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Survivors of Kissinger's Secret War in Cambodia Reveal Unreported Mass Killings

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At the end of a dusty path snaking through rice paddies lives a woman who survived multiple U.S. airstrikes as a child.

Round-faced and just over 5 feet tall in plastic sandals, Meas Lorn lost an older brother to a helicopter gunship attack and an uncle and cousins to artillery fire. For decades, one question haunted her: "I still wonder why those aircraft always attacked in this area. Why did they drop bombs here?"

The U.S. carpet bombing of Cambodia between 1969 and 1973 has been well documented, but its architect, former national security adviser and Secretary of State **Henry Kissinger**, who will turn 100 on Saturday, bears responsibility for more violence than has been previously reported. An investigation by The Intercept provides evidence of previously unreported attacks that killed or wounded hundreds of Cambodian civilians during Kissinger's tenure in the White House. When questioned about his culpability for these deaths, Kissinger responded with sarcasm and refused to provide answers.

An exclusive archive of formerly classified U.S. military documents — assembled from the files of a secret Pentagon task force that investigated war crimes during the 1970s, inspector generals' inquiries buried amid thousands of pages of unrelated documents, and other materials discovered during hundreds of hours of research at the U.S. National Archives — offers previously unpublished, unreported, and underappreciated evidence of civilian deaths that were kept secret during the war and remain almost entirely unknown to the American people. The documents also provided a rudimentary road map for on-the-ground reporting in Southeast Asia that yielded evidence of scores of additional bombings and ground raids that have never been reported to the outside world.

The road to Tralok Bek, Cambodia, in 2010, left. Meas Lorn, right, poses for a portrait in Ta Sous, Cambodia. Photos: Tam Turse

Survivors from 13 Cambodian villages along the Vietnamese border told The Intercept about attacks that killed hundreds of their relatives and neighbors during Kissinger's tenure in **President Richard Nixon**'s White House. The interviews with more than 75 Cambodian witnesses and survivors, published here for the first time, reveal in new detail the long-term trauma borne by survivors of the American war. These attacks were far more intimate and perhaps even more horrific than the violence already attributed to Kissinger's policies, because the villages were not just bombed, but also strafed by helicopter gunships and burned and looted by U.S. and allied troops.

The incidents detailed in the files and the testimony of survivors include accounts of both deliberate attacks inside Cambodia and accidental or careless strikes by U.S. forces operating on the border with South Vietnam. These latter attacks were infrequently reported through military channels, covered only sparingly by the press at the time, and have mostly been lost to history. Together, they increase an already sizable number of Cambodian deaths for which Kissinger bears responsibility and raise questions among experts about whether long-dormant efforts to hold him accountable for war crimes might be renewed.

The Army files and interviews with Cambodian survivors, American military personnel, Kissinger confidants, and experts demonstrate that impunity extended from the White House to American soldiers in the field. The records show that U.S. troops implicated in killing and maiming civilians received no meaningful punishments.

Together, the interviews and documents demonstrate a consistent disregard for Cambodian lives: failing to detect or protect civilians; to conduct post-strike assessments; to investigate civilian harm allegations; to prevent such damage from recurring; and to punish or

otherwise hold U.S. personnel accountable for injuries and deaths. These policies not only obscured the true toll of the conflict in Cambodia but also set the stage for the civilian carnage of the U.S. war on terror from Afghanistan to Iraq, Syria to Somalia, and beyond.

> "You can trace a line from the bombing of Cambodia to the present," said Greg Grandin, author of "Kissinger's Shadow." "The covert justifications for illegally bombing Cambodia became the framework for the justifications of drone strikes and forever war. It's a perfect expression of American militarism's unbroken circle."

Kissinger bears significant responsibility for attacks in Cambodia that killed as many as 150,000 civilians, according to Ben Kiernan, former director of the Genocide Studies Program at Yale University and one of the foremost authorities on the U.S. air campaign in Cambodia. That's up to six times the number of noncombatants thought to have died in U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen during the first 20 years of the war on terror. Grandin estimated that, overall, Kissinger — who also helped to prolong the Vietnam War and facilitate genocides in Cambodia, East Timor, and Bangladesh; accelerated civil wars in southern Africa; and supported coups and death squads throughout Latin America — has the blood of at least 3 million people on his hands

All the while, as Kissinger dated starlets, won coveted awards, and rubbed shoulders with billionaires at black-tie White House dinners, Hamptons galas, and other invitation-only soirées, survivors of the U.S. war in Cambodia were left to grapple with loss, trauma, and unanswered questions. They did so largely alone and invisible to the wider world, including to Americans whose leaders had upended their lives.

Henry Kissinger dodged questions about the bombing of Cambodia for decades and has spent half his life lying about his role in the killings there. In 1973, during his Senate confirmation hearings to become secretary of state, Kissinger was asked if he approved of deliberately keeping attacks on Cambodia secret, to which he responded with a wall of words justifying the assaults. "I just wanted to make clear that it was not a bombing of Cambodia, but it was a bombing of North Vietnamese in Cambodia," he insisted. The evidence from U.S. military records and eyewitness testimony directly contradicts that claim. So did Kissinger himself.

In his 2003 book, "Ending the Vietnam War," Kissinger offered an estimate of 50,000 Cambodian civilian deaths from U.S. attacks during his involvement in the conflict — a number given to him by a Pentagon historian. But documents obtained by The Intercept show that number was conjured almost out of thin air. In reality, the U.S. bombardment of Cambodia ranks among the most intense air campaigns in history. More than 231,000 U.S. bombing sorties were flown over Cambodia from 1965 to 1973. Between 1969 and 1973, while Kissinger was national security adviser, U.S. aircraft dropped 500,000 or more tons of munitions. (During all of World War II, including the atomic bombings, the United States dropped around 160,000 tons of munitions on Japan.)

