

Teaching Business in Mai La Refugee Camp in Thailand Oct 3-23, 2006

By Neil Sowards

At the Mission Conference at Green Lake, Wisconsin I asked Rev. K. D. Tu Lum, Executive Secretary of Myanmar Baptist Convention, if he thought there would be any repercussions if I went to teach at the Thai-Burma Border. He said "No Problem".

Two weeks later Rev. Mary Wood asked me to teach business for two weeks at Kawthulei Karen Baptist Bible School to their B.A. program. I agreed. Diana decided she was more needed here in Fort Wayne helping to resettle recently arrived Karens from Tham Hin camp in Thailand.

Mary and I flew to Bangkok, overnighted at the airport, and flew on the next day to Chiangmai, where I saw Saw Htaw Plaw Htoo and Kelly, recently arrived from Fort Wayne to do translation work. Next day by bus to Mae Sot where I had printed 30 copies of a book I had rewritten and simplified on starting and running a business. After a night in Mae Sot and picking up the books, Saw Simon came from Mai La and took us back by pickup truck.

Rev. Mary Wood had taught three times at Mai La before and was teaching Comforting the Grieving. It was a revealing experience for both her and her students. The Karen culture does not encourage a person to express their grief so it was a new topic for them. These camp residents have much to grieve about.

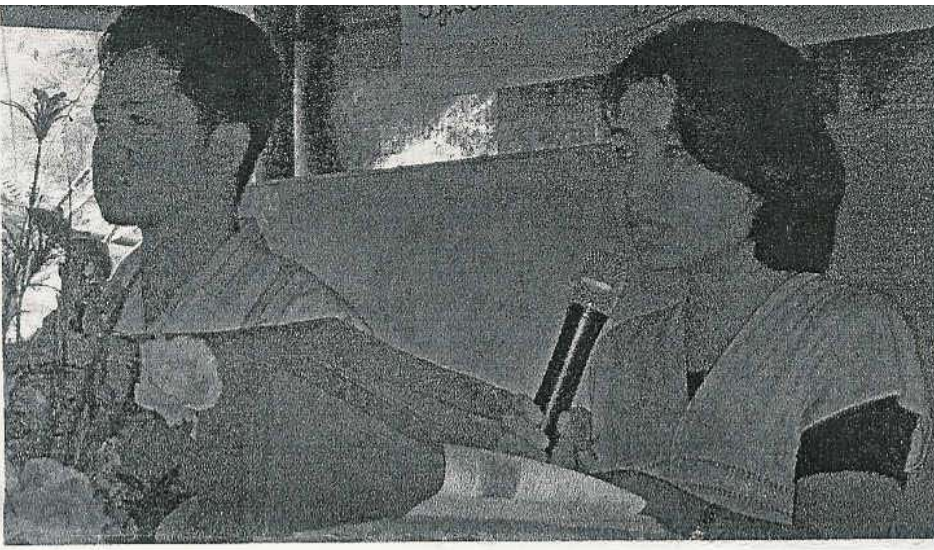
I had visited the border three times before and gave the Charge to the graduates when the school was at Wal Lei before it was burned by the Burmese army. I was in a picture on the wall with the second batch of graduates.

Diana and David were in some other laminated pictures.

I taught two classes on Entrepreneurship-How to Start Your Own Business. I took a popular book, rewrote it and simplified it, and had 30 copies printed in Mae Sot. I taught 9:30 to 12 noon, and 6:30 to 9 pm. The evening class was about twelve from the camp who were



interested in learning business. Their English was not as good as the B.A. students, so I had to have everything translated. I taught six days a week for two weeks. My classes started large but quickly shrank to about twelve in each. Some had trouble understanding my Midwest English.

