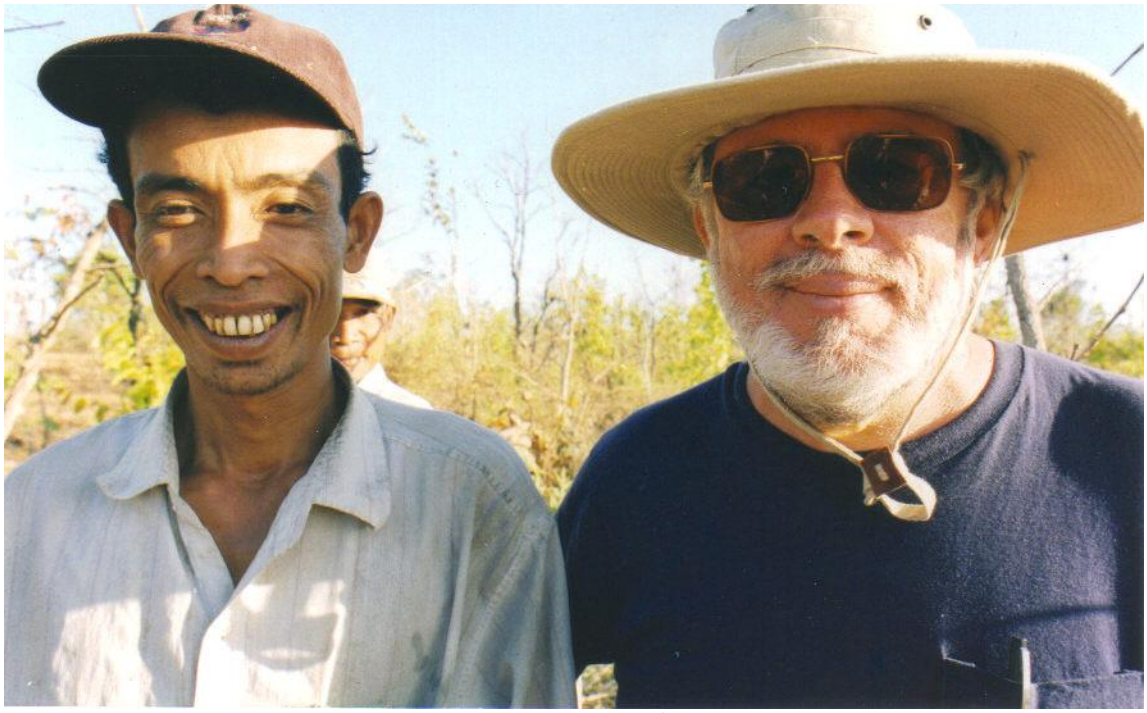
THE UNREDACTED SEARCH FOR THE SON OF CAPTAIN BLOOD

By Richard Linnett October 18, 2002



Ban Poev and Zalin Zip Grant on the outskirts of Kratie, Cambodia

I am walking point in Cambodia, through bone-dry rice paddies and mango scrub. "Keep going minesweeper, dead ahead," says Zalin Grant, taunting me as he follows well behind me, keeping his distance in case I step on a booby-trap. When he was in Army intelligence in Vietnam during the war and later as a Saigon bureau staffer for Time Magazine Zalin never walked point. Only the crazy ones walked point without being ordered to do it, he says, like his old photojournalist buddy Sean Flynn, and he's dead.

Our Cambodian guide Ban Poev stops and points to three sinkholes. In the monsoon season, he says, bullocks bathe in the muck. Now, in the dry season the sun has baked them so hard that his hatchet, small but razor sharp, barely scratches the surface. About thirty years ago, when Ban Poev was a kid, he saw bloated corpses choking these pits. Zalin is here because he believes that his friend, the son of Errol Flynn, may have been

one of them. Zalin has evidence that he believes can prove it, and he has a feeling that he will find the bones of Sean Flynn below the hard earth on which he is now standing.

"If they find Flynn here, this place will really be on the map," says Doug Ebbot a Canadian expat living in the town of Kratie. He's the program officer of the Partners for Development, a U.S. AID supported non-government organization or NGO that digs wells for potable water in his adopted home. "It will be just like the Pere Lachaise," he adds, referring to the cemetery in Paris where fans serenade the tombstone of rocker Jim Morrison with Doors songs. It's not hard to imagine, really: Sean Flynn groupies flocking here to these sinkholes to pay their respects, and perhaps, even to sing the Clash tune "Sean Flynn" from the Sandinista album.

You know he heard the drums of war
When the past was a closing door.
The drum beats into the jungle floor.
Closing door. Closing door…
You know he heard the drums of war
Each man knows what he is looking for

The case of Sean Flynn, who was captured by communist guerillas while on assignment in Cambodia is one of great mysteries of modern war reporting. For many people, especially fellow war correspondents, the disappearance of Flynn was as emotionally charged as the kidnapping and murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan this year. Flynn was extraordinarily handsome, like his father, and at the age of 29 something of a legend. He had abandoned a career as an actor—his first film was *Son of Captain Blood*, a cheaply made sequel to his father's classic *Captain Blood*—in order to put his young neck on the line in Vietnam as a combat photographer.

In April 1970, Flynn and Dana Stone—a freelance cameraman who was on assignment with CBS—disappeared riding motorcycles to a battlefront in Cambodia. Flynn and Stone had become legends in their own time for just this sort of thing. They were called the "easy riders" of the Western press corps in Saigon. They were longhairs, they rode bikes and were part of a fast-living, hard-driving group of freelancers who were not indentured to the big newspapers and magazines and were forced to live by their wits

in order to make a buck, breaking stories on the front line, hitchhiking on Army or Marine choppers to battle zones where many bureau correspondents refused to go.

"Sean was a devil may care, swashbuckling kind of guy who was absolutely charming," Walter Cronkite says to me in a phone conversation from his home in Martha's Vineyard. Cronkite chaired the International Committees to Free Journalists held in Southeast Asia, a group of journalists who searched for Flynn and other missing colleagues at the time. "But he also gave me the impression of a guy very desperately trying to live up to his father's movie achievements."

The charge of living up to his wild-living father, the actor and author of an autobiography with a title that left little to the imagination: *My Wicked Wicked Ways,* would dog the young photojournalist during his lifetime and even after his death. Some have said that Flynn's obsession with his father, who died of a heart attack and cirrhosis of the liver at the age of 50, became so profound that he cultivated a death wish. But people who knew Sean Flynn well, deny this. Despite the long shadow cast by his old man, the younger Flynn became an accomplished photographer whose work is still reproduced in books and magazines, most recently *Requiem* edited by Horst Fass and Tim Page.

Joe Galloway, a UPI correspondent during the war and the author of the book *When We Were Soldiers*, was a former roommate of Flynn's in Saigon. "Flynn was a beautiful guy and a talented character," says Galloway. "And for him to go missing like that, it caused a great stir among the press. Many of his old friends still question what exactly happened to him."

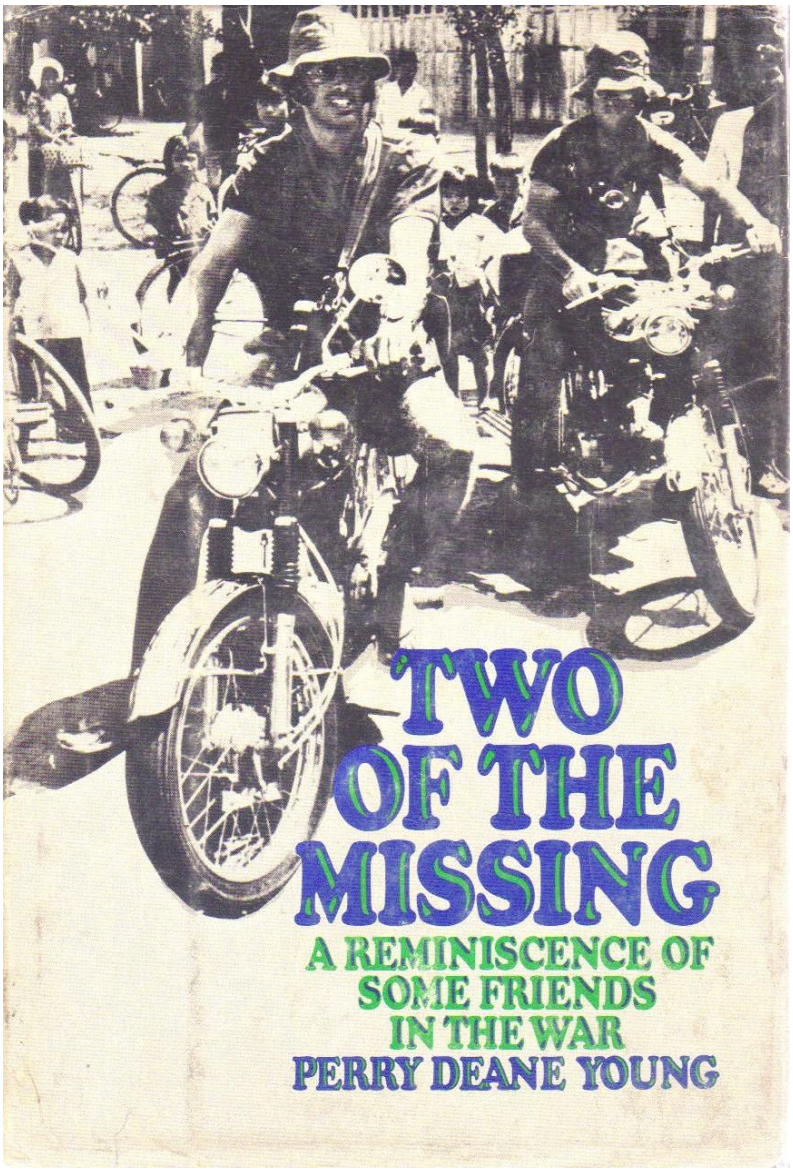
Since their disappearance, Flynn and Stone have become the press corps equivalent of rock gods who died tragically young. They are the Jim Morrison and Brian Jones of their business, immortalized in Michael Herr's classic book *Dispatches* as well as in countless other books and articles about combat journalism in Vietnam including *The Cat From Hue,* an extraordinary recent memoir by former CBS war correspondent Jack Laurence. Searching for answers about what exactly happened to Flynn and Stone has become as crucial to some people as an accurate toxicological examination of the remains of Kurt Cobain is to Nirvana fans. The bloodhounds are still out there searching for them. Their bones have been almost as hotly pursued as the Titanic's hull.

Why? Some say these surviving war correspondents are simply trying to recapture the greatest and glorious moments of their youth. While Flynn and Stone, gone at age 29 and 30 respectively, remain forever young, their friends age—many of them pushing 60 now. The Keith Richards of combat journalism, the close friend and "bandmate" who survives them, Tim Page, refers to Flynn and Stone still as the "lads." In contemporary literature the lads remain straddling little Honda motorcycles in a famous series of photos—the last shots taken of them—by Terry Khoo (another dead photojournalist) in Phnom Penh, on their way to the front.

Flynn is tall, gangly, the bike much too small under him. A Cambodian scarf, cameras and a kit bag hung around his neck, a floppy hat on his head, tinted aviator glasses almost hiding his eyes. He is unshaven, his muttonchop sideburns and his big toothy smile make him look uncannily like another friend, the actor Peter Fonda. Behind him, his feet just touching the ground is Dana on his Honda, also with a camera and a kit bag. He is focused, watching the road ahead, not quite as cool as his companion. They are surrounded by curious Cambodian children.

One frame from this series is on the cover of a long out of print book, considered by many to be the bible on Flynn and Stone and their disappearance, *Two of the Missing* by Perry Deane Young, a former UPI writer, and another close friend of the pair. The book was published in 1975 and has been optioned by Hollywood sixteen times. There have been at least four different screenplays written. *Missing* has become almost as legendary as its protagonists. It began life as a story in Harper's Magazine. Film rights were locked up by producer Stephen Kesten, who produced *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*. James Bridges, who helmed *The Paper Chase*, was lined up to direct. The Kesten deal eventually fell through and later, as a book, the project passed through hands. It even made it to the desk of President Gerald Ford, thanks to official White House photographer David Hume Kennerly who optioned the book three years running. "Kennerly loved the book from the beginning when others in the profession were shunning it," Perry writes me. He now lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and writes columns for local newspapers. "David put the book on President Ford's desk so it would be in all the White House photos for a week."

The *Missing* option now is in the hands of Ralph Hemecker, a TV director who has held it for five years but is unable to get financing. Copies of the book are impossible to find. Hemecker, according to Perry, buys all copies that turn up on the Web.



