

## SAO HKUN U (1934-37)

He was born on 26 February 1920 and was the son of Hkun Pan Sing and Sao Noom. His father was the Sawbwa of Tawngpeng in Burma. "Sawbwa" is a royal title. His older brother **Sao Hkun Aung (1934-36)** also attended the College.

During WW2 he served with the RAF in Burma and was killed in operations over Burma on 3 January 1945. He is commemorated on the WW2 War Memorial in the College Chapel.



That would have been all we knew of him if it hadn't been for Matt Poole of Wheaton, Maryland, USA who got in touch with us in January 2009. He has undertaken a huge amount of research into what became of the crew of KH214 and I'm delighted to include below what he has provided.

*I am writing in reference to **Flight Lieutenant Sao Hkun U**, an Old Framlinghamian who, as a Royal Air Force mid-upper turret gunner, was killed flying on a Far East combat operation in the Second World War. With your help, I seek further information on his Framlingham College years. I would be grateful for the opportunity to correspond with a relevant school historian and/or with Old Framlinghamians who are still around who attended school with him, such as Commander John Simpson (K32-36) and Ken Knight (K32-38). Perhaps Richard Rowe might best assist me; I am guessing that he posted a photo of Sao Hkun U and his 1936 Framlingham College rugby teammates to the Society of Old Framlinghamians website [he is middle row one from left]. More on this follows.*



*I have extensively investigated the loss of Sao Hkun U's four-engine bomber, an RAF 215 Squadron B-24 Liberator whose serial number was KH214. It was shot down by anti-aircraft fire on 3 January 1945 during a low-level attack along the Burma-Siam Railway (of "The Bridge on the River Kwai" notoriety), constructed by PoW and Asian labourers at a hideous human cost. The eleven men comprising the crew of KH214, killed in the crash, are officially missing, with no known graves.*

*I have discovered, however, that their communal grave site in southern Burma was visited on 26 September 1945 by the first post-war Allied graves search team to reach the area (in a quest to document PoW burial sites before the jungle growth hid them). The crewmen's remains had been recovered from the wreckage and interred by the Japanese in a bomb crater in the village of Anankwin, adjacent to the rail line. A photograph of a graveside memorial service was taken on this date, and a surviving diary written by the British padre who conducted the service has provided me with the evidence needed to link these casualties, without question, to KH214.*

*For reasons that are unexplained, these airmen were never exhumed from the grave and reinterred in a war cemetery, as were literally thousands of Burma -Siam Railway PoW casualties. Among the men buried today at Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery, only 28 miles from Anankwin, is an Australian Army PoW whose solitary grave, per the padre's diary, was also found on 26 September 1945 in Anankwin. Why was this PoW casualty recovered (in 1946) while eleven KH214 airmen in the same village were forgotten? I suspect that an administrative error resulted from the fact that these RAF crewmen were non-PoW casualties, unlike the vast majority (all?) of other graves found in the region.*

*One wonders if the villagers shared their knowledge of the airmen's gravesite with the casualty-recovery team, which returned to exhume the Aussie PoW's body in 1946. This team, most likely, consisted of none of the thirteen men who comprised the September 1945 group.*

*Regardless of the reasoning, clearly an awareness of the existence of the KH214 crew remains was either ignored or, more likely, lost through poor communication.*

*When the war ended, the stability in this region of Burma began to deteriorate. After Burma gained independence from Great Britain in 1948 lawlessness and political insurrection increased further. Eventually the region was declared unsafe, and the war graves searches were halted.*

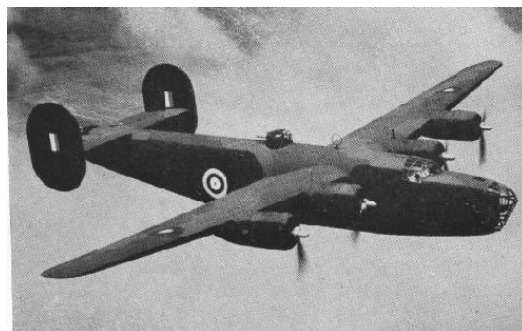
*This is the Karen District of Burma. Factions of the Karen people, of whom many are Christians, have essentially been at war with the Burmese government for over sixty years. Atrocities against the Karens continue to this day. In fact, the Burmese Army maintains a military encampment in Anankwin, and I know that in 2008 there was violence in the area.*

