Help 4 Forgotten Allies (H4FA)

Projects to Support Refugees from Burma (PSRB)

Photo Credit (Evangeline Modell)

Annual Report
2025

UK registered charity no.1139273
Patrons: Dame Joanna Lumley DBE FRGS & Karen Archer
President: General Sir Alex Harley KBE CB

H4FA

Introduction: (Geoff Holt writes)

Our charitable objects are to help relieve the suffering of those who have fled hardship and human rights abuses, including refugees from Myanmar/Burma. These activities specifically include aid for needy veterans (and their widows) who served so faithfully in the armed forces raised in Burma during the Second World War. Sadly they have often not received the proper recognition they deserve. During the year, with the help of local partners, and despite increasingly challenging and often dangerous situations on the ground, we have continued to distribute grants.

The trustees have agreed that the future strategic direction of the charity will be to focus increasingly on educational and humanitarian projects, seeking to provide a longer-term legacy for these people who have suffered so much. We remain immensely grateful to all our supporters and donors, both individuals and grant-making bodies, without whom none of this would be possible. As we look forward, we believe there is a strong and much needed future for the charity.

Myanmar/Burma: (Peter Mitchell writes)

Over the last year, the conflict ravaging the country has become even more dire. Indiscriminate bombing by the Myanmar military junta continues in large parts of the country allowing them to maintain a hold on key territory, not least the major towns and cities. Air power has been used to terrorise the population with targeted attacks on villages, towns, schools, hospitals, places of worship of different religions – anywhere where people might gather. The aim of the junta is to make the people fearful of their power and thus deter opposition. There have, however, been some positive developments. Opposition forces have made gains across large parts of the country, especially in more rural locations. Some areas are no longer under the junta's direct control. Nevertheless, there are circa 3.5 million IDPs and many thousands of refugees on the borders with both Thailand and India. There are huge problems in accessing humanitarian aid and the education of young people has suffered greatly. The recent termination of US Aid has exacerbated the situation.

The recent earthquake damaged the country greatly, especially in the central areas. A state of emergency was declared in Sagaing, Mandalay, Naypyitaw, Magway, Bago, and Shan State. The relief effort has been hampered by the authorities. ABC News reported there were relief supplies with the ASEAN logo at a warehouse in Naypyidaw nearly a month after the earthquake. Elsewhere in the country, local self-help is all there is to rely on. There is little or no help at all from the authorities.

The future of the country remains very uncertain. Internally, the junta oppress the people; externally, powerful neighbours have a strong influence which destabilises the country's society and economy. We must continue to do all we can to help.

VJ Day, 15th August 2025 – 80th Anniversary: (Peter Mitchell writes)

This important anniversary is fast approaching. The effort Britain and her allies in Burma made to defeat the Japanese invasion of Burma were gigantic but the war in Burma was largely forgotten. This will realistically be the last opportunity for a major commemoration. It is vital that we recognise all that these wonderful, courageous people did; thus the anniversary holds huge significance for H4FA.

‘The Last Burma Star’ Film: (Alex Bescoby writes)

I first heard about Sally Mclean and the incredible work of H4FA almost a decade ago, when I was cutting my teeth as a filmmaker in Myanmar. Given my focus on exploring the shared history of Britain and Burma, someone suggested I might want to follow their story – I’m so grateful I did. Out of that first meeting grew a lasting friendship and one of the proudest creations of my filmmaking career: Forgotten Allies: The Search for Burma’s Lost Heroes. Little did I know then that nearly ten years later I’d be working with Sally as a proud Trustee of H4FA, sharing some of the most meaningful adventures of my life with this extraordinary group of dedicated volunteers.

After the success of Forgotten Allies in raising awareness of the Burma Campaign – and the men from Burma who fought in it – both in the UK and beyond, we knew that in this VJ80 year, we had to do something equally ambitious. We realised it might be our last chance to tell first-hand stories from the ever-dwindling band of WWII heroes. Joining forces with my old friend Major Levison Wood – whose grandfather fought in Burma with the Royal Welch Fusiliers – the idea for The Last Burma Star was born.