In *Missing*, Young writes much about Louise Smiser Stone, wife of Dana, who was really the first to search for the lads. She lived with her husband in Saigon and Danang, and she was in Phnom Penh when he disappeared. She not only wrote letters to the North Vietnamese, to politicians in the United States, and to the U.S. military requesting information about her lost husband, she also went out into the bush herself.

"In late 1971, I took Louise up to Kompong Cham on the western bank of the Mekong River to track down reports that two Europeans had been seen in the area," Carl

Robinson tells me. He was an AP photographer based in Saigon and was another friend of the "easy riders." He now lives in Australia. "We weren't able to verify the story. But looking back, it's clear now that the reports were referring to our lost friends."

It wasn't until 1990, long after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, that it was safe for anyone to track down these reports. Page led a high profile expedition that year up to Kampong Cham, which was filmed for Granada TV as the documentary *Danger at the Edge of Town*. He also wrote about the trip in his book *Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden*. Page believes he has solved the mystery of Flynn and Stone, though he has no bones. The book and the film engage is a bit of prestidigitation.

"My gut, my inner sense from talking to the Buddha says I've got Flynn," Page explains to me in a phone conversation from his farmhouse in Kent, England. In his film and book Page reported feeling the presence of Flynn and Stone in Kampong Cham. "I go on passion and emotion and feeling and vibrations. It links all the other details, in my way of thinking. That's the linkage, I don't know if I can prove it."

Better yet, Jeffrey Myers, the Tom Clancy of literary biographers—he seems to churn out a biography a year—is the latest to claim that he has finally solved the mystery of Sean's death. In his 40th book, *Inherited Risk*, a dual profile of Sean and Errol, Myers says that Flynn was killed by lethal injection by a Khmer Rouge pharmacist. Myers did not go out into the field to do his research, but rather, sitting comfortably at his desk in Berkeley, California, he got his hands on a Cambodian intelligence report through email that contains a single interview with a source named Heng Pheng who says the Khmer Rouge euthanized a malarial ridden American, again in the same area of Kampong Cham province, with an injection of a drug normally used to treat psychosis. The report concludes: "Based on the physical features of the many foreigners he saw who were missing in Cambodia, Heng Pheng inferred that the late American journalist was physically similar to Mr. Sean Flynn."

Zalin Grant does not find Mr. Myers' effort enlightening or amusing. "I've read a thousand interrogation reports and it is my opinion that this one [in Myers' book] is a bullshit report, from start to finish."

Zalin has a right to be dismissive. He has been chasing Sean Flynn for 32 years. Besides Louise Stone, Zalin was one of the first of the bloodhounds, hot on the heels of

the easy riders in April 19, 1970, just two weeks after they and at least nine other Western journalists were captured in Svay Rieng. Zalin's employer, Time Magazine, which had given Flynn the Cambodia assignment, and CBS television tapped him to investigate. Zalin was the right person at the right time, with a background in both journalism and military intelligence. "I interviewed face to face more than 500 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese who were from the Eastern Zone in Cambodia," he says about his investigation. Although he didn't find the missing journalists on his first attempt, his research led him to the conclusion that they were still alive.

Later, in 1973, the Cronkite committee asked Zalin to continue the search. Zalin returned to Phnom Penh and found a crucial witness who told him that 10 journalists were being held in a prison camp in Kratie, north of Kampong Cham, a place that was controlled by the Khmer Rouge. These prisoners apparently were captured in Svay Rieng by the North Vietnamese. Zalin was optimistic that Flynn and Stone were among them, but he couldn't get up to Kratie. The area was held by the coalition of Khmer Rouge, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong armies.

Two more of the missing, at a Khmer Rouge mass murder site in Kratie

In 1975, the Vietnamese communists took Saigon and the Khmer Rouge marched on Phnom Penh and the iron curtain dropped. At the time, Zalin was living in Malaga.

"Walter Cronkite phoned me in Spain and asked me to go back to make a further investigation," Zalin writes me. "It wasn't clear at that point what was happening in Cambodia, but I had already figured it out based on my experience of talking to Khmer Rouge in 1973. So I told Cronkite, sorry fella, it ain't worth my ass. And that continued to be my attitude. I took a lot of chances, well documented chances, during the war but I wasn't the type to just do anything without measuring the odds."

Grant and Page, who know each other well enough to disagree on almost everything, do agree on this: Flynn and Stone were captured by the North Vietnamese in Cambodia and were then turned over to the Khmer Rouge. In *Ho Chi Minh's Victory Garden*, Page says that the transfer came by decree from Hanoi, "as part of the process of legitimizing their new allies," he writes. In the book he says that the transfer probably took place with a ceremony on an island in the Mekong River. Page does not say where he got this information. Lately, he has modified his story. In another recent phone conversation with me he said that the transfer may have actually taken place in Kratie, which he had visited while making his movie but passed over at the time, believing it wasn't likely that Flynn and Stone had been there. Kratie is several hours north of Kampong Cham, through rural countryside, some of it forest.

"I suspect that the Kratie prison was possibly the place that the Vietnamese handed them over officially to the Khmer Rouge," Page said to me. "After the edict saying they were going to recognize the Khmer Rouge official front as being the front of all resistance. I suspect that was where it went on. What I haven't got out of the Vietnamese is a copy of that edict, which was written in Hanoi in 1970."

Otherwise, Tim Page is satisfied that he caught up with his friends in Kampong Cham. He does not however explain why the Khmer Rouge would have marched the lads far north and then back south again just to kill them. In *Requiem*, a book of Vietnam War pictures by photojournalists who lost their lives, Page signs off with a eulogy in which he again claims that he solved the mystery in Kampong Cham. "The jigsaw puzzle now seems complete."

For Zalin Grant, however, the puzzle is still in pieces, and none of the pieces come from Kampong Cham. Zalin believes that Page successfully tracked the movement of two Americans who were held prisoner by the Khmer Rouge in that province, but they were not Flynn and Stone.

"In the reports, neither one of these men wore glasses," says Zalin. "And Page knows Stone was virtually blind without his glasses. Page ignores this, and he ignores other facts to suit his own purpose."

There is an intense competition between these two old colleagues, Zalin, the former staff reporter for the Saigon bureau of prestigious Time Magazine and Page, the wildman freelance photographer, whom bureau chiefs in Southeast Asia generally considered unstable and unreliable.

"In 'Nam, they called him Zip. But he was more zits than Zip," says Page, from Kent. "Zip has poured nothing by cynicism on all my efforts, just so he may have his five minutes of fame."

Zalin is equally flattering of Page. "I told Page he may take good pictures, but he's no reporter. *Page after Page* is too many pages," he says, referring to Page's autobiography, *Page after Page*.

Both men have searched and written about Flynn and Stone, both for their own personal reasons, they tell me, while each insists the other is really just looking for celebrity and money. Page tells me he is doing it for his conscience, to bury an old friend. Zalin tells me he is searching because it's been a lifelong mission to find the truth.

"I don't give a shit about being famous," says Zalin. "What would I do with that? I'm too old to care about fame."

Zalin finally picked up the chase again just last year, determined to write the final chapter of a book he hopes to publish in 2003: *The War and I: A 30-Year Search for Sean Flynn, Dana Stone, and Other Missing Newsmen*. In February 2001, he briefly visited Kratie, a place he had never been, joined by Sos Kem, a native Khmer and a naturalized American citizen who acted as an investigator and interpreter. They met Ban Poev on that trip and made other contacts. Again accompanied by Sos, Zalin returned to Kratie this year to finish up. And I joined them.

Zalin planned this trip to coincide with a Cambodian mission by the U.S. Defense Department's Joint Task Force-Full Accounting team. It's the dry season, and the JTF goes to Cambodia, as they do every year at this time, searching for the remains of military personnel still missing after the war in Southeast Asia. It's a yearly ritual searching for MIA bones in Asia, and the U.S. military does it big time. They chopper in dozens of husky men and truckloads of supply crates full of freeze dried American food.

JTF supplies arrive in Kratie in an old Russian chopper

The JTF mandate is to search for the remains of missing soldiers and U.S. civilians who worked for the military during wartime. They will search for the remains of missing journalists, but typically not as an end in itself. Captured journalists were sometimes held in camps along with captured military personnel in Southeast Asia. To JTF investigators, journalists are clues and not much more than that. Zalin asked Ann Mills Griffith, the head of the powerful POW/MIA lobby, the National League of Families, to persuade the JTF to help him. The JTF had agreed only once before to dedicate a search just to missing journalists. In 1992, Kurt Volkert, a former CBS news cameraman, convinced them to help recover the remains of CBS and NBC news crews that were killed near Takeo in southern Cambodia, less than a month after Flynn and Stone disappeared. Volkert and the JTF excavated a burial site that was under a flooded rice paddy. It was a difficult

operation that required the JTF to divert the course of a small river, but it was successful. The JTF recovered the remains of 4 journalists, including former NBC news correspondent Welles Hangen.

When I contacted the JTF to officially request permission to join the Zalin mission Lieutenant Colonel Jerry O'Hara, the unit's information officer, told me it wasn't likely Zalin would find anything. Instead, he offered me the opportunity to accompany a JTF investigation that was certain to yield remains of downed U.S. airmen. After I insisted on joining Zalin's search, the JTF sends back a curt email: "Due to logistics and other media requests, we can not support you on the Zalin case." I called Lt. Col. O'Hara, who repeated the statement "we can not support you." And that was that.

"Once in Cambodia, the U.S. government has no say over your actions," Zalin wrote, encouraging me to come. "The JTF is within its rights not to support you, but… you should just coordinate your visit with the Cambodian government, and Sos Kem can help you with that."

Sos Kem is the first person I meet in Phnom Penh. He is on the second floor terrace of the Scandic Hotel in Phnom Penh, a small out of the way villa that is home to many expats. He is nursing a cup of tea. Nearby, three very young Khmer girls sit under the shade of a mango tree, eating steak. They are pretty, dressed in light cotton dresses and sandals. White butterflies attracted to the mango tree flutter around them, creating the illusion that the girls are innocent; three little Snow Whites in a Disney film. But they speak loud, laugh and spit on the floor, giving themselves away for the whores that they are; guests of the men at the bar, a Belgium demining team and members of the European Union Assistance on Curbing Small Arms and Light Weapons in Cambodia, which rounds up guns in local districts in exchange for funding the development of schools.

"I just don't understand these people," says Sos shaking his head scornfully. "Why do they let them in here. I don't like it." Sos is a highly civilized Khmer who, I shall discover, is very sensitive about the poverty and corruption of his homeland. He left in 1961, at the age of 28, on a U.S. cultural exchange program. Sihanouk refused to allow him to return because he had worked for the U.S. government, teaching Khmer to foreign service officers.

"I was blacklisted by the Sihanouk government," says Sos. "My name, along with six other Khmer students studying in the U.S. appeared in the Khmer language state-newspaper, Neak Cheat Niyum. In other words, the Sihanouk government would have loved me to return, but to face a firing squad."

It was only after Hun Sen took over that he finally came back. Sos is now a U.S. citizen and has worked as a foreign service officer in Washington and in Thailand, and is the editor of a college standard Khmer language course and dictionary. Sos now works for Radio Free Asia in DC and carries an American flag when he travels, draping it over the bed in his room like a blanket.

Zip and I meet with Cambodian military brass in Phnom Penh

Zalin has not arrived yet, so I rent a small Honda motorcycle for $4 a day to visit the famous Hotel Royale where Flynn, Stone and most of the other journalists who scrambled to the city in early 1970 stayed. During the Khmer Rouge years, Le Royale was virtually abandoned. It has lately been transformed by the Raffles chain into an antiseptic, Western-style retreat with Western-style prices. There are no longer any traces of the exotic hideaway that it once was, when journalists covering the new battlefront

gathered on a terrace by the pool every afternoon, sharing it with young Parisian girls and their French rubber baron lovers, who were booted off their plantations by Vietnamese and Cambodian guerillas.

"Each day saw long-legged French girls grace the pool," wrote Jon Swain in his memoir *River of Time*. A correspondent for Agence France-Presse, Swain was captured by the Khmer Rouge along with Dith Pran after the fall of Phnom Penh and was later released. "Their presence conjured up an irresistible atmosphere of hot sex and ice-cold drinks."

Back then, Le Royale was a refuge. The streets of Phnom Penh were charming, clean and free of the noxious little motos that crowd them now. The press corps from Saigon made themselves at home in little white bungalows facing the pool, dined on Kep lobster and crab at La Sirene, the hotel's outdoor restaurant and swam the pool in the evening after returning from field trips.

