

'Killing Fields' cast dark shadow over return to Cambodia

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BY R.L. SCHREADLEY

In the summer of 1998, I made my first trip to see the thousand-year-old Angkor temples that lie just north of the then sleepy little town of Siem Reap, Cambodia. The hotel I booked rated, at best, one-star, which meant it was very cheap. I always traveled cheap in those days, especially when on my own. The Grand Hotel D'Angkor, which at the time seemed to be the only luxury hotel near the temple complex, was way out of my price range.

I've just returned from a second visit to the temples and, my, how things have changed. Today there are 30 or more elegant hotels in or nearby Siem Reap, which now boasts a population rapidly approaching a million. The tourism industry has exploded. Angkor Wat, the largest and most magnificent of the temples, is said to attract some 800,000 visitors a year. On my first trip, I literally could explore many ruins on my own. Not any more.

My wife, who is more particular than I when it comes to choosing a place to sleep, was with me on this trip and I had booked, well in advance, a room at the five-star Angkor Century. She liked it.

Though this was my second visit to Siem Reap, it was my third to Cambodia. And thereby lies a tale, a tale about "collateral damage" inflicted on Cambodia as a result of the Vietnam War.

In the spring of 1970, shortly after President Nixon gave a green light to U.S. and South Vietnamese forces to invade Cambodia, I traveled by boat up the Mekong River as far as the Neak Luong ferry crossing, just south of the capital Phnom Penh. My notes from this excursion compare the land on the Vietnamese and Cambodian sides of the border, respectively, to Dorothy's Kansas and the Land of Oz in the classic film *The Wizard of Oz* - the former black and white, the latter emerald green. For years, river banks on the Vietnamese side of the border had been heavily sprayed with defoliants; those in Cambodia had not. The difference was startling.

The purpose of the Cambodian invasion was to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, thereby disrupting the flow of men and material from North Vietnam into the Three and Four Corps regions of South Vietnam. Massive bombing of the communist supply line had failed to do the job. As it turned out, the uproar the invasion provoked at home, and the meager results it achieved on the ground, in fact hastened the withdrawal of American forces from both Cambodia and Vietnam.

In 1970, we knew relatively little about the Khmer Rouge. Our invasion, and the bombing that preceded it, gave a powerful boost to the KR struggle to overthrow Cambodia's sometimes neutral and sometimes pro-American government. Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge on April 16, 1975. Two weeks later, the North Vietnamese Army took Saigon.

If things were grim for our abandoned allies in South Vietnam, they were unimaginably horrible for those who sided with us in Cambodia. On April 17, 1975, Phnom Penh's more than one million inhabitants were ejected from their homes and marched into the countryside. Hospitals were emptied, some of their patients wheeled away on gurneys. No preparations were made to receive them, no food, no water, no shelter.

The black pajama-clad Khmer Rouge, many of them mere teenagers, hurried and harassed the evacuees. Those who lagged behind were shot or clubbed to death. "The American B-52s are returning to bomb the city!" the KR screamed. "You will be allowed to return in three days!" They were not. Many would never return at all.

The insane dream of Pol Pot and other leaders of the Khmer Rouge was to create a socialist, agrarian society of the type they imagined had existed in Cambodia's distant past. To that end, between two and three million of their countrymen, nobody knows precisely how many, were murdered. Singled out were the upper classes, the educated - doctors, lawyers, teachers, military officers and policemen, all who had served in any capacity the fallen government.

Almost all Cambodian cities were emptied, even Siem Reap. All had their "killing fields," which have now become popular stops for visiting tourists. Japanese investors are said to have plans to "upgrade" them.

The Khmer Rouge ruled for nearly four years. They were then defeated by an invading Vietnamese army that occupied Cambodia for four more years.

Today the country is struggling to put the bloody heritage of the 1970s to rest. It was impossible for this visitor to forget, however, that the smiling and oh-so-polite middle age Cambodian man or woman met today might well have been, 30 years ago, one of the ruthless young killers who formed the rank and file of the most murderous ideological movements ever to rise in the delightful lands of Southeast Asia.

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