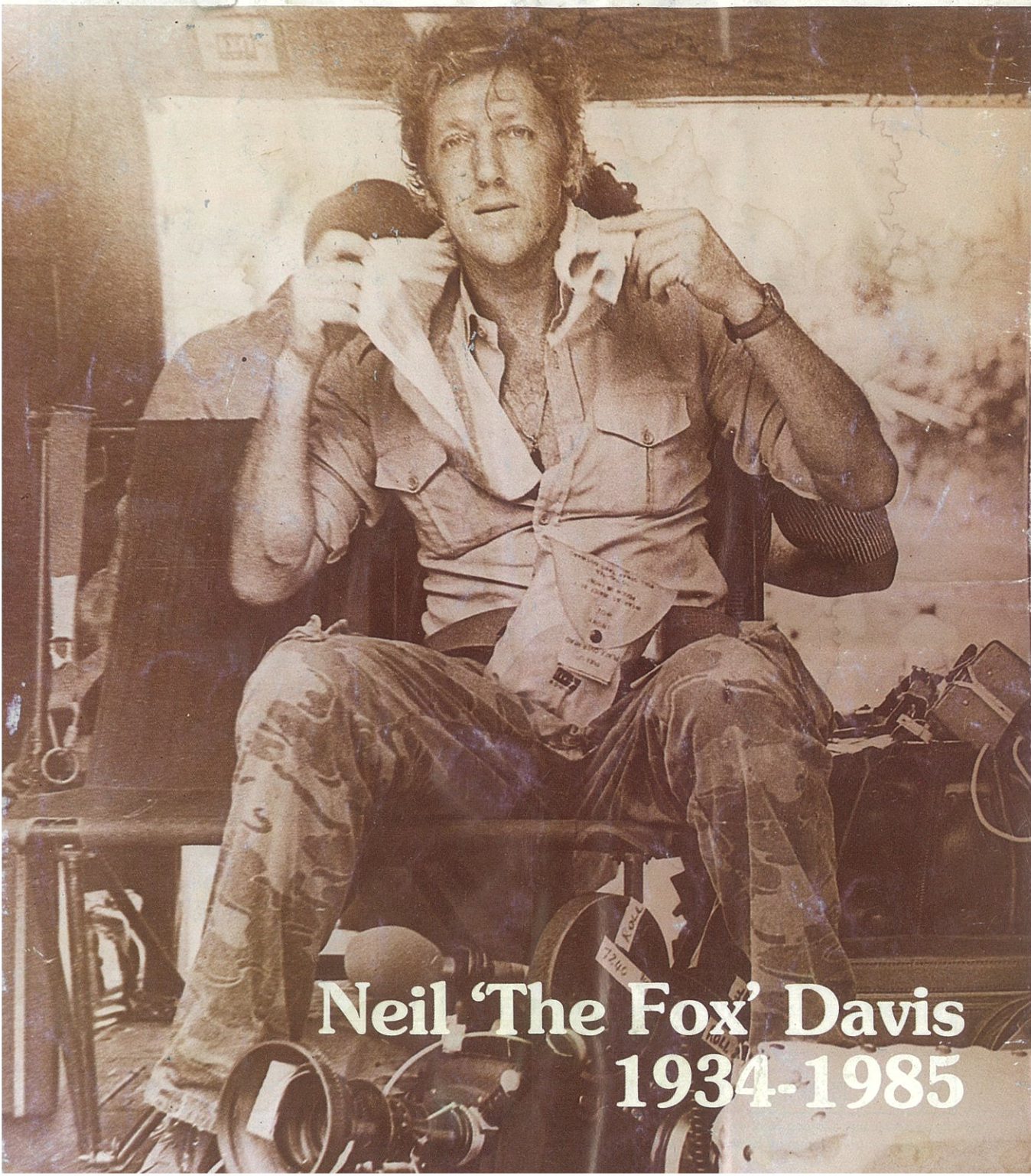


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THAILAND

DATELINE BANGKOK

Volume 6, November 1985



**Neil 'The Fox' Davis
1934-1985**

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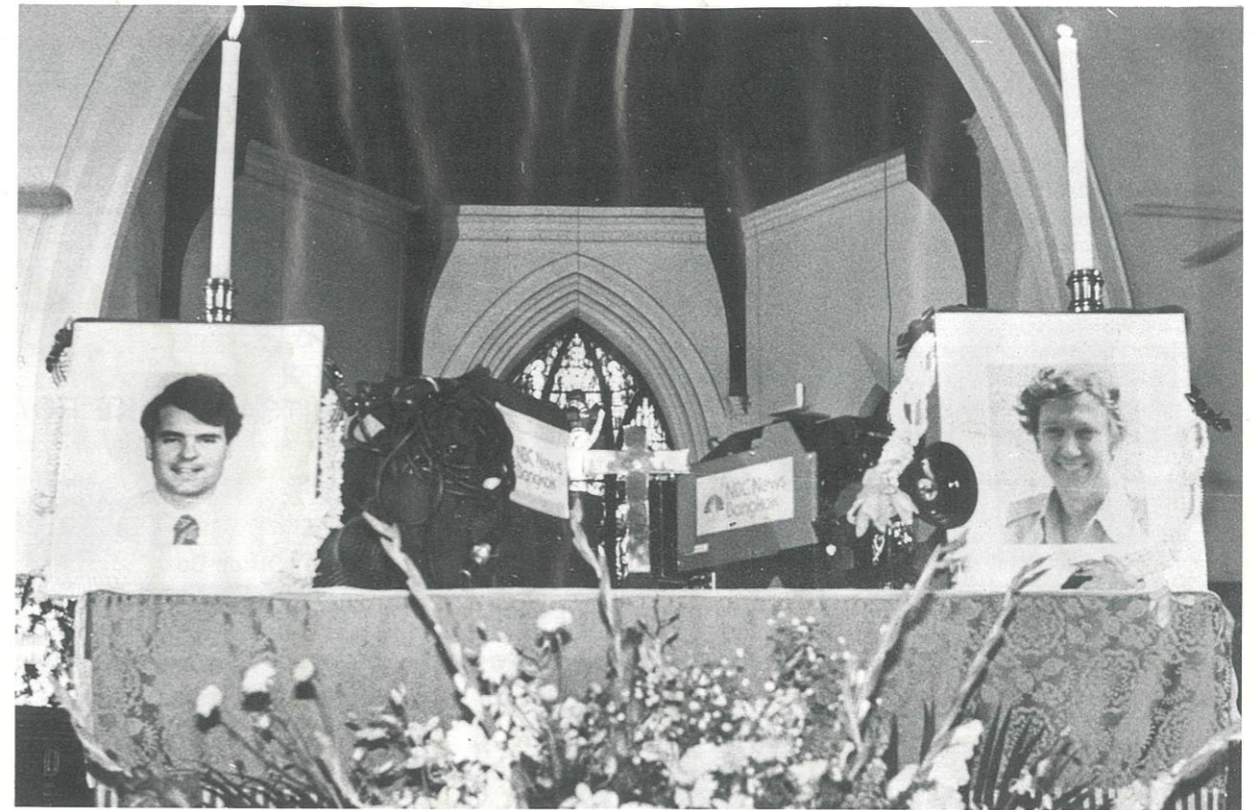
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This issue of Dateline Bangkok is dedicated to the memories of Neil Davis and Bill Latch, who died on assignment in Bangkok on 9 September, 1985. It has been prepared with the assistance and co-operation of their friends and colleagues, both in Thailand and abroad. The opportunity should be taken here to thank those from all walks of life who offered their sympathy and condolences during a sad and tragic time, one which we hope will never be repeated.

It is also appropriate to use this space to pay tribute to the extraordinary courage of Visnews cameraman Gary Burns, who risked his life to pull Neil's body clear of the gunfire. Gary is returning to Australia to settle. He says he will never pick up a camera again...

Photographs of Neil appearing here were taken during the past five years. Older pictures from his own personal collection, as well as his diaries, were forwarded to his biographer, Tim Bowden, who would like to hear from anyone with a story to tell about the Fox, or who can fill in some of the gaps in his life. Tim's address is 11 Marana Rd, Northbridge, New South Wales 2063, Australia.

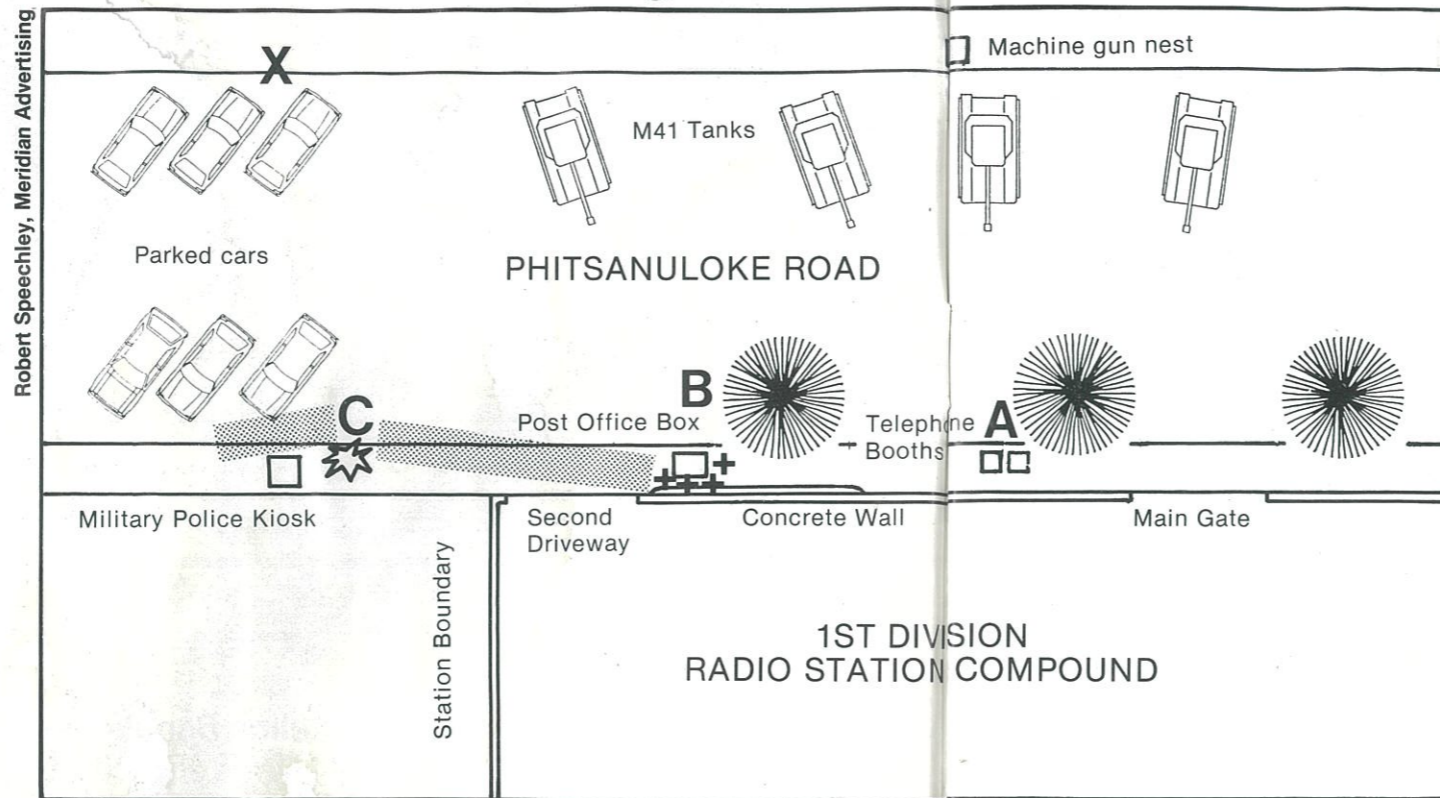
How they were killed.....

