



Lost in the Killing Field

Forty years ago, at the height of the Vietnam War, Specialist 4 McKinley Nolan, a U.S. army infantry soldier, disappeared into Cambodia. Some people say he's a hero—the Army claims he's a traitor. His family—and one obsessed veteran—just want to find out if there was anyway he could have survived the most murderous regime of modern times.

By Richard Linnett

"I get these calls from Cambodia," Dan Smith says to me on the phone in a cranky voice, a morning voice, as if a nightmare or an alarm clock just rocked him out of bed. "In the middle of the goddamn night. Something about bones. They found his bones. And then the phone cuts off, goes dead."

Smith is a Vietnam vet who served two years in the trenches with Big Red One, the Army's First Infantry Division in Tay Ninh and Cambodia and other harsh places. He was wounded in a fierce firefight in 1971, north of Saigon, and lost his right leg. He's retired now, on a military pension, but fighting a new battle. He's trying to find a man he considered, until very recently, a traitor.

McKinley Nolan, Specialist Fourth Class, Company A, 2nd Battalion, 16th Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, is one of only two officially recognized defectors of the Vietnam War and the only

one still at large. (Marine Private Robert Garwood turned himself in in 1979, four years after the war ended, and was court-martialed for collaborating with the enemy.) Nolan left his Army platoon in Tay Ninh on the Cambodian frontier more than 40 years ago and vanished, leaving behind a wife and infant son in Texas. The Army claims he was radicalized and went native, joining the Vietcong and then the Khmer Rouge. Propaganda leaflets in his handwriting with his picture were distributed by the Vietcong, and his voice was heard over Radio Hanoi, calling on fellow black soldiers to drop their guns and desert.

"My dear colored friends in U.S. troops in South Vietnam," he wrote in one pamphlet. "I am taking the pleasure to write you these words to let you know how I feel about the war and also what I have learned. It is not us colored people that the freedom



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fighters dislike. It is those who push us to the front. We are the first on line but the last to receive the bread. [The Vietcong] are fighting for liberty. Why don't we colored people stick together and help them, because we want the same thing ourselves."

In 2005, Dan Smith thought he ran across Nolan in Tay Ninh. Smith was returning to the country where many died long ago. He had killed many Vietnamese as a soldier, and had returned, as many veterans do, to make amends. He was on a humanitarian mission, delivering wheelchairs and crutches to amputees like himself. "I was visiting the Cao Dai temple. I saw this black man standing in front of a building. He looked around 60 years old. When he saw me approaching, he stepped back as if he didn't want to be seen. I shouted out to him, 'Hey, you a GI?' And he said, 'Yes, I was in the First Infantry in 1967.'"

Smith engaged this reticent fellow with a few more questions, learned he was from Texas and that he went by the name Buller. But when he tried to take a picture of him, the man angrily waved him off, said "no pictures," and walked away.

"As he was walking away," Smith recalled, "an old Vietnamese man came up to me, and points to the man and shouts, 'VC! American VC!' I tried to catch up with the guy but I couldn't with my leg. He was gone."

When Smith returned to the States, he looked up "Buller" in the Library of Congress's POW/MIA database and came across a large file, the McKinley Nolan case, more than a thousand pages on an American defector the Vietnamese called "Buller," apparently because he was big and strong like a bull and the Vietnamese often used him to pull ox carts. Nolan had become the stuff of grunt folklore, often seen armed and in the company of VC patrols and a beautiful Vietnamese woman, a Mata Hari and guerrilla who was his lover. He was credited with extraordinary exploits, such as single-handedly infiltrating isolated Army outposts and stealing armored personnel carriers and weapons caches. Military intelligence hunted him down but he always avoided capture, melting into the woods with his comrades. As far as the U.S. brass is concerned, if he is found alive today he will be court-martialed and prosecuted for desertion, sedition, aiding the enemy, and possibly murder. There is no statute of limitations for traitors.

Doug Ramsey, a former Foreign Service officer, spent seven years in and around the rain forest-shrouded POW compounds of Kratie province in Cambodia, suffering the chills and fevers of malaria, the intense muscle cramps of beriberi, and the pain of dysentery. Captured in 1966 while attempting to organize a shipment of emergency food to refugees on the border between Vietnam and Cambodia, Ramsey was held in a Cambodian camp near where Nolan was living with the Vietcong. "We were held in one part of the forest, and you could hear the other guys deeper in the woods," Ramsey told me. "We never really saw them. But we got news of them. Nolan was over there with his woman."

