

TERZANI IN CAMBODIA

By Elizabeth Becker

I first typed the name “Tiziano Terzani” while addressing labels for an American anti-war journal put out by the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars. We were a group of students and professors who challenged the official justification for the U.S. war in Vietnam with the potent weapon of history. Tiziano’s name stood out as the rare Italian reading our work.

About one year later, in 1973 I was a neophyte war correspondent in Cambodia when an Italian walked into my office wearing impeccable white trousers and shirt and carrying himself with the manner of a thoughtful movie star. He introduced himself as no one other than Tiziano. Wow, I thought, here is someone

who actually exceeds expectations. “You can’t be *the* Tiziano Terzani.” I said, and explained the label connection and how I had imagined him to be a quiet, buttoned-up professor. He laughed. I ordered us coffees from a stall across the street and we got down to the business of Cambodia. A disciplined scholar of Asia, a journalist with a magpie’s attraction to exotica; a son of the working class with a philosophical nature to match, Terzani had exceptional qualities and contradictions even in a profession that attracts its share of eccentrics.

An Italian fluent in Chinese, he was the Southeast Asia correspondent for the German weekly *Der Spiegel* who mostly filed his stories in English. He seemed blessedly free of office politics and saw his fellow foreign correspondents as colleagues, not rivals. This goes a long way to explaining his often other-worldly views and the professional risks he took.

His line of questioning was original, to begin with. He could raise political issues with the best of them and offer needle-sharp follow-ups. But his notebooks were also filled with the names of

birds, flowers and the Buddhist avatar in a destroyed pagoda, not just details of the latest defeat of the government Army at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. More than a few reporters dismissed Tiziano as an over-ripe European intellectual who took himself too seriously. It didn't help that he ignored those critics and was known to demean the whole profession with laughing toasts to "our shitty little articles."

Looking back, much of this was obvious on one of our first reporting trips together. We were four journalists: Jean-Claude Pomonti of *Le Monde* (one of Tiziano's favorite colleagues), Jacques Leslie of the *Los Angeles Times*, Tiziano and me, Elizabeth Becker of the *Washington Post*. The American bombing campaign had been underway for weeks and the U.S. Congress was in an uproar. After the Paris Peace Accords, the American military was supposed to be winding down its presence, not expanding it. Cambodian refugees fleeing south to the capitol of Phnom Penh were the best witnesses to this new air war and what bombs were being dropped from the sky.

We stopped at a check-point where refugees were lining up to gain entry into Phnom Penh, the capitol. At first we asked standard questions: Did the bombing come at night, were there three explosions in a row, the signature of a B-52 raid? How big was the bomb crater?

Then Tiziano asked where the bombs came from. “The fireball in the sky,” these peasant farmers answered.

“Was the fireball an airplane?” Tiziano asked. The farmers hadn’t a clue what an airplane was. At Tiziano’s urging, the farmers married myth to what they saw with the own eyes.

“Maybe from Garuda,” they said, mentioning the magical bird that carries one of the Hindu-Buddhist divinities.

We all scribbled down the exchange but looking up I noticed Tiziano wasn’t with us. He had gone to the back of one of the carts and asked the family if they had anything to sell. The Cambodian unfolded a cloth and showed Tiziano the family’s Buddha. They agreed on a price and Tiziano bought it.

“How can you do this?” I asked, very American, very indignant.

“I gave him a much better price than he would ever get on Silver Street,” he answered, naming the quarter where antiques were sold by clever merchants.

So, yes, Tiziano could tell himself he had vastly improved the chances of the family’s survival by paying three times the going rate for the statue but he had also improved his own antiquities collection by avoiding the rapacious middleman.

It seemed creepy that he bought a family treasure off a destitute refugee we met reporting on the war. We argued journalistic ethics driving back to Phnom Penh in our rented white Mercedes while the refugees trudged far behind us in their ox-driven carts.

The contrast between the weapons and ideology of modern war and the feudal reality of Cambodia was catnip for Tiziano. He arrived feeling the received admiration for anti-colonial revolutions but fell in love with the thatched huts on stilts; bright

green rice paddies tilled by farmers draped in plaid sarongs;
lumbering water buffalo; sugar palms and the golden spires of
Buddhist temples puncturing the skyline; orange-striped sunsets.

It also didn't hurt that Cambodia had the atmosphere of
Rick's Café in Casablanca. The Vietnam War was the conflict of
our generation, just as World War II had been. Tiziano could not
believe his good fortune to be a witness to this history.

