

Courtesy of Chhang Song



Courtesy of Elizabeth Becker

Elizabeth Becker's ID card around 1973. AP correspondents Matt Franjola and Carl Robinson (below) choose cigars before a 4th of July party in 1974.



Courtesy of Peter Sharrock



Courtesy of David Terry



A Skyraider flies over Cambodia in 1971. Courtesy of David Terry



Courtesy of Kurt Volkert



Carl Robinson



Roland Neveu

BY MICHELLE VACHON • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

GOING BACK DOWN THE ROAD

Correspondents Recall Their Experiences Documenting Cambodia's Civil War

Toward the end of March 1970, Dispatch News Service correspondent Mike Morrow was driving on National Road 1, looking for the war. At the wheel of his turquoise International Harvester Scout—an early SUV—he was hoping to run into US troops in Cambodia. “What had happened: They had encountered some resistance and they had moved off the road,” he said of the troops he never found. “Near Svay Rieng town, I traveled beyond what was the front line right into a unit of [communist] Vietnamese soldiers.”

“In my view, that’s what saved my life: Had I been left in the hands of the Khmer guerillas...,” Mr Morrow said from his home in Beijing, leaving his sentence incomplete.

The 24-year old journalist and his two passengers, US newspaper journalists Richard Dudman of the St Louis Post-Dispatch and Elizabeth Pond of the Christian Science Monitor, remained prisoners for 40 days, moving from one location to the next with their captors, who were under attack by US and South Vietnamese forces.

After his release, Mr Morrow went to Saigon, where he was based, and filed his story, mentioning that they owed their lives to the communist Vietnamese officers who had protected them, a comment which South Vietnamese authorities did not appreciate at the time, he said.

Mr Morrow and his two colleagues were the first of many journalists and photographers to be captured while covering the war in Cambodia between 1970 and 1975. But they would be among the few to be spared.

Mr Morrow is one of more than two dozen

reporters, photographers and TV cameramen who covered Cambodia in the early 1970s to hold a reunion this coming week in Phnom Penh along with many relatives.

This will be the first time that some of them have met since the fall of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Some, such as British journalist Jon Swain and American photographer Al Rockoff, were among the last to leave the country on a convoy of trucks that drove to the Thai border after evacuating the last group of foreigners who had gathered at the French Embassy after the Khmer Rouge's capture of Phnom Penh.

The reunion is being organized by Carl Robinson, Associated Press correspondent in Vietnam and Cambodia in the early 1970s, and Chhang Song, who served as a military press spokesman for Lon Nol's Khmer Republic before becoming minister of information toward

the end of the military regime. The correspondents' visit to Phnom Penh will include a public forum on Thursday evening at the Himawari Hotel on Sisowath Quay, during which panelists will talk of their experiences covering the Cambodian civil war.

Most of the participants—whose stories, photos and film footage put the little-known Cambodian conflict on the world stage in the early 1970s, at a time when the Vietnam war was getting most of the attention—first came to Cambodia following Lon Nol's coup against then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

For a number of years, the foreign press had hardly been able to enter the country. So much so that Associated Press correspondent Jeff Williams was the only journalist to cover the ousting of Prince Sihanouk on March 18, 1970.

Arriving three days earlier, Mr Williams had passed himself off as a visiting professor at then-Pochentong Airport and, in spite of the fact that



American photographer Al Rockoff witnessed the Khmer Rouge's capture of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975.

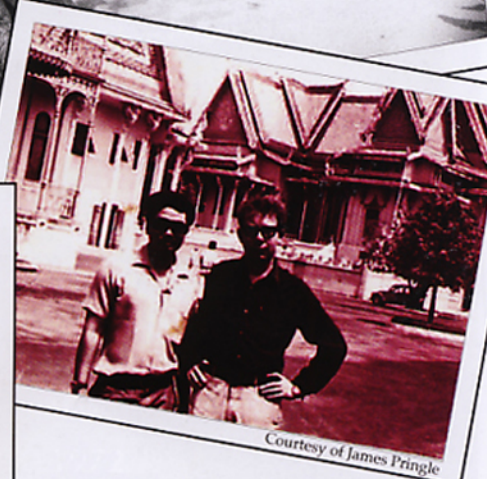
Courtesy of Roland Neveu



Courtesy of David Terry



Courtesy of Sylvania Foa



Courtesy of James Pringle

he was carrying a camera and a typewriter—obvious journalist tools—immigration officials let him enter.

