

A Few Stowaways Joined Long Convoy

CAMBODIANS ABLE TO EFFECT ESCAPE

FRIDAY, MAY 9, 1975

From the French Embassy

to Thailand

Travelers See How Rulers
Have Organized Rural Life
—Troops Along the Way

The following dispatch was also written by Sydney H. Schanberg.

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BANGKOK, Thailand, May 8 — As refugees beginning our evacuation journey to Thailand, we left the French Embassy in Phnom Penh on April 30 in virtually the same chaos in which we had entered it 13 days earlier.

In the predawn darkness there was milling and confusion in the embassy yard as more than 500 of us clambered into 26 Soviet, Chinese and American military trucks for the 250-mile journey.

There were supposed to be 20 persons per truck, but darkness and confusion cover a multitude of things and some stowaways managed to sneak aboard. There were five: Asian wives of westerners whose papers were incomplete but who were fiercely determined to get out; a child of one of them and a German television correspondent.

All of them, for reasons that cannot be fully told here, got onto my truck, which contained, among other passengers, some Americans, Swedes, Bulgarians and seven Russians from their embassy, with a mammoth load of luggage and food.

The German newsmen sat upright but the other stowaways slipped under our legs and we covered them with towels, bush hats and other oddments. Somehow the officials who were checking the convoy never noticed them.

At 6 A.M., with the sun just coming up, the convoy moved out. As it did we saw a frosh

battalion of troops marching single file into the city from the north—a mirror image of the battalion that marched in on the evening of April 17 when we entered the French Embassy.

New Images on the Way

Then the scene changed and we met new images. The street light burned casting their artificial rays along the boulevards of a deserted city. Abandoned cars and assorted trash marked the trail of the missing population.

In the courtyard of the Hotel Le Phnom soldiers stood in morning formation. Another battalion formation was lined up down the street in front of the railway station; similar formations were visible on adjoining streets.

The soldiers stood with heads bowed, their weapons at their feet, as if in prayer. An anthem was being played; it appeared to be some kind of morning "thought session."

Every shop had been broken open and looted. Not a single civilian was visible—only soldiers camping in the shops and on the sidewalks. There were large numbers of them.

We suddenly turned right—that is, west—down the road to the airport, and this was puzzling because we were supposed to be heading north and northwest toward the Thai frontier.

Our journey gave us a brief but revealing glimpse into the covert spy system and communally organized countryside of the Communists—a glimpse that, as far as is known, no Westerners had ever before gotten.

Covert Supply System

We traveled on some of the well-defended dirt roads they had built by hand and used as clandestine supply routes during the five years of the war that ended with their seizure of Phnom Penh on April 17.

None of these roads show on maps of Cambodia, yet some were only half a mile or so from the main highways.

We saw reservoirs, dikes, bridges—all built with hand tools. No machines or earth-moving equipment were visible.

We also saw boy militia units on patrol everywhere and male-female work crews repairing roads.

As we passed many of the villagers and soldiers stared at us wonderingly, as if they had never seen a white man before—which is possible.

From what we could determine it seemed that these areas had been developed and organized over a long period and that they had remained untouched sanctuaries throughout the war. There were no signs that either American planes or planes of the old Phnom Penh government had bombed here, nor were there any signs that troops of the old Government had tried to mount a ground assault against those areas. The trees bore no marks of bullet holes, as they always do when there has been ground fighting.

The over-all impression was striking. Some of the handhewn reservoirs, for example, had a terraced system that channel water into an agricultural irrigation system.

The supply network that we got the best look at snaked through thick forest and swampy ponds along a line that ran generally parallel to and west of Route 5. It covered approximately 40 miles, running from near the town of