At a 2010 State Department conference on U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia from 1946 through the close of the Vietnam War, I asked Kissinger how he would amend his testimony before the Senate, given his own contention that tens of thousands of Cambodian civilians died from his escalation of the war.

"Why should I amend my testimony?" he replied. "I don't quite understand the question, except that I didn't tell the truth."

“Anything That Flies on Anything That Moves”

One night in December 1970, Nixon called his national security adviser in a rage about Cambodia. “I want the helicopter ships. I want everything that can fly to go in and crack the hell out of them,” he barked at Kissinger, according to a transcript. “I want gunships in there. That means armed helicopters. … I want it done! Get them off their ass. … I want them to hit everything.”

Five minutes later, Kissinger was on the phone with **Gen. Alexander Haig**, his military aide, relaying the command for a relentless assault on Cambodia. “It’s an order, it’s to be done. Anything that flies on anything that moves. You got that?”

Two years earlier, Nixon had won the White House promising to end America’s war in Vietnam, but instead expanded the conflict into neighboring Cambodia. Fearing public backlash and believing that Congress would never approve an attack on a neutral country, Kissinger and Haig began planning — a month after Nixon took office— an operation that was kept secret from the American people, Congress, and even top Pentagon officials via a conspiracy of cover stories, coded messages, and a dual bookkeeping system that logged airstrikes in Cambodia as occurring in South Vietnam. **Ray Sitton**, a colonel serving the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would bring a list of targets to the White House for approval. “Strike here in this area,” Kissinger would tell him, and Sitton would backchannel the coordinates into the field, circumventing the military chain of command. Authentic documents associated with the strikes were burned, and phony target coordinates and other forged data were provided to the Pentagon and Congress.

Kissinger, who went on to serve as secretary of state in the Nixon and Gerald Ford administrations, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom — America’s highest civilian award — in 1977. In the decades that followed, he has continued to counsel U.S. presidents, most recently **Donald Trump**; served on numerous corporate and government advisory boards; and authored a small library of bestselling books on history and diplomacy.

Born Heinz Alfred Kissinger in Fürth, Germany, on May 27, 1923, he came to the United States in 1938, amid a flood of Jews fleeing Nazi oppression. He became a U.S. citizen in 1943 and served in the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II. After graduating summa cum laude from Harvard College in 1950, he continued on to an M.A. in 1952 and a Ph.D. in 1954. He subsequently joined the Harvard faculty, working in the Department of Government and at the Center for International Affairs until 1969. While teaching at Harvard, he served as a consultant for the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson before his senior roles in the Nixon and Ford administrations. A believer in *Realpolitik*, Kissinger heavily influenced U.S. foreign policy between 1969 and 1977.

Through a combination of relentless ambition, media savvy, and the ability to muddy the truth and slip free of scandal, Kissinger transformed himself from a college professor and government functionary into the most celebrated American diplomat of the 20th century and a bona fide celebrity. While dozens of his White House colleagues were engulfed in the swirling Watergate scandal, which cost Nixon his job in 1974, Kissinger emerged unscathed, all the while providing fodder for the tabloids and spouting lines like “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac.”

Kissinger was the chief architect of U.S. war policy in Southeast Asia, achieving almost co-

president status in such matters. Kissinger and Nixon were also uniquely responsible for attacks that killed, wounded, or displaced hundreds of thousands of Cambodians and laid the groundwork for the Khmer Rouge genocide.

Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leadership cannot be exonerated for committing genocide on the Cambodian people, said Kiernan, the Yale scholar, but neither can Nixon nor Kissinger escape responsibility for their role in the slaughter that precipitated it. The duo so destabilized the tiny country that Pol Pot's nascent revolutionary movement took over Cambodia in 1975 and unleashed horrors, from massacres to mass starvation, that would kill around 2 million people.

Kaing Guek Eav (known as "Duch") who ran the Khmer Rouge's Tuol Sleng prison, where thousands of Cambodians were tortured and murdered in the late 1970s, made the same observation. "Mister Richard Nixon and Kissinger," he told a United Nations-backed tribunal, "allowed the Khmer Rouge to grasp golden opportunities." After he was overthrown in a military coup and his country was plunged into genocide, Cambodia's deposed monarch, **Prince Norodom Sihanouk,** leveled similar blame. "There are only two men responsible for the tragedy in Cambodia," he said in the 1970s. "Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger."

In his 2001 book-length indictment, "The Trial of Henry Kissinger," Christopher Hitchens called for Kissinger's prosecution "for war crimes, for crimes against humanity, and for offenses against common or customary or international law, including conspiracy to commit murder, kidnap, and torture" from Argentina, Bangladesh, and Chile to East Timor, Laos, and Uruguay. But Hitchens reserved special opprobrium for Kissinger's role in Cambodia. "The bombing campaign," he wrote, "began as it was to go on — with full knowledge of its effect on civilians, and with flagrant deceit by Mr. Kissinger in this precise respect."

Others went beyond theoretical indictments. As a teenager, Australian-born human rights activist Peter Tatchell felt greatly affected by the U.S. war — and war crimes — in Indochina. Decades later, believing that there was a strong case to be made, he took action. "It surprised me that no one had tried to prosecute Kissinger under international law, so I decided to have a go," he told The Intercept by email.

In 2002, with **Slobodan Miloševic**, the former president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, on trial for war crimes, Tatchell applied for an arrest warrant at Bow Street Magistrates' Court in London under the Geneva Conventions Act of 1957, an act of Parliament that incorporated some components of the laws of war as defined by the 1949 Geneva Conventions into British law. He alleged that while Kissinger "was National Security Advisor to the U.S. President 1969-75 and U.S. Secretary of State 1973-77 he commissioned, aided and abetted and procured war crimes in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia." **Judge Nicholas Evans** denied the application, stating that he was not "presently" able to draft a "suitably precise charge" based on the evidence Tatchell submitted.