Though he had the scoop, filing his story was not easy. Afraid of being censored at the Post, Telegraph and Telephone office, which is today's central Post Office in Phnom Penh, Mr Williams sent a coded message by cable, indicating that he would deliver a second, uncensored text if an AP person from Saigon could meet him at the Bavet-Moc Bai border crossing in Svay Rieng province. The AP's editors in Saigon had deciphered the cable and sent a messenger to the border to pick up the story, he said.

Soon afterwards, the international press corps began arriving to cover what many journalists taking part in the reunion either refer to as the US incursion or the US invasion that year of the "parrot's beak" area of Svay Rieng province to flush out clandestine North Vietnamese bases in what was then still neutral Cambodia.

The secret US bombardments of Cambodian border areas to destroy those bases began in February 1969, but resulted in forcing the communists deeper into the country and currying local support for the homegrown Khmer Rouge insurgents. The pro-US Lon Nol government's toppling of the prince, the bombing and the Chinese and North Vietnamese military support would help swell the ranks of the fledgling Khmer Rouge.

On May 1, 1970, US and South Vietnamese forces entered Cambodian territory in armored columns, officially this time, to destroy the Vietnamese communist headquarters. The Vietnamese war was now being fought on Cambodian soil.

Most members of the press, hardened by their experiences in war-time Saigon, found Phnom Penh an odd setting for a war.

"Arriving in Phnom Penh in 1970 was just like being transported back to the colonial era,"

said Mr Williams, who later covered the war for the CBS television network.

"It was just beautiful and quiet and calm compared to the chaos that was Saigon, and in fact most other cities in Asia," he said of the capital's wide avenues, broad trees, light traffic and cyclos. "Then to see the war begin to spread and get closer and closer every day, it was disheartening."

But the war in Cambodia proved elusive and difficult for the press to cover.

"It was a very different war," said Mr Robinson who had been reporting on the Vietnam war since 1968 for The Associated Press. "In Vietnam, you could count on the US military to take you out to where the fighting was; whereas in Cambodia, we were on our own. The Cambodia military was not in a position to take us anywhere."

Although Lon Nol's military spokesman Am Rong—a name that evoked many jokes—and Mr Song held situation briefings every morn-

ing with the media, this was not a conflict that could be covered from the capital.

"You did have to go out because military headquarters in Phnom Penh didn't know much more than we did. You did have to physically go out there and see firsthand what was going on," Mr Robinson said.

"We used to get up in the morning...go to the briefing, get into our car and go off to war. Like that. It was not like Vietnam where you'd take [military] helicopters...This was like taking a taxi ride to a war," said Mr Swain who covered the war first for Agence France-Presse and later for the Sunday Times in London.

The front line constantly moved, which made coverage extremely dangerous.

"There were times when I'd be driving

down a road and, all of a sudden, you'd get this scary feeling in your stomach," said Sylvania Foa, one of the storied female war correspondents in Cambodia who wrote for United Press International.

"You'd look around and there were no naked little kids playing by the road, there were not even chickens by the road. Suddenly everything was deserted and you knew you were in big trouble. And you either made a very fast U-turn or you simply went into reverse and kept going back as fast as you could," she said.

"We did not know where the enemy was...because the situation changed overnight, and what was today friendly territory could be enemy territory tomorrow," said Kurt Volkert, a CBS cameraman who had been covering the war in Vietnam before coming to Cambodia.

"It was an entirely new war for us, even for experienced war combat photographers and correspondents: We had to learn and we paid a very bloodied price for it," Mr Volkert said.

In April and May 1970, 20 foreign journalists

were killed or declared missing in Cambodia.

By the end of that year, the count of missing and killed rose to 25 foreigners plus one Cambodian interpreter and driver.

Journalists learned to tread carefully, but an additional 12 members of the media died or disappeared by the time the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh in April 1975.