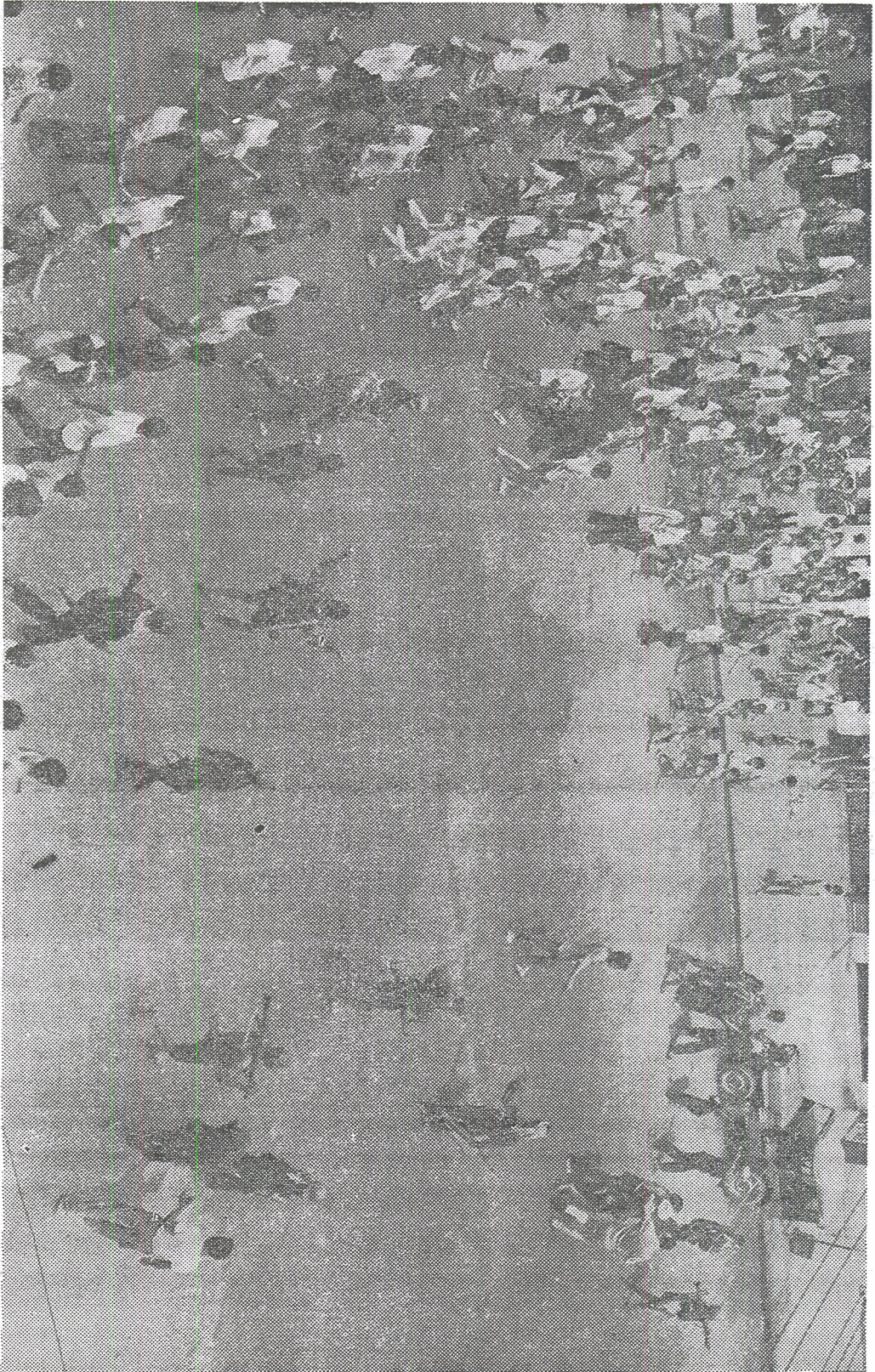
Oudong to the province capital of Kompond Chhang.

One got the feeling as we traveled along these dirt roads, which were occasionally wide but often so narrow that tree branches along the sides thwacked against our trucks, that the village and countryside organization was much stronger than anyone on the other side had imagined.

Yet while this organizational system was impressive, when we traveled on other roads we saw some depressing sights. Refugees forced out of Phnom Penh and other places were still plodding along, pushing carts and carrying heavy sacks of belongings over their shoulders as they headed for the interior areas, where the Khmer rouge say they must now become peasants and grow rice.

Abandoned and stripped cars littered some highways: apparently city people had started out in them and jetisoned when they ran out of fuel. There was other detritus too—steel helmets and other military equipment and weapons discarded on the run by the routed troops.

Here and there were bodies, but it was difficult to tell if they were people who had succumbed to the hardships of the march or simply civilians and soldiers killed in the last battles.



Cambodian Communists, followed by a crowd of civilians, moving down Monivong Boulevard after entering Phnom Penh on April 17

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