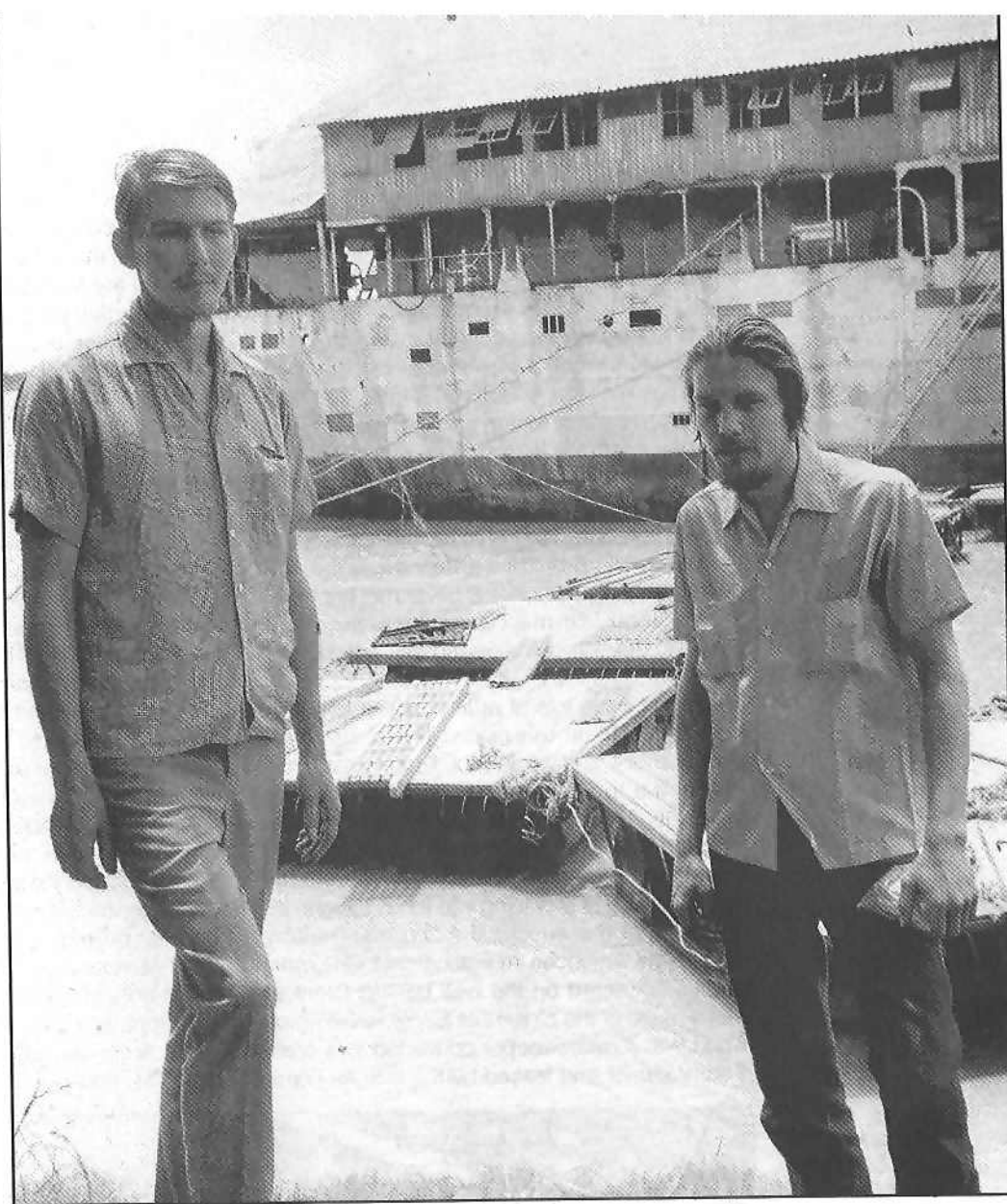


**McKay (left) and Alvin Glatkowski on July 3, 1970, in front of the Mekong River prison ship where they were held, near Phnom Penh.**



## The Last Mutineer

Clyde McKay told the world that his actions would inspire a wave of revolts against the Vietnam War. That wave never came, at least not in his time, not during his war.

**By Richard Linnett and Roberto Loiederman**

A brilliant white nylon tent was pitched in a corner of the San Jacinto Valley Cemetery, the tarp sides hitched up to allow in cool Santa Ana winds, keeping about three dozen people comfortable. They were gathered to pay their last respects to a man who had disappeared more than three decades ago in Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Under the canopy there was a small boxlike casket holding cremated remains, identified last year by the U.S. military as those of Clyde William McKay Jr. On an easel near the casket was a large color photo of McKay—Billy to his family—walking toward the camera, in his early twenties, handsome, tall, blondish, with piercing dark eyes.

