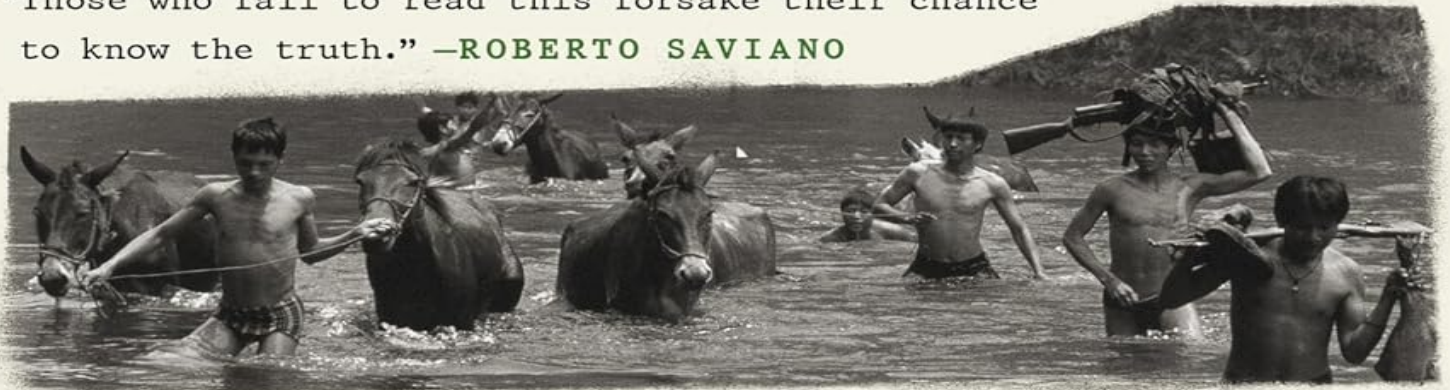


"Those who fail to read this forsake their chance
to know the truth." —ROBERTO SAVIANO



In Search of the
Asian Drug Cartel That
Survived the CIA

NARCOTOPIA



Patrick Winn

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Most accounts of the drug trade are told from the law enforcement perspective. There is a reason for this. Drug Enforcement Administration agents who describe their adventures to journalists are often lionized. They might even score a budget hike for their department.

But drug traffickers have little incentive to tell their stories. In that profession, running your mouth leads to prison or worse. The upshot is that most drug war stories sound the same: valorous detectives battling vile figures—the junkie, the pusher, the kingpin.

It is a genre of half-told tales.

This book does not presume virtue among antinarcotics agents or cruelty among traffickers, or vice versa. I've relied heavily on accounts of lawbreakers in the Golden Triangle, some of whom risked their necks to talk to me. Because few of these sources are scrupulous record keepers, I'm forced to lean on their memories. Every attempt has been made to corroborate their oral histories with other witnesses, but in some cases I can only present recollections as they were told.

Police records and anthropological studies of Wa rituals helped me reconstruct scenes. Central Intelligence Agency and DEA documents proved vital. Some are declassified, others acquired by creative means. For clarity's sake, I've sometimes rendered multiple conversations into one or shifted the order in which certain facts were revealed to me. Most names in this book are genuine, but I've disguised several identities to prevent retribution, from either criminals or government agents.

These are my caveats. They allow for perspectives seldom heard. Few of the stories in this book appear elsewhere. My goal is to present a narrative that is more expansive and truthful, less monochromatic. There is good and evil in this book, but it mostly resides in the heads of its characters, crusading for honor and power and always believing themselves more righteous than their enemies.

Finally, a note about the term *Golden Triangle*, which lacks a formal definition. I use it to describe Southeast Asia's drug-producing heartland: a mountainous area, almost entirely in Burma, that seeps across the borders of China, Laos, and Thailand. It is, to coin a phrase, a *Narcotopia*—a place where narcotics are a defining force shaping commerce, politics, and daily life. This zone powers a regional heroin-and-meth economy that is, according to the United Nations, possibly worth more than the entire GDP of Burma itself.¹

THE NATIONS AND PEOPLE OF NARCOTOPIA

THE NATIONS

Wa State

Population: 600,000

Size: ~12,000 square miles

Governance: authoritarian

Ruled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Split into two noncontiguous territories, the motherland and Wa South, both inside Burma's borders but off-limits to Burmese authorities. Wa State does not seek formal independence status with the international community; yet it functions, for all intents and purposes, as a sovereign state.

Burma (officially, Myanmar)

Population: 54 million

Size: 261,000 square miles

Governance: military dictatorship

Former British colony that broke free in 1948. Since 1962, controlled by an isolationist military regime. This junta fears both China and the United States—as well as its own citizens, especially ethnic minorities in the hills. Burmese is the dominant ethnicity, accounting for two-thirds of the population, living mostly in the lowlands. Burma's mountainous borderlands are beyond government control and ruled by indigenous armed groups, the Wa being the most powerful of them all.