*Because of the Karen region's turmoil, it has been impossible (so far) for me to find anyone who can gain permission to visit Anankwin in order to make inquiries about the grave.*

*As six of the KH214 crewmen (including the pilot) were members of the Royal Canadian Air Force, the Canadian government in 2005/2006 was keen to negotiate with Burma for permission to search for the KH214 gravesite. In the 1990s Canada had engaged in protracted diplomacy with Burma and had won approval to excavate a jungle crash site in another part of the country. Human remains were recovered during that successful operation.*

*However, due to worsening relations between Burma and Canada in the past three years, coupled with a change in internal Canadian policy, Canada is not currently involved with the KH214 project.*

*I have been able to make contact with the kin of all eleven KH214 airmen. Not one family knew of the crew's grave or the photo of the 26 September 1945 graveside memorial service. In addition to Sao Hkun U and the six Canadians, there were four British men in the crew.*



*It is Sao Hkun U's story, which is perhaps the most intriguing of the KH214 crew biographies. He was the son of Hkun Pan Sing and Sao Noom (father and mother, respectively), of Namhsan, Tawngpeng, in the Federated Shan States of Burma - a semi-autonomous region ruled for over 200 years by the Sawbwas, or hereditary rulers of the Shan districts. Hkun Pan Sing became the Sawbwa of Tawngpeng in 1926, and Sao Hkun U was his eldest son. On the Internet, should you google on their names and/or "Namhsan" or "Tawngpeng", you will find a smattering of further information.*

*Sao Hkun U was sent to England for his education. I do not have full details, but from your website I have learned that he attended Framlingham College between 1934 and 1937. He went on to attend either Oxford or Cambridge before volunteering for the Royal Air Force.*

*Hkun Pan Sing remained as Sawbwa of Tawngpeng after Burmese independence. The Constitution which went into effect in 1948 with independence, however, was illegally altered by then-Prime Minister U Nu, and by the late 1950s the Shan leaders realized they had been taken advantage of. Secession from the Union of Burma arose as an issue among the Shan leaders, but the majority of the Sawbwas were committed to working out a solution with the elected U Nu Government. In March 1962, during a high level seminar on federal issues attended by the Prime Minister and senior Shan representatives, General Ne Win staged a coup, placed all members of parliament, including Sawbwas, in prison and subjected the people to military rule which still exists. Burma became a country without law and order. Over the ensuing decades the military has readily used its power to oppress, persecute, and terrorise people, especially those belonging to ethnic groups: the Shan, Karens, Kachins, Chins and others. Burma's human rights record is considered abysmal.*

*The Sawbwas were forced, through violence, to give up their power and hereditary rights. Many families scattered far and wide, to escape persecution.*

I am not quite certain of the fate of Hkun Pan Sing and his family during this period. I presume that he was still the Sawbwa of Tawngpeng at the time of General Ne Win's violent coup, but whether he was imprisoned is unclear. I was told that he died at the age 82, though I do not know when this was.

One of Sao Hkun U's younger brothers emigrated to Thailand, and then to the United States. He was still living in Texas, as of 2006 (my most recent contact with the family), but advanced Alzheimer's Disease had robbed him of his memory. His wife told me that two other siblings, a brother and a sister, still resided in Burma, but due to their intense fear of persecution it was not safe for me to have direct contact with them. I do know that the brother still in Burma had been jailed without explanation at some point. Several of Sao Hkun U's half-siblings live in Florida, Canada, and Australia. Theirs was a large family.



Two nights ago I searched the Internet and discovered the aforementioned photo of Sao Hkun U, as a member of the 1936 Framlingham College School Rugby First XV. This photo is the first image of Sao Hkun U I have seen; his brother's wife could not provide a photo. It is my hope that I might obtain an even higher resolution version, or a new high resolution scan which is cropped around the image of Sao Hkun U.

