

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Falling of the Bike: New York Times reporter Sydney Schanberg lives through captivity in Cambodia. Mark Richford talks with Tony Kahn about the significance of rubbing shoulders and sharing breath in Kona, Hawaii.

Tony Kahn:

Hi everybody. This is Tony Kahn, the Producer and Director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston.

On January 1, 2007 an amazing law went into effect here in the United States. All classified documents, twenty-five years or older, were open to the public. Overnight, a whole world of state secrets and state stories swam into view. And for anyone who believes in the power of setting hidden stories free, then it's a cause for celebration.

It made me think of a story that I had produced about Cambodia, a country that caved in on itself and had almost lost half of its population under the Pol Pot regime and the Khmer Rouge. That time of Killing Fields is gone now, but the memories of a reporter who lived through them, Sydney Schanberg of *The New York Times*, seem very relevant still today. Sydney's story: *Falling Off the Bike*.

[Excerpt from the movie *The Killing Fields* begins to play and continues under the narrative]

"All right this is it! Is the floor clear? This is the last check."

Tony Kahn:

In April 1975, as American diplomats fled Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge, a communist guerilla movement led by Pol Pot consolidated its hold on Cambodia.

[Movie plays]

"I'm leaving!" [inaudible]

Tony Kahn:

The 1984 film, *The Killing Fields*, told the story of two men in Phnom Penh that day, Dith Pran, a Cambodian interpreter and his friend and colleague, *New York Times* reporter, Sydney Schanberg.

Sydney Schanberg:

The vast majority of people who were the targets of the Khmer Rouge, the people in the cities, deeply believed there would be a reconciliation. But no one had a clue that there was going to be a kind of genocide.

[More movie footage]

Tony Kahn:

One of the first prisoners the Khmer Rouge took was Sydney Schanberg. He was arrested with other journalists and driven in an armored personnel carrier to the edge of town.

Sydney Schanberg:

We could see the river and there were men outside with their automatic weapons on their hips pointing at the door. And we just assumed that they were going to shoot us and roll us down the riverbank into the river. [movie footage gets louder]. We were nothing to them.

Tony Kahn:

The illiteracy of the troops saved Schanberg's life. Dith Pran told them that Schanberg and the others were French journalists covering the Khmer Rouge victory. The soldiers couldn't read Schanberg's passport and know the claim was a lie.

Sydney Schanberg:

We were saved, however, there were these two officers in the Cambodian navy who had been picked up on the street and they had been praying the whole time. That's when you feel responsible, 'cause you're free and they're going to be dead.

[Movie footage continues, including sounds of gunshots]

Tony Kahn:

The targets of the Khmer Rouge were the educated, the business people, the intellectuals, the teachers. Less than four years later, two million of them lay dead and decomposing in killing fields, yet few images of it ever reached the West or survived to haunt our collective memory.

[Movie footage, including sounds of children crying]

Today in Cambodia, Schanberg says, the killing fields still exist, inside each Cambodian.

Sydney Schanberg:

Someone will be riding a bicycle down a main boulevard and suddenly the bicycle will veer out of control and hit the curb or hit a parked car. The person will fall off, "What happened?"

What happened was that an image thrust itself back into their head. A father, mother, relative living under the Khmer Rouge dying on the mud floor of a thatch hut starving to death, asking for food and there is no food to bring them.

And so you watch the loved one die. That image is seared into their head. As much as

they try to get back to quote, “normal” life it will never go away completely and they just break down and fall off the bicycle.

Tony Kahn:

What the victims of the Khmer Rouge suffered from most, says Schanberg, was the feeling that nobody knew what was going on. He recalls the story of one group of prisoners whom a friendly Khmer Rouge guard let listen to his radio.

Sydney Schanberg:

These men gathered around this radio, huddled and they had it muffled with something, a piece of cloth, and they heard on the BBC *World News* that a plane had dropped bombs on Khmer Rouge positions. So they knew that somebody in the outside world knew what was going on and had bombed the Khmer Rouge. And one of the men said, “Now, I can die in peace.”