“It has been a long time of silent grieving, which makes this moment in time so much more precious,” eulogized a woman who bore a resemblance to the charismatic young man in the photo—at least to what Billy McKay would have looked like had he lived today; he would have been 60. This was McKay’s sister, Lois Basiger, 54. She spoke in a trembling voice, and frequently glanced up from her prepared comments at two women in the front row. One was her older sister, Kerry Burrell, who had given military investigators a crucial blood sample used in the DNA match of McKay’s remains. The other, in a floral-print dress, was a striking presence, with gray hair and dark eyes. This was McKay’s

mother, Jean Triplett, nearly 80 years old. She was the one who most resembled her son, and, like him, seemed to come from another place and time.

She was of the second generation of upstanding Scotch-Irish farmers and preachers who had settled Hemet, California, and nourished it with faith and hard work, planting orchards and carving dairy farms out of arid lands. Today there are hardly any orchards or farms in Hemet, and hardly any members of McKay's family; most of them now lie around Billy, in more than a dozen graves.

"We are together now not to grieve," his sister Lois continued, "but to give thanks for Billy's life. He was someone special to each of us, whether he was a son, a brother, a nephew, a friend, a neighbor ... or an uncle you never met but heard stories about. Or maybe you were first, introduced to Billy through a newspaper article."

There had been lots of articles about Billy, and many reports on television. The news about McKay broke so fast, in fact, that Walter Cronkite, at the top of the *CBS Evening News* on March 16, 1970, stumbled over his words as he read the copy that was rushed to him on camera. "One of the more bizarre stories from the high seas is slowly coming into focus tonight. It's the case of the successful two-man mutiny aboard the American munitions ship *Columbia Eagle*." Projected on the wall behind Cronkite was a photo of the *Columbia Eagle*, an old gray World War II minesweeper converted to a commercial carrier and leased by the U.S. Air Force

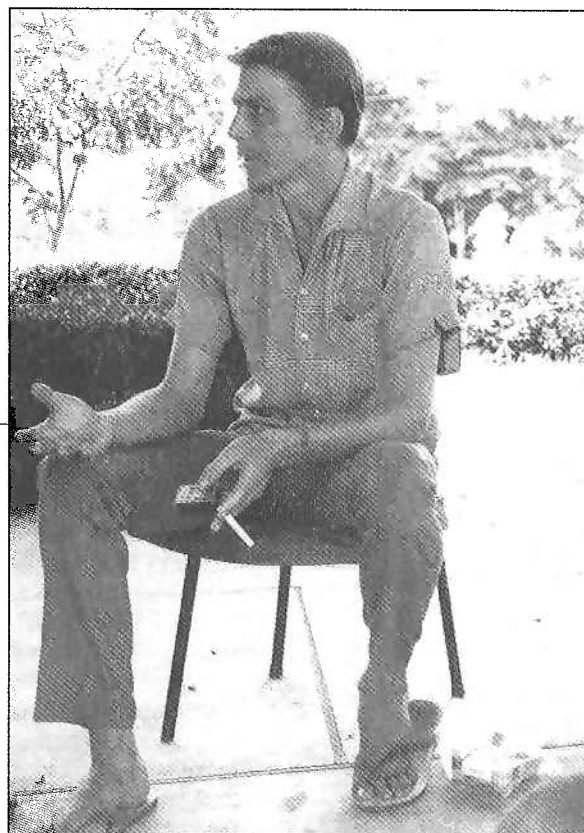
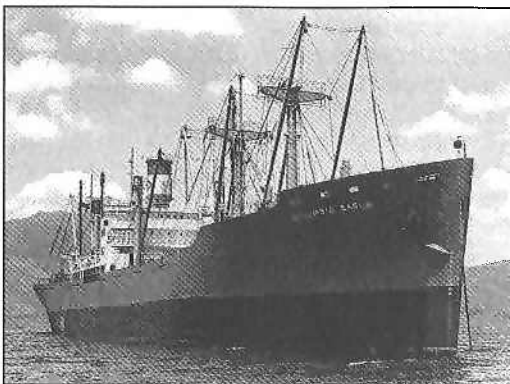
to run cargo between the States and Southeast Asia—what was then called "the zone," as in war zone. Cronkite identified McKay, then 25, as one of the mutineers, and characterized him as being against the war in Vietnam.

