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SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

The Cousin of a US National Killed by the Khmer Rouge Seeks Closure in Cambodia

By Ian Neubauer

Picture this. A family member-perhaps your closest-is kidnapped, > tortured And senselessly executed by a group of foreign extremists. More than a Quarter of a century passes and, despite your best efforts, you can't > find Out about the circumstances of their death nor locate their remains.

US-national Don Bittner does not have to imagine this scenario. He's > been Living it ever since he picked up a copy of Life magazine in early > 1980 and Read with disbelief that his cousin and best friend Lance McNamara had >been Killed by the Khmer Rouge.

Since then, Bittner has visited Cambodia twice, hoping to find answers > to The events that proceeded his cousin's disappearance in 1978.

"Lance was a god in my eyes," says Bittner, now 51. "He was the >funniest, most amazing, creative person I have ever met. He picked me up when my father died and showed me how to live again. I owe him so, so much."

To add to the tragedy, Bittner did not even say good-bye to his cousin >the Last time they spoke. He'd left McNamara's Santa Barbara, California, >home And headed off to the US city of San Francisco on a whim in late 1977. >When The rebellious 23-year-old returned a few months later, he was told > that McNamara and his good friend James Clark had just left on a sailing > trip to Southeast Asia.

According to genocide researcher and author Peter Maguire, once there, > they Planned to load their boat with Thai stick-then the most sought after Marijuana in the world-and smuggle it back to the US.

But the risks associated with the Thai trade were correspondingly high. Among those who posed a threat to would-be smugglers were US Drug Enforcement Agency officials, as well as the Thai, Vietnamese and > Cambodian navies, whose waters had to be trespassed en route to Thailand.

McNamara and Clark could never have imagined the terror that awaited > them As they sailed off into the sunset on what was meant to be just > anotheract

Of youthful rebellion yet turned out to be the closing ad of their >lives.

McNamara was the epitome of California's beach culture: Blonde, > blue-eyed, With a scraggly beard and surfer's physique. He worked as a caretaker > ata Santa Barbara mansion where he lived, yet his passion lay in the small > art Gallery he co-owned with his brother.

Bittner and McNamara grew up in the village of Woodstock, New York, > not far From where the world-famous Woodstock rock concert was held in 1969.

Bittner today has the appearance of a middle-age Woodstock rocker, with wire-rimmed spectacles and gray streaks running through his long, sleek hair.

McNamara moved to California in the early 1970s. Apart from the art Gallery his interests lay in watersports and the Mary K: A 12-meter Ferro-cement block Island Rig yacht he built with fellow victim Clark. Bittner, who left home at 17, turned up at McNamara's door in late 1977 Just after his father passed away.

'When I arrived at Lance's doorstep a short time later, I was a mess. > But he took care of me," Bittner said.

But the emotional baggage he slung at his cousin made Bittner pack up and Leave for San Francisco without even a farewell note.

"Everything was happening there. But I regret it, because I never did see Lance again," Bittner said.

It is unknown whether McNamara and Clark actually crossed into Cambodian Waters when they were arrested by members of a Khmer Rouge patrol boat on April18, 1978. But they were definitely in the vicinity, skirting around The Vietnamese and Cambodian islands as they crossed the Gulf of Thailand.

"The primary purpose of [Khmer Rouge] patrol boats was to intercept Vietnamese naval craft and to interdict fishing by Thai boats," noted Historian Stephen Heder. "The Westerners were simply in the wrong place at The wrong time."

At first, McNamara and Clark thought the men in the oncoming vessel were pirates. They tried to out sail them but were fired upon with a mounted 50-calibermachine-gun. Clark returned fire, first with his revolver, then with McNamara's pearl-handled. 45 Colt. The patrol boat retorted with a 20 mm cannon, scoring a direct hit on the Mary K's hull, according to a confession Clark later wrote for his abductors.

The pair were blindfolded, taken ashore and thrown into the back of a Rickety truck. From there, they were driven to the port of Kompong Som-now Sihanoukville-and then to Phnom Penh, to the former Tuol Sleng high school, Which the Khmer Rouge had turned into a prison.

The amateur drug-smugglers would join at least 14,000 others who were Imprisoned and tortured at Tuol Sleng.

Genocide researcher Maguire's recent book, "Facing Death in Cambodia" Includes an account of Clark and McNamara's abduction among its interviews With former guards and survivors from Tuol Sleng. One survivor, Ung Pech, "recalled hearing one of the American prisoners cry out in pain as a teenage guard dragged him across the courtyard by his beard." Both McNamara and Clark had big bushy beards.

Details of what happened to Clark and McNamara once inside Tuol Sleng Remain sketchy. They may have been kept shackled together with hundreds of Cambodian prisoners in a long room, or chained to the wall of a cupboard-size cells. They most certainly would have been kept on starvation rations and forced to undergo weeks, perhaps months of torture until they confessed to the "real" purpose of their yachting excursion.

"Everyone had heard of these amazing, exotic; get-rich-quick schemes," Maguire wrote. "One of the major ones was marijuana smuggling from Thailand."

The Khmer Rouge regime, however, was under the impression that Cambodia had been severely infiltrated by countless foreign agents. They tortured and executed thousands of Cambodians under charges of espionage, and leveled the same accusations at any foreigner who trespassed their borders.

Clark's lengthy biography, found at Tuol Sleng after the Vietnamese ousted the Khmer Rouge in 1979, is laced with tales of his fictional involvement with the US Central Intelligence Agency.

"The key country to watch in Southeast Asia is Cambodia, the most successful Communist country," Clark wrote. "The US thought that if Cambodia became strong enough, it would invade... Thailand and turn it into communism. After Thailand, it would be easy to make Malaysia communist and then Singapore would be threatened."

