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NILO Ha Tien: On the Brown Water Border
By Larry Serra



There appears to be renewed interest in Brown Water Operations by the US Navy, and there are some lessons that can be learned from the past. I had to learn some of them personally. I probably should outline briefly for you what my job was as NILO Ha Tien in 1970, how I got there, and what happened. I had been assigned to CNFV N-2 staff as a mine warfare officer, and was bored by staff duty.

The situation in Cambodia was heating up as 1969 ended. I speak French fluently and was a new honors-graduate of Princeton, itching for some excitement. The Ha Tien NILO post was up for rotation, so I lobbied CDR Paul Keast, who ran the NILO section, to let me take over the post, and to let the NILO who had been ordered in behind that job to take mine on the staff.

Paul Keast liked my attitude, and that I had worked under CAPT Ed Hollyfield, my C/O on USS PROVIDENCE during my first tour, under whom Keast had served on the Cyrus Vance mission to Cyprus, which successfully effected a ceasefire. He knew I was a "Hollyfield-trained man" so I got the job.

I think the political and intelligence terrain had changed a bit by JAN 1970. While on staff I concentrated on the communist logistics, which ran through Sihanoukville, down through Cambodia and across the Vinh Te canal near Ha Tien.



From our team house at Ha Tien, I used to watch caravans of Hak Ly trucks bring weapons down from Sihanoukville to the Cambodian side of Nui Dai Dung mountain.

It turned out that we (DIA) were correct and the CIA was wrong about the magnitude of supply coming through Cambodia—it was much greater than the CIA believed. I did visual reconnaissance missions (VRs), crossed into Cambodia to lay sensors, and in the process discovered a blinking light signal system used by the Viet Cong to show the coast was clear for boatloads of weapons heading south.

We were under strict rules of engagement not to fire into Cambodia unless in self-defense or hot pursuit. Then in FEBR, an NVA ambush team killed one and wounded 5 U.S. sailors on an MSR from the Cambodian side of "The Bend" in the Giang Thanh River at Ha Tien.

This really got us upset, so with another Navy man (a CWO3) we decided to create a Navy Fire Team to stir up the enemy around the Ha Tien peninsula, hoping to provoke a response from them from just across the border, so we could respond in hot pursuit.

It worked.

On March 3rd, 1970, the 525 MIG officer at Ha Tien and I were taken under mortar fire at the border by VC/NVA inside Cambodia.

The event was declared a tactical emergency, and air support was flown in from Can Tho to bomb the area and its surroundings for more than two weeks 24/7. They cleaned out the VC in the mountain, and flattened Krabau hamlet on the Cambodia side of the border, from which we had received fire, and which had also been used by the VC for staging.

This event fed into the protest that Prince Sihanouk had planned against the NVA embassy in Phnom Penh. The NVA had been taking liberties and violating their tacit agreement with Sihanouk to remain in Cambodia: The NVA would be left alone to move supplies as long as they did not interfere with or cause damage to the Cambodian towns along the border. The flattening of Krabau by our aircraft fed into this perfectly. To our surprise, the Cambodians blamed the VC/NVA and not us for provoking the U.S. into responding into Cambodia.



Former Defense Minister Lon Nol

Within days, Sirik Matak and Lon Nol had deposed Sihanouk, and the battle for Cambodia was beginning. From March 1, the NVA had already begun to move its units inside Cambodia to put them in strategic control of the border areas.

We developed some good sources at Ha Tien. My 525 MI Group colleague recruited the Recording Secretary of the Cambodian cabinet, and we received regularly 3d carbon copies of his minutes and reports of the cabinet meetings.

I expanded my Blackbeard CT-5 network by recruiting new agents all the way up the Cambodian coast to the Thai border. We discovered that the PRC charge d'affaires in Phnom Penh had offered to Lon Nol the opportunity to have Prince Sihanouk eliminated. The Prince was the primary political opponent and had asylum in the PRC, where "a plane crash" could be arranged, if Lon Nol would re-open Sihanoukville to communist weapons shipments.

Lon Nol declined.

You will remember the U.S. publicly sat on the fence about aligning with Cambodia from March until April 30, 1970, when the "incursion" was announced by President Nixon. Around that time (late April or early May) a Cambodian navy ship sailed into Ha Tien (RVN) waters and by flashing light signaled the desire to speak to a U.S. Navy person.

I was called out and went alone to board RCE 311 (a Cambodian navy corvette) with a pistol stuck in the waistband of my fatigues.