"Early in the morning a reporter could rent a chauffeured Mercedes, get a box lunch and some wine from the hotel restaurant, then venture out into the very picturesque countryside," writes Young in *Missing*. "By midafternoon most days, the reporters would each have brought back exclusive stories and they could all relax and laugh around the pool."

Meanwhile, in the countryside a homegrown Maoist revolution was emerging, aided by Viet Cong units crossing over from neighboring South Vietnam, and North Vietnamese infantry coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail. In 1969, President Richard Nixon, believing that the Viet Cong had built a sophisticated headquarters in the Cambodian frontier, secretly ordered B52 bombing of the sanctuaries just inside the country's border with South Vietnam. The bombing killed many civilians, and the local fighters, officially the Kampuchea Communist Party but called the Khmer Rouge, were able to rally support and fighters from among the terrorized population. Within a year, the eastern zone of the Cambodian countryside was controlled by the well-organized North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong and their Cambodian friends, who, though still developing as an organization, were gaining a reputation as ruthless fighters.

Cambodia's ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk went to Moscow to plead with the Soviets to force the North Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia. While he was away

his top general, Lon Nol, pulled off a seemingly effortless coup, and after solidifying power sent the Cambodian military out to fight the communist coalition in his backyard. Meanwhile, the U.S. supported South Vietnamese government sent its own troops into Cambodia to root out the rebels, who in effect were caught in the middle. The communists, like rats with their backs against the wall, chose to face Lon Nol, the weakest front and began a campaign of expansion towards Phnom Penh.

For journalists, these were exciting developments. A new war was on the verge of breaking out. The old war had become routine, the only news in Saigon was the Pentagon's de-escalation in anticipation of a full U.S. military withdrawal. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, the battle was just beginning, complete with rumors of secret bombings and U.S. marine incursions. Later in the month, after Lon Nol's army lost a strategic engagement at the Chupp rubber plantation in Kampong Cham province, a full invasion of U.S. infantry swept through the sanctuaries in support of South Vietnamese troops.

Events in Cambodia were spinning out of control, just the kind of situation, chaotic and deadly, that would attract "crazy ones" like Flynn and Stone.

After reporting the war for years on the U.S. side, Flynn and Stone and many other journalists were drawn to Cambodia hoping to see what it was like on the other side, to get a peek at the Viet Cong sanctuaries and the Khmer Rouge. The country was deceptive. The beauty of the place, the smiling Khmer people and the absence of any outward signs of hostility gave the reporters a false confidence.

Zalin arrives at the Scandic a day after me. Blustery and demanding, he orders the hotel boys to drag his baggage out of a taxi. They struggle with a bulky suitcase that is so heavy it takes two to carry. "My documents are in there," Zalin explains. He sits down with Sos and I. He is a shambling character with long white hair that he tucks behind his ears. He wears crooked sunglasses, which makes it hard to see his eyes. But he has a smile that says a lot about him: it is mischievous, the playful grin of a troublemaker. At age 61, Zalin has been around and looks it, but he gives off the air of not having grown up yet, not fully.

He immediately orders a Scandic specialty--steak. It is the first of many. Zalin will not eat local dishes. He is worried about getting sick. I find this odd coming from a man who spent years in Southeast Asia reporting from the battlefront.

"It is simply a question of experience," he lectures me, mildly. "You see, I've been here before. Isn't that right, Sos?"

Zalin has a trace of a Southern accent, which he is both ashamed and proud of. Ashamed because he associates the South with racism; proud because to him it as a sort of badge that he wears proudly in his adopted home in France, like Ezra Pound wearing cowboy boots in Paris, Zalin's accent is a sign of straight-shooting American ways. A native of Cheraw, South Carolina (the birthplace of Dizzy Gillespie), Zalin graduated from Clemson University where he was awarded the South Carolina Collegiate Press Association's top prize in his senior year in 1963 for his coverage of the school's integration--the first in the state. He had also worked as a part-time reporter for the Associated Press before enlisting in the Army, going to Vietnam in 1964 as a military intelligence officer. He rose to 1st lieutenant in the Army Intelligence Service and would have been a captain, he tells me, had he reupped.

Discharged in 1965, Zalin pursued his original career and landed a job with the Time Magazine bureau in Saigon as a reporter. He met Flynn and Stone a year later. He became a friend of Flynn's—they were the same age—but they were never close. Zalin was not part of the "wild bunch," though he knew all of them well. Part of the problem, according to Zalin, was that he was not a smoker and Flynn's group was heavy into opium. "You had to take long inhales on the pipe," says Zalin. "I couldn't do it." Flynn also was a bit of a cowboy and Zalin apparently was not.

"I kept a five shot 38 caliber pistol in my room," Zalin tells me. "Still, I was never wild, not like Sean was with a gun. I was more relaxed. I was a loner. I just did my job. But at night, I always had at least two girls in bed with me."

Zalin's reputation is largely based on his book *Survivors,* an oral history of a group of POWs in Vietnam. *Survivors* is a gripping read, and still in print. He is also remembered as the subject of a gruesome photograph in which he is at the wheel of a mini moke stacked with the bodies of Time Magazine's John Cantwell and three other Australian-born journalists who were killed during a street battle in the Chinese section of Saigon. It was the year of the Tet offensive, 1968, Zalin and his buddy Wallace Terry, then a Time correspondent and later the author of *Bloods. An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*, bravely drove through a hot-spot to recover the bloated corpses.

From that point on Zalin found his calling. He would spend most of the rest of his life chasing after fallen and missing colleagues. He became well-known for it.

Strangely, he also ended up in relationships with women who had been held captive. One of Zalin's girlfriends in Saigon was Michele Rey, a beautiful French adventurer who was snatched by the Viet Cong while shooting a travel documentary in South Vietnam. She was eventually released and wrote a book with a Bernard Fall-like title: *The Two Shores of Hell*. He met his wife, Claude Renee Boutillon, after she was captured by the Khmer Rouge in 1970 while working as a freelancer in Cambodia. One of the few lucky ones, Claude was released in a week and Zalin debriefed her about Flynn and Stone. He was in the middle of his first search.

"Zalin was very brave getting back in that country while it was under the control of the Cambodian guerrillas," says Walter Cronkite. "It was a personal mission of his and we all appreciated his gallantry and his effort."

"He wasn't a snob like a lot of those bloody mag and newspaper types, especially the New York Times," says Carl Robinson. "And he always had time for a chat with a wire service hack like me."

Joe Galloway, an old friend, heaps nothing but praise on Zalin. "The first time I met Zalin he was in uniform working for Army intelligence," says Galloway. "Some people thought he was spying on us. I didn't think so, he was a nice guy. Eventually, he went from being one of them to being one of us."

"I've always found him to be a straight shooter," says Jack Laurence, who now lives in England. "His work on the search for the missing in 1970 and beyond was very professional. His reporting was meticulously documented. He cared about his friends."

But others are not fans of Zalin.

"We called him a redneck rube, though not to his face," says one source who knew Zalin well in Vietnam and requested anonymity. "I think he always cast that air of mystery about himself that he was involved in grand adventures he could never talk about...for years. During and just after the Vietnam War, such guys were a fixture in every American bar."

Of course, Page does not like Zalin much, and it all goes back to Saigon. Zalin was working for Army intellligence when he first met Page, who insists to this day that Zalin was a spy. What or who he was spying on, Page would not explain.

“He’s squirrelly, he’s a real ferret. He’s got little sharp teeth and defends his hole in the ground like a rat. He was taking a double dollar when he was with Time Magazine. We knew he was a spook and we didn't have spooks in our midst. And let’s get the record straight. Zip never knew Flynn. Zip was never part of our circle. Zip never visited Frankie’s Place once. No, we would never have him around. You’d hold the hex key up to him, the guy was bad news.”

Zalin says he knew Flynn, he admits not well, but well enough at least to tape him. Zalin claims he has the only recording in existence of Flynn speaking at length. He is using the material in his book. “The thing about Flynn, nobody got him in an interview but me. It is not all that deep but I've got him, along with his photos, in three chapters. And it is Flynn--how he imagines himself, not how Page or vets imagine him. He comes across very clear. And in fact likable.”

The only son of Errol Flynn and the beautiful French actress Lilly Damita, who was abandoned by her husband before their child was born, Sean was raised by his mother in Palm Beach and Paris. After dropping out of Duke University he starred in movies filmed in Hollywood and overseas. He lived the life of a young playboy, dating starlets and models, driving sports cars, playing tennis, fencing, riding horses, jetting back and forth from Paris. He went on a big game hunting trip to Tanzania, where he killed a tiger, and stayed on working as a safari guide, an experience that gave him a taste for real adventure.

But it was in Vietnam that he came into his own. In 1966 he convinced Paris Match to send him to Southeast Asia to take photographs of the war, though he had never operated a camera. To make up for his lack of experience he threw himself into combat, riding with chopper pilots into battles and marching into the jungle with Special Ops units. Flynn led the dangerous life of the ambitious freelancer in Vietnam. In order to compete with the journalists on staff at Time, the New York Times, Newsweek, or CBS, freelancers like Flynn pushed themselves to the edge of safety and sanity in order to bring back an exclusive story and photographs.

Colleagues accused him of coming to Vietnam to play, but he proved himself early. On one of his first assignments Flynn accompanied a unit of vicious Nung tribesmen on an operation. These were mercenaries who hated the Viet Cong and really enjoyed killing. Flynn photographed them torturing prisoners deep in the jungle. The cold, merciless photos were syndicated around the world.

Meanwhile, in between combat missions, back in the strange, sexy social stew of war-torn Saigon, Sean was a local celebrity. He was the city's only movie star, and while his films played on Saigon's big screens, the man himself could be found having a mid-morning coffee and croissant at the Tu Do street café La Pagode. He was tall, with long blond hair, sideburns, blue eyes; a stunning package that attracted the attention of everyone, especially the girls working at the embassies and the Vietnamese bargirls. Even the U.S. military officers and grunts were happy to take him along on missions, as if some of his glamour might rub off on them. And the press corps always invited him to their parties.

"You wanted to know him better but you also didn't want him to invite you on a mission he was going on," said Cronkite, who reported from Saigon frequently during the war and ran into Flynn in social settings. "You would have found it very embarrassing to have to say no, you were afraid. People made a lot excuses to keep from going out with him."

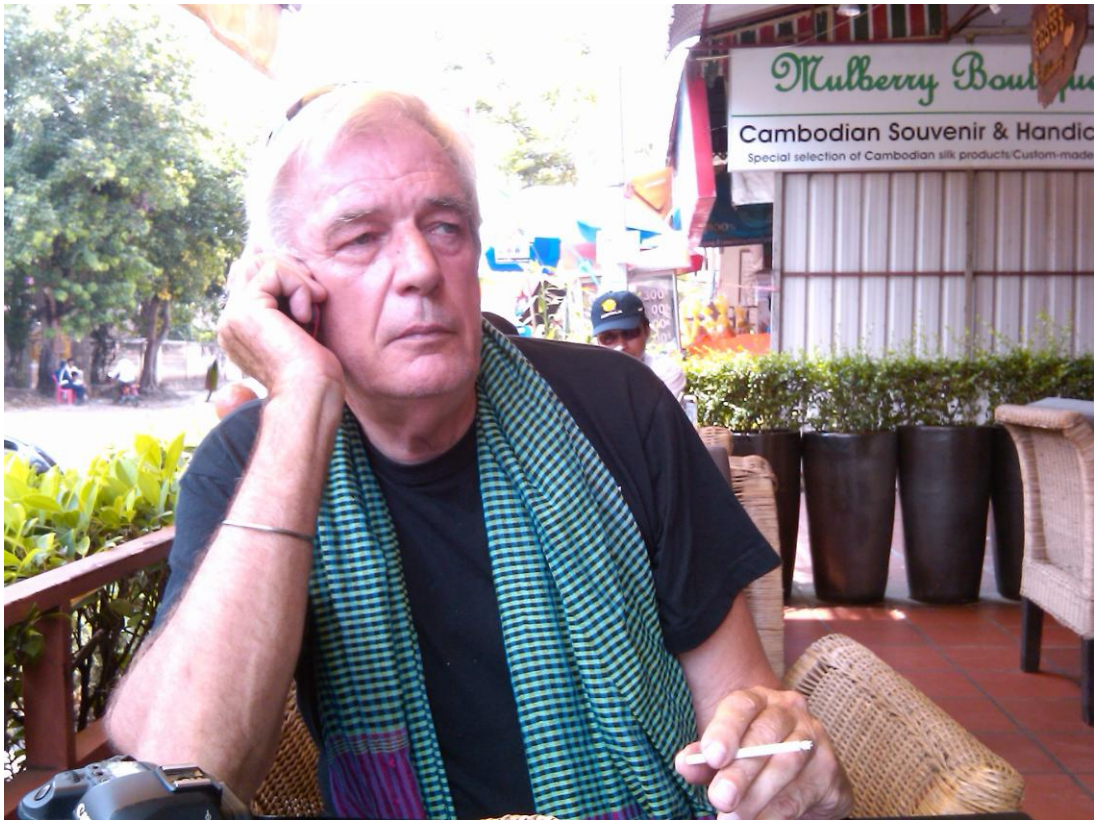
Flynn met Page soon after arriving in Saigon. He moved into a flat Page was sharing with a gang of journalists at number 47 Bui Thi Xuan Street. It was called Frankie's Place after the houseboy who took care of the building, cadged drugs for the tribe and was their in-house pimp.