Shanland (defunct)

Peak population: 3–4 million

Peak size: ~5,000 square miles

Governance: authoritarian personality cult

A rogue nation that existed from 1976 to 1996. Controlled patches of territory along the Thai-Burma border. Led by Khun Sa, a world-class heroin trafficker. He was also a self-avowed freedom fighter for the Shan, the largest of Burma's minority groups and ethnic cousins to Thais. Shanland was targeted by both the Drug Enforcement Administration and Central Intelligence Agency.

Thailand

Population: 72 million

Size: 198,000 square miles

Governance: military-dominated quasi-democracy

Major US ally since the Cold War. Then and now, provides a base of operations for the CIA and DEA. Narcotics produced in Burma's landlocked mountains flow south through Thailand to reach global markets, making the Thai-Burma border one of the world's busiest drug-smuggling zones. Much of that border is now controlled by the UWSA.

China

Population: 1.4 billion

Size: 3.7 million square miles

Governance: communism (one-party authoritarianism)

US rival. Strives for dominance of Southeast Asia. Ruled since 1949 by the Communist Party of China, which enforces strict laws against drug use among its own citizens. However, China is not above colluding with drug traffickers. Beijing supports the UWSA under an agreement: the Wa can only traffic drugs to other countries, never China.

Communist Party of Burma (associated group, now defunct)

A disbanded surrogate of China's Communist Party. This armed group, headed by ethnic Burmese Maoists, hoped to conquer all of Burma but failed. It only succeeded in occupying the Wa motherland from the late 1960s to the late 1980s.

United States of America

Population: 332 million

Size: 3.8 million square miles

Governance: democracy, empire

Strives for global supremacy. Competes with China for sway over Southeast Asia. Strongly allied with Thailand. Antagonistic toward Burma's isolationist dictatorship, which resists taking sides. America also seeks the UWSA's downfall. Historically, the United States exerts influence on the Southeast Asian narcotics trade through two agencies: the DEA and the CIA.

US Drug Enforcement Administration

Collaborates with overseas police and troops to seize narcotics and arrest foreign drug traffickers.

US Central Intelligence Agency

Upholds American supremacy by covert means: gathering intel and sabotage. Willing to conspire with criminal organizations, even drug traffickers.

The Exiles (associated group, now defunct)

Once Asia's largest opium-trafficking cartel. Rooted in the Thai-Burma border from the 1960s to the 1980s. Protected from prosecution by the CIA. The Exiles cartel assisted US and Taiwanese spies in espionage operations along the Burma-China border, sometimes using Wa warlords as assets.

The League of Warlords (associated group, now defunct)

A short-lived coalition of Wa warlords in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Sold opium to the Exiles. Some members aided CIA operations against China. Led by four warlords: Saw Lu, Shah, Mahasang, and Master of Creation.

THE PEOPLE

Saw Lu (Wa): Born in 1944 on the China-Burma border. Raised in an American Baptist missionary sect. An anticommunist warlord in his youth. Later a top UWSA leader—and DEA asset.

Jacob (Wa): Saw Lu's pious son-in-law, married to his daughter, Grace. Born in the late 1970s.

Lai (Wa): Born circa 1940 in the Wa highlands. Full name: Zhao Nyi Lai. A Maoist guerrilla in his youth but later rejected the ideology in favor of Wa nationalism. Founding father of Wa State.

Bao (Wa): Wa State's current leader. Born in 1949 in Wa highlands. Full name: Bao Youxiang. Former communist guerrilla commander turned Wa ethnonationalist.

Wei Xuegang (Wa-Chinese): The most successful drug lord of the twenty-first century so far. Born mid-1940s in the Wa peaks. Former Khun Sa protégé. Finance czar of the UWSA since 1989.

Khun Sa (Shan-Chinese): The most powerful Asian drug lord of the latter twentieth century. Born in 1934 in Burma's Shan foothills. Original name: Zhang Qifu. Founder of Shanland and a former mentor to Wei Xuegang.

Gen. Lee Wen-huan (Chinese): Born in 1917 in China's Yunnan province near the

Burma border. Scion of an opium-merchant clan. A die-hard anticommunist, he fled to Burma after China's Maoist takeover in 1949. A founder of the Exiles. Protected by the CIA and the Thai military.

