

**LI7-- "THE MEDIA, THE WAR AND 3.4 MILLION GHOSTS:
REFLECTIONS ON THE U.S. PRESS CORPS IN INDOCHINA,"
SNR, 1998**

STRANGE TO SIT DOWN AT AGE 56 AND recall events which, though they happened 30 years ago, feel more vivid than what occurred yesterday. Having lived among Laotian peasants as a volunteer for two years, I was shaken to my core in September 1969 when I discovered from refugees that the United States was massively bombing civilians in Laos. I set out to investigate and expose the bombing, interviewing U.S. airmen in South Vietnam and Thailand, writing stories and serving as an interpreter for reporters from many of the top TV networks and major newspapers.

One of the many things I remember is that visit to Long Tieng ...

LONG TIENG, 1969

Long Tieng was a large CIA air base in northern Laos, Long Tieng was a large CIA air base in northern Laos, one of the busiest in the world. Its existence was denied to the world. It was headquarters for the CIA's secret war in Laos, which pitted Hmong tribesmen headed by General Vang Pao against communist forces. It was off limits to journalists who were, however, encouraged to visit Sam Thong about 20 miles away.

Sam Thong was a rice distribution center, and a generation of journalists dutifully filed stories about compassionate U.S. aid to refugees fleeing the communists. The reporters rarely mentioned that the aid was going to CIA-led soldiers and their families, and almost never reported on the off-limits air base nearby.

In 1969, several dozen journalists were flown to Sam Thong to cover the by-now familiar story. I was along as an interpreter for NBC. We spent the day interviewing Vang Pao and refugees hanging out around the marketplace. It was a moving day for

me, as I interviewed a 14-year old kid with a machine gun around his neck who had been dragooned into the CIA army at age 11.

At 4 p.m. we all dutifully gathered at the air strip to board the chopper that was to take us back to Vientiane. Suddenly there was a stir, as the legendary Pop Buell, the man in charge of the rice, and some say weapons, distribution to the Hmong came running at us, cursing at the top of his lungs. "You bastards! I knew I couldn't trust you! They've gone to Long Tieng! Goddamn that Allman!"

It took a few minutes to figure out what was going on. T.D. Allman, a stringer for Time and the New York Times, Max Coiffait of Agence France Presse, and John Saar of Life had snuck off and walked to Long Tieng! They had risked their lives to be the first western journalists ever to see a secret CIA air base.

What was the reaction of their journalistic comrades to this dangerous feat? An ABC News reporter began to fume: "Those amateurs! I've got to get my film on the plane to Hong Kong. How dare they!"

Various reporters began to apologize to Pop Buell, disassociating themselves from Allman and his pals. Suddenly, to my utter amazement, a London newspaper reporter had an even better idea. He began drafting a petition to U.S. Ambassador G. Godley McMurtrie "denouncing" the three for breaking the rules of the press tour, which we were all to sign. Most of the others began nodding enthusiastically.

I began arguing with him, saying we should be proud of what they had done. I suddenly found myself being screamed at by the reporter, and facing a cocked fist. In the end, I didn't get punched, and Allman, Coiffait and Saar had a scoop that made the front pages of newspapers around the world. But it didn't really matter. The CIA continued waging its war out of the large air base. U.S. bombing continued. The number of corpses mounted.

LET'S CUT TO THE CHASE: 1.5 MILLION corpses, mostly peasants, largely civilians, mostly murdered by U.S. bombing or other firepower.

Countless beloved mothers burned alive, innumerable honored grandparents buried alive, uncountable precious children cut to pieces. We never heard their voices nor saw their faces. But they are the ghosts at the banquet of any attempt to understand the U.S. experience in Indochina, including that of its media.

More often than not, reporters perpetuated the basic mindset that caused the war: As bad as "our" Indochinese were, theirs were worse. Even the most humane of the U.S. journalists had little sympathy for the fact that the guerrillas enjoyed more support than did our side. No one who relied for his or her news on the TV networks and major print media would have guessed.

Nothing more dramatized this than Ross Perot's second visit to Laos.

ROSS PEROT'S VISIT, 1970

Oh my God! I couldn't believe it. The chartreuse-colored jet was coming back to Laos a *second* time! Yes, I read on the front page, Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot would be returning in February 1970, just two months after his first visit. Although ostensibly seeking permission for his jet to fly to Hanoi to deliver food and presents to U.S. POWs, Perot's real goal was to draw worldwide attention to the issue. And this time, I learned, he would be bringing a plane load of journalists with him.