During the following days and months, newspapers carried pictures of McKay, with the same smile and dark eyes of the framed photo above his casket. He looked old beyond his years, as if he already knew what lay ahead.

The *Columbia Eagle* had taken a berth at Pier 245J in Long Beach Harbor, California, on February 17, 1970, after a trip down the coast from Port Chicago, a naval ammunition base at the mouth of the Sacramento River on San Francisco Bay. Port Chicago was the site of an explosion in July 1944 that killed 320 men, two-thirds of them black stevedores who loaded vessels with munitions. The facility had been rebuilt, and since the beginning of the war in Vietnam, it had been a busy port again, devoted exclusively to weapons cargo.

When the *Eagle* arrived in Long Beach, her manifest listed a variety of warheads picked up in Port Chicago. The shipments packed into crates in her holds included 90mm, 20mm, and 40mm bomb cartridges, 66mm rockets, dummy cartridges, rocket mortars, nose rockets, depth charges, propeller assemblies for torpedoes, ammo components, Hawk missiles, small arms, and air-defense guided missiles. She had about 1,750 tons of matériel below decks, much of it from American Electric, Inc., of La Mirada, California, and stamped with labels that read

**This page, clockwise from top left: Captain Swann talks to the press, April 8, 1970; the hijackers, guarded by a Cambodian officer, talk to the press; the *Columbia Eagle* at anchor in Subic Bay, April 1970.**



NAPALM B BATCH, NUMBER 840 M.F.D. 717 LB. Later, crates filled with tons of fuses and igniters would be loaded onto the *Eagle's* decks. It was dangerous to put igniters and fuses in the cargo holds next to the bombs, so their loading had to be conducted out in the harbor, far enough from the piers to minimize catastrophe should there be an accident.

The *Eagle* was on what was called a "bonus run" because the men who worked on her earned hazardous-duty pay. From 1965 onward, most cargo going to Vietnam was carried on American merchant vessels (i.e., civilian ships with civilian crews) on Military Sealift Command charter. In the late 1960s, there were not enough seamen available, so the union halls made seamen out of anyone they could. Says Jerry Brown, a former official of the Seafarers International Union, "You should have seen some of the guys we had on ships back then." The unions sent out anyone who could meet the rock-bottom requirements, and rarely, if ever, checked people's pasts.

Today, merchant seamen are subject to background checks and drug screening before they are allowed to ship out on bonus runs. According to Jordan Biscardo, editor of the SIU newspaper, there are more than 200 private merchant ships sailing with munitions and matériel to Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Middle East destinations. "We just moved the Big Red One, the First Infantry Division," said Biscardo not long ago. "We moved all the stuff that they needed." After a long lull for U.S. merchant shipping, war in Afghanistan and Iraq has generated lots of

activity in union hiring halls, reviving ports like Long Beach, California, and creating opportunities for young men with few skills. "It's certainly keeping the halls empty," said Biscardo, meaning that men are shipping out as soon as they show up. "And none of our ships are sailing short of men."

Clyde McKay was one of a number of young men with little skill but a taste for adventure who signed on as merchant crew during Vietnam. He'd grown up on or near military bases, rarely saw his father (a U.S. Army noncom), and got his Merchant Marine papers at 19. On one trip in 1966, he'd jumped ship in the East African port of Djibouti and joined the French Foreign Legion for four months, fighting in Somalia. After dropping out of the Legion, he spent eight and a half months in a Barcelona prison, charged with selling marijuana, and another four months in the same jail, charged with being an accessory (as a passenger) in a hit-and-run accident that had killed a policeman. McKay's family sent him money for a lawyer, who eventually got him off.

When McKay returned home, he shipped out almost immediately on ammo vessels to Vietnamese ports like Saigon, Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Qui Nhon, and what he saw and heard about—the destruction of villages and people and the "pacification" of an alien culture halfway round the world—radically changed him. He felt guilty about delivering the bombs and napalm that destroyed lives. Later, in a letter to his mother, written while he was imprisoned in Cambodia following the *Columbia Eagle* mutiny, McKay wrote, "If I had not played a part, however small, in opposing the war machine, I would live in inner torment. I had to follow the dictates of my conscience, and when the U.S. government acts against God and humanity, I'm bound to oppose it."

McKay returned home at Christmastime 1969. He exchanged all the money in his bank account for gold pieces and bought a pistol.

