



# KATE WEBB: 1943-2007

*Southeast Asia has seen its share of legendary foreign correspondents. But none of them were like Kate Webb, writes former FCCT president, author and Burma expert **Bertil Lintner***

There can't be many who have lived to read their own obituaries. Kate Webb, however strange it may sound, was one of them. On April 21, 1971, the *New York Times* reported that she had been found dead in southwestern Cambodia, where she had disappeared two weeks earlier. "The body bore a single bullet in the chest...and was cremated on the spot in accordance with Cambodian military procedure," the report said. "The death of Miss Webb brings to at least 10 the number of correspondents killed in Cambodia since Prince Norodom Sihanouk was ousted in March 1970. Seventeen are listed as missing."

Ten days later, when a memorial service was to be held in Australia — where most of her family had moved from their native New Zealand — she and five colleagues who had been captured by Vietnamese Communist forces walked out of the jungle. "Miss Webb, you're supposed to be dead," an astonished Cambodian army officer said when he spotted her and her friends on a remote country road near the town of Kompong Speu.

She later wrote a gripping account of her time in captivity called "*On the Other Side: 23 days with the Viet Cong*" — and went on to cover the rest of the war in Cambodia, the fall of Saigon, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in India, the Tamil Tiger rebellion in Sri Lanka, the 1986 "People Power" revolution in the Philippines, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the 1999 vote for independence in East Timor. That was her last major assignment before retiring in 2001, and her health was already then beginning to

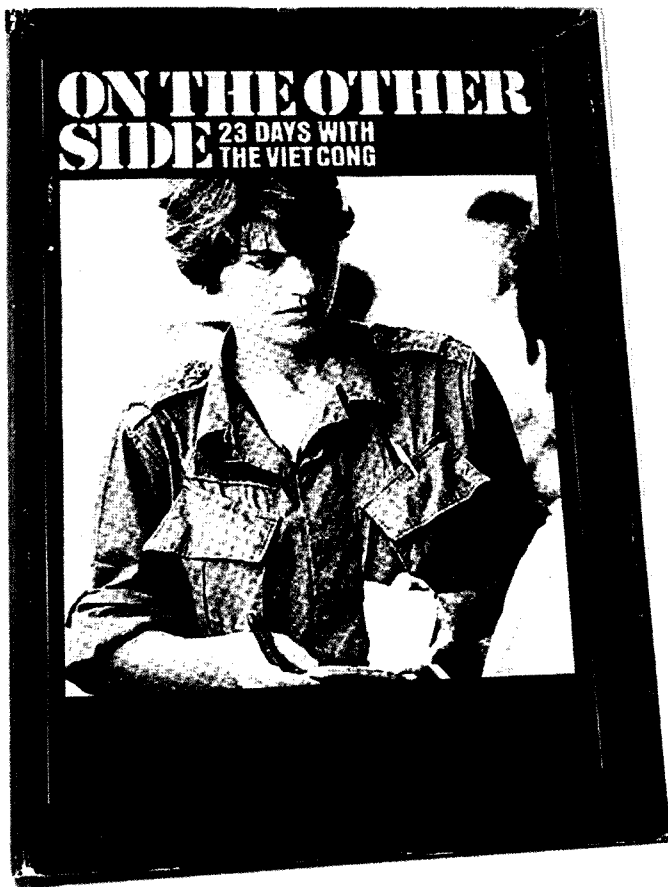
deteriorate. But she was as cheerful as ever, and dropped her walking stick on the floor to give me a hug when we ran into each other at a UN press briefing in Dili.

I first met Kate during the upheavals in Burma in August 1988. The story was too big for the *Agence-France Presse* office in Bangkok to handle, so reinforcements had to be brought in. Kate, who had worked for *United Press International* in Indochina, then had become a star reporter for the *AFP*. She rang me and we met at the FCCT, which at that time was located on the top floor of the Dusit Thani Hotel.

We got on immediately, and continued our rather wild drinking session at the long-gone *Front Page* pub around the corner. It was there I got used to what seemed to be her distinctive feature: a cigarette in one hand and a glass of beer in the other. And she was great fun to be with. A friendship was born, which lasted for nearly two decades. I was profoundly saddened when Michael Field, another Kiwi journalist, told me about her death over breakfast in Auckland in mid-May this year.

She was famous, a genuine press legend, but having arrived in Southeast Asia after the Indochina war — and been brought up in Sweden, far away from the Asia's conflict zones — I didn't, at first, know much about her background. And she didn't tell me; like any correspondent who had seen serious combat, she was not gung-ho about it. When someone — I can't remember who — told me about her capture in Cambodia and the book she had written, I was astonished but not surprised. She was obviously a real journalist.

I found out that the book was out of print,



*“That Cambodia thing? Not a big deal”*

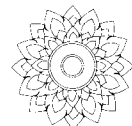
wander to where they might be and whether there'll be any chance in the future of us sitting down and talking — over beer, not rifles.”

I tried to persuade her to have the book republished, perhaps with a new introduction or epilogue, but in vain. She didn't think anyone would be interested in reading about her time in captivity during a war that was long over. But another of the very few who had survived captivity in Cambodia, Robert Sam Anson, had in 1989 — 14 years after the end of the war — published a book about his experiences, *War News: A Young Reporter in Indochina*, which had sold extremely well. But Kate did not want to dwell on the past; she had more important things to do, she said.

This remarkable woman was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1943, but her family moved to Australia when she was eight. At the age of 18, she tragically lost her parents in a traffic accident, but somehow managed to finish her studies — in symbolic logic — at a university in Melbourne. But academic life was not for her. She bought a portable typewriter and landed in Saigon in 1967, only 24 years old. That was not unusual for correspondents covering the war in Vietnam, most of whom were very young. But she was the only woman in a man's world, although she never saw gender as an issue.

“Only later did she come to realise that she had been an inspiration for many young women to follow in her footsteps,” was how one journalist wrote about her when she retired six years ago. But, like most other writers, she never really retired, and she once described herself as a “geriatric teenager.” She never married, and never settled down anywhere.

But now she is gone, and rest in peace, Kate. We miss you dearly.



so I e-mailed her asking if she had any author's copies left, and if I could buy one. She wrote back saying that she didn't have any books at all, not even one that I could have photocopied. She had given them all away.

“That Cambodia thing? Not a big deal,” was typical of her admirable modesty and professional integrity. Anyone else would have bragged about an experience like the one she had been through.

I did, in the end, find a copy in a second-hand bookstore in the United States. It was a great read, and, there again she displayed her remarkably humble attitude: “I reject entirely the word ‘ordeal’ to describe the experience. I feel it was an ordeal for the people who were trying to find out if I was still alive. But for me now, the little insight I got into the army of the other side was, in retrospect, rewarding...When I remember our captors, my thoughts always