Ramsey recalled seeing Nolan's propaganda while he was a POW: "The guards showed us McKinley's writings. It had an effect on some of the guys; it kind of broke down our spirit. A lot of POWs ended up writing things to save their skin. Even I wrote something condemning the war. But some of us would draw a line. We wouldn't go too far. Nolan went all the way. He tried to get men to defect."

I've been investigating Nolan since 1997, tracking evidence that he's still alive, slowly building a book project. Over the years, I've worked with McKinley's brother Michael, who lives in Austin, Texas, and sells recycled shipping pallets for a living; McKinley's surviving son Roger, who was two years old when his father disap-



A map of Cambodia made from human skulls and bones at the museum of Tuol Sleng, which was used by the Khmer Rouge as a torture and interrogation center. One eyewitness claims Nolan was clubbed to death by the Khmer Rouge in 1977.

peared; and McKinley's wife Mary, who lives in Washington, Texas, near the Brazos River, not far from the shotgun shack she shared with McKinley when he enlisted in 1965. Washington is rural and poor; basically the Deep South. When McKinley was growing up here, Jim Crow laws separated blacks from whites. He was a simple, guileless fellow who worked most of his life as a farmhand and enlisted, as most young people do, to see the world.

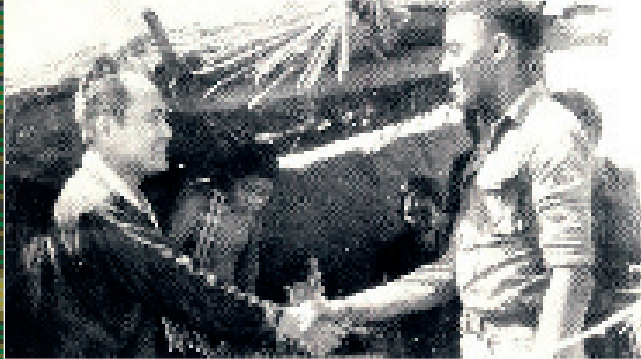
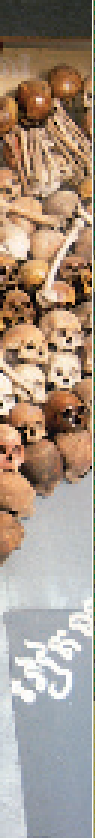
Mary has always insisted Nolan didn't join the Vietcong but was captured, and she has tried to force the Army to release his personnel records to prove it. The Army has refused, arguing that a soldier's documents can be released to next of kin only when the soldier is deceased—and 40 years after Nolan's disappearance, he's still listed as AWOL.

Dan Smith tracked down the family last year. When I first spoke to him, he sounded possessed. There are a lot of Vietnam vets who are into conspiracy theories, unsubstantiated "bright-light," or live POW, sightings. Smith wanted to bring Nolan back to justice. He's got time on his hands, and he's angry. He wanted to know how a man who took up arms against his fellow Americans could still be on the loose. After all the death he saw in Vietnam, it just wasn't fair. Smith had a new mission, less charitable than delivering wheelchairs.

"What are you gonna do about it if you find him?" Smith challenged me. "I know what I'm gonna do."

I arranged for him to meet the Nolan family. They were willing, even though Smith seemed hell-bent on hunting down Nolan. They just wanted to know if McKinley's really alive and if this stranger had actually seen him. They figured they had nothing to lose. Smith flew from his hometown in Washington State. In person, he was impressive—not your stereotypical unkempt,

SKULLMAP PHOTO BY JACQUES LANGEVIN/CORBIS; TEMPLE PHOTO BY JACK KURTZ/CORBIS



(Top) Nolan being greeted by a Vietcong soldier after he defected in November 1967. (Above) Dan Smith in Cambodia, searching for the truth

about Nolan, in March 2008. (Top left) The Cao Dai temple, where Smith thought he saw Nolan in 2005.

wild-eyed Vietnam vet. He was clean-cut, well spoken, and walked confidently with a prosthetic leg. He was like an old warrior looking to fight one more day.

Smith was born in Compton, California, in 1951; he dropped out of high school and went to Vietnam in 1969 out of a sense of duty. "My family has always been soldiers," he says. His grandfather was a World War I vet, his uncle served in Korea, and his father served in World War II, landing on Omaha Beach with the Normandy invasion. "He lay down there on the beach, pinned down by enemy fire, for three days, his friends dying around him, waiting for reinforcements. Because of that, he never took us to the beach. He hated the beach. And we lived in Southern California."

In Southeast Asia Smith operated with the Army Recon Rangers in Cambodia. He was in the initial invasion of Cambodia in 1970, when the military secretly moved across borders to suppress the Vietcong sanctuaries and capture weapons caches.

