

Cambodia: Between the Tiger and the Crocodile

Few countries were ever so dominated by the personality of one individual as was Cambodia under the late Norodom Sihanouk. “Mercurial” was the favorite adjective in press reports, but he was a patriot who tried his best to keep his country free and independent while the wars in Indochina raged around him. He failed horribly. His was a high-wire act in which he would favor the East one day and then the West the next. He would favor rightists in his own country and then the leftists. He tried to balance the interests of the Americans and then North Vietnamese and Chinese, until finally he fell off the wire. And, in one of the greatest miscalculations imaginable, after he was deposed and exiled, he threw his support behind the extreme leftist Khmer Rouge, or Red Khmer. By so doing he contributed to his country’s descent into its darkest nightmare.

Cambodia, like Laos, is very much the “Indo” part of Indochina, and you felt it right away crossing the border from Vietnam. While Vietnam was under the cultural, religious, and linguistic sway of China, Cambodia was influenced by Hinduism and the Theravada Buddhism common to Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Laos. The Khmer people, as Cambodians are called, are generally darker skinned and stockier than the slender Vietnamese or the Lao.

Even the countryside itself changed the minute you crossed the Mekong.

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The travel writer Norman Lewis got it right when he wrote: “On one bank of the river were the ordinary forest trees [of Vietnam] . . . The other bank bore sparse clumps of coconut palms . . . and beyond them, a foretaste of the withered plains of India.”*

The Khmer empire reached its zenith in the twelfth century, when its territory spilled over into what is now Vietnam and Thailand. But in subsequent centuries, as its power waned, Cambodia has felt more like an Asian Poland, squeezed between, and threatened by, two more powerful neighbors. “Between the Tiger and the Crocodile,” was the way Cambodians saw themselves.

Sihanouk had come to the Cambodian throne in 1941, after the fall of France, when his French colonial masters answered to the collaborationist Vichy government under the German thumb. The Japanese allowed the French to govern Indochina, as long as they collaborated, until the very end of the war, when the Japanese took direct control.

Sihanouk’s eye was always on complete independence, which came in 1953 when French colonial rule in Indochina was in its death throes. In 1955 he abdicated in favor of his father, who had been passed over for king. Sihanouk wanted more room for political maneuvering and took the title of prince. He would take up the role of king again after the Khmer Rouge had been defeated and the monarchy restored.

Sihanouk was revered by his people as something close to a deity, and I watched worshipful peasants touch his shadow as he walked by. He would compose songs and both write and direct his own movies, in which he would take the leading role. He would press foreign diplomats into playing bit parts. *Shadow over Angkor*, a tale of CIA intrigue, which costarred him and his wife, Monique, was my favorite.

When I was first stationed in Saigon correspondents were barred from Cambodia, except on special occasions such as the national day, when Sihanouk would invite them in and put on a show.

The vast and flooded rice paddies of Cambodia reflected the sky from an airplane, so from above it looked as if a thin gauze was covering yet another sky

* Norman Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), 193.

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underneath, and when you saw the temples and pagodas of Cambodia, you knew you were in a different, and, before the war came, a more peaceful land.

Phnom Penh was a low-rise city, full of broad avenues and boulevards flanked by charming French colonial buildings—more gracious than scruffy Vientiane, and far less modern than Saigon. Foreign correspondents would stay in the sprawling, old colonial pile called Le Royal. Compared to traffic-choked Saigon, Phnom Penh had a languid air with few cars, so we glided around town on a three-wheeled bicycle rickshaw called a cyclopusse, or cyclo for short, basically a seat in front with a sunshade and a man pedaling behind. There were good French and Cambodian restaurants, some of the latter on floating barges in the Mekong River, where fresh fish could be had for a song.

In the 1960s Sihanouk was keeping his country out of the maelstrom that was devouring Laos and Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communists were using his forests to infiltrate their men and munitions into Vietnam. But that remained hidden in the midsixties, and visiting Cambodia then was to be transported back into another time, very different from bustling Bangkok or wartime Saigon. We would always make a point of visiting the great twelfth-century ruins known collectively as Angkor Wat, although Angkor Wat was but one of the temples in that vast complex.

