

A WEEKEND IN GENEVA

May 1980

We sat in the front row of the Conference Center and watched the assorted diplomats and bureaucrats sitting in neat semi-circular rows, dressed in Armani suits, sipping Perrier, shuffling paper and pretending to talk about starving people in a jungle half a world away. There were five of us in the balcony and we were like stars in orbit passing each other only once in our existence.

UN-speak has a meaning of its own. The words sound the same but you listen for the code. The subject was Cambodia which was in the death-throes of the Khmer Rouge regime but also in the death-throes of a nation. While those in the balcony disagreed with the crowd on the floor on tactics and strategy – we all had the same goal of rescuing a nation from its self-inflicted holocaust.

I was 38 years old and still had energy and enough hair to allow for an Afro. I was also a veteran of civil war and chaos. Reg was a veteran of VietNam – but not of the gun-toting kind. Yvette was a legend in her own time – a French orphan who purchased a one-way ticket to Cambodia at the age of 16 and had made a life that warranted a spy novel plot and was in fact the subject of more than one of Le Carre's story lines. William Shawcross had written the definitive book on the secret war in Cambodia and had arrived from London. Then there was Joan Baez. We shared Harvard Square in the sixties when she started her career in the coffee shops while I spent at least some of my time on the right bank of the river and the political world. Fate and war in a remote jungle had brought us together.

The subject was Cambodia and how to end the debilitating war that was the holocaust of its era and how to rebuild a society that was in total collapse. There was only one problem. The Vietnamese had effectively destroyed the Khmer Rouge or at least pushed them into remote corners of the country or along the border – but it is difficult to destroy a determined and hardened jungle army when friends like Thailand, China and the United States were willing to rescue its defeated warriors and re-insert them at another point along the jungle border to fight another day.

VietNam had decided to attack in December of 1978 to clean up their more radical Communist brethren in Cambodia and establish what they considered a more normal socialist society. While the US, Canada and a number of other Western countries did not really care for the Khmer Rouge and had yet to discover the full horror of that regime – they did not really want VietNam to extend its hegemony over its neighbors. The domino theory still had some believers – at least that was the rationale.

This was Monday morning in Geneva and we had only decided to attend and challenge this global conference three days earlier. Several of us were part of a major program in the border jungles of Cambodia designed to re-supply the country and its people with the products necessary to start village life over again. The country had been totally decimated and there were no seed, no tools, no fishing nets, no anything – the essentials that a simple agrarian society needs to survive. The UN had succeeded in negotiating its first ever arrangement with a Communist nation to co-ordinate relief activities and these supplies were intended to pass through VietNam on their way to Cambodia. There was only one slight problem. The Vietnamese authorities after a couple of generations of war were

hardly organized and of the mindset to deal with a situation that they could not fully control – and Cambodia in early 1980 was not a country that could be said to be in any kind of normal order. As a result the supplies from the UN, ICRC and various Governments arrived but then sat in warehouses. A small group of entrepreneurial NGO's with the often informal on-the-ground help of the UN agencies (or at least their local staff) had devised a rather creative system to push supplies through the jungle by ox-cart, bicycle and on foot. The jungle supply line was so effective that it succeeded in delivering vastly more supplies to the people who mattered than the UN could deliver with two DC-10s, a huge fleet of trucks and assorted ships.

Why was this a problem? The UN wanted to assert control over the process of supply to Cambodia since the jungle trail had many known and unknown side-effects. The army of VietNam stripped the returning refugees of about 10% of their supplies – a toll that effectively fed their army. The Khmer Rouge also had access to some of these supplies so it enhanced their ability to survive. It was a huge strategic and ethical dilemma for all concerned and we were not unaware of the implications. On the other hand – we were in the jungle every day with a million peasants from Cambodia who were trying to return to their villages and start life again. The UN was limited to distributing only 'life-support' because the Governments who control the UN had decreed that the UN could not provide 'development assistance' to a Government that they did not recognize - and the West led by the USA did not like the VietNameese. That was one subject where the USA and China were in amazing agreement. The main concern of Thailand was to keep the VietNameese from threatening their political existence and supporting the lingering Communist insurgency in the North-East – they were also concerned that if Cambodian refugees were allowed to enter Thailand they may never get rid of them since there was little sign that Western countries would ever accept them. These were not simple questions and there was ample room for disagreement.

