

Vanes and Vietnam



In May the FCC remembered much-loved Club stalwart, Hugh Van Es, who died a year ago. A wonderful retrospective of this famous photographer's work – deftly put together by Vanes' close friend and fellow photographer, Kees Metselaar – started proceedings while a huge gathering of old friends and media professionals, many of whom had just attended events in Vietnam and Cambodia that commemorated the 35th Anniversary of the “fall of Saigon”, brought things to a suitably rowdy close. It was fitting – as a consummate social networker, Vanes had always been instrumental in arranging the previous reunion gatherings. Former FCC President **John Giannini** attended both the Vietnam and the Hong Kong events and here, for *The Correspondent*, he remembers when he first met Vanes in a bar (that was actually a tent) in Quan Loi in 1969. Overleaf, former Vietnam war journalist **Don Kirk** uses the reunion to trigger media memories from the war while **Luke Hunt** finds that the mystery surrounding the disappearance of famed combat photographer Sean Flynn is as strong as ever.

A GUY WALKS INTO A BAR...

The bar happened to be the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment's Air Rifle Platoon enlisted men's club at Quan Loi, Vietnam, near the Cambodian border. The bar wasn't really a bar, but a tent on a wooden floor. It was the Fall of 1969.

At a table sat four civilians, at least the guy assumed they were civilians. They wore mismatched bits of military uniforms and they had more style than any military personnel. The guy thought they were the coolest people he'd ever seen. They had cameras, lots of cameras. Worn cameras that had obviously seen a lot of combat.

Since the guy was a combat photographer in the Cav, he introduced himself and to his surprise, the four were happy to meet him. They treated him like a colleague. The group talked about various operations, about cameras, and about photography. Mostly the guy just listened, because he realized that this was the day his life changed. This was the day he figured out what his life was going to be. This was the day he realized that he could travel the world with cameras, taking pictures and telling stories.

The four people at the table were UPI photographer Nik Wheeler, UPI photographer Kent Potter, CBS cameraman Dana Stone, and AP photographer Hugh Van Es. Only Nik Wheeler survives. Stone was captured in Cambodia in April, 1970. It's believed that he was executed by the Khmer Rouge. Kent Potter was shot down in a helicopter over Laos, with three other photographers covering Operation Lam Son 719. Van Es died last year after suffering a brain haemorrhage.

It's only fitting that the wall in the Main Bar should be dedicated to the memory of Hugh Van Es. After all he shot the defining picture of the fall of Saigon, 35 years earlier. That one picture summed up the futility of the wasted lives and treasure that was the Vietnam War. But Hugh was more than that. He was a friend. A friend to many who passed through the FCC over the years and a link to an era in journalism, the like of which will never be seen again. He was the Club's historical archive; much of that archive was displayed on the walls of the Main Bar.

Fast forward to May 7th, 2010. Same guy walks into a bar on his way back from Saigon, after a lifetime of travelling the world taking pictures and telling stories. It's a familiar bar. One that he's called home for many years, but one that he seldom gets to visit. He's there to honour one of those who had changed his life that day in 1969. Thanks Hugh.

John Giannini



Top: Annie Van Es addresses a Main Bar packed with Hugh's friends and colleagues. (Image: Bob Davis)

Above: Kees Metselaar, creator of the retrospective, points out the details. (Image: Bob Davis)

Below: Hugh Van Es on one of the many reunion trips back to Vietnam.



The Media and the War

During the Vietnam war, Western journalists had a very free hand to see and write about what they wanted. Many have since mused these media liberties cost the United States the war. American journalist **Don Kirk** was in Vietnam in the '60s and '70s and was back there again recently, for the 35th anniversary events in May. For Kirk, the reunions kick-started a lot of conflict memories and also once again raised the debate about the function of the media – both then and now – in combat zones.

The diminutive president of Vietnam, Nguyen Minh Triet, was on the reviewing stand greeting high-level well-wishers after the reunification day parade in Ho Chi Minh City. In the absence of Vietnam Communist Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, Triet was the central figure lending top-level dignity to a three-hour review of history as reenacted on the 35th anniversary of “the fall” of the ancien regime of old “South” Vietnam.

