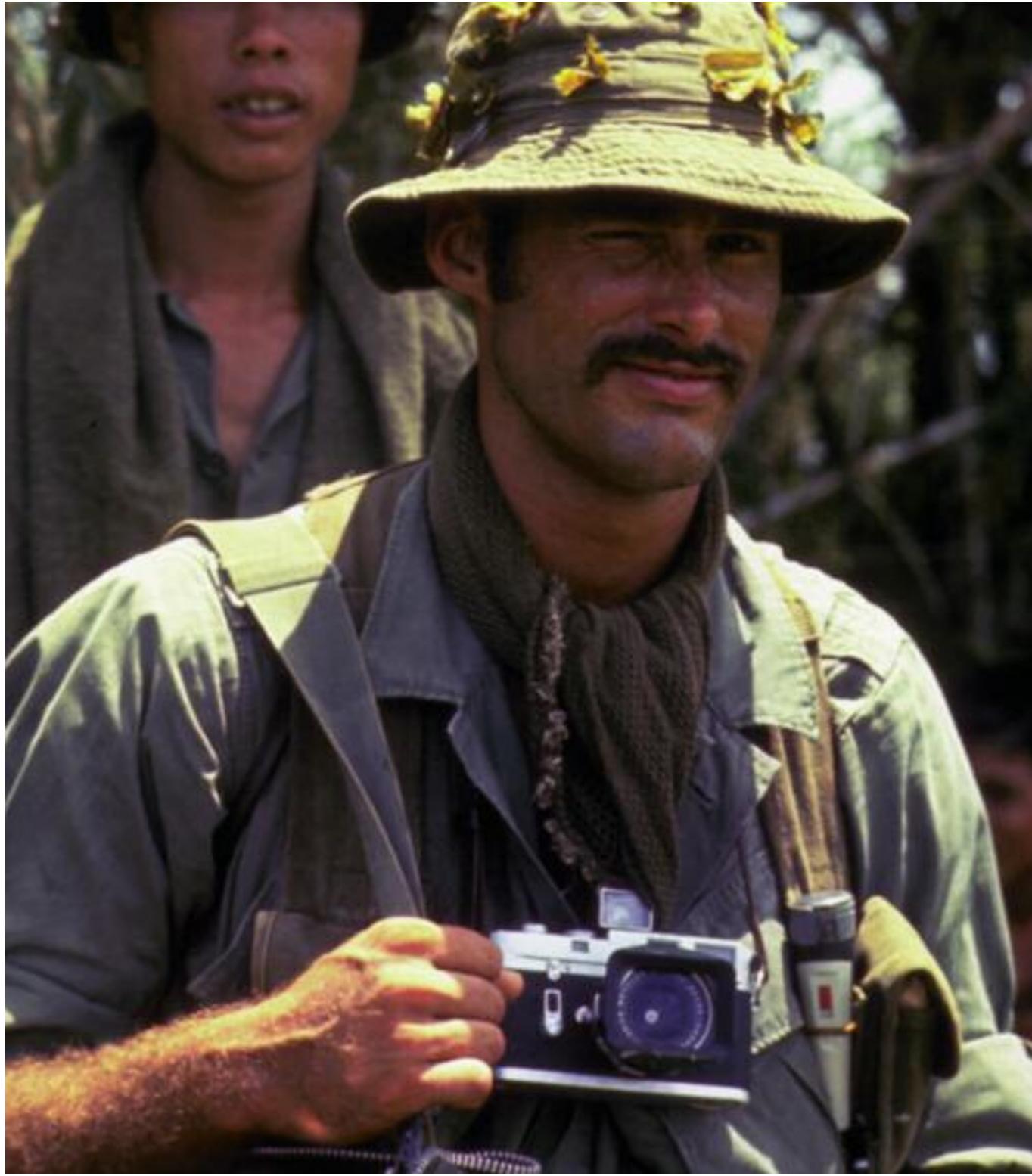


Still Desperately Seeking Sean



Four decades later, iconoclastic photographer Tim Page and the U.S. military find themselves playing the same tune in the search for remains of Sean Flynn BY RICHARD LINNETT