On one occasion some American soldiers on a riverine patrol took a wrong turn up the Mekong River and strayed into neutral Cambodia's territory by mistake. They were arrested by the Cambodian authorities and thrown into prison in Phnom Penh. Washington expressed outrage, but before an international incident could get out of hand, Sihanouk decided to release them.

Being Sihanouk, however, he was not about to do this by a simple hand-over. He arranged to have them released during the ceremonies for the national day, when the world press and foreign diplomats would be gathered.

He sent his tailor around to the prison to have the bewildered Americans fitted for white cotton suits and shirts. When the national day came, Sihanouk had the wayward American soldiers up on the reviewing stand with him, looking quite spiffy, if uncomfortable, with bright neckties in the colors of Sihanouk's political party. He made a short speech, saying that the Ameri-

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cans were free to go. Their landing barge, however, would stay in Cambodia. “It has no heart, it has no soul. It will do very well here with our little navy,” he said in his high-pitched voice. It was the kind of beau geste at which he was a master.

There would be enchanting performances of the court ballet, with the dancers, similar to those in Thailand, performing their graceful and stylized steps with fingers arched into seemingly impossible positions. We all believed that the Cambodians were a gentle people, beguiled as we were by temple bells and Khmer culture in this oasis from war. What we did not suspect was that the ancient torture scenes from the bas reliefs of Angkor would be repeated in the years to come under one of the century’s cruelest regimes in a mad effort to turn back the clock to a pre-industrial, pre-urban past that would turn the entire country into a vast agricultural concentration camp.

That grim future would not come as long as Sihanouk was in power, as he desperately tried to balance the dark forces locked in a contest of wills that would eventually decide the fate of Indochina.

I happened to be in Laos on the ides of March, 1970, when Sihanouk was deposed while out of the country on a trip to France and Russia. I hurried to Phnom Penh. One of Sihanouk’s top generals, Lon Nol, the only palindrome chief of state I ever met, had engineered the coup. Lon Nol impressed me then as high-strung, nervous, and perhaps a little frightened over the monumental step he had taken. Lon Nol abolished the monarchy, replacing it with the Khmer Republic, with himself as president.

Lon Nol and his officers had grown weary of the Sihanouk show. The prince had secretly allowed the North Vietnamese and the Communist powers to use the port of Sihanoukville to bring supplies to the Vietnamese, who were also using his eastern border as part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Sihanouk, also secretly, told the Americans that he would not object if they bombed the Vietnamese in his woods, as long as the bombs stayed away from population centers. The secret bombing of Cambodia was exposed in the American press, and the resulting White House effort to find who leaked the story resulted in the famous “plumbers” whose burglaries, authorized by the White House, contributed to Nixon’s eventual downfall.

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But now the balancing act was over. Lon Nol immediately ordered all Vietnamese Communist forces out of the country—an order he was pathetically unable to enforce.

I never found any evidence that the Americans engineered the coup, even though they, too, had grown weary of Sihanouk's maneuvers. The Americans were quick to take advantage of the coup, however, at first sending ethnic Khmer soldiers from South Vietnam to Phnom Penh. Soon General Ted Maxis would arrive from the American army to help organize the war. But it would be a Cambodian war. America would supply the arms and ammunition, but, unlike in Vietnam, no American ground troops would be sent, except for a brief incursion in May of 1970. This incursion, although limited, caused widespread protests in the United States, culminating in the shooting of unarmed students at Kent State College.

Modern times have not seen such an army as Lon Nol organized in those early months of 1970. Patriotic youths flocked to his banner, for the Vietnamese were never popular with Cambodians. Waving flags, beating drums, brandishing swords as well as firearms too few knew how to use, Cambodian soldiers sallied forth to slay the Vietnamese dragon, putting little carved images of the Buddha in their mouths to save them from harm. Many adorned themselves with sashes sewn from prayer flags. They were shot to bits by the Vietnamese and sent reeling back from the frontier.

