

How Michael Deeds and Chris Delance From Long Beach Became the Last American Victims of the Khmer Rouge

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Between 1975 and 1979, 2 million Cambodians died during their nation's four-year experiment in stone-age communism. In 1994, I began documenting atrocities carried out by the Khmer Rouge, the peasant army that took over Cambodia on April 17, 1975—just two weeks before the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War—for a number of nonprofit organizations. During my first trip to Cambodia, I visited Tuol Sleng Prison; of the approximately 15,000 to 20,000 men, women and children who entered, less than 20 survived. Included in the mountains of photographic and documentary evidence left behind were the “confessions” of American sailors Michael Deeds and Chris Delance. While some historians speculated they might have been working for U.S. intelligence, I suspected they were marijuana smugglers.

Although my long hair is gone now and my views are more conservative than they once were, there is a part of my past I will not sweep under the rug and disavow. I am old enough and honest enough to remember the Thai sticks that flooded my beachside town each summer—a surfer's equivalent of the Beaujolais nouveau. During the 1970s, Thai stick marijuana—so-called because the buds were tightly wrapped around hemp or bamboo sticks before being packed into watertight bundles for the long trans-Pacific trip—was one of the most valuable commodities in the world. At \$2,000 per pound, a single load of Thai could and did make many a smuggler a small fortune. To us pot-smoking teenaged surfers, these scammers—the people who fetched these loads from afar—were heroic Robin Hood characters who

trafficked only in pot and surfed more world-class waves than anyone else.

Like myself, Delance and Deeds grew up in the waters and on the beaches of Southern California. An expert sailor and skilled surfer, Delance was the well-liked son of a Long Beach yacht broker. A gifted guitar player, Deeds was the son of legendary Cal State Long Beach tennis coach and athletic director, Cameron "Scotty" Deeds. Deeds and Delance both grew up in the Naples section of Long Beach and moved to Maui after graduating from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1969.

Both men were feeling the pressure of Maui's high cost of living and its limited employment opportunities when Ron Jackson (not his real name) approached them about smuggling a load of Thai pot aboard his sailboat the *Iwalani*. The state-of-the-art, teak-decked Nicholson 45 was more than capable of a trans-Pacific crossing. According to Jackson, he had smuggled marijuana before, but Deeds and Delance had not.

Deeds told his family he was going to Molokai's remote Halawa Valley and would be out of touch for several months. After the *Iwalani* reached Singapore, Jackson traveled to Thailand to put together their load while Delance and Deeds lived aboard the sloop at the Republic of Singapore Yacht Club. Although the Americans told harbor acquaintances they were delivering the boat to an Australian buyer, after weeks of waiting turned into months, their expat friends began to suspect the two men were smugglers. Jackson had laid the groundwork for a deal a year earlier, but because he had arrived late, his source in Thailand was out of pot. He turned to Mike Ritter (a fellow marijuana smuggler and co-author of my 2013 book, *Thai Stick: Surfers, Scammers and the Untold History of the Marijuana Trade*, with Columbia University Press) and Don Hagee (also not his real name). Both men agreed to help him arrange a load, but even with their collective efforts, they could not locate decent marijuana so late in the season.

Jackson grew frustrated waiting and found another longtime American scammer in Bangkok who could load the *Iwalani* immediately. He contacted

Deeds and Delance and told them to set sail for Thailand while he left the port of Sattahip on a Thai Navy vessel with the pot on board. When the Thai ship reached the rally point, the *Iwalani* was nowhere to be found. After three days and nights of waiting, the ship returned to Thailand with the pot still on board.

"That was Nov. 23, 1978," Jackson told Ritter in a 2002 interview for our book. "I spent the last four days of November, all December and the first week of January going up and down the Malaysian coast in case they'd been blown off or shipwrecked. The only thing we couldn't do was get into Cambodia. They just disappeared into the void."

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The *Iwalani* was within sight of Cambodia's offshore islands when Delance and Deeds spotted a boat heading toward them at high speed. The Khmer Rouge Navy consisted of eight Chinese escort boats, a dozen fast torpedo boats, and a number of armed fishing boats scattered between the port of Kompong Som and the Ream Naval Base. For smugglers such as Ritter, who regularly took boatloads of pot out into the Gulf of Thailand, their greatest fear was being captured by the Khmer Rouge.

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"I'd look over there, and I would just get cold shivers," Ritter recalls. "My image of the country at that time was comparable to Tolkien's Mordor, a black hole where all regard for life and civilized behavior broke down. I choked at the thought of dying slowly in a Cambodian prison."