"We found the biggest weapons caches in Cambodia. They called it the City. It was immense; it was terrifying to see all the

ammunition. We killed 40 NVA soldiers going into the villages."

The base camp of the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam was in Lai Khe. "It was a relatively secure base, but once you left the front gate on Highway 13 headed towards Tay Ninh, you were in Indian country," Dan recalled.

Highway 13, the road between Lai Khe and Tay Ninh was called "Thunder Road" by the grunts. For eight months Dan was based at a "night defensive position" nicknamed "Thunder Three" on a desolate stretch of ground between the two villages. In April 1970, Thunder Three was attacked by the enemy. It was later called the Battle of Thunder Road.

"Thunder Road was the most devastating night of my life. We got overrun; we only had about 120 men. There were 47 casualties that night and we couldn't get resupplied for a couple of days."

During that battle, Smith killed his first enemy. "He was two feet in front of me. I could see his eyes. He was very young. I can't even count how many I killed in Vietnam. But it's that first one that I can't forget, that I have problems with. Until you kill somebody, you don't know. It destroys you. It destroyed me. I am not a cold-blooded man."

When Smith's first tour of duty was over, he went home to take time off while waiting to return on his voluntary second tour. His father, who was wounded in World War II on that beach in Normandy, surprised him by pleading with him not to return. He tried to persuade Smith to go to Canada instead. "He said, 'This is the wrong war. I don't want you there,'" Dan recalled. "I told him I had friends there; I had to go back."

He returned and spent another year in Vietnam, earning the rank Sergeant. "I thought about making it a career. I had a lot of dreams, thought about going to college, going to medical school. In fact, in my unit, I was called Doc because our medic was killed in a battle and we didn't get a replacement medic for so long, I did the work. The medic who was killed was my friend; he had taught me a lot. So I just kind of took over."

One night in the central highlands, his life changed forever. Dan was a two-man reconnaissance team pulling security for an engineer battalion. The engineers were building a road through the mountains and had been ambushed several times. Dan and his partner were scouting for signs of North Vietnamese Army or VC activity. "And we found them," said Dan. "We could hear them, in the forest." They cut a retreat through a swamp and as they emerged, covered with leeches, the guerrillas attacked them with command-detonated landmines.

"Four of them exploded," Smith says. "One blew my leg off; another one sent me flying. My partner fell on his stomach and a



In April, Dan Smith and Michael Nolan set out together to trace Nolan's strange journey. Michael is battling prostate cancer. He is convinced it's now or never to find his long-lost brother.

mine blew him literally in half. I was just spilling blood. I sat up to apply a tourniquet and got shot. Finally, I just lay on my back and started spraying the bushes where I was at and screamed. All I could see were flashes from the bush. I sprayed clip after clip and then suddenly it went dead quiet."

The engineers eventually found Dan and brought him down the mountain. When he talks about it today, he breaks down—as he did when he met the Nolan family at Mary's modest home and told them that he thought he had seen her man.

It was an emotional moment. Tears in her eyes, Mary, who never remarried, vowed to take McKinley back despite his long absence and whatever may have happened to him. "When we got married, I told the preacher, 'Till death do us part,'" she said. "I meant it then, and I still mean it. Till death do us part."

Her passion and his own memories of battle seemed to suddenly engulf Dan Smith. A psychologist might call it "sudden conversion syndrome," but whatever it was, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth and his eyes red and watery with welled-up emotion, Smith dramatically changed his mind about the man he had vowed to hunt down. "I was a scared 18-year-old kid when I went to Vietnam," he says. "I was in the country nine days and my company got wiped out. I was a scared kid, but I survived. That's why I understand McKinley. He was scared, like me."

He told Mary that he was still determined to find Nolan—not to bring him back to a traitor's justice, but simply to bring him, finally, home to his family. As promised, Smith traveled to Sangkum Mean Chey, where Nolan was last seen alive, one month after I introduced him to the Nolan family. He did it on his own, with his own money, and against my advice. Cambodia is no country for old men, even those with two legs. The hamlet is hidden in the

(Top) Reconnaissance photo of the village of Sangkum Mean Chey, Cambodia, where McKinley lived with his family and the Khmer Rouge. (Above) Viet Cong

propaganda photo of McKinley taking tea with his VC comrades around November 1967.

backcountry, accessible by narrow dirt roads that are passable only in the dry season, and there are old land mines buried everywhere. The Nolans wanted Smith to go; they asked me to give him directions, information, and photos of McKinley to show the villagers. Armed with my research, he arrived in Cambodia, hired an interpreter in Kampong Cham, and set out.

"It was the first time many of these people had seen a white man," Smith said about his arrival in that remote region.