When the arrest warrant was denied, Tatchell tried to engage international humanitarian organizations to help or take over the case, he told The Intercept, but they "did not see it as a priority." He tried unsuccessfully to contact potential American witnesses and engage U.S. human rights groups.

But Tatchell maintains that Kissinger should still have his day in court. "I believe that age should never be a barrier to justice. Those who commit or authorise war crimes should be held to account, regardless of their age," he wrote, "providing they have the mental

capacity for a fair trial, which I understand is the case with Kissinger."

Five Decades of Impunity

Kissinger and his acolytes frequently cast blame for the American war in Cambodia on the North Vietnamese troops and South Vietnamese guerrillas who used the country as a base and logistics hub, while giving short shrift to U.S. involvement there. "What destabilized Cambodia was North Vietnam's occupation of chunks of Cambodian territory from 1965 onwards," wrote former Kissinger aide Peter Rodman. But three years earlier — long before most Americans knew their country was at war in Southeast Asia — U.S. "bombs hit a Cambodian village by accident … killing several civilians," according to an Air Force history. And the "accidents" never stopped. Between 1962 and 1969, the Cambodian government tallied 1,864 border violations; 6,149 violations of its air space by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces; and nearly 1,000 civilian casualties.

To Nixon and Kissinger, Cambodia was a sideshow: a tiny war waged in the shadow of the larger conflict in Vietnam and entirely subsumed to U.S. objectives there. To Cambodians on the front lines of the conflict — farming folk living hardscrabble lives — the war was a shock and a horror. At first, people were awed by the aircraft that began flying above their thatched-roof homes. They called Huey Cobra attack helicopters "lobster legs" for their skids, which resembled crustacean limbs, while small bubble-like Loaches became "coconut shells" in local parlance. But Cambodians quickly learned to fear the aircraft's machine guns and rockets, the bombs of F-4 Phantoms, and the ground-shaking strikes of B-52s. Decades later, survivors still had little understanding of why they were attacked and why so many loved ones were maimed or killed. They had no idea that their suffering was due in large part to a man named Henry Kissinger and his failed schemes to achieve his boss's promised "honorable end to the war in Vietnam" by expanding, escalating, and prolonging that conflict.

In 2010, I traveled to Cambodia to investigate decades-old U.S. war crimes. I searched the borderlands, looking for villages mentioned in U.S. military documents, carrying binders filled with photos of Cobras, Loaches, and other aircraft, asking villagers to point out the military hardware that killed their loved ones and neighbors. My interviewees were uniformly shocked that an American knew about attacks on their village and had traveled across the globe to speak with them.

For decades, the U.S. government has shown little interest in examining allegations of civilian harm caused by its military operations around the world. A 2020 study of post-9/11 civilian casualty incidents found that most have gone completely uninvestigated, and in those cases that have come under official scrutiny, U.S. investigators regularly interview American military witnesses but almost totally ignore civilians — victims, survivors, family members, and bystanders — "severely compromising the effectiveness of investigations," according to researchers from the Center for Civilians in Conflict and the Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute. The U.S. military rarely conducted investigations of civilian harm allegations in Cambodia and almost never interviewed Cambodian victims. In all 13 Cambodian villages I visited in 2010, I was the first person to ever interview victims of wartime attacks initiated 9,000 miles away in Washington, D.C.

Over the last two decades, investigative reporters and human rights groups have documented systemic killing of civilians, underreporting of noncombatant casualties, failures of accountability, and outright impunity extending from the drone pilots who slay innocent

people to the architects of America's 21st-century wars in Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere. A 2021 investigation by New York Times reporter Azmat Khan — which revealed that the U.S. air war in Iraq and Syria was marked by flawed intelligence and inaccurate targeting, resulting in the deaths of thousands of innocent people — finally forced the Defense Department to unveil a comprehensive plan for preventing, mitigating, and responding to civilian casualties. The 36-page Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan provides a blueprint for improving how the Pentagon addresses noncombatant deaths but lacks a concrete mechanism for addressing past civilian harm.

The Defense Department has been clear that it isn't interested in looking back. "At this point we don't have an intent to re-litigate cases," **Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin** told **Rep. Sara Jacobs,** D-Calif., when she asked last year whether the Pentagon was planning to revisit past civilian harm allegations from the forever wars. The possibility that the Defense Department will investigate civilian harm in Cambodia 50 years later is nil.

I share some responsibility for the delay in publishing these accounts. For 13 years — while I was reporting on drone strike victims in Somalia, ethnic cleansing in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and civil wars from Libya to South Sudan — survivors' accounts from Cambodian villages like An Lung Kreas, Bos Phlung, Bos Mon (upper), Doun Rath, Doun Rath 2, Mroan, Por, Sati, Ta Sous, Tropeang, Phlong, Ta Hang, and Udom were lodged in my notebooks. Other projects and imperatives, coupled with the vagaries of the news industry that doesn't always view past atrocities as "news," kept them there.

When I conducted my interviews, in 2010, the life expectancy in Cambodia was about 66 years. Many of the people I spoke with — their ages in this article pegged to the date we spoke — are likely dead. Few in these rural villages had cellphones 13 years ago, so I have no way to reach them. But their accounts remain vibrant and the horrors they recounted have not diminished. Nor has their pain necessarily passed on with them from this world. We know from Holocaust survivors, for example, that trauma can have intergenerational effects; it can be passed on, whether genetically or otherwise. Even at this late date, the pain of America's war in Cambodia lives on — along with the architect of that country's agony.