The next morning they were marshaled out into the yard and he walked forward and struck a Khmer Rouge guard and he was instantly shot to death.

Tony Kahn:

For a world growing smaller by the second, says Schanberg, the lesson of Cambodia is two- fold. We need to respond to problems more quickly, but we also need to appreciate that the real solutions take time.

Sydney Schanberg:

This is a country that had an election under UN auspices in 1993, but you don’t plant democracy with one election. And we’re not patient. We want to have an election and say, “OK, well, we’ve taken care of that genocide now we’ll move on to the next one.”

It’s not that way and we do have an obligation. I mean, it’s one thing you do learn when you live in a foreign country and bad things happen and you feel a level of responsibility. You learn that you are your brother’s keeper. It doesn’t matter whether you want to be or not. You are.

[Music plays]

Tony Kahn:

That was Sydney Schanberg with today’s morning story: *Falling Off the Bike*. I’m here in the studio with Gary Mott.

Gary Mott:

This brings to mind Vyrik Eng.

Tony Kahn:

Vyrik Eng, an earlier Morning Story.

Gary Mott:

Yeah. The story: *Dancing with History*.

Tony Kahn:

Right

Gary Mott:

His mother has these, sort of, recurring flashbacks: nightmarish experiences that have manifested in alcoholism and the inability to function. [Tony murmurs in agreement]. And so Vyrik (American-born), her son, has taken over much of the responsibility for the family. Financially, [Tony agrees, "Yeah."] as a, a caretaker for his siblings.

Tony Kahn:

He said something else in that story that I remember. His mother needed somebody that she could tell her story to.

[Music plays]

Tony Kahn:

During that horrible period nobody dared speak.

[Music continues then fades]

Well, to, to turn to a more hopeful subject. As you know we've been asking you out there to help us run the family budget here at *Morning Stories* by making some contributions. And in a family spirit a number of you have responded so we wanted to thank you and get to know you a little bit better. We made a call to one of our contributors. A fellow named Mark Richford who is living [telephone rings] nowadays in Hawaii.

Mark Richford:

Hello.

Tony Kahn:

Mark, hi. It's Tony Kahn calling from Boston.

Mark Richford:

Tony Kahn! It's so nice to hear your voice. I mean feels like, it's like, it's like I know you from all those *Morning Stories*.

Tony Kahn:

I should have called sooner [both men laugh].

Mark Richford:

Ha, ha. Oh please.

Tony Kahn:

How did you happen to come across *Morning Stories*?

Mark Richford:

iTunes. [Tony murmurs in agreement] Click on podcasts. Go to NPR. [Tony murmurs again]. I've contributed to NPR, probably twice in my lifetime and I'm forty-nine. When I went onto the website, you had a spot there that said, "click here to donate." I figured, you know, I'm benefiting from this, and in a moment of weakness [Tony laughs] I clicked and I sent a tiny little donation.

Tony Kahn:

What did we do right?

Mark Richford:

What, you know what you did right? You put a place to click on the website. It was convenient.

Tony Kahn:

Oh. OK.

Mark Richford:

And there was no rig-a-ma-roll. It was like, "click her to donate." And that got, that's what got it done.

My, my iPod keeps me entertained. I drive from West Hawaii to East Hawaii on the big island. It's two to two and a half hour drive.

Tony Kahn:

Yeah

Mark Richford:

I moved here from Montana a couple of years ago cause it was just so amazing. Here, everybody just tries to help each other out, and it, I was impressed by the aloha. It's, it's an amazing thing.

Where I first noticed the aloha it was, we have a real shortage of roads here, poor infrastructure. It grew too fast in Kona. And so there is a lot of traffic. [Tony murmurs in agreement] And more often than not, some of the traffic is caused by people letting other people in. The opposite of how it is in metropolitan areas [Tony laughs] you know. But it's, it is just amazing, and, and I love that, the aloha. And that's why I live here. This is my home. It's like coming home.