I spent an afternoon speaking French with the Cambodian Commanding Officer, Som Sary. The NVA had already besieged two battalions of Cambodian Marines in the hills above Kep, and they were without food or ammunition.

Som Sary said he was sent by Lon Nol to request that the U.S. supply his marines with weapons and ammo to resist the NVA. This information and the weapons shopping-list (I still have the little brown pocket notebook with the weapons list and notes in Som Sary's handwriting) which was sent immediately to Saigon, then kicked upstairs to MACV and the White House. I was ordered to cut out all my addressees on this traffic except VADM Zumwalt, General Abrams, the Ambassador and the CIA station chief in Saigon.

The Cambodians came back in two days, and I went aboard again, and this time got underway with them north into Cambodian waters for two days, gaining intelligence from observation and COMINT about their codes and radio procedures.

By the time I got back, N-2 thought I had been taken prisoner, so cautioned me to be careful with the situations I got into, but VADM Zumwalt complimented me on the "outstanding and professional job of liaison" I had effected with the Cambodian Navy. (Not bad for a 24 year old reserve!) The Cambodians got their weapons without any public incident, and we became official allies a month later.

Within weeks after that meeting, I had been introduced by my Cambodian navy friends to Um Samuth, the Governor of Kampot and Bokor Provinces in Cambodia, and civilian commander of the military region along the Vietnam border at Ha Tien.

Samuth admired the US .45 as a sidearm, and I admired his 9mm parabellum Belgian Browning pistol. I had learned from US sailors who had been at Ha Tien for more than a year that the Cambodians regarded the exchange of pistols between combatants as being akin to the blood brother ritual of Native American Indians. After few meetings with Samuth, he voluntarily offered me his 9mm Browning, which really floored me. I went back and retrieved my .45 and gave it to him. Samuth and I were fast friends and colleagues after that.

Lon Nol asked that I be appointed US Naval Attaché (I saw the message) when we opened our mission in Phnom Penh, but a career intelligence officer was sent instead. As a consolation prize Lon Nol sent me a Cambodian Naval beret which I wore for the rest of my tour, to the consternation of many Army colonels who told me I was out of uniform.

Before April 30th, while the NVA were moving to secure militarily the border regions of Cambodia and to surround Phnom Penh, VADM Zumwalt came out to Ha Tien with CINCPACFLT ADM Hyland to be briefed on the Cambodia situation. As we rode in a PBR from Phao Dai to the new ACTOV base at Ha Tien, I told the admirals that the military situation in Cambodia was "turning to shit" (I think VADM Zumwalt winced), explained the details, and suggested we'd better intervene soon or Cambodia would be lost. ADM Hyland said "I know son, we're doing what we can to get us off the fence on this." ADM Hyland reported to Washington and we intervened 10 days later on April 30th with President Nixon's announcement of the Cambodian incursion.



The waterfront at Kep, June 1970

Then I was sent TAD to be intelligence officer for Market Time (CTF 115), to plan an amphibious naval