Map: The Intercept

Memories of Atrocity

Crossing a bridge over the Mekong River, I sped into the Cambodian countryside, along highways where SUVs passed tiny carts pulled by tiny ponies, motorbikes loaded with sheaves of bamboo or brightly colored textiles or baskets of squealing pigs, and ancient flatbed trucks piled high with rough-hewn, ochre bricks. I rolled through market towns of open-air butcher shops and wooden stalls selling cases of motor oil or motorcycle helmets or child-sized bags of rice or cases of Angkor Beer. I raced past thick, unruly forests and rubber plantations and rice fields where you could spot lines of water buffalo loping, single file, along the paddy dikes. Finally, I turned off the pavement onto a path of rutted, red dirt, looking for villages unknown even to the local police. At the end of one of these dusty, pitted trails, I found a hamlet straddling the border with Vietnam.

The air in Doun Rath was dry and musty during the day and punctuated, in the late afternoon, by the comforting smell of cooking fires that wafted up to wooden homes built on stilts to maximize air circulation on sweltering days like these.

I came looking for members of a ravaged generation who had survived both the American war and the Khmer Rouge genocide that followed. One of them, Phok Horm, spry and 84 years old at the time of our meeting, with close-cropped salt and pepper hair, told me: “Bombing was very common in this area. Sometimes, it happened every day. Sometimes there were dive bombers. Sometimes, the aircraft with the legs of a lobster would fly over and shoot at everything.”

Vietnamese guerrillas operated in the nearby forest, Phok and fellow village elders recalled.

They came to Doun Rath to buy supplies from residents already living hard lives, growing rice and selling it across the border in Vietnam, before the war flooded the hamlet with refugees from other bomb-ravaged Cambodian villages. But the guerrillas generally weren't present during the attacks. "Many people here were shot," said Chneang Sous, who was in his 20s during the conflict. "Most of them were Cambodian."

When the shooting started, villagers would scatter, running for the uncertain protection of paddy dikes and, as the war dragged on, subterranean bunkers that families dug beside their homes. Min Keun, a teenager in 1969, remembered the regular intrusion of "lobster legs" in the skies over the village. "People would panic. They would run. Sometimes they made it. Sometimes they would be killed," she recalled. "There was so much suffering." Min and others remembered helicopters firing on fleeing villagers. Water buffalo and cattle were repeatedly machine-gunned. At night, the helicopters' bright search beams lit up the darkness as they hunted for enemy forces. Bombs might fall at any time.

Around 1969, Phok's husband was caught in the open during a "bombardment" and hit in the neck with shrapnel. He hung on for seven days before succumbing to his wounds. Chneang recalled an instance when an American Huey gunship popped up from behind a tree line, forcing villagers to bolt for safety. The helicopter raked the area with machine gunfire, killing his aunt and uncle. Nouv Mom told me that his younger sister was gravely wounded in a 1972 bombing. Vietnamese guerrillas arrived after the attack and took her away for medical treatment, but his family never saw her again. All told, survivors believed that more than half of all the villagers living in Doun Rath during the late 1960s and early 1970s were either killed or wounded by American attacks.

In nearby Doun Rath 2, former village chief Kang Vorn said residents led a simple life before the war, growing rice, beans, and sesame seeds. They began to see Vietnamese guerrillas around 1965, but the bombing didn't begin until about 1969. Vet Shea, a one-eyed woman, recalled that the attacks intensified as time went on. "Sometimes we were bombed every day. Once, it was three or four times in one day," she said. She herself survived a helicopter attack targeting farmers working in the nearby fields. "I ran flat out when I saw it," Vet told me. "One person was wounded. A few others died."

Thirteen elders of Doun Rath 2 did their best to recall the names of the dead. "Nul, Pik, Num, Seung," said Sok Yun, an 85-year-old who relied on a weathered walking stick, as she ticked off the names of four villagers killed when their bomb shelter collapsed under a direct hit from an airstrike. Vet said her aunt was slain in another attack. Tep Sarum was just a teenager when a bomb hit his aunt's house, killing her. Mom Huy, 80 years old at the time of our interview, said deaths and injuries from the bombs were common, while Kang, the former chief, estimated that at least 30 villagers were wounded by airstrikes but survived.

Just how many people in and around Doun Rath and Doun Rath 2 were killed by Nixon and Kissinger's war was already lost to history when I visited. The U.S. documentary record is quite sparse, but it does exist. On the night of August 9 and the morning of August 10, 1969, according to an Army inspector general's report, a U.S. "Nighthawk" helicopter team — consisting of one Huey, equipped with a spotlight and high-powered M-60 machine guns, and a Cobra gunship outfitted with a powerful Gatling gun, rockets, and a grenade launcher — was operating in a so-called free fire zone near the South Vietnamese border with Cambodia.

The previously unreported investigation reveals that while only some members of the

helicopter crews mentioned sporadic ground fire that night, they all agreed that lights were seen in “living structures.” Helicopter crew members claimed that radar operators told them they were over South Vietnam, but the radar operators said otherwise. One of them, Rogden Palmer, speaking to investigators about the Huey commander, said:

> [H]e told his Tiger bird (the cobra accompanying him) that he thought he saw a light. At this time I advised him that he was close to the Cambodian border, and he rogered my transmission. Night Hawk and Tiger started circling … about the same time I advised him that he appeared to be over the border. I don’t remember if he rogered my transmission, but I beleive [sic] he did. At one time I told him he was over the border.

Apparently undaunted, the Huey focused its searchlight on the houses and the Cobra gunship commenced a firing run, blasting three of what the Pentagon documents referred to as “hooches” — shorthand for civilian dwellings — with machine gunfire and rockets filled with “flechettes,” tiny nails designed to tear through human flesh.

The U.S. investigation determined that the helicopters “did engage a target in the vicinity of the Cambodian border which could have been the village of Doun Rath.” The survivors in Doun Rath and Doun Rath 2 didn’t recall this particular incident, emphasizing that attacks were so common for so long that they blended together. The report concluded that the “aircraft commander exercised poor judgement [sic] in engaging a target under these circumstances.” The inspector general, however, recommended that “no disciplinary action be taken,” and until I arrived decades later no one, apparently, had tried to investigate what actually happened in Doun Rath.

