

## NO GREATER LOVE

Resistance in Japanese Occupied Burma



# N GREA LO

Resistance leader Hugh Seagrim waged war 75 years ago with a Bible in one hand and a Tommy gun in the other to become one of Britain's most highly decorated clandestine heroes of the Second World War. **Steve Snelling** chronicles an epic saga of courage and self-sacrifice in Japanese-occupied Burma. >>



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**MAIN IMAGE:**  
Clandestine hero:  
Hugh Paul Seagrim  
(1909-1944),  
inspirational  
leader of the  
Karen resistance  
movement, best  
remembered by  
his nickname as  
'Grandfather Long  
Legs'.

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### ABOVE:

*Beasts of burden: elephants like these seen fording a river in the Karen Hills were used to ferry arms and supplies among Seagrim's underground army of volunteers.*

**T**he jungle trail followed no discernible pattern as it snaked precariously over precipitous hills and through thickets of bamboo. Every step was a struggle. But the small party, comprising a solitary British soldier and seven Karen guerrilla fighters, did not deviate as they trudged ever deeper into one of the remotest corners of Burma. For five exhausting days they slithered and stumbled through the southern Shan Hills until, at last, they reached their journey's end. A quarter of an hour or so after passing a primitive bamboo shelter, they approached an even more ramshackle hideaway and its sole occupant: a tall, bearded, dark-skinned man, his long hair tied up in a bob, clad in native dress.

### BELOW:

*Burmese battleground: it was in these hills that Seagrim was hidden while the Japanese carried out their campaign of terror in early 1944.*

At first glance, he looked like an Indian. But appearances were deceptive. Within moments, the gaunt and gangling figure had leapt

down from the shack's veranda and, in a voice trembling with emotion, welcomed his visitor. "Hello, old chap," he said. "How are you?"

In this peculiarly English manner did Roy Pagani make the extraordinary acquaintance of Hugh Seagrim, more familiarly known to his army of Karen tribesmen as 'Grandfather Long Legs'. It was, by any standards, one of the Second World War's strangest and most remarkable encounters between two British soldiers - one an escaped prisoner from the notorious Death Railway and the other the most revered of all British resistance leaders operating behind enemy lines. Pagani would later compare their meeting with that of Stanley and Livingstone. And there were certainly parallels between them as the unruly adventurer found himself in thrall to a visionary destined to be remembered as the embodiment of the Christian soldier. The memory of their time together, engaged in a perilous clandestine struggle against the tyranny

of a ruthless Japanese regime aided and abetted by Burmese nationalists, would serve as a lifelong inspiration. Describing his unconventional commander as a "bloody saint", he recalled a man, worshipped by his native troops as a demi-god, who conducted war "with the Bible in one hand and a Tommy gun in the other" and whose courage and self-sacrifice became the moving spirit behind an unrivalled guerrilla campaign which helped seal one of the greatest victories of the Far Eastern conflict.

### 'ACCIDENT PRONE'

One of five brothers to serve 'King and Country', Hugh Paul Seagrim was an unusually independently-minded officer whose unorthodoxy was almost certainly rooted in his free-spirited upbringing. The youngest son of a gifted clergyman, he was born in Ashmansworth, Hampshire, in 1909, the year that his father became rector of Whissonsett-with-Horningtoft, two small Norfolk villages 20 miles north-west of Norwich. Schooled at home until his eighth birthday, he grew up with a love of nature and the surrounding countryside that served as his playground in what was a charmed childhood. His brother Jack recalled: "We were as poor as church mice, but we had a wonderful life... We knew everybody by their Christian names and we were all great friends. We had a huge garden, a huge house and we had our own cows, pigs, hens, bees and dogs - lots of dogs. As youngsters we could do more or less what we liked, but we had to go to church at least once every Sunday and took it in turns to pump the organ while our mother played."

In those halcyon days before and during the First World War, Hugh acquired the first of his nicknames, 'Bumpkins' shortened to 'Bumps' on account of his propensity for tumbling



**ABOVE:** Brotherhood of valour: the Seagrim boys with their mother at home in Norfolk. Hugh Seagrim, the youngest, is second from the right, with Derek, the future Victoria Cross recipient, next to him on the far right. They remain the only instance of brothers earning the nation's highest bravery awards.