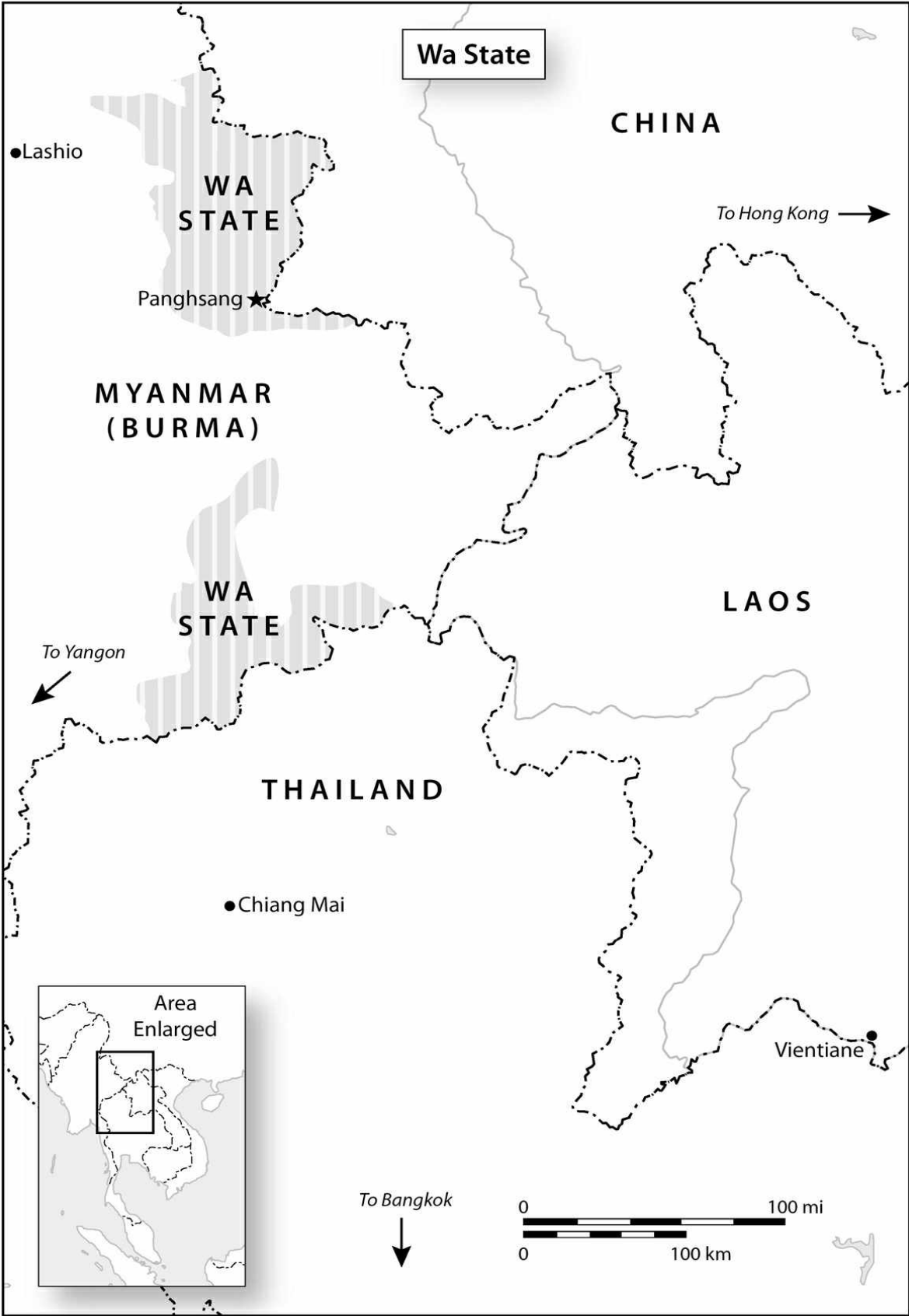
Angelo Saladino (American): Lead DEA agent in Burma from 1989 to 1992. Formerly posted in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Rick Horn (American): Lead DEA agent in Burma in 1992 and 1993.

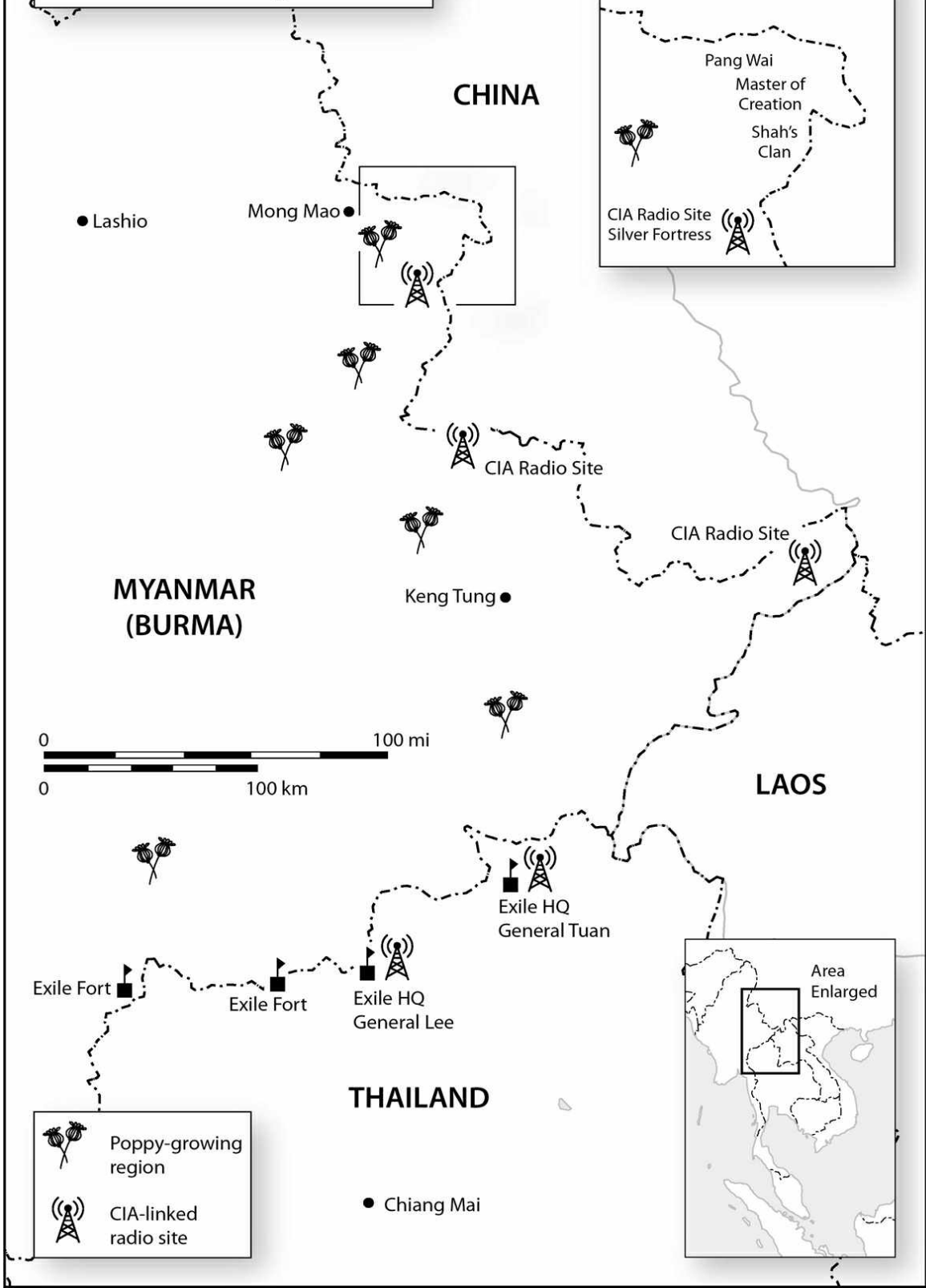
John Whalen (American): Longest-running DEA agent in Burma. Arrived in 1997 and retired in 2014.