Fifty years on, most U.S. attacks in Cambodia are unknown to the wider world and may never be known. Even those confirmed by the U.S. military were ignored and forgotten: cast into history’s dustbin without additional reviews or follow-up investigations.

On January 6, 1970, for example, five helicopters breached Cambodian airspace and fired on the village of Prastah, killing two civilians and severely wounding an 11-year-old girl, according to an Army inspector general’s summary report. That perfunctory review found that helicopter gunships from the 25th Infantry Division had fired on enemy forces, who allegedly withdrew into Cambodia. The inquiry determined that the “gunships continued to engage and rounds did impact in Cambodia.” As to the question of civilian casualties and property damage resulting from the attack, the report stated only that “it was possible that civilian personnel … could have been struck by fire from the gunships and some crops could have been destroyed.” There is no indication that anything was done to compensate the survivors.

In the early evening of May 3, 1970, a helicopter circled the Cambodian village of Sre Kandal several times, scaring villagers and forcing them to flee, according to a formerly classified Army report. The file states that witnesses said a “helicopter of unknown type circled their village several times. They became frightened and started to run, at which time the helicopter allegedly fired.” According to Cambodians who the U.S. military encountered just after the attacks, three people suffered burns when a home was set ablaze in the attack and one person was wounded by shrapnel. One of the burn victims, his name likely engraved in the hearts of his Cambodian relatives but otherwise lost to history, later died.

“Everything Was Completely Destroyed”

Less than a month after Kissinger and Haig began planning the secret bombing of Cambodia, the U.S. launched Operation MENU, a callously titled collection of B-52 raids codenamed BREAKFAST, LUNCH, SNACK, DINNER, DESSERT, and SUPPER that were carried out from March 18, 1969, to May 26, 1970. The attacks were kept secret through multiple layers of deception; Kissinger approved each one of the 3,875 sorties.

Survivors say that living through a B-52 bombing is unimaginably terrifying, bordering on the apocalyptic. Even within the confines of a deep, well-built bomb shelter, the concussive force from a nearby strike might burst eardrums. For those more exposed, the earth-shaking strikes could be extraordinarily lethal.

One morning, at the end of a busted dirt and gravel road near the Vietnamese border, I found Vuth Than, 78 years old at the time, with a shorn head of bristly gray hair and a mouth stained red with juice from betel nut, a natural stimulant popular in Southeast Asia.

Both Vuth and her sister, 72-year-old Vuth Thang, broke down as soon as I explained the purpose of my reporting. They were away from their home in the village of Por when a B-52 strike wiped out 17 members of their family. “I lost my mother, father, sisters, brothers, everyone,” Vuth Than told me, tears streaming down her cheeks. “It was so terrible. Everything was completely destroyed.”

Exposed by North Vietnam’s Hanoi Radio and confirmed by the New York Times in May 1969, the secret bombing of Cambodia was officially denied and unknown to the public and the relevant congressional committees at the time. Congress and the American people were kept so deep in the dark that on April 30, 1970, as he announced the first publicly avowed U.S. ground invasion of Cambodia to strike at suspected enemy base areas, Nixon could baldly lie, telling the country: “For five years neither the United States nor South Vietnam has moved against these enemy sanctuaries because we did not wish to violate the territory of a neutral nation.”

It was only in 1973, during the Watergate scandal, that the secret bombing allegations came to the fore, prompting the first effort to impeach Nixon on the grounds that he had waged a secret war in a neutral nation in violation of the U.S. Constitution. Eventually, that article of impeachment was voted down in the name of political expediency. In the face of the other charges, however, Nixon resigned from office.

“That was in essentially unpopulated areas and I don’t believe it had any significant casualties,” Kissinger told me at the 2010 State Department conference, titled “The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946-1975,” when I questioned him about the bombing. It was effectively the same reply he offered British journalist David Frost during a 1979 NBC News interview in which Frost charged that Kissinger’s Cambodia policy set in motion a series of events that would “destroy the country.” Kissinger stormed out of the studio after the taping and Frost quit the project, alleging interference by NBC, which was then also employing Kissinger as a consultant and commentator. NBC later released a transcript of the interview but allowed Kissinger to amend his comments through an attached letter to NBC News President William Small.

“We did not start to destroy a country from anybody’s point of view when we were bombing seven isolated North Vietnamese base areas within some five miles of the Vietnamese

border, from which attacks were being launched into South Vietnam," Kissinger told Frost. In typical fashion of seizing on discrepancies and muddying debates, he accurately denied Frost's contention that Base Area 704 was bombed — a mistake stemming from a typographic error in a Pentagon document — during the secret B-52 attacks, noting that "base area 740" was actually attacked. He said recommendations of targets were accompanied by a statement "that civilian casualties were expected to be minimal."

There were in fact 1,136 civilians living in Base Area 740, according to the Pentagon; a formerly top secret Air Force report, declassified decades after the Frost interview, noted that only 250 enemy forces were present there. An Army document I discovered in the National Archives also notes that the military was aware that civilians "were wounded/killed by B-52 strikes in Base area 740" between May 16 and 20, 1970, around the time of the SUPPER attacks. According to the confidential case file, those slain and injured were "Montagnards," members of an ethnic minority whose "hamlets were not accurately reflected on commonly used maps."

Meak Hen, left; Koul Saron, center; and Meak Nea, right, speak with reporter Nick Turse in Tralok Bek in 2010. Photos: Tam Turse

"I Was the Only Survivor of My Whole Family"

In 2010, the village was officially known as Ta Sous, but to its inhabitants it was still known by its name during the American war: Tralok Bek. "Every house had a bunker during the war. But during the day, if you were out tending to the cows, your life might depend on a termite hill and whether you could hide behind it," Meas Lorn explained. "Planes dropped bombs. Helicopters strafed. Many people died," said Meak Satom, a gray-haired man with a gold tooth. A B-52 strike in 1969 killed about 10 people, including a young friend, he recalled.