"By late 1965, the Saigon press corps had divided itself between the straights and the crazies, the serious reporters and the cowboys. And those who lived at Frankie's House were counted among the crazies," writes Jack Laurence in *The Cat from Hue*. "The combination of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll was not invented at Frankies House, nor was it perfected there, but it was practiced almost every evening with consummate enthusiasm."

Page was the center of attention. He was the prankster, the troublemaker, the dope smoker who was always stoned, even while skillfully piloting his BSA motorcycle

through the crowded streets of the city. All the *bao chi* had motorcycles at Frankies; they were practical, they got the journalists around town quickly and they also were used for dope runs and for late night trips to Saigon's opium dens. Frankie's place was where the "heads" gathered, they listened to Hendrix, Dylan, the Animals, smoked powerful Sumatran dope while swapping stories about daring runs in country on combat missions with the Marines and Specials Ops. The closets at Frankie's were filled with guns and explosives, some just souvenirs from combat missions, others in working order and used by the journalists, including Flynn and Page.

The place was so colorful, corrupt, outrageous and legendary that years later, in 1992, an Australian production company produced a dramatic cable TV series called *Frankie's House* starring Iain Glen as Page and Kevin Dillon as Flynn. Although much of the material for the series was adapted from his autobiography, *Page After Page*, Page was not happy with the outcome. He felt that his character was dumbed down.



Tim Page in Phnom Penh 2010

Stone didn't live at Frankie's but he stopped by often. He was a Vermonter, the son of rural postman. He had arrived in Saigon from San Francisco where he had worked at

odd jobs including male stripper in the Tenderloin district. Stone was a small man with thick glasses and curly red hair. Like Page, he was a prankster and a wiseguy, but more sardonic, not over the top like the Englishman. And he was a daring photographer. The grunts called journalists who went with them into combat "infantry." They called Stone the "mini-grunt." He was a tough freelancer who was not afraid to climb into a gunship on its way to the most dangerous place in the world, Khe Sanh, and drop into the middle of a raging firefight there. He was a self-taught lensman, perhaps more dedicated and finally more successful at it than Flynn.

Flynn and Stone got to know each other better later, after the Frankie's Place group broke up. Flynn and Page both traveled outside Vietnam for a year—Flynn to cover the Six Days War in the Middle East and Page to cover the antiwar movement in the United States, while Stone stayed in Vietnam. In 1968, the year of the Tet offensive, Flynn returned to see what was happening, and he was followed by Page. They shared an apartment on Tu Do with Stone, Perry Deane Young, who had just arrived in Vietnam for the first time, John Steinbeck IV, another famous man's son and one of the founders of the alternative news syndication Dispatch News, and Nik Wheeler a UPI photographer who was the first occupant of the apartment.

"Someone said Sean had come back and was looking for a place to stay so he and I shared the apartment and then there was another apartment next to it and Page and Dana moved in there," Nik told me in a phone conversation from Santa Barbara, where he now lives, running a successful photography business. "So for a while there were four of us."

Carl Robinson, who had married a Vietnamese women and lived among the locals, used to visit frequently. "The Tu Do Street pad was the place to hang out after work, a drop-in pad for Saigon's "heads," as opposed to its "boozers," Carl writes me. "Page would roll his famous "tampanellas" –- Tampax-size joints –- and put on his music, always the latest, at full volume and then entertain the regular stream of visitors. Dope would give the place a hyped-up buzz that could lead anywhere as the evening progressed. Page was the leader of the pack, or fancied himself so, and loved being the center of attention. In contrast to Page's loud and rambunctious manner, Flynn was calm and thoughtful, not saying very much. That's how he was when I first met him, sitting there one of those high-backed rattan chairs. Just calmly watching the scene. Stoned."

Robinson recalls a special moment with the easy riders. “I remember the thrill of sitting on a hilltop on the DMZ with Sean and Dana and Dana was looking around with the fighting going on, and he said to us: ‘You know, this is the high point of our lives.’”

Flynn once was famously interviewed in a radio show, saying that he “grooved on the danger” in Vietnam. And apparently he did groove, and so did Stone, and so did many other adventurous freelancers. Yes, they carried guns, and at times they apparently crossed the line separating themselves from combatants. Although under the Geneva Code, correspondents could carry pistols and could fire weapons in self defense without being classified as enemy combatants, Stone and especially Flynn sometimes went a bit further then just carrying pistols.

“Sean loved guns from the time he was a boy,” says Perry Deane Young. “It's incredible to imagine, but he traveled all over the world with all kinds of weapons quite freely; I mean, Uzis, you name it. He had enough C-4 plastique in our lockers in Saigon and Danang to blow up a village.”

In one well-publicized episode, Flynn, with a grenade in his hand, led a Special Operations unit on a successful charge of a hill held by the Viet Cong. He allegedly killed one of the enemy in the assault. Stone was there. He photographed Flynn taking the hill.

Stone was a marksman too. Jack Laurence describes an episode in *The Cat From Hue* in which Stone is recruited by an Army captain to guard a perimeter. The captain asks him if he knows how to shoot, and Stone proves it by hitting the center of a powder burn in a wall fifty yards away with a carbine. In Page’s film, *Danger at the Edge of Town*, the narrator recounts a story told by Tom Corpora, a UPI photographer, who said Stone once flushed out a North Vietnamese regular hiding in a river and shot him dead.

Perry Deane Young tells a different version of that story. He says Stone shot the guerilla with his camera, not a gun. “There's no question Dana fired at ‘the enemy’ on more than one occasion,” writes Perry Deane. “Who knows how many--if any--he killed. Stone was very troubled by the whole scene (and his enjoyment thereof) I think.”

Flynn on the other hand, proudly accepted a plaque from the Green Berets who wanted to give him a medal. In *Missing*, Perry Deane quotes a Special Forces officer who took Flynn with him on an assault in the deadly Ashau Valley. “Had he been military he

would have been cited for bravery," says the officer, "But all we could do was buy him a scotch upon return to camp base."

"Flynn did, in fact, kill a lot of 'the enemy'," says Perry Deane. "And that's why they wanted to put him in for a medal."

No one knows—or at least no one is saying—whether or not Flynn and Stone were packing heat when they went to Cambodia. "I feel very strongly that they absolutely would not have "packed heat" on that last journey for the most obvious of reasons," says Perry Deane. "They knew they were headed into enemy territory and also knew others had already been captured. Carrying a weapon would instantly put your own life in danger even if you were captured without violence."

Ironically, fate played a cruel trick on Flynn and Stone. In Army lore, a soldier's greatest fear is to be killed days before one's tour of duty is over. Flynn and Stone's tour of duty was just about finished when they decided to take this last assignment together. The easy riders had mellowed. Flynn had plans to settle in Bali with an Indonesian girlfriend. Stone was angling for a permanent job with CBS that might take him and his young wife, Louise, around the world. But deep down they couldn't shake their addiction. Flynn and Stone were war junkies, hooked on ambition and "groovin on the danger." Unfortunately, there were no U.S. Army or Marine troops to protect him while they "grooved" in the "Big C," as Page fondly calls Cambodia. The boys were on their own, on two small motorcycles, cruising to a porous, bloody battle field where invading North Vietnamese troops and Khmer Rouge were trading potshots with the Cambodian army. They sped down a stretch of lonely country road, past a North Vietnamese roadblock and vanished.

Page recently discovered long lost film footage of the pair at the roadblock. He plans to use the film in an Australian documentary he is helping produce called *Shoot the Messenger*, which he describes as the Vietnam *Sorrow and the Pity* (by Marcel Ophuls) featuring the talking heads of some of the great correspondents of that war, David Halberstam, Kate Webb, Joe Galloway, Walter Cronkite, Peter Arnett, Jack Laurence, Page and yes, even Zalin Grant, as well as at least three dozen others. The footage of Flynn was shot by Christian Hasch, a cameraman with ORTF. Flynn and Stone were with a group of journalists on Highway One, they stopped a few hundred yards from a car that

was intentionally angled sideways across the road to stop traffic. The car belonged to Claude Arpin, a French journalist who was captured earlier.

"Flynn rides towards the camera and does a wheelie to the camera, and says 'Pathet Lao, Pathet Lao' and then goes down the road again toward the ambush and you see this car, it looks like a big Opel Capitan across the road with the doors open. This is the Claude Arpin car. He rides up towards it, waving. It is obvious that he is putting the French TV off from getting at his scoop."

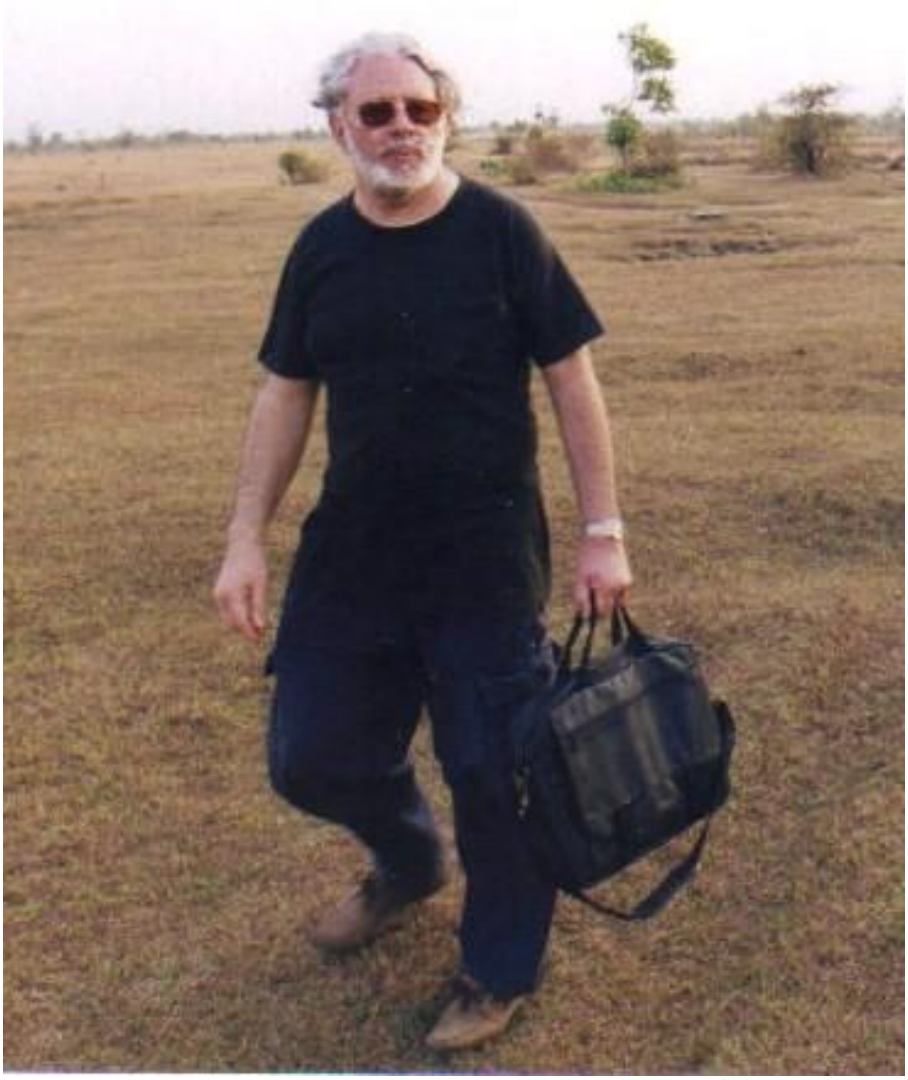
Pathet Lo of course is the name of the Laotian guerillas. Page says that Flynn probably meant to say 'Vietcong' or 'Khmer Rouge' but in his excitement at having probably seen guerillas down the road, got strangely confused. The date was April 6, 1970. Peter Arnett, who covered the war in Vietnam for AP, called it the beginning of "the blackest few months in modern war-reporting." Twenty-five Western journalists disappeared in Cambodia. Most of these newsmen, including Welles Hangen, George Syvertsen of CBS and Gerry Miller of CBS, were brutally killed on the spot.