The North Vietnamese had no desire to take over Cambodia, at least not then, but they wanted to keep the Ho Chi Minh Trail open in order to resupply the forces in South Vietnam. Sihanouk took up residence in Beijing and recorded audiotapes inciting peasants to rise up against Lon Nol. The tapes were smuggled into Cambodia. In the forests, where antigovernment guerrilla groups had waxed and waned for decades, a new and fanatical resistance was formed, known to the world as the Khmer Rouge. At its head was Pol Pot, a semieducated schoolteacher who had garnered half-baked ideas from the French Revolution from studying in France. He married these with the most extreme Maoist doctrines to form a nihilistic jacquerie movement, a peasant uprising, the countryside against the cities, dedicated to the complete destruction of modern Cambodia with its Western influences.

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In the first days of the new battle for Cambodia, when the front was very fluid, I ran into my old photographer friends from Saigon, Sean Flynn and Dana Stone, with whom I had worked before. Stone was a straightforward Vermonter, as different from the exotic and glamorous Flynn as Vermont cheddar is from Brie. Flynn was the son of Errol Flynn, the Hollywood actor who, as far as my generation was concerned, personified the word “swash-buckling.” Sean looked a lot like his father in *Captain Blood*, and had been in a couple of minor movies himself. *Cinq gars pour Singapour*, starring Sean, had played in a dingy Saigon movie theater, and we all went to see it as the occasional rat ran over our feet. As Mike Herr described him in *Dispatches*, Flynn was special. “We all had our movie-fed war fantasies . . . and it could be totally disorienting to have this outrageously glamorous figure intrude . . . really unhinging.” But Flynn had been in Indochina a long time, was used to long-range patrols where men would live in the jungle for weeks, and as Herr described it, soldiers knew that he was “a dude who definitely had his shit together.”

Flynn had a scheme that didn't seem as crazy as it in fact was. Encounters between reporters and the Vietnamese Communists, North Vietnamese and Vietcong, had taken place with reporters living to tell the tale during those unsettling April days when the North Vietnamese were moving back from the border. The North Vietnamese were afraid of an American incursion into Cambodia, which soon came. Flynn thought if he and Dana could travel by motorcycle, allowing them to run on trails and tracks off the main roads, they might encounter Vietnamese who were moving back farther into Cambodia. It would make, with photographs, a great story, he argued. I felt it was far too dangerous, and, since Flynn was shooting for Time-Life, I tried to pull rank, saying I was the senior *Time* guy in Cambodia. I knew that if I could dissuade Flynn, Stone would follow.

Pulling rank on Flynn was like trying to talk down a cockatoo on the wing, but I tried. We went off to an opium “*fumerie*” frequented by a few Cambodians, French rubber planters, some foreign diplomats, and a few journalists. The drill was that you took off your clothes, put on a sarong, and lay down on a straw mat. A woman, usually an ancient crone, would roll the

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little balls of opium, which she would insert, with a needle, into the bowl of your pipe. She would help you hold the pipe over the flame of a tiny lamp while you inhaled deeply. Unlike other drugs, it was only mildly intoxicating, causing a certain drowsiness and a feeling of well-being. There were, of course, opium addicts. But with opium you really had to work at it. A few pipes a few times wouldn't do it. The expression "pipe dream" comes from the dreamy optimism opium gives you.

Sex was not part of the deal, although sometimes a young girl would walk on your back as a kind of massage. But Stone, the steady Vermonter who had never been to an opium den before, refused to take his clothes off, put on a sarong, or try a pipe. He sat with his knees up in a corner looking very suspicious.

For hours I tried every argument I could think of, saying their motorbike scheme was a very bad idea, but Flynn just laughed, said I was getting too old. I was thirty-five, only eight years older than he, but evidently an old coot who had lost his sense of adventure. Flynn wasn't going to back down no matter what I said. We parted in separate cyclos back to the hotel for a restless night's sleep. I never saw either of them again.