Perot and I had tangled at his first press conference in Laos. Why, I had asked, was he so concerned about the pilots and so indifferent to the peasants they were bombing? Why wasn't he trying to stop the bombing-which even then was killing and wounding hundreds daily, and was the only way to stop the creation of new POWs and bring existing ones home? He had

smoothly answered that his concern was the POWs, Fred, and that others were working on the bombing issue. I did not look forward to seeing him again.

But, a few days later, there he was at the hotel, full of good cheer, surrounded by dozens of journalists, getting ready to visit a "North Vietnamese prisoner of war camp" outside Vientiane. The journalists, many in brand new safari suits, were from the Sunday supplements. Many were making their first trip ever to Indochina. Perot's idea was to show that the U.S. side was willing to let him interview North Vietnamese POWs, unlike the North Vietnamese who would not let him interview U.S. POWs. Warily, I decided to tag along.

We entered a huge compound. Off in the distance was a circle of North Vietnamese prisoners, staring sulkily at the ground. One can only imagine what they thought as they glanced up and saw a huge crowd of Americans descending upon them in swirling clouds of dust. After we arrived, they still refused to look up. There was dead silence. Suddenly, Perot put his hand up and boomed out, "Tell them we come as friends!" The men still looked at the ground.

There were whispered conferences with the prison officials, who told us that we would now interview another group of prisoners 100 yards away. We trooped over. This was more promising. About two dozen men were standing in a group, looking at us angrily, their leader clearly not a happy camper.

The journalists began to ask them questions. To my amazement, I discovered that the North Vietnamese leader spoke Laotian, and his interpreter was none other than a well-known American Catholic priest who lived in Vientiane. The good father was well-known in Vientiane-for his furry voice, lizard-like habit of grabbing your knee or shoulder, bad breath, anti-communism and custom of forcing his female parishioners to sleep with him. Choosing him as interpreter meant that he and I were the only two people who understood what the prisoner was

saying.

A journalist asked how the prisoners were being treated. The prisoner responded that they were being beaten in violation of the Geneva Conventions, and the priest translated that the prisoners were quite pleased with their treatment. After two or three questions and answers like this, the prisoner complained that they were not being fed properly.

When the priest translated that the prisoner said they had just received a new football last week, I heard a voice saying, "Father, you're lying! Why don't you translate what they're saying?" It was my voice. He said angrily, "Well, Fred, if you don't like the way I'm translating, why don't you do it!" and walked off in a huff.

After a few moments of pandemonium, I suddenly found myself translating. I faithfully translated the prisoners' litany of complaints, as the reporters gathered around eagerly. One of their comrades, they said had been carried off a month ago to a certain building, and had never been seen again.

CUT: I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. THE CHARTREUSE-COLORED JET WAS COMING BACK TO LAOS A SECOND TIME! YES, TEXAS BILLIONAIRE H. ROSS PEROT WOULD BE RETURNING TO LAOS AND HE WOULD BE BRINGING A PLANE LOAD OF JOURNALISTS WITH HIM.

Suddenly Perot, obviously alarmed that the reporters might start questioning the rest of the trip, came running up and said in that forthright manner of his, "All right! I understand this man says that one of his men is in the tower over there. I'd like you journalists to select five representatives so that we can go over and check it out."

Stunned, I tried to explain that the prisoner had said his comrade had been taken there last month, not that he was there now. But it was too late. To my utter amazement, the reporters were already earnestly engaged in deciding who would comprise the delegation. The team marched off to the tower, searched every

room, and returned back to report that nothing had been found. Perot triumphantly announced there was no problem, and then said the buses were leaving to take them back to their hotels for lunch.

The highlight was Perot's entering a small hut at the North Vietnamese Embassy uninvited, and spending several hours in it by himself, ostensibly waiting to see if they would invite him to Hanoi. The hut had a window, and Perot sat by it. His photo appeared on the cover of Time magazine and in newspapers around the nation. The reporters on that trip also wrote features in their Sunday supplements, in addition to the news stories that appeared on the front pages.