While I interviewed locals about the many attacks that occurred there during the war, Sdeung Sokheung said little. But when I brought out a binder filled with photographs of

many different types of American aircraft, she zeroed in on an F-4 Phantom. Pointing at it, she said that as a girl, she had witnessed the bombing of Ta Hang village, about eight kilometers away, by that type of plane.

After finishing our interviews in Tralok Bek, I traveled winding dirt roads, past stunted bushes and the occasional thin, tan-colored cow, until we reached an area of dry, rock-hard rice paddies and towering palms. A few minutes later, in a rustic wooden home, I found 64-year-old Chan Yath, a woman with a substantial head of dark hair and teeth stained from chewing betel nut. I asked if there had been a bomb strike in the area during the war. She said yes; a family had been nearly wiped out. The lone survivor, she explained, was her cousin, An Seun. A younger woman was dispatched to find An and, 20 minutes or so later, we saw her — a tiny, aging mother of 10 — ambling along a narrow paddy dike path leading to the rear of Chan's home. "During the time of a full moon," said An, referring to a Buddhist holy day, she was off visiting her grandfather's house. "At around 10 a.m., an airplane dropped a bomb on my home. My parents and four siblings were all killed," she told me with wet eyes and a catch in her throat. "I was the only survivor of my whole family."

During these same years, the U.S. was also conducting clandestine, cross-border ground operations inside Cambodia. In the two years before Nixon and Kissinger took over the war, U.S. commandos conducted 99 and 287 missions, respectively. In 1969, the number jumped to 454. Between January 1970 and April 1972, when the program was finally shut down, commandos carried out at least 1,045 covert missions inside Cambodia. There may, however, have been others, ostensibly launched by Kissinger, that were never disclosed.

From January to May 1973, between stints as deputy assistant to the president for national security and White House chief of staff, Al Haig served as the vice chief of staff of the Army. Retired Army Brig. Gen. John Johns told me that during this time, he was in Haig's office at the Pentagon when an important call came in. "I was briefing him on something, and the red phone rang, which I knew was the White House," Johns recalled. "I got up to leave. He motioned me to sit down. I sat there and heard him tell them how to cover up our intrusions into Cambodia."

Johns — who had never before revealed the story to a reporter — was relatively sure that Haig was referring to past covert actions, yet did not know if the operations were made public or who was on the other end of the phone line. But Kissinger was responsible for many of the cross-border missions, according to Roger Morris, a Kissinger aide who served on the senior staff of the National Security Council. "A lot of the time, he was authorizing the ongoing covert excursions into Cambodia," he told me. "We were running a lot of covert ops there."

"How Could the People Escape?"

After two days of driving local roads asking for directions, I turned off a highway onto a red dirt track that cut through lush farmland and finally spilled into a border village of simple wooden homes amid a sea of variegated greenery. During the war, these houses had looked much the same, said village chief Sheang Heng, a wiry man with calloused hands and bare feet wearing a loose dress shirt that had once been white. The only real change was that corrugated metal had replaced most of the old thatch and tile roofs.

In 1970, when Sheang was 17 years old, this village was on the front line of America's Cambodian incursion. Halfway around the world, at Kent State University, members of the

Ohio National Guard killed four students during a May 4, 1970, protest against this new stage in the war. While that massacre received worldwide attention, a larger one in Sheang's village three days earlier went unnoticed.

On May 1, 1970, helicopters circled the Cambodian village of "Moroan" (an American's phonetic spelling of the name) before opening fire, killing 12 villagers and wounding five, according to a formerly classified U.S. document that, until now, has never been publicly disclosed. After the assault, another helicopter landed and carried off the injured; the survivors fled their village to another named "Kantuot," located in a neighboring district.

There is no village in Cambodia named "Moroan," but the hamlet near the Vietnamese border where I located Sheang was, he said, called Mroan. As in the other Cambodian border villages I visited, focusing on a lone attack cited in U.S. military documents left residents baffled, given that they had endured many airstrikes over many years. Still, when asked about the date, Sheang gestured toward what is now the far edge of the village. "Many died in that area at that time," he recalled. "Afterward, the people left this village for another named Kantuot."

Mroan, Cambodia, in 2010. Photo: Tam Turse

Sheang and Lim South, who was 14 years old in 1970, said that many types of aircraft battered Mroan, from helicopter gunships to massive B-52 bombers. As Sheang — who lost his mother, father, a grandfather, a nephew, and a niece, among other relatives, to airstrikes — told me about the relentless attacks, his eyes reddened and went vacant. "The explosions tossed the earth into the air. The 'fire rocket' burned the houses. Who could survive? People ran, but they were cut down. They were killed immediately. They just died," he said, trailing off as he moved to a far corner of the room and slumped to his knees.

Each survivor told a similar story. Lim's sister and three brothers were killed in bombing

raids. Thlen Hun, who was in her 20s in the early 1970s, said her older brother was killed in an airstrike. South Chreung — shirtless in dress pants with a vibrant orange krama, the traditional Cambodian scarf, around his neck — told me that he had lost a younger brother in a different attack.

Villagers said that when they first saw American aircraft overhead, they were awestruck. Having never seen anything like the giant machines, people came out to stare at them. Soon, however, residents of Mroan learned to fear them. Cooking rice became dangerous as Americans flying above would see the smoke and launch attacks. Helicopters, survivors said, routinely strafed both the nearby fields and the village itself, then comprised of about 100 homes. “This one was the most vicious,” said Sheang, pointing at a photograph of a Cobra gunship among pictures of other aircraft I provided. When the “coconut shell” helicopter, a U.S. Army OH-6 or “Loach,” marked an area with smoke, villagers recalled, the Cobra would attack, firing rockets that set homes ablaze. “During the American War, almost all houses in the village were burned,” said Sheang.