To put the 25 Cambodian casualties in perspective, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 24 journalists were killed on the job worldwide in 2000. Last year, the number of worldwide deaths climbed to 37, but of that number only 13 were killed working in dangerous areas, such as Afghanistan. The others were singled out for murder specifically for their writings. What makes the Cambodian death toll so staggering is that most of them occurred within one place, a small country the size of the state of North Dakota, and within a couple of months of each other.

Flynn and Stone and about nine others who disappeared in Svay Rieng province—called the Parrots Beak because of its narrow shape--may not have been killed immediately. According to Zalin, they were captured by the North Vietnamese, not the Khmer Rouge, and were forced to march north towards Hanoi. Many journalists allege that the North Vietnamese understood the propaganda value of holding captured Western correspondents, treating them well and eventually releasing them. That's what happened to Robert Sam Anson, a Time Magazine correspondent, Kate Webb, a UPI reporter and Richard Dudman, a St. Louis Post Dispatch reporter. All three wrote books that drew sympathetic portraits of their captors. Dudman's book, *40 Days with the Enemy* also

painted a clear picture of massive support in the Cambodian countryside for North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops.

The Khmer Rouge on the other hand knew nothing about good press relations or propaganda and had no experience with Westerners; they simply exterminated *barangs*--foreigners--when they ran across them.



Zip searching in Kratie with his constant companion, his briefcase

Zalin believes that Flynn and Stone were taken up to Kratie by the North Vietnamese who handed them over to the Khmer Rouge along with the prison in which the men were held. It was not, according to Zalin, a transfer of prisoners so much as the transfer of a facility that happened to have Western journalists as prisoners. According to Zalin, Hanoi ordered North Vietnamese troops out of the country and they turned

everything over to the Khmer Rouge. Why the Vietnamese did not continue with their original plan of bringing the journalists to Hanoi, Zalin does not explain. Leaving them with the Khmer Rouge apparently was done as a gesture of solidarity. When I ask him if it's possible that the North Vietnamese simply killed Flynn and Stone, Zalin looks at me as if I am a lunatic, and informs me that they never killed journalists. Never. They always held them, treated them well for propaganda purposes and then released them. Always.

Before we leave for Kratie, Sos sets up an appointment with Joe Fraley, the new Defense Attache Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh. A retired Air Force non-commissioned officer, in other words a civilian, Fraley is in charge of Cambodian operations of Stony Beach, a unit of the Defense Intelligence Agency that searches for live bodies as well as remains of missing servicemen.

Fraley is about 35 years old, stocky, with thick glasses and a boyish, bookish face. We meet him for dinner at the Scandic. He brings his wife who has just arrived in town from Hawaii with their four children. Before coming to meet us, they drop the kids off at their first social event in Phnom Penh, a dance at a French Lycee, their new school.

This is a choice assignment, Fraley tells us, the culmination of everything he has been working for. In the past he flew into Cambodia once or twice a year, from his posting in Bangkok or from his last home in Honolulu, JTF's homebase. Now he is here full time. His appointment is a sign that the defense department is serious about reaching a final resolution of the JTF mission in Cambodia. According to the latest JTF figures, there are only 58 Americans unaccounted for in Cambodia. In Vietnam there are 1,444 and 404 in Laos. Fraley's new posting is also a sign that the U.S. wants to take advantage of Cambodia's helpfulness. The Cambodians have established their own POW/MIA committee to assist the U.S. in locating remains.

The dinner with Fraley is friendly. He speaks Khmer—he was a student of Sos—and has conducted many MIA investigations in Cambodia, including interviews that picked up information about the missing journalists. He seems interested in pursuing leads on Flynn and Stone, but it is hard to tell how interested. He suggests that perhaps Flynn and Stone were killed near their point of capture. He believes that Kratie is not a POW site really but a possible genocide site, in other words, Kratie is a place where the Khmers ruthlessly killed one another.

Almost one month after our dinner, Fraley and a JTF team will interview witnesses in Svay Rieng province, near where Flynn and Stone disappeared. The sources will allege that Flynn and Stone were first captured by the Khmer Rouge and then turned them over to the North Vietnamese army. In the JTF report, which I have obtained, though it has not been declassified, Fraley's team interviews a man who claims to have seen two American reporters in Khmer Rouge custody.

> The reporters were on motorcycles near Phum Thlok, Svay Teap district [Svay Rieng province]. The KR followed the reporters and captured them… They were then turned over to the Vietnamese communist forces commander of the Vietnamese base near Phum Monourom. The Svay Teap district chief kept the motorcycles. The commander of the base near Phum Monourom killed the taller of the two reporters and the deputy commander killed the short reporter…. The burial location for the reporters was near the Cambodia-Vietnamese border, near Phum Monourom, Svay Teap district, Svay Rieng province.

I have recently learned that the JTF plans on following up on this particular report during what they call their "scrub" or mission in Cambodia this October. According to a source at the JTF, the organization has witnesses in both Cambodia and Vietnam who say they saw these journalists and know something about their execution.

In guidebooks Kratie—pronounced crotch ay-- is often described as the last stop at the end of the world. The roads to Kratie from Phnom Penh are rough and there are bandits so the easiest way to get there is either by helicopter or by boat up the Mekong. Zalin, Sos and I take what is called the fast boat, a cigar-shaped, diesel powered ferry. Another way to go is a slow boat up the river that can take three days. We are advised to take the fast boat but warned to sit at the front, near the exits. There are no exits in the back, and these torpedo-shaped, human barges are known for hitting driftwood and sinking. Sos and Zalin take their chances inside.

I ride the roof, which is like riding on the hood of an SUV cruising down a highway. There is nothing to hold onto, other than the person next to you. There are no seats, the roof is dented and dinged, worn out from years of accommodating cargo, peasants, Cambodian students and the occasional tourist. On this trip there's an

Australian military demining detachment in full downunder getups: bush hats, sunglasses and camo-wear. They tell me, evasively, they are going up to Kratie to "scout around."

The great expanse of the bath-like Mekong lies before us, great sweeps of sandy beaches along its banks, alternating with sunbaked mud cliffs, lush palm forests, thatch huts, children bathing in the river with bullocks, or carrying buckets of water on their shoulders up old mud steps baked into the tall embankments. We thread our way past slender fishing boats and nets that use beer cans as floats. Almost seven hours and there are no accidents, no mishaps, no one overboard, just a sore ass and some sunburn.

There is a general air of decay about Kratie, especially in the central market, where rundown colonial buildings stand as a sad reminder that this was once a prosperous logging and fishing town, but there is no longer any logging and little commercial fishing. The riverfront road is still splendid and exotic, with mango trees and shabby French buildings lining the boulevard, and there are food and drink stalls on the river side. One of the most popular stall drinks is tikalok, a cocktail of crushed ice, condensed milk, sugar and a raw egg. You can also buy shortie cans of uncarbonated Red Bull. Zalin says Kratie reminds him of Danang, the seaside town in Vietnam, at the fabled shores of China Beach that was a popular R&R destination for soldiers and reporters.

"This is the meanest fish in the Mekong," says Zalin

He is sitting at a table at the Chne Tonle, a modest open air café facing the beaches of the Mekong, poking his finger at the head of a whole fried fish with nasty teeth that look ready to snap back. In Kratie, there is no steak, so Zalin will eat only eat fried fish, which he tells Sos to order for him every day. Sos also is cautious about the food. He insists that the restaurant owners sterilize the silverware in boiling hot water. He asks them to chill our beers in a bucket of chopped block ice rather than serve them the usual Cambodian way with suspicious looking cubes in our glasses. We make ourselves at home at the Chne Tonle, teaching them Western ways, while we wait for the U.S. military. Fraley, who promised to come up before the JTF, is a few days late. Zalin is very disappointed in him; after our dinner at the Scandic he felt that they might become friends. Now he is feeling like the jilted lover.

"Fuck them," he says. "If they don't get their asses up here, I'll do it all on my own. I don't need them."

Sos and Zalin locate Ban Poev quickly. He is at the home of his friends, Ung Narine and her husband Long Chem. They are just a few minutes out of town, in the countryside. They live in a typical stilt house set back from the road about 50 meters. Ban Poev's eyes are bright and bloodshot. His head seems too large for his wiry body. He wears a white, short-sleeve button down shirt, black loose-fitting pants, sandals and a baseball cap. He is very friendly, takes my hand and shakes it. Ung Narine is a stout woman, with a broad, intelligent face. She works as an election official for the government. Her husband is lean, like Ban Poev, but shorter, white hair. He is in the Cambodian army, on reserve, and wears his fatigue pants with a tee shirt. All three are in their forties.

Before leaving for the site, Sos asks Ban Poev some questions. We all sit in the shade of a shanty that is separate from the main house and serves as a bedroom for Ung Narine and her husband. Sos turns on a digital recorder and begins questioning. He is methodical. Zalin and I watch and listen. Sos occasionally turns to us to explain. "He says the bodies he saw were important people, intellectuals from Phnom Penh." How does he know this? The Khmer Rouge told him. He spoke to the Khmer Rouge about this? Not exactly, he was with another man, an old man who told him. He also told Ban Poev to keep quiet, don't say anything or the Khmer Rouge will kill you.

Ban Poev describes what he saw thirty years ago. Flies covering trees. A horrible stench. Bodies floating in muck, covered with branches. How many bodies? He assumes there were about ten. He only saw two, bloated and putrid. The pits—three holes--were large enough to hold ten. He said he saw the bodies just after the rainy season. Zalin is excited.

"He said ten, Sos? Ten?" Zalin pronounces his partner's name "sauce."

Sos serenely nods.

"You're sure he said ten?" Zalin repeats, pointing a crooked finger at Ban Poev. "Ask him, why ten? Ask him that Sos."

Sos pauses--clearly irritated by Zalin's hammering--and then speaks to Ban Poev quietly again, who replies, nodding his head.

"He says ten, because the holes are big enough to hold that many."

"Damn, that's how many journalists are missing," says Zalin, pointing his finger this time at Sos. "You know that, of course."

Sos wearily nods. Yes. He knows.

I'm walking point leading our group to the burial site. Zalin is thinking of mines. He's obsessed with them. One went off the other day, almost killing a Chinese worker who was working on Highway 13, which passes near here. "I don't plan on dying here," Zalin says. "Stay in front. That's right, just keep walking." He's carrying his little black briefcase. He carries it wherever he goes. I turn and take a picture of him.

"It takes an odd guy to be a photojournalist in a war," he says, suddenly reflective. "By definition you have to be crazy. And there are two types of crazy. Pure crazy are stupid and get themselves killed. And crazy; they develop an instinct for what they can get away with."

We are at the sinkholes, the depressions. They look so unpromising. If there were bodies here lying in mud, they are long gone.

"What does he say?" Zalin asks Sos, interrupting a conversation between him and Ban Poev.

"He is afraid the U.S. military will be mad at him if they don't find bones here," Sos explains.

"No you're doing fine," Zalin points his finger at Ban Poev. "You justify their existence."

Before dusk, we are led to another possible burial site by Ry, a friend of Ban Poev and a former Khmer Rouge camp guard. He's about forty five, short, with high cheek bones and a churlish grin. He wears a heavy cotton plaid shirt that is threadbare at the shoulders. His site is near Ban Poev's and butt up against a seven-foot high termite hill. Ry tells us he found two bodies here, one on top of the other. The legs on the largest corpse were broken so the body could fit into the hole. Ry took boots off the broken legs. Ry also found manacles near the bodies and a shovel. He took these too. He doesn't have any of these souvenirs anymore. He used the boots and wore them out. Zalin pulls Sos aside.

"This guy scares me," he says. "He looks like a killer. I mean, he took the boots of the broken legs of a dead man. That's pretty cold blooded. If you ask me, Ry murdered these people himself. He's showing us the grave of his own victims. He's got the balls to show us where he buried two people that he killed, and wants to get paid for it. This is some fucking country, huh, Sos?"

Sos shakes his head sorrowfully. It's hard to tell if he's disgusted with Ry, Cambodians in general or Zalin. I believe it's a little bit of everything.

At the end of the day Zalin reaches into his briefcase, pulls out a wad of cash and pays ten dollars apiece to Ban Poev, Ung Narine and Ry. He tells Sos to tell them that they should expect to work with him the rest of the week.

It goes like this for a few days; we interview people in the vicinity of the sinkholes. Some people don't mind talking about the Khmer Rouge past, while others are afraid. We come across people who stare at us with angry bloodshot eyes and refuse to speak. We find others who are evasive, looking away from us. And there are some people who are warm and sweet, smiling at us, who obviously have nothing to hide. But one never knows. Cambodia is a country of ghosts, and the people seem to live with them very easily.