Photo Credit (Evangeline Modell)

Our film tells the story of our search for one of the last surviving veterans of the XIVth Army, 100-year-old Corporal Con Herh. He was living on the front line of the battle between Chin resistance forces and the junta, and even as we boarded the plane to India, we couldn’t be certain we’d find him. Yet despite the terrain and the raging war, proving just how special his generation is, Con Herh was not to be deterred. On Easter Sunday, in a small church at a refugee camp on the Indian side of the Myanmar border, we were finally united with him. I can’t wait to share the film we made with him with all of you later this year.

Along the way, we were confronted time and again with the reality that Myanmar, 80 years after the end of WWII, is still a country torn apart by conflict. Con Herh himself told us how, in recent weeks, he'd had to flee his home in Chin State after it was bombed by Myanmar military fighter jets.

One of the most moving moments on our journey to find Con Herh was a chance meeting with a young man known to his friends as "Bahu," named after a heroic character in a famous Indian movie. Rather than being a veteran of the Second World War, he is a veteran of the war raging in Myanmar today. Slight and softly spoken, Bahu told me how he sustained life-changing injuries while trying to recover the bodies of friends killed in a skirmish with junta forces. Unbeknownst to him, the corpses had been laced with explosives – an act of cruelty that left him blind for life.

For years, my work with H4FA has allowed me to meet and film with veterans of the Second World War. These encounters are some of the most treasured memories of my life, and now that so many have passed on, I feel privileged to have captured their testimony on film for posterity. But meeting Bahu was something different – an experience I will never forget. WWII veterans' memories are distant, their scars lasting but faded. Meeting a war veteran many years younger than myself was a powerful reminder that while the war ended for us in the UK 80 years ago, for our friends in Myanmar, the conflict continues.

That's why the work H4FA is doing is more important now than ever. As well as continuing to support our heroic veterans as they endure civil war and natural disasters, H4FA's mission is evolving. The one unanimous request we received from all our veterans was: "Please care for the next generation, and ensure they get a good education." We listened. Today, we're proud to fund Phoenix School in Mizoram, India – just across the border from Myanmar. Run by its heroic headteacher Joyce, Phoenix School provides essential education to refugee children from Myanmar – many of whose grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought for Britain in her hour of need.

My brief time with the teachers and students of Phoenix School left a deep impression. Children as young as ten recounted their experiences of fleeing airstrikes and losing loved ones as they escaped their homeland in terror. Now, they face the daunting task of rebuilding their lives in a new country, while processing profound loss – something no child should ever have to endure. One day, when peace returns to Myanmar, they hope to go home. The least we can do in the meantime is ensure they have a safe space to go each day and the education they need to rebuild when that day comes. Until then, H4FA's mission goes on. I know every one of our veterans would support us wholeheartedly in doing so. Thank you to all of you for your support.

Distribution of grants to ex-servicemen and widows in Chin State: (Van Cung Lian writes)

Welfare grant distribution to the Chin State area was very challenging due to constant fighting between the military junta and local resistance forces. The resistance groups in Chin State have been growing stronger and gaining momentum in their fight against the military junta. The Chin Brotherhood alliance seized the town of Matupi in southern Chin State from the junta in June, and the town was fully evacuated prior to the assault. It took a while to find our beneficiaries, but we managed to deliver much-needed grants to them. We knew that the Chin Brotherhood had planned to start operations in northern Chin State, so we took action to deliver grants before the town and nearby villages were evacuated. We made a short documentary about our distribution in the Tedim area (https://youtu.be/ncNoxgCo6e0).

I am from Falam in northern Chin State, and the Chin Brotherhood and their allies started their offensive in November last year. After five months of fighting, suffering, and sacrifice, the Chin Brotherhood managed to liberate the town. The military junta bombed the town constantly and destroyed my hometown and my childhood house. We always kept our eyes and ears open and undertook constant risk assessments to look after our beneficiaries. After the victory at Falam, the Chin Brotherhood has now been planning to take Tedim town, and we are in the process of delivering welfare grants to the Tedim area before the battle.