The worst single incident occurred on May 31, 1970, when a CBS and an NBC television crew with eight foreigners and one Cambodian were killed off National Road 3, near kilometer 54.

Mr Volkert spent weeks the following year investigating what had happened to his colleagues, a task made almost impossible as he could not get into the area, which was controlled by North Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge.

What he discovered was that the first CBS car had been hit by a rocket propelled grenade and US journalist George Syvertsen later shot when he tried to get from the burning vehicle. The occupants in the second CBS car and the NBC crew were taken prisoner, and later beaten and shot to death, he said.

The NBC crew had followed the CBS team to make sure they would not get scooped, said Mr Volkert, who was meant to be part of the CBS crew but had been reassigned at the last minute and didn't go with his colleagues.

Page 4 and 5: Peter Sharrock and General In Tam. David Terry, right, stands with other photographers and Cambodian soldiers in 1971. Chhang Song, a Cambodian military spokesman, presides over a press lunch in 1970. Roland Neveu's press pass. CBS cameraman Kurt Volkert, left, and correspondent George Syvertsen, who was killed in a Khmer Rouge ambush in 1970. Page 7: David Terry rides a boat along the Mekong River. Alan Dawson (UPI), Sylvania Foa and Ishtiak Ahmad, a freelance cameraman, in Sihanoukville. James Pringle and Sok Ngoun of Reuters.



Courtesy of Kurt Volkert



Courtesy of Kurt Volkert

Under pressure from CBS in New York to produce harder-hitting combat stories, George Syvertsen had ignored all danger signs, including warnings by Cambodian soldiers at checkpoints to not go any further, Mr Volkert said.

The remains of all but one of the slain journalists would eventually be located and repatriated.

Journalists and photographers became more wary, and yet, Mr Volkert said, "They kept on dying because the nature of the war did not change: They still had to go down these lonely roads, still had to look for the war."

Some would not hesitate to take risks to shoot the perfect combat scene or get the story of the day.

Four decades after the fact, Mr Robinson is still furious at two friends of his, photographers Sean Flynn and Dana Stone, for taking off on National Road 1 on April 6, 1970, intent on reaching a Vietcong roadblock. They were never seen again.

"What in the hell were they trying to do? If they got down there and met the Vietcong, whom we knew were along the border there, what did they think was going to happen? That they'd just welcome them and let them take a few pictures and then leave? I mean, it was so naive," Mr Robinson said, his exasperation still pointed four decades later.

(The US-government agency JPAC, which searches for Americans missing from US conflicts abroad, took control of a site last week in

Kompong Cham province where human remains were found and sent for analysis to determine whether they are those of Sean Flynn, the son of famed actor Errol Flynn.)

As the years went by and the Cambodian conflict escalated, then-Washington Post reporter Elizabeth Becker said, "The danger was always there."

"[Norodom] Sihanouk had warned from Beijing that the Khmer Rouge would not let journalists live if they got into their zone. And I took Sihanouk seriously," Ms Becker said.

"No journalist went into the KR zone and ever came back alive—period," she said.

But two Japanese friends of Ms Becker ignored the warnings. "They believed they had negotiated safe passage in and out of the Khmer Rouge zone," she said.

Koki Ishiyama of Kyodo News was captured by the Khmer Rouge north of Phnom Penh in October 1973 and reported dead three months later. Freelance photographer Taizo Ichinose, whose shots of Cambodia are now legendary in

Japan, went missing on his way to Angkor in November 1973.

Yet, life in Phnom Penh also had its good moments. Journalists and photographers were fond of hanging out around the pool at Le Phnom as Hotel Le Royal had been renamed under the Khmer Republic. Many news agencies had offices at the hotel, which served as the unofficial headquarters of the international press corps.

There was also Chantal's opium den, said Peter Sharrock, who wrote for Reuters.

"Some of my best times in Cambodia were at Chantal's place," he recounted. "On some nights you would go there, under the [government] curfew, you were thinking, 'Is there anything anywhere going on?' And suddenly you were surrounded by the best sources on what was happening in the country," he said of the opium parlor's high-ranking clientele.