My final memory of the trip, however, was somewhat different. After his day at the North Vietnamese compound, press conferences and so forth, it was time for a little R&R. I happened to be leaving Perot's hotel just behind him and his aides. I saw Perot rub his hands and say happily to his "boys," "Now let's go buy some gold!" (Laos' jewelry shops were famous around the world for the beauty and cheap price of their jewelry.)

THE NIXON/KISSINGER STRATEGY HAD realized a tremendous propaganda coup. The focus had shifted from ongoing U.S. war activities to Hanoi's mistreatment of U.S. POW's, a shift that played a major role in allowing the bombing of Vietnam and Laos to continue for another three years, and Cambodia for another five.

The story also illustrates another key aspect of reporting on the war. While there was some reporting of its horrors, the fundamental assumptions about the behavior of the other side were rarely questioned.

NORTH VIETNAM, 1970

In mid-1970, as I was working closely with journalists on a daily basis. I made a surprising discovery. The U.S. military

attache in charge of briefing the press was saying that there were no more than 3,000 to 5,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos.

Excitedly, I conveyed this information to the Bangkok-based Time magazine bureau chief for whom I was working. I showed him official documents, suggested he talk with the U.S. military attache and helped set up interviews with military attaches from other western embassies. They all confirmed the small number of North Vietnamese troops in Laos.

I then showed him the vast amount of information I had collected on the number of U.S.-supported outside troops waging war in Laos, including U.S. military and CIA personnel masquerading as civilians; Thai, Nationalist Chinese and Filipino mercenaries who comprised the CIA's secret army, including Thai and Vietnamese pilots who bombed Laos on a regular basis; and the 50,000 U.S. troops participating in the bombing of Laos from Thailand.

Once you looked at the evidence, it was clear that the U.S.-supported "invasion" of northern Laos was far greater than that of the North Vietnamese, caused a great deal more destruction, killed many more people and undermined the official rationales for U.S. intervention in Laos.

The Time bureau chief was at first not particularly happy about looking into such a story, and a great deal of work was needed to convince him. It was one of the hardest sells of my life. But eventually, the evidence was so overwhelming that he could deny it no longer.

His integrity won out. He filed a story, which he showed me, reporting from on the ground in Laos that claims of a North Vietnamese invasion were greatly exaggerated; there were no more than 5,000 troops and no evidence of an increase in their number.

The next week I ran excitedly to the newsstand to buy the latest issue of Time, which featured a major story on Laos. I

found that the Time office back in New York had *increased* its estimate of the North Vietnamese fighting in Laos from 30,000 to 50,000, and its story depicted a fictional invasion of the country, illustrated by giant red arrows coming from four separate directions.

SHORTLY AFTER THIS INCIDENT, CAMBODIA became another theater in the U.S. war in Indochina. After Nixon and Kissinger invaded it in 1970, the country was divided into two zones controlled by the U.S.-backed Lon Nol and the Khmer Rouge, a tiny and previously virtually unknown guerrilla organization. Reporters soon flocked there. I caught up with them in 1973, when I went there to explore the bombing, particularly massive U.S. carpet-bombing of Khmer Rouge zones.

CUT: THE REACTION WHEN THREE REPORTERS RISKED THEIR LIVES TO BE THE FIRST TO SEE A SECRET CIA AIR BASE? TO MY UTTER AMAZEMENT, THE OTHER JOURNALISTS DRAFTED A PETITION TO "DENOUNCE" THEM FOR BREAKING THE RULES OF THE PRESS TOUR.

CAMBODIA, 1973

I happened to, have a CIA pilot friend from Laos who was dropping supplies to outposts of pro-Lon Nol troops. One day he took me up and we spent a day flying over areas of Cambodia officially estimated by the U.S. Embassy to be inhabited by over 2 million human beings, controlled by the Khmer Rouge.

It was eerie. We didn't see a sign of life: not a person, not a buffalo, not a puff of smoke. But we did see large holes. Lots of them. The kind the huge bombs dropped by carpet-bombing B-52S make.

I remember being shaken on landing. I asked my friend where the 2 million people were. "Living underground, hiding from the bombs. What do you think?" he answered. "Jesus! There must be an awful lot of pissed-off Cambodians," I responded. Little did I know.