The scene of Falam, Chin State after the town was liberated (Photo Credit: Anyein)

The ruins of the Roman Catholic Church in Falam, Chin State (Photo Credit: Anyein)

Other Areas Distribution

We were able to distribute grants to our beneficiaries from other areas, including Yangon, Taungoo, Hpa-An, Nyaunglebin, Irrawaddy and on the Thai border. We are very pleased that we were able to distribute welfare grants to some of our beneficiaries in Loikaw, Karenni State. We had not been able to distribute in this area last year due to the conflict in the region, and we lost contact with our beneficiary.

Phoenix School: (Van Cung Lian writes)

We now have two projects in Zokhawthar, on the Burma/India border. The night school, which we started in 2022, has been growing, and students have continued to learn English, Burmese and Maths. In addition, they learn about Chin culture and language, and then play sports and take part in creative pursuits.

I reported on the Phoenix school, its building, and its opening in last year's report. Phoenix School has just completed its first academic year. Due to the remote location of their refugee camp, this is the only way young children can access education. They have been learning a curriculum set by the Mizoram State government. The district education department has informally recognized the existence of Phoenix School, and graduates will be able to join middle school when they complete their studies.

Across the two projects, we are looking after 270 students and spent £19,900 during the academic year. 70% of the expenditure was for teachers' salaries, and the other 30% was for expenses related to materials required for teaching and building maintenance. We have 15 teachers, and we paid them £70 a month. Our teachers are also refugees from Burma who took part in the civil disobedience movement during the military coup. Prior to Phoenix School, children in this Bethel camp spent most of their time at the refuse dump trying to salvage something to sell and seeing them have access to education and witnessing their progress has been inspiring. They have also contributed to local community work by collecting rubbish and cleaning the town, and through this good work, the local community is pleased with them.

Out students during their community work i.e. cleaning the town

Our trustee, Alex Bescoby, was able to see some of the children, teachers, and parents during his trip to the area. In addition, Mr Ben Small, who works for the UK and Australian governments in research on refugees in the area, also managed to visit Phoenix School and said:

"*I think the project is value for money for trustees. I don't know where else these children would otherwise be getting an education. And given the challenges, the school was an impressive set up.*"

Photo taken during our trustee Alex Bescoby visit. The school honoured him with a Chin traditional ceremonial blanket.

Photo taken during Mr. Ben Small visit (November 2024) to Phoenix School

PSRB

Emmanuel School: (Sally McLean writes)

Emmanuel School is a small Anglican primary school in Mae La refugee camp. The camp, which has a population of over 34,000 people, is the largest of nine camps strung along the Thai/Burma border. It is 40 km from the town of Mae Sot, a small Thai town with an airport. There are currently 222 students: 108 boys and 114 girls, as well as 14 teachers, 2 cooks and a caretaker. The lower grades have higher numbers of children some of whom have arrived recently from war torn Karen State which is on the other side of the border where the schools are not functioning normally due to the raging civil war. We sent Emmanuel School £29,606 in four quarterly payments between April 2024 – April 2025.

There has been a drastic reduction in rations in the camps to just £1.74 a month per person and £1.10 for a child under 4 for food. Anxiety is exacerbated by the medical clinics in the camp closing. This has been caused by the cessation of USAID. The teachers and students and their families are enormously grateful to

you, the donors, for your continued support. The children find that the lessons in gardening and sewing give them hope of finding employment in the future, and that art is therapeutic. We are proud that their marks compare very favourably with other camp schools.

PSRB sends four quarterly payments to pay teachers' salaries, buy school equipment and stationary, and make repairs. The school has been recently renovated and the furniture upgraded and mended. With the intensity of the 'rainy season' keeping the roofs in good repair is essential. Recent developments include a change of head and several of the teachers; the resettlement programme to third countries has now reopened and some staff applied to leave the camp for a new life.

