

## My Trip to Anlong Veng District

By

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During the week of 16 June 2008, I was fortunate to accompany the DC-Cam Promoting Accountability Project Team on a field trip to Anlong Veng district, Oddar Meanchey Province. The team consisted of Dany Long, Chhay Khin, Vannak Sok, and Theany Hin. This diligent, collegial group was kind enough to allow Randle DeFalco and me to accompany them, which is no small gesture when this entails squeezing two big bodies into an already full backseat of a SUV for an eight hour drive through rural Cambodia. The purpose of the trip was to document good deeds undertaken by lower-level Khmer Rouge cadres from 1975-1979, and afterwards.

For Randle and me, the trip represented a unique opportunity to sit down and converse with Khmer Rouge cadres about their experiences. Not only would it provide our first face-to-face encounters with so-called “perpetrators,” but discussions would focus on acts of kindness rather than the atrocities for which the regime is notorious. In addition, all of this interaction was to occur in Anlong Veng district, the mountainous Northwest Thai border region where Khmer Rouge fighters fled following the regime’s collapse in 1979, and which is menacingly referred to as “the last stronghold of the Khmer Rouge.”

Over the course of a week, the team conducted formal interviews with eight people, and had numerous informal introductory conversations with other former cadres usually “too busy,” too skeptical, or both to go on the record. The interviews took place in various venues including an English school, commune offices, and homes. But these often very

basic physical spaces belied the difficult decisions, emotional conflict, and nuanced perspectives that the cadres shared with us.

One of the first people we interviewed was X. A soft-spoken man of 53, X was made to join the KR revolution in late 1970 at the order of his village chief. He was 15 years old at the time. In 1973, he was sent to join a military unit at Phnom Pros Phnom Srey, Kampong Cham Province and was promoted to platoon chief the following year. When the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, he spent two weeks in the city at Wat Phnom. From there he was dispatched to work at Kampong Som dock, where he oversaw a worker unit loading and unloading cargo from Chinese ships.

The good deeds that X spoke of primarily related to giving food to hungry villagers both prior to and after 1979. Nevertheless, even as an early member of the revolution and a KR cadre, his experience under the regime was by no means easy. In 1977, while working selling goods at the Cambodia-Thai border, his unit was ordered to return to Phnom Penh as part of Regime's effort to eliminate imagined internal enemies in the Northern Zone who had betrayed the Angkar and the party. After that, X was forced to do hard labor on a rice field until January 1979. Yet still, he opted to flee into the jungles near Anlong Veng when Vietnam toppled the regime. When I asked him why, he explained that while the Khmer Rouge had done bad things to people, he could not accept living under foreign enemy rule. Instead, he chose to remain in the jungles well into the 1990s, even refusing his mother's pleas to put down his gun and return to his village. And as the rain beat down on the tin roof of the dimly lit schoolroom in which we sat, it occurred to me that X had spent more than half of his life at war.

The seven other people interviewed occupied a variety of positions under the regime and afterwards including KR soldier, district chief, hospital chief, medical personnel, and factory chief. Their ability to commit good deeds under the regime seemed to depend on

their level of authority. Almost all of them mentioned sharing food with starving people. Others who occupied higher level positions such as District Chief were able to assist more people. For example, Y, a 65-year-old woman who served as District Chief spoke of defying orders from the DPK Central Committee to meet food production quotas in order to increase food rations for the hungry people in her district. She also refused two requests from the Region Committee to arrest and transfer two men in her district whom she believed were innocent of the crimes of which they were accused and who would almost certainly have been killed otherwise. Although she claimed that significantly fewer people died in her district under her leadership and that the people no longer suffered, one staff member at DC-Cam who lived in her district vehemently disagreed with her upbeat characterization.

At the outset of our trip, I expected to spend the week talking with monsters. I expected to listen to the lies they tell themselves to assuage their guilt for their roles in this dark chapter of Cambodian history. While I was certainly left sifting through myriad half-truths and inaccuracies cadres had ingrained as memory with the passage of time, I was most struck by the unapologetic, matter-of-fact manner in which they shared their stories. Instead of confirming my preconceived notions of evil embodied, the interviews left me grappling with a highly complicated historical reality in which the line between perpetrator and victim is often more blurry than clear.