There have been books written about Flynn and Stone and their disappearance, and their fate remains an enduring mystery in journalists' lore. They were seen by other journalists coming up the road in a car behind them the next day. Flynn and Stone seemed to be motioning their colleagues not to come farther. The speculation is that they were captured by North Vietnamese soldiers and died in captivity. There were reports of radio traffic being intercepted, with the Vietnamese saying they had lost two white prisoners killed in a B-52 strike, but as far as I know it was never confirmed.

They were among the first of some thirty-four journalists to die in Cambodia, many of them in those first months when we didn't know the ropes. Journalists were captured and released by the Vietnamese, but later, when the Khmer Rouge took over the fighting against Lon Nol, no one captured by them ever came back. If you were caught by the Khmer Rouge you could count on being pulled out of your car and either shot on the spot or clubbed to death to save ammunition.

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Once the restraining influence of Sihanouk had been removed, Cambodians in the capital and elsewhere turned against the Vietnamese in their midst, some of whom had lived in Cambodia for generations. There were disgraceful massacres. No one will ever know how many Vietnamese were slaughtered in those distressing days. I watched scores of mutilated and swollen bodies floating down the Mekong. The ancient antagonism between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese was on the loose.

The war soon settled down into a kind of stalemate, with the Lon Nol government holding most of the major towns and cities, trying to keep the roads and the Mekong River open. The Khmer Rouge owned the forests and fought to keep the roads, and then the river, closed as they slowly tightened their grip around the towns.

To cover this battle for the highways, reporters would drive out of Phnom Penh in rented cars with their Cambodian interpreters and drivers, down roads leading away from the capital, like spokes on a wheel, looking for the war. Sometimes we could hitch a ride on Cambodian river gunboats to visit some of the besieged towns along the Mekong. You risked rocket fire from the banks on those trips, but the classic death in Cambodia would come to reporters on a lonely road with a Khmer Rouge ambush in waiting.

There were certain rules it was wise to learn. If there was no traffic coming in the other direction for a long while, turn around and go back. If no curious children swarmed around your car when you arrived in a village, get out, and quick. For it meant the children were staying indoors because fear—or their parents' fear—had trumped curiosity. And that usually meant there were Khmer Rouge in the neighborhood. When you stopped to ask a farmer in the field about conditions on the road up ahead, you never asked too direct a question. You spent time with your interpreter, asking the farmer about his crops, the weather, his family, sidling up to the question about whether the road was safe. This way you were much more likely to get a straight answer instead of what the startled farmer might think you wanted to hear. It was time consuming, but there were more than a dozen reporters lost on the roads of Cambodia in just those early days, and I am convinced that these simple precautions saved my life.

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On these trips out of the capital you might find the front line manned by only two or three bored soldiers washing their laundry by the side of the road with nothing happening that day. One time I went out with a British military attaché, and when we got out of the car a sniper took a shot at us, and missed. “Saucy of them,” said the unflappable Brit.

Other times you would run into the back of a government advance, armored personnel carriers moving down the road with soldiers behind, and sometimes withering fire stripping the trees of their branches and leaves, which fell like confetti.

We were all very dependent on our interpreters, who, besides translating, could smooth over problems with the bureaucracy and find out valuable information. Many had been in the tourist industry before the war. When the war drove away all the tourists, many gravitated toward the capital, where, with their language skills, they could hire themselves out to journalists. It was dangerous work, and I often thought of them as similar to big-game hunters who had clients—sometimes foolish clients—who could get them killed. But like professional hunters, they were there to get their clients trophy stories and keep them out of trouble.

A very brave photographer and cameraman, an Australian named Neil Davis, once told me how he had been wounded in a firefight, and how his interpreter and guide carried him back to his car and put him in the backseat, where he drifted in and out of consciousness on the way back to Phnom Penh, losing blood all the way. Davis thought he was being taken to the hospital, but the car pulled up at the airport on the outskirts of the city. “Don’t you want to ship film?” Davis’s driver asked. Davis allowed as how this time it would be okay to go straight to the hospital and worry about the film later. Davis was later killed in Bangkok during a coup attempt, his dropped camera still running to film his own death.

