

Kachin State

Kachin state: In search of the amber earrings, and the story of one soldier who never went home. Kachin state was an area of Burma that had just recently opened up due to the cease fire signed in 1993 between the Kachin independence army, or K.I.A, and the Burmese government. Kachin state is the northern most part of Burma bordering India on its west, Tibet to its north, and china to the east. The highest mountain peak in South East Asia is in Burma's Kachin state, Hkakabo Razi near the border with Tibet and is 19,314 feet tall. At this height is constantly covered in snow. In 1954 during the flag march to the frontier areas, a pygmy tribe called the Tarons were discovered in the Adung Long river valley in the northernmost part of Burma. The taron are the only known tribe of Asian Pygmy. In addition to their very short stature, the men are said to be about 147 cm, and the women, 140 cm, it is their custom of only marrying within their own tribe has led to their near disappearance. This is a very remote area.

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There are many deep valleys between snow capped mountains and subtropical vegetation in Kachin state. Between the two rivers, the Hmali Hka and the Mae Hka is the area know as the triangle. The Mae Hka is colder than the Hmali Hka and those two rivers meet at the confluence, 27 miles north of the capital, Myitkyina. They join together to become the beginning of the irrawaddy river which flows from this source 1,350 miles, emptying into the Andaman sea. In this northern triangle area, people still pan gold dust with wooden plates. The gold was usually small flakes and stood out bright against the fine black sand.

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Because of the state having just been opened, people were not used to seeing foreigners and they just stare at you as if you had landed here from the moon. Some of the locals just assumed that you were an embassy spook from somewhere, worked with the United Nations development programs, or that you were a priest. Since I stayed at the church, everyone thought that I was a priest, including the sisters who greeted me every morning with a "Hello Father Richard".

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When I had last gone to Kachin state some nine months ago, I had found only one old Hkaku woman who could still wear the amber cylinder earrings in her lobes, typical of the Hkaku tribe. This trip, when I went to see her and to take more photos, she was unfortunately on her death bed. Believe me, had there been any chance to prop her up in bed and shoot the photo, I would have, but it was too late.

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Although I had searched a half dozen Hkaku villages myself, and had sent others into the hills where I was not permitted to go, I could not find another original Hkaku. Finally some good news came. One of the young priests, Father Leo, came to my small room at St. Colombans church and told me that they had found one old woman who still wore the amber earrings, but there was also a problem. The church had two trucks which were in constant need of repair, and at the moment only one truck was running, but they needed it because one of the faithful had died and they needed the truck to pick up the body.

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"Father, this is our last chance to photograph history", I said. "If we miss this chance the original culture of the Hkaku will be lost forever". "Richard you already have one picture of a Hkaku with the earrings from the last time. The church has only one truck and we need to transport the body". Father, one woman does not make a tribe. I need to shoot another woman who still wears the original earrings. Where is the body of the deceased father?". "In a village north of here". "And where is the Hkaku woman's father?". "She lives north of that village above the confluence of the rivers in the triangle area." "Well, lets go pick up the body father".

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We drove out of the brick gates at St. Colombans and headed north. After about an hour we arrived at a small village where a group of people were gathered around a wooden coffin. Some of the boys who stayed at the church including the one who had found the village of the old Hkaky woman jumped off the bed of the truck and carried the coffin into the back. Father Leo spoke to the headman and to the family of the deceased. I asked the boy who knew where the Hkaku village was located to sit in the front cab, and I sat with the others in the back next to the coffin. The road was very bad and I shifted sitting on top of the coffin to keep the lid from flying off.

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Finally we arrived at the Hkaku village and the boy directed us to the house of the old woman who still could wear the earrings. I think that she must have been surprised seeing a truck with a priest wearing black, and a starched collar, with a foreigner seated on a coffin which she, at her age, probably thought was intended for her.

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I hopped off the coffin and followed the priest and the boys into her compound. She was old, more than 85 years she said, although she was not sure of her own age, and her name was Flawg Yun. Flawg was wearing the amber earrings of the Hkaku. Her compound had little greenery but next door was a grove of bananas and bamboo which would be a better background for photography. Flawg Yun had a difficult time walking, so we removed a whole section of her neighbour's fence, moved her into place, carried in a chair by a few of the boys, and I photographed her near some bamboo. Although I saw many of the long thick amber earrings in Kachin state, I could only find one woman still able to wear them.

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Kachin State was not an area easily penetrated since it bordered tribal autonomus areas of India's Naga hills and remote parts of china. I had thought that because of the long isolation in Kachin state, that finding the various tribes would be rather easy. I was wrong.Â There was a paucity of tribal photos from the Kachin state primarily due to the hardships suffered by the hill people during the civil war which lasted 35 years. Many of the tribes had been burned out of their villages and their cultures and traditions had gone up in smoke. The K.I.A had conscripted many men to fight and many others had been taken as porters. Many died in conflict. At harvest time, the paddy and animals were taken away for the war effort on both sides. Many of the people fled to the towns where they gave up their cultures and dress to adapt and conform to the styles of their lowland neighbours.