Although the *Iwalani* attempted to head back out to sea to avoid capture, when the patrol boat opened fire, the Americans lowered their sails and awaited their fate. The Cambodian boat closed the distance quickly and didn't even bother to pull alongside; it smashed right into the *Iwalani*'s fiberglass bow. Black-clad men armed with AK-47s spilled onto the deck and

wasted no time in subduing and blindfolding the Americans. By the time the Cambodians had towed the sailboat to port, other soldiers from Cambodia's Third Division had heard over the radio that an American boat had been captured and were waiting at the dock to see it.

In 2005, I travelled to Kompong Speu, a province west of Phnom Penh, a lawless region where three Western backpackers had been kidnapped and murdered a decade earlier, and interviewed former Cambodian sailor Nek Long (not his real name). He recalled hearing over his radio that a patrol boat had just captured an American sailboat with two men dressed as civilians aboard. When the *Iwalani* came into port under tow, he saw two blindfolded white men. "Among the men I saw that time, there was one tall, big guy and another guy who was neither big nor tall," he told me.

Some of the Cambodian sailors who captured the *Iwalani* had fought against U.S. Marines on Koh Tang Island during the "Mayaguez Incident" of May 12 to 15, 1975, the last battle of the Vietnam War, in which American Marines attempting to rescue an American merchant vessel, the S.S. *Mayaguez*, fought Khmer Rouge soldiers, leading to the death of 10 Marines, two Navy corpsman and an Air Force crewman. Three Marines survived the battle but were left stranded on the island of Koh Tang, where they were captured a week later and executed.

In a 2005 interview in a former Khmer Rouge stronghold, Sok Sann (not his real name), a Khmer Rouge soldier who shot down an American helicopter during the battle, told me that he suspected Deeds and Delance "might be spies who were ordered to take photographs for military actions because Americans were preparing for another navy fight. We understood that they were supported by other ships or something else, that the boat could travel on its own."

Sann vividly remembered seeing the strange boat for the first time. "We didn't have such a boat in Cambodia," he recalled. "The sail had already been pulled down when it was captured. We had never seen this boat before.

It was very modern; it was made of neither metal nor wood." (Despite years of searching, the *Iwalani* was never found and is presumed to have been intentionally sunk by the Khmer Rouge.) When Sann and his curious comrades walked over to have a closer look, someone suddenly turned on floodlights and ordered the Americans to climb onto the dock. "Because they were blindfolded, they couldn't see, so they held their arms and walked them," he said. "In our mind, we had a lot of doubts; we didn't feel any hatred, as [we did] when we saw the Vietnamese."

The two Americans were loaded into a car that drove inland for a few hours before it turned down a hot, dusty road on the outskirts of Phnom Penh and stopped at the reinforced gates of Tuol Sleng Prison. Unlike the majority of Cambodian prisoners, who were photographed and put in mass cells, ankle-cuffed to large steel poles, the Americans were photographed and taken to a house for "special" prisoners just outside the gates. The head of Tuol Sleng was a former academic named Kang Keck Ieu, better known as Brother Duch. The torturers, guards and prison staff numbered around 1,500 young men and women between the ages of 15 and 19, all from what their intellectual leaders considered "pure" or "clean" peasant backgrounds.

The climate of fear and distrust at Tuol Sleng has few equals in 20th-century history. One former cadre recalled the hardening process: "At that time, the Khmer Rouge taught us to hate our parents and not to call them '*Pok*' and '*Me*' [Dad and Mom] because our parents did not deserve to be '*Pok Me*'; only Angkar [the nation] deserved to be children's parents," he explained. "We believed what they said, and step by step, they slowly made us crazy."

Although these self-righteous teens served as the praetorian guards of Pol Pot's revolution, in truth, their lives were little more secure than those of the prisoners. According to prison records, 563 guards and other members of the prison staff were executed between 1976 and 1979. One guard was killed for burning a wasp's nest, another for shouting, "The house is on fire" in his sleep. One of the most striking things about this was the all-pervasive

culture of paranoia—every ally was also a potential enemy.

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The most feared men at Tuol Sleng were the “catchers,” who were responsible for capturing people, bringing them to prison and executing them after interrogation. By 1977, the Khmer Rouge leaders were ordering so many killings that every few weeks, truckloads of bound and blindfolded prisoners were driven in trucks to Choeung Ek, 15 kilometers southwest of Phnom Penh. The “catchers” forced the prisoners to kneel at the edge of a pit and clubbed them in the back of the neck with an iron bar. These shallow mass graves they were buried in came to symbolize Cambodia's so-called “killing fields.”

The interrogators worked in three-man teams composed of a transcriber, an interrogator and a torturer. Torture came in a variety of forms: beating with fists, feet, sticks or electric wire; burning with cigarettes; electric shocks; being forced to eat feces; jabbing with needles; ripping out fingernails; suffocation with plastic bags; water boarding; and being covered with centipedes and scorpions. Different teams specialized in “mild,” “hot” or “chewing” interrogations. Many of the questions asked revolved around charges of sedition. Individuals were accused of being agents of “C” or “K,” shorthand for the CIA and the KGB. Typically, the victim was asked a battery of questions that had no correct answer. The goal of the torture was, according to Brother Duch, to loosen memories: “Beat until he tells everything, beat him to get at the deep things.”

