



HARD TO  
**FORGET**

DIFFICULT TO  
**REMEMBER**

IMPORTANT TO  
**SHARE**

**UN-SEEN**

# UN-SEEN

Living in a Warzone for 30 Years

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**Thirty years of warfare between 1969 and 1999.**

**It is to live under the constant threat of death, mutilation and loss through violence.**

**It is to live with the drama of your loved ones' brutal death and the loss of your home and belongings.**

**It is also nevertheless, a life that simply wants to be lived.**

**How do you, as a person, as a family, as a community, come to share the memories and come to face the grief and devastation?**

**Commemoration, alone and together, gives the deceased the place they deserve.**

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UN-SEEN is a photobook about the Nget family and their connection to the horrors that took place in Cambodia from 1967 till 1999.

This book is the outcome of a search for meaning, the unearthing of sadness and grief and the connection between four remaining siblings, their mother and other family members and villagers.

The bombing of the Nget's family home on the January 13th, 1970 is the heart of the book. Black and white photographs of contemporary everyday life illustrate the hardship of the now nearly 90-year-old mother Khun Ann. Accompanied with brief passages, these photographs expose the dramatic loss of five young children and the suffering that followed until the peace in 1999.

In 2018, I made two journeys to the Nget family in Bosthlan Village in the Kompong Cham Province in Cambodia. Together with Nget Vannarith, the youngest son, I captured their story. I shed light on a story of nearly thirty years of life in a warzone: the threat, the drama and the longing for an ordinary life. A story that was concealed in darkness for too long.

I returned to the family in June 2019. The first concept of the story sparked a conversation with other family members. The book turns out to be the key to breaking the silence: for the first time in fifty years, the four remaining siblings share their memories. The horrors, tragedies and struggles: impossible to forget and at the same time so painful to remember. The memories finally complete the puzzle and fill the emptiness. This all led to a simple Buddhist ceremony at the humble family grave in November 2019. A plaque was placed commemorating the family members who lost their lives.

Elly Valk

Together, Vann and I go on a journey. What starts out as a photography project on “A tuk-tuk driver in Phnom Penh”, grows into a search for connection and the unearthing of loss and grief that lies buried in the yard of his family’s farm in Bosthlan Village, Kompong Cham Province.

It hurts to see Vann, searching for photos of the Vietnam War in Cambodia, struggling with images from back then. He shares his story with Western tourists, taking Americans to his village and showing them the numerous bomb craters. His story is one of Un-Seen experiences of a horrific nature, which were fed to him as an infant.



## THE BOMBING OF CAMBODIA (1965-1973)

UN-SEEN by the United States Congress and most of the Western world

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Under the leadership of President Johnson, the secret bombings begin as early as 1965. In the years that follow, the Vietnam War spills into Cambodia. As North Vietnamese units travel through Cambodia with supplies for the Viet Cong, US and Allied Forces give chase. These actions were not approved by the US Congress.

Later, President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger would design Operation Menu. Scrupulously bombing the countryside of Eastern Cambodia. This was done in order to destroy