In February 1970, carrying his gun and a dog-eared paperback of the diaries of Che Guevara, McKay went to the SIU hiring hall in Long Beach looking for a ship. The antiwar movement in the United States was turning a corner. Some weeks



**Larry Humphrey (above) in Phnom Penh, September 12, 1970; Alvin Glatkowski (left) surrenders to federal authorities at the American Embassy in Phnom Penh, December 15, 1970.**

later, on March 6 in New York City's Greenwich Village, three young members of the Weather Underground blew themselves up while building a bomb intended for military officers and their wives and girlfriends at a dance at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Two months later, on May 4, four young protestors were shot dead and nine wounded by National Guardsmen at Kent State University in Ohio. The Summer of Love was freezing over.

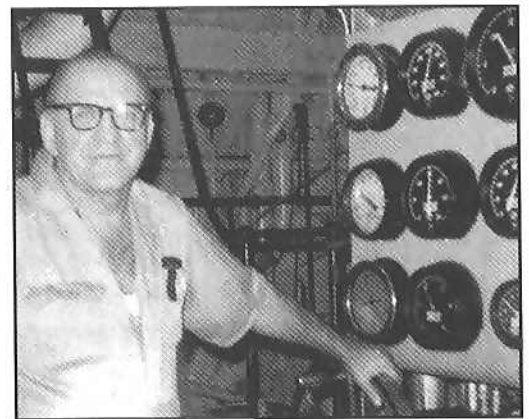
Twenty-year-old Alvin L. Glatkowski had entered the SIU hall that February day too. He wasn't carrying a gun, a book, or an agenda. He was looking for an escape. His teenage wife was pregnant. They were living in her parents' detached garage in a Long Beach suburb, and Glatkowski barely made enough money pumping gas to pay the rent. He still had his earlier-acquired seaman's papers, and after arguing with his wife and his mother-in-law about finances, he stormed out of the garage and went down to the docks. He was hoping to make some fast money on what was called a romance run down to South America and back.

him to join him, showing Glatkowski his gun and confiding that his intention was to stop a shipment of napalm by force. Glatkowski was reluctant, but finally gave in.

They caught jobs on the *Columbia Eagle*. As the ship crossed the Pacific, they met every day on the fantail, where they devised a plan to hijack the ship and take it to Cambodia, a neutral country. They bought a second pistol, a Walther P38, when the *Eagle* refueled in the Philippines. Finally, on March 14, as the ship was rounding the coast of Vietnam, they loaded their weapons and made their way to the captain's deck.

Captain Donald O'Bannon Swann, 51, was congenial to his men, but, like most skippers of merchant vessels, he simply wanted to get his job done with as little hassle as possible. He found himself that afternoon in his bathrobe and slippers facing two determined young crewmen with guns. "This is a mutiny," said McKay, the gun shaking in his hand. "We don't want to kill anyone, but we are nervous and these weapons have hair triggers, so be careful and do exactly

**Captain Swann and Commander Wayne Caldwell, commanding officer of the U.S. Coast Guard, April 1970; Walter Drabina (far right), *Columbia Eagle's* chief engineer, April 1970.**



According to Glatkowski, who survived the mutiny, he and McKay met in the SIU hall. While most of the other men in the hall supported the war in Vietnam, some younger sailors like himself and McKay were against it, and the two of them shared their thoughts on the war as they waited for a ship. Glatkowski himself came from a Navy family in Norfolk, Virginia. His stepfather was a career petty officer. On his own, Glatkowski had procured his seaman's papers and caught a few bonus runs to Vietnam. His experiences had been similar to McKay's: He saw the brutal effects of war firsthand, especially the cruelty of napalm, and it angered him. "Now they're using a bomb called napalm," Glatkowski later wrote. "It sticks to the skin and burns and there's no way to get it off. It mutilates innocent people, children. We carry it over in ships."

He moved to the West Coast, participated in antiwar demonstrations, met a girl, got married after she became pregnant, and tried to make a go of it on the beach. He was determined not to take another bonus run, but McKay pleaded with

as I tell you. First off, this cargo is not going to reach its destination." He said that he and Glatkowski were seizing the ship to stop the bombs from being used against innocent women and children in Vietnam. McKay then lied to the captain, claiming they had planted their own live bomb onboard and would detonate it unless the captain ordered his men to abandon ship.

"I was convinced that these men were under the influence of some kind of drug," Swann later told government investigators. He tried talking them out of it, but in the end, he put up no resistance. The captain called for the "Abandon ship!" Twenty-four crewmen scrambled to the lifeboats and were left at sea. They were rescued seven hours later by a passing merchant ship. Fifteen men, including its captain, stayed behind on the *Columbia Eagle*. McKay and Glatkowski forced Swann to steer the ship to Cambodia. Thirty-six hours later, after being pursued by U.S. Coast Guard destroyers under orders from the Pentagon and the National Security Council, the ship slipped into Cambodian waters.

