My Story



by Aki Ra

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I am not sure of the exact date of my birth, but recently an old teacher told me that I was born in 1973. I have always lived in the Siem Reap province in northwest Cambodia and spent most of my young life surrounded by guns, artillery, and most of all, the horror of landmines.

My parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge for committing very simple "crimes" when I was only five years old. Since that age I was brought up by the Khmer Rouge to work in their army. I was taught to fire guns and rocket launchers, lay mines, and make simple bombs. I was given my first gun at the age of 10.

When I was 13, our village was overthrown by the Vietnamese, and I was given the option of joining them or being killed. I was conscripted into the Vietnamese army and went on to fight against the Khmer Rouge. I stayed with them until 1990, when they eventually pulled their troops out of Cambodia. I joined the Cambodian Army, which was still fighting against the Khmer Rouge's strongholds around the Siem Reap area.

I went to work for the United Nations peacekeeping forces deployed in this province. I cleared the many mines that had been laid over the years by the various fighting forces. I now work solely for the people of Cambodia, and I regularly go into the rural areas to help clear the estimated six million remaining mines. I have found many relics of the war and exhibit them at the Siem Reap Landmine Museum, which I direct.

The purpose of this booklet is to highlight the horror of landmines still prevalent in Cambodia and to share some of my experiences.

A SHORT HISTORY OF CAMBODIA

The following historical account of Cambodia has been passed down to me by word of mouth. In 1866 the French colonized Cambodia. In 1942 the Japanese invaded Cambodia and defeated the French, who left to fight in Europe. The U.S. bombed Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945, forcing the Japanese to retreat from Cambodia.

The French returned to Cambodia the next year to rule again. The following years saw the Ho Chi Minh and Viet Minh armies fight the French in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. In 1953 Prince Sihanouk introduced civil service for all Khmer students, and by 1954 Cambodia declared independence.

Meanwhile, the Viet Minh were still prevalent in Cambodia. Dep Choun, leader of the Cambodian army, was determined to overthrow Sihanouk but failed. Sihanouk granted Dep Choun power over Siem Reap province, Kam Phun Tom province, and Battambang province.

Under the reign of Prince Sihanouk, Cambodia remained relatively peaceful for 10 years. In 1969, the U. S. began anti-Communist bombing raids in Cambodia and Laos as part of the war in Vietnam. In 1970 General Lonol, leader of the Cambodian army, launched a successful military coup against Prince Sihanouk, who then retreated to China. From there Sihanouk broadcast to the Cambodian people to fight Lonol's army with the support of the Viet Cong and Chinese troops. Lonol, however, had the support of powerful allies from Thailand, South Vietnam, and the U.S. By 1973 Lonol defeated the Viet Cong.

Fighting continued between the Khmer Rouge and Lonel's armies until U.S., South Vietnamese, and Thai forces pulled out of Cambodia in 1975, leaving Lonel's



army to fall to the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge took the capital, Phnom Penh, on the 17th of April, 1975, victoriously marching through the streets promising peace for Cambodia.

For the next four years, the Cambodian people would suffer greatly under the leadership of a Communist dictator and Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot. He sought to create an agrarian system in which everyone worked in the fields as was done 400 years earlier.

By way of implementing this system, the Khmer Rouge took a census of each citizen's job, family, and possessions in order to reorganize the society. Even the calendar was turned back to year zero. Educated people were considered the enemy and were mercilessly tortured and killed in the many killing fields around Cambodia.

The Cambodian army was forced to hand over their weapons and possessions with the promise of a new way of life. Then they were herded onto trucks, taken into the jungle, and brutally murdered. Between 1975 and 1979, it is estimated that over three million people died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

In 1979 the Vietnamese returned to Cambodia and eventually took control of Phnom Penh. Life slowly returned to semi-normality for some Cambodian people, but the Khmer Rouge still had many strongholds in the northwestern provinces and many camps in the jungles. The Vietnamese pulled out in 1989, and the Cambodian army, led by Hun Sen and Sihanouk, continued to oppose the Khmer Rouge. Although U.N. peacekeeping forces arrived in 1992, the fighting continued.

Funsenpex was eventually elected as the new president. It was not until 1998 that all fighting ceased, mainly because of the death of Pol Pot and the surrender of his right-hand man, Mr. Tamok, under the amnesty offered by the Cambodian government.

MY STORY

My family was separated when I was a baby. My mother and father lived in villages five kilometers apart. I grew up in a house with about ten other children and one or two adults. We worked long hours in the fields pulling ploughs like cattle, as the new regime did not allow machinery. We were fed very little, mainly rice soup, and we very quickly became undernourished.