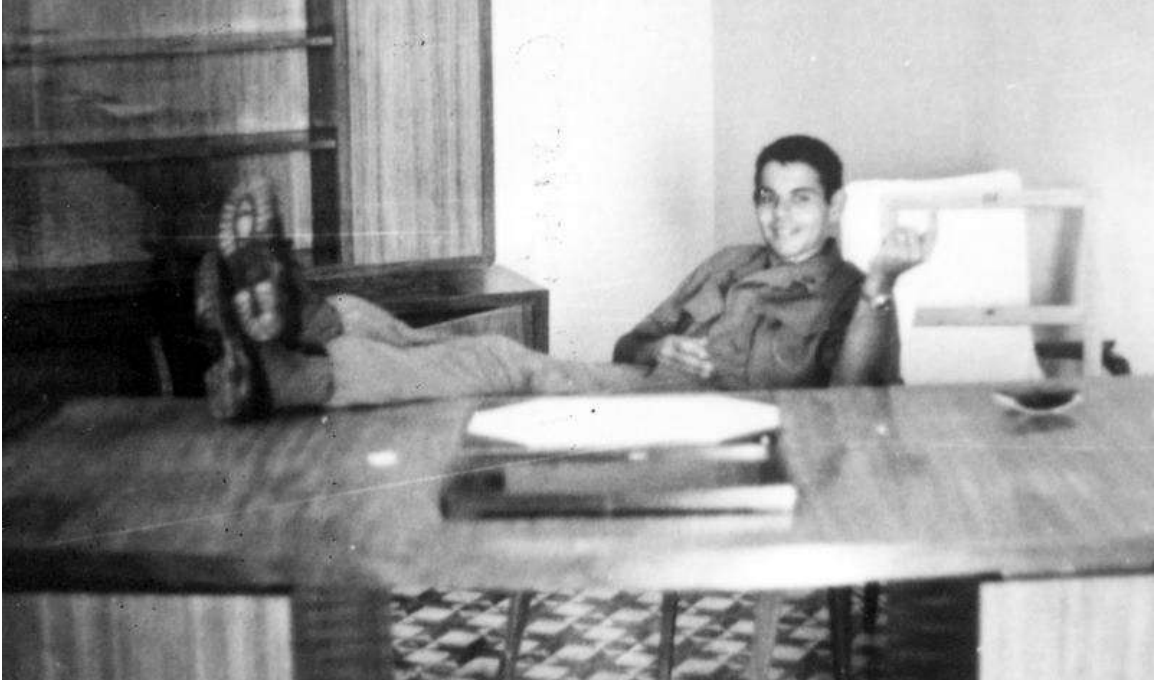
landing at Kep, Cambodia, and patrol boat incursions through small streams along the border. These were inadvisable ideas because of the extremely shallow water and muck at Kep, and the streams being too narrow for the PBRs and PCFs to turn around in. As an 1105 I had 18 months experience as a fleet OOD, assistant navigator, and boat officer before the NILO job, and this practical experience proved useful. I persuaded the Commodore not to try it.

Instead, we "invaded" Kep on USS ANTELOPE (Gallup class PGF), and met no resistance.

I was sent back into Cambodia in June with the army colonel who was head of the 525 MIG Group when the Cambodians started slaughtering ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia at Takeo and other places. On that trip I unknowingly watched our agent on the Cambodian cabinet be shot to death when the convoy in which he was riding was ambushed.

Next, I was sent by N-2 to Sihanoukville to take photos, do an official port survey (with the crew of the LST ostensibly there to deliver a shortwave radio transmitter), and determine how to take out the port if the Lon Nol government changed its mind and re-started communist weapons shipments through Sihanoukville.

That mission was completed successfully. There are more tales from that interesting tour, but they will have to wait for another installment.



LT Serra at the Prince's desk at the summer palace at Kep, Cambodia.

VADM Earl F. "Rex" Rectanus, former COMNAVFOR-Vietnam N2, comments to Larry Serra:

"Your story of NILO Ha Tien is of interest to me for a number of reasons. I departed SVN in June 1969 after the USN part of SEALORDS was winding down and Bud Zumwalt had completed much of the Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese (ACTOV).

I am especially interested in Cambodia and Sihanoukville for many reasons, not the least of which relates to efforts to convince State and the CIA to accept the problem of massive Chinese support through Cambodia. The non-acceptance of our estimates resulted in many problems; not the least of which was skewing the analysis on just what was coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In this regard as you now know our NAVFORV/MACV estimates of tonnages by analysis and SUNSHINE PARK (arguably the most successful net in this strategic sense) were only 5% different from the actual amount documented after the war.

Of course, James Jesus Angleton never did accept the ***bona fides*** of our people.

My counterpart, CAPT Nguyen Van Tan (the father of "Sunshine Park") and I were reunited in 1992 after he served sixteen years at hard labor. His grandson is now a LTJG in the US Navy; and we remain close to him and his wife, Saori.

In many ways, your remarkable NILO account could have served as a testament to my intelligence officer Jack Graf, who served two tours in the Republic of Vietnam, was shot down twice, captured, and finally killed after having escaped his bamboo cage, and to LT Ken Tapscott, NILO SEAFLOAT who was killed during your tour.

The details of the Sihanoukville mission and the NILO's intelligence collection efforts and activities are literally true and accurate."

Editor's note: Larry Serra has been a successful lawyer and adjunct law professor in San Diego for 33 years. He is also author of a fictionalized account of his NILO tour, and a play which was produced in San Diego a few years ago. Like many other veterans of the conflict in SE Asia, he became disaffected as Cambodia deteriorated and fell under the Khmer Rouge genocide. As history seems to be repeating itself, it is worth a moment of consideration on the consequences of military invasions, combat, and the terms on which the nation chooses to end them.