Interrogators were carefully instructed to write down prisoners' torture-induced personal histories. One interrogator's note to Duch that was recovered at the prison recounts a typical session. “In the afternoon and evening of July 21, 1977, I pressured him again, using electric cord and shit. On this occasion, he insulted the person who was beating him. ‘You people who are beating me will kill me,’ he said. He was given two to three spoonfuls of shit to eat, and after that, he was able to answer questions about the

contemptible Hing, Chau, Sac, Va, etc. That night, I beat him with electric cord again."

One Khmer Rouge lie detector was especially crude: a plastic bag went over the suspect's head, and if his or her carotid artery throbbed, the person was declared guilty.

In a 1997 interview in Phnom Penh, Tuol Sleng prison survivor Van Nath told me about the day Deeds and Delance were brought to Tuol Sleng. "I remember the first day they were brought to the prison; they had no clothes on, only underwear," he said. "They were blindfolded. There were two of them. They were both handcuffed separately. Both had beards." Van Nath also remembered the haunting sound of Deeds quietly singing to himself at night.

Throughout December 1978, Deeds and Delance were tortured and forced to write their confessions. Tuol Sleng's terrifying head interrogator, Mam Nai, a.k.a. "Chan," probably questioned the Americans because he was one of the only members of the staff who could speak English. Exceptionally tall for a Cambodian, with thick lips, he had skin and eyes so light that many thought he was an albino. When journalist Nate Thayer saw him in a Khmer Rouge camp decades later, he described Chan as "the most frightening" man he had ever seen. In a notebook that was left behind at Tuol Sleng, Chan wrote, "Apply political pressure, and then beat them until [the truth] emerges. Thinking only of torture is like walking on one leg—there must be political pressure [so that we can] walk on two legs."

The Americans' confessions are more a testament to man's remarkable creativity under extreme duress than anything else. Both men wove fact and fiction to tell a more convincing story. Deeds claimed to have been recruited by a CIA agent named Lazenby. After tactical training in Virginia and California and a 16-week course at the CIA's intelligence and operation school in Washington, D.C., he was given a certificate that declared him an "operation officer." Before going to Cambodia, the CIA allegedly sent Deeds

to Cal State Long Beach to keep track of radical student organizations, to Colombia to follow a drug-dealing revolutionary, and finally to Hawaii to infiltrate a radical environmental group. Deeds' stated objective was "to impede effectively the communist influence."

Delance wrote that the CIA recruited him in 1969 to infiltrate radical student organizations and "defend my country from within against communist insurgents." He claimed he was trained by "Commander Branley" at the nonexistent U.S. Special Services School; his "CIA number," 570-80-5777, was strangely similar to a Social Security number. Delance wrote that his mission in Cambodia was to make contact with Cambodian fishermen and turn them into spies who would photograph a Khmer Rouge military base.

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Delance tried to flatter his captors by inflating their international political significance. "The government of Kampuchea is strong and functioning well," he wrote, using the Khmer Rouge's preferred name for Cambodia. "The economy is in good shape, and the country is prospering. The only way to defeat Cambodia would be a full-scale nuclear attack (out of the question). This makes any form of bombing out of the question, and on the ground, Kampuchea has already demonstrated her superiority to U.S. Forces." The prisoner further claimed he and Deeds had been taking photographs for an hour when they saw the Cambodian naval vessel and threw their camera overboard to hide their espionage. After a series of warning shots, they were boarded by five or six soldiers who "immediately tied and blindfolded us."

The confession is dated Dec. 26, 1978. One week later, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and toppled the genocidal regime. While the Khmer Rouge leaders and their Chinese advisers were scurrying for the safety of the Thai border, Vietnamese combat photographer Ho Van Tay followed the smell of rotting corpses to the gate of Tuol Sleng and was the first to discover the hastily abandoned prison.

Back in Bangkok, Jackson had called Ritter and Hagee in a state of panic; they met near the old Oriental Hotel. An agitated Jackson told them he had no idea what had happened to his friends or his boat, but he said he would continue to search. When Jackson returned to Bangkok a few weeks later, after fruitlessly searching for them as far away as Malaysia, not only was he even more mentally and physically exhausted, but he was also out of ideas.

By January 1979, Deeds had not spoken to his family for more than half a year, and neither Jackson nor anyone else who knew about the *Iwalani*'s disappearance alerted them.

