**Interview with Keck Center Board of Governors Dr. Mimie Byrd ’87**

**By Amari Huang ’23**

**After serving in the US military for almost three decades, how do you think that your military service informed your expertise on Myanmar?**

At CMC, I majored in Economics-Accounting, but because I was in the ROTC program, I took many military studies courses. After graduating from CMC, I became a security practitioner, so I started putting into practice what I had learned. As a young woman right out of college, I had to manage a platoon of 62 people. I experienced the First Gulf War while I was still a fresh lieutenant. This gave me an opportunity to practice my leadership skills. Overall, my military experience enriched my life because I got a lot of opportunities that I would not have had otherwise. The career I have today can largely be attributed to my military experience.

In terms of Myanmar, when I visited Myanmar after 21 years of being in the US, I was stopped at the US Embassy to register that I was in the country as a member of the military. Colonel Dibrell, who was a defense attaché at the time, asked me to be a cultural advisor when we went to look for remains from WWII in 2002. As a result, I was a part of the negotiation team for the US with the Burmese military government at the time, which helped the US gain access to some areas where US service members were killed and disappeared during WWII. After 9/11, I was mobilized. Then, I worked on the War on Terrorism in the Southern Philippines. During this time, I realized that our terrorism strategy was missing an economic element. My peers laughed because they believed that the economy has nothing to do with terrorism. I started writing articles in the military journals to inform and educate people that there is a connection between economics and terrorism. Once I came off active duty, the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies asked me to come and teach based on my publications. As you can see, all my work has been significantly informed by my military experience.

**How did you make the discovery that economic circumstance is an important element to counterterrorism efforts? How did you convince your peers of this truth?**

I interviewed some of the terrorists that were captured. Some of them told me that they had joined the terrorist group, not because of ideology, but because they didn't have any job opportunities and the terrorist group offered them a job. This attitude does not explain everyone’s motivation and the issue is multi-dimensional. However, we needed to address the economic component of the problem. At this point, I was a reservist, so I was working in industry as the controller of Gillette Oral B division, whereas most of my colleagues were still in the military, so I had a different perspective looking at the problem.

**You mentioned that right after college you had to lead a group of 62 people at a very young age. What was the most challenging part of that for you? How did you overcome that challenge?**

In my entire platoon of 62 people, there were only two women. I was also the second youngest. I had no experience other than my schooling. During this time, I learned to approach interactions humbly and give mutual respect to everyone. I was in a position of authority, but I also knew that sometimes I didn’t know as much as someone else. I always tried to facilitate an attitude of working together. I found that giving people respect and hearing them out is always beneficial. By listening, you learn about people’s fears, inspirations, and motivation. Leadership is all about being able to inspire and move people to take action that aligns with a shared mission by framing a goal around what will resonate with someone.

Moreover, being an effective leader is all about practice. It’s just like running: you know how you are supposed to run but you have to actually run to become a good runner. It’s important to lean in. A lot of times, women will self-select themselves out. Hilary Clinton said that whenever she promotes a woman, she will say, “Do you think I'm ready?” But whenever she promotes a man, he will say, “What took you so long?” The women and men are all qualified, but men tend to lean in more due to cultural norms and hormones. Whenever you feel hesitant, just lean in.

**Based on your studies of women empowerment, what role do women have in Myanmar's society, especially since the protests against the coup?**

I stumbled into focusing on women’s issues when I started looking at economic factors. When I was helping develop the US's counterterrorism strategy for the Southern Philippines, we realized that women’s economic circumstances were a crucial factor. Women are a huge group of economic actors. If we don't include women, economic growth will lead to poor job creation and will not increase the standard of living. Initially, I was trying to solve the counterterrorism issue. When I started peeling back the layers of the onion, it led me to understand the essential roles of women. Women compose 50 percent of the population, which means we are 50 percent of the operating environment. When men are planning, much of the time they are blind to this fact. Once we began looking at the research, we found that when women are at the peace negotiation table, the chance of successful negotiation increases by 30 percent. With only a male perspective, we are not able to see the whole picture. Including the female perspective reframes issues differently in a way that dissolves tension in negotiations

In the context of Myanmar, women compose 60 percent of those in the resistance who are trying to restore democracy. One reason is that women know that if Myanmar goes back to a military dictatorship, they have more to lose. Additionally, there is a sentiment that as future mothers, they have the responsibility to restore democracy for their children. In this case, they see motherhood as leadership, which is unusual. And why? It is because when Myanmar was going through the transition to democracy from 2010 to 2020, they received a lot of aid from the US, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank. This aid changed the way that women saw themselves because many training and aid packages were targeted towards them. In the past, women stayed in the background. This time, women were in the front. They are able to be on the frontlines because they now have the education that gives them skills to participate.

The change in women’s roles has been crucial to the military’s ability to control the country because they are an unusual and new contributor to the frontlines. Women raise funds, gather intelligence, and most of all, keep people mobilized to support the resistance. This relates back to my earlier point that women bring in a unique perspective. When I interviewed male fighters, they always spoke about more firepower, more guns, more weapons. However, when I interviewed women, they talked about various ways to keep people mobilized. A successful revolution has three elements: popular support, international pressure, and defection. None of these factors are about firepower — they are all about people power. They cannot compete based on military power; instead, they need to use smart power. The resistance has homemade muskets right now, whereas the military has artillery that is provided by Russia. Women understand this concept, that revolution will be won by people power, not by firepower.

**What do you think is the best route for democratizing Myanmar? What do you think is the most possible route?**

The new mob of people on the opposition side are a coalition of very diverse groups of people. They need to be able to come together and cooperate tightly. They are more united than ever, but they need to do more. Closing the gaps to reach political cooperation will also lead to military cooperation. They need to close that gap and go to the next level of cooperation because the Myanmar military is not set up to fight everybody all at once.