Clark also admitted to photographing boats, islands and radio installations for the CIA. He wrote that he had been paid \$1.1 million for his efforts, and that he'd enlisted McNamara for a \$400,000 cut.

No other evidence has been unearthed at Tuol Sleng to prove that McNamara

evermade it off the Mary K.

Secondary evidence exists in the form of a declassified US Defense Department document dated January 1980. The document reports the visit of a Dr Sinclair to Tuol Sleng a few weeks following the Vietnamese liberation. Sinclair "was told by guides that four US nationals, two Australians and a number of French had died there" and that "two American civilians, James W Clark and Lance P McNamara, became missing in April 1978 while on a yachting trip."

"The Khmer Rouge leadership realized these Americans in particular were...hot potatoes, so they took special measures to dispose of their remains in secret," wrote genocide historian Craig Etcheson.

This theory was corroborated by Tuol Sleng's former commander Comrade Duch, according to photojournalist Nic Dunlop who discovered Duch in 1999 as he was working as a health worker under the alias Hang Pin.

Duch admitted that his superior, Brother No 2 Nuon Chea, "ordered the foreigners be killed and their bodies burned, so no bones were left, he said. "Only the Europeans were burned."

Bittner first came to Cambodia in 1999 with the hope of locating McNamara's remains. But the mission proved fruitless and after a heavy night's drinking, Bittner found himself at the gates of Tuol Sleng. Being midnight it was closed, but a \$5 bribe got him in.

Not only did the guards give Bittner a private tour, they simulated some of the tortures carried out on prisoners in one of the dark, dingy interrogation rooms.

Yet the mood was anything but theatrical. Coupling facts they knew about how the US abandoned Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge in 1975 with assumptions they made about Bittner's perverse curiosity, the guards became boisterous, outlandish and finally, incensed.

"You understand!" yelled one of the guards as he simulated electrical torture on one of his colleagues. "You understand!"

Next on the tour of horrors came the photograph rooms.

"This was my grandmother!" yelled one of the guards, pointing at a faded black and white photograph. "This was our famous folk singer!" yelled another.

Only when the party came across Clark's photograph, with Bittner pointing

madly at it and screaming "He was my friend!" did the guards become aware of Bittner's connection with Tuol Sleng. They went back to their posts and left him to further explore the museum on his own.

"I spent three hours alone in the interrogation room," Bittner said. "I was just so desperate for some kind of communication for Lance... to see what he saw, to talk to him."

The experience had a profoundly disturbing effect on Bittner. He returned to the US and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychological ailment common to those who experience the killing of a loved one.

"You get this overwhelming sensation where you just can't function," Bittner explained. "You cry but it's not like normal crying—it's like screaming crying—like a horror movie image that chases you again and again."

Discouraged with conventional psychiatry, Bittner sought a practitioner of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. The process is "the most effective and rapid method for treating post-traumatic stress disorder and has been used extensively to treat survivors of the Sept 11, 2001, terror attacks in the US," according to BioLateral.com, an EMDR Web Site.

In EMDR, the patient uses his eyes to track a therapist's fingers which are moving from side to side. This "stimulates powerful brain activity [while] the client reactivates a [traumatic] image," according to the EMDR Website.

"The client is instructed to uncritically follow his/her thoughts and associations, which often leads to... rapid insight and... a systemic letting go of the traumatic event."

"The whole thing sounds kind of kooky," Bittner admits, but adds that the treatment did work.

Bittner returned to Cambodia in late March with two goals in mind: To find out for once and for all how McNamara died, and to promote EMDR to mental health professionals here.

Bittner said he is not associated with any particular EMDR institution or therapist, and that he simply wants to help others benefit from the method.

One of the groups Bittner contacted was the Transcultural Psychological Organization, a World Health Organization collaborative group focusing exclusively on mental health. TPO Managing Director Dr Sothera Chhim said he has had some training in EMDR and that his staff is now discussing the viability of sourcing an EMDR trainer. According to TPO data, 28 percent of

the population suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

EMDR "seems to be effective in treating mild cases of post-traumatic stress disorder," he opined. "In Mr Bittner's case, he had some of the symptoms like nightmares and flash backs, and EMDR seems to have helped him."

But Sothera Chhim added: "I think maybe [Bittner] still has some problems....I could see how sad he was when he talked about his cousin."

During his latest visit to Cambodia, Bittner traveled to Kandal province's Prek Keo village in search of Suos Thy, who worked as the chief clerk at Tuol Sleng.

Armed with color photographs of McNamara as he would have appeared when he was abducted, Bittner hoped to get a positive identification and perhaps the information that would allow him to put McNamara's memory to rest.

But Suos Thy offered only muffled responses to questions. After a few minutes Suos Thy became so nervous that he had to stop tending his chilies and crouched down on the ground as his eyelids flickered uncontrollably.

Bittner stood at a distance, as Suos Thy replied in a nearly inaudible voice that he had paid for his crimes by serving five years in a Vietnamese prison camp. He gave only a cursory look at McNamara's photograph before stating that all foreigners brought to Tuol Sleng were kept in a segregated area to which he never had access.

It is not possible to verify Suos Thy's statement. Like the prisoners they violated, the lives of Tuol Sleng staff were tenuous at best. More than 500 of them were put to death, often for trivial offenses. "One S-21 guard was killed for burning a wasp's nest, another for shouting 'the house is on fire' in his sleep," wrote historians Meng Try Ea and Sorya Sim.

"It's hard to imagine that someone so benign could've been part of that," Bittner said, as he left Suos Thy. "It's frustrating. It doesn't seem like anyone is going to give anything up."

"I know it's nothing compared to what the Cambodian people went through," he said. "But I just have to know what happened to Lance."