The freelance war photographer who uncompromisingly documented the bloody grind of the average GI in Vietnam, taking innumerable uncalculated risks (wounded five times in battle, half his brain blown out the last time) while often stoned on the job and inspiring author and screenwriter Michael Herr to create the whacked-out lens man played by Dennis Hopper in *Apocalypse Now*, is indeed finally mellowing. Even the U.S. brass now considers this legendary stone-cold freak—Tim Page—a friend and “the voice of reason.” Tim Page and the U.S. military are now on the same page.

“*Inshallah*, can you imagine that?” proclaimed Page at a friend’s house in Phnom Penh last April, rolling a doobie on a handwritten manuscript of *Bones of Contention*, his latest book now in progress. The 66-year-old has added a few Islamic expressions to his patter, having spent time recently on assignment in Afghanistan. He lights up and reflects on his newly minted cred. “The cavalry considers me the voice of reason.” He draws heavily on his smoke. “How unreasonable is that?”

Not very. Page has been singing “Johnny comes marching home again” in a manner of speaking, praising the U.S. military, in particular his former adversary, the Joint Prisoner of War, Missing in Action Command, aka JPAC, the organization responsible for recovering the remains of fallen soldiers. Over the years—20 of them to be exact—Page had been infuriating JPAC by poking around their sandbox, conducting independent searches for the remains of his old friend, fellow war photographer Sean Flynn, the son of silver screen legend Errol Flynn.

Page, an Englishman who now resides in Australia, and his pals Flynn and Dana Stone, another freelance cameraman, are best known as the “lunatic” journalists and “bad, dope-smoking cats” of Michael Herr’s Vietnam classic *Dispatches*. Flynn was the handsome one; a stunning package fawned over by men and women alike. He had abandoned a middling career as an actor—his first film was *Son of Captain Blood*, a knock-off sequel to his father’s classic *Captain Blood*—in order to kick start a new life in Vietnam

ON ASSIGNMENT Sean Flynn, whose photographs appeared in *Paris Match*, *Time* and other publications, joins ARVN Rangers on a sweep north of Tam Ky in 1967, using a Leica M3 with 28mm lens and a Philips tape recorder.



SHOOTING STILL Tim Page, armed with his Canons, in Ho Chi Minh City last April during a reunion of journalists.

as a combat photographer.

“Sean Flynn was a beautiful guy and a talented character,” said Joseph Galloway, the fabled UPI correspondent who roomed for a while with Flynn in Saigon during the war. “And for him to go missing like that, it caused a great stir among the press. Many of his old friends still question what exactly happened to him.”

Flynn and Stone disappeared in April 1970 while riding motorcycles together to cover the battlefield in Cambodia. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, they were captured by Viet Cong and then turned over to the Khmer Rouge, who executed them. At the time, Page was still recovering after he had been severely wounded a year earlier when shrapnel

from a land mine pierced his skull, resulting in serious brain injuries.

“He was a pain in the ass, digging on his own,” a longtime JPAC employee who requested anonymity told me when I asked him recently about Page. “Now suddenly he’s on our side. Nothing wrong with that, just wish he had his hallelujah moment a lot earlier.”

Air Force Lt. Col. Wayne Perry, a spokesperson for JPAC who has worked with Page, was happy to go on the record about his new friend. “I find Tim Page to be one of those captivating individuals that can take you on a journey filled with ups and downs and outright madness,” Perry enthused. “Professionally, I found him to be forthright, knowledgeable and dedicated to the business of finding missing Americans. He has provided us with insight, information and good humor.”