Franklin "Pancho" Huddle (American): Top US State Department official (chargé d'affaires) in Burma from 1990 to 1994. Oversaw feuding DEA and CIA bureaus inside the US embassy.

Bill Young (American): DEA operative based in Chiang Mai. Former CIA officer who became disgruntled with the spy agency. Grandson of legendary Baptist missionary William Marcus Young, known as the "Man-God."



The Golden Triangle (1960s)





CHINA

MYANMAR
(BURMA)

LAOS

THAILAND

-  Poppy-growing region
-  CIA-linked radio site

Pang Wai
Master of Creation
Shah's Clan

CIA Radio Site
Silver Fortress

Area Enlarged

● Lashio

● Mong Mao

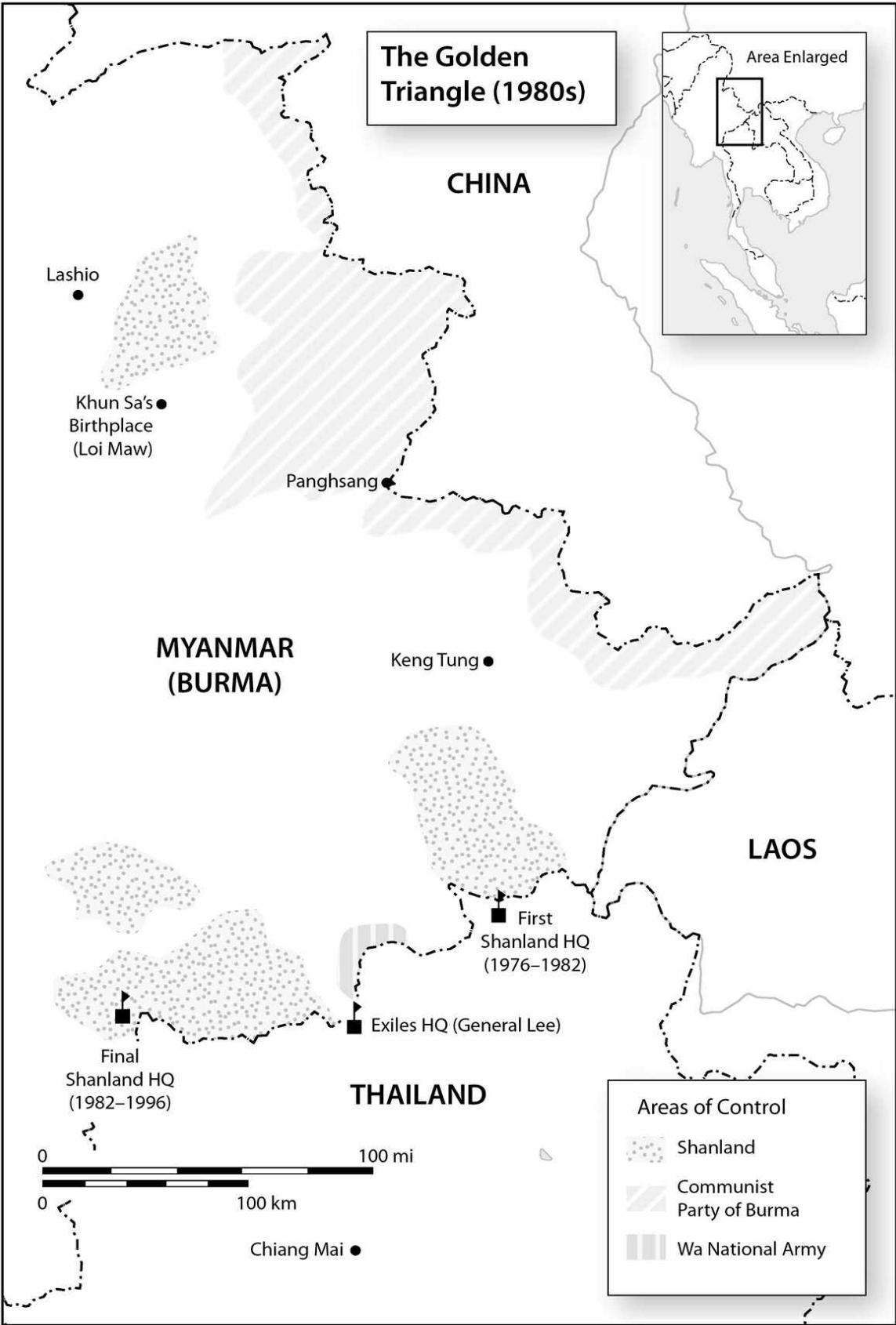
● Keng Tung

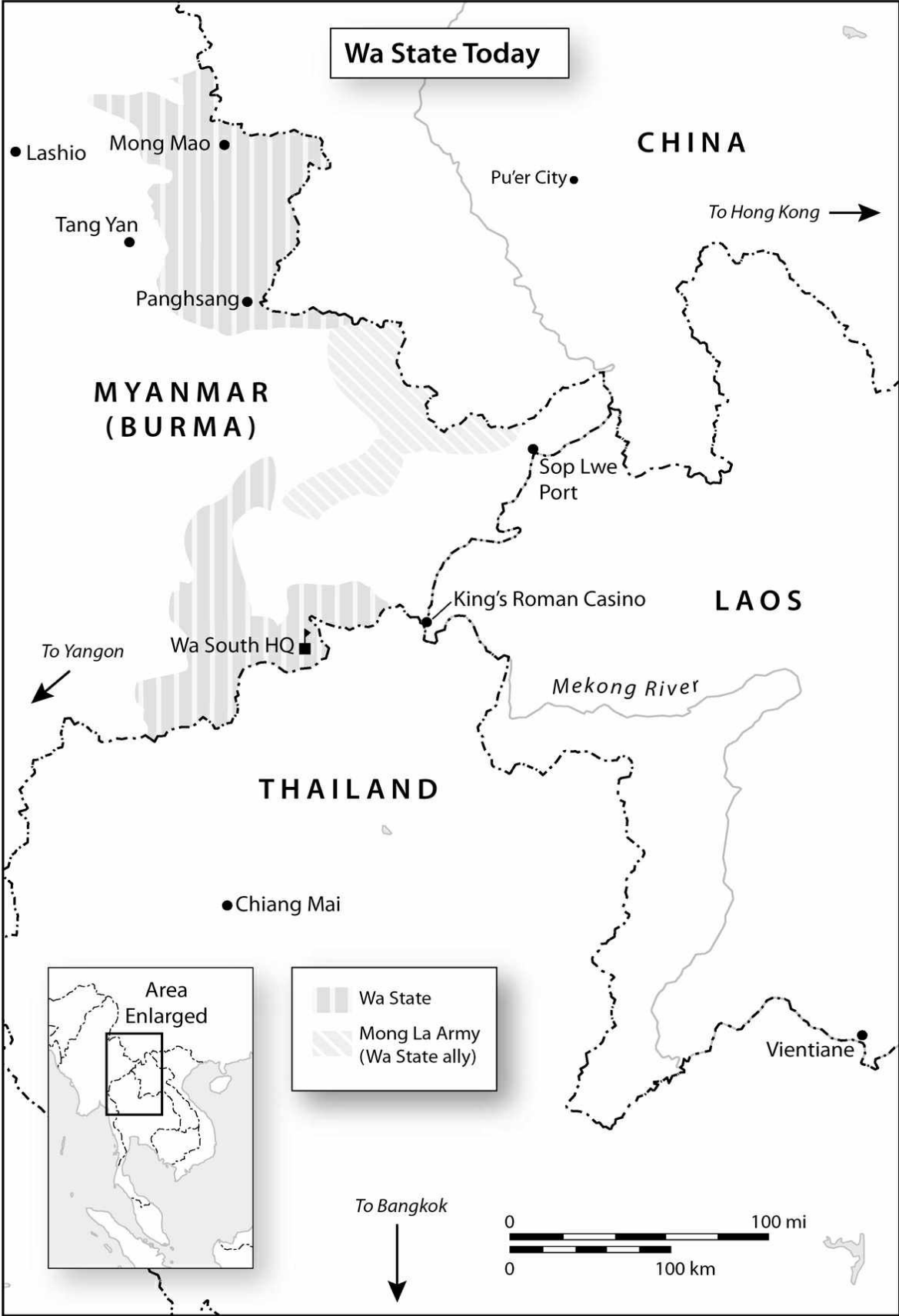
Exile HQ
General Tuan

Exile HQ
General Lee

● Chiang Mai







PROLOGUE

The Wa are among the most vilified people in Asia, if not the world.