After compelling journalists to arrive at dawn and stand on a platform for the media, minders and guards mostly wandered off as the crowd dispersed in the heat. Policemen who had blocked us most of the morning from getting down from the media perch on a platform had lost all interest. Jim Pringle, veteran of years in the region with Reuters and *Newsweek*, suggested venturing across the street for a closer look. President Triet was managing diffident smiles for a cluster of the faithful gathered around him. No one questioned our presence as we shook hands, offering “congratulations” that he accepted with a polite if uncomprehending grin.

Nor did anyone stop me from following the president down the avenue in the centre of a smaller entourage toward the gates through which a tank had crashed on April 30, 1975, and then rolled onto the expansive lawn of Independence Palace, once the center of power of the old U.S.-backed Saigon regime. Inside the gate, I met a man in white shirt and dark trousers who said he was providing security before pointing the president and aides to their limousines, parked behind the fence. Apologizing for breaking off our brief exchange, he hopped into an SUV and was off, just ahead of the VIPs in vehicles massed behind him.

It was a strange ending to an anniversary laden with symbolism and significance for a country and a society that seems strangely uncertain whether it's

socialist or capitalist – and old-style communism exists less as a frighteningly repressive influence than as a firm reminder that the power still lies with the forces that marched to victory in 1975. The flag of Vietnam, gold star on a red field, flew everywhere, from shops and stores and office buildings, for the long holiday weekend, but whoever planned the celebration seemed more interested in appealing to southern sensitivities, and promoting capitalism, than in preaching revolutionary values.

The course of the parade was only a couple of miles, up the broad avenue leading to the palace, and all those in the cheering throng had to have passes to attend, but non-stop television coverage on a panoply of government and party networks insured maximum publicity. It was the biggest event of the holiday, this city's day to wallow in pride – or, more accurately, the chance for the Ho Chi Minh People's Committee and the local branch of the party to breathe inspiration and loyalty into a populace that tries not to think about the dominance of Hanoi.

In that spirit the vice chairman of the HCM People's Committee dwelled on the vibrancy of a metropolitan region that rivals that of some of the major cities of China in its aggressive pursuit of industrialization and modernization. “You can see a lot of changes here,” he reminded foreign journalists, most of whom had covered Vietnam in “the old days,” that is, before April 30, 1975. The vice chairman held forth in a setting laden with historical ironies, the rococo HCM People's Committee building, that is, the French-built city hall, a confection of mansard roofs and gables and marble floors and statuary, at the end of Nguyen Hue, as much the Street of Flowers as it ever was. “We are the most vibrant centre for economic advance,” he assured us. “We are a city of enormous economic potential with an average economic growth rate of ten percent a year.”



Don Kirk at a Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) base to the south of Danang in early 1972.
(Image: David L. Terry)

He was sensitive to the need to preserve old architecture, but he made no apologies for the imminent demise of the nearby Eden Building, a hulking, shadowy warren of mostly abandoned offices and apartments where the AP, NBC News and Visnews, not to mention Indian money-changers, made their headquarters for years. On the corner, opposite the revived Continental, its ground-floor “shelf” now glassed in and sedate, Givral’s, where correspondents and Vietnamese staffers shared news, views and rumours throughout the war, was shuttered and about to close, its sign still drooping as a sentimental reminder of years gone by.

As the holiday parade suggested, the policy of Hanoi is to display nationalist benevolence, to encourage free enterprise and let the good times roll. There is just one catch: all news and views, everything in print, on the air, in theatres or on the internet, even if non-political, has got to be reviewed and censored. And, of course,

there is no bona fide political opposition in a society where the party, which includes the president but is controlled by the general secretary, reigns supreme.

Thus a retired general, Nguyen Van Tai, talked about the “Ho Chi Minh campaign” that precipitated the downfall of the Saigon regime but had no information about the reeducation camps to which thousands of southerners were consigned, many of them never to return. “Our policy is to put aside the past and look to the future,” said Colonel Nguyen Van Bach of the Veterans’ Association. “The victory was a victory of the whole nation.”