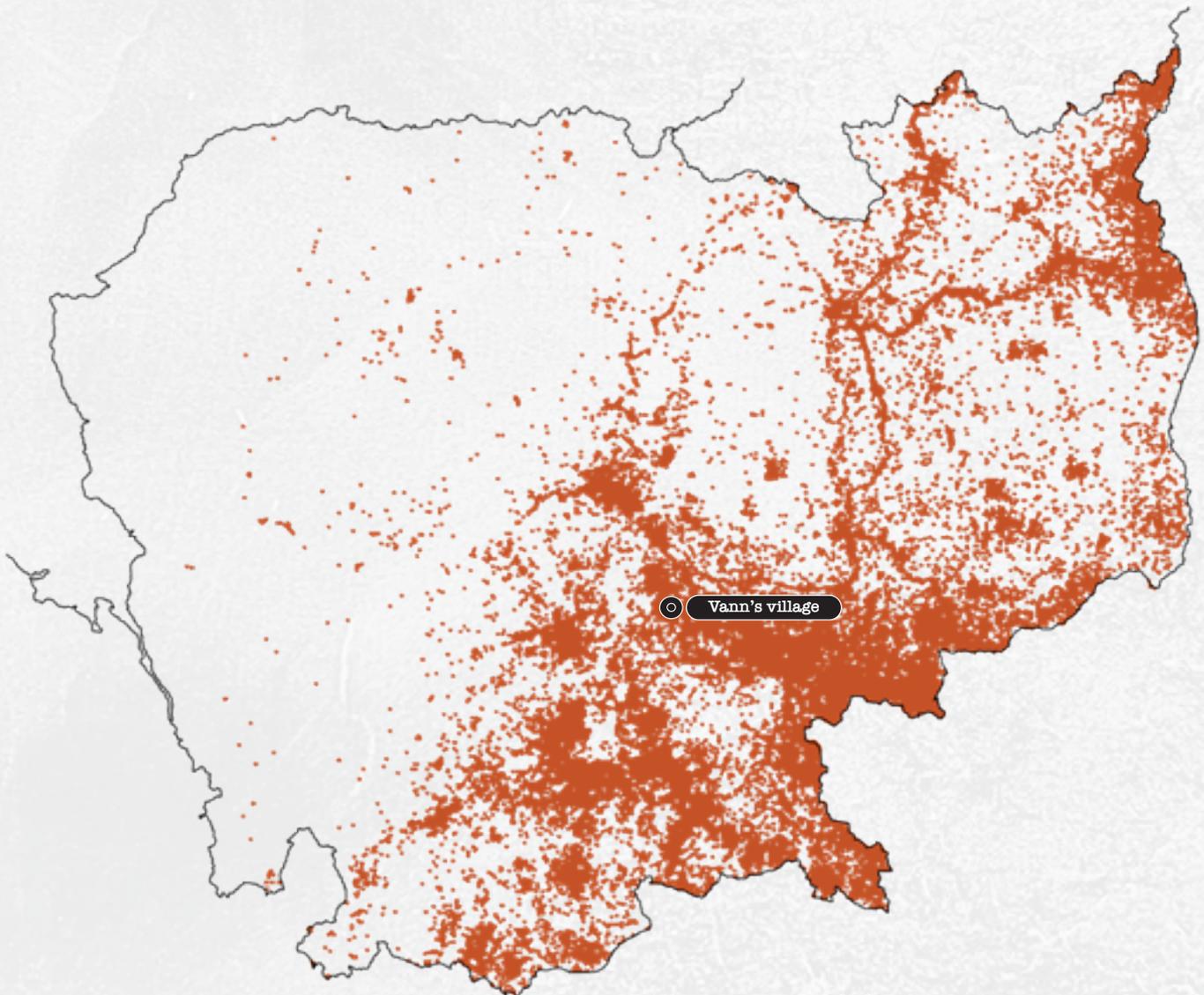
the Ho Chi Minh trail, and prevent the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) from continuing to supply the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. These raids were not made known to Congress either.

In the Western world, we only have a slight understanding of what is going on. Most of the available footage is of the brutality of the war in Vietnam itself. Mr. Kissinger tells the world that the jungles are home only to very small communities - hardly any civilians.

A total of 115,273 targets were bombed.  
It is difficult to estimate the number of civilians that died as a result.  
Some say 50,000 - others calculate that 600,000 Cambodian  
civilians were killed.

## THE BOMBING OF CAMBODIA

[Click to watch shortfilm](#)



**ALL SORTIES - October. 4th, 1965 to August 15th, 1973**

Map assembled by Taylor Owen, 2012



The bomb craters have filled with water.  
Cambodians call them AMERICAN PONDS.



# HARD TO FORGET

Khun Ann looking out over the yard –  
as if to call out to all of her children.

Thorn

Thy

Loon

Hooch

Rim

Mom

Ry

Rourng

Chamrean

Chhuch

Vann

Oun





## DIFFICULT TO REMEMBER

It becomes clear to me that the bombing raid is central to my project when Vann and his mother, Khunn Ann, let me in on their story. They don't hold back any tears or emotions. Vann helps shape the story, translating Khmer into English as his mother speaks.