This has been true for ages. To the Imperial British, they were “filthy” and “undoubtedly savage.” Before that, China’s Qing dynasty deemed them the “most obstinate among the barbarians.”¹

Even Vasco da Gama slandered the Wa, though the sixteenth-century explorer never reached their homeland: a jagged stretch of mountains dividing Burma and China. He’d only heard rumors about the tribe, which he immortalized in a poem:²

*On human flesh, with brutal hunger they feed
And with hot irons stamp their own—rude deed!*

He was wrong. The Wa weren’t cannibals. They were headhunters, ritually planting enemies’ heads on spikes. Like Scottish clans and French revolutionaries, they had their reasons.

From the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century, the Wa have been steadily denigrated. They quit head-hunting a few generations ago—the last skulls were lopped off sometime between Beatlemania and disco—but the stigma endures. They’re now branded as a narco-tribe. Practically everything written about the Wa portrays them as vicious hill people who churn out illegal drugs.

Few cultures are so strongly linked to a commodity. The Amish build furniture. The Swiss make watches. The Wa cook meth—and before meth was in vogue, the Wa churned out heroin. Their soil is cold and bitter, terrible for vegetables but ideal for heroin’s raw ingredient: *Papaver somniferum*, the opium poppy.

Like mountain peoples from Chechnya to the Ozarks, the Wa like to do things their own way. A tribal authority called the United Wa State Army (UWSA) controls their native terrain, even though every inch technically sits inside Myanmar, also known as Burma. The UWSA makes laws, defends its motherland, builds roads, and collects taxes. It even issues driver’s licenses. In every sense, it is a government. Yet to the United States of America, the latest empire to target the Wa, the UWSA is just a cabal of “kingpins” and “drug lords” presiding over a “dangerous criminal syndicate.” Dangerous to whom? Americans, we are told. That may surprise the Americans who’ve never heard of the Wa people, which is practically all of them. Still the Drug Enforcement Administration insists that the Wa foster “crime, violence and terrible social damage here in the US.”

Illegal drugs are indeed one of the UWSA’s top revenue sources. Over the years, tons of narcotics produced on Wa soil have hit the black market, and traffickers have smuggled them onto American shores. The DEA therefore sees the UWSA as a Mastodon-sized trophy kill. America’s stated goal is to “disrupt and dismantle” the entire system of Wa governance.

Herein lies the problem. The UWSA isn’t some jungle-dwelling mafia. It’s running an honest-to-God nation called Wa State, home to more than half a million people. It has its own schools, electricity grid, anthems, and flags. Because it is not sanctified by the United Nations, its territory isn’t marked on official maps, but it comprises more than twelve thousand square miles. Wa State controls nearly as much soil as the Netherlands.

Wa State’s army commands thirty thousand troops and twenty thousand reservists, more than the militaries of Sweden or Kenya. The Wa possess high-tech weaponry: artillery, drones, and missiles that can knock jets out of the sky. When it comes to firepower, the UWSA makes Mexican cartels look like street gangs. The Wa stockpile guns for a reason. America isn’t the only country they’ve had to worry about. Wa people are indigenous to China’s frontier, just like

Tibetans and Uyghurs, minorities who've suffered deeply under a Chinese government that micromanages their every move. The Wa have faced the same threat.

So why is there a "Free Tibet" movement but none to free the Wa? Because they freed themselves. Yet, through Western eyes, they did it the wrong way: by producing illegal drugs, spending the profits on weapons, and daring outsiders to come take their land.

There's no getting around it. Just as Haiti was built on sugar and Saudi Arabia on oil, Wa State was built on heroin and methamphetamine. The UWSA sits at the core of a Southeast Asian drug trade generating \$60 billion each year in meth alone.³ The national economies of most "real" countries are smaller than that.

Wa leaders are indeed sovereigns of a narco-state. But to capture them and toss them into American prisons would wipe out the executive branch of a foreign government. In other words, it would constitute regime change. This book is based on a modest conviction: when a superpower tries to undermine an entire civilization and doom its people as untouchables on the world stage, it is essential to seek out the underdog's side of the story. That is what I've spent years trying to do.

I'm an American journalist who has lived and worked in Bangkok for more than fifteen years. In my day job with *The World*, a foreign affairs show airing on National Public Radio stations, I might cover anything from pop groups to riots. But I'm also a part-time *narcoperiodista*: a reporter specializing in drugs and organized crime. The premise of my first book (*Hello, Shadowlands*) is that lawbreakers tend to be rational actors, not just black-hearted ghouls. It's a collection of real-life stories about smugglers and rebels in Southeast Asia. You might suppose it would offer the UWSA more than a cameo, but that was all I could muster. Like Vasco da Gama, I'd only encountered the Wa through secondhand tales.