Two senior JTF officers arrive in Kratie scouting ahead of the main unit. Colonel Neil Fox, deputy commander of the JTF, and Lieutenant Colonel Mike Dembrowski, who is the commander in charge of JTF operations in Cambodia. Dembrowski is Air Force and aloof, he wears dark sunglasses, clutching a notebook that has the JTF seal on it: a red iron cross stamped on a map of Southeast Asia. Fox, a Marine, is straight-forward and courteous. They are both new to the JTF, having been brought in by Brigadier General Steven Redmond, Air Force, who was appointed commander of the JTF in July 2001.

Zalin and I talk to Fox and Dembrowski in a restaurant on the river front road. Zalin is convinced that they have come to check up on him even though Colonel Fox insists they are here to see the hotel and make sure there are enough rooms for his team. There is only one big hotel in Kratie, the Santepheap, a French colonial-era building that has been rehabilitated. The cost of my room with no fan and a cold shower is $5. Zalin has a $20 room; the best in the house. It is the only one with lounge chairs, a TV on a rolling cart and a refrigerator. Zalin lounges around his suite wearing a sarong and watching Asian MTV. The room was originally reserved by the JTF's chopper pilot, but Zalin forced the hotel to give it to him.

"Fuck the pilot," says Zalin. "The only reason they're here is because I'm here."

That line has been our running joke in Kratie. Anytime anything goes wrong, we say: "Fuck the pilot." Now suddenly, it appears the pilot is here, at least I assume—wrongly—that Dembrowski is the pilot in question. I tell Dembrowski, in a lighthearted way, that Zalin stole his room and of course I put my foot in my mouth. Zalin flashes me a withering glare. Dembrowski shakes his head: he never booked a room.

"Hey, listen," says Zalin, changing the subject. "I know the military doesn't like journalists. We're a pain in the ass. I was in the military. I volunteered for Vietnam. I know what that's all about. But I think I've got some good information here. I think there were journalists held here and I'm just trying to find them."

Fox nods. "Listen, Zalin," he says. "We're all in this together. We're all looking for the same thing. Believe me. We're going to help you out."

The full JTF teams arrives the following morning in choppers, landing in an old soccer field. One bird is a clunky Russian built MI-17, and there are two French-built Aero Spatiale "squirrels." Last year, seven JTF personnel and nine Vietnamese officers

died in an MI-17 that got lost in heavy fog while on a recovery mission in Vietnam and slammed into a mountain. The Russian buzzard on this trip carries equipment only. Passengers take the French choppers.

I scramble up to the field on my moto and greet the party. “So you’re the infamous journalist,” says one of the officers. “We heard you’ve been giving the brass some trouble.”

“No,” I say to him. “That would be Zalin.”

That afternoon, Zalin, Sos and I and the JTF investigators, including Fraley, Dembrowski, Fox, the anthro, Rich Wills, a civilian who wears glasses and a baseball cap, Army Sargeant First Class Greg Parmele, Army Chief Warrant Officer Tom Munroe, Air Force Senior Airman Ruben Caudle, a young fresh faced soldier, and investigative team leader Army Major Dave Combs go to Ung Narine’s house. Fraley is all business, not the friendly fellow American we met at the Scandic. He listens to Zalin describe his sources and then perfunctorily walks off with Caudle, who speaks Khmer, to debrief Ban Poev. I can tell Zalin is put off by Fraley’s coolness.

Meanwhile, Long Chem leads the rest of us to the alleged burial sites. The JTF guys pull out their measuring tape, their global positioning instruments and Major Combs who sports a Marine-style mohawk buzz cut, pulls out a pickaxe (“Got this at Home Depot”) and starts chipping away at the rock hard ground.

The JTF is divided into an investigative unit, which chases down leads and interviews witnesses, and a recovery unit, which does the digging once a site has been established. The recovery team is assisted by members of the Central Identification Lab in Honolulu, which identifies remains. The anthropologist, Rich Wills works for CILHI, which they pronounce “So-high.”

“Once we find remains,” Colonel Fox says. “We let the anthro do his magic.”

Colonel Fox, however, does not seem very optimistic about this site. In fact, as they poke around, the investigators shake their heads and roll their eyes at one another, all accept for Major Combs, who is absorbed in his digging. I overhear snippets of conversations. The depressions are not like graves, but more like scars from B52 drops because they line up in a row.

The JTF meets the Commander of the ZTF – the Zalin Task Force

Greg Parmele smokes cigarettes, the only one on the investigative team, and seems jumpy. He wonders why the Khmer Rouge would go so far back from the road into the jungle to bury a few bodies. Munroe points out that in order for the JTF to dig here they need to get permission, which means searching for the land owner and maybe paying money. If they refuse, they can't dig, at least not right way. Colonel Fox explains that even before they start digging, they have to do a dirt test, which would involve punching a hole in the ground and pulling out a sample that would be tested for metal or bone content back in the lab in Honolulu. This doesn't sound good. Zalin and I have to leave in a week, which does not give us enough time for the bureaucracy to grind through the red tape, paperwork and all the dirt tests.

"Fuck the pilot," Zalin says later. "We'll do our own dirt test."

We are at the Chne Tonle again, this time having a last meal with Sos who is leaving us. He has a job interview in Phnom Penh. The United Nations wants him to run an office for them in the city.

Zalin is impatient. The JTF does not believe in Ban Poev and his sinkholes. But Zalin does, and he wants to dig them up with or without the JTF. Sos is all for the idea.

He is convinced Ban Poev saw bodies in those pits, whether or not they were Caucasian, he can't say. But there were bodies.

Personally, I'm a little worried. If we just go in there and dig, the JTF may refuse to keep looking into the case.

"I don't care," he says. "I'm never coming back to Cambodia. This is it. I'm going to finish this once and for all. I never want to see this country again. Never."

"What if we find something?" I ask.

"We'll let the anthro do his magic," says Zalin, dripping with contempt. "Listen," he continues, "we'll dig a hole, and if we don't find anything, we'll pat down the earth real nice, cover it up and disappear on the next boat."

In *Danger at the Edge of Town*, Page starts where "the lads" first disappeared on Highway One in southern Svay Rieng province about 250 miles from where we are in Kratie. A source in Chi Pou is filmed telling Page about two Americans on motorbikes who were captured by North Vietnamese troops and hustled into a village. Page then jumps north, about 150 miles into Kampong Cham province. Why such a leap? Well, because he found declassified CIA and Department of Defense MIA documents from the late 70's in which eyewitnesses saw two Americans in the custody of the Khmer Rouge in Kampong Cham in 1971. In the reports, Defense Intelligence Agency analysts suggested that the sightings might be of Flynn and Stone. However, they also hypothesized that the two men might have been a different pair of lost Americans, something that Page does not reveal in his film or book.

With an armed escort of 40 Cambodian troops—remnants of the Khmer Rouge still roamed the countryside—Page and his crew tracked down the original sources in Kampong Cham. In the film, villagers are translated describing one tall American journalist and a short one. Long Sokha Bun Ny, a former Khmer Rouge cadre, says that one of the Americans said his parents were Hollywood actors. She also is filmed identifying Flynn in a photo "This is Seen Fleen," she says, looking at a photo of Flynn and smiling at the camera.

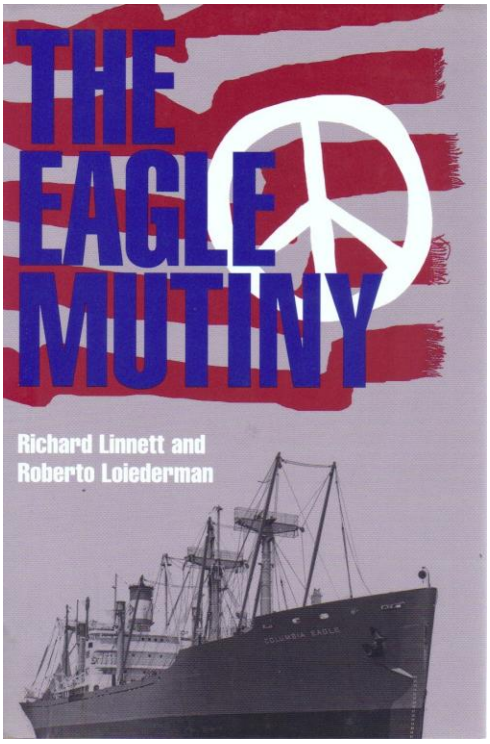
One of the more persuasive interviews in the film is with a guileless villager named Lek Lang who sheltered the Americans in her house for several months. She and others tell Page that the two Americans were brutally executed near a banana grove "with a

blow to the back of the neck with a hoe," adds Bun Ny. Page is then brought to a site near the village of Bei Met where the two men apparently were murdered and buried. They meet a local farmer who claims to have dug up bones and turned them over to the Cambodian government years ago. He gives Page a few souvenir teeth; all that survives. Page later loses them.

Major Coombs

A few years later, Richard Arant, an investigator with Stony Beach—a Fraley predecessor—retraced Page's steps and discovered inconsistencies in the story. Arant reinterviewed Long Sokha Bun Ny who told him that she had been forced by officers in Page's military escort to identify the correct photo as "Seen Fleen." Arant also turned up other witnesses whose testimony suggested that the two Americans executed in Kampong Cham province were probably not Flynn and Stone, but rather, a merchant marine seaman named Clyde McKay and his friend Corporal Larry Humphrey, who had gone AWOL from the army.

In March 1970, McKay had led a mutiny, as an act of protest against the war, on board the SS Columbia Eagle, a merchant ship that was carrying napalm to a U.S. Air Force base in Thailand. With a young fellow crewmember, Alvin Glatkowski, he diverted the Eagle to Cambodia and Prince Sihanouk gave them asylum. Two days later the Prince was booted out in the Lon Nol regime change and the mutineers were jailed by the new strongman. In jail, McKay met Humphrey who had been picked up by Lon Nol forces near the border of Thailand after he went AWOL from his army unit at Sattahip, Thailand. Together the two new friends escaped on a motorcycle traveling north on Route 7 to Kampong Cham, leaving Glatkowski behind. They had told Glatkowski that they were going to join the Khmer Rouge and become revolutionary guerillas.



Dana Stone's wife, Louise, who was still in Phnom Penh searching for clues of her lost husband, had met McKay and Humphrey and encouraged them on their adventure, telling them to keep an eye out for her husband. According to Perry Deane Young, Louise advised them to pose as journalists should they be caught, increasing their chances for survival. Glatkowski claimed to have made the same suggestion and had given them a camera.

A witness interviewed by Rich Arant in 1993 identified the man who ordered the execution of the two Americans in Kampong Cham as Mam Sabun.

"Mam Sabun told [the witness]," read the report, "that while the two claimed to be correspondents, Angka [the Khmer Rouge leadership] knew that in fact they were 'marines' who had served on an ammunitions transport ship."

Roberto Loiederman, a former merchant seaman, and I wrote a book about the mutiny, *The Eagle Mutiny*, which was published last year. We went to Cambodia and reinterviewed Lek Lang and others and it seemed to us that the two men who had been with the Khmer Rouge in Kampong Cham province in 1970 and '71 were McKay and Humphrey. Lek Lang described both men as tall, with little difference in their height. McKay was 6'1" and Humphrey exactly 6 foot. Flynn, on the other hand, was much taller than Stone, almost one foot, a difference hard to overlook. Lek Lang could not pick out McKay's picture but her husband did, positively identifying his photo among many others, without prompting. Lek Lang also said the taller one's name was "Khly," again without prompting. Despite our findings, which Loiederman and I agree are not absolutely conclusive, Page held to his theory

Since our book was published, more evidence has surfaced that the pair of Americans in Kampong Cham were not Flynn and Stone, as Tim Page believes, but more likely McKay and Humphrey. The army's Central Identification Lab in Honolulu, where remains of unidentified military casualties are identified and stored, recently informed McKay's sister that mitochrondrial DNA tests of a bone turned over by a Cambodian woman who lived in the vicinity of the execution site showed that "the remains are consistent with Clyde McKay." The CILIHI test "compared 16 individuals, all lost in Kampong Cham province, with negative results." According to a source at the CILHI, sample DNA from relatives of Flynn and Stone were used in the identification.