The village elders remembered Nolan fondly. He worked hard, they recalled, and was always friendly and positive, and he lived there in peace for a few years. He lived with a Vietnamese lover, allegedly a Saigon prostitute, who bore him a son in Vietnam and had talked McKinley into deserting. The woman became pregnant with another child in Sangkum Mean Chey and delivered a baby girl, whom Nolan named, oddly, Mary. A Khmer Rouge cadre took over the village in 1975 and things changed dramatically.

"You realize the villagers loved McKinley," Smith says. "He'd sing Cambodian songs to them to cheer them up when the Khmer

Rouge took over and treated everyone so viciously. As the Khmer Rouge became more brutal toward the villagers, McKinley would literally step in front to protect them. They all loved him.”

The villagers also claimed that McKinley did not intentionally join the Vietcong. He “quit the war” and was trying to escape to Cambodia with his new family, but he was captured by the Vietcong, who used him for their own propaganda and then tossed him aside, eventually releasing him to the chief of the village when they retreated up the Ho Chi Minh trail after a U.S. bombing raid.

“Of course, in the end,” Smith adds, “he wanted to go home. He knew when the Khmer Rouge took over that his time was up. The entire village prayed that American soldiers would come to rescue him, but no one came. The villagers told me that even McKinley prayed that the Americans would come to rescue him.”

The Khmer Rouge moved McKinley and his family to Chamkar Cafe, a village some 50 miles deeper into the forest, where there was a prison camp. McKinley was allowed to work the fields, but at night he was closely guarded. In Chamkar Cafe Dan found an old-timer named Cham Sone who cried and beat his breast when Dan showed him a picture of McKinley.

Cham Sone told a chilling story: “The Khmer Rouge increasingly became paranoid about McKinley ... [and so] on a September morning in 1977, the Khmer Rouge commander sent McKinley’s son into the cornfield to have his father return to the headquarters building. The cornfield was across the road from the building, and when McKinley walked out of the field onto the dirt road, three or four Khmer Rouge soldiers stopped him at gunpoint. They tied McKinley’s

hands behind his back, put a blindfold over his eyes, and walked him down the road and into the rubber-tree field that surrounded the corn and coffee fields. Once inside the grove, McKinley was hit in the head from behind, sending him sprawling to the ground. Then all of the soldiers began beating McKinley with clubs until he died. Finished with their murder, the soldiers buried McKinley’s body in a shallow half-meter grave. Then, they returned to the barracks where McKinley’s wife, baby daughter, and son were, and beat them to death. They took the bodies into the coffee field and buried them. Following the burial of the children and their mother, the Khmer Rouge soldiers returned to the scene of their crime and killed and ate McKinley’s dog.”

“The villagers told me he didn’t make a sound as they clubbed him to death, not a word,” said Smith. “He didn’t try to escape.”

The field where Nolan was said to be buried has been re-plowed several times and it is likely his remains are gone forever. But his presence still lingers in the village of Sangkum Mean Chey, and there is a very tangible and enduring reminder—a rice paddy that he built and planted himself, which is still used by the villagers.

Michael Nolan is not discouraged. In his opinion, without forensic evidence—in other words, bones—

this latest information proves absolutely nothing. “I won’t be convinced till I go there and find out for myself,” he said. “And what about that man Buller? Who was that?”

Good question. Dan Smith is convinced that the villagers of Sangkum Mean Chey are telling the real story about McKinley Nolan. Perhaps Buller is an imposter, Dan suggests, an American expat fortune hunter looking to sponge off the flood of Vietnam vets who return to ‘Nam as tourists. He doesn’t know. But he hopes soon to find out for certain.

In April, I set out with Dan, Michael, and the award-winning documentary filmmaker Henry Corra to retrace McKinley’s steps and Dan’s search. Everything Dan had found we found—the villagers who knew McKinley and the lingering, haunting presence of this American who once lived among them—but we did not find the man or his remains. Armed with new insight and some additional evidence, we plan to return later this year to dig deeper into the mystery. Michael is confident we will find a final answer. Michael is now battling prostate cancer. He is convinced that it is now or never to find his long-lost brother.

Dan Smith also has health issues. Recently diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease, he has already experienced early-stage symptoms. The disease does not affect the mind, which remains sharp, but the body progressively degenerates. He wants to live to fight just one more day—this time for a good cause.

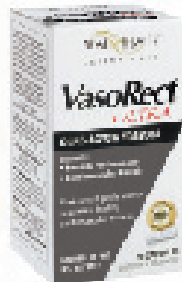
“McKinley was no coward,” Dan says passionately. “I don’t care what the goddamn U.S. military believes. The Cambodians loved him. He helped them. That man was a hero.”¹

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