



Reach Sambath, 1964-2011

Luke Hunt

May 12, 2011

As a war correspondent, Reach Sambath was among the bravest. Throughout the 1990s, he earned his stripes as the journalist ‘who got on the chopper first’ when Cambodia’s warring factions went into battle. Later on, he emerged alongside his most affable compatriots as his country began stitching together a peace. Sambath, sadly, passed away Wednesday after a massive stroke. He was 47 (we think).

When I began as bureau chief for Agence France-Presse (AFP) in Cambodia on July 1, 2001, Sambath’s exploits had already lent him an air of superiority. With his great friend Ker Munthit at Associated Press, the pair had formed the formidable local backbone of the international press corps in Cambodia. They survived the Khmer Rouge, and got themselves educated in Cambodia and abroad before going on to tell the noble truth.

By the time I arrived, Sambath had just returned from the United States where he had completed a scholarship for advanced journalists at Columbia University. He held the best contact book in Cambodia and a love for the job that was unsurpassed, matched only by the size of his big Khmer heart.

On only our third day on the job together, a bomb was detonated inside the Hong Kong Hotel on Monivong Boulevard. It was a wet and miserable day and Monivong was then a bog of red clay. We arrived just minutes before a second bomb went off about 130 feet away.

Sambath didn’t flinch as others dropped into the mud. Fastidiously clean, the idea of ruining a perfectly pressed shirt just wasn’t acceptable to him. Two people were dead and another seven wounded. Quickly and calmly, Sambath led our small group to shelter in case there was a third bomb.

Such stories were common among my predecessors Matthew Lee, who helped build the roof on Sambath’s family home, and Sheri Prasso, who initially hired him back in 1992.

That calmness, however, often masked a heightened sensitivity.

At times, Sambath was deeply frustrated by the asinine coverage of Cambodia that was occasionally offered by journalists looking for a sensational headline to please an editor and a by-line from the Killing Fields to appease his or her ego.

The same could be said for editors in Hong Kong and Bangkok, who liked to think

Cambodia was simply an extension of Thai foreign policy and were prone to making horribly wrong assumptions. That thinking is evident in the coverage of the conflict at Preah Vihear today. They lacked respect.

Sambath even once chided Hun Sen for not giving him enough respect. They met for the first time after his return from the United States and Sambath told me within earshot of a standoffish prime minister: ‘He thinks I’ve been tainted by foreign influences.’

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Sambath could be prickly as he juggled a family life with the hard and fast dictates of a wire service while also moonlighting as a university lecturer and for some of the world’s great mastheads.

His favourite gigs were with Seth Mydans at *The New York Times*, although the list of journalists with whom he shared a cold beer, many more laughs and his political insights, was endless. Among them: Michael Hayes, Hurley Scroggins and Seth Meixner—all of *The Phnom Penh Post* at some point—and *The Cambodia Daily*’s long-serving editor, Kevin Doyle.

In the early days, the idea of a Khmer Rouge tribunal scared Sambath. He wasn’t opposed to the idea of justice—both his parents were killed by Pol Pot, and he loathed the Khmer Rouge who orphaned him. As a result, I don’t think Sambath ever knew his real birthday or his true age.

This is a point too often lost on Cambodians who grew up abroad, and long time observers whose incessant and sometimes hysterical demands of the tribunal to deliver on *their* sense of justice scare the daylight out of the very people they claim to represent.

Sambath genuinely feared a tribunal would lead his devastated country back to war, and revenge was never in his book. He spent a disproportionate amount of his time getting journalists out of trouble and was the only person I knew who could calm and cajole an irate Hok Lundy, the much feared bully and former National Police Commissioner.

His attitude to the tribunal, like many Cambodians, did eventually change after years of arduous negotiations evolved into the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and the surviving leaders of Pol Pot’s 1975-79 rule were charged and remanded. In time, Sambath warmed to the ECCC and eventually embraced it whole-heartedly.

He would leave AFP and work an array of media institutions including the New York-based Independent Journalism Foundation, before joining the ECCC as Case 001 got underway with Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, in the dock.

As the fortunes of justice fluctuated, Sambath rose to the occasion, serving the courts as chief of public affairs. I will always cherish the smile on Sambath’s face that day last year when Duch was found guilty and jailed for crimes against humanity and the extermination of his compatriots.

Sambath was a man of many moods, happiest and best when taking charge of his students at the Royal University of Phnom Penh or spending an afternoon as host for the thousands of men and women who were trucked from remote kampongs to the ECCC, where they witnessed the trial process first hand.

In his final hours, doctors were preparing him for a medical evacuation to Thailand. But in the end, Sambath died where he belonged—in Cambodia. He leaves behind a wife, Chhoy

Chanthy, three children—Champaradh, Rithvong and Samboreak—an indebted nation and a generation of young Cambodian journalists who he inspired. He was also my friend, and I will miss him.