The most famous of these Cambodian guides was Dith Pran, who was later portrayed in the film *The Killing Fields*. I had met Pran at Angkor Wat, where he worked before the war. He would arrange elephant-back rides to the temples at dusk. He became intensely loyal to Sidney Schanberg of the

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New York Times, who would often yell at him in a way that would have been offensive to most Cambodians, but Pran would only smile.

Sidney was obsessed with the Cambodian story, and he made it his own, seldom leaving the country as the rest of us did from time to time. By the time I met him I had left *Time* and was working for the *Washington Post*. Even though our papers were rivals, I always enjoyed Sidney's company and admired his reporting skills. He was, like many *New York Times* men, very competitive.

One scoop that got away from both of us is also portrayed in *The Killing Fields*. Pran came to Sidney and told him that something horrible had happened in the Mekong market town of Neak Luong downriver. An American B-52 bomber had dropped its load over friendly territory with great loss of life. Pran got Sidney downriver in a boat, where he had the story all to himself but was detained by the Cambodian military. The rest of the press caught up with him when they were brought down by helicopter the next day—robbing Sidney of his scoop, even though his story was more complete and better than anyone else's.

When I say “the rest of the press,” I mean all except this correspondent, who was nowhere to be seen. My interpreter, Yun, had also heard of the disaster, and like Pran, he smuggled me onto a boat headed downriver. Mine was a rice boat bound for Neak Luong. In the dark of night, Yun hid me among the bags of rice until we were clear of Phnom Penh. As we headed downstream I gloated that I would have the story all to myself, not realizing that Sidney was also headed downriver on another boat. But for me it was not to be. An hour out of Phnom Penh the engine quit and we drifted slowly until a Cambodian patrol boat took us under tow and brought us back to Phnom Penh the following day. I had not only failed to get there first, I had failed to get there at all. When I got back to the hotel, a “Why we no have?” telegram from my editor awaited me.

Telegrams were regularly left on the reception desk for reporters to pick up, mostly “play cables,” saying things like “fronted your pagoda story,” which meant it was on page one, or even “led paper with your Lon Nol.” These telegrams were our primary source of communication with our home offices,

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as the telephone was notoriously unreliable, if you could get through at all. Sometimes to fool rivals, reporters would send themselves congratulatory telegrams about nonexistent stories.

A typical day reporting the war in Cambodia would often mean an early start and a day on the roads, trying to find out about how the ebb and flow of the fighting was going. At day's end I would come back to the Royal, which had been renamed Le Phnom after the monarchy was abolished. I would take a quick shower, which did little to cool me off in the exhausting heat, and sit down to write the daily story. Sometimes I would attend a government briefing, given by a Cambodian official who was appropriately named Am Rong.

I wrote my stories on that old Olympia typewriter that I had bought during my Oxford student days, stained with candle wax. Power outages were frequent, and I had two enormous, five-foot orange candles that I had bought in a Buddhist supply shop. Sitting in a sarong, which I always wore when writing in that climate, the candles casting giant shadows on the wall and sweat dripping on the copy paper, I typed out my pessimistic reports about a dying country. My stories were usually about the slowly deteriorating situation as the government's perimeter shrank and shrank. Roads were temporarily opened, then cut again, as the war dragged on.

I have a yellowing clip from the *Washington Post* of that year:

ANG SNOUL, September 19th, 1973—After three weeks of fighting, Highway 4 to the sea was cleared of insurgents Tuesday and Wednesday. Just off the road the government soldiers were sitting around in the ruins of the Kruos Pagoda burning bits of bodies.

First the government troops and then the insurgents had occupied the pagoda, and now it stands a tall ruin—its curling roof and red tiles holed by a hundred shells—stark white against the darkening, rain-swollen sky . . .

Outside the pagoda the insurgents had had to dig their bunkers in the rice paddy dikes because the paddies are flooded at this time of year. But pagodas always stand on high ground and they are well-built and solid. They make excellent positions from which to fight off an approaching enemy, and all over the country the fighting has often centered on pagodas like this one.