Forensic reports now seem to make it clear that Neil Davis and Bill Latch were not deliberate targets, but more the victims of indiscriminant shooting from four rebel tanks outside Bangkok's 1st Division radio station during the 9 Sept coup d'etat. Police investigators have told correspondents they intend prosecuting any cavalrymen who are determined to have taken part in the incident, which also claimed the lives of a woman and two pro-government soldiers in the immediate vicinity.

Davis was killed instantly by shrapnel from a tank shell and Latch was mortally wounded when a fragmented machinegun round penetrated his liver, according to evidence forwarded to the police committee investigating the rebellion. The death of the two newsmen was bigger news than the coup itself in newspaper and television coverage abroad and prompted an emotional statement from one NBC executive that they had been murdered.

Bangkok-based Visnews cameraman Gary Burns claims that he came under fire out of the direct line of the four M-41 tanks as he dragged Davis' body away from the scene. The allegation appears to be supported by film taken from the dead correspondent's camera, which kept rolling for about 10 minutes after he died and perfectly frames Burns' progress along the street with Latch crawling on all fours behind him. Burns says he was aware of machinegun rounds whipping around him, and the film at one point shows a cannon shell hitting a tree after passing over his head. Witnesses say one of the tanks swung its turret in his direction.

Police say they identified all the crewmen aboard the tanks, partly from



+ Final position of Davis, Latch, Burns and Thai soundman, Daeng
 --- Line of exit of Burns and Latch

★ Burns and Latch fired on here.
 X Mabuchi's position

enlargements they made of photographs taken during the shooting. Questioning has revealed that the orders to open fire on the radio station came by motorcycle — a fact which is supported by Davis' video tape made available to the investigation committee. So far, 27 out of 33 rebel soldiers have been detained in connection with their involvement in the rebellion itself, all of them either captains, lieutenants or master-sergeants.

Davis and Latch were standing in front of two telephone booths immediately to the right of the radio station gates when the tank machinegunners opened up without warning from the other side of the street. The newsmen were forced to stay for about a minute in that position, then took advantage of a lull in the shooting to run along the footpath and join Burns and his Thai soundman behind a post office box and a roadside tree.

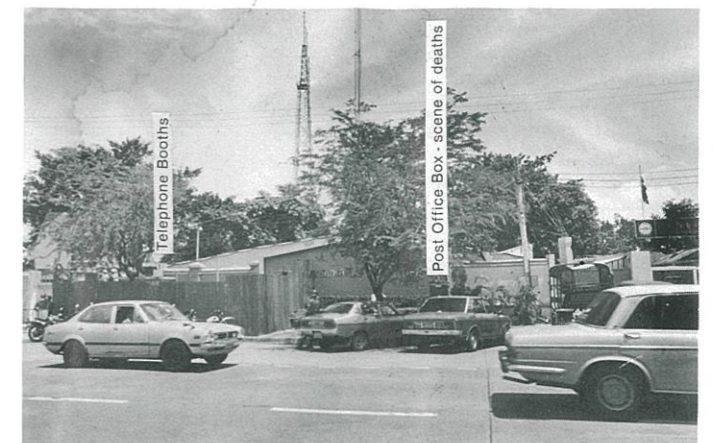
Then the tankers went into action again, firing their main 76 m.m. cannon in addition to their turret-mounted .50 calibre machineguns. The fire was almost continuous and two shells exploded against a wall behind the two television crews. Davis was nearest to the point of impact and shrapnel tore into his left side, causing massive wounds and instant death.

Shrapnel also shattered Latch's ankle and spattered his back, but at that point, or more likely some time before, what is believed to have been the head of a machinegun bullet ricocheted off the concrete and entered his right rib cage, causing a seven-inch laceration which bisected his liver. The 35-year-old American is shown partly on film waving a white handkerchief and pleading in Thai for the gunners to cease fire, but only moments after that the tanks resumed their barrage — most of it aimed at the station gates and the tall antenna some distance behind. Although Latch managed to crawl to safety, he died six hours later from internal bleeding.

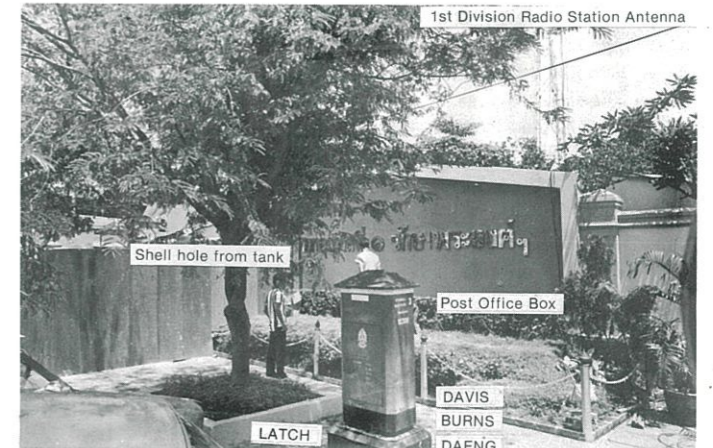
WIZARD of ID



by Parker and Hart



A Davis and Latch were originally positioned in front of the telephone booths just to the right of the station's main gate. In this picture, taken several days after the coup, repair workers have fenced off the gate area.



B During a brief lull in the shooting, the NBC crew ran to join Burns and his stand-in soundman Daeng Kariah behind the mailbox, in roughly the positions shown here. How and when Latch was hit is uncertain, but shrapnel spraying off the wall behind them killed Davis.



C The path Burns and the mortally-wounded Latch took to get out of the firing line.

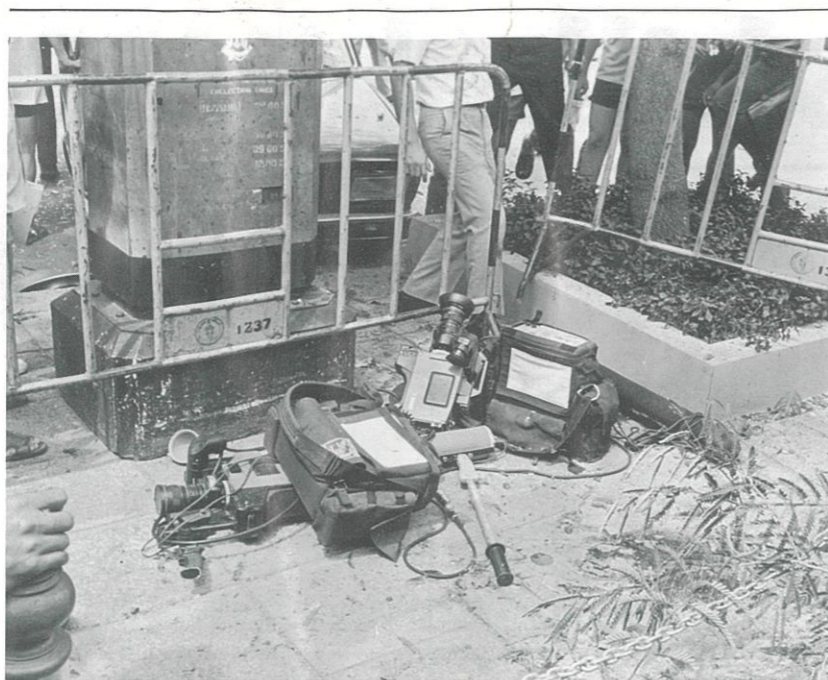
Police forensic specialist Col Dr Pravet Koompai, who has performed more than 10,100 post mortems over the past 19 years, told correspondents Joe de Rienzo and John McBeth that the jagged, oval-shaped entry wound, the expanding path of destruction and the lack of an exit wound pointed to a ricochet. The fragment was not found during the autopsy and it is assumed it was removed during emergency surgery. He said if Latch had been hit by a direct shot, evidence of a possible deliberate killing, the round would have passed cleanly through him and, in the case of a machinegun bullet, would have left a much larger external wound.

The international attention paid to the killing of Davis and Latch unhappily tended to overshadow the death toll among the Thais, now thought to be more than twice as high as the three people acknowledged officially so far. Diplomatic sources, for example, say they have an eyewitness sighting of two motorcyclists dying from a shellburst in Thvet Market. The number of wounded is also believed to be higher with police specifically mentioning a woman who was blinded by shrapnel.

Despite critical letters to local newspapers, including one acerbic note from former foreign minister Thanat Khoman, it is clear however that the deaths of the two foreigners added an edge to Thai concerns over how the world perceived the coup.

Police were encouraged to carry out a thorough examination of the circumstances behind the deaths and it is understood their findings were a particular point of interest when police chief Gen Narong Mahanond briefed Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond on the investigation the day before the Thai leader embarked on a 17-day visit to the United States and Europe.

While there does not appear to be a case for saying Davis and Latch were killed deliberately, those who witnessed the incident and others who have taken an interest in the case find it difficult to accept official statements that they were merely the victims of an accident. Likewise, the woman killed in a taxi as she tried to reach her son trapped in a nearby school. A tank crew which fires a shell down a street in the direction of a busy intersection must surely have realised the awful possible consequences of such an act, just the same as those gunners who tried, without success, to bring down the radio station antenna. It was a miracle not more people died.



TOP: NBC and Visnews equipment lie at the spot where Davis and Latch met their deaths.

LEFT: Freelance cameraman Naoki Mabuchi, who filmed the incident from across the street.

BELOW: Burns relates the tragedy to Newsweek photographer Alex Bowie, who moments earlier had helped drag Latch away from the scene.

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A Message From The President



It was a tumultuous period for members of the foreign press corps. The death on September 9 of veteran Indochina hand Neil Davis and his soundman, Bill Latch, left many of us in shock and grief. The massive outpouring of emotion was perhaps understandable. Neil in particular was such a dear friend! After covering wars, riots and all sorts of violence for more than 20 years, it was tragic that he should die on a Bangkok street in a seemingly absurd rebellion, the real motive of which may never be told.

There was much controversy whether Neil and Bill were accidentally shot, or deliberately gunned down (see earlier story.) It serves no meaningful end to further fuel this controversy. Suffice to say that we trust in Thailand's justice machinery, and that the culprits responsible for ordering the tanks to fire on the 1st Division radio station will be brought to trial. Following some informal dialogue, three of our colleagues, Naoki Mabuchi, Alex Bowie and John McBeth were invited to give police investigators their accounts on the circumstances surrounding Neil's death. Naoki and Alex were at the scene; John was acting on behalf of Gary Burns who left for a short visit to Australia in the aftermath of the coup.

So that Neil and Bill will continue to live in our memory, the FCCT has established a Davis-Latch Memorial Fund. After much discussion and refinement, here is the gist of how the fund will be utilized:

Since the two were long-time residents of Bangkok and Neil was club president during 1982-83, it was deemed appropriate that the fund should assist in raising the professional standards of Thai journalists. An annual award will be given to a young but outstanding media practitioner who will go on an approximately two-month apprenticeship with a major news organisation in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia or selected countries in Asia. The nature of the awardee's work is left flexible. He can be either a television cameraman, newscaster, photo-journalist or someone from the print media.

Participation from overseas news organisations is vital to make the scheme work. Approaches are being made to seek their support in the form of sponsorships. At current reckoning, the fund will provide the awardee with minimum financial assistance to cover his air travel between Bangkok and the country of destination, with the sponsoring agency taking care of the rest (namely the provision of a training programme, working per diem plus accommodation). The fund's assistance can increase, but much depends on how much it is going to grow.

