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War story



PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTYAN WOODS

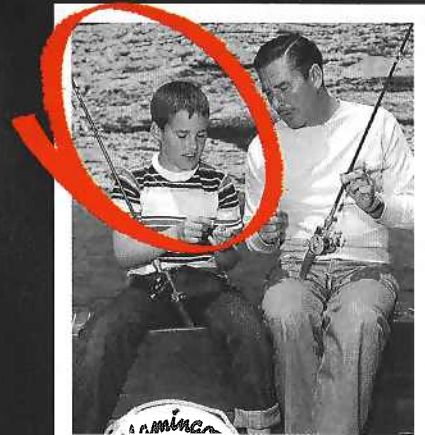
Sex, drugs and on patrol. Sean Flynn poses with camera and automatic rifle during a tour as combat photographer with US Special Forces at Duc Phong.



the continuing search for the son of captain blood

Sean Flynn was a movie brat turned battle photographer 'grooving on' the Vietnam War... right until the conflict tragically devoured him

BY RICHARD LINNETT



Young Sean teaches dad Errol the finer points of threading a leader

Awiry Cambodian rice farmer named Ban Poev points at three parched sinkholes hidden in mango scrub just outside the Mekong River town of Kratie. Over 30 years ago, when he was just a child, he saw bloated corpses choking these pits. One of them may have been the long lost son of Errol Flynn.

*You know he heard the drums of war,
When the past was a closing door,
The drum beats into the jungle floor,
Closing door, closing door...
Each man knows what he is looking for.*

Joe Strummer's thirsty howl on "Sean Flynn", from The Clash's 1982 *Combat Rock* album, invoked the ghost of its vanished namesake. Today, Zalin "Zip" Grant is still trying to lay it to rest. A former Vietnam war correspondent for *Time* magazine, Zalin first began searching for his friend Sean on April 19, 1970, right after the photojournalist was captured by Communist guerrillas. Zalin returned to Cambodia again last year, determined to write the final chapter of his book, *The War And I: A 30-Year Search For Sean Flynn, Dana Stone And Other Missing Newsmen*.

"Everything is intensified in war," says Zalin, nowadays an irascible character, untidy and pock-marked, with long white hair that he tucks behind his ears. "Sex is better. Food is better. Drugs are better. You'd see someone get shot and you'd say, 'Hey, we're lucky guys. That won't happen to us.' But some of us, in the end, weren't so lucky. Like Sean."

Flynn and Dana Stone – a freelance cameraman on assignment with CBS – were captured by guerrillas while riding rented Honda motorcycles from Phnom Penh to a battlefield in Cambodia. Called the "Easy Riders" of the Western press corps in Saigon, Flynn and Stone were a pair of fast-living freelancers who hit the frontlines by bike or by hitch-hiking rides on Army and Marine helicopters.

Flynn was a stud, like his dad, and at the age of 29 a legend. He dropped out of acting – his first film was *Son Of Captain Blood*, a quickie sequel to dad's popular *Captain Blood* – and went to Vietnam to shoot pictures.

Stone was a former male stripper from San Francisco's Tenderloin who remade himself as a gung-ho lensman.



They are war journalism's rock gods, its Jim Morrison and Brian Jones, immortalised in Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and countless other books and magazine articles.

"Sean was a devil-may-care, swashbuckling kind of guy who was absolutely charming," says Walter Cronkite, former CBS anchorman and chairman of the International Committee To Free Journalists Held In South-east Asia. "But he gave me the impression of a guy very desperately trying to live up to his father's movie achievements."

The legend of big daddy Errol, international matinee idol and author of an autobiography that left little to the imagination entitled *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, dogged Sean. Some say that his father, who died of a heart attack aged just 50, obsessed him, and that he cultivated a death wish.

Others say he scoffed at the Errol legend. Indeed, Sean was a self-made man, an accomplished photographer, his work reproduced in books and magazines, most recently in *Requiem* edited by Vietnam war colleagues Horst Fass and Tim Page.

The disappearance of Flynn and Stone is one of the great mysteries of modern war journalism. Their bones have been almost as hotly pursued as the Titanic's hull. Louise Smizer Stone, the feisty wife of Dana, was the first to search for the boys. She lived with her



Left: last of the international playboys – “Easy Riders” Flynn (circled) and Stone leave Phnom Penh on their final assignment. Above: newsounds Stone and Flynn take a break ‘in country’. Right: end of the road – the hijacked car used as a roadblock by the Viet Cong to trap the pair



Called the ‘Easy Riders’ of the press corps, they hit the frontlines on rented motorcycles or hitched lifts on army helicopters

husband in Saigon and Danang, and she was in Phnom Penh when he disappeared.