That was a message repeated constantly as television channels broadcast endless footage of Communist forces on the march to victory. For those who had known “South” Vietnam in the late 1960’s and early 1970s, the whole show conjured other memories. One letter in those days from an employer to the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office on the ground floor of the Rex

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER STORY – MERITING HEADLINE, WITH PHOTO, ACROSS THE TOP OF PAGE ONE OF THE NEXT DAY’S WASHINGTON STAR. IT WAS ALL DECEPTIVELY EASY, AND THEN SUDDENLY IT GOT DANGEROUS

Hotel in Saigon, or two letters from editors willing to vouch for freelancers, sufficed to get a press card good for U.S. military transport, for cheap dining in military mess halls, for discount shopping at post and base exchanges, and even for receiving and sending mail via the Army post office. And hotels, markets, bars, and restaurants of Saigon offered services at amazing discounts for those who changed their dollars for local dong at “the bank of India” – money-changers from India who operated behind the cover of book stores and offices.

One-time war correspondents in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos shared nostalgic memories of restaurants purveying fine French menus, mingled with the adrenalin rush of rocket attacks and firefights, distant battles and close-up coups. The daily military briefings, the “five o’clock follies,” evoked stories of tiffs with briefing officers while soldiers on all sides waged war in very different environments in which the pleasures of Saigon, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane were nonexistent.

“We had incredible freedom in Vietnam and Cambodia,” Dan Southerland, a former correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* and United Press International, observed at a panel that packed the huge ground-floor ballroom of a new hotel by Phnom Penh’s river front. Southerland, revisiting Phnom Penh as executive editor of Radio Free Asia, a US government network that broadcasts news into Asian countries, compared the ease with which journalists ranged over the region with the practice now of “embedding” reporters with military units if they wish to cover what they’re doing. “What you need is both embedding and the outliers,” he said, meaning news organizations should rely on reporters both within and outside military units. In general, he said, “I think they are doing the best they can.”

Others, however, strongly disagreed with the whole concept of “embedding,” as required by the Pentagon of anyone who wants to write and report from inside a military unit. “My instinct is not to get embedded,” said Simon Dring, who reported on Vietnam for Reuters in the 1960s and spent much of his later career with the BBC, covering wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. He sees reporters

as having done some of their “best work” in Iraq and Afghanistan beyond the scope of military control. “It is very dangerous,” he observed. “They take tremendous risks. They do fantastic reporting.”

If covering wars in the states of former French Indochina carried many of the same risks, returning journalists seemed to have more of a sense of camaraderie than do those from later conflicts in Eastern Europe, Central America, and, lately, the Middle East. One-time Vietnam and Cambodia correspondents, banded together in a network of “old hacks,” looked back fondly on good times there and in Laos.

Even the daily military briefings known as the “five o’clock follies” evoked stories of tiffs with briefing officers, of reporters noted for relying more on the word of MACV, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, than on first-hand views from the scene. Those days, old-time correspondents conceded, have disappeared into the miasma of history while U.S. forces wage war in very different environments in which security is never certain and nightlife, as experienced in Saigon, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane, the sleepy capital of Laos, is largely nonexistent.

Danger lurked in different forms, often where least expected, in Vietnam and Cambodia where 69 correspondents, photographers and local interpreters and assistants were killed. Those who had to get the images on camera took the greatest risks. The first casualty was the photographer Dickey Chapelle, killed by shrapnel set off by a booby trap in the Mekong River in November 1965. The last was another photographer, Frenchman Michel Laurent, killed on April 28, 1975, two days before South Vietnam’s last president, Duong Van “Big” Minh, broadcast the surrender at noon on April 30.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk loved to call Cambodia “an oasis of peace,” and it seemed that way when I hitched rides from Saigon after he was overthrown while drumming up support for his policy of “neutrality” on a mission to Moscow and Beijing. On well-travelled Route One, then as now the highway between Saigon and Phnom Penh, I chatted on the way with CIA-financed Khmer Serei, Free Khmer, identifiable by their shiny new American M16 rifles.

