



## **US Navy commander returns to Cambodian roots**

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SIHANOUKVILLE, Cambodia (AP) — The distant thuds of gunfire and bombs weren't nearly as memorable for Michael Misiewicz as fishing barehanded with his older brother in Cambodia's Mekong River.

In 1973, as a 6-year-old then called Vannak Khem, he was more concerned with boys' games than the deepening war — unaware, like most Cambodians, of the trauma that the Khmer Rouge would soon inflict on the country. He had no idea that after his adoption by an American woman that same year, it would take him 37 years to go home.

Misiewicz finally returned home Friday as commander of the U.S. Navy destroyer USS Mustin — reuniting with the relatives who wondered whether they would ever see him alive, and the aunt who helped arrange his adoption. His ship departs Monday.

"Chumreap suor, Om," he greeted 72-year-old Samrith Sokha in the Khmer language, clutching her in a sobbing embrace on the Mustin's sea-swept walkway. "Greetings, Auntie."

The warship has a larger mission: to help the United States as it deepens ties with Cambodia and other nearby nations in a region overshadowed by China's economic and military clout.

But the ship's arrival in the port of Sihanoukville also ends an odyssey that took Misiewicz, now 43, from the poverty of Cambodian rice fields to the farmlands of the midwestern United States to the helm of a U.S. destroyer.

The process of returning has been intensely emotional, he said: sadness for the more than 1.7 million who died or were killed by the communist Khmer Rouge when they held power in 1975-1979, combined with guilt at his escape from it and joy at seeing the relatives who helped him leave it behind.

"This isn't going to wash the guilt away but I am looking to provide some sense of closure, going

back to my birth country, going back to where my family suffered, and where my dad was executed, seeing it firsthand," he said in a phone interview before his ship arrived.

Born south of the capital, Phnom Penh, Misiewicz and his family were uprooted in 1969 as Khmer Rouge fighters forced villagers to join the radical communist movement. His father didn't sympathize with it, unlike many of his mother's family, and many considered him a traitor for not joining up, Misiewicz said.

They fled north, living on the streets as beggars for a time and scraping by until settling in Phnom Penh. They lived in a stilt house over mosquito-infested waters, subsisting mainly on his father's work as an herbal medicine pharmacist. His father's oldest sister, Sokha, worked for Maryna Lee Misiewicz, a U.S. Army administrative assistant with the defense attache's office at the U.S. Embassy.

Misiewicz remembers eating popcorn and watching cartoons while his aunt cooked and cleaned Maryna's home. Eventually, he said, his father decided they should ask Maryna to adopt him and Maryna and the boy left for the United States in April 1973.

"They were concerned about the Khmer Rouge. No one had any idea what would happen, but they hoped for a better life for Mike," Maryna Misiewicz said in an interview from her home in Freeport, Illinois. "We had no idea how long it would be before they would ever see each other again."

He grew up in Lanark, a town of 1,500 people just south of Freeport, most of whom had never seen an Asian before, and he said he cried frequently, thinking about his family.

Gradually, the letters to his relatives went unanswered as Cambodia spiraled into chaos. He forgot what little Khmer he knew, graduated from local high school and enlisted in the Navy. Like most Americans, he only later realized how many had died and suffered because of the Khmer Rouge's nightmarish efforts to create an agricultural utopia. Maryna Misiewicz said she initially tried to shield her adopted son from the few reports about the Khmer Rouge's brutal actions.

"You didn't have any idea it would end up like that," Maryna said. "I felt badly for Mike and his family and I wondered what was going on, what they were going through."

"As I got older it was less painful to not think about it," Misiewicz said.

It was in 1989 when he was at the U.S. Naval Academy when he was finally located by his family — and he learned of their own odyssey through refugee camps on the Thai border and in the Philippines

and finally to Austin, Texas.

His birth mother, two brothers and a sister had survived but two other sisters died, most likely of disease or malnutrition. All of his mother's relatives, except for a brother, died or were killed by the Khmer Rouge, he said.

"We never knew what was going to happen," said Misiewicz's younger brother, Rithy Khem. "Thank God we were able ... to be reconnected with each other finally."

Misiewicz learned that his father, who was drafted as a medic for the U.S.-backed government that collapsed in 1975, was summoned to a meeting with Khmer Rouge officials on the anniversary of their takeover and never returned.

Misiewicz said his reunion with relatives in Cambodia would go a long way toward easing his qualms about the opportunity he had — and that his relatives did not.

"A lot of who I am is small-town America, you know, work hard trying your best at whatever you do ... but certainly the genetic thing, so many of the blessings that I've had come from my birth family," he said.

"I feel a lot of sadness for my own family, but also for so many Cambodian families," he said. "It's been a long, long time of war, genocide, civil war; my birth country and my fellow Cambodians just need a break."