

NATIONAL DEFENCE
A Brief History of the
Guyana Defence Force,
1965-2005

David A. Granger



free press

Georgetown, Guyana
2005

officer under the law in whom operational use of the Force was vested and all other defence bodies, viz., GYC, GNS, GPM, should have been regarded as subordinate to his command.

Paramountcy

The increasing involvement of the Defence Force in party politics, a marked departure from the apparent non-partisan stance taken in the immediate post-Independence period, raised public concern about the direction being taken by civil-military relations. This pattern of politicisation became more evident after the promulgation of the *Declaration of Sophia* on 14 December 1974, exactly 10 years after the PNC had first come to power. Empowered by an overwhelming parliamentary majority as a result of the 1973 elections and speaking as leader of the PNC, Prime Minister Burnham declared that "...the Party should assume unapologetically its paramountcy over the Government which is merely one of its executive arms."¹⁸

As a consequence of this thinking, political participation was positively promoted and many officers and soldiers were encouraged to become members of the PNC in the ensuing period. Prime Minister Burnham declared that "...this nonsense of being a professional and not having any part with politics must be discarded forthwith".¹⁹ Similar ideas had been embraced by the GDF high command for several years and, in 1977, the Chief of Staff, Clarence Price, appeared in military uniform before the PNC's 2nd Biennial Congress and pledged publicly "...our loyalty and dedication to the Comrade Leader of the People's National Congress and Prime Minister, Forbes Burnham..." committing the Defence Force to "...following the road mapped out by the party and Government."²⁰ This ritual pledge of loyalty was repeated in succeeding congresses up to Burnham's death in 1985, although not by the Chief of Staff in person. It was at the 2nd Congress, also, that the PNC officially declared that it was a socialist party.

As a result of these measures, the civil administration was able to establish and maintain its control over the GDF. It was not felt that there was need to instal civilian political agents in military units as it was thought that there was already significant support for the PNC party in the Force. This interest was fostered by the attitude of the Prime Minister who, as Minister

responsible for defence, started to appear regularly at official military functions, dressed in uniform. Whereas the wearing of military uniform by the colonial Governor and Commander-in-Chief was traditional, it was uncommon for a civilian Prime Minister.²¹ The significance of this symbolism was not lost on the public or the troops.

Professionalism

Other major personnel disruptions in Guyana's defence system had an effect on the composition of the GDB and the GDF high command in the 1970s. The appointment of Arthur Chung as President and Commander-in-Chief in 1970; the resignation of Shridath Ramphal as Foreign Minister and Attorney General and the appointment of Frederick Wills as Foreign Minister in 1975, and of Rashleigh Jackson in 1978; the changes of the Ministers of Home Affairs - Desmond Hoyte, Oscar Clarke and Vibert Mingo - on the GDB; the dismissal of senior military officers and the appointment of a GDF Commander, in conjunction with the Chief of Staff, all must have modified the personal relationships among the élite group of civil and military leaders.²²

These changes might have made it difficult for newly-appointed officials to build inter-personal relationships and must have made the role of a single person - the maximum leader - more pronounced in the formulation of policy. Taken as a whole, the changes had the effect of making Prime Minister Forbes Burnham the longest-serving defence policy-maker, a fact that enhanced his confidence in handling military affairs and of disregarding professional traditions.

Having spent ten years as Chief of Staff (1969-1979), Clarence Price, then 57 years old, had passed the mandatory age of retirement (55 years). It was at this time, early in the morning of 11 July 1979, that a mysterious fire broke out at the Ministry of National Development which combined with the Office of the General Secretary of the PNC (OGSPNC&MND).²³ Within twenty-four hours, Prime Minister Burnham removed the GDF high command including the Chief of Staff, and installed a new high command. The occurrence of these two events may have been mere chance, but the appointment of a former police officer as the new Chief-of-Staff²⁴ was greeted