My father, who used to be a teacher, was given a new job of building roads. He was underfed and overworked and soon became very ill. He was admitted to the hospital and given medicine. The medicine was actually tablets made of rabbit droppings, and the I.V. serum was just root-stained water. Consequently, after ten days my father was still sick and starving. He was given a big bowl of nutritious soup which he ate very quickly.

When he had finished eating, the Khmer Rouge accused him of lying about being ill, took him away, and killed him as punishment. Consequently, whenever I was ill I was scared to tell anyone, since I knew what would happen.

My mother had been given the job of collecting the sewage from each of the houses for use as fertilizer. If a house did not have any sewage, the people would be tortured as punishment. My mother told people to make pretend sewage from mud and water. She was considered a good worker and promoted to rice rationer and tailor. The only time I saw my mother was when she brought me my food. She was always accompanied by the guards, but when they were not looking she would sneak people more rice. In return, they would give her small animals to take to the sick people in the village. It was a simple system of helping each other to survive.

One day she was caught committing the "crime" of calling out to an old man to be careful, as he was about to trip and spill his food. The Khmer Rouge did not miss a trick. They had eyes in the back of their heads like a pineapple. They took my mother away and said that they were sending her to school. School and education were severely frowned upon by the new regime, and if you went to school you never came back. For this reason I was terrified of school.

As a child I knew more than anything else what it was like to be hungry. Everybody was living in a state of virtual starvation. Sometimes my friends and I would sneak out at night to find small animals and insects to eat. My friend went to the pig trough and stole some scraps and quickly ate them.

The next morning when the Khmer Rouge were carrying out their usual feces check they noticed that one lot was different from the others and asked who it belonged to. My friend said that it was the pig's, but there were telltale child's footprints beside it. The Khmer rouge accused the child of lying and killed him for the crime of eating the pig scraps.

One man was so hungry that he decided to steal a banana from the tree. The Khmer Rouge spotted him and told the villagers that they were going to make an example out him in case anyone else had similar ideas. They disemboweled him in front of his family, who were forced to cheer and clap. No crying was allowed — this was also considered a crime of weakness.

Every week there would be a village meeting to decide who had been good and who had been bad. Those who had been bad for whatever reason would have their throats slit very slowly with palm fronds. Again the villagers were forced to cheer and clap as these people were murdered, and they were taught to regard the bad people as the enemy.

One night when I was urinating in the long grass at the side of the road I heard a lot of footsteps and could see a long dark shadow winding slowly up the road. I thought that it was a giant snake, but as it drew closer I could see that it was about 150 people marching along. I stayed very quiet and hid in the grass. The people were being marched to the killing fields at Ta Yet, 40 km. north of Siem Reap. They were teachers, doctors, artists, musicians, and students, all people who under Pol Pot's new regime were considered to be the enemy. Among them I saw a little girl holding onto her mother's hand. I tried to grab her arm and whisper to her to run away with me, but she was very frightened and wanted to stay with her mother. This

was one of my earliest memories.

After my parents were killed, I was educated by the Khmer Rouge and indoctrinated into their way of thinking. They were able to control the minds of many young, orphaned children through fear. The only actual education of a formal nature that I received was learning one letter of the Khmer alphabet each week.

They had my innocence in their hands and were able to warp it any way they chose. I thought that the whole world was like this. Brutality, hardship, starvation, and guns became my reality. The Khmer Rouge taught us that the enemy was always just an arm's length away. We learned songs like:

Victory, power, new government.
New power, strive to kill the enemy.
Everybody as one.

I was given my first gun at the age of 10. It was an AK47, and it took me a little while to get used to its weight and the recoil when I fired it. The Khmer soldiers laughed at me as I struggled to learn how to handle it. I learned to shoot by aiming at fruit in the trees, small animals, and fish in the rivers. The gun was about the same size as I was, so I had a hard time finding a way to carry it over my shoulder.

The Khmer soldiers had a huge pile of guns and would let us choose which ones we wanted to use: AK47s, M16s, M60s, and Kalashnakovs. I could also use rocket launchers, mortars, and bazookas. These weapons were like toys to us children, and we used to play games with them.

Some small children were not familiar with the guns, and the Khmer Rouge would give them loaded guns with the safety pin off. One of my friends shot himself in the head accidentally because he did not un-

derstand how the gun worked. Rocket launchers and mortars were actually easier for us to use because we would be lying down as we fired them and would not have to support any weight as we would with a machine gun.