**LEFT:** Charmed childhood: Hugh with his father, the Rev Charles Seagrim, rector of Whissonsett-with-Horningtoft during the First World War.

down stairs. "He was incredibly accident-prone," Jack recalled. "I even remember him once falling out of our pony and trap and landing slap in the middle of the road!" By 1917, though, the three youngest brothers, Derek, Jack and Hugh, had exchanged village life for boarding school in Norwich where they became known as Seagrim major, Seagrim minor and Seagrim tertius. None were particularly academic, though Hugh harboured ambitions of becoming a doctor until his father's death in 1927. The loss, during his final year, ended all hopes of a university education and with the family's finances strained, he resorted instead to a career in the services. His brothers were all officers in the army - Charles in the Royal Artillery, Cyril

the Royal Engineers and Derek with the Green Howards (with whom he later earned a posthumously awarded Victoria Cross in North Africa) and Jack in the Indian army. As a result, Hugh sought to break the mould by joining the Royal Navy but a medical examination scuppered his plans when it was discovered he was partially colour blind. And so it was that he became the fifth sibling to enter Sandhurst, and on his way to a commission in the Burma Rifles, where he quickly gained a reputation as an amusing if somewhat eccentric officer with a radical outlook on military and imperial life in general.

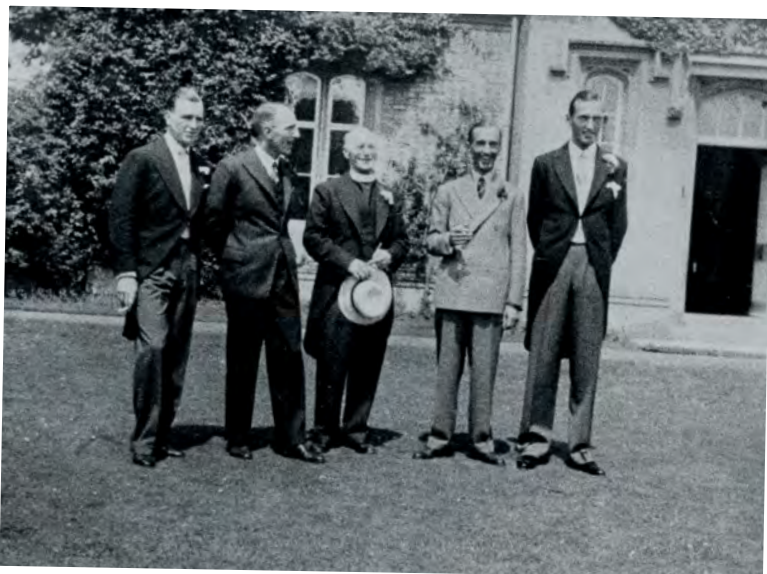
A friend, Harold Braund, who later served with the Burma Frontier Force and knew him as a fellow worshipper

at Rangoon's Anglican Cathedral, described him as "a dynamic, infectious character".

Recalling happy times spent in the company of 'Stookey' Seagrim, as he had been dubbed after a defrocked Norfolk rector whose scandalised liaisons with prostitutes had made headlines around the world, Braund observed how they "got involved in discussion, sometimes religious, sometimes not, but usually serious - despite which, Stookey's manner of arguing promoted laughter sooner or later".

Part philosopher, music lover, voracious reader and inveterate traveller to the remoter regions of Burma and the Himalayas, he did not fit easily into the reactionary world of the colonial ruling class. >>

**LEFT:** Family gathering: Hugh Seagrim is on the far right, next to his brother Derek, in this rare reunion between the two world wars.