Strangely, the new rapport between the military and the madman was made possible by a 29-year-old Australian who has described himself on Facebook as a fashion designer, model, musician and bodyguard. Dave Macmillan upstaged Page last spring when he secretly dug up some bones in a remote Cambodian location on March 14 and then announced to the world that he had finally found Sean Flynn.

A vehement Page said of Macmillan shortly afterward: “We can’t



COLD CASE A man who had been a messenger boy for the Khmer Rouge in 1970 examines photos of Sean Flynn and Dana Stone in the village of Pkhar Daung in 2009. The village is near a hospital where Page claims some evidence suggests that Flynn was possibly given a lethal injection in April 1970.

give him any oxygen. He's desecrated the site. He went in with a backhoe. You can't do that. There's a method to it. You have to carefully scrape out the dirt layer by layer and screen the material, the way JPAC does it. There's a science to it and JPAC are the scientists."

The back-story here is that Macmillan was once a devotee and assistant to Page, who shared information with his protégé about a possible location for Flynn's remains. According to Page, Macmillan betrayed him. "He's a head case," said Page.

I met Macmillan in a Phnom Penh riverfront café last April. He's young, tattooed and highly strung. He was in the company of Keith Rotheram, a 60-year-old Errol Flynn fan and look-alike, complete with a pencil moustache, who owns a bar in Cambodia called Flynn's. Macmillan denied betraying his mentor and explained in subsequent email correspondence that he had been hired by Page to do research for *Bones of Contention* and that Page reneged on payment. Macmillan said he then took the information he had gathered, contacted Flynn's stepsister, Rory Flynn Amir, who lives in North Carolina, and received her blessing and some funding for a "Page-less" recovery. Rotheram also helped bankroll the adventure, and made news by announcing that they would sell their story "to the highest bidder." While Macmillan held onto their macabre booty for a few days, allegedly to do some DNA testing of their

own before turning it in, Page steamed, "I'd wager they put the bloody bones on display above the bar."

When the remains were finally turned over to the U.S. Embassy on March 17, 2010, the military was none too happy. A JPAC spokesperson characterized Macmillan's dig as "amateur" in press reports, chastised him for using a backhoe or excavator and issued a statement: "The remains are badly fragmented due to the manner in which they were recovered." JPAC then sent a team to the site to investigate on April 8. When Page showed up, he was at first turned back by Cambodian police. Later, on April 12, he was invited to join in a mopping-up operation, digging where Macmillan had dug, also ironically using a mechanical excavator. The team found a few small bone fragments that were sent to the lab for testing along with Macmillan's set. An initial assessment by a former JPAC investigator who wishes to remain anonymous indicated the dental work appeared to be of "European origin, or belongs to an older Westerner."

At this point, Page began rallying public opinion in the press against the two diggers, whom he began calling collectively "the ferals," as in feral cats. "They have no respect for the dead."

He also sought the support of the "Vietnam Old Hacks," a group of surviving war correspondents who keep in touch through an

eponymously named Google social network. The Old Hacks closed ranks, railing against the "grave robbers" in news interviews and in their email dispatches and, like Page, complimenting "the dedicated professionals from JPAC."

Page insists Flynn was like a brother to him and says this is why he continues his quixotic search. Critics contend Page's obsession is selfish; that his quest has nothing to do with paying respects to Flynn or Stone and everything to do with satisfying his own need to relive his youth. For while the Old Hacks like Page grow older, many pushing 70 now, Flynn and Stone—gone at age 29 and 30 respectively—remain forever young. Their images are frozen in time, straddling Honda motorcycles in a famous series of photos—the last shots taken of them—by photojournalist Terry Khoo (who was himself killed by the North Vietnamese while covering the siege of Quang Tri in 1972) in Phnom Penh, on their way to the front.