"You would have the diplomats there, the Red Cross personnel, the planteurs—people coming from the plantations—some missionaries and the intellectual officers of the Khmer



"[Norodom] Sihanouk had warned from Beijing that the Khmer Rouge would not let journalists live if they got into their zone. And I took Sihanouk seriously. No journalist went into the KR zone and ever came back alive—period."

—ELIZABETH BECKER,
FORMER WASHINGTON POST REPORTER

PRESS PEOPLE KILLED DURING CAMBODIA'S CIVIL WAR, 1970-1975

This list was compiled by Richard Pyle, Associated Press' Saigon bureau chief in the early 1970s, and revised by Carl Robinson, AP's Saigon and Phnom Penh correspondent from 1968 to 1975. According to them, 37 foreign and Cambodian journalists, photographers and cameramen were killed or declared missing in action in Cambodia between April 1970 and April 1975.

During that period, those killed or missing included 10 Japanese, eight French, seven Americans, two Swiss, one West German, one Australian, one Austrian, one Dutch, one Indian, one Laotian, and five Cambodians.

1970

Gilles Caron, France, Gamma photo agency

Claude Arpin, France, freelance/Newsweek

Guy Hannoteaux, Switzerland, L'Express

Akira Kusaka, Japan, Fuji TV

Yujiro Takagi, Japan, Fuji TV

Sean Flynn, US, freelance/Time

Dana Stone, US, freelance/CBS

Dieter Bellendorf, West Germany, NBC

Georg Gensluckner, Austria, freelance

Willy Mettler, Switzerland, freelance

Takeshi Yanagisawa, Japan, Nihon Denpa News

Teruo Nakajima, Japan, Omori Institute

Tomoharu Iishi, Japan, CBS

Kojiro Sakai, Japan, CBS

Ramnik Lekhi, India, CBS

Gerald Miller, US, CBS

George Syvertsen, US, CBS

Yeng Samleng, Cambodia, CBS

Welles Hangen, US, NBC

Roger Colne, France, NBC

Yoshihiko Waku, Japan, NBC

Raymond Meyer, France, ORTF

Rene Puisseuseau, France, ORTF

J Frank Frosch, US, UPI

Kyoichi Sawada, Japan, UPI

Johannes Duynisveld, Netherlands

1971

Francis Bailly, France, freelance

1972

Alan Hirons, Australia, freelance

Terry L Reynolds, US, freelance/UPI

Chim Sarath, Cambodia, freelance

1973

Has Prak, Cambodia

Lim Saron, Cambodia

Taizo Ichinose, Japan, freelance

1974

Koki Ishiyama, Japan, freelance/Kyodo

Marc Filloux, France, AFP

Manivanh, Laos, AFP

Lim Savath, Cambodia, freelance/AP

1975

Ly Eng, Cambodia, Domneung Peel Prik

CBS cameraman Kurt Volkert (above) carries a wounded Cambodian soldier in the early 1970s. Tiziano Terzani, Laurent Chevalier and Sylvana Foa on the terrace of La Taverne. Former CBS cameraman and producer Kurt Volkert painted this as an homage to Japanese CBS cameraman Tomoharu Iishi—who was killed in a Khmer Rouge ambush in 1970—but also to all media people as well as soldiers who died in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and 1970s.

PRESS PEOPLE KILLED UNDER THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME, 1975-1979

This list of Cambodian media people who were killed or disappeared during the Pol Pot regime is based on existing information and may be incomplete. It was compiled by Youk Chhang of the Documentation Center of Cambodia and by journalist and author Elizabeth Becker.

Chhor Vuthi , AP	Vantha , AP
Hong Ho , UPI	Ung Kim Seng , known as Cheav
Sun Heang , freelance/AP	Saing Hel , Areyathor newspaper
Tea Kim Heang , known as Moonface, freelance/AP	Yun Huor , Nihon Denpa News
Mean Leang , freelance/AP	Keo Yun , freelance
Put Sophan , CBS	Soeung Phoeuk Thor , Maet-to-Phum
Sou Vichit , Gamma photo agency	Ou Nget , photographer; Ministry of Information
Sok Ngoun , Reuters	Hak Kheng , freelance
Ith Chhun , freelance	Buoy Sreng , Sangkruos
Chea Ho , UPI	Suon Chheng Horn
Lanh Daunh Rar , AP	Chey Chum
Lek (full name unknown)	I Ith
Leng (full name unknown)	Men Manil
Lyng Nhan , AP	Ly Khuon
Ty Many	Koy Sarun
Heng Hok , UPI	Ang Kheao

List provided by Youk Chhang/Documentation Center of Cambodia

were among the best fighters in the country.