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#### RIGHT:

*Tribute: Harold Braund, right, was a pre-war friend who described Seagrim as 'a dynamic, infectious character'. Braund later served with the Chin Levies, earning an MBE and a Military Cross.*

He eschewed the 'horsey atmosphere' of the polo field for the football pitch where he was often the only British player in a team of Burmese. He drank little, smoked less and argued a lot, particularly about senior officers' hide-bound attitudes towards soldiering. Over time, he also came to question training methods, which he felt were too formal and fundamentally unsuited to the character of the hill men who made up the bulk of his battalion, also the recruiting system, which he maintained duped 'simple' folk into enlisting for paltry reward, and the rigid promotion structure which he criticised for placing seniority ahead of merit and ability to lead. Of all his complaints, the one that rankled most was the failure to acknowledge the particular strengths of the soldiers they commanded. Rather than mindless drill and formal manoeuvres, he argued time and again that they would be better trained as guerrilla fighters to operate in the hills they knew so well. That such revolutionary views might have hindered his own advancement mattered hardly a jot. For as he was fond of remarking, "he would sooner have been a postman in Norfolk than a General in India". It would take a world war and the prospect of



catastrophic defeat for High Command to recognise the error of their ways.

#### 'HARASSING PATROLS'

In January 1942, the man who had spent much of his career cheerfully challenging authority and forever flouting convention suddenly found himself no longer 'a prophet without honour' but rather as a key figure in a new form of irregular warfare intended to counter the seemingly

unstoppable march of the Imperial Japanese Army into Burma. After only a few weeks spent in charge of a detachment of the 12<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles guarding Mingaladon airfield, Captain Hugh Seagrim's application to join the so-called Karen Levies being hurriedly raised under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Noel Stevenson, an irascible and far-sighted Frontier Service administrator, was granted. At the age of 32, 'Stookey' Seagrim finally had the opportunity to put his frequently espoused ideas into practice in the most desperate of circumstances.

Though little over a month old, the war in the Far East was progressing badly for the Allies when he set off for Papun in the Salween District with a truck-load of arms and in full knowledge that the region to which he was headed was liable to be overrun in a matter of days. His plan, outlined during a meeting with Major General Jackie Smyth, Commanding 17<sup>th</sup> Division, was to organise a force of Karens using as a nucleus the 55 members of the Salween District military police, to stage hit-and-run raids on the enemy's rail and road communications between Moulmein

#### RIGHT:

*Ill-equipped: men of Seagrim's unit, the Burma Rifles, with First World War vintage Lewis gun prepare to meet the Japanese onslaught in late 1941.*



#### BELOW:

*On manoeuvres: men of the Burma Rifles practice an attack as they prepare for conventional war in 1941. They would prove ill-prepared for the struggle against the Japanese.*



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and Rangoon. Operating under the aegis of Special Operation Executive's Oriental Mission, albeit under Army control, he was supplied with 200 Italian rifles and a few thousand rounds of ammunition which reached him just hours before the Japanese advance effectively cut him off from the retreating British and Indian army.

The risks, already enormous, now multiplied - but Seagrim stuck to his original plan. As the Army, together with thousands of mostly Indian civilians, continued the longest retreat in British military history, he determined to remain behind, foster resistance and to share the uncertain fate of his Karen volunteers in the belief that they would one day be able to rise up in support of an anticipated counter-offensive.

Between February and April 1942, as his force swelled to number more than a thousand, he became engaged in a ruthless struggle for survival; more often, this was against sections of the Burmese Independence Army

otherwise known to the British as the Burmese Traitor Army. In a bitter internecine conflict characterised by atrocity and massacre that served as a grim presage to the longer war to follow, the ill-armed but more highly motivated Karen Levies eventually triumphed, driving the Burmese turncoats out of the hills. By then, Seagrim, who had moved his base further north to an all but inaccessible village deep in the heart of Karen country and out of touch with the Allied forces disappearing rapidly north towards the Indian border. His last contact with a British officer was via a letter delivered by one of his most trusted volunteers which resulted in a small but much-needed supply of arms. It was barely enough to mount anything beyond what a report described as "harassing patrols against Jap foraging parties". Seagrim, however, remained undaunted.

Together with a final shipment of shotguns and grenades, he had received word not only of the parlous state of affairs in Burma, but also of a



possible way out should he prefer to escape.