# IMPORTANT TO SHARE



During two more trips to Cambodia, the Nget family and I meet again. They are inviting and open up. We continue to speak about the event of January 13th, 1970. Vann's eldest brother, Thorn, and his sister, Ry, join the conversation, adding vivid memories to the story.

The first draft of this book leads to more talks, sparking the interest of more family members and villagers. Vann's story is a key that enables these family members to open up to each other, as they open the door to remembrance of the brothers and sisters who died in the war zone.



On a fourth visit to Cambodia, the final piece is laid as the family holds a modest ceremony, naming each of the family members who died on a plaque at their grave site.

I just hope that this book can be a key as well. One that opens our eyes, showing us the terrible effects that people in power can have on so-called 'civilians'. Revealing to us what the brutality of war does to people, families, communities.



## THE NGET FAMILY MEMBERS WHO DIED IN THE WAR ZONE

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Thy, 1953–1974	died as a soldier in Oudong
Loon, 1956–1983	died with her newborn baby in Bosthlan Village in a rocket attack by the Vietnamese army
Hooch, 1958–1976	died as a soldier at the Vietnamese border
Rim, 1959–1970	died as a result of the bombing raid on Bosthlan Village
Mom, 1960–1970	died in the bombing raid on Bosthlan Village
Rourng, 1963–1970	died in the bombing raid on Bosthlan Village
Cham Rean, 1964–1970	died as a result of the bombing raid on Bosthlan Village
Chhuch, 1967–1970	died in the bombing raid on Bosthlan Village
Si Yeat 1955-1976	died under the Khmer Rouge regime



## The Evolution of UN-SEEN

It is my intention to publish this book in Cambodia, the story belongs there. Next to the gruesome stories about Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) belongs a story that preceded this (1969-1975).

In many studies of the Khmer Rouge, it is believed that the 115,273 violent bombings by the United States Air Force promoted the rise and growth of the communist movement. The bombings were initiated by President Johnson on October 4th, 1965 and were not authorized by the US Congress. At the initiative of President Nixon and Mr. Kissinger, the bombing of Cambodia was increased, resulting in the carpet bombing the jungles of eastern Cambodia. Additionally, the land was invaded in May 1970.

The Cambodia Documentation Centre in Phnom Penh wants to include the story in its collection and have it translated to Khmer. It will become available to schools, libraries and communities.

In January 2020, all arrangements had been made: developing, printing, agreements with the bookstore, a book presentation in Meta House Gallery affiliated to the Goethe Institute with an exhibition and three small exhibitions in Siem Reap, Phnom Penh and Battambang. A date was set for April 2020, to commemorate the invasion of Cambodia 50 years later.

In February 2020, Asia was already moving towards strict measures regarding COVID-19 and for us, the world shut down in March. It was a possibility to publish the book in October 2020, 55 years after the very first bombing of Cambodia.

Unfortunately, travelling around the world is still not possible. Hopefully someday...

So, I decided to release the book in the Netherlands and from April 1st, 2021 it is for sale at the publisher: [Boekengilde](#).

The book presentation has taken place on April 28th, 2021 in collaboration with Pakhuis de Zwijger. Through Zoom, those involved in this project, including Luke Hunt (journalist for South Asia), Nico Mesterharm (Meta House) and Bill Morse (Landmine Museum Siem Reap) from Cambodia, were also be present.

A number of books has been made available to Monument Books in Phnom Penh and the proceeds of the book sale will go to the Landmine Museum in Siem Reap. This museum was founded by Aki Ra, a former child soldier of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese army. Aki Ra works as a deminer, he decided that the landmines he layed, he now had to clear. The Landmine museum is run by Bill Morse.

A small exhibition at the Meta House in Phnom Penh will be arranged by Nico Mesterharm from november to december, 2021, if Covid-19 permits this. In consultation with people in Phnom Penh, opportunities to hand over a book to the Minister of Education of Cambodia and the Ambassador of the United States in Phnom Penh are still being contemplated.

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BOOK RELEASE

With Andrea Pol