I was taught how to swim by the Khmer Rouge by being thrown into the river. I struggled to doggy paddle, but swallowed a lot of water. I would have drowned if it had not been for the help of one of my friends, who dragged me from the water. Life was cheap to the Khmer Rouge, They did not care who lived or died during their four brutal years of power.

We were all given the same simple uniform to wear, black trousers and a black shirt, loose fitting like the peasants would wear. We would put our guns down the back of the shirts. Our shoes were sandals made from tires and were very strong. If one of the straps broke, it was simple to repair them with a small pin made of bamboo. We also wore a red and white checked scarf. When I was very young, I was just given black shorts and no shirt.

The Vietnamese army came to Cambodia as early as 1979 but did not reach Siem Reap until 1983. The Khmer Rouge maintained many camps in the jungle, but the Vietnamese were everywhere on the roads. Both sides occupied temples around the Angkor Wat area. The Khmer Rouge occupied Ta Prahm and Preak Khan; the Vietnamese occupied Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom, and Bakain Mountain where the Vietnamese General stayed.

One night we learned that the Vietnamese were coming. We applied all sorts of tactics to fight against them. At one camp the Khmer rouge made a huge pot of soup with a lot of meat and vegetables, and also poison from a local tree. As the Vietnamese approached the Khmer Rouge ran away, leaving the poisoned soup

behind. The Vietnamese were very happy with their easy victory and sat down to eat the soup to celebrate. As they all began to fall ill due to the poison, we came back to the camp and opened fire on them, killing them all.

At the time of the Vietnamese arrival I was living in the Khmer Rouge camp learning how to set and detonate mines. The Khmer Rouge had taken such control over my young and innocent mind ,that they convinced me that the Vietnamese were giants with huge great teeth and long moustaches. In fact, the Khmer word for Vietnam is *yeaknanwhich*, which translates as *giant Vietnamese*. As children, we were obviously terrified. I was quite happily surprised to find that they were exactly the same dimensions as myself.

Both sides were evenly matched. However, after a few days of intense fighting, the Vietnamese cunningly adopted new tactics, and they sent in tanks. Ninety percent of the Khmer Rouge had never seen a tank and were not sure how to combat them.

The Khmer Rouge launched an attack with all they had — machine guns, rocket launchers, and mortars. When the tanks stopped, the Khmer Rouge thought that they had immobilized the enemy and moved towards them. At this point, a signal was given by a Vietnamese soldier hiding in the jungle, and the tanks started moving, opening fire as they did so, killing all the Khmer Rouge.

Fortunately I had not approached the tanks. Instead, I had run into the jungle to hide. Unbeknownst to me, Vietnamese soldiers were lying in wait for me in the trees. They captured me at gunpoint and took me away. Many of my friends had been killed, and the children who were left were taken to a camp near Angkor Wat.

The Vietnamese were desperate for conscripts, as were the Khmer Rouge, who had by this time started

treating people very well instead of brutalizing them as before. The two armies adopted the same tactics to encourage people to join them, and the Vietnamese told me that if I joined them I would have rank, power, good food, money, and other such promises.

Although I was starving, the stories told to me by the Khmer Rouge were still fresh in my mind. I thought that they were fattening me up for something bad and was very confused. However, they treated us very well, and the village elders came to trust them. Based on their advice, I slowly began to work with the Vietnamese army and began to fight against my old army, the Khmer Rouge. At this point, I still knew nothing of what was going on in the outside world and continued to imagine that this kind of life was normal.

Life with the Vietnamese army continued in a similar vein as with the Khmer Rouge. We still had very little to eat and were constantly looking for food. Both the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese forces would raid villages and take what little food they had. I ate many bizarre things during this time — on one occasion the trunk of an elephant!

The rations were very poor, and the packets of rice were often found to be old and moldy with bits of rocks. If we were very hungry and were unable to find water to cook the rice, we would urinate into the plastic bag to soften the rice; many times I had to eat like this.

The Vietnamese had many camps around the Siem Reap area and placed the Russian Mon 50 mines all around the perimeters. The Khmer Rouge sent a spy during the day to determine where the mines were laid. Later that night the spy returned with some other soldiers and turned the mines around. These mines are lethal to a distance of 100 meters and are remote controlled. When the Khmers attacked, the mines were discharged back towards the Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese B40 grenade launcher has a special significance for me. Sometime during the rainy season between July and November in 1988 I was attached to a Vietnamese army unit fighting the Khmer Rouge in the Siem Reap area. While marching through the jungle, one of our men noticed four or five Khmers.