“I took Louise up to Kampong Cham on the western bank of the Mekong River to track down reports that two Europeans had been seen in the area,” says Carl Robinson, who was an AP photographer based in Saigon and a close friend of the “Easy Riders”. “We weren’t able to verify the story. But looking back, it’s clear now that the reports were referring to our lost friends.”

It wasn’t until 1990, long after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, that it was safe to track down these reports, generated by American military intelligence and containing eyewitness sightings by local Cambodians. Tim Page, another close friend, led an expedition that year to Kampong Cham, a few hours northeast of Phnom Penh. It was filmed for Granada TV as the documentary *Danger At The Edge Of Town*. He also wrote the book *Derailed In Uncle Ho’s Victory Garden*

about the search, which ended in a banana grove where witnesses said the Khmer Rouge executed “the lads” by chopping off their heads with garden hoes. Page believes he has solved the mystery of Flynn and Stone, though he has no bones.

“My gut, my inner sense from talking to the Buddha, says I’ve got Flynn,” says Page, adding that he felt the presence of Flynn and Stone in Kampong Cham. “I go on passion and emotion and feeling and vibrations. It links all the other details, in my way of thinking. That’s the linkage, I don’t know if I can prove it.”

“Vibrations, my ass,” says Zalin Grant, who dismisses Page’s findings and the reports he based them on. “Neither one of these men (in the reports) wore glasses,” says Zalin. “And Page knows Stone was virtually blind without his glasses. Page ignores this, and he ignores other facts to suit his own purpose.”

In the reports, both men were also described as the same height, about six feet tall. Flynn, in actual fact, was much taller than Stone, by at least a foot – a difference that would be difficult to miss.

Grant and Page, who met on assignment in Saigon in 1965, are today on unfriendly terms. “*Page After Page* is too many pages,” says Zalin, of the war photographer’s celebrated autobiography.

“He’s squirrely, a real ferret,” says Page of Zip. →

→ “He’s got little sharp teeth and defends his hole in the ground like a rat.”

Though they have their own competing theories, they both agree that North Vietnamese units captured Flynn and Stone in Southern Cambodia and marched them north towards the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Hanoi. But the prisoners became a burden to the Vietnamese troops, who were constantly harassed by US bombers and invading troops, so they turned them over to the natives – the Khmer Rouge – who promptly killed them.

Zalin and Page insist the North Vietnamese did not kill captured journalists, that they always made friends and released them to spread positive propaganda. The only explanation for their certain execution is the ruthless Khmer Rouge.

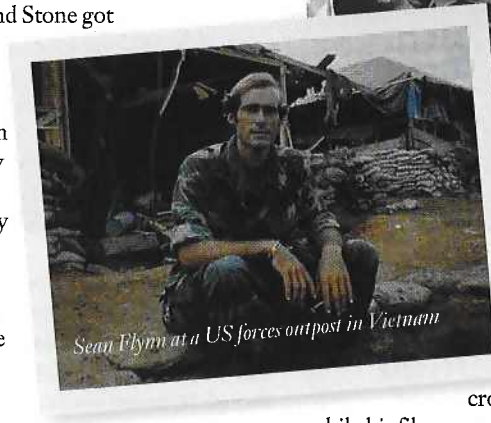
In Page’s version, Flynn and Stone got only as far as Kampong Cham province, about 150km as the crow flies – over jungle – north-east from their point of capture in Svay Rieng Province. Zalin, meanwhile, is convinced they went 250km north to Kratie before they were executed.

Working for the Cronkite committee, Zalin tracked the pair immediately after they disappeared in 1970 and returned to Cambodia three years later to follow up.

“Zalin was very brave going back while it was under the control of the Cambodian guerrillas,” says Cronkite. “It was a personal mission of his and we all appreciated his gallantry and his effort.”

But after 1975 and the rise of Pol Pot, he stayed away. In February 2001, Zalin returned and found Ban Poev and other key sources in Kratie. He went back there again just last year, meeting with a unit of the US Defence Department’s Joint Task Force For Full Accounting. The JTF annually goes to Cambodia in the dry season searching for the remains of MIAs and POWs. They chopper in dozens of men and truckloads of supply crates full of freeze-dried American food. This time, they came to help look for the lost journalists.

When Sean first arrived in Saigon in 1965, he moved into a flat Page shared with a rowdy gang of journalists at 47 Bui Thi Xuan Street. It was called Frankie’s Place after the houseboy who took care of the



Sean Flynn at a US forces outpost in Vietnam

building, cadged drugs for the tribe and was their in-house pimp. Sean chilled out between combat missions at Frankie’s, or he could be found having a mid-morning coffee and