In accepting the former, he chose to ignore the latter. No matter how bleak the outlook, he had resolved to continue with his mission for as long as possible and, in the words of a last letter written to his mother, "to leave a memory with the Karens". It was a brave act of defiance that very nearly ended before it had hardly begun. Returning from an audacious but vain attempt to renew contact with retreating British forces in order to obtain a wireless receiver >>



**ABOVE:**  
*Source of strength: the church at Pyagawpu where Seagrim worshipped while preaching resistance to the Japanese.*

**LEFT:**  
*Training for war: camouflaged troops from the Burma Rifles lead their pack mules through the jungle during the countdown to war.*

**LEFT:**  
*Great escaper: Roy 'Ras' Pagani served with the East Surrey Regiment before transferring to the 18th Reconnaissance Regiment.*

**BELOW:**  
*Forested refuge: the jungle-clad hills of the Salween district of Burma proved fertile ground for resistance to the Japanese occupation.*

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#### RIGHT:

Resistance refuge: a hut typical of the sort in which Seagrim was sheltered during his efforts to maintain the loyalty of the Karen people during the Japanese occupation.



#### BELOW:

Faithful friend: Po Hla, the former Burma Rifleman who acted as a liaison officer for Seagrim, and was later sentenced to eight years' imprisonment by the Japanese. He escaped by jumping out of a train while being moved from Rangoon in April 1945.

#### BELOW RIGHT:

Loyal lieutenant: Ba Gyaw, the first SOE agent to parachute into the Karen Hills in 1943. Later captured, he was executed together with Seagrim in September 1944.

and transmitter, he and two others were ambushed by bandits. One of his companions was killed, but he escaped and went into hiding from which he did not emerge for four gruelling months.

#### 'SMILEY-FACED'

Although he did not know it, Seagrim was the last-remaining British officer from the Oriental Mission still at large in Burma. But despite being marooned in a pestilential forest without any idea of the location of his superiors, or means to contact them, he persisted with his efforts to expand his sphere of influence. Before heading north on his failed reconnaissance, he had given strict orders to his burgeoning army of resistors to lay low. They were to "return to their villages in order to protect them against the dacoits [armed robbers]... and to keep as quiet as possible until he called for them".

But from his isolated hut near Mawtudo, where he remained

under the protective care of two Karen pastors, Seagrim continued to grow his organisation. Between bouts of malaria and spells of work, helping local peasant farmers tend their fields, he made clandestine contact with an increasing number of former soldiers from the Burma Rifles, compiled a secret register of potential new recruits and made preliminary plans for his extended network of guerrillas to assist British troops when they returned.

In order to maintain support, he ordered the sale of three 'government elephants' to pay his expanding underground army and, at the same time, made unsuccessful efforts to signal his presence to 'friendly' aircraft.

Finally, with his health weakening, he arranged to return to Pygawpu. He arrived at a neighbouring village on 5 December 1942, wearing traditional Karen garb and carrying only a Tommy gun, pistol, blanket and Bible which he would read from cover to cover no fewer than 12 times. According to Ian Morrison, the

Times correspondent who became his biographer, he was "bare-foot and bearded, thin and haggard, but in great spirits", or, as one volunteer put it, "smiley-faced". Seagrim's morale was further lifted by the extraordinary arrival of Roy 'Ras' Pagani. Having escaped from the Burma end of the Death Railway, the 27-year-old corporal from the 18<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment had been guided into the hills by friendly Karens.

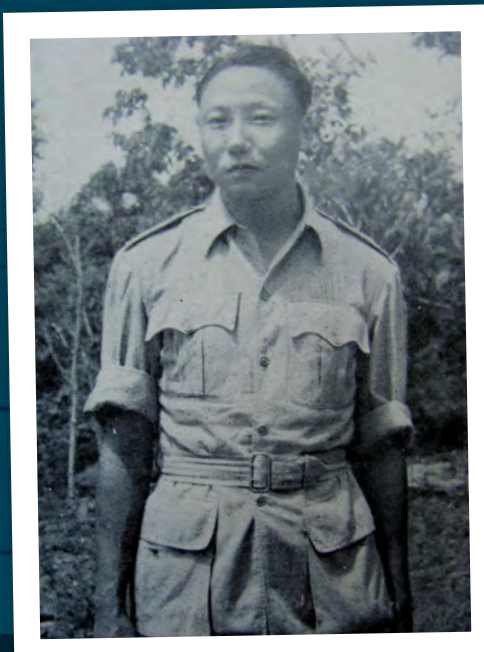
Their mutual joy was unconfined. They spent their first night together talking without pause about their experiences. "I'd never met a man more likeable," recalled Pagani years later.