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It is the insurgents' tactic to hold positions like this as long as they can and then to fade away in the night taking their dead and wounded with them whenever possible. The government soldiers said that this battle was no exception, and when the final assault was made the soldiers found the enemy gone.

For the first time in three weeks traffic was moving all along the road Wednesday, and the first truck convoys up from the sea have already reached Phnom Penh.

When we didn't run the roads, we would write stories about Phnom Penh, how much petroleum was left in town, what was the food supply. We tried to find out what the government might or might not be thinking, or just write human-interest stories about the hundreds of refugees pouring into the city each day.

We would take our stories down to the PTT, "Post, Telegraph, and Telephone," where they would be transmitted, very slowly, to Paris and then on to America. Colleagues, who were all filing at the same time, would go across the pretty little square, for all the world looking like a town square in the French Midi, to relax and have dinner together. My favorite restaurant was called Le Tavern.

It was a time to relax with your work done for the day. You had not been killed, and this was the moment to chat with friends and colleagues over a meal and some wine while your stories went out to the world. There was Jean-Claude Pomonti of *Le Monde*; John Swain, first of Agence France-Presse and then the *Times* of London; Schanberg; Elizabeth Becker, *Far East Economic Review*; Martin Woollacott of the *Guardian*; and the poet James Fenton, who was stringing for the *Washington Post*, to name a few. And who could forget Tiziano Terzani, a tall, mustached Florentine who wrote for the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. Tiziano always dressed in a white shirt and matching white trousers, and in conversation was a master of colorful hyperbole. We all basked in the sunshine of his personality and friendship. We were members of an informal club of sorts, held together by the all-absorbing story of a beautiful land coming apart. Of course none of us suspected just how terrible the end would be.

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I did have one small glimpse of what was to come, however. I was told that a North Vietnamese adviser to the Khmer Rouge had defected to the government side and that I could interview him. He told me that he had fled from the Khmer Rouge because he feared for his life. He said that, unlike the Vietnamese Communists, who would perhaps come to a village and kill the head man if he was corrupt and hated by the people, or perhaps too well loved, the Khmer Rouge would kill people indiscriminately, despite his advice. Hanoi had sent him to help and guide the Khmer Rouge, he told me, but they, like many Cambodians, hated the Vietnamese and he feared they would kill him. Still, even his tale did not prepare me for the killing that was to come.

At night, often too tired to sleep well, we could hear the thunderous explosions from the B-52 bomber flying in from faraway Guam in the night sky, trying to keep the Khmer Rouge at bay. The shock waves rolling over the city would rattle the windows as if a demented intruder were running around the outside trying to get in.

Later in the war, when Khmer Rouge rockets were arriving in Phnom, I pulled my mosquito-netted bed away from the window in case a round should burst in the trees outside, sending shrapnel into my room.

On a hot afternoon, when I was writing a long article for the Sunday paper, I heard an incoming rocket burst not far from the hotel. There was a moment of silence, and then the high-pitched and desperate cries of children screaming—birdlike screaming in a way I had not heard before or since. The rocket had landed on a school, and the sight, when I went to see, of blood-soaked sandals lying in the dust, with small bodies torn to pieces, was heart-breaking. But it is the sound of those screams that I can sometimes hear still in my worst dreams almost forty years later.

One of the more dramatic stories of the Cambodian war was of the little tramp steamers, coasters, that would make the hazardous journey up the Mekong from the South China Sea. They brought vital food, fuel, and ammunition to besieged Phnom Penh. Once all the roads had been cut, this gallant flotilla became the city's main lifeline.

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These little freighters and tugs pulling barges of ammunition were heavily sandbagged to protect their bridges. Their crews, representing all the races of the East, were well paid, but the voyage up from the sea was astonishingly dangerous. Many were holed by rocket fire from the banks, arriving in Phnom Penh very much the worse for it. Some were sunk along the way.