He slowly aimed the B40 towards them, but before he could pull the trigger, a Khmer sniper cracked off some shots at the launcher. Had any of the shots made a direct hit, it would have exploded, killing all of us. Fortunately for us, the bullet just pierced the muzzle of the grenade just bellow the ordinance. The AK47 slug can still be heard rattling around inside. I know this because I returned to the scene a short time later and recovered the B40 as a souvenir.

When I was 14, I had another experience that I will never forget. One day we were outnumbered by the Khmer Rouge, and many of our soldiers had been killed, leaving the rest of us to run for our lives. While we were running, we dropped ammunition from the magazines of our AK47s onto the ground. We had added poison to the bullets so that when the guns were fired they would give off a toxic gas. We later returned to find the Khmer Rouge choking on the poisonous flames, and we killed them all without a problem.

The Vietnamese were responsible for destroying many of the precious statues in and around the Angkor Wat area, using them for target practice when they were bored. They also looted many ancient and valuable artifacts from the temples and took vast amounts of wood from the jungles to send back to Vietnam to sell as a valuable commodity. Three times a day they would chop down the wood, and we have lost large amounts of our jungles as a result.

The Vietnamese finally pulled out of Cambodia in 1990, and I was conscripted into yet another army. This

time it was the Cambodian army, still fighting with the remaining factions of the Khmer Rouge. I was finally given the option to return to school to begin studying as a normal child would, but I was still called upon many times to fight the Khmer Rouge.

I was very lucky during my time spent with the various armies, experiencing many close calls. On one occasion, a General of the Cambodian army based at Banteay Meanchey was asked to move to a nearby area. Before he left, he wanted to say good-bye to some of his friends in the villages and requested a visit to the village of Samrong.

A security check was made on the roads surrounding the village to make sure that the road was clear of mines. None were found. However, the villagers forewarned the Khmer Rouge that the General would be visiting, and in exchange for cash, the Khmer Rouge gave them anti-tank mines to place on the road to the village. It was common knowledge that as an important man, the General would be arriving in a tank.

In the morning, a convoy of 10 soldiers and a pick-up had passed without problem. A double anti-tank mine had been placed outside the perimeters of the pick-up's wheels and therefore did not detonate the mine. The larger wheels of the tank did, and four important men inside, as well as the General, were crushed to death by the blast. I was on top of the tank as a look-out, and the blast catapulted me into the rice fields that flanked the road, where I landed safely.

On another occasion, I was in an army camp of thirty soldiers next to a village. We knew that Khmer Rouge were close by in the jungle. Every night the Khmers would fire mortar shells at our camp, killing soldiers and innocent villagers. They always moved their camp, so they were hard to find. My army commander chose three soldiers, including me, to find and

destroy this band of Khmers.

I took one rocket launcher and some hand grenades, and my friend took rockets and AK47s. Another friend took an M16 and a different rocket. Because we had so many different weapons, from a distance we could appear to be a large unit.

We moved towards the enemy in the dark through the rice fields, changing places many times and firing the different weapons. I crept up on the Khmer unit, fired my rocket, and killed all five of them. When we returned to our camp, I told my boss that no one was injured, and he was very cross with me. Then I explained that no one was injured because they were all dead.

Not all my stories are about killing and horror. I remember one time when I was laying mines I noticed monkeys watching us from the trees. Monkeys are very curious and they wanted to know what we had done with wires and bombs. Unfortunately for the nosey monkeys, they tripped the wire and blew themselves up. When the soldiers heard the explosion they thought that they had killed some of the enemy and went to see what had happened. All they found was dead monkeys, which they took home for dinner.

After a few days the soldiers noticed that bears would often use the same path that they had mined. Bears are much more intelligent than the monkeys, and on a hot day they make themselves a kind of hat from cut leaves. The soldiers saw the bears and looked forward to another feast. They mined the path and put a huge pot of water on to boil in anticipation. The clever bears came by as usual but the soldiers were surprised to see that the bears actually stepped over the trip wire and avoided blowing themselves up.

A United Nations peacekeeping force arrived and asked many Cambodian people if they wanted to work

by helping to clear the millions of landmines. When I first came into the town of Siem Reap, I was amazed by many things I saw. I had only known life in the jungle, where we lived without electricity, toilets, and roads.