On your website I also found a photo of the College's War Memorial, which includes his name.

I will be contacting his brother's wife in Texas very soon and will send her copies of the photos. Perhaps she will be able to share this photo with her far-flung family in Burma, Canada, Australia, and the US.

Attached is a photo of the 26 September 1945 memorial service at the KH214 crew gravesite. You will note that there are Japanese soldiers standing on the rim of the bomb crater, along with local Anankwin villagers. The war was over, but the Japanese military forces had not been sent home. A Japanese Army captain who had been in charge of the anti-aircraft gun crew which brought down the bomber had come forward on 26 September to explain what happened on 3 January 1945. His details, recorded in the padre's diary, were very accurate when compared to the RAF records documenting the circumstances of the KH214's downing.



A newly liberated Death Railway POW, Padre Henry C.F. Babb, volunteered to participate in the first post-hostilities graves survey along the length of the railway in late 1945. His fascinating diary, entitled "War Graves Commission Search for Graves Along the Burma-Thailand Railway September-October 1945", survives in the archives of the Australian War Memorial.

Below is the appropriate excerpt of Padre Henry C.F. Babb's trip diary, 26 Sept 1945, when the search team reached the grave of Sao Hkun U and crew. The search team did not know which B-24 crew was buried there. The relevant diary passage connects perfectly to RAF 215 Squadron Liberator KH214, in which Sao Hkun U was flying as Mid-Upper Gunner:

**Excerpt of the graves search mission diary of Padre H.C.F. Babb, 26 September 1945**

We were up at 06.00 hours - wash and brush up - the sky is badly overcast and we can expect showers today. At 08.15 hours we left Anarkwin by diesel and returned to the 380 km mark. Near the line was a single Australian grave which was checked by Lt Lemon.

Through the interpreter, Capt SAKAI, who was acting as our guide, told us a very interesting story, which seems to ring true. "On Jan 3rd 1945, four planes (B 24) flew in from the sea over ANANKWIN. Ronsi and Apparon (85 km) were bombed, and back came the planes to Anarkwin - they were flying fairly low and circled the area once. An AA unit of the India National Army opened up with their Bofors. 2 planes were hit and one crashed on the left hand side of the line coming from THANBYUZAYAT. It fell some 100 yards from Army Post Office building near the bazaar area.

The plane was burnt out, and Capt SAKAI collected the bones of 10, evidently all the crew, and had them buried nearby. The grave stands in a 250 kilo bomb crater which was made on a previous raid.

Capt Sakai took us to the grave, which was in perfect order and a 6 ft cross had been erected.

The Padre took a burial service, and all the party paid their last respects to 10 fellow comrades. Nips and Burmese watched the ceremony in silence.

Capt Sakai told us that on Jan 4th 1945, the day after the B-24 was brought down, 12 planes came over ANANKWIN for revenge as he put it. They plastered the area with 58 bombs, killed every Nip soldier in the area except himself, knocked out the Bofors and killed 2 Indians of the AA unit.

We were then taken by a staff car back to the Officers' Mess of last night [in Anankwin]. Our favourite sweet drink was provided and bananas. We then walked to the Railway Track and crossed it to find an Australian grave, a lad by the name of Barnard. **[It was Barnard's grave which was recovered the following year and moved to Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery, 28 miles away, while the Liberator crew grave was completely forgotten.]**

We had completed what we had set out to do plus the visit and service at the B-24 grave. It had been raining as it only can in Burma. We were soaked, but happy in that we have done a good job of our work in spite of torrential rains.

I recently located the Japanese Army translator who had accompanied the Allied graves search team on their September visit to Anankwin. He was there at the KH214 gravesite, and I know he wrote about it in a book, which was printed in English; I do not yet have this book. Any day now I expect to receive his reply to my specific questions regarding his recollections of the gravesite visit. It is possible that he was also taken to the actual crash site nearby, as well. I have not yet found the evidence of the crash site on very detailed wartime air reconnaissance imagery taken five days after KH214 went down, and it would be remarkable if this Japanese veteran (who happens to be very well known for his decades of peace-and-reconciliation activities) could help me to pinpoint it.