Although the Deeds family thought Mike was on Molokai, they were beginning to worry. When Mike's brother Karl began to look into his brother's disappearance, he was met with a wall of silence from his old friends who had moved to Maui.

"Everybody was holding to the creed 'Don't say anything,'" Karl later told me, adding he didn't start getting any answers until the summer of 1979, when he attended a 10-year high school reunion and bumped into a girl he knew from school. When the subject got around to Michael's disappearance, she realized Karl didn't know the full story. "I am tired of this bullshit!" she exclaimed angrily. "Nobody has told you? Last thing we heard, they were in Singapore."

Karl was stunned. It was the first time he had heard his brother was in Asia.

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Following that conversation, Karl spent all of his spare time looking into his brother's disappearance. A full year after his capture, he still knew next to nothing. He later recalled watching ABC's *Evening News* at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines on Nov. 25, 1979, and listening to Jim Laurie, among the first American newsmen to visit Vietnamese-occupied Cambodia, as he filed his report from Tuol Sleng Prison. "Oh, my God, this is horrible," Karl told

me he thought as he watched the report about the death camp. During the segment, Laurie listed the names of several Americans whose confessions had been found at the camp. When he heard his brother's name, Karl immediately knew his brother was dead. "It was like a dagger," he recalled.

Once he was certain Michael was dead, Karl wanted to locate his brother's remains. "I just don't want him to lie where he was tortured and killed. He deserves a lot better than that," he told one reporter at the time. "He was a really good guy. A great guy." Against the wishes of the U.S. government, Deeds traveled to Cambodia in 1989. He met Tuol Sleng survivor Van Nath, who helped him dig up several skeletons at Tuol Sleng. However, none of the identifiable bones proved to have been those of Americans. Although Karl never found his brother's remains, he forged a lifelong bond with the Cambodian people. "There was a sense of something shared—family killed," Karl said. "I never compared mine to theirs because theirs was a suffering greater than anything that I could ever know."

In December 1989, on the 11th anniversary of Michael Deeds' death, Karl held a press conference in front of the Chinese consulate in Los Angeles and demanded that China end its ongoing support of the Khmer Rouge. Karl was one of the first and most passionate advocates for a Khmer Rouge war crimes trial. Although he did not live to see it—Karl died of cancer in 1999—his brother's tormentor, Tuol Sleng commandant Brother Duch, was sentenced to life in prison by a mixed Cambodian-United Nations war crimes tribunal in 2011. During his trial, Duch testified, "The Westerners, they came in pairs, and at that time, Nuon Chea [a.k.a. Brother Number Two, second in command to Pol Pot] said that the long-nosed prisoners should be taken out, and I was ordered by him to burn them to ashes and not to leave any remaining behind."

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During the summer of 2012, 1,427 new inmate photographs from Tuol Sleng Prison were anonymously donated to the Documentation Center of

Cambodia in Phnom Penh; two were of Westerners. One was immediately identified as French Embassy employee Andre Gaston Courtigne. The other photo is a torn image of a handsome, light-eyed Caucasian, wearing a collared shirt and staring straight ahead with open eyes and dilated pupils, his fear palpable. The man remained unidentified for more than two weeks, as neither the Documentation Center nor the U.S. Department of Defense's Joint POW/MIA Command could name him. Documentation Center of Cambodia researchers even took the photograph to imprisoned Tuol Sleng commandant Brother Duch; he was also stumped. The Documentation Center approached me to identify the man in the photograph. It took me and the surfing fraternity's coconut wireless less than 12 hours to identify the man as Christopher Delance. (No Khmer Rouge photograph of Deeds has ever surfaced).

While multiple sources have provided salient details about the *Iwalani*'s ill-fated Thai marijuana scam, others maintain that Deeds and Delance were simply "adventurers" in the wrong place at the wrong time. A 1990 *Los Angeles Times* article repeated the fiction that the two men had sailed to Thailand to deliver the boat to a prospective buyer. One Maui resident who spoke to Ritter during our research for *Thai Stick* even made the absurd and unsupported claim that he was aboard the *Iwalani* when it was captured but jumped overboard and somehow survived by clinging on to a cooler.

Although other family members have acknowledged the role that Thai stick smuggling played in the death of their loved one, an unnamed close relative of Deeds told *Foxy Lady* author Dave Kattenburg that there is "not one scintilla of evidence" that Deeds and Delance were attempting to smuggle pot, adding that "anything that derides, sensationalizes or takes away from the deaths" is beneath contempt. Retired Thai marijuana smuggler Ritter, whose friends were waiting for Deeds and Delance in Thailand, agrees with that sentiment.

"Does it really matter if the *Iwalani* was on a pleasure cruise or scamming?"

he asks. "The end they met was horrible and undeserved. Mike Deeds and Chris Delance were great guys who left many loved ones behind. God bless them."