My friend Martin Woollacott wrote a story about the river sailors who made these parlous journeys. “The three captains, a wolfish Australian, a mustached Swede, and a dapper little Norwegian, stood on the quay above the broad Mekong River cursing the Khmer Rouge, their own crews and the port authorities. Drifters and fortune hunters right out of the pages of novelist Joseph Conrad, they were men who brought last Thursday’s convoy up to Phnom Penh.” Losses had been so heavy among the ships that the charter companies “had to put in some Goddamn round-eyes [white men] or else the Goddamn convoy never go at all,” said the Swede. The Australian described to Woollacott “four bloody bad hours . . . I’ve never seen anything like it. It was four hours of continuous firing. Jeez, I thought Australians were popular everywhere, but we ain’t got many friends on the Mekong, I can tell you.”

The Norwegian captain told Woollacott: “It was incredible. The crew were screaming at me, one minute shouting at me to turn back, the next to keep the tug at full ahead. Everyone was shouting ‘*Beaucoup* VC. *Beaucoup* VC.’” But they weren’t Vietcong. They were Khmer Rouge.

When the river was finally cut off, it was clear to us that the city was doomed. I wrote a story for the *Post* about starvation breaking out in the city. I was later told that the story helped prompt Washington to begin bringing in food and supplies by air, as had once been done in Berlin when the Soviets tried to close off access to that city.

But there was no political will left in America to defend Cambodia. It was not Berlin. Congress cut off funding, ending the intense bombing campaign on August 15, 1973. It was a clear blue day when the bombing stopped, with the slightest suggestion of thunderheads forming up to the south. Perfect flying weather.

I could see American planes bombing and strafing away to the north, the jets pulling straight up from their runs at what seemed an impossible angle

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of ascent. On a little radio, of the kind that you could buy cheaply in Hong Kong, I could hear the pilots talking to each other and to ground control. Around eleven o'clock on that last morning, in that laconic manner in which American pilots talk, I heard: "You should not expend any more air. You should not expend any more air. Understand there is negative more activity for the facers [forward air controllers]," said another.

"That's affirmative on that," came the answer.

"Outstanding. Well we all enjoyed working with you. You did some fine work and we knocked their ass off more than once. We hope to work for you again," the pilot said, but it was not to be. America's air war in Indochina was over.

One of the spotter planes did a slow barrel roll. A pilot played "Turkey in the Straw" on a harmonica over the airwaves, as the planes broke off and headed west toward their bases in Thailand.

On the ground, a few miles outside the capital, I watched two government howitzers banging away at where they thought the Khmer Rouge might be, the soldiers bending to their task ramming rounds into the breaches. Farmers, ignoring the firing, were gathering rice stalks.

The Lon Nol government hung on for almost two years more and the war ground on. Thousands more refugees, with bullock carts looking exactly the same as those portrayed on the bas reliefs of Angkor eight centuries before, plodded down the roads toward the illusion of safety in Phnom Penh.

A couple of weeks before the Khmer Republic's end I was ordered to Saigon, so I missed the downfall. Schanberg and Dith Pran stayed, Sidney to win a well-deserved Pulitzer Prize, and Pran to endure his time in Khmer Rouge hell. Cambodia's four years of agony under the Khmer Rouge began with the "year zero," as they called it—taking their cue from the French Revolution.

Later, when the first shocking news of what life in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge was like began to seep out, I visited the border refugee camps in Thailand and heard of how children were being indoctrinated to denounce their parents. People would be taken out and beaten to death. Anybody who could read or write was suspected of being a class enemy. An auto-genocide

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that would claim many more than a million lives through execution, starvation, and neglect was in full cry.

In 1979 the Vietnamese, finally losing patience with their erstwhile ally, invaded Cambodia and pushed the Khmer Rouge into the mountains and border regions near Thailand. In 1989 I returned to Cambodia again to write a story for the *New Yorker*. Normalcy was trying to creep back. But the horrors of Toul Sleng, the school that had been taken over by Pol Pot's people as a torture chamber and death camp, were terrible to see. The walls were lined with photographs of the condemned, which the Khmer Rouge had taken in a Nazi-like organizational effort to record their proceedings, each face showing the unbearable sadness and resignation of those who knew they were about to die. I searched in vain for any of my Cambodian friends, especially Yun.