Page led his first search for "the lads" in 1990 to the remote Cambodian village of Bei Mat in Kampong Cham province, which at the time was crawling with former Khmer Rouge guerrillas turned bandits. It was a dangerous trip that took Page back into his element. His search was made into the documentary for Granada TV, *Danger at the Edge of Town*. He also wrote about the trip in his 1995 book *Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden*. At the time, Page believed he had solved the mystery of Flynn and Stone.

The remains that he found at Bei Mat in 1990, however, proved to be of Clyde McKay, another American killed by the Khmer Rouge. That's how I first met Page. Our paths crossed in 1999, when I was researching the whereabouts of McKay for my book *The Eagle Mutiny*, co-written with Roberto Loiederman. McKay had been on the run in Cambodia after orchestrating an antiwar mutiny on a U.S. munitions ship carrying napalm to the war.

In Phnom Penh last spring, Page confided to me: "*Bones of Contention* is my mea-culpa. I will fess up to the McKay confusion. And now I have to add a chapter on the ferals. It's a circus isn't it? You can't dream up this insanity."

Page had traveled to Cambodia for two reasons; he was working damage control on *l'affaire feral* and joining

a reunion of journalists commemorating the 40th anniversary of what is being called the Cambodian War (1970-1975), a sideshow of the war in Vietnam. Billed as the "first and last reunion of a unique band of brothers," the event was organized by Chhang Song, a former press officer of wartime Cambodian strongman Lon Nol, and Carl Robinson, a former Associated Press combat reporter and photo editor.

Traveling with Page was his partner and Australian filmmaker Marianne Harris and the American actor George Hamilton, who was attending the gathering as a childhood friend of Sean Flynn. Hamilton was, as Page put it, "going full Cambo" by not shaving,



PHOTO BY TERRY KHOO

LAST RIDE Fellow photographer Terry Khoo captures freelancers Sean Flynn (left) and Dana Stone astride their red Honda motorcycles as they pull out of Phnom Penh for Khmer Rouge-held territory on April 6, 1970.

Page Turners

PHOTOJOURNALIST TIM PAGE has authored a number of celebrated books about his Vietnam War and postwar experiences and the craft of wartime photojournalism. More about Page and his Vietnam images can be found at timpageimage.com.au.

- Tim Page's Nam (1983)
- Sri Lanka (1984)
- Ten Years After: Vietnam Today (1987)
- Page after Page: Memoirs of a War-Torn Photographer (1988)
- Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden (1995)
- Mid Term Report (1995)
- Requiem (1997)
- The Mindful Moment (2001)



staying in a modest \$50 a night hotel and traveling by *tuk-tuk*—a modified motorcycle pulling what Hamilton took to calling a “chariot.” Shabby Phnom Penh is downmarket for someone with Hamilton’s jetsetter bonafides, but his self-effacing irony fit right into the incongruity of the scene. “I don’t get noticed much,” Hamilton confessed, “but a few times people have pulled me aside and asked if I was George Clooney. That is flattering. A real compliment.”

The Cambodia reunion was a joyous but also somber affair. Along with Flynn and Stone, 35 other journalists were killed during the five-year war there, more than in Vietnam.

The events were book ended by a pair of commemorative ceremonies: the planting of a memorial Boddhi tree at the location of a massacre of journalists in a village south of the city, and the dedication of a Phnom Penh memorial to all of the fallen journalists. In between, reporters traded war stories over drinks at Cantina, a Phnom Penh riverfront restaurant otherwise known as Hurley’s. Owned by *ex-Phnom Penh Post* reporter Hurley Scroggins, it is a favorite haunt for local and visiting journalists like Al Rockoff, the photographer played by John Malkovich in the movie *The Killing Fields*, and Page, who, while amusing drinkers with his story of the ferrets, was seemingly resigned to the fact that Macmillan had found something: “Possibly a Westerner, which could mean any of the dozen reporters who were murdered by the KR at that location,” he said.

