

**Reach Sambath – Hero in my Heart**  
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This week, many of us, Cambodians and foreigners alike, find ourselves having a big lump in our throats as we come together to mourn the death of our dearest friend: Reach Sambath. His passing breaks our hearts and leaves us asking: is it real? We have just lost a rare breed of journalist in Cambodia, a professional journalism trainer, a very close friend and a dedicated pursuer of justice in the Khmer Rouge crimes.

I happened to know Sambath in 1992. Cambodia was still pretty much in turmoil. We both were apprentices of journalism, constantly chasing stories - big, small and odd - and trying to get the "scoop." Sambath often scooped everyone else, including me. As time went by so our friendship grew stronger, both professionally and personally. I wish I could recount all the memories that we shared in our career, but because of how difficult it is to write this recollection, let me just share some of them.

In late March or early April 1994, when the government's troops captured Pailin from the Khmer Rouge, Sambath and I joined a bunch of journalists and foreign military attaché in trekking through the jungle (very dense then) from Battambang province to Pailin. We wanted to witness the victory with our own eyes and to report on it for our respective organizations. It was late in the afternoon and raining. Pailin was nowhere in sight. We were wet and cold. As we stopped to camp out for the night, I tried to open a sardine can to eat with bread for dinner. My hand slipped, and I accidentally cut my finger. Sambath said to me: "You can just urinate on the wound to stop the bleeding." I did - and the bleeding ceased. After dinner we jumped into our respective hammocks, hung between trees, to sleep. Sambath brought his own hammock from home but I did not and I ended up renting one from a soldier's wife for \$15 for the night. It was outrageously expensive, but I had no choice. I was shivering. Sambath gave me more advice: "Put your hands under your pants and between your legs to get warmed up." I did and it worked - I fell asleep. At dawn we got up, packed our gear and continued our journey to Pailin - on foot. In the jungle, we came across abandoned rifles, bullets and rocket launchers. We could have stepped on land mines too since this was part of the frontline zone, but luckily all of us reached the destination safely. We got there 12 hours later completely exhausted. We woke up the next day to rumble through Pailin to do reporting.

There was never a shortage of big items to cover. Another was a protest against toxic waste dumping in Sihanoukville (now Preah Sihanouk province), in around December 1998. Local residents were fleeing for fear of the impact of the waste on their health. Many others were marching in protest through the town. We followed them wherever they went to make sure that we wouldn't miss any interesting episode. When the crowd approached a house of a senior local official, a man started unleashing bullets from his machine gun into the air. The sound was deafening. The crowd ran for their lives.

Sambath and I jumped on a motorbike taxi to flee. At a local government office far away from the shooting scene, we stopped to catch our breath. Sambath apparently didn't know that something had gone wrong with his outfit as we were running for safety. Only when he sat down at this latest location did he realize that the rear side of his pants was ripped apart, revealing his underwear. We laughed!

It may sound strange to talk about what seems to be funny at a time of enormous grief. But I want to share the lighter moments that enriched our bonds with Sambath. As we grieve, we also celebrate his life achievements by cherishing all the memories, big and small, that we have experienced with him. They will stay with us forever and also remind us of the man whose generous and open heart, professionalism and integrity had an enormous impact on so many people from different walks of life: politicians, friends, journalists, students, relatives - you name it. No word can fully describe the larger-than-life Reach Sambath. He now rests in peace - and he will be missed profoundly.

*Ker Munthit is a former journalist for the Associated Press and a friend to Reach Sambath for the past 20 years. He and Sambath attended the Columbia University School of Journalism together, graduating in 2001. He currently lives in Phnom Penh.*