At the time of writing, we have raised about Baht 150,000 from the September 18 evening plus all donations. Contributions are still coming in and, needless to say, more are welcome. The size will substantially increase, once promised contributions from the FCCs in Hongkong and Tokyo arrive. By drawing on interest and leaving the principal intact, we intend to make the award a permanent annual exercise to be administered by the yearly-elected executive committee or a specially appointed board of trustees. Pending the finalisation of sponsorships and other details, we hope the first award can be granted at some point in 1986. It is meant to be prestigious as well as professionally meaningful for the recipients.

On other fronts, we continue to see a gradual but steady improvement in club finances thanks again to the prolific programme committee under Norman Borttorff and the support of all concerned. As we receive more exclusive material from around the globe, extra-Wednesday night activities are becoming more frequent. The dinner address by Prince Norodom Sihanouk was a great success, breaking all records. The function was the biggest (with nearly 500 people), longest (lasting close to midnight) and probably most entertaining. The trial of co-hosting the event with the Reporters Association of Thailand proved to be a worthwhile exercise and we have agreed to do it again, this time, a joint dinner-address invitation to Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond. That should be the last major event before the current board's term expires next January.

Paisal Sricharatchanya

'Keep it rolling, no matter what'

HONG KONG – The first time Neil Davis came under fire, he was waist deep in water in an open paddy field late one afternoon in Vietnam.

"I remember being very tired," he said. "And I remember thinking 'My God, I really don't want it at this stage; I'm too tired. Why don't they do it when I'm fresh in the morning?'"

But the TV newsman continued to slog on with the troops he was filming. He survived that encounter, and numerous others, as he recorded the Vietnam War from before the arrival of U.S. ground forces in 1965 to the communist victory in 1975.

Eluding bullets, bombs and booby traps, Mr. Davis developed an uncanny ability to stay alive. While more than 80 fellow newsmen died on the job in Indochina, he defied the odds daily for 11 years, often being wounded but always recovering. After Vietnam, he covered revolutions and upheavals from Angola to Iraq to Lebanon.

His luck finally ran out Monday on the streets of downtown Bangkok. Caught by fire from soldiers trying to overthrow the Thai government, he died on the spot – camera in hand.

His death at the age of 51 has stunned his colleagues, not only because they regarded him as almost indestructible, but because he died on what for him should have been a safe, even mundane, assignment: a pathetic coup attempt by a bunch of ambitious, second-rate current and former military officers. Though modest and unassuming, Mr. Davis appeared larger than life to his colleagues: someone who had seen it all and done it all.

Mr. Davis was a craftsman with a camera. But he was more. Over the years he acquired knowledge that made him an authority on armies, military hardware and battle tactics. Furthermore, he had a detailed understanding of the history, geography and culture of Indochina, especially of Cambodia, a country that fascinated him.

Born on the Australian island state of Tasmania, Mr. Davis arrived in Saigon in 1964, a year before the U.S. buildup. He worked for Visnews, a London-based TV news agency, as a cameraman-correspondent, which meant he shot his own film and wrote his own scripts. He chose to concentrate on South Vietnamese troops in battle because, as he put it, "It was

On television networks, in magazines and newspapers around the world, there were hundreds of tributes, accolades and stories which sought to capture the remarkable spirit of Neil Davis. Few said it better than Asian Wall St. Journal managing editor BARRY WAIN, writing in his newspaper's September 11 edition.



Hong Kong-based photographer Nancy Nash captured this likeness of the Fox we knew and loved. The enigmatic smile here was usually reserved for the fairer sex, as all his friends will testify.

A man who never quit

their war. It meant a great deal to them."

And since the Vietnamese, contrary to popular belief in the U.S., did most of the fighting, he was often in the thick of it.

"I would always try and go to the extreme frontline," he said. "You can't get the spontaneity of action if you're not there. You can't get it if you're 100 meters behind the soldiers trying to get it with a telephoto lens. You don't see the faces, the expres-

sions. You don't feel the compassion that they may show for their wounded comrades, or for their enemy for that matter."

Mr. Davis discovered that the quick reflexes he'd developed as a professional football player helped protect him on the battlefield. As he explained it, he would sense danger before it actually arrived.

Not always, though. He was hurt badly enough to be hospitalized

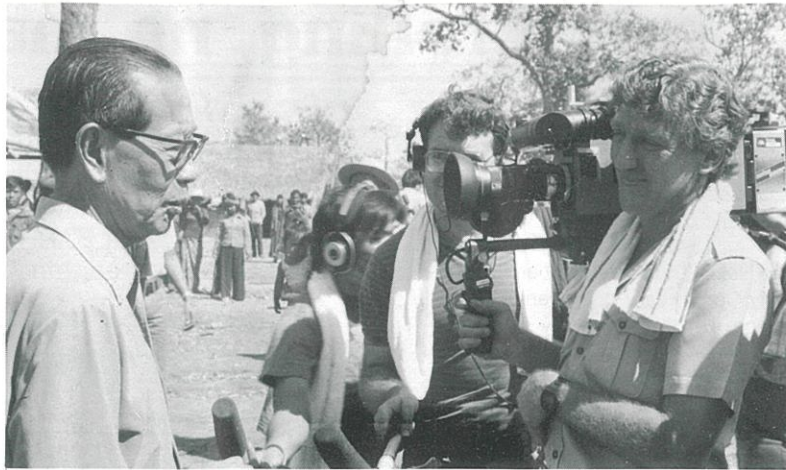
six times, once within a fraction of his life. In Cambodia in 1974, a mortar exploded a meter away, killing a couple of soldiers and blasting shrapnel into his legs and back. Only a tape recorder strapped to his belt stopped the jagged metal from tearing his stomach apart. Surviving Cambodian soldiers gave him a life-saving transfusion of milk from coconuts taken off a nearby tree to overcome temporarily his loss of blood.

On April 12, 1975, Mr. Davis was evacuated on one of the last American helicopters from Phnom Penh—his home for five years—as Khmer Rouge revolutionaries encircled the city. He returned to Saigon in time to see it captured by the communists on April 30. As North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units advanced through the streets, he entered the presidential palace by an unguarded rear gate and was waiting on the front steps when the victors arrived. He filmed—from the inside—the first tank crashing through the locked front gates.

There was a tense moment when the young and excited soldiers raced into the palace to fly their flag from a first-floor balcony. One charged at Mr. Davis screaming in Vietnamese, "Stop, stop, stop." Mr. Davis kept filming until the soldier was nearly upon him, then went into a routine he had carefully rehearsed. "Welcome to Saigon, comrade," he said in Vietnamese. "I've been waiting to film the liberation."

It worked. The soldier hesitated, then dashed past him.

Signing on with NBC News, a division of National Broadcasting Co. of the U.S., Mr. Davis relocated to Bangkok. Again, he became a cameraman-correspondent, a role usually performed by two persons.



Neil and Bill talk to Cambodian resistance leader Son Sann in a Cambodian border encampment last February.

His war experience left him with few visible scars. In conversation, he wasn't bitter, cynical or tormented. Indeed, most people found him charming. He married in 1977, but his wife, Julie, returned to her home in Taiwan within a few years.

Mr. Davis didn't inflict war stories on listeners, though he was often prevailed upon to tell them. He was more likely to be talking about boxing, cricket and tennis—and wagering considerable sums of money with friends on the outcome of those sports.

In fact, he counseled young reporters against following his lead and becoming war correspondents. "But if you must do it," he said, "do it because you believe in your work and want to do it well, not because you want to be famous"

Fame long eluded Mr. Davis. It was only his colleagues—and Indochina scholars and specialists—who appreciated his achievements and knowledge.

That changed in 1980, with the release of a documentary film entitled "Frontline." Made by David Bradbury, also an Australian, it consisted largely of Mr. Davis's news clips from the Visnews library, strung together with a commentary by Mr. Davis.

The simple format belied the powerful impact of the 55-minute film, which was distributed world-wide and made the final half dozen nominations in the documentary section for the 1981 Academy Awards.

In the film Mr. Davis appeared as a person of rare talent and courage, able to retain his nerve and humanity amid constant danger and appalling human tragedy. All parties to the conflict leaped to the conclusion that he was on their side.

The truth is that during the war Mr. Davis kept about equal distance, politically, from the contenders. He saved his sympathy for the soldiers on both sides who fought and died for decisions made by politicians far away.

In recent years, however, he did take sides. He strongly opposed Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, and placed his considerable influence behind one of three resistance factions, the non-communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front.

When the end came Monday, Mr. Davis's friends weren't surprised that he tried to keep filming, even as he died. That's the way it was when he watched friends perish in the war, the way he insisted it should be. "The idea is, for a news cameraman, to get the film and keep it rolling—no matter what happens," he said.

His quick death was another consolation. "I was never afraid of being killed because that's that; you're done," he said in "Frontline." "I didn't want to be badly wounded."

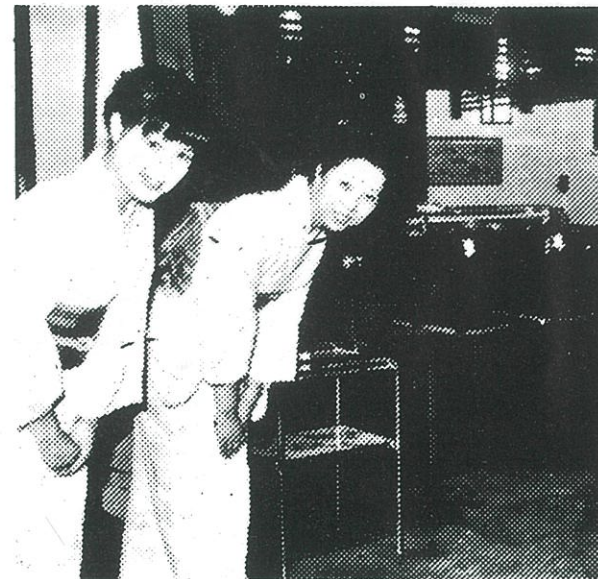


... and on the other side, Neil, Bill, Burns and Visnews soundman Sampote Puerksumlee cover a Vietnamese troop rotation in June 1984.

Japanese Restaurant



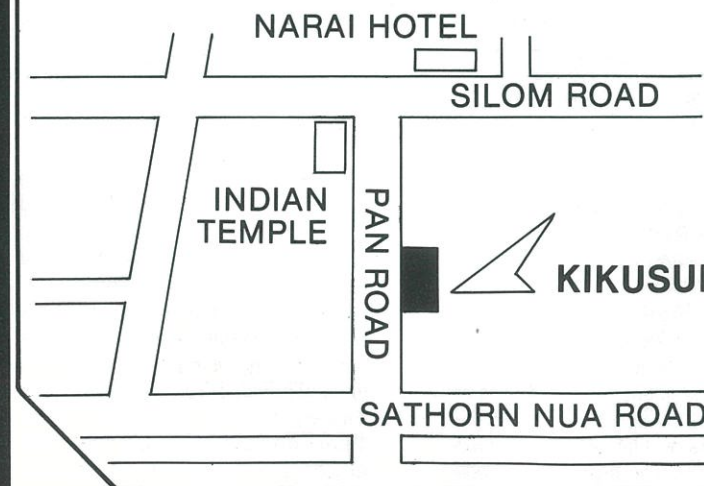
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The flip side of the Fox

There are a million and one stories about Neil Davis -- the newsman, the sportsman, the gambler, the lady's man, the prankster. And, of course, the brave and unselfish person that he was. We will confine ourselves to just a few simply because there are many second-hand tales that are much better told by his legion of friends around the world who because of pressure of time could not be asked to contribute.