Several weeks earlier the local UN authorities had challenged the two agencies in charge of the border program known as the landbridge to moderate their pace of deliveries so that they would not exceed what the UN could accomplish with the presumed fear that this would be embarrassing the whole UN system. The larger border program operated officially under the auspices of the international agencies. The ICRC (actually this is the Swiss Red Cross with only Swiss citizens) controlled the border emergency operation that supplied rice (must be hulled so that it cannot be planted – that would be development), medical aid and similar life-saving services. They did a great job within their permitted mandate. The border was actually not really controlled by the ICRC but by 26-year-old Robert Ashe, a Brit who had married a Cambodian refugee, spoke the language and had figured out how to communicate with the various factions in the border area – and there were many. The VietNameese were pressing everyone against the border, the Khmer Rouge survived at the pleasure of their Thai and other supporters, the various Free Khmer factions lived a somewhat similar existence and the Thai army made sure everything stayed on the other side of their border. Mixed in were any number of agents from "pick your favorite intelligence or spy agency".

The border program was not the only agenda item for the foreign ministers of the world who had gathered in Geneva. They were trying to look beyond the Khmer Rouge but had to deal with the turmoil of an unfinished war and a lack of a common view of a desirable outcome. We created a problem for

them. Our program was working very well and saving lives but it perpetuated a situation of chaos. The international headquarters of the ICRC, UNICEF (they controlled the supply line to the border), the FAO who provided many of the resources, the UNHCR dealing with the 250,000 who had made it across the border plus the UN political apparatus all were vying for a voice. After that you had all of the various interested embassies – enough opinions to go around!

Several weeks earlier we had experienced a challenge from the leadership of these assorted agencies. I was called to a midnight meeting at the elegant Erewan Hotel to be faced by the Global heads of the ICRC, UNICEF and the UN itself. They were standing with suitcases in hand and a tight deadline to get to the airport to catch flights back to Europe. They demanded that I slow down deliveries to a level below what they could deliver. Since the decision – in my view – had no strategic impact but only served their internal political interest I told them that I would not starve deserving Cambodians to meet their political ends. CARE was operating parallel to our agency and would supply about 50% of the requirements of this program. CARE was much more susceptible to political pressure of this kind since they relied on funding from Governments and the UN. Although I was nominally working for the NGO World Relief of the USA, I was essentially a free agent and had nothing to lose – at least politically. CARE was willing to restrain its activities and allowed me to take the heat which I was more than willing to do. We all stood in this non-air-conditioned room in the Erewan – the temperature must have been 100 degrees and Sir Robert Jackson the senior UN official was sweating and stripped to the waist. I responded that they had physical control of the access to the border and if they wanted to reduce the flow of my products they had the ability to stop the trucks. On the next scheduled delivery day we sent the usual 40 trucks to the border and the UN authorities allowed only 10 to pass. We paid the drivers an adequate risk premium and the other 30 trucks created a long line on the lonely road that led into the Cambodian jungle. Two days later we sent another 40 trucks and 30 more were added to the line. When 90 trucks created a line more than a mile long the international press took notice and wanted an answer to this unusual situation. They were advised to “ask Art DeFehr in Bangkok and he will have an answer”. The reporter for International Newsweek was the first to show up. The UN agencies were in turmoil internally and all of the long telegrams arguing the matter were being provided to me in unmarked brown envelopes. Locally we had full support but the global headquarters were more interested in the political cold war games. I showed the Newsweek reporter all of the telegrams with an implicit understanding that I would be personally protected in any report. I was quoted 6 times with different descriptions in an article titled “Seeds of Survival”. Within 24 hours the border program was wide open again. This was the background to that part of the debate in Geneva.