It was a relief to be away from the morass of Vietnam. Here was major news that was simple to cover. You could go to war in Cambodia, accompanied by a local assistant, in an old Mercedes-Benz taxi, picked up behind the Hotel Royale, listening to the latest in American pop music on the Armed Forces Vietnam Network. Down the road, you might hear the crump of artillery or even staccato of small arms fire, interview a few villagers about the spreading war, return in time to file a story by cable or telex, and then relax over dinner by the Royale pool. Nor was I all that concerned when I ran into North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge troops while driving far south of Phnom



Above: The author on a South Vietnamese army truck in 1970. (Image: David L. Terry)

Left: British photographer Tim Page in Vietnam for the 35th Anniversary reunion in May. (Image: Don Kirk)

Penh with a Canadian TV team led by globe-trotting correspondent Bill Cunningham at the beginning of April. They let us go with propaganda leaflets, written in Vietnamese and Khmer after Cunningham showed his Canadian passport – and did not ask to see my US passport.

Another day, another story – meriting headline, with photo, across the top of page one of the next day's *Washington Star*. It was all deceptively easy, and then suddenly it got dangerous. Several days later, I counted the bodies of 90 Vietnamese refugees gunned down overnight by Cambodian soldiers in a barnyard in the eastern Cambodian town of Prasaut. Down the road, stopping at a roadside stand, I ran into photographers Sean Flynn and Dana Stone on motorcycles.

An old woman, through my interpreter, told us the Khmer Rouge were “over there,” but Flynn and Stone drove off, flushed in their eagerness for photographs. I returned to Phnom Penh with my story on the massacre. Flynn and Stone were never seen alive again. “In Cambodia, we just couldn’t believe how bad it was going to be,” said Southerland, who saw them that day too. “I feel very badly. You couldn’t be unaffected by this stuff.”

Correspondents who were there have never forgotten those whom they knew. We all have special memories. I never saw my interpreter, Ith Chhun, again after visiting Cambodia in July 1974 when we interviewed peasants telling us the Khmer Rouge were terrifying the populace, sawing off heads with sugar palm leaves in public displays of torture. On my most

recent visit, in April, a Cambodian who had worked for a foreign news agency told me he believes Chhun, who had learned English from Christian missionaries and was offering tours around Sihanouk’s palace when I met him, died of starvation after the Khmer Rouge drove the people from Phnom Penh and other cities into the countryside.

British photographer Tim Page, wounded severely four times, now walking with a limp but still taking pictures and writing books, has been searching for years for clues as to what happened to Flynn and Stone. Page responds indignantly to claims by four young Australians that they dug up the probable remains of one of them north of Phnom Penh. He suspects the four want to capitalize on the mystique surrounding Flynn, son of the swashbuckling actor Errol Flynn. He feels especially disdainful after the U.S. Joint Prisoners of War, Missing in Action Accounting Command, based in Honolulu, dismissed the find as having nothing to do with either Flynn or Stone.

More memories of forays down empty roads flashed by as three busloads of one-time correspondents, plus a few latter-day journalists covering the return of the hacks, drove 40 miles south of Phnom Penh past sun-baked fields to the site of more killing of colleagues 40 years ago. A former CBS cameraman, Kurt Volkert, told how two competing network correspondents died along with their crews covering a war that no one understood. First George Syvertsen of CBS and producer Gerald Miller ran into an ambush and were

Cover Story

gunned down along with their crew. Then, Welles Hangen of NBC and his crew were stopped, led to a nearby schoolhouse and detained overnight before their captors, saving bullets, bashed in their heads.

