

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

APRIL 2004

Welcome to the 4th issue of our Mekong Circle 2004 Reunion newsletter.

We continue with this issue our series on the Filipino groups that composed our Mekong association in Laos. The series began in the November 2003 issue with the Filipinos employed by USAID-Laos, followed by Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL) in the January 2004 issue.

Now we focus on three Filipino groups who served with Air America, Bird & Son and Continental Air Services. All three companies which provided air transport in Laos relied on a wide range of Filipino skills – from maintenance to signal transmission – to keep the planes flying, on course, and to keep U.S. outposts all over the country able to communicate with each other.

NON-COMBATANTS ON THE FRONTLINES

Accounts of the Laos air war, from 1962 to 1975, report that by the mid-1960s, when major military activities between the combatants began to really ratchet up, the combined aircraft inventory of these three companies exceeded the number flown by any other regularly scheduled commercial airline in Asia. William Leary's short history of Air America, owned by the Central Intelligence Agency, said that by the summer of 1970, Air America employed more than 300 pilots, copilots, flight mechanics and air-freight specialists flying out of Laos and Thailand. It flew some two dozen twin-engine transports, another two dozen short-take-off-and-landing (STOL) aircraft, and some 30 helicopters.

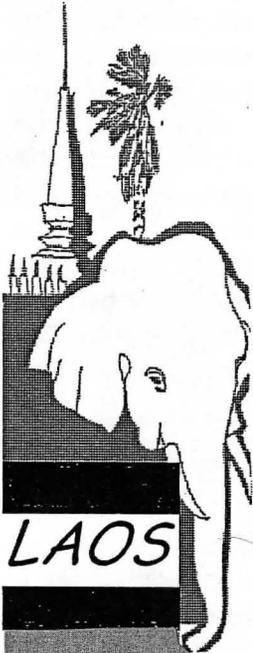
Continental Air Services, Inc. (CASI) a wholly owned subsidiary of the U.S.-based airline Continental Airlines, had 350 employees and 22 aircraft after buying in September 1965 Bird & Son's aviation division, a company doing construction work in Laos.

To wage the unconventional ground war that raged over northern Laos, the skies over it swarmed with all sorts of aircraft. Fixed-wing types included the C-130, Douglas DC-3s/C-47s, Curtiss C-46s, Pilatus Porters, Turbo Porters, Dornier Do28s, Beech Barons, Beech Twin Bonanzas, Twin Otters, Helio Couriers. Also in the fleet : a pair of Scottish Aviation Twin Pioneers purchased by CASI from Philippine Airlines. Bell and Huey choppers were indispensable transport over the mountainous terrain and uncharted jungles. Propeller-driven T-28 fighter planes flown by Lao, Thai and Meo pilots, taking off from Lao airfields, joined American piloted fighter jets, taking off from Thai airbases, on strafing and bombing sorties.

Both Air America and CASI flew non-combat missions for USAID, the U.S. Embassy and what they refer to as



Air America electronics technician Jun Ilustrisimo (right) and Paul Gage, a supervisor, atop Skyline Ridge known as LS 20 sometime in 1968. The site is located between Long Tieng and Sam Thong.



LAOS

Keep
these
dates
open
for our
next
reunion:

August
6, 7 & 8
2004

Chicago,
Illinois
USA

"the customer" (CIA). Regular "milk-run" flights ferried provisions and personnel to USAID provincial stations, including the OB hospitals. When the bombing campaigns over the northern provinces intensified between 1965 and 1973, displacing Hmong tribal people into 600,000 refugees constantly on the move, these milk-runs became their only lifeline for food and basic necessities. Where airstrips were long enough to land C-46s, these airlifts supplied CIA sites, known as Lima (for landing) Sites, scattered across the country. Short LS airstrips, hacked out of jungle clearings, take only 2- or 3 passenger STOLs or helicopters. These were mountain bases for CIA interdiction operations against North Vietnamese incursions into Laos.

Milk-run and other fixed-wing missions flew out of the Wattay airfield in Vientiane. Choppers flew in and out of Udorn, in northeastern Thailand, some 40 miles south of Vientiane. There is no record of Filipinos who served as AA or CASI pilots.

The skies above two Lima sites – LS 20 in Long Tieng and LS 20A at Sam Thong, on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars – in Hmong heartland, were so crowded with all sorts of aircraft flying in and out, they were described, perhaps only a bit in exaggeration, as busy as Chicago's O'Hare airport. Indeed, Long Tieng, during the 1960s, was the refuge of war-displaced Hmong, turning it at one time into the country's second largest population center after Vientiane, with 40,000 residents.

Estimates of the number of Filipinos who worked with Air America and CASI range up to 200 with AA and 120 with CASI. Flight mechanics were the most numerous among them. They serviced fixed-wing aircraft at Wattay. (Some 10 Filipinos tended the helicopters at Udorn). One or two technicians would rotate for one to two weeks in the larger LS sites in Luang Prabang, Pake Savannakhet, Ban Houie Sai, Saravane, Attopeu.