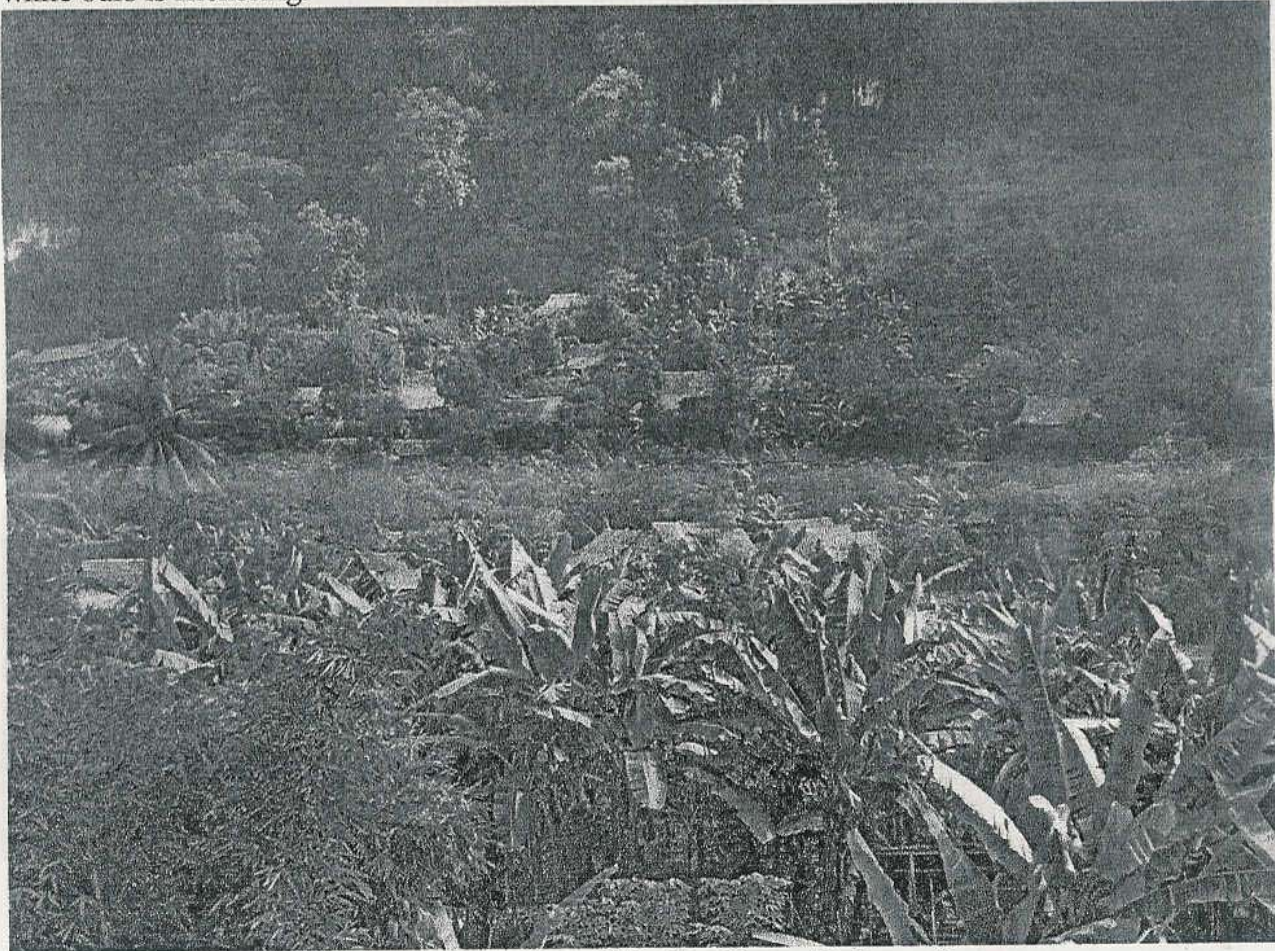


There were two teachers, Peter and Aleno, from Nagaland in NE India, who had been teaching about a year and a half. Both were very pleasing personalities and had pledged two years service in KKBBS after graduating from their seminary in India. They had to leave early because the India government arbitrarily shortened their visa. The students deeply appreciated them and gave them a heartfelt

Peter and Aleno

sendoff party. Aleno was stunningly beautiful but didn't seem to know it.

Also two young women visited camp. Yu-mi Bae, a Christian from Korea, was giving a year of service in Chiangmai, setting up a Christian matching service to help Christian young people find a Christian mate. Pan Hung-Yu, from Taiwan was overseeing her and three others in various types of service. I wondered how many American young people would give a year of service. Maybe we don't challenge our youth enough. I had the feeling the torch of faith is now being carried by other nations while ours is flickering.



A Small Section of Mai La Karen Refugee Camp

Mai La camp stretches for 3 miles along a highway and has 50,000 Karens, with about half being children. Many had been born in the camp, and so, know no other life. There are 20 elementary

schools, 6 middle schools, and 4 high schools. The entire camp is houses of split bamboo, teak posts, and leaf roofs. The roofs only last about two years. KKBBS (Kawthulei Karen Baptist Bible School) is on the west end. The camp has three sections, A, B, and C. We were in C and foreigners are not allowed to cross the river to the main C by orders of the Thai officials. The entire camp is surrounded by barbed wire with many breaches to get fire wood. In our sections were five guardposts where Karens watched out for Burmese troop attacks. The guards have no weapons. In theory the Thai army is supposed to protect the Karen refugees from incursions by the Burma Army, but actually they run away.

The Burma army is systematically destroying Karen villages in Shwe Gyin and Nyaungleben in Burma and has produced 30,000 new refugees since February 2006.

In theory, the Karen refugees are not allowed to do business. So we discussed how they could have unobtrusive businesses. They came up with some good ideas—1. Karen Museum with Karen History, How Christianity came to the Karens, Karen artifacts, Karen Hall of Fame, and current Karen handicrafts.