Volkert had gone down a different highway but led the search for the bodies, including excavation more than 20 years later of a muddy streambed in which the bones of Hangen and four others were buried. He talked about the search as villagers gathered around, smiling at their foreign visitors, seemingly oblivious to the memory of the scourge that swept the land a generation ago. “The area has changed completely,” Volkert told us, looking over the parched land. “The road has doubled in width. All the buildings are new.” New construction forced traffic into a single lane while a convoy of bullock carts competed for space. Freshly slaughtered beef hung on roadside stands, and marketplaces were ablaze with umbrellas fending off the hot sun.

There were no signs of the tragedy of the Khmer in the villages on the way. “The hospitality of the Cambodian people shines once again,” said Carl

Robinson, who covered the war for the Associated Press and organized the reunion of “old hacks.” Carl, now living in Australia and running tours to Vietnam with his wife, Kim Dung, whom he met and married in the Mekong Delta, synthesized the sensations. “It brings a lot of closure,” he said, “to our feelings after all these years.”

Vietnam was actually a less dangerous place for foreign journalists. Far more correspondents were based in Saigon than in Phnom Penh, and fewer died, 32 as opposed to 37. The vast American troop presence offered a better sense in Vietnam than in Cambodia if a road was safe to travel. Periodic offensives and flights over scenes of conflict presented the worst danger. Four photographers – Larry Burrows, Henry Huet, Kent Potter, and Keizaburo Shimamoto – were aboard a helicopter that went down over Laos in February 1971. Four reporters – John Cantwell, Ronald Laramy, Michael Birch, and Bruce Piggot – died in an ambush in Saigon in May 1968 during “mini-Tet,” the Communists’ second gasp after the Tet holiday offensive three months earlier in February. François



Don Kirk meets Vietnamese journalists at a specially arranged anniversary lunch. The lady on the left is a retired TV journalist who covered the Ho Chi Minh Trail for the Hanoi government during war. (Image: David L. Terry)

Sully of *Newsweek* went down in a helicopter carrying a senior South Vietnamese general in February 1971. Robert Ellison died when the plane carrying him into the besieged Khe Sanh combat base near the Laotian border in northwestern South Vietnam was shot down in March 1968 before he ever saw the cover and layout he had photographed for that week's *Newsweek*. Freelancer Alex Shimkin, on assignment for *Newsweek*, was gunned down by invading North Vietnamese troops in July 1972.

Such episodes, though, seemed isolated, almost like accidents in a war that ebbed and flowed over widely diffused stretches of highlands, coastal lowlands, and the Mekong Delta. There was no censorship, no worry about officials slowing the flow of stories or photographs. Nor did correspondents in those days have to worry about Internet messages or calls on cell phones. You never called your office, and you waited for the surprisingly efficient postal offices in Saigon, Phnom Penh, or Vientiane to deliver cables the next day on the fate of the pieces you had filed the night before.

"Journalists today don't have fun like we did," lamented Sylvana Foa, who filed for United Press International, which years later she served as top editor. "There was no way our offices could contact us. Nowadays journalists can spend their whole time filing on a 24-hour news cycle." Mostly, though, she worries about the influence of embedding, a system the Pentagon developed as a response to the often adverse reporting of the Vietnam era.

"This whole system of embedding is a disgrace," said Foa, citing restraints placed on photographing coffins containing the bodies of fallen soldiers. Foa, who may have forgotten the Obama administration partially lifted controls on such coverage last year, sees a mounting problem: "This censorship is very worrying," she said. "When a country sends its people into war, they should know what happens to them."

Not that journalists covering Vietnam and Cambodia in those days were always free to do as they wished. MACV withdrew accreditation from correspondents for violating an embargo imposed on reporting plans to withdraw from Khe Sanh after the 77-day siege was broken. Nor did reporters witness the "secret air war" over portions of Laos and Cambodia except on rare occasions when they went up in U.S. warplanes from bases in the central highlands of Vietnam, either Kontum or Pleiku. The bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail down which North Vietnam shipped men and supplies to the South remained a mystery, exposed occasionally but rarely actually seen.

For all the freedom they had, correspondents puzzle over the deeper mystery of how Cambodia sank into mass killing under the Khmer Rouge. Matt Franjola, who covered Vietnam and Cambodia for both UPI and the Associated Press, is sure of one thing: "The Americans never had any clue of how to run this war.