Neil was particularly sensitive about his age, going to extraordinary lengths sometimes to try and hide it in his quest for eternal youth. But the secret slowly came out, simply because Davis' taunts that we would never find out only served to fuel our determination to do just that. Joe De Rienzo, who lived and worked in Bangkok during the 1970s before joining the US Navy, was prevailed upon to check the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Hobart if and when his ship called there. Dutifully, he did so -- and even went to the lengths of finding Davis' sister among a couple of hundred people of the same surname in the phone book to verify that the all-important date was St Valentine's Day, 1934.

When his 50th birthday came round last year, his mates threw a party for him. Neil entered into the spirit of the thing and even submitted to being pushed into the FCCT clubhouse in a wheelchair with a plaid rug around his knees. Unfortunately, he also chose this moment to demonstrate a well-known rose-eating habit, chomping off at the stem a beautiful red bloom presented to him by Tempo correspondent Yuli Ismartono.

A mock trial was held accusing Davis of trying to cover up his age. The prosecution case was overwhelming, with De Rienzo -- now back in Bangkok working for Agence France Press -- and Visnews mate Gary Burns called as chief witnesses. Davis put up a spirited if slightly pathetic defence by producing a stack of congratulatory birthday cards he had written to himself. One read: "I'll make a deal with you. I'll tell everyone your real age,



CBS mate Derek Williams, wearing a T-shirt specially minted for the occasion, wheels the Fox into his 50th birthday party at the old FCCT clubhouse.

which is 29, if you tell everyone what a good bloke I really am. Pol Pot."

Neil enjoyed many nicknames during his life, but the one that stuck and the one he liked the best was "The Fox." Review chief correspondent Rodney Tasker initially came up with "the old grey fox," but out of deference to his feelings the "old and the grey" were often forgotten and finally dropped.

It was Tasker who also received Neil's very last missive. The Fox was an inveterate gambler, betting on just about anything, but particularly one of his greatest loves, boxing, which he knew a great deal about. He often used betting also as part of his well-

known psy-war campaign on the tennis court, trying to make victorious opponents nervous by putting money on the next game -- and then, if that didn't work, making a double-or-quits challenge.

One of the Fox's bets four months before he died was Baht 1,000 on the Australia-England cricket test series in England.

Alas, Neil's team -- Australia, of course -- lost badly. As his secretary tells it, the last thing he did before leaving his office on the fateful morning of 9 September to go out to film the coup was to hand her an envelope addressed to Tasker, marked "important." When Tasker returned later in the week from a holiday in England, he opened the

envelope and found two Baht 500 notes inside, with a small message written on the back of the original slip of paper recording the mutual bet which read: "Lucky, Tasker. LUCKY!" and signed: "Fox Sept 9."

There was a sad posthumous ritual for John McBeth as well: The opening of a sealed envelope kept locked in his secretary's drawer which contained the Fox's best times for the longest way around Lumpini Park. Before being visited by an old rugby injury, McBeth had made a rash vow that he would vanquish Neil's record. He would never have done it, of course, but once he had a time he thought he could boast about the two were to open the envelope together. The note inside said this:

Best ever: 11min 24 sec (not yet had all-out assault)

Then he went on to add the following, just for a little bit of encouragement.

Above average: 11:30 to 11:50

Average-good: 11:50 to 12:15

Average: 12:15 to 12:25
OK to maintain fitness: 12:30 to 12:45

Very fair: 12:45 to 13:15

Slower than 13:15 OK, you've warmed up -- so now do your

fast lap.

It should be noted here that the Fox was once a professional runner. He was the first correspondent to finish in the second annual Run-for-the-Park and was only pipped on the post by a much-younger Bill Branigin of the Washington Post in the inaugural event in 1984.

Most people have forgotten when Neil Davis gave up cigarettes -- buying them, that is. He was in fact probably the heaviest non-smoker anyone with a packet of Marlboros came across. He also had a weakness for flaming red socks. When Visnews cameraman Gary Burns was married recently, the Fox showed up -- immaculate as usual -- in a very nice suit. Halfway through the ceremony he caught Burns eye and casually lifted up a trouser leg. They were the reddest socks Burns had ever seen. When he was dressed for the last time his mates saw to it that he had them on.

Another of the more amusing stories concerning Davis was when a glass of flaming Zambucca stuck to his fingers during a speech Australian Foreign Minister Bill Hayden was giving to the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand last year. Davis, who had forgotten that a waiter had lit up the drink, let out such an explosion of pro-

fanities that he halted Hayden in mid-sentence. Recognising the Tasmanian tone to the voice, the minister cocked his head and remarked: "That sounds like an Australian in distress."

Everyone who knew Neil almost automatically became a mate. He kept every letter anyone had sent him and it is believed that when he died he was carrying on a running correspondence with at least 200 people -- a remarkable feat in a profession which is not exactly rich in letter writers.

During the final months of his life, the Fox spent much of his spare time recording reminiscences for a biography being prepared by Australian author and friend Tim Bowden. Although he kept a diary for years, Neil had a remarkable memory for detail. So much so that Bowden was forced to chide him gently in a letter. "Let's face it, old mate," he wrote some weeks ago, "five Sony C90 cassettes and we've only just got across the Derwent River from Sorrel (Neil's birthplace) to Hobart."

The book, to be called "Frontline" after the television documentary on Neil of the same name, is due out in December. Without any doubt, it will immortalise a journalist who was a legend in his own lifetime. The cliché in this case, fitted only too well.

Respect for the ARVN

By Tokyo-based ABC News correspondent JIM LAURIE, special to Dateline Bangkok.

We all have our memories of Neil. I first met him in the spring of 1970 in Saigon. I was a young freelancer and radio stringer, more than a little wet behind the ears, and Neil set me up with a desk in the Visnews office in Saigon's old "Passage Eden." I was considered by Neil a worthy replacement for the Indian money changer who sometime earlier he had politely evicted from the Visnews office when the activities of the "Bank of India" threatened to undo the good efforts of the newsfilm agency.

Unlike me, Neil had little time to sit at a desk. He was always out in the field: shooting, questioning, understanding, reporting, taking constant risks.

Unlike most of us, Neil was not much concerned with the passing American military parade, that seemingly endless turn-over of men attached to MACV (Military Assis-

tance Command Vietnam.) He was much more concerned with the Vietnamese. It was after all their country, their war.

He had a much higher opinion of ARVN, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, than most of us. But then he had spent much more time with them. He knew them better: the Vietnamese Marines, the men of the Army's First Division. They were good men. Neil knew a number of their commanders, often on a first name basis. He had respect for them. Years later he visited a communist re-education camp in North Vietnam and came upon one of the ARVN commanders he had once known well. The commander remembered Neil. Daring not to talk, the officer closed and opened his eyes quickly, a sign of acknowledgement and then he smiled between the tears.

When Neil visited Vietnam recently (he and Bill Latch were there for more than two months this spring), it angered him that the communists were desecrating the graves of former ARVN soldiers. No peaceful resting place for the ARVN, while well-tended communist cemeteries were springing up all over, in tribute to the "martyrs to the revolution."

While being among the Vietnamese was important to Neil, his first love was Cambodia. He moved to Phnom Penh to live in late 1970, taking all his possessions which had been housed in Singapore. Neil's flat on Boulevard Monivong became a place where the privileged visitor could learn much of what there was to know about Cambodia.

Sometimes Neil's generosity

backfired. I remember a certain American radio reporter we used to call "Snitch" who accosted Neil one day outside the Phnom Penh PTT as Neil was about to file his Reuters dispatch.

"Snitch" rarely ran the roads and Neil's first hand account was just what New York would want. So after a few minutes debriefing, "Snitch" turned on his heels and raced back into the PTT where he filed the story for CBS Radio. Neil later got his revenge. From then on, "Snitch" got only the frontline stories that were complete inventions.

If Neil had respect for the Vietnamese fighting man, he had even more for the Khmer. While we made black jokes about Lon Nol's "shadow army," and the young kids who went off to war in Pepsi Cola trucks, Neil knew the Khmer soldier better. Their bravery astounded him. These young, poorly trained, ill-armed boys, clenching their buddhas in their mouths, ran out to die before the hardened, disciplined Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge.

There were the Khmer women too. Neil was never known to miss an attractive woman. The Khmer woman donned tailored fatigues and marched off to battle too. And the families. He was particularly affected by the women and children who followed their loved ones into battle, often to die there with them.

Neil knew too the Khmer Republic's military leaders, a bunch who many of us dismissed as good-for-nothing, hopelessly corrupted commanders. But Neil knew them, understood them and their problems. He used to talk of the general charged with the defense of Phnom Penh who had literally to barter with thousands of riels to obtain from other commanders artillery support and the occasional air strike. It was not simple corruption. It was a barter system simply to keep the army going, to achieve survival for beleaguered men.

In April 1975, after he joined NBC News, I was working with Neil in Phnom Penh when it all came to a tragic end. Neil packed what he could in early April preparing to leave the country he loved, yet hoping somehow Cambodia would hold out one more dry season.

But on the morning of April 12th, Cambodia neared collapse and Neil decided to leave. Reluctantly he joined "Operation Eagle Pull," the helicopter evacuation of Phnom Penh staged from a school yard near the American Embassy.

It was probably the only story from which Neil ever walked away, or in this case flew away. Emotionally, Neil was exhausted. I remember him sitting in the Marine Corps CH-53 cradling his CP-16 camera that morning as the orange and gold pagodas of Phnom Penh disappeared beneath us and the cheering of school children still rang in our ears. Neil reckoned that those journalists who stayed behind in Cambodia would have a pretty rough time and that a horrible blood bath was about to descend. He was of course terribly right. Leaving Cambodia, I think, was the hardest decision of Neil's life.

In the belief he could more productively see through to the end of the Vietnam story he had covered for 12 years, Neil resolved next to return to Saigon. Buoyed in the knowledge that I would be under the guidance of Asia's most experienced combat reporter-cameraman, I decided to join him. Warned by NBC that all staffers were being pulled out, Neil and I flew together to Saigon from Hong Kong on April 26, determined to see through what then seemed inevitable, the fall of Saigon and the communization of all Vietnam.

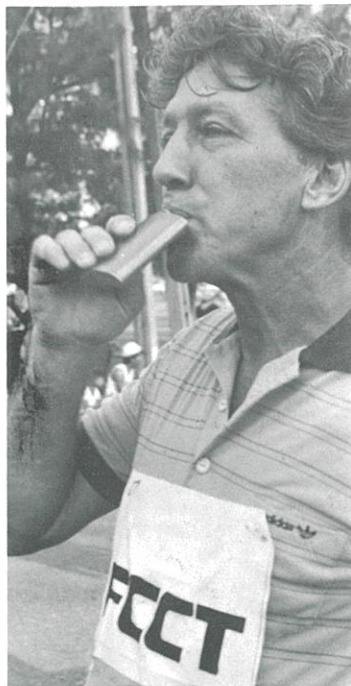
The memories I have of the next month with Neil in Saigon are filled with the crush of dramatic events: the panic, the tense few hours after the take-over, the remarkable normalcy that set in shortly thereafter.

Throughout all, Neil maintained his constant sense of humor, his coolness and his curiosity about everything around him. On the morning of April 29 as we watched our colleagues assemble and then join the American evacuation of Saigon, Neil displayed too his sensitivity to the plight of the people he was assigned to cover. We spotted a French photographer snapping away at a desperately sobbing young woman who in all the panic could not board one of the evacuation buses to Ton Son Nhut Airport. The photographer having got his pictures, jumped on one bus, the door slamming in her face. Neil put down his camera, grabbed the girl and a younger sister, and with me at the wheel of a small Citroen "Dalat," we raced down the street in pursuit of the US Army buses. We finally caught up near Ton Son Nhut and Neil forced the tearful couple into the evacuation. Years later, Neil heard from the woman. From Belgium she extended her thanks.

