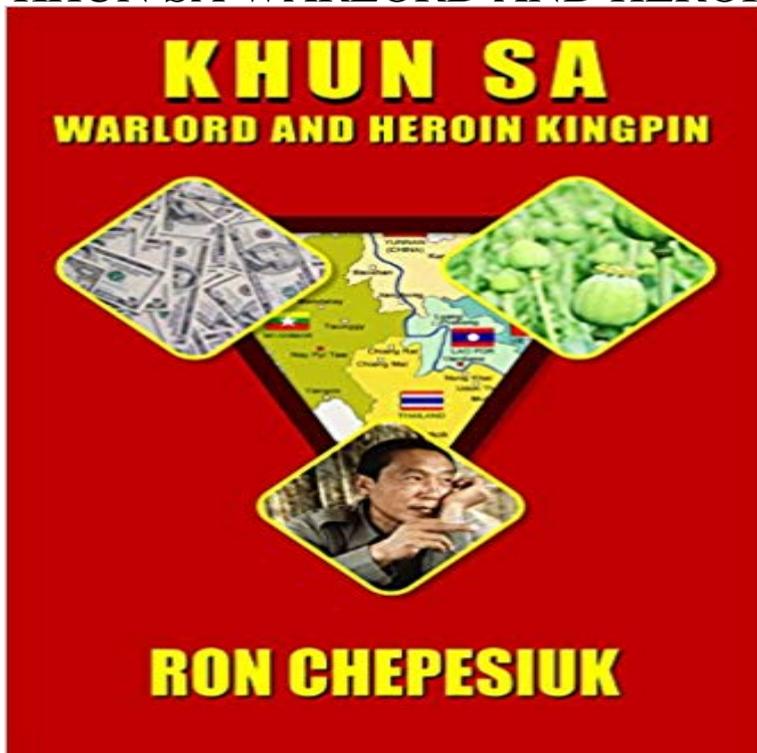


KHUN SA WARLORD AND HEROIN KINGPIN



In 1967, Khun Sa was riding high. At age 33, the charismatic Burmese warlord had trafficked in opium on his own for a mere three years, but he had been busy consolidating power, grabbing territory, commanding an army of about 2,000 men, and garnering the loyalty and respect of the hill tribes of his native Shan State in Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle region. Khun Sa's rapid rise, however, put him in conflict with the powerful Kuomintang of China (KMT), the remnants of the military forces defeated by the Chinese Communists under Mao Tse-Tung. The KMT was forced to flee to Burma (present day Myanmar) in 1949. The KMT was also heavily into drug trafficking, and it viewed the upstart Khun Sa as a dangerous rival. Unfortunately for Khun Sa, he got sucked into a local opium war with the KMT in 1967. Fighting broke out after a Khun Sa caravan of 500 men and 300 mules laden with raw opium set out from the Shan State for Ban Houei Sai in northern Laos. The caravan was to travel across 200 miles of mountain trail and deliver the opium to Laotian general Ouane Rattikone, one of the region's most powerful individuals. The KMT had developed an alliance with the Royal Laotian Army under Rattikone, and he, like Khun Sa, was heavily involved in opium trafficking. The general had also developed a relationship with the CIA during the Vietnam War, which, at this time, was heating up, and he, on the CIA's behest, provided military support against the North Vietnamese Army and the Pathet Lao in Laos' northern region. What became known as the Opium War heated up when the KMT ambushed Khun Sa's caravan about 50 miles outside Ban Khwan on the Mekong River. Six bombers from the Laotian air force dumped 500-pound bombs on both the Khun Sa forces and the KMT. Then General Rattikone arrived on the scene with his government force, but to the surprise of both Khun Sa and the KMT,

the general forces attacked both sides and took the opium. The KMT had demanded \$250,000 from Rattikones army to retreat, but it was in no position to negotiate. Under heavy assault, which continued for two days, the KMT fled north for the safety of Laos. Meanwhile, Khun Sas forces beat a hasty retreat across the Mekong River. This so-called Opium War was an event of global significance. Most importantly, it ultimately boosted the manufacture and export of heroin from the Golden Triangle, making the area of international importance in the illicit drug trade. Also, General Rattikones victory and his continued involvement in heroin trafficking allowed him to retire a very rich man in 1971. It looked as if the opium War had delivered a knockout blow to Khun Sa from which he would never recover. But it would not be the last time that his adversaries would count him down for the proverbial ten count. It took timeten years to be exactbut the Burmese warlord showed remarkable resilience and made a big comeback. Over the coming decades, despite being one of the worlds biggest heroin traffickers and the target of local governments, rival ethnic groups, and the CIA, he skillfully projected himself on the world stage as a folk hero, a liberation fighter who stood up for his people, the Shan ethnic minority. Khun Sa argued that only economic development in the poverty-stricken Shan State could stop opium growing and heroin trafficking. My people grow opium, the warlord said. And they are not doing it for fun. They do it because they need to buy rice to eat and clothes to wear. The U.S Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and other worldwide anti-narcotics organizations did not buy Khun Sas line. Rather, to the good guys, Khun Sa became known as the Prince of Death because of the heroin plague he unleashed on the world community. The DEA estimates that, at one point in the 1980s and 1990s, the height of Khun Sas power and influence, 60 percent of the heroin being sold on the streets of the U.S. came from opium refined and processed in

areas of the Golden Triangle that

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