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Every generation makes the same mistakes as the one before. The Americans have no idea what they're doing in Iraq and Afghanistan either."

On the six-hour express bus ride from Saigon to Phnom Penh, I searched for reminders of war. The Cao Dai temple, where I had seen black smoke rising one morning in June 1972 after a South Vietnamese A1 Skyraider showered it with napalm, was freshly painted and festive. The road where I had seen the napalmed girl and her brother running was filled with the normal traffic. As we neared the Parrot's Beak, where Cambodia juts into Vietnam, the names of the towns, Mochai on the Vietnam side, Bavet on the Cambodian, flitted vaguely into memory.

These were datelines from stories I had filed when U.S. troops roared into Cambodia in May 1970, paving the way for the Khmer Serei. Nowadays Vietnamese show their passports to bored immigration officials, first their own, then Cambodian, lured by garish casinos and cushy hotels across the line.

Donald Kirk a life member of the HK FCC, covered Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos for the Washington (D.C.) Star and Chicago Tribune in the late 1960s and early 1970s, wrote articles for The New York Times Magazine and others and is the author of two books from that period, "Tell It to the Dead: Stories of a War," an expanded edition of "Tell it to the Dead: Memories of a War," and "Wider War: The Struggle for Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos."

Flynn Claims Continue

Sean Flynn, the combat photographer son of iconic tough Hollywood star Errol Flynn, disappeared in 1970 along with cameraman Dana Stone as the pair headed to the Cambodian front line. It is thought they were held and then killed by the Khmer Rouge but despite many searches their bodies have never been found. It's a saga that still causes controversy today, writes **Luke Hunt**

Their ranks were thinner, the hair a little greyer but their collective moral backbone was as strong as ever. About 40 journalists gathered in Vietnam to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.

Absent were the likes of Hu Van Es, Kate Webb and Philip Jones Griffiths.

But foremost in most people's minds was the death of a colleague more than 40 years ago. Sean Flynn was again in the headlines after a couple of self-anointed adventurers claimed to have found his remains, ending one of the great mysteries of that era.

"The best thing about all this, whatever you want to call these people -- bone hunters, collectors -- whatever you want to call them, they have fired a BB gun into a hornet's nest," said photographer Tim Page, a great friend of Flynn's.

Known as the Old Hacks' Reunion, correspondents who covered the Vietnam War gathered in Saigon -- Ho Chi Minh City is still struggling for acceptance as a name -- every five years when the government in Hanoi commemorates the "re-unification" of North and South Vietnam.

Many had come from Cambodia where a similar event was held amid claims by Australian Dave MacMillan and Briton Keith Rotheram that they had found Flynn's remains in the south-eastern Cambodian province of Kampong Cham.

They also created a stir within the journalism industry and in Cambodia where long-time observers questioned the intentions of MacMillan and Rotheram, and their moral judgment.

Flynn, the son of Hollywood star Errol and French actress Lily Damita, had disappeared with colleague Dana Stone on April 6, 1970.

The pair had rented Honda motorbikes in Phnom Penh and rode into the countryside to find the front lines of fighting in Cambodia. Investigations indicate that Flynn, 28, and Stone, 32, were taken to the village of Sangke Kaong, and then moved around before being handed over to the Khmer Rouge.

Most believe Flynn was killed by the Khmer Rouge in June 1971.

In late March bones were dug up, wrapped up and delivered to the US embassy for verification by the US military's Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command based in Hawaii.

This has raised accusations the bones were not excavated properly, evidence was damaged and if the information MacMillan and Rotheram had acted on was correct then JPAC should have been informed and handled the entire excavation from the start.

Then as Page was packing his bags for Vietnam, JPAC and the US embassy in Phnom Penh revealed the bones recovered were not that of a Caucasian.

"I feel very sorry for the poor bugger who they found," said Page. "The skull belonged to someone. That someone had a family, a mother and a father. This was a person. And they destroyed the evidence."