The high tension after the communists took Saigon was confined only to the first day or so. After that, Neil was certain, and I because of him, that

no harm would come to any of the journalists who stayed behind in Vietnam. On the afternoon of April 30, Neil and I found ourselves in the middle of a fire-fight between North Vietnamese regulars and a few South Vietnamese hold-outs. It was all over in less than an hour, but it gave me a glimpse of Neil's celebrated coolness under fire.

Neil seemed to be everywhere at once, that first day of the communist victory and in fact after that as well until the day a month later when I carried out of Vietnam more than forty rolls of Neil's film. Neil stayed on well into August when finally the Vietnamese suggested it might be best for him to leave.

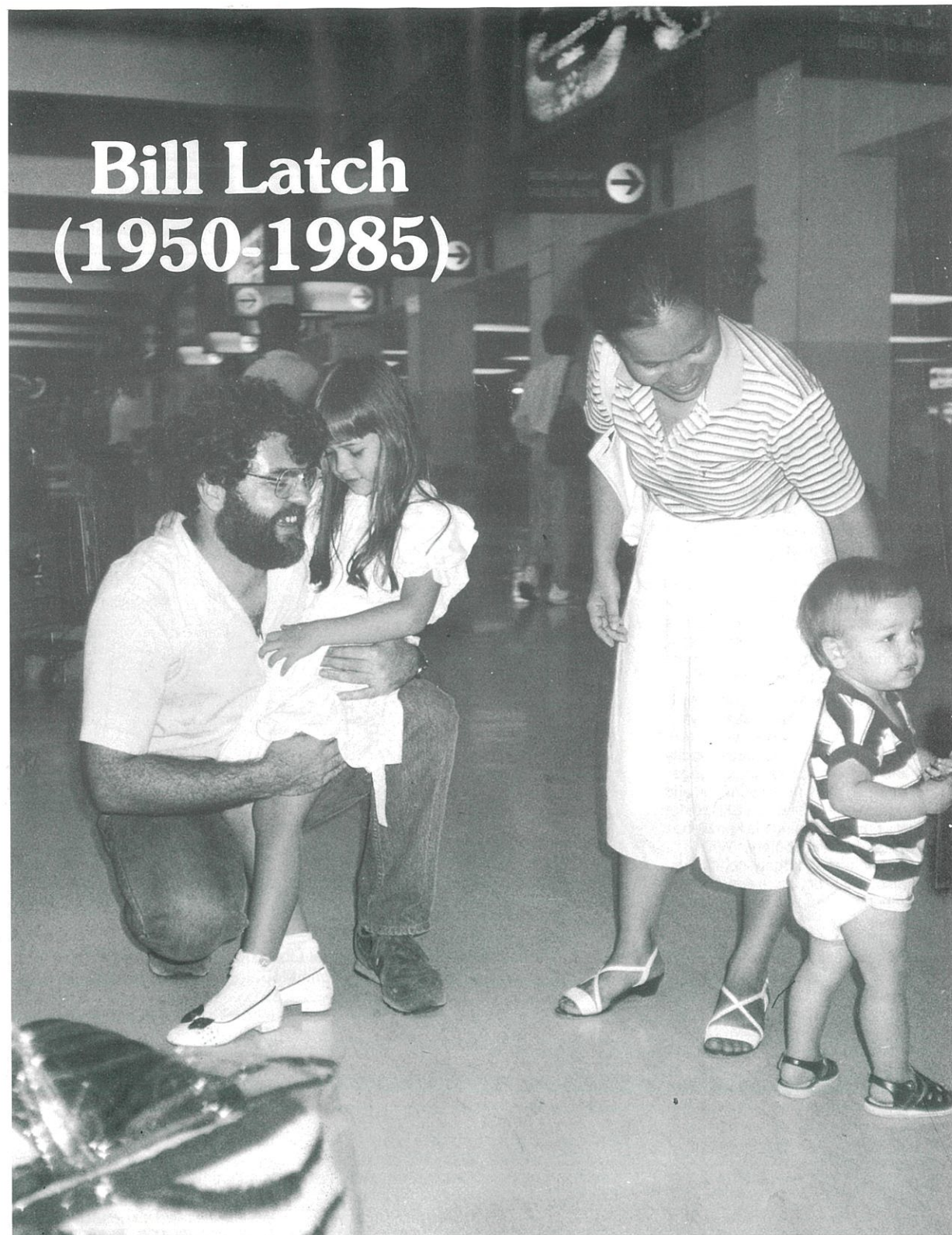


Davis takes a sip of Bundaberg rum supplied by ABC man Geoff Leach before the FCCT's 1984 Lumpini fun run.

But on that first day, Neil was at the US Embassy as the last helicopter lifted from the roof. He was with General Duong Van Minh an hour or so later as Minh prepared to surrender. And he was at Doc Lap Palace at noon when North Vietnamese tanks slammed through the palace gates. The tanks at the gate—the most famous film at the end of the war.

I wonder if, when Neil stood recording the American-built tanks converging on 1st Division Headquarters, Bangkok, his real thoughts were of Soviet-built T-54's, their turrets turning menacingly toward him in much the same way ten long years ago.

Bill Latch (1950-1985)



Bill Latch greets his daughter, Ann-Marie, his wife, Sornanong, and his son, Michael, after his return from an extended assignment in Vietnam earlier this year.

Tragic ending to a Thai love affair

By NEIL KELLY (The Times) and NICK CUMMING-BRUCE (The Guardian), close colleagues and friends of Bill Latch.

When Bill Latch first worked as a correspondent in Thailand he frequently roamed the Cambodian border on a motor bike, often staying in Thai villages or across the border with the Khmers. It was not just a knowledge of the local language that enabled him to do this but also his warm personality, a generous smile, an inquiring mind and a friendliness that made him the best of companions. He never went on his border walkabouts without a supply of candy for the children, cigarettes or sometimes a bottle of Mekhong.

Those news-gathering methods made Bill one of the best informed foreign correspondents who ever worked in Thailand. His natural ability for and interest in foreign languages gave him an early fluency in Thai and a day rarely went by when Bill did not devote time to refining his knowledge of syntax and vocabulary. With that accomplishment, largely self-taught, he also built up an ever-widening knowledge of Thai customs and culture.

But there was much more to Bill's knowledge of the area than that. When he came to Thailand in 1975 at the age of 25, he already had a deep knowledge of China, its history and politics, fluency in Mandarin and a grounding in Japanese. Those had been his subjects at university in Colorado. His objective was to make Asia China, Indochina and Thailand his life's work.

His first 2½ years in Thailand were spent teaching advanced English and the history of civilization at Kasetsart University. At that time he and his wife, Pom, were living in Ayutthaya, Bill commuting to work by train. It was much cheaper living and, besides, they loved their modest house by the Chao Phya. Often Bill would catch their evening meal in the river.

Bill said he learnt a lot about Thai life and ways in this period and the train journeys between Ayutthaya



At the Khmer People's National Liberation Front headquarters of Ampil in 1980. From left: Paul Lockyer, John McBeth, Davis, Latch and Neil Kelly.

and Bangkok gave him useful hours to work on the Thai language.

At Kasetsart, Bill's modest, unassuming manners and his great capacity for friendship brought him close to students, teachers and their families. Many of the people, both Thai and foreign, who have come forward to express their grief at Bill's death came from that portion of his life. His old students frequently stayed with Bill and his family in Bangkok and some even visited his old home in Colorado.

His acquaintance in these years also contributed to Bill's widening knowledge of the local scene and allowed him to form contacts who would be invaluable as a correspondent.

In 1978 he started working for NBC as a radio reporter and two years

later added the job of television soundman. The work of a soundman is among the least glamorous in the business but in his other capacity, Bill was nominated for a national media award for a programme he put together on the writing of Vietnamese boat people.

Both in his working life and his leisure time one of Bill's outstanding qualities was his well-rounded character. His interests and experience were enormous for one as young as 35. Apart from his work as a teacher and journalist in Thailand, he had had jobs as a land surveyor and on an oil rig. During his college years he had worked as general manager of KCSU radio station — diluting the hard rock diet with news and current affairs and classical music.

His great loves apart from his family were English and American literature, the theatre and music, especially opera. He was an avid reader and book collector as friends who visited him at home well know. Boxes of books and junk food accompanied him to wile away the hours of waiting on long assignments to Vietnam. His office desk was stuffed with books, from old tomes on Thailand in the thirties, to the Cultural Revolution in China, the development of the US press and the Bay of Pigs fiasco, to cigars — a favourite luxury. He had a fine library of recorded music, especially European opera, but also tapes of the Thai music he had heard on trips round the north and northeast.

Professionalism marked all Bill did, both as a teacher and journalist. His knowledge of the struggle for Press freedom in his own country made him unrelenting in his search for accuracy, truth and for fair practice by everyone involved in the communications media.

At the same time he was the most generous man professionally. Bill never flaunted his knowledge yet countless correspondents owe Bill a debt for the open-handed manner in which he shared his knowledge, his contacts and his copious files. He possessed a remarkable capacity for getting a "handle on a story" — that is the swift recognition of the significance of an event.

Time and again, there would be Bill's cheerful voice on the phone in the early hours of the morning or late at night, with the news of a hijack at Don Muang or a Vietnamese incursion on the eastern border or the rumble of tanks in Bangkok.

The day Bill died bore testimony to his many personal and professional qualities. Bill saw the tanks as he was driving his daughter, Ann-Marie, to school and his message to NBC's Asian headquarters in Tokyo that an attempted coup seemed on the way was one of the first news flashes on this story. Nothing was more characteristic of Bill than the other message he sent that morning. As he was hurrying out of the office he stopped to scribble a note asking someone to pick up Ann-Marie from school if he were not back in time.

And as the videotapes of the coup attempt relate, it was Bill, mortally wounded, who had the presence of mind to wave a white cloth and shout at Thai troops to allow those civilians caught in the shooting to get out of the line of fire.

One of the cruellest aspects of September 9 is that Bill Latch met his death on the streets of Bangkok, cruel and unfair for a man who knew and loved the Thai people so well. One of the last projects of his life was an immensely long and complex negotiation with the authorities to secure



Thai citizenship for his children. He wanted Ann-Marie, just turned seven, and Michael, who is two, to be able as adults to decide whether to be American or Thai. Bill's regard for Thailand could go no higher than that.

FOOTNOTE: Sornanong ("Pom") and her children are being well taken care of by NBC. It appears now that they will move to the United States to live with Bill's father in Colorado. It is perhaps the only happy ending to the tragedy that there can be.

Celebrating at The Frog, the French restaurant on Sukhumvit Soi 1 where Bill and his friends spent many a happy hour. From left: Malcolm Bain and Lito Katigbak of Reuters, Mimi Katigbak, restaurant owner Jean Schlumberger, Nongnoi Poosirivong, Neil Kelly, Anuraj Manubhand, of the Bangkok World, Bill, Nick Cumming-Bruce, and Bill's wife, Sornanong.



Latch and Visnews soundman Sampote Puerksunlee on the road to Dien Bien Phu in April, 1984.

April 30, 1985. Ten years almost to the minute since he took the now-historic film of North Vietnamese tanks battering down the gates of Saigon's presidential palace, Neil Davis (left) returned to the same spot for this picture with some of his legion of friends. Neil spent almost two months in Vietnam setting up NBC's coverage of the 10th anniversary celebrations, only to take a back seat to the network's media stars whose knowledge and experience of Indochina would not have filled half a page in a Davis scrap book. Pictured with him here, from right, are: Frankfurt-based NBC cameraman Jeff Riggins, Visnews cameraman Gary Burns and London-based NBC cameraman Howard Smith.