On the final night of the reunion, there was a cocktail party



PAYING TRIBUTE Actor George Hamilton, who was a friend of Sean Flynn, travels in Phnom Penh in April 2010 via *tuk-tuk*—which he took to referring to as “my chariot”—for ceremonies honoring journalists killed in Cambodia.

hosted by U.S. Ambassador Carol Rodley at the ambassador’s residence, located next door to Prime Minister Hun Sen’s palace. The house was abuzz with U.S. military officials. The wife of the embassy’s military attaché asked me: “So, who is Tim Page? I was told that I must meet him.” Obliging, I escorted her to the patio where Page was holding court poolside.

He was engaged in an animated conversation about the ferrets with a group of military men, including Johnie E. Webb, JPAC’s deputy to the commander for public relations and legislative affairs. A big man in girth and seniority, Webb has been with the organization longer than anyone else, since 1975. He was listening intently to Page and nodding in agreement.

Later, Page pulled me aside, all lit up, perhaps from weed or adrenalin or a combination. He could barely contain himself as he whispered: “Johnie Webb just gave me an exclusive. JPAC has preliminary results on the ferret’s bones. *Negativo!* They’re indigenous.”

As a broad grin spread across his face, like one bad, dope-smoking cat, Page flicked an ash from his cigarette and proclaimed, “*Inshallah*, the search continues!”

As the guests departed the ambassador’s residence that night, Page fondly gazed upon the gray-haired, stooped tribe of former wartime daredevils and reflected. “This may be the last time we see each other,” he said. “That’s why we called this our first and last reunion. We’re getting old, dropping like flies.” Page watched as Chhang Song, the host of the reunion, struggled to climb into a tour bus. “I really worry about Chhang,” he said. “His health is not good.”

Indeed, a few months later, Chhang Song suffered a stroke at his home in California. He survived, but barely. And then in September, back in Hanoi to attend a photography workshop, Page himself collapsed and had to be air-evacuated to a hospital in Bangkok, Thailand. (One old colleague ruefully commented that learning the oft-wounded Page being medevaced out of Vietnam was “like déjà vu all over again.”)

Surgeons at Bangkok’s Bumrungrad Hospital not only discovered Page had broken his pelvis, but also found he was walking around with a literally heart-stopping trifecta: three clogged arteries that would have killed him had they not been detected. In fact, he recalled, he had not been feeling well lately and tests showed that he had already suffered a small heart attack a few weeks before. His arteries were successfully stented, and doctors bound two broken parts of his pelvis together with a metal plate, yet another dish in the cupboard, adding to the plastic plate already in his skull



FRIEND INDEED After being wounded in the head by grenade fragments in Da Nang on May 22, 1966, a bloodied Tim Page is loaded into an ambulance by Sean Flynn (right) and Marine Major Michael Styles.

after his last war wounds were repaired in 1969.

“I got nuts and bolts and bits of the Brooklyn Bridge holding me together now,” he said to me in a phone call from his hospital room in October, his humor intact. “I was a dead man walking, holding hands with the widow maker.”

Page has cheated death so many times, his colleagues were confident he would pull through once more. “As I’ve said before, Page will outlive us all,” declared Jim Caccavo, former combat photographer with *Newsweek*, in an email to fellow Old Hacks.

Looking on the bright side, Page told me: “It’s all worked out. I’m healthier now. The doctors fixed me up. I can continue my work in much better shape than before.” And yes, he plans to con-

tinue searching for Flynn. “First thing, I’m going to get into the archives in Hanoi, that’s where the answer is,” he said and then excused himself; a nurse had arrived to take him to his first physical therapy session.

“I have lived to see another day, mate.” ☆

Richard Linnett is a journalist and co-author of The Eagle Mutiny. He was the consulting producer on The Disappearance of McKinley Nolan, a documentary about the search for a U.S. Army defector in Vietnam, based on his reporting and directed by Henry Corra and produced by Danny Glover. He also reported on Zalin Grant’s search for Sean Flynn in 2002 (richardlinnett.wordpress.com).