Also, I later learn that after our encounter with the JTF in Kratie, in April, the investigative unit led by Fraley moved on to Bei Met searching for McKay and Humphrey. They interviewed two witnesses who described a pair of men who fit the description of McKay and Humphrey, and whom Fraley and company assume was McKay and Humphrey. "This information possibly correlates to two Americans who escaped in November 1970 from Royal Cambodian custody in Phnom Penh and crossed over to the Khmer Rouge," reads the report, which I have obtained. One of the witnesses, according to the report, which describes the investigation as a priority mission, "recalled

seeing the Americans for about two months in the 1970's. They walked freely around the village and smoked marijuana and cigarettes."

The other witness testified: "The foreigners were led away by five or six guards. [The source] followed the group to a site behind the Tuol Snuol pagoda and near a large mango tree. [The source] claimed to be the only person to follow the group. He watched from a distance of about ten meters, as the guards shot each foreigner in the back and buried them in a hole dug nearby."

A source at the Central Identification Lab tells me that they will be traveling to Cambodia in October 2002 to excavate this site. Their primary interest in this case is Humphrey even though he went AWOL. "He's still one of ours," says the source.

Back in Kratie, meanwhile, Mike Dembrowski invites me to join the JTF recovery team on another excavation. We take one of the choppers and fly over miles of rice paddies, over mountains and finally dropping down onto a freshly cut LZ in the middle of triple canopy jungle. We enter the forest, hiking past banyan trees, teak and giant fan palms that resemble yard yuccas but they are four stories high instead of four feet. After walking a few hundred meters we are in the camp, which is teeming with people, 12 JTF personnel, including the anthro, Rich Wills, and 30 Cambodians who have been hired for $5 a day to help with the excavation.

The camp is divided into three areas, the excavation site, a spot for JTF workers to eat and relax and an area further back and hidden where the Cambodians sling hammocks in the trees and set up a cooking pit. The excavation itself is marked out in a grid pattern and there are about 8 screens for sifting through the dirt. The centerpiece of the site is a huge banyan tree. In 1971, a Huey chopper with four Americans and six South Vietnamese troops slammed into this tree after taking fire from the North Vietnamese. The American pilot and all of the South Vietnamese were killed instantly. Three Americans took off in the jungle, two were hunted down by the communists and killed. The third, Warrant Officer James Hestand, was captured and eventually released in 1973.

This JTF operation is methodical and impressive. It reminds me of anthropology digs in college. While I am there, the team discovers a bone. Rich Wills is excited by the find. It appears to be an arm or a leg bone. He will send it back to Honolulu for analysis. Rich explains that the lab will do a mitochondrial DNA test on the specimen, which is not as

exact as the nuclear DNA testing used on live tissue. Most of CILHI's tests are MT, says Rich, which cannot provide an exact match but can place a sample within a range of possibilities. Rich explains that for an identification to be more precise, MT DNA results must be supported by other physical evidence, including dental records, if teeth are found, and reliable testimony, which can place the bone in context. In other words, the JTF knows the chopper, based on the extant wreckage and on testimony from the survivor--Hestand--so, if the bone DNA "is consistent with" the pilot, then the JTF has a definitive match.

Ban Poev and his trusty axe

On the way back to Kratie, after clearing the mountains and stretches of triple canopy Annamite forests, Colonel Dembrowski orders the pilot to fly over Ban Poev's sinkholes. As the chopper banks over the area, Mike snaps pictures. The sinkholes do indeed line up in a row. And there are others in the surrounding area. I ask Mike what they look like to him. "I'm from the country and to me they look like the kind of place

where cows lay in the mud," he says. As we continue to circle overhead, I notice shadows in the sinkholes. They look like deep gashes in the earth. They're probably shadows from the trees cast by the late-afternoon sun.

A van with Colonel Fox, Sargeant Parmele and Major Combs picks Dembrowski and I up in the old airfield.

"We did some digging today," says Colonel Fox, as I pile into their van.

ZTF Commander inspects one of the JTF trenches

I'm not surprised. Those shadows I saw are not shadows, they're trenches. The team made two cuts in the sinkholes. Colonel Fox has a big smile on his face. He's obviously

relieved. “We didn’t find anything,” he says. And then he tells me that they are going to let Zalin dig his own hole, literally and figuratively.

“Zalin says he is going to hire his own crew,” says Colonel Fox. “We told him if he finds anything, he should give it to our anthropologist.”

I knock on Zalin’s door when I return to the hotel. He opens it wearing his sarong. His face is as red as a peeled blood orange, as if he had been out in the sun all day. And he looks physically spent.

“Welcome, back minesweeper,” he says. “We missed you.”

That night Zalin and I take our usual dinner at the Chne Tonle. The JTF investigative team arrives and sits down with us: Munroe, Fraley, Parmele, Combs and Caudle. It’s obvious they’ve been looking for us. They order drinks. Within minutes an argument breaks out. Fraley and Zalin square off. Fraley doesn’t believe Flynn and Stone or any other journalists made it as far north as Kratie. Why would the North Vietnamese simply hand over Western prisoners? Fraley says that Zalin is blind to the reality that the North Vietnamese were ruthless and quite capable of killing journalists; after all, they murdered U.S. military personnel who were captured.

The argument escalates with Zalin accusing the JTF of being small-minded and ill-informed while the JTF guys accuse Zalin of being pushy and out of line.

Pointing his finger at them Zalin says: “You guys would just hate it if I found something in that hole tomorrow. It would look like I was doing your job for you.”

“We’d like nothing more than to have you be successful, Mr. Grant,” says Munroe, the most outspoken of the investigators.

“Are you being truthful now?” Zalin shoots back. “Are you being honest? What I’m doing threatens you and your comfortable jobs.”

“Sir, with all due respect,” says Munroe.

“Don’t call me sir,” Zalin snaps at him. “I’m Zalin.”

The argument ends with Zalin getting up from the table and disappearing in the darkness beyond the edge of light of the Chne Tonle, with moonlight shimmering off the placid Mekong River in the near distance.

I find Fraley’s arguments reasonable. The North Vietnamese did not hand over other journalists whom they captured in Cambodia, reporters like Robert Sam Anson of Time

Magazine, Richard Dudman of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, Elizabeth Pond of the Christian Science Monitor, Bob Morrow of Dispatch News Service International and Kate Webb of UPI. According to published accounts by Webb, Dudman and Anson, the North Vietnamese checked their reporters' credentials, their background, their writing. And they kept them well away from the Cambodian communists

Before the storm at Chne Tonle - Commander Zip hosts a meal and a frank discussion

"My experience was that the Vietnamese didn't get along with the Khmer Rouge," says Dudman in a phone conversation from his home in Maine. Dudman's book, *Forty Days with the Enemy* was published a year after his release. "They tried to keep a distance from them. It doesn't sound very plausible to me that the Vietnamese would turn over prisoners to the Khmer Rouge."

After he was released, Dudman learned that the Vietnamese had planned to execute them all, but changed their minds.

"In our case, when we said we were journalists, they said we are going to check you out and see if you are for real before we'll release you. I found out later, when I met the Vietnamese general who held us, it was a hardship for him to keep us alive, because we were right in the middle of a war zone, during the U.S. incursion into Cambodia…

Another Washington journalist said that he learned from the CIA that there had been a message intercepted from the people who held me saying that it was too much trouble keeping us alive and looking after us and they were going to have to execute us. Now I don't know if that is true or not, and I have made a lengthy effort through the freedom of information act to get a copy of that intercept."

Dudman returned to Vietnam in 1994 on assignment with the St. Louis Post Dispatch and met with the North Vietnamese officer who had captured him. (He was captured along with Morrow and Pond as they traveled from Saigon to Phnom Penh by car.) The officer, who had become a general, denied that the message was a request to kill them.

"We sent a message [to Hanoi] asking permission to release you because we knew that the South Vietnamese army was going to attack the area and that it would be difficult to protect you," he had told Dudman. "If you had been killed, I would have had to report our failure to Hanoi. As the commander, I was responsible."

Dudman also asked for information about Flynn and Stone but the general said he was not familiar with the case.

Anson, who was held for three weeks by the North Vietnamese in Cambodia and wrote about it in his book *War News*, agrees with Dudman. "It would be odd for them to turn Flynn and Stone over to the Khmer Rouge, none of the other people who got picked up were turned over to the Khmer Rouge. The Vietnamese were very nervous around these guys. These were not nice guys."

Anson tells me that it is inaccurate to claim the Vietnamese never killed prisoners. "I have no idea why people believe this, but I know they do." He says that Welles Hangan was captured by the Vietnamese and killed by them. Anson himself was about to be executed by the North Vietnamese—he was pushed into a fresh hole in the ground and an AK 47 barrel was aimed at him, he heard the safety click—but they suddenly changed their minds and kept him as a prisoner.

The North Vietnamese did background checks on journalists they captured. Anson went through one, so did Dudman and his friends. All of them came out clean. Even if Flynn and Stone survived their initial capture, they may not have survived such scrutiny.

"If the Vietnamese did their homework on these guys, they didn't stand a chance," says a former war correspondent who will not go on record.

It's a touchy subject. Many reporters I spoke to insisted staying off the record when talking about the issue of journalists who carried guns.

"I can see a scenario in which the Vietnamese did kill [Flynn and Stone]," says another journalist who knew both men and requested anonymity. "And I think I know the motive too. [Flynn] spent his weekends going out, shooting up the countryside. It was a rush. Going out on patrol with the grunts. And he was not going just armed with a camera, by all accounts. I think it is entirely possible that it was the Vietnamese who killed them. I can think of a motive why they would have killed them and I *can't* think of a motive as to why they would have turned them over to the Khmer Rouge."

"Yes, Flynn and Stone did engage in combat," says Perry Deane. "I had a very sound reason for leaving this out of *Two of the Missing*. Although it's there if you look for it. If they were still alive and the Communists found out about [their participation in the war], they would have been executed as combatants. It was important [for us] to maintain the image of them as non-combatants because of the work of the international committee working in their behalf."

Even Page himself to a degree gives some ground on this point. "The [North Vietnamese] knew more about us then we ever knew about them," he says. "Probably, they had a complete record on Stone and Flynn and all their actions. They knew perfectly well who they were. The fact that Stone had put a wounded North Vietnamese officer out of his misery, and that Flynn had gone off playing with weapons. But I don't think that would have influenced the case at all. Every newsman at one time or another picked up a weapon, and they could have gotten incriminating pictures of any of us about in the field. I only carried a weapon when I was out with a Phoenix unit, or a recon unit or Special Forces cross border unit. Otherwise, I never had to use it."

Dudman and Anson, on the contrary, say they never carried weapons. "I once wore a safari outfit, but I thought that looked too military so I started wearing sportshirts and khaki shorts," said Dudman. "I never carried a gun. I thought that would be the wrong role for me to carry a gun, and also I thought I'd get into nothing but trouble."

"It was bad Karma," said Anson. "Once you start fucking around with that stuff, it's gonna bite you."

The ZTF walking point (note Commander Zip's briefcase).

The sun is out the next morning. We are at Ung Narine's house. She is in the backyard dousing herself with buckets of water.

"My chief of staff is taking a hand bath," says Zalin.

Zalin has named her, half-jokingly, his "chief of staff." She is in charge of recruiting the workers. We call ourselves the Zalin Task Force, or ZTF, and Zalin is Commander Zip. Gradually the hired help filters in, a rag-tag group of Cambodian peasants ranging in age from 16 to 40, carrying old worn-out and weathered hoes, pickaxes and shovels. Zalin wonders out loud in English--which the workers don't understand--if these implements date from the days of the Khmer Rouge. They certainly look like it; in which case, they may have done double duty in the killing fields.

"Keep your eyes open," says Zalin. "Watch out who's walking behind you. Remember, there are just two of us and a lot of them."

We line up and walk single file through the countryside. Others join our group as we walk, literally emerging from the brush. We look like a small band of soldiers.

"There's Ry!" Zalin bursts out excitedly as our famously elusive source, who has avoided us and the JTF since our first interview with him, tags along, carrying a hoe with a homemade handle. Zalin takes it as a good sign. "He must think we'll find something,

otherwise he wouldn't dare show his face here," Zalin hopefully remarks. "That, or he plans to cave-in our heads."

Long Chem and Ry point out the spot and we begin clearing. Rich Wills loaned one of his screens, so we immediately set that up and begin sifting through dirt. We approach the dig in much the same way as I saw the JTF working the remote jungle site, patiently scraping off layers of earth in sequence; first the topsoil looking for signs of disturbed earth underneath. We take turns swinging the hoes and picks.

Another familiar face shows, Ban Poev. Zalin is delighted. Poun, a motoboy who is acting as our interpreter, wryly turns to me and says that Ban Poev and Ry are here for the money only. Zalin is paying six dollars a day to every man, and four dollars for a half day. For that kind of money, Ry and Ban Poev are willing to risk facing the music if nothing turns up.