I've been fascinated with Wa State—a forbidden republic hiding in plain sight—since the moment I learned of its existence. Growing up in a factory town in the Appalachian foothills, I have a soft spot for mountain peoples and always assumed the Wa couldn't be as sinister as their reputation. But it is hard—no, really damn hard—to get to Wa State, vastly more difficult than traveling to North Korea or Antarctica. Americans face the highest bar to entry because the UWSA regards all US citizens as potential spies. Harder still is sitting down with UWSA leaders, many of whom are wanted by the DEA. Still I set out to meet the supposed supervillains of Asia's drug trade and understand their worldview.

This book is the result. It is the saga of an indigenous people who've tapped the power of narcotics to create a nation where there was none before. But much more is at stake here than the struggle of a little-known tribal group. Hollywood and cable news would have us think the War on Drugs is a conflict solely waged in the Americas. They've wrung dry every last detail about Latin kingpins. Meanwhile, Asia's underworld goes ignored. It is treated as a fringe curiosity that has little to do with the United States.

That is a dangerous lie.

When I began peering into the UWSA's inner workings, I didn't expect to find puppies and marshmallows, but what I uncovered was far stranger than I ever imagined. As it turns out, the origin story of this narco-army is smudged with American fingerprints. Not only did the Central Intelligence Agency create the conditions for its inception, but one of its foremost leaders was also a DEA asset.

The American government tells us the UWSA is a monster "poisoning our society for profit." But this is a beast that US agents, through malice and incompetence, have secretly nurtured.

Every empire needs its barbarians.

SUPERSTAR

They called him Superstar.

His former Drug Enforcement Administration handlers still speak of him with reverence, which is unusual, because confidential informants are seldom praised by anyone. CIs rat out fellow criminals to spare themselves from prison. Some CIs snitch for envelopes of cash, others to help police arrest their underworld rivals. As DEA agents see it, most are liars and squirmers who believe in nothing bigger than themselves.

But Superstar was different. Unlike other CIs, he brought a grad student's intensity to the informant role. His DEA handlers would go to a rendezvous in some Burmese safe house and find him already waiting inside, a sheaf of papers on his lap. His handwritten reports contained coordinates of heroin refineries and upcountry poppy farms, even rosters of corrupt police. They read like almanacs of crime.

"My God," said one DEA analyst, "the intel he gave us and the things he did to get it." Said a DEA agent, "I don't want to give away any sensitive secrets. But he certainly earned it—the name Superstar." And yet another agent said, "I'd never met a CI who was also an idealist."

As DEA agents extracted information from Superstar, he sought to extract something in return: a promise that America would honor its Christian soul and uplift the world's downtrodden, including his own people: the Wa. Superstar had a dream that, one day, Wa children would tote schoolbooks instead of Kalashnikovs. That Wa elders, once prone to decapitating outsiders on sight, would welcome foreigners into their homes. He imagined a doctor on every mountain to spare the sick from pointless death. A Wa nation of which he could feel proud.

Superstar told the DEA that the Wa wanted to go clean. They would torch their poppy fields, demolish their heroin labs, and stop making the white poison that so entranced addicts in New York and Los Angeles, a people clueless about the Wa yet spellbound by the silky powder they produced. In exchange, Superstar wanted American aid: schools, hospitals, expertise in building a modern nation, and the glory that comes from friendship with the United States.

Superstar believed divine forces sought to bind together the world's most powerful country and its most despised tribe—and that he was God's intermediary. He was a CI who talked like a messiah. "Like the heroin addicts that result from opium we grow, we too are in bondage," he wrote in one of his classified reports. "We are searching for help to break that bondage."

He dreamed of an alliance between the DEA and the United Wa State Army—known to the United States as a drug cartel. The agents had every reason to laugh. Yet, one by one, Superstar seduced them with this radical idea: that the DEA might bring about the largest narcotics eradication in history without firing a single bullet. For a brief time, there emerged on the horizon the glimmers of a bloodless alternative to the War on Drugs.

The DEA called him Superstar. But by the time I met him, no one had used his code name in a very long time. He was an old man with scars and a conviction somehow undiminished by a tragic life.

He made me call him by his Wa name: Saw Lu.

BOOK ONE

FIRST ENCOUNTER

It's been said there are two ways to enter Wa lands: fight your way in or get invited.¹ Since my last fight was in middle school (I lost), I'd have to invite myself. If only I knew how to start the conversation.

The United Wa State Army (UWSA) has many trappings of government: a central committee and departments of finance, health, and education, but it does not have a press bureau that actively courts international media. The UWSA would rather starve journalists of contact, particularly Westerners, assuming anything we write will further the same old “narco-tribe” narrative. Google UWSA and you'll see why. The acronym conjures thirdhand stories about meth labs and child soldiers inside what the BBC calls “one of the most secretive places on earth.”

Over the years, I'd requested permission to visit Wa State through various interlocutors. Sometimes I'd get a curt no. Usually I was ignored. But in 2019 my stubbornness generated a twinkle of hope. My emails to a senior UWSA officer—an envoy of sorts—received a reply written by the envoy's assistant in Google Translate–assisted English. First he asked for scans of my passport, which I sent reluctantly. Then he told me to come to their office later in the week—a de facto UWSA embassy, located in a Burmese city called Lashio, roughly fifty miles west of Wa territory.