Just a few miles outside of Myitkyina town, malaria was rampant. This was 1995. Everyone was surprised when I told them that I had never had malaria. I was the anomaly.Â The Hkaku generally live in the northern triangle area around sumprabum and east of the Mae Hka river, around the Bumba bum mountain at over 11,000 feet. There were persistent legends of the Yeti or Abominal snowman who many say they have seen here. It is a remote area, perhaps one of the most remote areas on earth.

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The dominate group, the Jinghpaw tend to live south of the Hkaku but are spread throughout the state. The Jinghpaw and the Hkaku are closely related. Hkaku means literally, head of the river. To the north of the Hkaku near the town of Putao live the Rawang, whose men wear the finely woven headdress circled in wild boars tusks. When hunting they wear a different cap covered in red squirrel tails. Here in this snow capped peak area of Putao also live a group of lisu who wear cloths that were different from the Lisu in Bhamo, south of Myitkyina near the chinese border.

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The Maru or Lawng Waw as they choose to be called themselves are also closely related to the Azi or Zai Wa and to the Lashi by both costume and language. The difference in dress between the Maru and that of the Lashi is slight. Both women traditionally have three large holes in their ears, one at the top section, one through the center, and another through the earlobe. The Lashi wore a long silver tube through the earlobe section, while the Maru wore a thick wad of cotton through the second section which passed through the lower ear lobe holding a rather heavy silver insisted square.

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The first wave of migration from Tibet was composed of Maru, Azi, and Lashi, who followed the course of the Mae Hka. The Jinghpaw and the Hkaku are said to have followed the river course of the Mae Hka. All of these groups freely marry and thus their language, customs and dress change and correspond to whichever group they join.Â In Myitkyina town, the fire brigade had an old world war two shell casing to beat out their fire alarm. In many ways it was if the war had never ended. Army green vintage jeeps drove down the roads driven by civilians with netting on their camouflaged steel helmets. Lovely girls with erect backs, wearing colorful sarongs rode on their chinese bicycles at the same speed as the butterflies, with braided hair nearly long enough to sweep the ground.

At night, as it is winter and nearly christmas, the fruit vendors sold tangerines, grapes, avacado, oranges, grapefruits from putao and persimmons all stacked up in rows of traingular piles. The vendors were seated in a row, huddled under their thick hats and sweaters. Their faces orange and black in the exaggerated shadows of the flickering candle light, Myitkyina had no electricity. It was cold.Â Kachin state had been a recruiting ground for the British during world war one, and many Kachin distinguished themselves in the battle of mesopotamia from 1917. This adventure did much to ring the Kachins into the modern world, teaching them discipline and war techniques. In world war two, Kachin state was the sight of fierce battles between the Japanese and allied troops. Many crashed airplanes still litter the hills of what was known as the "Burmese hump" between Kachin state and china. In spite of the fact of the recent cease fire, that area, and most areas of Kachin state outside of Mytkyina, were off limits, since cease fire did not necessarily mean peace. One old soldier never went home.

Denis Rosner was born in Rangoon in 1920 of German immigrant parents who were dairy farmers from the time of King Mindon. Few men have had such an impact on Kachin state as Rosner. Denis Rosner was a farmer who introduced new crops into the state. He was a British soldier who led his troops into battle against the Japanese. He became a teacher and taught thousands of students the English language. I have met students from all parts of Burma who speak flawless English because of his teaching them, hundreds of whom became teachers themselves.

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In 1941, a young Denis Rosner was commisioned in Meiktila, south of Mandalay in central Burma. That year, the japanese took myitkyina and controlled all the territory across the river by 1942. Rosner was going to Putao with twenty-five officers. At that time, thousands were leaving for India to get away from the war. H.N Stevenson was commander and twenty of the officers with provisions and money headed west for India through the Hukawng valley and the Naga hills and the Ledo road. Nineteen of the twenty died of cholera and the 20th officer was court-martialled for desertion. Denis Rosner and five others stayed behind near sumprabum. Rosner was 22 years old in 1942 and his major said that they had better learn the Jinghpaw language because they didn't know how long they would be there. Rosner learned Jinghpaw and was promoted to captain. From sumprabum to the Naga hills was under captain Rosner's command. They were air supplied by the Americans flying DC-3's.