The Cambodia Conference was scheduled for a Monday in Geneva. The prior Thursday the Embassy of Canada contacted me and asked if I could help. The UN had not provided any advance information about its agenda or arguments and the various embassies were in the position of sending their foreign ministers to Geneva with little preparation or advice about the nature of the issues. The Embassy of Canada had scheduled a meeting at 1000 on Friday morning to exchange views that would allow the preparation of a memo to their politicians heading for Geneva on the weekend. They felt they were shooting blanks and needed some input. These were the days before word processors, email and every other device other than carbon paper and a typewriter. I did an all-nighter with great assistance from

my capable assistant Donna and by 1000 on Friday we delivered a paper titled “Alternative to Famine” that argued the case to allow the border to operate at full capacity. This paper was distributed to the 10 major Western embassies in attendance and we were advised later that this was possibly the only relevant paper that their ministers read on the way to Geneva.

The secrecy that shrouded the Geneva event worried those of us involved in the border operation and we took a quick decision to act. Reg and I together with Yvette decided we would take the Saturday night flight to Geneva. Yvette got into action and called William Shawcross, the writer about Cambodia and Joan Baez who had already been involved in our program by performing at concerts in support of our cause. We flew with Mort Abramovitz the articulate and highly respected US Ambassador to Thailand who would later head the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. We met in the suite of Baez on the top floor of an elegant hotel on the north shore of Lake Geneva and plotted strategy. Somehow a Sunday night dinner was organized on short notice for a number of the Western diplomats where Baez sang songs written for the occasion. This is the background that led us to a Monday morning sitting in the front row of an empty balcony in Geneva and watching the self-important diplomats of the world shuffling paper and sipping Perrier.

We were totally ignored by the authorities on the Conference floor. We knew which 10 embassies had received my paper and we had to wait to see if their speeches would indicate any challenge to the position proposed by the UN. This conference was organized where each country spoke in alphabetical order so we made a list and listened. The first of the 10 countries to speak did indeed use the code words that signified disagreement with the UN position and support of our arguments. The same was true with numbers 2 through 6. A low buzz was noticeable on the Conference floor since these diplomats are well-trained to pick up these coded signals and nobody knew where this dissonance had come from. Suddenly a clerk appeared with a big armful of documents and began distributing a copy to each member. I could tell from the balcony that the format was clearly my document. By the seventh speaker a messenger suddenly appeared behind us and asked in rather curt language if we would come to the lobby to meet with Mister Hay, the Head of the Global Red Cross Societies. There was no polite preamble – simply slightly muffled anger and the question – “What the hell do you people want?” We responded that the UN should continue to maximize its efforts and we endorsed them –however – until they could demonstrate that they were up to the task they should leave our program alone since it was actually doing exactly what the UN wanted to happen. There was no answer but when the dust settled our program was allowed to exist without further disruption –at least on the question of volumes.

There were many other challenges before and after this Conference. Not least was a three –day war caused by the decision of Thai and UN authorities to return several hundred healthy Khmer fighters back into the jungle after being restored and re-supplied in the refugee camps. That is another story – for another time. The program had been designed to supply Cambodia with seed and related supplies in advance of the monsoon and the planting season – the only way that refugees could return to their villages. Our urgency was not political but driven by the very limited window of opportunity before the monsoon made the trails impassable and seeding impractical – thereby trapping the refugees at the border for another 12 months. The short war was near the end of June and we determined that the useful opportunity for seed delivery was for all practical purposes at an end. We cleared up the

inventory, shut down the program and declared the landbridge closed. Agencies like any other reality take on a life of their own and not everyone wanted to quit – there was capital involved – political and financial. We felt we had accomplished our goals for the planting season – closed the books, issued reports to all parties – including that our total overhead for the program was less than 1.0% of our expenditures. I returned to my family in Bangkok and together we returned to Canada. It was a truly remarkable program that existed for a mere 100 days in the midst of feuding armies and agencies – a miracle that operated with whistles rather than guns. The program delivered 800,000 sacks of rice seed plus many other kinds of supplies. Western Cambodia actually had a crop surplus that season and some estimated that the program had saved 100,000 lives. Robert Ashe who created this program was awarded with an Order of the British Empire at the age of 26.

Years later we would visit a friend at the ICRC headquarters in Geneva. He commented that he was glad that I could not read French. “Why” – I asked. He responded – “Because we tried to shut down your program but after the fact everyone recognized its success and in the official records of our organization we take full credit for the program and you are not even mentioned.” Life has its own rewards.