The assistant did not provide a street address or a date or time. I tried to nail down the particulars, but his follow-ups made little sense.

Good morning, Patrick, thanks to received your concerning.

Yours, Wa State

Sent from Mail for Windows 10

Screw it, I thought. An invite's an invite. I bought a ticket from Bangkok to Lashio and started packing. In my luggage: envelopes full of pristine \$100 bills (always good to have in Burma) and a box of chocolates for the envoy. My wife was skeptical—“Is this a date?”—but the chocolates, I explained, were treats for his children, a gesture that might skirt the Kingpin Act, a piece of US legislation that can put anyone conducting “dealings” with the UWSA in prison for ten years.

Then I scrambled to line up a translator, ideally a Wa person in Lashio who could articulate my long-shot request: to enter the UWSA's territory and interview its leaders. I contacted a local travel agency, usually a good source of people who are bilingual and outgoing. Over email, they put me in touch with a “high-character Wa guy around 40 years old with a history of working for the Wa government.” Perfect.

The interpreter introduced himself in an email—I'll call him Jacob—and wrote that he looked forward to meeting me at Lashio's airport. I told him not to bother. I could make my way to the hotel just fine on my own. But he wouldn't have it. Jacob was waiting outside the arrival hall, among the taxi touts and ladies with *thanaka*, tree-bark paste, painted on their cheeks. He was scanning for a pale face coming out of baggage claim. When I emerged, he jostled forth, flip-flops squeaking on the tile floor—a stranger coming straight at me with a handshake. His free hand relieved me of my luggage.

“Oh, Jacob? I can carry that.”

“No, Mr. Patrick. Let me do it. It is a pleasure to make fellowship with you.”

Bespectacled, his onyx hair gelled into a schoolboy part, Jacob wore a clean sweater and gray jogging pants in lieu of the usual sarong, worn by men and women alike in Burma. We walked

toward his car, parked beyond a security booth manned by officers with shotguns. My wheeled suitcase rattled behind him.

“Your first time in Lashio,” Jacob said. I took it as a question.

“Yes, though I can’t count how many times I’ve been to—”

I stopped myself from saying either Burma or Myanmar. A person’s preference between these names indicates their politics, and I did not want to reveal much about myself, not just yet.

“—this country.”

I detected a stagger in Jacob’s walk, more pronounced as he wheeled my luggage. Most Wa males have served in the UWSA—each household must hand over at least one son for a few years, sometimes at the tender age of twelve—and I wondered if he’d been injured while soldiering.

“Did police bother you inside the airport?” he said.

“Not really.” When I came off the plane, two vacant-eyed Burmese cops waved me aside and took camera-phone snaps of my face. Nothing atypical. I was relieved they didn’t ask the purpose of my visit.

“I don’t think police will be a problem on your visit,” said Jacob, sliding my suitcase into the trunk of his old Japanese hatchback. “Don’t worry. We will take care of you here.”

JACOB TOLD ME my hotel was close to the airport distance-wise, “but we’ll have to take the long way around.” There was something in the way: Northeast Command Headquarters, a giant Burmese military base.

Lashio is an army town and has been since the British colonial days. It sits on a plateau with mountains hunkering on the horizon. As far back as Queen Victoria’s time, British troops used it as a staging ground for raids into the peaks. They were hellbent on conquering native tribes.

This subjugation drive remains unfinished. When the Brits pulled out after World War II, ending more than a century of occupation, Burma became an independent country. Its military picked up where their colonizers left off, deploying brute force into the borderlands. The old colonial machinery creaks on—only now the generals are Buddhist and ethnically Burmese, the country’s majority race, native to the balmy lowlands. Their mission is to dominate everyone inside the former colony’s borders, especially the unruly mountain folk. They’re not very good at it though.

Beyond Lashio, eastward in the direction of China, military rule weakens and the country shatters into pieces. It is an archipelago of rebellions—the scattered domains of hill-dwelling minorities: the Shan, Kachin, Kokang, and Lahu, to name a few of Burma’s minorities, which number in the dozens. They intend to rule themselves, and most have their own mini-governments, complete with armed wings defending patches of homeland with rifles and rockets. Among these groups, the UWSA is the mightiest. Just as the Wa terrified the British in the 1800s, they terrify the Burmese military now.

Cruising past Northeast Command HQ, I took in a sprawling fortress secured behind spiky iron gates. Seeing Burmese platoons running drills on a dusty field, I wondered which indigenous group they’d attack next. “It’s good you didn’t need to fly here last month,” Jacob told me. Apparently some guerrillas crept down from the hills, lobbed mortars at the army base, missed, and blew up the airport runway. “There were no flights for a while.”

Jacob was full of questions. Was I married? Yes. Is your wife American? Thai-American and we live in Bangkok. In which American state did I grow up? Carolina. I omitted the “North” so he wouldn’t mistake me for a northerner, but Jacob knew his US states, asking if I was from the Carolina that touches Tennessee. Impressive.