"I remember that morning, as we got out there in Kompong Cham, seeing the guys who had human livers for breakfast," Mr Sharrock said. "They had survived a very tough battle in the night, in trenches and everything, and fought off a North Vietnamese attack.... So they'd cut out their [dead enemies'] livers and ate them for breakfast and played football with a severed head. That was too much for me—it didn't get worse than that."

Don Kirk, who was working for the Washington Star at the time, remembers arriving at the scene of Lon Nol troops killing Vietnamese civilians in Svay Rieng province.

"I stayed overnight at a provincial governor's house," he said. "It was in Prasat [district], and the next day, there were the bodies of 90 Vietnamese refugees in a farm around the barn. They'd been shot by Cambodian soldiers

across the street during the night."

On the other side of the war, reports of Khmer Rouge atrocities started to emerge around 1973 as people escaped from the "liberated" zones under their control, Mr Kirk said. He interviewed many of them and filed a story with the Chicago Tribune. It was published, but at that time the story didn't generate much interest, he remembered.

Years later, others would deny that the Khmer Rouge were involved in the systematic elimination of an entire class in Cambodia and, belatedly, the world was shocked to discover the truth of the Khmer Rouge killing fields and the more than 2 million dead when Pol Pot was toppled in 1979.

Constantly living with war was not always easy, Ms Becker said. "When you live with it every day, every week, every month, it's very hard: There is no relief."

The whole sort of nature of the place...the beauty and the joyfulness of all of it made you think that nothing awful is going to happen. But it could turn very, very quickly.... There's always been a dark interior."

—JOHN SWAIN,
A FORMER CORRESPONDENT FOR THE
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE AND LATER FOR
THE SUNDAY TIMES IN LONDON

But the journalists—who were mainly in their 20s and 30s at the time—were also aware that they were covering one of the biggest stories of their lives and the time.

"It was the best story I've ever had, it was by far the best story I've ever covered," Sylvana Foa said.

"You know, when you think back, it was the best friends I've ever had because of the danger. When you're in danger, your friends are friends forever, you know," she added.

"And I was freer because we didn't have e-mail, we didn't have cell phones and your editor wasn't calling you every five minutes. I mean once you filed by telex, that was it.... It was a wonderful, wonderful time in my life," she said.

In the early 1970s, about 15 foreign news people lived full-time in Phnom Penh, while the others dropped in from Saigon or other Asian cities when stories warranted it, Ms Foa explained.

"It was a small band of people who covered that war based specifically from Phnom Penh," Mr Swain said.

"We thought it was important. It was regarded as less important than Vietnam, obviously. But it became very much a war, and we covered as best we could. We had a lot of heartbreaks and a lot of joy doing it," he said.

This week's reunion will be Mike Morrow's first return to Cambodia since his capture in March 1970, when he and his North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge captors ran side by side to avoid US and South Vietnamese shelling.

"The older I get, the better I understand how much my war experiences changed my life. I live much more in the moment, as a Buddhist might say," he said.

Morrow added, "I enjoy camaraderie but distrust human nature, my own most of all. I am hard to be around for long stretches. I respect more than ever good journalism but my own interests now run to education and literature.... I enjoy walking in the mountains." ■

BY MICHELLE VACHON
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The first time Chhang Song found himself in front of a group of journalists was for a press conference on the incursion of US and South Vietnamese forces into Cambodia in May 1970.

Authorized by US President Richard Nixon, the operation targeted communist Vietnamese forces on Cambodian soil.

Mr Song had just been named deputy to military press spokesman Am Rong.

And here he was, in front of the international press corps who had flown from throughout the region to cover the Vietnam War's spread into Cambodia.

"And I knew nothing" about media relations, he said.