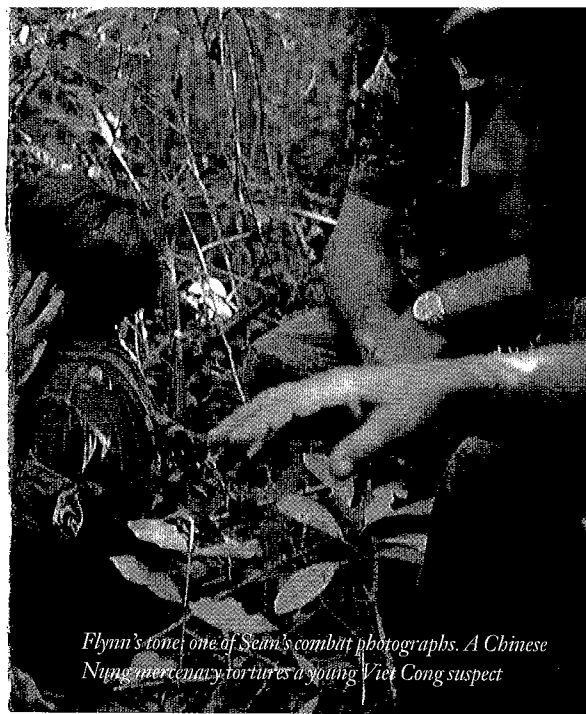
croissant at La Pagode on Tu Do Street, while his films appeared at a cinema down the block.

Sean was a local celebrity. He was tall, with long blond hair, sideburns and blue eyes; a stunning package that attracted everyone’s attention, especially girls working at the embassies and in the bars. The US military officers and grunts were happy to take him along on missions, thinking his glamour might rub off on them.

Later, in 1968 during the Tet Offensive, Flynn shared an apartment on Tu Do Street with Page, Stone, Perry Deane Young (a UPI reporter who later wrote the only book about the disappearance of Flynn and Stone, *Two Of The Missing*) and John Steinbeck IV, another famous man’s son and one of the founders of the alternative news syndication Dispatch News.

“The Tu Do Street pad was the place to hang out after work, a drop-in pad for Saigon’s ‘heads’, as opposed to its ‘boozers’,” says Carl Robinson. “Page would roll his famous ‘tampanellas’ – giant joints that resembled Tampax – and put on his music, always the latest, at full volume and entertain the regular stream of visitors.

“Dope would give the place a hyped-up buzz that



Flynn's tone; one of Sean's combat photographs. A Chinese Nung mercenary tortures a young Viet Cong suspect

'Going out on patrol with the grunts was a rush and by all accounts Flynn was not just armed with his camera'

could lead anywhere as the evening progressed," continues Robinson. "Page was the leader of the pack, he loved being the centre of attention. Flynn was calm and thoughtful, not saying very much. That's how he was when I first met him, sitting there in one of those high-backed rattan chairs. Just calmly watching. Stoned."

But there was another side to Flynn.

"Sean spent weekends shooting up the countryside," said a prominent US reporter who knew Flynn and Stone well in Vietnam, and requested anonymity. "It was a rush. Going out on patrol with the grunts. And he was not going just armed with a camera, by all accounts."

Correspondents were allowed to carry pistols and fire weapons in self defence under the Geneva Code without being classified as enemy combatants, but Flynn may have gone too far.

"Sean loved guns from the time he was a boy," says Perry Deane Young. "He travelled all over the world with all kinds of weapons quite freely - Uzis, you name it. He had enough C-4 plastique charges in

our lockers in Saigon and Danang to blow up a village."

He once told a reporter during a radio interview that he "grooved on the danger" in Vietnam.

"You didn't want him to invite you on a mission he was going on," says Cronkite, who reported from Saigon frequently. "You would have found it very embarrassing to have to say no, you were afraid. People made a lot of excuses to keep from going out with him."

In one well-publicised episode, Flynn, with a grenade in his hand, led a Special Operations charge of a Viet Cong-held hill. He allegedly killed one of the enemy. Stone was there. He photographed Flynn taking the hill.

"Flynn did kill a lot of 'the enemy'," says Young.

And, apparently, the enemy got back at him.

A soldier's deepest fear is to be killed days before finishing a tour of duty. Flynn and Stone were just about to split the war. Flynn had plans to settle in Bali with an Indonesian girlfriend. Stone had been angling for a new job with CBS that might take him and his young wife, Louise, around the world. But Flynn and Stone were war junkies, "groovin' on the danger". They couldn't go cold turkey. They took one more assignment.

Unfortunately, there were no US Army troops to protect them while they "grooved" in Cambodia. The boys were on their own, on two small motorcycles, cruising to a porous, bloody battlefield where invading North Vietnamese troops and Khmer Rouge were trading pot shots with the Cambodian Army. Looking for a story, they sped down a stretch of lonely country road, past a North Vietnamese roadblock and vanished.

Page recently discovered long lost film-footage of the pair at the roadblock.

"Flynn rides towards the camera and pops a wheelie," says Page. "And then goes down the road again toward the ambush."

He was never seen again. ■

Yeah, having a beer, watching a Hitler documentary



Link