Additionally, the opposition side needs to tell their story better, especially to the international community. Right now, everybody talks about Ukraine, but nobody knows about Myanmar. Myanmar has a lot of successes, but internationally, people aren't aware of them. If they can gain international traction, then more people will try to help them because people never want to be on the losing side. Those are two things that they must do: facilitate political guarantee for the ethnic minority groups and improve their communications with the international community.

**Most of the time, domestically in the US, people’s attention towards foreign policy has more to do with our positionality against other “great powers,” which is why Ukraine and Taiwan gain a lot of political attention. Within this context, how do you think communication with the international community can be done?**

This has always been Myanmar’s issue because it is so far away, and it was also self-isolated for so long. As a result, many Americans do not know about Myanmar. Whereas, with Ukraine and Russia, Americans have long been concerned with Russia. This has made it easier for Ukraine to gain attention, and President Zelensky has also done a great job. Myanmar is certainly not all lost. The opposition has not focused their energy on communicating. They have been haphazard, but they have not had a real, coherent strategy to tell their story. One way they can do this is by seeking more English-speaking journalists that would be willing to work with the local Myanmar people, so they can reach an English-speaking audience.

**What has proven to be the most challenging aspect of studying Myanmar and providing your expertise to American officials?**

Myanmar has always been a blind spot for American policymakers and strategists. It is possible that they never looked at history closely, even though Myanmar has been tied to geopolitical strategy for a long time. The British needed Myanmar to control Asia because it is a geographically strategic position. It is located along the coastline leading to the Malacca Strait, which is one of the most important trade routes in Asia and the world. During WWII, the Japanese needed to control Myanmar if they wanted to control East Asia. Similarly, today for China, access to Myanmar is necessary to reach the Indian Ocean. The Malacca Strait is also important for China because 80 percent of China’s energy supply goes through the Malacca Strait. As such, if the US gets a hold of the Malacca Strait, it will have power over China’s energy supplies. China has built a pipeline from the Western end of Myanmar to Yunnan, which enabled them to bypass the Malacca Strait – solving the Malacca dilemma for China. Thus, for China to continue being competitive and eventually control Asia, it needs control of Myanmar.

Helping people see the significance of Myanmar has been challenging, but the latest issue of the National Security Strategy under the Biden Administration specifically names it as a source of instability in the region. This gives room for many policymakers and strategists to build out more deliberate plans, because this document has prioritized Burma/Myanmar.

**What was it like to work with Myanmar military personnel and government officials as a Burmese-American?**

As an immigrant, you always feel like an outsider: you are neither here nor there. I always felt a little bit lost, I was quickly recruited by 426th Civil Affairs Battalion as a Civil Affairs officer for my ability to speak Burmese soon after the first Gulf War. Civil Affairs was under special operations, so I worked closely with many Special Forces officers, the Navy Seals and Rangers. In Civil Affairs, I was trying to understand the people in that operating environment. Going back to my work in counterterrorism, I continued to focus on the people because that was what my background as a Civil Affairs Officer was all about. My job was trying to understand civilian motivations and to find a way to keep them away from the battlefield. Moreover, because of my background, I started doing a lot of work in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand.

To give an example, when we were chasing Hambali, a terrorist that transit through Cambodia, we wanted to conduct interviews to find out more information. They wanted to send two soldiers who were white, male with me, but I argued that I would be safer by myself because I could camouflage myself into the operating environment.

Being assigned to work in Civil Affairs was when I realized the benefits of having multiple identities. It means I am flexible. Sometimes I can cater to the side of my identity that is Burmese, or sometimes I can cater to the side of my identity as a woman, an officer, a civilian, or an academic. My identities are flexible, and I embrace all of them. I am all of them.

**How did your CMC education contribute to your decision to go into the field of Asian security?**

It was less of a decision and more of a natural meander into Asian security. However, CMC allowed me to make that journey because my liberal arts education was so comprehensive and robust. My education gave me a lot of flexibility. I can write, think through various issues, and problem-solve. Everything that I have learned from CMC is the foundation for everything I have done. This includes both personal and professional aspects of my life. For example, my philosophy about life came from a religion class. At the time, I grudgingly took the class because I needed to fulfill my religious studies requirement. I ended up taking another class with the same professor because it shaped my perspective; it helped me solidify and frame how I see the world in a life changing way. In the class, we debated the difference between taking a leap of faith and thinking critically. In a way, religion forces you to suspend your critical thinking. Previously, I did not have a framework to analyze religion. When you are young, you don't know what you don't know. A liberal arts education allows you to expand into areas that you didn’t know existed.

**What was your experience like as an Asian woman at CMC during a time when there were far fewer Asian women at CMC?**

I grew up with my father, who was in the Burmese military, so we moved a lot. By the time I got to CMC, I was attending my 12th school. As a result, I was used to adapting, so I did just that at CMC. However, like I mentioned earlier, I always felt like I was an outsider. I would constantly compare myself to my classmates. When I came to CMC, I had only been in the US for about five years, so my English was at about a 10th grade level. I had only started learning English systematically in eighth grade. By then, students had already learned a lot of grammar, so I had to catch up. This was always an insecurity of mine, and I had to do double work. For example, since I was on the ROTC scholarship, we had to do field training exercises. I would take my accounting textbooks with me, and then at night, when everyone else was sleeping, I was shining a flashlight reading. I had to read texts a couple of times before I would understand the meaning, so I couldn't waste any time. From this experience, I learned to always be persistent. The research has shown that you just need grit and persistence. Even if you fail, you keep on going.