Tony Kahn:

I spoke to a woman who is Hawaiian and she said “ha” means breath and “alo” I think means share.

Mark Richford:

Right

Tony Kahn:

To share. To share the breath.

Mark Richford:

Yeah. I thought they were rubbing noses or something when I saw somebody do that.

Tony Kahn:

Mmm hmm. A guy told me in, in Moscow, people from Kazakhstan greet each other by touching each other’s shoulder. He said because your guardian angel sits on your right shoulder.

Mark Richford:

That’s where they rest.

Tony Kahn:

[Murmurs agreement] And this is a way of thanking the guardian angel for taking care of this person you care about.

Mark Richford:

That’s what I love about *Morning Stories*, is that it, it shares from people that we’re seemingly unrelated. We would have nothing in common. Folks that would not usually mix, and, and, and the way you handle the shows and the, the tac that you take, shares a part of someone’s life that we can all identify with, you know. I think that’s the amazing part of what you bring to *Morning Stories*. Thank you, thank you, thank you. And mahalo. Mahalo and ma lai kaliki maka.

Tony Kahn:

Mahalo, Mark. Thank you.

Mark Richford:

See you Tony. Thank you so much.

Tony Kahn:

OK, aloha. [Tony chuckles]

Mark Richford:

Aloha.

Tony Kahn:

Bye-bye.

Mark Richford:

Bye-bye.

Tony Kahn:

Listening to Mark brought me some memories of the one and only time that I went to Hawaii, Gar, and I had been doing a piece for the *Savvy Traveler*, and I got the absolutely stupid idea that I should try hang gliding.

[Tony and Gary laugh]

I had never done it before. I, I, you know I get nervous even going from one room to the other when they're on the same level.

Gary Mott:

The first and the last hang gliding experience.

Tony Kahn:

The first, the first and the last, but not either the first or, we hope, the last time that we thank Ipswitch for being our support for this podcast. Ipswitch a leader, among many things, in file transfer software. If you want to check them out, you can go to their website at I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H-dot-com <ipswitch.com>.

Gary Mott:

And we have all sorts of exciting things happening on the web <wgbh.org/morningstories>. You'll notice a couple of links to contribute [Tony agrees, "Right"]; if you feel so moved, please. We've got a link to our Flickr page [Tony agrees again] which is growing slowly but steadily.

Tony Kahn:

Yep. Pictures of our contributors.

Gary Mott:

And what else, Tony? I mean . . .

[Hawaiian music begins to play]

Tony Kahn:

How about "goodbye and see you soon"?

Gary Mott:
Goodbye.

Tony Kahn:
Goodbye. See you soon, folks.

[Traditional Hawaiian music plays, then fades]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Lorena Knight

Note from Liz:

Of course, you know I'm in complete agreement with Mark Richford about his description of the way Tony and Gary do *Morning Stories*. He hit the nail on the head with his phrase: "Folks that would not usually mix, and the way you handle the shows and the tac that you take, shares a part of someone's life that we can all identify with, you know."

With regard to the story about the Cambodians' war experiences being seared into their heads - something that I, a Midwesterner-turned-Westerner who moved to the South two decades ago learned, is that this kind of seared experience is what causes many Southerners to retain resentment over the treatment of their region during the American Civil War. When I moved here in 1987, there were still older people around who were told by their grandparents how the war years were for them. These grandparents had been children during the Civil War, and their memories were not happy ones. First-hand memoirs turn what outsiders might consider "past history" into immediate family stories, laced with the emotions they engendered when they were originally experienced. A lot of "outsiders" wonder why the Southerners don't "just get over it," but mothers passed bitterness down to their children's children. And so, it is true that for many in the South, the Civil War isn't over yet.