Emmanuel Middle School was begun through the generosity of the Van Mesdag Trust. Provision of lunches each day is with money kindly given by the Tadworth and Walton Overseas Aid Trust. These lunches are hugely appreciated as camp rations are now so meagre and for the children this can be their main meal of the day. The school has a library which commemorates and honours the memory of Mr Rob Van Mesdag. Full reports are sent each quarter. Currently the school is planning to build a kitchen. We were able to send extra money for Christmas 2024 celebrations and prizes.

Trustees visited in October 2022 and a visit was again made in March 2025. The earthquake, although felt in Mae La Camp, did not affect the school. The teachers, pupils and committee thank donors very wholeheartedly.

Sponsored Students

We sponsor three former students through Emmanuel School, who were chosen as particularly promising. One is sponsored in memory of Major Winstanley who fought at the battle of Kohima. Another hopes to become a health worker or even doctor.

Care Villa

Care Villa, also in Mae La refugee camp received **£3,012** at Christmas 2024 from PSRB. This pays for basic needs beyond the food rations the nine handicapped men receive; their housing is also very basic. They are casualties of landmines in the endless war between the Karen and the Burma Army. Now that rations have been cut by 53%, our donation may be more vital than ever. The money has been spent on two helpers throughout the year, working out at £28 per resident per month, for extra food, the two carers, medicines, extra hygiene products and music, current affairs discussions and English lessons.

Karenni Bible College

We have supported this small Bible College in Ban Mae Surin, Karenni Refugee Camp on the Thai Burma border since 2001. Despite the ongoing threat of camp closure, a devastating fire in 2013, and now the big cuts to camp rations from the US government, the College survives. It is in a very remote jungle location near the border with Myanmar and the internet connection is problematic. Currently there are 51 students, 21 teaching staff and the college is full of life and a source of comfort and support to the camp population of over three thousand. They provide a home for 60 war orphans and have a very successful choir appreciated locally in Thai villages. In March the College held three days of Jubilee events to mark 25 years of the College and our representative made the long journey to be there and report and take photos. Alumni returned and people visited from Thailand, the US and Australia. It was a major event for them. They are so grateful that throughout the life of the College PSRB has been their major donor. We gave a total of £14,024 over the year.

Over 25 years, the College has grown a great deal and it is good to see how its relations with Thai Churches as well as Burmese Churches and with Churches in Australia, through its diaspora, have grown and helped it to become well established and supported. As the Burma Army has bombed many churches on the other side of the border in Karenni State, and persecuted Christians over decades, this Bible College is an unlikely jungle haven of education and preparation for the students to rebuild their country in the future. The donations we send are mainly spent on paying staff, supplementing food rations, supporting the orphans in their care, and buying office equipment.

IDP Teacher's Project

Our distributor takes small individual grants, often travelling on foot through the jungle, to teachers in remote areas of Karenni State. The teachers work in schools that were set up for the children of villagers who have fled Burma Army incursions. The bombing of civilians has been the worst in Karenni State. We pay travel expenses and a grant to him in recognition of the work he does for his people and PSRB. He visited four schools and writes that in 2004 he supported 24 schools but now travelling is much more difficult due to the bombing. In total, between the four schools supported this year, there are 68 teachers and an average annual wage of £177. We gave them roughly £63 each. £6,533.25 paid out on 30th August 2024.

Maternity Bags Project

This is a project to provide expectant mothers, living in difficult circumstances as IDPs or in refugee camps, with the basic necessities for child birth and for their newborn baby. For the Karen people, following evidence of genocidal intentions towards them by the Burma Junta, protecting their newborns is very close to their hearts. There are three and a half million IDPs now in Myanmar, many in the east of the country and, therefore, too many women have to give birth in very difficult circumstances. PSRB has now decided to give annually to the project at roughly the same rate as this year: June 2024, £762.

Emergency Relief for IDPs

£2,500 was spent on tarpaulins and food for IDPs this year brought directly to them by one of our volunteers.

Flood and Earthquake relief

The Special Forces Benevolent Club made a generous donation for earthquake victims. Thanks to good information we were able to give to organisations on the ground bypassing the junta and reaching those in greatest need fast for those badly affected by the earthquake. We also sent £997 through the Free Burma Rangers for flood relief in October 2024.

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