Sheang and Thlen said that about half the families in Mroan — some 250 people — were wiped out by U.S. attacks. They led me to the edge of the village, a riot of foliage in every shade of green that sloped into a depression, one of several remaining nearby bomb craters. “About 20 people were killed here,” said Sheang gesturing toward the crater. “It used to be deeper, but the land has filled it in.” Thlen — slim, with graying hair, her brown eyes narrowed in a perpetual squint — shook her head and walked to the crater’s edge. “It was disastrous. Just look at the size,” she said, adding that this hole was just one of many that once dotted the landscape. “How could the people escape? Where could they escape to?”

A boy stands at the edge of a bomb crater in Mroan in 2010. Photo: Tam Turse

The Stolen Suzuki and the Girl Left to Die

The results of Nixon’s December 1970 telephone tirade and Kissinger’s order to set

“anything that flies on anything that moves” were immediately palpable. During that month, sorties by U.S. helicopters and bombers tripled in number. Soon after, in May 1971, U.S. helicopter gunships shot up a Cambodian village, wounding a young girl who couldn’t be taken for treatment because a U.S. officer overloaded his helicopter with a looted motorcycle that was later gifted to a superior, according to an Army investigation and exclusive follow-up reporting by The Intercept. The Cambodian girl almost certainly died from her wounds, along with seven other civilians, according to previously unreported documents produced by a Pentagon war crimes task force in 1972.

How many similar killings occurred will never be known. Cover-ups were common, investigations were rarely undertaken, and crimes generally evaporated with the fog of war. But there were ample opportunities for mayhem and massacre. In the two years before Nixon took office, there were officially 426 helicopter gunship sorties in Cambodia, according to a Defense Department report. Between January 1970 and April 1972, there were at least 2,116. In January 1971, Congress enacted the Cooper-Church amendment, which prohibited U.S. troops, including advisers, from operating on the ground in Cambodia, but America’s war continued unabated. Evidence soon emerged that the U.S. was violating Cooper-Church, but the White House lied about it to Congress and the public. “As long as we didn’t set our foot on that ground, we basically weren’t there, even though we did missions there every day,” Gary Grawey, an Army helicopter crew chief who flew daily missions in Cambodia during the spring of 1971, including the May mission that killed the young girl, told me.

“They attacked that village,” Grawey said, noting that both the South Vietnamese and American troops shot up the hamlet. “They were shootin’ and they didn’t even know who they were shootin’ at,” he recalled, adding that the victims were “women and children,” just “regular villagers.”

It started at half past noon on May 18, 1971, according to an Army investigation file and previously unreported summary documents produced by a Pentagon task force in 1972, when three U.S. helicopters — a “hunter-killer team” conducting a reconnaissance mission — skimmed the treetops inside Cambodia. The team came upon a village where they spotted motorcycles and bicycles that, according to crew members’ testimony, were suspected of being part of an enemy supply convoy. Hovering above, the Americans tried to motion for people on the ground to open packs on the vehicles. When the villagers instead began moving away, the highest-flying helicopter fired two incendiary rockets, a numbingly common tactic to draw out enemy personnel who might be hiding nearby. While the crew of one of the helicopters reported taking isolated ground fire, no Americans were killed or wounded, nor were any enemy personnel or weapons ever found.

According to a confidential report discovered in the U.S. National Archives and published here for the first time, the high-flying helicopter then “rocketed and strafed the buildings and surrounding area with approximately 15 to 18 rounds of high explosive rockets and machine gun fire.”

Capt. Clifford Knight, pilot of the “low bird,” said that his gunner shot an apparently unarmed man, clad in civilian clothes, who was “trying to run away.” The gunner, John Nicholes, admitted it, noting that the killing took place after the initial rocket barrage.

Capt. David Schweitzer, the “high bird” commander, testified to rocketing and strafing the area and calling for the insertion of South Vietnamese, or Army of the Republic of Vietnam, troops to search for suspected enemy forces. According to a summary of the testimony of

Grawey, the helicopter crew chief who ferried an elite ARVN Ranger team and an American captain, Arnold Brooks, to the village:

> CPT Brooks and the ARVN Rangers acted "hog wild" when they deplaned, shooting up the area although they received no return fire. … [H]e did observe 5 to 10 Cambodian personnel that appeared to be wounded, but that he did not know if they were wounded from air or ground fire.

Decades later, Grawey reconfirmed details of the incident in an interview, noting that, as the ARVN deployed from the helicopter, he told Brooks that "he was not to get off my bird." But Brooks, whom Grawey described as "gung ho," pulled rank and ignored him. Brooks — who he said was carrying a non-regulation "machinegun" — started shooting indiscriminately.

Davin McLaughlin, the commander of a replacement "low bird" that was called in when the first helicopter ran short on fuel, similarly noted that the South Vietnamese met no resistance and, according to the documents, "grabbed what they could." A summary of the testimony of his gunner, Len Shattuck, in the investigation file adds:

> The ARVN Rangers appeared melodramatic when they were inserted and in his opinion fired excessively in the area. … He stated that there were approximately 15 wounded personnel in the area and that he observed 2 males 50-60 years of age, and one female 8-10 years of age, that appeared to be dead.

In a 2010 interview, Shattuck told me that he didn't fire a shot that day and stressed that he only saw one section of the village. What he saw there, however, stayed with him. "We came into a smoking village," he said. "I witnessed dead bodies. I witnessed some wounded people that appeared to be civilians. … We didn't evac[uate] anybody." Shattuck remembered the little girl as even younger than indicated by his testimony, just 3 to 5 years old, and that she was covered with blood. "She was pretty badly shot up," he recalled.

