

LARRY SCHREIBER

Nong Chan Camp, 1980 (Rice in her Mouth)

At 7am, I was driving down the potholed dusty road through Thai military check points. Brown water buffalos wallowed in snake-infested, and emerald green rice paddies, set below even greener rolling hills. The leaves on the Sugar Palm trees flanking the route were also covered in dust from the military vehicles and civilian motorcycles carrying entire families. At times malnourished dogs, some of them probably rabies-infested, barked at us.

We'd been in the white Toyota Red Cross pickup for about an hour, leaving Aranyaprathat in Thailand, where we loaded our truck each day with daily supplies of IV fluids, antibiotics, and anti-malarials. We were headed for the Nong Chan Camp, located half in Thailand and half in Cambodia, a major feeding station for 60,000 Cambodians displaced from their homeland by the Khmer Rouge genocide. The Khmer Rouge who were responsible for killing 1.7 million of their own people including my adopted son Michael's mother, father, and six brothers and sisters. I was in the midst of the most intense three months of my life.

How in the world did I end up in this Red Cross pick-up, with a broken air conditioner under such sweltering conditions? With me were five nurses. I was one of only two United States doctors that the International Committee of the Red Cross allowed into the border camps. All of us even so early in the day were damp from sweat. Sunshine was already blistering in this pre-monsoon season of March 1980.

Suddenly, just short of the camp entrance we were waved to a stop at a check point manned by a half dozen teenage soldiers from the right-wing Task Force 80, a Thai military group whose function was to prevent Cambodian refugees from

escaping into Thailand. They also wished to keep excess aid from reaching the camp so the border would not become “too attractive,” for the starving refugees.

Several skinny Thai soldiers carrying U.S. made M16 rifles inspected our papers. I punched on my walkie-talkie to connect with the United Nations advance person who checked out the camp for us, radioing information like: “The border is quiet; the enemy is not active today, go on in,” or “It’s too bloody dangerous right now, do not proceed.”

Yet before I got through to him my attention was diverted off to the left side of our vehicle. At first I did not understand, the scene made no sense, it was surreal. An angry Thai soldier was aiming his rifle at a Khmer family of three, and he was yelling and shooting at them. Could this be possible? What should I do? Get out of the car? Wave my hands? What? I did what I knew best when frustrated in an automobile. I honked my horn over and over and over again. I really leaned on it. I banged on it as hard as I could calling attention to our truck. Obviously I hoped to distract the soldier. I couldn’t speak, I was too shocked, and so I kept honking the horn.

The nurse beside me, Cora from Vermont shrieked.

Startled, another Thai teenage soldier swung his weapon around jammed his M16 right into my face yelling incoherent Thai words with the M16 firmly and precariously against my left cheek. I quit banging on the horn and reflexively lifted my hand to push the barrel away. The other nurses were frightened and Sister Marie shouted, “No!”

I never saw if the Khmer family of three made it from the fields back into the camp.

The soldier was apoplectic; jabbing at me furiously screaming epithets, I flinched and twitched thinking he might pull the trigger. A Thai superior officer hustled over to us, barking orders in Thai and English: “Move now, leave Red Cross people.” He grabbed my angry assailant’s shoulder yanking him backwards, breathless, ears ringing and hands shaking, I fumbled to start the pick-up hoping our continued presence would prevent bloodshed. I stalled it twice, and then we drove forward into the refugee camp.

When we entered the camp, the banner over the camp entrance pissed me off more than usual: *Welcome Thai Khmer Friendship Nong Chan Camp*. As the nurses and I stumbled out of the truck, Damry hurried over clearly agitated. Damry, the barefoot doctor who spoke a moderate amount of French and rudimentary amount of English who I trained to be a “doctor” and would become my lifelong friend.

“Come in quick Dr. Larry little girl shot right now.”

I ran down the slim hallway to where we kept trauma victims. There I recognized the family of three I'd attempted to save outside of the camp. The mother and father were bent over their limp girl who was about seven years old. Body still warm, she had rice in her mouth. I could see an entrance wound at the rear of her neck around the seventh cervical vertebrae. She had no carotid pulse, her chest did not move. No rise or fall. Her Khmer father knew she was dead but he still expected the American doctor to do something. His eyes pleaded with me as he spoke in a language I did not understand. A language both shrill and gentle at the same time.

What could I do? How had this happened? I had thought by honking my horn I had saved lives.

Dazed, I swiped with two of my fingers the right side of her mouth clear of rice. Next I started an IV in her arm, pushed on her emaciated thorax, and closed my mouth over hers. In and out. In and out I breathed. No oxygen no blood circulating no chance. She was dead, but for minutes I could not stop breathing in and out on her mouth, pushing on her sternum. I knew as a doctor there was not going to be a miracle, yet I desperately wanted one.

The Khmer father approached me and said, *Ab Gun* thank you. He actually told me thank you.

So, I gave up, backed away and apologized to him in English, words he did not understand, yet did.

His wife cried without tears. Lifting their little girl into their arms, they left the hospital, disappearing into the crowded camp.

I looked at my watch. It was barely 8 am. Damry handed me a towel and I wiped her blood off my hands.

LARRY SCHREIBER, MD, has lived and practiced family medicine in northern New Mexico for thirty-nine years. Schreiber is the proud father of fourteen children, ten of whom were adopted from around the world. In 1980, Schreiber worked as the medical team director for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Cambodia. His recent and upcoming publications include *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Western Press Books*, *Lime Hawk Literary Arts Collective*, *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine* and the journal *Neurology*. He is married to poet Catherine Strisik and they live in San Cristobal, New Mexico.