However, the then 30-year-old Mr Song had studied at Louisiana State University in the US and spoke English. He also served as an interpreter for his boss, Mr Rong, who was not very comfortable speaking English.

In the weeks to follow, Mr Song grew into his job, believing that one could not brief the press without knowing what was taking place in the country, he said.

He started to build a network of contacts among the military so that he would know what to reveal and what to keep quiet with the media. For instance, giving a detailed account of the damages caused by night shelling in Phnom Penh could be dangerous, amounting to mapping objectives for the next attack by Vietnamese communists and Khmer Rouge, he said.

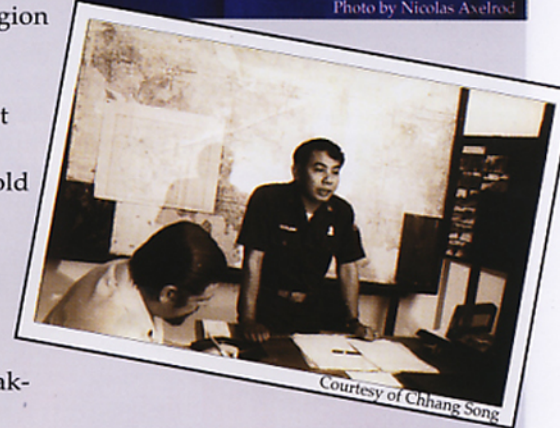
Once the city recovered, the press could be told details of the previous week's damages, Mr Song said. But vague information regarding national roads could put journalists' and photographers' lives in danger when they went in search of the front line.

Now a government adviser, Mr Song splits his time between Phnom Penh and Long Beach, California.

THEN AND NOW: Chhang Song, a military spokesman, gives a press briefing in the 1970s. He currently splits his time between Phnom Penh and the US.



Photo by Nicolas Avelrod



Courtesy of Chhang Song

So Mr Song would use his military contacts as best he could to give as accurate a picture as possible at daily morning press briefings. In those days, before mobile telephones, this meant using radios to contact sources.

As a result, "military officers were very happy to work in close cooperation with me," he said.

Mr Song remained a military spokesman until he was named the minister of information in 1974.

The following year, he would accompany President Lon Nol when he fled to Hawaii a few weeks before the Khmer Rouge's capture of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975.

Now a government adviser, Mr Song splits his time between Phnom Penh and Long Beach, California.

army—young captains with university degrees. All these people sitting in one room, lying on the floor, talking about what was going on, analyzing the war situation: It was the headquarters of news analysis on the war," Mr Sharrock said.

Very early on, Scottish journalist James Pringle, who had been based in Saigon since 1966 and covered Cambodia for the Reuters news agency, sensed that the Cambodian army was hardly in a position to win the war.

First, there was the fact that soldiers would go to the front on buses or Coca-Cola trucks instead of military vehicles, he said.

"Cambodian soldiers were [at the front] with their women and children. They had their cooking pots. The army didn't feed them so they had to feed themselves.... Women and children were at the frontline in trenches that were very shallow," and no doubt many were injured or killed, he said.

Moreover, soldiers and officers lacked training: Mr Pringle remembers a captain asking him, before charging into battle, which maneuver he would recommend.

All this showed how ill-prepared the army was for war, he said.

During the conflict, Ms Becker said, "Both sides did incredible atrocities."

Even such cruelty seemed foreign to Cambodia, Mr Swain said.

"The whole sort of nature of the place...the beauty and the joyfulness of all of it made you think that nothing awful is going to happen. But it could turn very, very quickly: I mean in the same way the French always talked about the "sourire khmer" [Khmer smile] but, beneath it, there's always been a dark interior."

Mr Sharrock recalls going to meet Kompong Cham province's then-Governor In Tam whom he considered one of the country's most competent military officers and whose soldiers

American journalists Sean Flynn and Dana Stone in Vietnam in 1968. Flynn, the son of Hollywood actor Errol Flynn, and Stone left Phnom Penh and headed toward Viet Cong troops reportedly operating around National Road 1 inside Cambodian territory. They were captured by Vietnamese communist forces in 1970, and were eventually turned over to the Khmer Rouge.