

American's Brief Brush With Arrest and Death

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BANGKOK, Thailand, May 8—Some of the foreigners who stayed behind after the American evacuation of Phnompenh learned quickly and at first hand that the Communist-led forces were not the happy-go-lucky troops we had seen in the initial stage of the Communist take-over.

I had my first experience with the tough Khmer Rouge troops early in the afternoon of the first day of the take-over.

With Dith Pran, a local employe of The New York Times, Jon Swain of the Sunday Times of London, Alan Rockoff, a freelance American photographer, and our

This dispatch was also written by Sydney H. Schanberg.

driver, Sarun, we had gone to look at conditions in the largest civilian hospital, Preah Keth Mealea. Doctors and surgeons, out of fear, had failed to come to work and the wounded were bleeding to death in the corridors.

As we emerged from the operating block at 1 P.M. and started driving toward the front gate, we were confronted by a band of heavily

armed troops just then coming into the grounds. They put guns to our heads and, shouting angrily, threatened us with execution. They took everything—cameras, radio, money, typewriters, the car—and ordered us into an armored personnel carrier, slamming the hatch and rear door shut. We thought we were finished.

But Mr. Dith Pran saved our lives, first by getting into the personnel carrier with us and then by talking soothingly to our captors for two and a half hours and finally convincing them that we were not their enemy but merely foreign newsmen covering their victory.

We are still not clear why they were so angry, but we believe it might have been because they were entering the hospital at that time to remove the patients and were startled to find us, for they wanted no foreign witnesses.

At one point they asked if any of us were Americans, and we said no, speaking French all the time and letting Mr. Dith Pran translate into Khmer. But if they had looked into the bags they had confiscated, which they did not, they would have found my passport and Mr. Rockoff's.

Officers Also Picked Up

We spent a very frightened half-hour sweating in the baking personnel carrier, during a journey on which two more prisoners were picked up—Cambodians in civilian clothes who were high military officers and who were, if that is possible, even more frightened than we.

Then followed two hours in the open under guard at the northern edge of town while Mr. Dith Pran pulled off his miracle negotiation with our captors as we watched giddy soldiers passing with truckloads of looted cloth, wine, liquor, cigarettes and soft drinks, scattering some of the booty to soldiers along the roadside.

We also watched civilian refugees leaving the city. We thought they were people who had fled into the city from the near outskirts in the last days of the fighting and were now returning home. We did not yet realize that people were being forcibly evacuated.

We were finally released at 3:30 P.M., but the two Cambodian military men were held. One was praying softly.