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Rosner was informed that 150 Japanese were coming to attack his 14 men and himself. 12 men went with bren guns to

Kumon pass in the Kumon mountain range and selected a spot above the Japanese and dug three trenches aiming Bren guns in a crossfire direction. Down that valley from the mountains came three Jinghpaw girls of 14, 15, and 17 years old. Rosner asked them where they thought they were going. They answered that they were going to get salt.

"You can't go, there are Japanese coming up the valley". Rosner said. "Who are the Japanese?", they asked. "They are our enemies". "They are people, there is no danger from people". "They will come and shoot us". "Why, we haven't done anything to them?". "If you aren't afraid of Japanese, there are tigers". One of Rosner's men had been dragged away by a tiger and his companion shot the tiger, but also killed the man. The girls said, "we are not afraid of tigers, we will chop the tiger with our machete, let us go and get salt". "There are wild elephants", Rosner said. "Elephants, we are used to elephants, we will climb a tree until they go away". "Not afraid of Japanese, not afraid of tigers or elephants. You come back tomorrow and I'll give you all the salt you want".

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Right after that, Rosner and his men could see the Japanese coming up the valley with two elephants and their provisions on mules. He instructed his men not to shoot the elephants. Only 15 feet or three meters from the ambush point, Rosner and his men opened fire killing 85 of them in the first ambush. At that, the Japanese withdrew and Rosner captured the elephants and went back to camp. He was inside making his report when the three girls arrived asking for salt.

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"Sir, there are three girls here and they want salt". "Yes, yes, give them all they want". Two days later, the girls came back again. "Sir, those three girls are here again". "Why?", Rosner asked annoyed, "Do they want more salt, didn't you give them the salt?". "No sir, it's not that. They have brought presents, baskets of pumpkins, eggs, rice, cucumbers and Kachin beer". "Oh, well ask them to come into the tent", Rosner said.

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It struck him that they were grateful and brave. The 17 year old who was leading them was not afraid of Japanese, not afraid of tigers or elephants. Rosner told his sergeant to tell her parents to come along and see him. Two days later, half a dozen of her family came to inquire what was happening. Rosner told them that he wanted to marry her. "No, no white man has ever married a Kachin girl. No. You will leave her", they protested. "No" Rosner replied, "I promise that I will stay. I will marry her for life". The family discussed amongst themselves and said, "If you marry her, you must pay double the bride price". The dowry was to be so many buffalos, Chinese long coats, gongs and guns. "I haven't got buffalos or gongs, but I can give you as many guns as you want, and I can give you money".

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Rosner was paid 900 rupee per month as a captain, and had not been paid in a year. His troops received 16 rupee per month. Over the radio he asked to draw his money and the silver rupees were air dropped by parachute. In 1943, Rosner paid 7,000 rupees for his bride. Buffalos were sacrificed along with pigs and Rosner was married. In 1948, Rosner was given the choice of going back to England or to stay and become a Burmese citizen. He chose to stay.

In 1950 he began to teach English at St Colombans in Myitkyina. He was on his bicycle and met an Indian man who asked him if he wanted to buy a plot of land. The Indian took him to the land which was overgrown with bushes. "How much do you want?". Rosner asked. "300 rupees", said the Indian. "I'll give you 250", Rosner replied. After they had signed the papers, Rosner asked the man why he had sold so cheaply. "I have your money, and you have my land, so I'll tell you the truth and don't get angry. Every night three Japanese soldiers march by my window with their long swords

dragging on the ground". Rosner was not afraid of ghosts and began to clear the land. Underneath the overgrown bushes were bomb craters 15 feet deep or 3 meters deep. During the war, the Americans held the airfield and the Japanese held Myitkyina town. Rosner's land was in between and many bombs from both sides fell short and landed here. Clearing the land, he dug up 21 skeletons which he collected and buried in one grave near the bamboo grove at the back of his land.

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Now he is growing strawberries which he introduced from Maymyo, many kinds of vegetables and ground orchids. I brought him tomato seeds from my father's own garden which will yield him fruit of more than a pound each. He planted them the very next day.Â Â Denis Rosner speaks fluent Jinghpaw, English, German, and Burmese. Rosner has twelve children, all of whom he delivered himself. His last two children were twins. His wife had prepared the boiling water and lay down to give birth. She told him to measure the babies navel cord to the babies knee, cut with a sliver of bamboo, tie the end and dip in saffron powder with ground nutmeg paste and Kachin alcohol.Â Â He has thirty three grandchildren, twenty six of whom live with him onÂ his productive farm. Of all those twelve children, and thirty three grandchildren, all look like Jinghpaw, except one who looks like him, a lively little girl with blond curly hair and blue eyes, his granddaughter. At the age of seventy seven, Denis Rosner still rode his bicycle everyday from his farm into Myitkyina town, wearing his old straw hat, to tutor his students in English, to say a prayer at the church, and to sit down for a cup of tea.

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