This was an unusual experience. Most reporters did not have a chance to fly over Khmer Rouge zones, let alone have the slightest idea what was going on in them. They tended to report features on how Prime Minister Lon Nol consulted astrologers, or what the war looked like from his troops' point of view. Russell Baker once wrote that all he knew about Lon Nol was that he was the only world leader whose name was spelled the same forward and backward.

Sid Schanberg of the New York Times was an exception. He often covered stories that more docile reporters missed, including those of refugees escaping U.S. bombing. The U.S. government insisted, of course, that we never bombed civilian targets in Cambodia. They even explained the "rules of engagement" which supposedly ensured that no U.S. pilot would bomb buildings of any sort before checking with the "bombing officer" at 7th Air Force Headquarters in Nakhorn Phanom, Thailand, to ensure that it was a legitimate military target and that no civilians lived there. (I was later to actually talk with the bombing officer at Nakhorn Phanom, who was dumbfounded to be told he was supposedly determining whether civilians were in the way of U.S. bombs. "How would I know that?", he scratched his head "The only thing I check for is whether there are any CIA teams in the area.")

One day I got a brainstorm and borrowed a shortwave radio from my CIA pilot friend. He taught me how to listen in as the U.S. pilots were bombing. I tape-recorded the conversations, laboriously transcribed them and was able to prove to Schanberg that U.S. pilots were bombing civilian targets indiscriminately, without checking with the bombing officer or anyone else.

Schanberg - who was not easily convinced - listened to the tapes, read the transcripts, checked the stories out with other sources and eventually ran a story on how civilian targets were being bombed. It ran on the front page of the New York Times on the day of one of the House votes to end the bombing of Cambodia, which passed by a few votes. It was tempting to believe that the story might have swayed some of those votes.

CUT: ONE DAY I BORROWED A SHORTWAVE RADIO FROM MY CIA PILOT FRIEND AND LISTENED IN AS THE U.S. PILOTS WERE BOMBING. WITH THE TAPES, I PROVED TO SID SCHANBERG THAT THE UNITED STATES WAS BOMBING CIVILIAN TARGETS INDISCRIMINATELY.

Shortly thereafter, I saw another side of U.S. journalism in Cambodia. I went out with a reporter to the front lines, which in this case consisted of Lon Nol soldiers lobbing mortars at civilian targets on the other side of a river bank. On the way home, in the early afternoon, the journalist asked if I wanted to attend a going-away party for a popular reporter from one of the major U.S. newspapers.

"Why not?" I said, and suddenly found myself in a houseboat by a river with the cream of American journalism, reporters from virtually every major TV station and newspaper in the United States - all dressed in sarongs cavorting with young Cambodian prostitutes who outnumbered them 2-to-1. I saw a major TV station's representative being fed grapes by several laughing young women. I saw a major newspaper's man in Phnom Penh disappearing into a back room behind two young women. I saw several reporters swinging a terrified young woman back and forth prior to tossing her in the water.

Oops! The woman couldn't swim, and began to drown! A few reporters had the presence of mind to jump in, pick her out of the water and dump her on the floor where she was gasping for air. For a moment, everything seemed frozen, no one sure what to do.

Suddenly, while others remained uncertain, my friend came running up to me and displayed the style that made him a top journalist."Fred, let's get the hell out of here," he whispered.

He then ran for the door-but not before giving his card to one of the young women and inviting her to visit him at his hotel.

THIRTY YEARS LATER

Thirty years later, I am still appalled by the lack of objectivity, callousness to human suffering, disinterest in local culture, and political and cultural bias that characterized so much of the reporting.

Still, given where it was coming from, American journalism in Indochina was an improvement over its predecessors. And whatever their faults and whatever constraints they were operating under, many American journalists showed remarkable courage and integrity in reporting the truth as they saw it. Some went even further and showed real compassion and humanity. Some reporting undoubtedly helped limit a war that would otherwise have caused even greater devastation.

But it was not enough. The ghosts of 1.5 million dead call out to us. "We died fighting for our country or as innocent bystanders. And most of us died by the hands or weapons of you Americans. Your media may have been better than its predecessors. But it failed to save our lives. Whatever you did, it wasn't enough."

No, the U.S. media did not do nearly enough in Indochina.

And we must never, ever pretend that it did.