Upon seeing all the big cars, I could not believe my eyes. Before this I had only seen trucks, tanks and occasionally a very old motorbike. At first I thought



that the paved roads were a mountain that started in the town. The concrete houses also fascinated me because I had only known shacks and huts. I touched the walls of the houses to see what they were all about.

When the U.N. erected a huge movie screen, people came to marvel at a film. As cars and tanks moved on the screen, many people in the audience ran, thinking that the vehicles would come right off the screen into the audience.

Many different ethnic groups arrived with the U.N.: African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and many types of people we had never seen before. For a while I thought I was either dreaming or had been transported to another planet. It took me about a month to get used to

my new surroundings.

My best day was going up in the helicopter with the U.N. troops. As the pilot flew over Angkor Wat and through the jungles, I could not believe how everything looked from the air. I quickly learned English and sometimes worked as an interpreter for Cambodians and for foreign members of the U.N. forces who could not speak English.

I was given the opportunity to attend school and study, and my life took a dramatic turn for the better. The U.N. trained me to use metal detectors and other equipment to find landmines. We were taught how to make them safe, and spent long hours clearing the many mines in and around the Angkor Wat area.

This area was made safe five years ago. We also went into the villages to explain to the people about the mines, and showed them the red sign, which indicated a dangerous area. We taught the victims of landmines how to look after their injuries and stop the blood flow should anyone step on a mine.

Some victims carried guns when they stepped on the mines. Pain would make them crazy, and they might shoot people who came to help them. We had to explain many things about problems with the landmines to the villagers.

I worked with the U.N. for three years until they left Cambodia in 1994. I received a salary while I worked for the U.N., so I was feeling quite well off. I decided to continue to clear the mines. However, I did not have the use of special equipment and had to make do with more simple tools. I found many relics from the war. I started collecting various bits and pieces and hid them in several places around the jungle. At the time I lived in a small rented room in Siem Reap and had nowhere to keep my collection. Eventually I bought a small piece of land and built what is now my

home. It resembles a lookout tower made from bamboo with a grass roof. I built it upon bamboo stilts because of a couple of incidents with robbers. I greased the poles and pulled the ladder up at night so they couldn't steal anything from me.

THE LANDMINE MUSEUM

I had collected many items and had nowhere to keep them, so I decided to establish a museum. My collection included AK47s, Kalasnikovs, M16s, M60s, small pistols, machine guns, large rifles, rocket launchers, mortars, grenades, gas masks, gas canisters, bombs, mines, and even uniforms. Of course, I diffused all of the mines and bombs, and they no longer pose any threat.

I have also created paintings to depict scenes of the various wars discussed in this booklet, having no photographs to show visitors. The museum took a long time to establish because I had to acquire the money to build a place to exhibit everything. I slowly saved up enough money from my job as a tour guide and finally opened the museum to the public in 1999.

I still travel regularly to rural areas of the Siem Reap province to find and diffuse landmines. I rely heavily on donations for this work because I do not work for any organizations, and I sometimes have to pay local people to help me. I am always looking for volunteers to assist me. Many foreigners have accompanied me on trips to understand the full extent of the horrors caused by landmines.

Many visitors to Cambodia are interested in the impact of our recent history, and they ask how Pol Pot was allowed to get away with the things he did.

I can only reply that from my point of view, I understand that many people still feel distress for the loss of their families and suffer from hardships created by that regime. However, I believe that Cambodia should focus on moving forward and rebuilding a new way of life; sadly, the past is irreversible.

We live daily with the legacy of landmines and unexploded bombs. I hope that my museum and this booklet will help explain that the horror is not yet over. We still need help in dealing with this massive problem, and I feel that the world is not fully aware of the scale of the situation.

There are 27,000 victims of the landmine in the Siem Reap province alone, and the count rises daily. Data on the number of mines in this country and other parts of the world are only estimates; many minefields have not been documented. It may take 50-100 years to find and clear every mine. You can help us by informing people in your country about the problems we face in Cambodia, and we hope to eventually enlist enough support to speed up the clearance of landmines.

Thank you for visiting this museum. Please do not forget us.

NOTE: The International Treaty to Ban Landmines entered into force on March 1, 1999 and is now binding international law. It has been signed by 137 countries and ratified by 100 (as of July 2000). 56 countries have yet to sign it, including the United States, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Finland, Turkey and Cuba. If you are a citizen of one of these countries please do what you can to encourage your country to sign and ratify the treaty.

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This museum is **not** government-supported.
Your donations are appreciated and will help
rid Cambodia of landmines.