No-one quite understood the so-called Australian Mafia, which alternatively terrorised and titillated the FCCT during the early 1980s. Some of the time, they didn't understand it themselves given the fact that its members also included New Zealanders, Americans and Englishmen and a few other token nationalities. What it had a lot to do with, of course, was the Down Under concept of matesmanship.

While its core members were probably overly rude, overly macho and overly drunk at times, their brand of camaraderie did more than anything to keep the club functioning during a crucial period in its history. Neil Davis was the patriarch, Gary Burns was the cutting edge, Paul Lockyer played the fool, John McBeth provoked the arguments (and usually lost), accident-prone Rodney Tasker provided the entertainment, and Derek Williams was known as Kloster -- for obvious reasons. David Hatcher, West Point-trained and better organised than most, delighted in stirring things up, and Barry Wain was admired for his devious ways.

Together, they were probably as hard on each other as they were some-



The last Mafia lunch before the September 9 coup.

times on other people. Davis, in what is now jokingly referred to as "The Year of Living Dangerously" or the "Year of Mismanagement", was club president in 1982 - followed the next year by Voice of America correspondent David Hyatt who probably headed the best board the club has ever had. For a long time, David thought the Mafia's opposition to many of his ideas was borne out of a general dislike for him personally and Americans in general. Later he was to discover they were probably some of

his best and warmest friends.

That's the way things were with the Mafia. It's gone now, depleted with the departure of Hatcher, Lockyer, Wain and Williams and finally shattered by the death of Neil and the impending departure of Burns. But those who belonged to it, are not likely to forget the Friday lunches, the nights around the small bar at the Grand Prix, and those other salad days when Bangkok seemed to be the centre of the universe.

A hero to worship

GARY BURNS mourns the man who changed the course of his life:

Sitting at my desk ten days after Neil's death trying to write something about him for the club magazine is proving to be a task almost beyond me. Those ten days feel like ten years.

My desk is piled high with letters from many of Neil's worldwide legion of friends. There is a common question in all the letters: why was Neil killed?

Tim Page asks me, "Is the Buddha pissed (angry) at Thailand?"

Yes Tim, I think the Buddha is pissed (angry) at Thailand, but I can't believe he was angry with Neil.

Another close friend John Tulloh, the former Visnews World Editor and the recently appointed ABC (Australia) International Editor describes Neil as "the lodestar of life."

John's letter takes me back to the first time I got to know Neil. It was in London in 1973. Neil had just come in from Cambodia and was taking John and myself to dinner at a steakhouse. I was really looking forward to it because after having lived in London for year on a Visnews salary I couldn't remember what a steak looked like. This night was to be the first of many, many meals I shared with Neil in countries all over the world.

I do remember it being a bitterly cold night and Neil walked into the restaurant completely engulfed in a huge gabardine trenchcoat. He looked like the Tasmanian Maigret.

That long, boozy dinner was to alter the course of my life. It was the night that led to me making the decision to follow in Neil's footsteps and seek a correspondent/cameraman's posting with Visnews. A decision that led to 12 years of Neil's friendship and guidance. Salad days in Africa and Asia when life was so sweet that you just knew we would all live forever.

Unfortunately the price for those days was a high one: being forced to witness Neil's death.

People say that time will heal all and that we, Neil's closest friends, must get on with life. That's easy to say.

This troubled, tortured world needs men that are larger than life; men who can rise above the mire. The world needs heroes and we just lost one.

Neil Davis was a hero. His courage extended beyond the boundaries that contain normal men.

As a young man of 22 I hero-worshipped Neil. And, despite the layers of cynicism gathered in this business and the fact that I got to know him very well, I retain some of that hero-worship even now.

I have a great fear of flying. All my friends know and joke about it.

In fact on one particularly nasty Air Vietnam flight from Hanoi to Bangkok Neil and former ABC Bangkok correspondent Paul Lockyer amused themselves greatly by writing out my last will and testament.

But on many long journeys when I would be suffering from acute anxiety, I would get Neil to



talk to me about his Aussie Rules football career in Tasmania.

He would drone on and on about those boring games played long ago, delighted for once to have an audience.

But there was something in the gentleness of his tone that soothed me greatly and allowed me to overcome my fears.

In fact, both he and I knew it was yet another way for me to ask for his help during difficult times and for him to give it, without either of us acknowledging it.

On his dying day he helped me overcome and live through my greatest fears ever. His last example to me was how to die like a man.

He was what I wanted to be when I grew up, but I never thought he would leave me to grow up without him.

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Davis and Burns shooting the valley of Dien Bien Phu in April 1984.

The last frontline

By Candace Sutton, writing in the Sydney Daily Telegraph

At the age of 34, Gary Burns has just completed a dozen years of overseas schooling – an education which transformed him from greenhorn to talented professional.

On the face of it, his curriculum was no different from other of Australia's successful sons.

At the feet of the Oxford don of his art, he witnessed the virtuosity of the master while they did the "grand tour" of foreign lands.

Gary Burns has graduated as a war correspondent.

He has filmed for the Visnews agency on the frontline in Africa, the Middle East and Asia with no better a teacher and friend than the late Neil Davis.

And as with many educations, the final lesson was the toughest, though, ironically, the least edifying: On September 9 in Bangkok, when Thai rebels shot Davis in a "tin-pot"

coup and Australia's most famous combat cameraman died in Burns' arms.

"Neil's last example was how to die like a man," Burns says, "There was no yelling, screaming; he died filming and he was protecting me."

"If it hadn't been for him, no doubt about it, shrapnel from the rebels' tank would have hit me."

"He died like a man, but I didn't like what happened afterwards, his body dragging along the ground and his intestines falling out and then we had to wait for an hour and a half in the hot sun with people gawking and some photographers asking to take the newspapers off his body."

A month later, Burns has returned to Australia courtesy of the American network NBC, Davis' employer, which supplied first-class airfares for Burns and his wife, Orawan

(Davis was best man at the wedding, a week before his death).

NBC even offered him Davis' job.

Burns, still distressed, cringes at the thought: "I couldn't. How could I sit at his desk, open his mail...?"

He quit his own job at Visnews in the aftermath of Davis' death and now home is questioning the system of war correspondents.

"I am disaffected with the whole principle that kept Neil chasing wars until he was 52.

"This business is so upside down. Neil Davis was working class because he had to work to eat.

"What pisses me off is that while dopes like Neil and to a certain extent myself went out and got pictures, we were working for a tenth of the salary of the anchorman back at the network.

"Occasionally NBC would send American pretty boys over for standups to accompany the story and Davis would have to hold their hands during the experience."

Burns first met Davis in a London restaurant in 1973, when he had just joined Visnews and Davis was going to NBC.

"In came this glamorous bloke," he recalled, "and I decided then and there to be a war correspondent."

After three years working in Europe, Burns met Davis again on assignment in Rhodesia and later they covered Angola and the Zaire uprising in Kulawesi together.

"He had a lot of dignity and generosity and great cool at all times.

"Before he went in he weighed the odds, whether the end product was worth the risk."

On one of their first jobs together, the two cameraman were arrested by the Rhodesian Special Police on counter-espionage charges which, Burns adds, carried the death penalty.

"I was having a shower in my hotel room in Salisbury and the door burst in with these police holding Davis.

"He was calling them storm-troopers, Gestapo bastards and saying 'I suppose you are going to torture us'.

"They locked us in a sound-proof room and when they came back

Davis said 'it's torture time now'; he was so-cool.

"They gave us a cup of tea which Davis tasted, spat out and said 'this really is torture, there's no sugar'. It was only then that I realised everything was alright."

In the next years Burns learnt the skill and thrill of filming on the frontline.

"It's adventure and it's addictive: it's better than drugs or sex.

"If you survive when you are filming in a very dangerous situation you get that adrenalin rushing through your veins, like you've just won a marathon.

"I can look at anything through a camera lens – blood, gunwounds – but when you take it away you lose the detachment."

He and Davis filmed from opposite sides during the Israeli invasion of Beirut and in other places which supplied Burns' parents back in

Maroubra with more than their fair share of nailbiting.

"In Sri Lanka, covering the Tamil rebels, I came the closest I have to coping it.

"We were walking up a dirt road in absolutely nowhere and we stumbled across the army burning an entire village: suddenly there were armored cars and troops aiming directly at us.

"I have been under fire lots of times, but I thought that day was going to be cold-blooded murder".

For Gary Burns, as for Neil Davis, all that is history.

Burns will return briefly to tie up his affairs in Thailand: back in Sydney he intends to work as a current affairs reporter.

"There's something wrong about the whole system of war correspondents.

"Davis was committed lifelong, but I don't think he saw himself filming

on the frontline for much longer...after 20 years so close to the edge, it was just pushing the odds."

Davis will be remembered in a permanent display at the Canberra War Memorial of his camera, diaries writings and photographs.

Davis Awards for Australian journalists will be established with the prize of a return ticket to Bangkok, a workshop in gathering news in Thailand.

Thai journalists will have the chance to win Neil Davis and William Latch (killed with Davis in the Thai coup) memorial awards and a two-week scholarship in an Australian network or newspaper.

"Neil was very philosophical about death," Gary said, "He didn't have a death wish, but very much the Buddhist attitude which says death is a lady who greets you softly.

"We always said to him if she's a lady, then you probably know her."

'Walk beside me, be my friend'

Washington-based ABC (Australia) correspondent PAUL LOCKYER telexed this report from New York on NBC's recent memorial service for Davis and Latch.

Tom Hudson, senior Visnews executive, London, Art Lord, NBC producer, Sydney Schanberg, New York Times and George Lewis, NBC producer.

Sydney Schanberg, who of course worked in Phnom Penh when Neil covered the war there, was a late stand in for the BBC's Brian Barron who was unable to get to the service. A tribute to Neil and Bill from their close friend, Jack Reynolds of NBC, was also read out at the service. Jack was on assignment in Central America. All eulogies touched on the senseless nature of the tragedy and the shock that it brought to colleagues and friends throughout the world.

There were tributes to Gary Burns for the extraordinary courage he showed in trying to pull Neil clear of the Thai gunfire, and to all in Bangkok who rallied around in the aftermath of the tragedy to ensure that everything that could be done was done.

Sydney Schanberg spoke not only for himself, but for Dith Pran and all Neil's Cambodian friends, emphasising the love he had for the people and how deeply he would be missed by his remaining Cambodian friends.

More than two hundred people attended the memorial service, including Bill's parents and his sister flown in by NBC from Durango, Colorado. NBC set aside a huge television studio for the occasion. The memorial service began with a tribute to Neil and Bill from NBC chief Larry Grossman who pledged that NBC would not let the tragic incident rest and that pressure would continue to be exerted wherever necessary to see that the Thai Government institute a proper inquiry and demonstrate that justice is done.

Grossman also announced the creation of the Bill Latch Education Fund, to be underwritten by NBC, to ensure the education of Bill's two children. And he announced that a scholarship in journalism, in memory of Neil, would be established at an American university.

NBC wants the scholarship to be attached to a university with a strong Asian studies department and is now examining a number of possibilities. After Grossman spoke videotape tributes to Neil and Bill, presented by NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw, were played. They included excerpts from "Frontline," together with reports from Bangkok on the tragedy and the last radio reports filed by Bill and Neil on the morning of the coup attempt.