# Mutineer

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When the mutineers finally arrived in Cambodia, officials of Prince Norodom Sihanouk's government treated them like heroes. On their second day ashore, things changed. Cambodian General Lon Nol led a coup against Sihanouk, allegedly with the assistance of U.S. intelligence agencies, which reportedly wanted the prince removed after he refused to let the Pentagon covertly bomb Vietcong sanctuaries in his country. It was at this time that a rumor quickly spread, finding its way into the French newspaper *Le Monde*, and, later, into Sihanouk's autobiography, that McKay was really a CIA agent and that the mutiny was not a mutiny at all but an elaborate American plot to bring arms to the insurgents who overthrew Sihanouk.

Partly because of the rumor, Cambodian officials didn't know what to do with McKay and Glatkowski. They did not want to turn them over to the United States, fearing that would give the impression that Lon Nol was working with the CIA. So they arrested the mutineers and placed them in a prison ship on the Mekong River. McKay and Glatkowski found themselves sharing a cell with

another American, Larry Humphrey, a U.S. Army deserter who had been picked up in Cambodia after having abandoned his post at a base in Thailand. Spending endless days on the stifling prison ship, Glatkowski became delusional, suffered a breakdown, and was moved to a mental hospital in the suburbs of Phnom Penh, where he attempted to kill himself.

International journalists in Cambodia had publicized the poor conditions on the prison ship, and the Americans were moved into decent quarters in Phnom Penh. They received visitors, including Louise Stone, the wife of Dana Stone, a freelance combat photographer who had disappeared in the countryside with fellow news cameraman Sean Flynn, son of actor Errol Flynn. When Flynn and Stone were captured by Communist guerrillas in April while on assignment, the world took notice. A group of prominent politicians and journalists, among them Walter Cronkite, petitioned the North Vietnamese for Flynn's release.

Louise Stone, meanwhile, was in Phnom Penh looking for someone to help locate her husband. She found eager accessories in McKay and Humphrey. She advised the two men to escape and seek out the Khmer Rouge, and through them, find her husband.

She advised them to say they were war correspondents in order to avoid being harmed. Some have suggested that she gave McKay money to bribe their guards and that she helped furnish the two Americans with a getaway vehicle.

Glatkowski has said that, before they escaped, McKay said he planned to join the Khmer Rouge, as he had once joined the French Foreign Legion—but in this case he would become a guerrilla instead of a mercenary defending imperialism. At the time, not much was known about the Khmer Rouge—the Cambodian Communists—other than that they called themselves liberators. McKay invited Glatkowski to join the mission. Glatkowski refused. He gave McKay a parting gift, a camera he had taken from the *Eagle*.

On October 29, 1970, McKay and Humphrey, carrying the camera as a prop in their guise as journalists, escaped their guards on a motorbike, taking a road that led to Kampong Cham province, the heart of Khmer Rouge territory. Glatkowski went in the opposite direction, back toward home and his wife, who had given birth to a boy while he was on the prison ship. He turned himself in to the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh, was flown under armed escort back to the States, and stood trial for mutiny on the high seas. His lawyers copped a plea and he was sentenced to ten years in Lompoc prison in California.

On October 20, 2004, Alvin Glatkowski returned to Cambodia for the first time since the mutiny. Along with his 19-year-old son, he visited the mental hospital outside of Phnom Penh, where he had attempted suicide. He also made the difficult journey through the countryside to Thnol Bei Met, where McKay's remains were found. Glatkowski said, "I want to close a door in my life, and my son wants to be with me."

What about McKay and Humphrey?

CIA and Department of Defense MIA documents from the late seventies report that Cambodian eyewitnesses saw two Americans who fit McKay and Humphrey's descriptions in the custody of the Khmer Rouge in Kampong Cham province in 1971. They were loosely guarded, not held in compounds like other Khmer Rouge captives. For a long time, however, these two Americans were believed to be Sean Flynn and Dana Stone, a theory aggressively pushed by one of Flynn and Stone's old friends, Tim Page, another combat photographer with a larger-than-life reputation, the model for Dennis Hopper's drug-addled cameraman in *Apocalypse Now*. Page and Flynn were known as the "easy riders" of the Western press corps in Vietnam. They smoked lots of dope, rode bikes, and were part of a hard-driving group of freelancers who were not in-

