



**Cambodian war correspondents mourn ex-colleagues  
Mike Eckel and Sopheng Cheang  
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KANDOUL, Cambodia — The bodies were dumped in a shallow grave amid the untilled earth of rice paddies: five journalists who had been ambushed by Khmer Rouge and Viet Cong guerrillas on May 31, 1970.

Om Pao, then 12, remembers the stench of decay for days after. He helped his father heap more earth on top of the remains to keep the smell down, the pigs out and the bodies from floating away.

In all, nine journalists — American, Indian, Japanese, French and Cambodian — were attacked that day near this dusty village south of the capital, Phnom Penh. All are believed to have been killed. It was one of the deadliest incidents for reporters in the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, in a year that remains one of the deadliest anywhere for journalists.

This week, 40 years later, two dozen aging colleagues trekked to Kandoul to mourn and remember. They honored the dozens of reporters, photographers and cameramen who died covering the five-year war, which ended in 1975 with the takeover by the brutal Khmer Rouge.

"It's not only sadness for our colleagues, but also for our Cambodian friends," said Elizabeth Becker, who covered the war for The Washington Post, "but the biggest sadness is that it's taken so long for this country to recover."

Impoverished Cambodia, already roiled by the fighting in neighboring Vietnam, plunged into open war in March 1970 when Gen. Lon Nol overthrew Prince Norodom Sihanouk and seized power in a CIA-backed coup.

Two months later, as Lon Nol's forces battled Khmer Rouge insurgents and their Vietnamese allies, a six-man crew from CBS News was ambushed on the morning of May 31 as the team drove south of Phnom Penh. Three men from NBC News, rushing after their competitors, were also captured.

According to former CBS cameraman Kurt Volkert, who compiled a detailed reconstruction based on witness accounts, four of the CBS employees were killed instantly. The five others are believed to have been taken to Kandoul in the days after and executed. They had their hands bound and possibly were clubbed to death.

In 1992, Volkert helped a U.S. military forensics team locate the grave just outside Kandoul. Four bodies were recovered and identified as the three NBC employees and one from CBS. The fifth body was never found.

In all, more than three dozen foreign and Cambodian journalists were killed or listed as missing during the 1970-75 war. As many as 26 were killed in the war's first year, according to tallies compiled by former Associated Press correspondents.

Earlier this year, amateur searchers digging northeast of Phnom Penh unearthed what they believe to be the remains of war photographer Sean Flynn — son of Hollywood star Errol Flynn. Sean Flynn went missing nearly two months before the U.S. television crews were ambushed.

After the Khmer Rouge took over in April 1975, dozens of other Cambodian journalists — mainly freelancers for foreign media — were executed or simply disappeared.

On Thursday, reporters, photographers and cameramen who covered Cambodia's upheaval joined throngs of curious villagers, huddling from the scorching heat under an orange and yellow tent in the middle of a rice paddy.

The smell of burning incense and the chants of Buddhist monks mixed with the sound of passing ox carts. Several visitors wept as the names of the dead reporters were read aloud. Children, naked and barefoot, begged for handouts, sipped coconut juice being sold by a vendor and splashed in the nearby puddle where the four bodies had been exhumed in 1992.

"We remember those who have died seeking both truth and reality in Cambodia," said Chhang Song, the minister of information in the Lon Nol government who worked closely with many of the reporters and helped organize the reunion.

Om Pao, whose father's paddy was just yards away from the grave in 1970, said: "To hold a Buddhist ceremony like today is good for dead people, to show the gratitude to the dead and to offer their souls a chance to rest in peace."

Former AP correspondent Carl Robinson said covering Cambodia's turmoil was much more dangerous than Vietnam. Journalists were more often on their own, without the protection of the U.S. military. And, he added, he was troubled by the U.S. role in Cambodia.

"It was nightmarish to cover it all," he said. "It's too hard to look back upon. The whole thing had been a disaster. I left feeling guilty and bitter, as a reporter, as an American, it

was just shameful and the Cambodians suffered."

For Jeff Williams, a former correspondent for AP and CBS, the trip was a chance to remember the collegiality of the foreign press corps at the time.

"I don't believe in closure. Maybe it's just me, but nothing ever closes," he said. "You just move ahead."

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