I must say it is a special treat for me to learn history in a roundabout way. For example, from my investigations into the KH214 crew I stumbled upon your website, with intrigue and now I know a bit about Framlingham College and its storied tradition of excellence. The name Framlingham, by the way, is recognizable to me as being a wartime American B-17 base, and I was just comparing a recent google satellite image of the old airfield with an aerial shot from the war. Then and now...it really fascinates me.

He also provided the following additional information :-

I just found an excerpt from the 215 Squadron records stating the following:

POSTINGS - R.A.F.

112240 F/Lt. H.U. Sao GD (Wop/Air) Posted from No. 357 Squadron for flying duties w.e.f. 8/12/44 to No. 215 Squadron.

A translation of this: Flight Lieutenant H.U. Sao, who was trained as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, ("GD" being something like "General Duties") was posted to 215 Squadron from 357 Squadron for flying duties

effective 8 December 1944.

So we now know that although he flew as an Air Gunner when he died, he had been trained as both a Wireless Operator and an Air Gunner and wore a half-wing brevet on his uniform to indicate this dual rating. It was not unusual for a WOP/AG, as they were often called, to fly as an Air Gunner only. There is more research to do here, and further digging into the 357 and 215 squadron records possibly will reveal how many times he flew, and in what crew position. 357, by the way, flew Liberators, Hudsons, Dakotas, and later even Lysanders on cloak-and-dagger Special Duties ops. Very, very secret work! (Your famous alumnus, Pickard, also did some of this work in Europe.)

Another fascinating titbit I just rediscovered was sent to me by my friends in the Canadian Directorate of History and Heritage -- the folks I was working with on the KH214 recovery project before they had to bow out. They were able to get the UK Ministry of Defence's Air Historical Branch to send them a handful of KH214-related documents, including this:

### **Blackpool Country Borough Police report dated 13 August 1947**

"In 1941, the above named aircraftman was billeted at 32, Queen St. Blackpool, this address being shop premises which were requisitioned during the war. This person, of Burmese nationality, was the owner of an MG saloon car, REG. No. FXU843, which was kept at Messrs Brown and Mallalieu's garage, General St. Blackpool. The vehicle was filled with a radio set, which was seized by the police and handed over to the Post Office Engineer, at Preston, and the airman was cautioned for an offence contrary to Para 2 03a of Regulation 8, Defence (General) regulations, 1939. As previously stated, Sao is Burmese and is the son of the Saw Bwa (Ruler of the Tawngpeng State) Burma.

On the 6th, instant, a communication was received at this office, from the Post Office Authorities, at Preston, with a request to trace this man, and return the equipment. I respectfully ask that a copy of this report be forwarded to the Officer in Charge, Royal Air Force Records, Gloucester, with a view to enquiries being made in an effort to trace this man's present address, and then the property may be returned to the rightful owner."

I do know that Blackpool was where all RAF recruits went for their initial "square bashing". It seems Sao Hkun U had a little fun with his sports car, complete with an illegal radio! Note that he was referred to as "Sao" in this report...and that was how he was listed in the 215 Squadron records.

He next got in touch to say that he'd had a further chat with Urai Reamkham, the wife of Sao Hkun U's brother, Sao Htun Aye.

I was set straight on one thing -- there was, indeed, another brother who attended Framlingham College. In fact, he was older than Sao Hkun U, and he went by the name Freddy. He died "young", but I did not press Urai for details this time. In reviewing old scribbled notes from 2006, I see that Urai had told me that Freddy was called back to Namhsan, Burma by his father after Freddy's mother passed away, thus interrupting his education.

Urai was delighted to learn of the photo of the war memorial with Sao Hkun U's name on it, and the 1936 rugby XV team photo. I am running off copies for her, including extras for her to mail onward to other relatives.