"We talked about religion and beliefs and there was never any question of officer and other rank." The astonishing meeting acted as a much-needed tonic to both men. It served also to galvanise Seagrim into renewed action with Pagani a willing ally in his scheme. After just 10 days together, Pagani, who had agreed to put on hold his own ambitious hopes of reaching India, was sent off to take control of the southern sector with instructions to put a stop to feuding and to beat off any enemy incursions - though only if he felt strong enough to do so. "He put his faith in me," Pagani later recalled, "and told me to go with the motto: 'to think is to act.'" It was typical of Seagrim. Ever the compassionate commander, he never lost sight of the bigger picture. To him, resistance meant maintaining the loyalty of the Karens and establishing an army in waiting rather than indulging in the kind of pin-prick raids that would have served only to provoke brutal retribution for no military purpose.

One of his most trusted supporters, Saw Ta Roe, later reported a village elder urging Seagrim to supply him with arms and ammunition to fight the Japanese, "but the captain said that the time is not yet ripened (sic)". Another time, Saw Ta Roe recalled Seagrim telling him "not to be disheartened as the British troops will be returning". For now, though, there were only two. And, all too soon, there was just one.

#### 'BURNT DOWN'

Having successfully reasserted control in the south, Pagani returned to Pygawpu to discover Seagrim was no longer there, having been forced to go back into hiding at a few hours' notice following a Japanese sweep of the neighbourhood. The two men would never meet again. After waiting for three or four days, Pagani





**ABOVE:**  
Fugitives: Eric McCrindle, far right, seen here during the desperate retreat through Burma in 1942, volunteered to join Seagrim in the Karen Hills and was killed during a fire-fight with the Japanese in February 1944.



**LEFT:**  
Clandestine warrior: Jimmy Nimmo commanded the SOE team dropped into the Karen Hills in the autumn of 1943.

decided to resume his great escape - an epic journey destined to end with his recapture and incarceration in Rangoon Jail. Seagrim, however, was able to stay one step ahead of his pursuers thanks to the unwavering support of his loyal volunteers who included Po Hla, a former subaltern in the Burma Rifles, who acted as a liaison officer between the various sections. And, although he didn't know it, help was also on its way from another unexpected source which, ultimately, would prove a curse as well as a blessing, leading to the downfall of the most successful resistance leader in Burma.

Following the first Chindit operation in the spring of 1943, reports had reached SOE Headquarters suggesting

that Seagrim was still very much alive. A daring plan was, therefore, hatched to send a search party to the Karen Hills to find out for certain and, if possible, make contact with him.

Led by Burma Rifleman Second Lieutenant Ba Gyaw, they represented the advance guard of a second wave of British resistance leaders, comprising two Scots, Major Jimmy Nimmo and Captain Eric McCrindle, pre-war timber workers who had trekked out of Burma in 1942. After myriad difficulties and delays, Ba Gyaw and Nimmo were both able to reach Seagrim and, by October 1943, were feeding 'high grade' intelligence back to India. But so much activity did not go unnoticed. Parachutes had been seen.

Rumours fuelled reports leading the Japanese to step up their hunt. Bit by bit, the net began to tighten round the newly reinforced resistance network, culminating in a campaign of terror that spelled the beginning of the end for Seagrim. In the space of 48 hours in mid-February 1944 McCrindle and Nimmo were killed in fire-fights as Japanese forces led by Captain Motoichi Inoue of the Kempeitai raided two of the volunteers' forest camps. Yet again, the man known as 'Grandfather Long Legs' was on the run, but this time the Japanese pursuit was as brutal as it was remorseless. Persecution was their chief weapon in efforts to flush out Seagrim. Saw Ta Roe later gave the colonial authorities

an account of the horrors inflicted on his people: "After a week's search for him and as he could not be found the neighbouring jungles were burnt down together with many Karen villages for a radius of eight miles round Papun and all food destroyed."