Eulogies were then delivered by eight colleagues and friends... Jeremy Lamprecht, NBC foreign editor, Paul Lockyer, ABC Australia, Bruce MacDonnel, NBC bureau chief, Tokyo,

Tributes, sympathy from around the world



Neil greets Prince Norodom Sihanouk as the Cambodian leader arrives to address the FCCT on 30 August. This was the last club function the Fox attended before his death.

Tributes from around the world poured into Bangkok following the deaths of Davis and Latch. Here are some of them, listed in no particular order of station or priority.

Col James Bo Gritz, who Neil got to know during efforts to locate living American POWs in Indochina:

I was most distressed to learn of the unfortunate and untimely death of correspondent Neil Davis. In my opinion he was one of the few greats in the media business. Neil always treated me and the Lazarus Team fairly. He focused on the PoW issue instead of personalities and sought the truth instead of sensationalism. Neil did not know it, but I had always planned to use him to cover the return of American POWs. He was the only newsman I knew we could trust to hold the story and present it objectively.

"I'm really shocked that he was killed by those he had great love and respect for. It is difficult to imagine that he survived the dangers of Vietnam, only to lose his life in a free nation. I'm sorry that the political aspirations of men resulted in the

demise of such a super human being. I loved and respected Neil. I wish he were still with us. He is in our prayers.

"I don't mean to add misery to an already difficult situation. I do want to convey my condolences and respect to those who knew and worked with Neil Davis - a man I admired. Please forward my heartfelt condolences to his survivors and friends. I would be remiss if I didn't add my name to the long list of those who will miss him greatly. Neil and I communicated infrequently, but there was never a time I did not enter the kingdom without inquiring at the office if he were available ... it was comforting to know that a responsible reporter was available when needed.

"There was only one Neil Davis. We will only see him again across the veil. While he cannot be replaced, I hope that you will make every effort to duplicate his sense of ethics and objectivity."

Haney Howell, CBS, New York.

"When the smoke clears, please onpass to family and friends my deep sadness over the death of

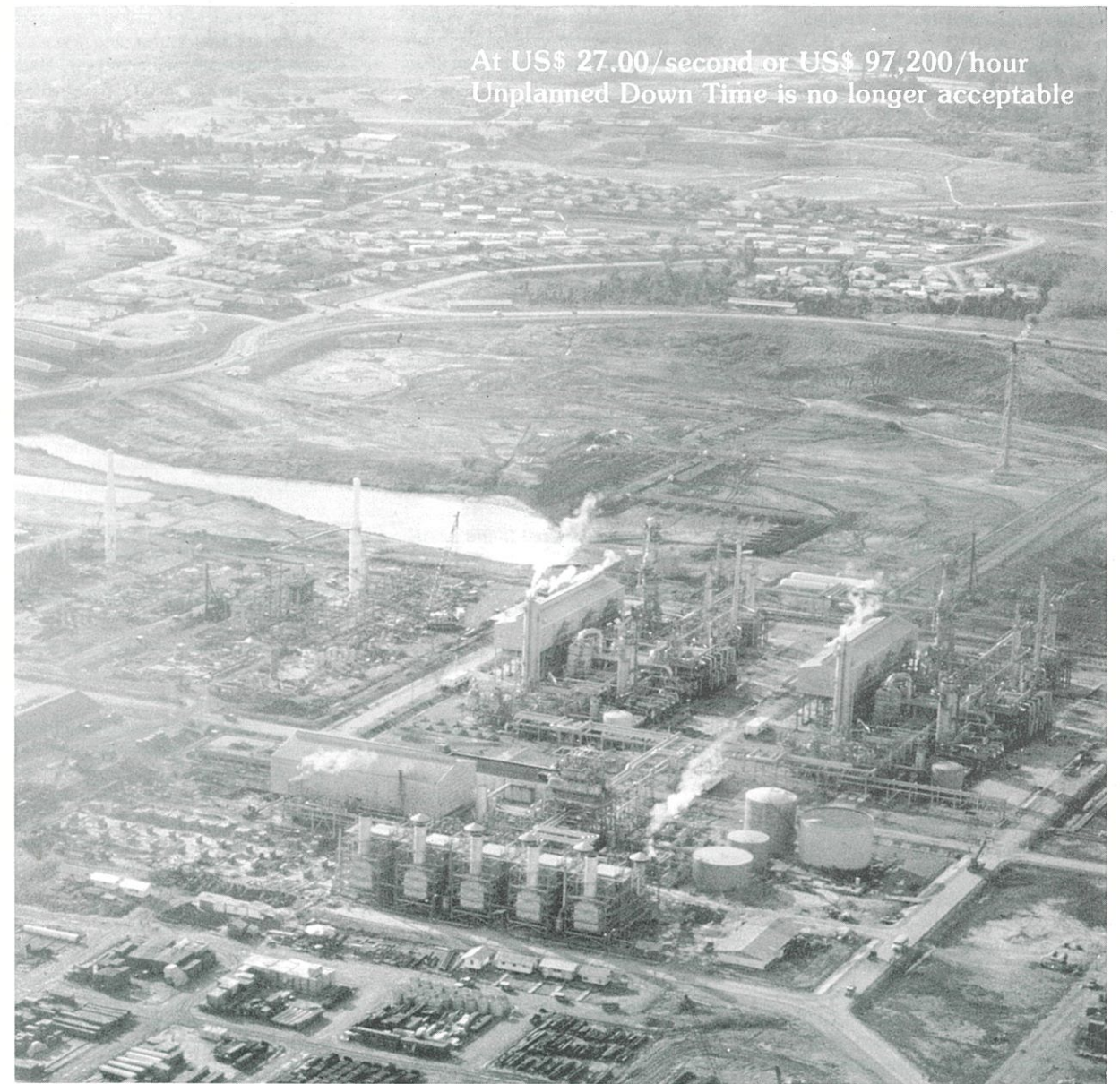
Neil Davis and Bill Latch. Neil was the most unselfish journalist I've ever known, beyond his incredible ability to tell stories with pictures. He was a class act and will be missed. But to quote Neil quoting the Cambodians, 'Death is a lady.'"

John Gunther Dean, who Neil knew as the last US Ambassador to Phnom Penh and who served here as ambassador before taking up his current post in New Delhi:

"I have just read a news ticker item that Australian Neil Davis of the American NBC television network was killed during events last 24 hours. I have known Davis since our time together in Cambodia eleven years ago. He was an excellent reporter dedicated to presenting the true facts."

Richard Virden and Bill Lenderking, both former American press attaches in Bangkok:

"We are deeply saddened by the news of Neil and Bill's loss. We respected them greatly as outstanding journalists and knew them as



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good friends. Please extend our deepest sympathies to their families and colleagues."

Kevin Hamilton, managing editor of Visnews Ltd, the television agency Neil worked for in Indochina, writing in his weekly news service report:

"There is great rivalry amongst journalists, and Neil Davis was as competitive as any of us. But there is also, within the news community, a bond that transcends competition, born perhaps out of shared experience, some of it dangerous, some of it not.

"Neil Davis, in his years in Asia, first with Visnews and then with NBC, was a shining example of what that bond is all about. Were he in show business, he would inevitably have been described by the cliché writers as a legend in his own lifetime. But I doubt if that's the way Neil saw himself. He loved Asia and its people and he loved showing them to the world, warts and all, in the way he knew best. He quickly came to the understanding that the way to cover wars and violence for television was to be up front, where the wars and violence are evident. No soft aftermath pics for Davis; that wasn't his way.

"But whatever the legend-makers might say, Neil was neither rash nor foolhardy, nor did he have anything resembling a death wish. He was totally professional under fire, always calculating the odds, always using that sixth sense that comes with experience. When amateurs and newcomers to war latched themselves onto him, as they often did, he would invariably back off to protect them from themselves. He wanted the story, yes, but not at the expense of life - his own included.

"His death is an enormous loss to those who knew him, particularly those like Gary Burns who knew and loved him so well. But the loss is also ours, for his passing leaves a huge void in the community of international news-gatherers, of which Neil Davis was such a distinguished member. For years to come, he will be sorely missed."

George Esper, former Associated Press Bureau Chief in Saigon and now one of the agency's special correspondents:

"It is hard to believe that Neil Davis and Bill Latch are dead. They were such wonderful friends. It seems only yesterday we were together. Neil invited me to an NBC

dinner. We had another great dinner in Hanoi. Bill and I had lunch. I will long remember the camaraderie of my visit earlier this year to Bangkok and Vietnam."

"After I returned to the States, Neil sent me a copy of Dateline Bangkok in which he had written a nostalgic article about old Vietnam hands gathering for coverage of the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon. With it, Neil sent a note saying, 'Thought you might like a copy of this FCCT magazine for old time's sake.'

"Neil's legions of friends and admirers will miss him very much. I'd give anything right now to be in Bangkok having a beer with Neil and Bill."

Brian Ellis, CBS Cronkite Unit and formerly CBS Bureau Chief in Saigon, in a cable to former Bangkok-based CBS cameraman Derek Williams:

Sad, sad day old friend, particularly for you I know. Only met Neil's soundman in recent months, but as you know Neil was what most of us wanted to be if we ever grew up. Our business is much richer for his having been in it and for those of us fortunate enough to have worked alongside him. We would like to think something rubbed off. Please put a packet of cigarettes down for me, will you."

Col George McQuillen, former army attache in Bangkok and now defence attache in Kuala Lumpur, in a cable to John McBeth:

"I was shocked and extremely saddened to learn that Neil Davis had been killed covering the latest coup attempt in Bangkok. I know it is a tremendous personal loss to you and Neil's innumerable friends in Bangkok and throughout the world. It is also a great loss to the news media as Neil was an exemplar of everything good and decent in your profession. I was fortunate to see Neil when he was down here covering the Asean Foreign Minister's conference in July. As we parted, I remember him saying, 'So long, mate.' He would have said the same thing to Gary Burns had he been able. Neil was one of those rare individuals who go through life without complaining. He gave much more than he took. All of us who were touched by his wide grin and friendly nature are the better for it. So long mate."

Masato Matsushita, London correspondent, Kyodo News Service:

"I was in Phnom Penh in 1974 when I first met him. Still remember him filming the arrival of long-awaited convoys on the Mekong River. Then

came rocket attacks. Everybody took cover, but Neil kept filming the scene just as he did every morning. He was such a brave journalist and very kind to fellow reporters."

Javier Perez de Cuellar, UN Secretary-General:

"I have learned with deep regret the news of the deaths of chief correspondent in Bangkok, Neil Davis, and his assistant, Bill Latch, whilst fulfilling their professional duties. Both Mr Davis and Mr Latch accompanied me on a visit to Vietnam earlier this year, and on that occasion I had the opportunity to appreciate their warm personalities and their talent in their respective fields. Please convey to the families of Mr Davis and Mr Latch my sincere condolences on their sad loss."

Lew Simons, Knight-Ridder correspondent in Tokyo and formerly Washington Post correspondent in Bangkok:

"Neil Davis was the kindest and most gentle man I have known in journalism. I will miss him deeply."

Bill Lynch, CBS News, New York:

"I was shocked and saddened to learn of the death of Neil Davis. He was a colleague and competitor of great courage, skill and insight, and his loss will be deeply felt. Neil left a lasting mark on our craft and his work should serve as an inspiration for all of us."

Jean Claude Malet, who together with ABC cameraman Y.B. Tang flew all the way from Rome to attend the memorial service:

"My condolences for your loss. I have lost a good friend."

Dick Blystone, former Associated Press correspondent in Bangkok and now with Cable News Network in London:

"To everyone else who knew and loved Neil Davis. My wife and I join you in mourning this good, brave man. His life, his standards and his manner were examples to us while he lived, and will be so still. But we are all much poorer without him."