ENDIT

CUT: I SUDDENLY FOUND MYSELF IN A HOUSEBOAT BY A RIVER WITH THE CREAM OF AMERICAN JOURNALISM, FROM VIRTUALLY EVERY MAJOR TV STATION AND NEWSPAPER IN THE UNITED STATES - ALL DRESSED IN SARONGS, CAVORTING WITH YOUNG CAMBODIAN PROSTITUTES WHO OUTNUMBERED THEM 2-TO-R.

FROM THE SACRAMENTO NEWS AND REVIEW, NOVEMBER 12, 1998

Introduction, by the Sacramento News and Review:

Despite the nearly quarter-century that has passed since the last U.S. soldier was evacuated from Saigon, Vietnam remains a contested territory in the American psyche. Why we fought, how we fought, whether we should have fought and what lessons are to be drawn from America's first losing war—these fundamental issues about our engagement on the Indochina peninsula are still debated.

The continuing war over the war is waged in large part on the historical record created by the media coverage that, after the soldiers themselves, serves as the greatest reservoir of information about the conflict. The publication of a new two-volume set of the canonical journalism from the Vietnam era sparked our interest in looking at the media itself and its conduct during and impact upon the war.

Luckily, we were able to secure an insightful review of the new anthology from occasional war correspondent and novelist William Vollmann just before his departure for the current battle in Kosovo. We also enlisted the services of a journalist who covered part of the Indochina war and who was legendary for his knowledge of the Laotian front, Fred Branfman. Here he shares stories of how some of the press corps actually "covered" the war.

UNREPORTED VIETNAM

This month's publication of the Library of America's *Reporting Vietnam* reprints some of the classic journalism from the Indochina war. But it also represents the reportage that journalists would like to remember themselves by.

Missing in action are the highly influential stories from the press reflecting the Cold War sentiment of the time, which ran with headlines like, "Yanks Clobber Viet Reds." These were stories that intended to and succeeded in enlisting popular sentiment for war against a country Americans knew nothing about.

Also missing are the dissenters who were critical in breaking through the official lies: I.F. Stone's columns carefully analyzing government reports; Tom Hayden's and Staughton Lynd's 1965 account of their inspection of the bombing; Noam Chomsky's dissection of the media coverage. If Reporting Vietnam presents the "canon" of U.S. journalism from the war, then even today it remains off limits to voices suggesting that not only was the war wrong, but that the media was complicit as well.

This week's cover stories, starting on page 16, give voice to some Vietnam veterans and journalists who remain uneasily quieted in the post-Cold War consensus. Whether you agree with them or not, we believe you will find their stories gripping and disturbing.

-- Ralph Brave

GENERATIONAL HEALING (Reponse to angry letter to editor from a U.S. Vet about this story.)

The angry response by a former U.S. combat soldier (SN&R, Nov.19) to my article, "The Media, the War and 1.5 Million Ghosts" (SN&R. Nov. i2), reminds us how much unresolved anger and bitterness lies beneath the placid surface of American life today. It is tragic that even today, 30 years later, we have neither acknowledged as a nation, nor as individuals, our responsibility for mass murder in Indochina-let alone moved to do anything about it.

Of course the communists killed innocent civilians, and many in the peace movement, including myself, over-romanticized them. But however bad the communists may have been, that does not gainsay the fact that the vast majority of the hundreds of thousands of civilians killed in Indochina were murdered by indiscriminate U.S. ground and air firepower, in a war against indigenous forces whom President Eisenhower privately admitted would have won a free election by 80 percent.

I believe that neither America as a whole, nor the individuals who were involved there-including the media-can fully heal until we are able to civilly discuss and make amends for the portion of the killing that we inflicted upon the peasants of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia whatever we may feel about the communists.

Thirty years on, I don't feel angry at anyone anymore, including the writer of this letter. We all did what we had to do. But I despair of my generation ever being healed until we can all, whatever our position on the war, at least acknowledge that our nation still has the blood of hundreds of thousands of Indochinese peasants on our hands.

It is long past time to stop redirecting internal pain into external anger at each other. When Germany paid reparations to Israel after World War II, they said they did so not for the Jews but for themselves. While the circumstances are quite different for Indochina, the underlying principle is not.

I believe that our children will only grow up in a healthy America when we are willing to teach them that we, too, like the Serbs, like the Hutus, were capable of murdering large numbers of civilians in a war we had no business fighting.

**Fred Branfman
Washington, D.C.**