As Cambodians lay wounded and dying, the ARVN Rangers looted the village, grabbing ducks, chickens, wallets, clothing, cigarettes, tobacco, civilian radios, and other nonmilitary items, according to numerous American witnesses. "They were stealing everything they could get their hands on," Capt. Thomas Agness, the pilot of the helicopter that carried Brooks and some of the ARVN, told me. Brooks, however, had the biggest score of all. With the help of South Vietnamese troops, he hauled a blue Suzuki motorcycle onto a helicopter, according to Army documents. Brooks acknowledged his service in Cambodia during a telephone conversation and asked for a formal interview request by email. He did not respond to that request or subsequent ones.

Agness, according to an Army investigator's summary, said that he received "a radio request to evacuate a wounded girl [but] denied on instructions of CPT Brooks since he was fully loaded with the ARVN Ranger team, a motorcycle and he was low on fuel." The stolen Suzuki was presented as a gift to his commanding officer, Lt. Col. Carl Putnam, who was later seen tooling around base on it, according to the investigation documents. The Army concluded that the wounded girl, left behind for the sake of the Suzuki, died.

Furious, Gary Grawey resolved to report Arnold Brooks. "I was really pissed at the time," he told me. "I said I would report him, which I did." A previously unreported final status report on the "Brooks Incident," contained in the files of the Pentagon war crimes task force, concluded that allegations of excessive bombardment, pillage, and a violation of the rules of

engagement had been “substantiated.” While no enemy weapons or war materiel were found in the village, according to the report, civilian casualties “were estimated at eight dead, including two children, 15 wounded and three or four structures destroyed. There is no evidence that the wounded were provided medical treatment by either U.S. or ARVN forces.”

Putnam and a direct subordinate were issued letters of reprimand — a low-grade punishment — for their “actions and/or inactions” in the case. (Putnam died in 1976.) While court martial charges were filed against Brooks, his commanding general dismissed them in 1972, instead giving him a letter of reprimand. Records indicate that no other troops were charged, let alone punished, in connection with the massacre, the looting, or the failure to render aid to wounded Cambodian civilians.

Backing the Genocidaires

When Henry Kissinger hatched his plans for the secret bombing of Cambodia, Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge numbered around 5,000. But as a 1973 CIA cable explained, the Khmer Rouge’s recruitment efforts relied heavily on the U.S. bombing:

> They are using damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda. … The [Khmer Rouge] cadre tell the people … the only way to stop “the massive destruction of the country” is to remove [U.S.-backed junta leader] Lon Nol and return Prince Sihanouk to power. The proselyting cadres tell the people that the quickest way to accomplish this is to strengthen [Khmer Rouge] forces so they will be able to defeat Lon Nol and stop the bombing.

The U.S. dropped more than 257,000 tons of munitions on Cambodia in 1973, almost the same amount as during the previous four years combined. A report by the U.S. Agency for International Development found that “the intense American bombing in 1973 increased the cumulative number of refugees to nearly half of the country’s population.”

Those attacks galvanized Pol Pot’s forces, allowing the Khmer Rouge to grow into the 200,000-person force that took over the country and killed about 20 percent of the population. Once the regime was in power, the political winds had shifted and Kissinger, behind closed doors, told Thailand’s foreign minister: “You should also tell the Cambodians that we will be friends with them. They are murderous thugs, but we won’t let that stand in our way. We are prepared to improve relations with them.” He then clarified his statement: The Thai official should not repeat the “murderous thugs” line to the Khmer Rouge, only that the U.S. wanted a warmer relationship.

In late 1978, Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia to oust the Khmer Rouge from power, driving Pol Pot’s forces to the Thai border. The U.S., however, threw its support behind Pol Pot, encouraging other nations to back his forces, funneling aid to his allies, helping him keep Cambodia’s seat at the United Nations, and opposing efforts to investigate or try Khmer Rouge leaders for genocide.

That same year, Kissinger’s mammoth memoir, “White House Years” was published. As journalist William Shawcross pointed out, Kissinger failed to even mention the carnage in Cambodia because “for Kissinger, Cambodia was a sideshow, its people expendable in the great game of large nations.”

In 2001 and again in 2018, the late chef and cultural critic Anthony Bourdain offered sentiments shared by many, but rarely put so eloquently:

> Once you've been to Cambodia, you'll never stop wanting to beat Henry Kissinger to death with your bare hands. You will never again be able to open a newspaper and read about that treacherous, prevaricating, murderous scumbag sitting down for a nice chat with Charlie Rose or attending some black-tie affair for a new glossy magazine without choking. Witness what Henry did in Cambodia — the fruits of his genius for statesmanship — and you will never understand why he's not sitting in the dock at The Hague next to Miloševic.

In the early 2000s, Kissinger was sought for questioning in connection with human rights abuses by former South American military dictatorships, but he ducked investigators, once declining to appear before a court in France and quickly leaving Paris after receiving a summons. He was never charged or prosecuted for deaths in Cambodia or anywhere else.

"Play With It. Have a Good Time."

"To spare you is no profit; to destroy you, no loss" was the cold credo of the Khmer Rouge. But it could just as easily have been Kissinger's. In 2010, I followed up with Kissinger, pressing him on the contradiction in his claims about only bombing "North Vietnamese in Cambodia" but somehow killing 50,000 Cambodians, by his count, in the process. "We weren't running around the country bombing Cambodians," he told me.

The evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates otherwise, and I told him so.

"Oh, come on!" Kissinger exclaimed, protesting that I was merely trying to catch him in a lie. When pressed about the substance of the question — that Cambodians were bombed and killed — Kissinger became visibly angry. "What are you trying to prove?" he growled and then, when I refused to give up, he cut me off: "Play with it," he told me. "Have a good time."

I asked him to answer Meas Lorn's question: "Why did they drop bombs here?" He refused.

"I'm not smart enough for you," Kissinger said sarcastically, as he stomped his cane. "I lack your intelligence and moral quality." He stalked off.

Cambodians in villages like Tralok Bek, Doun Rath, and Mroan didn't have the luxury of such an easy escape.

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