John Lewis, Cable News Network Bureau Chief in Tokyo:

"We believe we have not only lost very professional colleagues, but also personal friends. Friends who will be remembered by all here for not only their work, but also their warmth. Who could ever forget doing battle with Neil on the tennis court."

Brendan Farrow, Visnews, London:

"To his family, friends and other colleagues may I add by deepest sympathy on the death of Neil. His courage and integrity as a journalist in Vietnam shone through every frame he filmed there, every line of dope he wrote, every backup map he drew. As a Visnews staffer privileged to view and edit his material in London I stood in constant awe of his matchless professionalism. I shall remember him with lasting affection and admiration."

Tim Arlott, duty editor, Visnews, London:

"I like to consider myself a friend of Neil's and only hope I made clear my respect for him as - in my opinion - the best news cameraman ever to work for Visnews. He was also an extremely modest man who never once gave the impression (although it was true) that he had seen it all and you had not"

"For me, the only thing that has alleviated the sadness and shock

of his death was the unprecedented eulogy given to him here on BBC and more particularly the opposition ITN who were never able to use Neil's material as a Visnews or NBC cameraman."

David Phillips, NBC Bureau Chief in Paris:

"I once heard Neil described by a fellow journalist as 'a legend in his own lifetime.' The legend will live on. He was also a gentle and charming companion and will be greatly missed by all of us who had the luck to work with him. Bill was an ideal colleague for Neil, a professional and, as an individual, blessed with the same agreeability."

Rod Norland, formerly in Bangkok for the Philadelphia Inquirer and now Beirut Bureau Chief for Newsweek:

I'm sure the loss of these two fine journalists and wonderful men will be deeply and lastingly felt by all of us who knew or worked with them."

Hal Walker and Frabrice Mousus, ABC News, Frankfurt:

"We had the privilege of working with those two dynamos in a number of rough and not so rough spots. We share your loss. For what comfort it can bring, we can only think they went out as they would have wanted - doing what they did best, and far better than most. Farewell to two fine gentlemen and tough competitors. They will be missed."

Jim Carroll, NBC News, London, in a message to all the network's bureaux:

"I'm sure you have already heard, but I wanted to say: 'Two very good friends of ours died today covering a news story - Neil Davis and Bill Latch. I hope and pray that this type of thing never happens again.'"

In Thailand, condolence messages were received from the King's private secretary, Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond, officers of the Thai Army, and Foreign Ministry press spokesman Sawanit Kongsiri, as well as from an overwhelming number of Thai and foreign residents.

Crazy? No, not Neil Davis...

By AL DAWSON, former UPI Bureau Chief in Saigon and Bangkok, and author of the book, "55 Days."

What a lot of people didn't know was that Neil Davis even had his retirement plans set. He was going to live in the Cambodia that he fervently believed would emerge after the defeat, military, political or both, of the Vietnamese there. Within, say, 10 years.

Most people didn't know that because Davis never pontificated on his political beliefs. He never publicly hoped that any side in the continuing Southeast Asian wars would win or lose. He was, in retrospect, one of the consummate observers, dealing in facts as they occurred.

It is true and therefore not banal to reiterate that Neil Davis was truly a nice man. In toting up the bad side

of his character, one inevitably starts with: His only brand of cigarettes is OPs.

Think about that for just a second and then ask if something that trivial is the worst thing your enemies say about you. Especially considering that other people smoke and enjoy Gitanes and Camels.

Like a lot of people, probably a majority, I never actually met Neil. He was just there, quietly, doing his job or contributing to the dinner conversation or sipping his drink. When asked, he was one of the most gracious sharers of information, inside stories and tidbits garnered from interviews.

Unlike a small but significant number of his small-screen colleagues, Davis never refused to "pigeon" film or stories for others, even in the most competitive of occasions.

Being around the vindictive, the petty, the violent and the foolish

was his job, but not his inclination. Happily, his own private sense of humor never left him during what was a very full life indeed.

After a very dangerous week in a very vile Iraqi prison (he was suspected of being an Israeli, or a CIA, or a KGB or something spy), he had come as close as ever to cracking. He was on the verge of a hunger strike. And, later, he laughed!

"A hunger strike was about the easiest thing in the world in that place," he recalled, chuckling. "Truly revolting food. Worse than Australian tucker, mate."

They hung a banner on Patpong Road to welcome Davis back from that escapade. Technically, it was probably less dangerous than other of his close calls. But combat only lasts minutes in most cases. Unlike Indochina or Lebanon or Africa, Neil thought he wouldn't bother going back to Iraq again.

Davis saw the good in people around the world. For a number of reasons-probably, mainly, because it was where he "made it" as a cameraman and a journalist-Cambodia and Vietnam were dearest to his heart. He moved as easily among the communists as their ideological enemies. Indeed, after 1973, he moved back and forth across the lines.

Those who knew Davis by reputation assume he was one of the war-lovers, a Sean Flynn or Tim Page, walking backwards in front of the point man, urgently needing the adrenaline of the high-pitched pop of the AK-47, the heat of napalm dropped 300 meters away. There is no denying he saw a lot more combat than any GI ever did.



Davis stands with Fareer's John McBeth (left), Khmer People's National Liberation Front military commander Maj-Gen Dien Del, Al Dawson and UPI correspondent Paul Vogle (right) after a tough climb over a border range to the KPRLF's original Sok Sann camp in December, 1979. Neil was suffering from a recurring bout of malaria and only made it with sheer willpower and determination and a little help from his mates. He and Dien Del were friends from the war years in Cambodia when the Khmer general commanded the republican army's 2nd Division.

In 1975, he remained in a dangerous Saigon. The single greatest reason for that was not the action. Rather, Davis had evacuated Phnom Penh with the Americans. "Truly humiliating, mate," he said of his first evacuation, and vowed never to do it again.

But Davis didn't fit the mould of the crazies, who were on the first plane for Beirut after Saigon fell. Neither, rather obviously, did he cover the war from the rooftop bar of the Caravelle Hotel and its sisters in Angola, Cyprus, Iraq, Lebanon.

In Cambodia, where most people knew him best because he was the

resident expert, one got to the front by car. Some of the rides were very hairy. Often, the front would have to be approached along the edges of the Vietnamese or Khmer Rouge lines. Many newsmen didn't make it.

Davis was never afraid to turn around when the odds looked bad. "Not down here, mate, not today," he told companions often enough. "I don't like the look of this."

A cautious man. As he said often and for posterity in "Frontline" his single greatest fear was a massive wound that left him both alive and, later, crippled.

He was, like most of the still, motion and tape cameramen who pursue organized violence, wounded several times. Once, his wound required a fairly long period in the hospital. But all his wounds were what the GIs have always called the "million-dollar" variety--bad enough to get you out of the war but non-crippling.

Except, of course, that Davis never quit.

Nor would Davis consider, in what is rapidly becoming a cliché, that his death in the midst of a truly stupid action was hopelessly ironic. Where else would Davis be in the middle of an attempted coup but in the middle of the coup action? The deaths of September 9 - all of them - were incredibly sad, needlessly savage and stupidly unnecessary. But the coup attempt itself was a major, prime-time story, so Davis was there. Naturally.

It is a goddamned callous thing to say, but apart from dying in bed at 92 attended by a fine woman, Davis went out the best way. Professionally. Covering a big story of the day. Camera rolling.

There is, unfortunately, little good that will come out of Neil Davis' death. A scholarship fund, a few hoisted toasts and perhaps a measure of revenge extracted from those who killed him are quite simply inadequate replacements for the presence of the man himself.

When the GIs in Vietnam had just lost their best buddy, they inevitably told the others that "it don't mean nothin'." In the '60s jargon of the Vietnam GIs, the meaning of the phrase was clear: "It means everything."

At 30, and at 40 and at 51, Neil was in the prime of life. It was his one conceit, but it was an earned one. It was awarded him by all his friends, unanimously, without rancor.

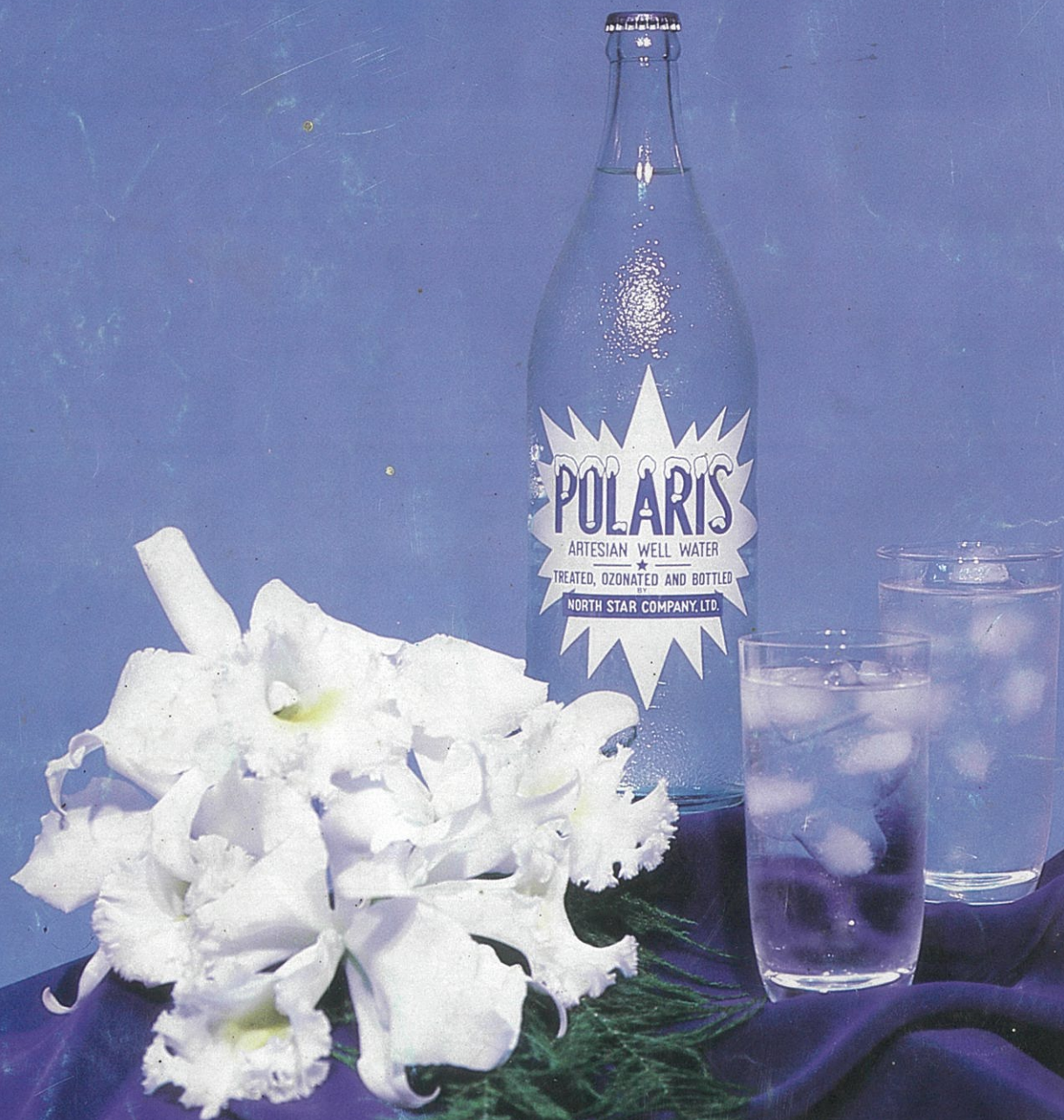
Davis contributed to everyone he came in contact with.

His death? It don't mean nothin'.

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