**'I WILL SUFFER'**

Pillage and torture were followed by executions with the threat of more to follow, but still the Karens continued to shelter Seagrim. Earlier, with the crisis deepening, Seagrim called a meeting of Karen elders at which he had asked them to decide >>



**LEFT:**  
The hunter: Captain Motoichi Inoue led the brutal campaign to kill or capture Hugh Seagrim and to eradicate his resistance network.

THE TEXT OF THIS MESSAGE MUST BE PARAPHRASED IF NECESSARY TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE



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### RIGHT:

Honours displayed: descendants of the Seagrim family presenting Hugh's George Cross group and Derek's Victoria Cross group to the Imperial War Museum on loan.

### FAR RIGHT:

For gallantry: Seagrim was awarded a posthumous George Cross for 'self-sacrifice and bravery'. According to the citation accompanying his distinction, he 'deliberately gave himself up to save others, knowing well what his fate was likely to be...'

### BELOW:

Roll of honour: Hugh Seagrim's name features along with his brother Derek on the war memorial in Whissonsett where he grew up.



his fate. "Must I... make my way out of this place; must I surrender to the Japanese; must I commit suicide?" And he concluded, according to Saw Ta Roe by saying "If I have to suffer I will suffer it by myself. I do not like Karens or anybody to suffer for me."

At that time they had agreed for him to move, but abandonment of the people who had shielded and sustained him for so long was no longer an option in Seagrim's eyes.

At least 270 people had been arrested, many of them beaten and some murdered. The only way to stop the slaughter was to give himself up in the certain knowledge that he would be effectively signing his own death warrant.

One day in March, 1944, Hugh Seagrim walked into a Japanese-occupied village. According to Saw Ta Roe, "he gladly came to surrender, dressed in Karen costume". Almost his first words to the senior Japanese officer: "Treat the Karens generously. They are not to blame. I alone am responsible for what has happened in the hills." It was a plea he would repeat throughout his incarceration in Rangoon, and again at his trial in September when the death sentence was passed on him. Saw Ta Roe, who was with him almost to the end, recorded: "Before... sentence was passed the Japanese officer asked... whether he agreed to the sentence passed. Captain (sic) Seagrim replied that this war is not a Karen war but a war between the Japanese and the British, therefore you must release all the Karens." But it was all to no avail. Seven Karens, including Lieutenant Ba Gyaw, were sentenced to death with Seagrim. Offered a last meal of rice and hot tea, most declined. Saw Ta Roe, who was among 10 Karens given 10-year prison terms, witnessed the final act. "Seagrim's hands were tied behind his back," he later reported. "They were then told to get into a motor truck and were driven away. Captain Seagrim, as he passed us, shouted 'goodbye' to us all.

This was my last view of our Seagrim." Some time before, Seagrim had told one of his supporters:



"Christ sacrificed for the world. I will sacrifice for the Karens." He had kept his word, just as he had kept faith in the people who had answered his call to remain true to the British cause.

Months after his death in front of a Japanese firing squad that faith would be fully justified as 12,000 Karen fighters, armed and led by British agents, took part in Operation Character, a major guerrilla campaign launched against the retreating enemy forces that was credited with helping drive the Japanese out of Burma. In the fullness of time, Seagrim's final gallant gesture would be recognised by the posthumous award of the George Cross which, together with a Distinguished Service Order and MBE awarded for his work in the Karen Hills, made him the most highly decorated British clandestine warrior of the Second World War. But his most enduring legacy was to be found elsewhere, in the Christian example he had set. He had wanted to 'leave a memory' and this he had done at the cost of his life.

Roy Pagani, who survived captivity to receive a Military Medal for his audacious escape from the Death Railway, later reflected: "Through all their subsequent troubles, the Karens never forgot what he did for them. He was a good Christian who made the ultimate sacrifice and I think the Karens saw him as a symbol of those who would relieve them of oppression." ©