Matt also provided a fascinating bit of background to why he had undertaken this research :-

My mother is a native Liverpudlian. She met a young Liverpudlian lad, George Plank, in an air raid shelter during a Luftwaffe attack on their city, and they fell in love. He went off to war with the RAF...and trained as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner just like Sao Hkun U. (Who knows...their paths may have crossed, as George was in Blackpool for his initial training in late '41.) On the night of 29 February 1944 George and his 159 Squadron Liberator crew were shot down over Rangoon, Burma and were declared missing. In 1990 curiosity got the best of me, and I began a very intensive few years of researching this story. It led to phenomenal results, including a trip to Rangoon in 1993 when, by chance, the previously unrecognised graves of 7 of the 9

men on George's bomber were discovered buried as unknowns in Rangoon War Cemetery. I also found one of the two Japanese night fighter pilots, each an ace, who had teamed up to down this Liberator and another from the same squadron over Rangoon. He apologized to my mom for killing George. Quite extraordinary!

I ended up tracking down the kin of all 18 RAF airmen shot down that night. Only one of the men was still alive, having baled out of his bomber with five other crew members. These six ended up in Rangoon Jail, where two died of disease and mistreatment. Three died in '71/'72, and the final survivor just died last October.

Anyway, I started researching other missing Liberators in the Far East, in a quest to solve mysteries and share answers with next-of-kin. There are a number of cases where the official story shared with the families does not match the truth, and where remains located right after the war were forgotten. The KH214 story was dropped into my lap by researcher Rod Beattie (Burma-Siam Railway expert who is often seen in documentaries), who had come across the 26 September '45 memorial service photo held at the grave of the KH214 crew. And my natural curiosity took over from there. The project was essentially on hold until, by chance, I discovered in November the name of the Japanese Army translator who had been on this visit to the KH214 crew grave. It got the old juices flowing again, and one thing has led to another and I'm trying to tie up loose ends.

So, essentially, I'm an amateur researcher who has been able to find a few needles in haystacks and share the news with those who were denied the truth for decades -- the families of the missing. I've got a fascinating RAF Liberator wreck project ongoing on the Malaysia-Thailand border, and this one perhaps has the best shot at success because the government is cooperative in Malaysia. All of my Burma wrecks, on the other hand, are on hold, due to politics. But at least I have been able to share my information.

**John Simpson (K32-36)** has provided the following recollections on Sao Hkun U's time at the College :-

Yes, Chris – I knew him well. He was not in the same House, so not a close friend, but played in the same Rugby XV and was in the same patrol in the Scout troop (also run by Rupert Kneese). One particular memory I have is of some lurid drama (which I think I wrote) performed by our patrol, in which he stalked me round the stage with a knife in his hand: I remember hoping at the time that I hadn't triggered some atavistic urge to use it.

What is surprising in the correspondence is that there is no mention of his elder brother, Sao Aung. The elder brother's name was plain Sao Aung, no 'Hkun': this crept into the records (as Hkin) erroneously later. There is no shadow of doubt about this. They arrived together in 1933. Both were in the 1<sup>st</sup> XV in 1935 but Sao Aung (older than me) must have left when I did in the summer of '36.

The best place to look for photographs would be in the annual House photos. I am not sure, but think they were in Stradbroke. Both of them also appear in an informal photograph of the 1935 XV published in the Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News – one of the glossies from the same stable as the Tatler, The Illustrated London News & others. It was running a series entitled Great Schools in Sport & did Fram in 1936. I came upon a copy when going through some old papers a couple of years ago and handed it on to Norman for the archive, together with names for those in the photo. [I'll follow this up]

A further memory has bubbled to the surface of the morass that used to be a brain. Sao Hkun U & I were both awarded our 1st XV colours after the last match of the 1935 season - an annual affair against King's, Rochester played after the last day of term on the Old Merchant Taylors' ground at Teddington. The brown blazers we were then entitled to were ordered at the beginning of the Easter term. When they arrived, we found that neither fitted - until, that is, we realized that the larger did not go to the taller (me), but to the larger chest (Sao).

I don't think I can tell you much more but don't mind trying, if there are any specific questions.