In Phnom Penh he stayed at the "Hotel Le Phnom" a fading
stucco colonial masterpiece built by the French after World War I
that had a desperate romance accurately captured in the movie
"The Killing Fields." The bar around the pool attracted journalists
and diplomats, businessmen as well as prostitutes who, with the
waiters, were often the only Cambodians in the crowd.

Huge, suit-case sized blocks of ice were dragged by rope
across the dusty hotel lawns and broken into shards for the endless
rounds of gins and tonic or whiskey soda. International reporters,
novelists, spies and arms dealers drank into the night, trading

gossip and making money with their return airplane tickets safe in their hotel rooms.

Twenty years after independence, Phnom Penh still had the air of its French colonial past of baguettes and bougainvillea, a French Catholic cathedral and Cercle Sportif sports club. And as an Italian from Florence, Tiziano knew instinctively how these French post-colonials fit in the scheme of the war. He met with the rubber barons who had stayed on to do business with both sides of the nasty war; they would often meet at Chantal's opium den after curfew.

As a resident correspondent, I was often charged with arranging these visits and then driving Tiziano and other visiting correspondents through the darkened deserted streets, flashing our laissez passé cards until we reached the traditional wooden house where soft bamboo mats and deep cushions awaited. Tiziano was more likely to nurse a solitary whiskey-soda than puff off an opium pipe. What mattered was the atmosphere, the kerosene lamp

burning in the corner and the precious nuggets of information he gleaned while wearing a sarong in a forbidden den.

He saw beyond the French colonial veneer of Corsican restaurant owners and French archeologists keeping a distant eye on the temples at Angkor to the twisted anger laid bare on the Cambodian battlefield. Cambodian atrocities horrified even their Vietnamese counterparts.

During one of his visits Tiziano was part of a group of us journalists who came across the all-too-common discovery of corpses of several government soldiers who had been disemboweled and disfigured. Tiziano was quiet. When we returned to the city he asked me how I could cover this war day in and day out with such concern in his voice that I blurted out a truth I hadn't acknowledged even to myself: "It is especially hard because these deaths remind me of my own sister's death when she was beheaded in a car accident."

That was the effect Tiziano had on many of us.

Overall the Cambodian War was seen as less serious as the great confrontation in neighboring Vietnam. For some it was a joke. Newcomers would marvel that the government's military spokesman was named Am Rong. And that the Marxist Khmers Rouges were led by an Asian despot, the charming Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Tiziano was incapable of belittling the catastrophe that was Cambodia. Thomas Enders, the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy, said after an interview with Tiziano and me that Cambodians, as Buddhist, had a different idea of death and didn't grieve the way we do. Tiziano raised his bumble-bee eyebrows to express his profound disagreement.

How could Enders confuse the naïve bravery of those young Cambodian soldiers at the front lines sucking on their Buddha amulets and winding magic scarves around their necks as an indifference to life or the stoic grief of the parents who lost their children as anything but broken hearts?

Angela Terzani took photographs of Tiziano and me on the way to that interview. Almost alone among visiting correspondents, Tiziano had insisted that his wife accompany him at least once, when it was still safe, so she could share his fascination with Cambodia. It was noticed by Cambodians who thereafter looked on Tiziano with a new respect.

As the war grew uglier, Tiziano wanted to believe that a Khmer Rouge victory would bring relief. When I wrote a 1974 expose warning the contrary that the Khmer Rouge used terror tactics and extreme cruelty, Tiziano was one of the few reporters who took the piece seriously. While he wasn't entirely convinced by my work, he was unnerved. "You are not a stooge of the C.I.A.," he said, by way of a compliment.

During the last months of war, the remaining Cambodian elite disappeared to France and the United States. Trees on the grand boulevards were chopped down for firewood. The Mekong River was blocked and then the airfield. The Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. In four short years

they killed nearly two million people through executions, starvation and hard labor.

Tiziano berated himself up for failing to understand that his faith would have been better placed with the Cambodian monks who were bludgeoned to death than the xenophobic Marxists who oversaw their killing in the name of progress.

But no one had predicted the Khmer Rouge terror. The difference with Tiziano was he took Cambodia's ordeal to heart. From then on he rejected the siren song of economic determinism whether preached by a communist or a capitalist government. His North Star was Asia's culture as it was expressed in ancient solemnity or modern folk whimsy. That became his legacy: chronicling the grand duel in Asia between modern development and culture even though he knew ahead of time that the deck was stacked against culture, the lure that brought him to Asia in the first place.