Among the Cambodian faces in the photographs there was one of an American, an unsuspecting yachtsman who had been picked up off the coast and taken to the torture chamber to die. The thought of a carefree sailor, sailing way out in the blue sea, being snatched and ending up in this horror remains unbearable to me.

I wandered down to the little square where, years before, we had come to file out stories and share a meal. I found the building with the now-faded letters saying LE TAVERN. But the building had been burned out and was now just a hollow shell, as was Cambodia itself in the immediate post-Khmer Rouge years.

I went back to Angkor with some Australian aid workers, a quick visit, flying west in a terrifyingly decrepit Russian transport plane flown by Vietnamese pilots. We were told we had to be out by dark because the Khmer Rouge would infiltrate back into the ruins under cover of darkness. You could hear the rumble of artillery to the west where the Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge were still fighting in the mountains.

Our guide, in the course of visiting one of the temples, pointed out ashes

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in a corner where, he said, the Khmer Rouge had lit a campfire. I felt the ashes. They were still warm. The Air France hotel, I believe it was called l'Auberge du Temple, near the ruins where I had first met Dith Pran in happier times was burned to the ground. The old Grand Hotel d'Angkor in the town of Siem Reap was a mess, with blocked toilets and tattered mosquito nets and power failures. Vietnamese military officers lounged around smoking in broken armchairs.

The Khmer Rouge had been so efficient at wiping out Cambodians who showed any sign of education that there were very few left who could pass on the elements of Khmer culture to future generations. A search was afoot for old-timers who had survived, or had been living abroad, who could teach young girls the intricacies of Cambodian dance.

In Phnom Penh there were holes in the soaring yellow roofs of the royal palace, and the rusting hulk of a Philippine freighter lay beached on a nearby river bank. Little had been done to repair the city's water system, and foreign aid workers told me it was among the world's most polluted. Broken sewer and water pipes were leaking into each other, a constant source of disease. It was a measure of the horror in which traumatized Cambodians held their recent past that they would tell you that the real reason for the water pollution was that the Khmer Rouge had killed so many people that the water table itself was contaminated.

If the Khmer people are destined to choose between being eaten by a crocodile or a tiger, in 1989 the people of Phnom Penh seemed content with the Vietnamese tigers, who were by then planning their withdrawal, rather than Pol Pot's crocodiles whom they hoped would never return.

The United Nations was trying to prepare the country for its first post-war election. In one village not far from the capital, I watched as UN personnel tried to convince skeptical villagers that there could be such a thing as a secret ballot. They handed out pieces of paper to villagers and asked them to put them into a box. Then the box was opened, and the villagers were asked to find their particular piece of paper. The villagers could not, of course, but the UN people were missing the point. If the Khmer Rouge were to come back—and the Khmer Rouge were still holding out along the

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border with Thailand—they wouldn't be interested in which villager had voted for which party. They would kill the whole village for having anything to do with the voting. Against all odds the elections were relatively successful.

In 2000, more than thirty years since my first visit to Angkor, JB and I were back in the Grand Hotel d'Angkor in Siem Reap, now beautifully restored to its original splendor. There were hundreds of carefree tourists having a good time and visiting the ruins. I never thought I would be glad to see a site overrun with tourists, but after everything that Cambodia had been through in the intervening decades, the sight of foreigners having a good time—without a thought of what had transpired in that unhappy land—lifted my heart. A measure of normality was creeping back to a country that had been so abused.*

What made the Khmer Rouge so cruel and extreme, emptying cities and trying to erase every trace of Cambodia's culture, religion, even family life? Some blame it on Henry Kissinger and the intense American bombing, but I don't agree. Parts of Vietnam were also heavily bombed, and Laos even more, but the Lao and the Vietnamese did not revert to anything like the "year zero" of the Khmer Rouge.

Cambodian history is full of peasant uprisings, countryside against city, and the answer is more likely to be found deep in the Khmer psyche than in anything Henry Kissinger did.

* The monarchy was restored in 1993, and Sihanouk was back on the throne.