Few were surprised. Cambodia is littered with bones. Other high profile killings -- like those of three Western backpackers in 1994 and a British deminer in 1998 -- have also attracted their fair share of unwanted bounty hunters claiming to have found their remains.

This obviously throws enormous stress on the families and friends.

"What can you say? It's such a touchy subject, it's about the death of a colleague," said former CNN reporter Peter Arnett.

Former Reuters, *Times of London* and *Newsweek* correspondent Jim Pringle added: "It's a bit ghoulish that they're doing this thing. It's also wrong."

"They were using equipment like spades that destroyed the evidence and those bones were someone -- who knows who?"

Perry Deane Young -- the author of *Two of the Missing* which documents Flynn and Stone's disappearance -- said the retrieval of remains from Vietnam and Cambodia was the responsibility of JPAC and no one else.

"It belongs in the hands of professionals -- not idiots. We're all upset about it."

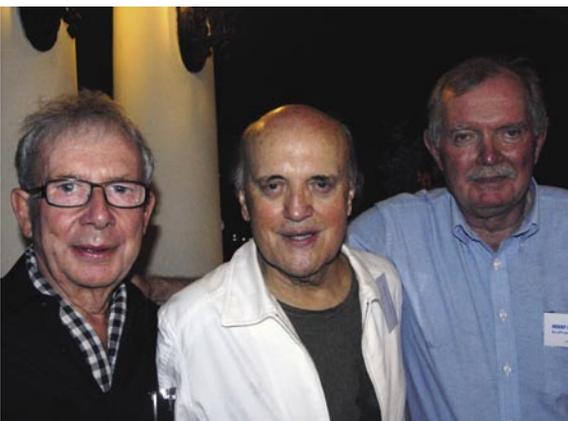
Saigon Faces



Former FCC President John Giannini with Jim Okuley, the brother of Bert, with the Saigon River in the background. (All three images by Luke Hunt)



Former UPI correspondent Perry Deane Young with George Hamilton, the Hollywood actor and friend of Sean Flynn.



Jim Pringle, Peter Arnett and Perry Deane Young strike a pose at the Old Hacks' Reunion in Saigon.

Hacks hold maiden bash in Cambodia

When the communists marched into Saigon on April 30 1975 they signalled the end of a war and an era that had crystallized the 1960s, 1970s and Cold War dogma. The communists were on a roll, South Vietnam and Laos had been overrun and just two weeks earlier the cadres had also marched into Phnom Penh, but in Cambodia much worse was to come. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge ravaged what was then Democratic Kampuchea and the wars continued almost until the end of the 20th century.

It was against this backdrop that correspondents who covered Cambodia, and what some now call the Lon Nol War, finally gathered in Phnom Penh. "It could not have come anytime sooner, it was the first time in 35 years," said former Reuters, *Times of London* and *Newsweek* correspondent Jim Pringle, who helped organise the reunion. The Cambodian affair was modelled on the Reunion of Old Hacks held in Vietnam to commemorate the end of the Vietnam War every five years, and in line with government-sponsored events.

Among those making the trip back were the American and British photographers Al Rockoff and Tim Page, who presented a Cambodian edition of *Requiem* – a portfolio by combat photographers who died on the battlefields. Pringle said one highlight was a trip to Wat Po, a pro-communist village that the Khmer Rouge drew heavily upon for support.

"It's still very isolated and there was a bit of edginess to it," he said. "The villagers told us they were afraid of foreigners and didn't like us. It's not all sweetness and light in Cambodia."

Many more turned out for a panel discussion on the war, which was hosted by the Overseas Press Club of Cambodia and included correspondents Jon Swain and Dan Southerland and the author Elizabeth Becker. Youk Chhang, the director of DC-Cam which has spent the past decade collecting evidence of the atrocities committed by Pol Pot, used his resources to help locate journalists and photographers.

"I grew up during the war time and I have heard of them since I was a young boy and 30 years later I have met some of them. The event was very emotional for many of them because they have never been forgotten and they are part of Cambodia's history," he said.

Luke Hunt