Another thought of making a children's book of Karen children's games. Another suggested making Children's videos—one to teach the Karen alphabet, another to tell Karen folk stories, another Biblical stories in Karen, and lastly a DVD on Karen contemporary music.

Others worked on a solar cooker and succeeded in cooking some rice. The evening group wants a coffee shop, a shop selling traditional clothes, etc.

Most read the textbook because their English is better than in Burma, but their math is very weak. For example, if a merchant bought 12 items for 375 baht, they could not figure out what he paid for each one.



They did have an interest in learning more about the Grameen bank which does micro credit loans in Bangladesh.

The school recently got Internet but smoke (from cooking fires), rain and clouds often prevented access.

There were a number of heart warming incidents. Last spring, while walking for exercise, I found a harmonica. I saw it while packing up and put it in. A year earlier a student has asked Mary for one but she forgot about it. I gave it to her and she passed it on. The student was thrilled. My finding it and bringing it was a good coincidence. Coincidences are God's way to stay anonymous.

For years Lauckport Baptist Church of Parkersburg, W. Va had supported five students at KKBBS and I got a report on them. Paw Chrit graduated and became a teacher in a primary school and also Sunday School. Her students are Sgaw Karen, Pwo Karen, Burmese, and Bangladesh. She teaches in English and Karen. Sai Ler was another student who worked in the school office after graduation and then went to Wallei where he is a pastor. Kay Ra Htoo is working with a NGO (Non Government Organization) in teacher education and training. She is married with five children including two who are twins. Genevieve worked in the KKBBS library. She lost her baby and then resettled in Australia. Saw Kaw Lah Moo is a pastor at

Ler Dah mission church in Burma. Saw Isaac works with IDPs as a medic with Free Burma Rangers, Dr. Cynthia and the KNU. Saw Htoo Gay is the principal of a Bible School at Chon Pongs, Thailand.



My Morning BA Students Class

Nine Norwegians came for two days on a fact finding expedition for their Lutheran fund raising program for forgotten people.

On another day an old man showed up with his daughter, Karen, and two granddaughters who had been raised in the Netherlands. He had been hidden by the Karens in WWII for three years from the Japanese. He named his daughter Karen in honor of them and wanted to show his granddaughters the people who saved his life.

The Women's group had a conference and I gave the pastoral prayer. They insisted on giving me 500 B (\$13.51) which Mary said I must not refuse. The camp guards make 500 B a month for thirty nights guarding. I felt bad accepting it.

One of the women's leaders, Naw Blay Paw Htoo, came up and told me she had received a Sowards Scholarship at Karen Baptist Theological Seminary in 1987. She also remembered my speaking in Wal Lei.

At least three old persons came up and told me my father had taught them when they were young. One even sang the song they had sung at his farewell.



The second week I got a lot of bites on my bottom which made life miserable. I washed each morning in a bucket of cold water but the unclean water caused infection and then a lot of pain. I made a simple solar water heater so I could wash my hair in the afternoon in warm water.

I went to Mai Sot twice with Saw Simon through three check points were he gave a bag of goodies to get us through.

I met so many dedicated people. The principal, Saw Simon, has morning worship in his home every morning. The room was packed. Mary said he had about 50 in his family—students, orphans, and others taken in because they had no one. I asked him how many were in his family and he said he didn't know. He has dedicated his life to this school.

When we talked about Karen traditions, my class told me about a "love bag" which a girl would give a boy to indicate her love for him. So they made one for Diana and me which she is modeling after I got home.

Excerpts from Students' Lives

Wally: I was born in Bu Koe village from Karenni State. My life style was very bad because of situation. Many times the SPDC (Burma Army) came to my village and burned the homes so the villagers were separated and became lower (poorer) people. Therefore my heart is very sad.

Saw Has Bwea Say: My grandfather and father were killed by Burmese (SPDC) soldiers when I was a child.

Naw Khu Pwo Do Soe Gay: I became a refugee when I was eight. Now I'm staying in Mae La Camp for more than 13 years. But I know that I am really blessed by God so I love my family here with me in camp.

Naw Eh Ti Paw: In 1997 the Burmese army attacked the camp and burned so my grandmother died and others were hurt.

Saw Peter Pan Bu: The villagers in my father's village are farmers and plantation workers. Their lives are very difficult. The Myanmar government troops force them to carry their things when they go to the front... Sometimes the government did not allow to ship important things such as dry cell batteries, medicines etc. Whenever I visit my father's village, I bring some medicines for the village. So the government also accused me as a supporter of KNU (Karen National Union which is fighting the Burma government.)

Naw Dah Mu: I was born in the jungle under the tree because my parent(s) had no home to live.