We start digging deeper. Zalin, in the meantime, takes a small party over to the sinkholes to start another dig, leaving me in charge of the termite mound excavation. After about 20 minutes I look in on Zalin. He and his boys are not taking the high road, digging methodically in pure anthro fashion. No, they are into sheer brute force, letting their picks fly. The earth is desperately hard. The nearby JTF dug trenches—about 20 feet long by 3 feet deep and 2 feet wide—although modest looking, are really incredible accomplishments in this hard ground. Zalin tells me it took the JTF and a group of Cambodian workers all day to dig them.

Zalin's stab at the sinkholes turns out to be a bust. The earth shows no sign of yielding anything but layers of baked brown earth. Still, even as Zalin packs in his picks and hoes, he stares at the JTF trench, rubbing his perspiring farhead.

"Just six feet to the left and there could be 50 bodies buried in there," he says. But he knows, as I do, that it is impossible given our resources to break through that.

Back at the termite site, our team has dug three feet deep, through some tough stuff, and reached a layer of earth with white deposits that are powdery to the touch. The deposits are spread throughout the dirt evenly and it looks to me like leached material, or brine that is left behind when the ground is saturated and then dried out in the sun. But the Cambodians start chattering loudly about bones, saying the word in English—obviously they are familiar with it—and that gets Zalin going.

Commander Zip digs at alleged Sean Flynn burial site

"Let me see, give it here," he grabs a few clumpy pieces. "I'm not an archeologist, but this looks like bone to me."

I'm absolutely sure it is not bone and I tell Zalin that, grabbing a piece out of his hand, which he is holding very carefully and I crush it into a powder.

"Don't do that," he says.

Meanwhile, all the Cambodians are picking up pieces, examining them and putting them in a bag. Even Poun is caught up in the nonsense.

"He says it is bone because he has seen this before when he dug graves for his relatives," says Poun, interpreting Ban Poev who is busy chattering away about bones

and placing clumps of white stuff into a bag. It's preposterous, I tell Zalin. This is not bone.

"Who should I believe, Ban Poev, the anthropologist from Cambodia who has seen more bones than you will ever see in your lifetime?" Zalin asks, dripping with sarcasm. "Or the anthropologist from New York City?"

I give up. Let them collect their clumps of brine. I am convinced that the Cambodians know damn well that this stuff is not bone. They are hoodwinking Zalin.

The Zalin Task Force hard at work on the alleged Sean Flynn burial site

At midday, our excavation crew slows to a crawl. Even Zalin has had enough. Long Chem breaks out a battery powered radio and he turns on a Khmer music station. Ban Poev is in a good mood. He invites me to dance with him to a Khmer pop tune, sung by a girl. It sounds like Indian pop music. And then he teaches me a popular Khmer lyric. " Bang saralanh tae oun muoy". This translates as "I love only you, sweetie." I create my own variation: Bang saralanh tae oun *Sopy.* That's the name of the cute little Khmer girl at the Chne Tonle who has been treating us every day, three times a day, to that fabulous word that Khmer women use to say yes. "*Chas"* (pronounced Chai). Sopy, in particular, says it in a fabulously quiet, breathy and flirtatious way.

Our Cambodian workers erupt in laughter and take up their own choruses of the Sopy song. We are all rather giddy singing about Sopy as we march in single file back to Ung Narine's. I am of course walking point.

According to Colonel Fox, whom I contact after returning to the states, a preliminary test of the samples taken at our excavation site indicate the material we found at Ry's site is not ossified material, in other words not bone, but rather, vegetative matter. Probably old rice plantings, long buried and degraded.

I also learn from the JTF that their investigators checked out many of Zalin's leads in Kratie and still believe that Flynn and Stone never made it that far north. And as for Ban Poev's sinkholes: several JTF investigators told me that they believe Ban Poev saw the carcasses of dead cows in those pits, not humans. The final JTF report from our trip, which I have obtained, concludes:

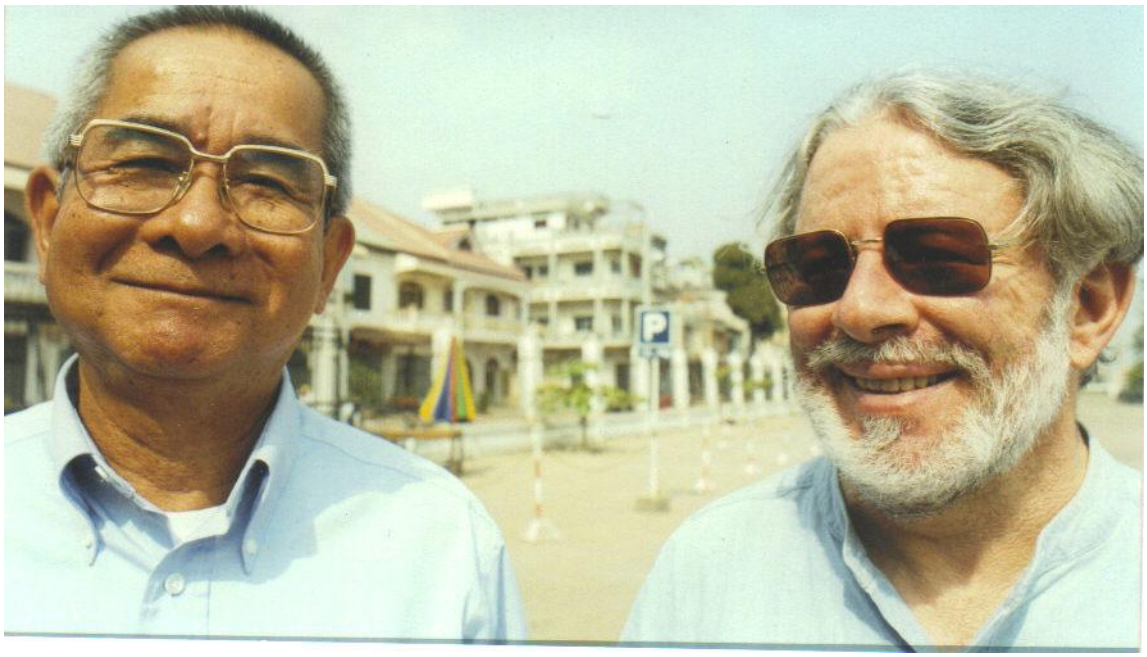
> "At no time during the investigation of this uncorrelated report did any information or physical evidence surface which supported the burial of U.S. personnel or journalists near Kratie City. Extensive interviews, test pits, and aerial surveys produced no supporting evidence or statements.

On the other hand, the report does say that the JTF team picked up testimony that six Caucasians wearing uniforms were seen in the area, and were displayed in Kratie city by the Khmer Rouge as war trophies. The investigators believe these may have been captured U.S. airmen. This jives with history. There were several well-documented POW camps run by the North Vietnamese north of Kratie city during the war. Many of these prisoners were finally released in Operation Homecoming in 1973.

The investigators also have another theory about these six Caucasians—one that actually leaves a small opening for Zalin. A source at the JTF says that these six men may have been journalists, however, based on the description of them by witnesses it is likely that they would have been European journalists not American. My JTF source says that these men may correlate to four French reporters, a Swiss and a Canadian who were missing in Cambodia.

"We don't investigate non-Americans," says my source, "but we will investigate this information because the Canadian was described as being an American."

Although Zalin didn't find his friends' bones, he tells me he is content. His search is over. "We generated some good leads and the JTF is following up on them. That's all I ever really wanted to do. I just wanted to get them on this case, get them out here searching for these missing journalists."

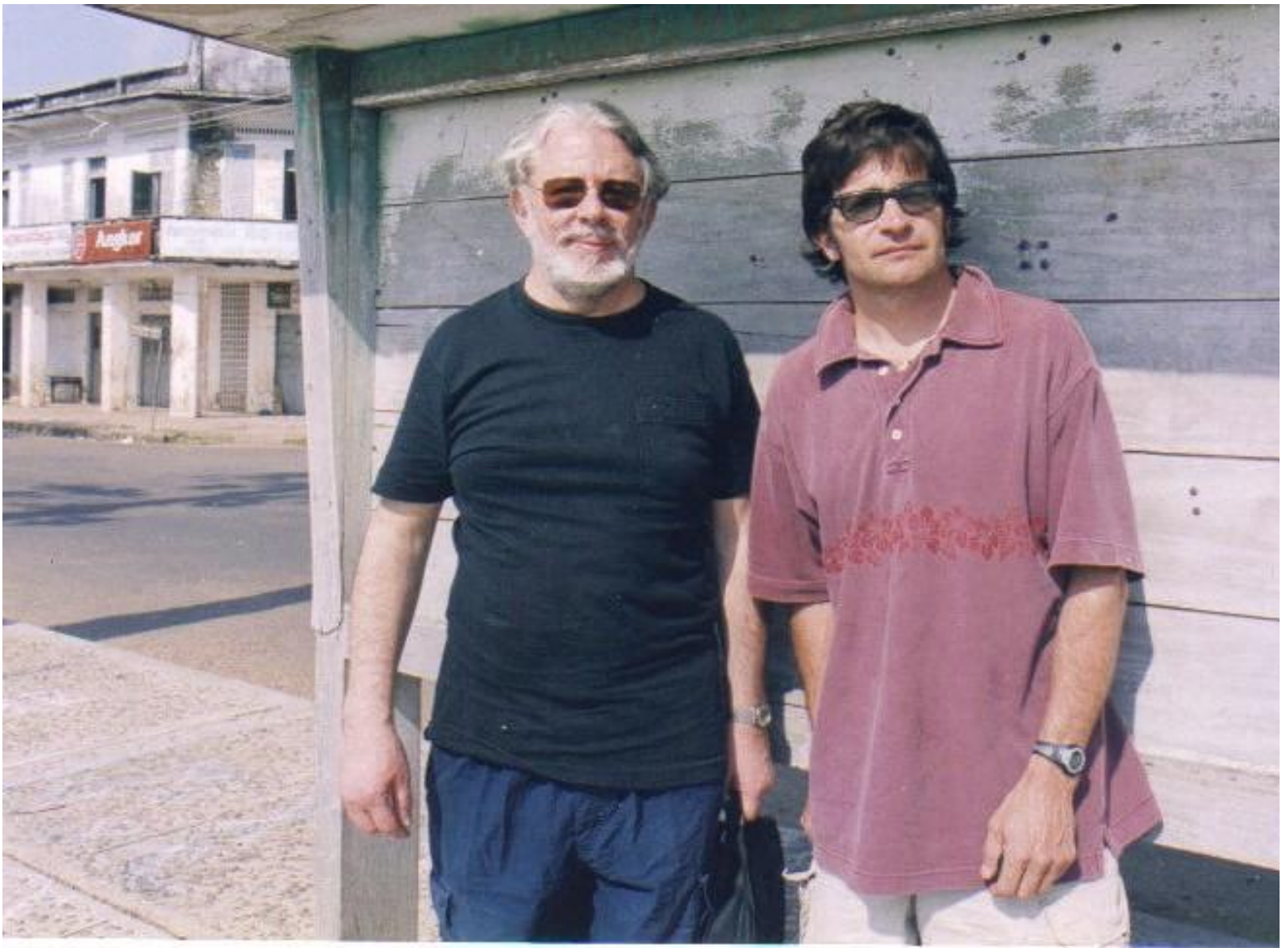


Sos Kem and Zalin Grant back in Phnom Penh

Is Zalin really satisfied? He hasn't found what he is looking for. Even Sean Flynn, according to the song, found what he was looking for, though he died doing it. Has Zalin given up the ghost? Is he so afraid of mines and food poisoning that he'll walk away? Is he so hell bent on returning to the creature comforts of the French countryside that he's willing to abandon this honorable pursuit? Don't journalists have a credo to live by, just as the Army does: Never leave a fallen soldier on the battlefield? Or will journalists like Zalin only go back to rescue their brothers if there is a story in it?

I pose these questions to him back in Phnom Penh. We are having a parting lunch on the terrace at the Scandic. Zalin cuts into a blood red Scandic steak. The air is filled with acrid smoke, which is coming from the Wat across the street. The tallest tower in the compound looks like a factory chimney, belching out the blackest, most acrid looking plumes I have ever seen. Kenta, one of the owners of the Scandic, a Norwegian expat, apologizes for the smoke and explains that they are burning bodies next door. It's a Buddhist crematorium.

"The smoke rises," Zalin says, "And the ashes fall onto my steak. An unexpected condiment." He swallows a mouthful, and then says, apropo of nothing. "You never know, I may return. But if I do, I'm renting a backhoe."



The Commander and I in Kratie