Another set of technicians at AA composed the Electronics Maintenance Department (EMD) who installed and maintained ground-based navigational stations and their power equipment. Many of these are located on small LS outposts, requiring weekly servicing. A typical station was equipped with ultra-and high-frequency communications gear capable of air-to-ground and ground-to-ground communications. Manned stations would have Thai radio operators on 24-hour duty. Unmanned stations are visited for reg-



Air America electronics technician Art Linchangco in 1963 with a group of Hmong youngsters in military uniforms near Sam Thong, Xiengkouang province.

ular checkups and refueling of their generators. (Diesel fuel would be parachuted down where they cannot be flown in – an idea of the extreme isolation of some of these sites).

Art Linchangco who served as an EMD technician from 1962 to 1967 had taught Hmongs at an LS to watch over the unmanned equipment between his weekly visits. Normally such a visit was a one-day chore – a chopper would drop him in the morning, then he would radio to fetch him out after he did his job.

"At one mountain site, the weather prevented a pick up. I had a terrible sinus. I slept in the village chief's house for a week. I kept a vigil at the end of the runway, hoping for the weather to clear."

Art's team, who like him hopped to dozens of LS radio shacks during their Lao tenure, included **Joe Parco, Efigenio Hernandez, Joe Mendoza, Dante Flaviano and Honorato Tapang**. There were some close calls. At one LS during the mid-60s, he and **Ernie Rigidor**, were among the last evacuated by helicopter before the station was overrun by the enemy.

Electronics technician **Jun Ilustrisimo** remembers another tight escape. After two weeks at Lima 69 in the south, he was eager to get out of there on the eve of Christmas 1968 in order to return to Vientiane as he promised his fiancée. "I was having a problem flagging a ride back. Finally a Helio Courier was available. The pilot said that the airstrip was getting dark and he may have a hard time taking off but I got in anyway. Five hours later, I was told the site was destroyed. Three Thai radio operators were killed. One Filipino named Sorita was captured but was released after five months."

And like Art, Jun was stranded atop Skyline Ridge, a station overlooking the valley

where the Plain of Jars lay below. "We were socked in by the weather for 21 days. We ran out of food. Finally, I and my Thai radio operator walked down mountain trails four hours to Sam Thong." Why did they wait that long? "After a while, the C-rations made us throw up," he explained. Sam Thong, being a key operational center for the counter-North Vietnamese campaign in the north, was a major airbase. Aircraft mechanics such as **Angie Angelo** would be stationed there for two weeks at a time, three to four times a year. The planes they serviced were the larger C45, 46 and 47s.

It was in Taiwan where Angie was called for an interview after he answered a tip from a fellow FEATI aeronautical engineering graduate that an "Air Asia" company was hiring licensed aircraft mechanics. After he passed the hiring tests, he arrived in Vientiane on January 1962 and learned that Air Asia was actually Air America. He was one of 60 Filipinos together with about 60 Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong who comprised the Regional Maintenance Department. During his nine-year stay, he helped train Lao to become aircraft mechanics well enough to obtain their U.S. Federal Aircraft Agency licenses. AA and CASI planes were flown mainly by American pilots; flight mechanics were a multinational crew but Filipinos were more numerous because of their "hardworking" reputation, according to **Ernie Felix** who managed personnel administration for both AA and CASI.

Being non-combatants, few Filipino technicians suffered war-related deaths. Three died in accidents – **Ray Castillo, Augusto Calderon and Baltazar Reyes. Ernesto Cruz and Montano Centeno** — were killed in helicopter "line training" flights.

CASI closed its Laos operations in 1972. A year later, a cease-fire agreement among the combatants in Laos signaled the end of the war. On June 3, 1974 the last Air America plane crossed the Mekong into Thailand. During its 17 years in Laos, 100 of its personnel died there. At the dedication of an Air America plaque at the CIA headquarters in Virginia in May 1988, an official said: "The air crew, maintenance and other professional aviation skills they applied on our behalf were extraordinary. But, above all, they brought a dedication to our mission and the highest standards of personal courage in the conduct of that mission."

by J. "Pete" Fuentecilla

There is a listing of 36 books about Air America found in their website www.air-america.org. For a concise short history of Air America, we recommend William Leary's "CIA Operations in Laos, 1955-1974" which can be read from www.odci.gov/csi

RATS, BUFFALO MEAT & MORTAR ROUNDS: MY FIRST ASSIGNMENT

By JUN ILUSTRISIMO

I arrived in Laos on January 1966. My first assignment was to install a UHF transceiver at Nha Kang, near Sam Neua in the northern province of Xiengkhouang. A UH-34 chopper put me down on an airstrip, buzzing with choppers taking off and landing supplies and soldiers. The sounds of mortar barrages echoed from the hills around. Hey, this was not in the job description, I told myself.

As I strung a coaxial cable from an army command post to a 25-ft antenna mast downhill, **Joey Juachon**, a Filipino radio mechanic, yelled at me, warning of landmines on the ground. I froze. I climbed up a pole, then realized it may not be anchored to the mast properly. It would topple and drop me right onto the mined ground. What kind of job have I got into? What the hell am I doing here? I had a cushy job in Manila with the Civil Aeronautics Authority. Mortar rounds continued to resound here and there. If I get out of here alive, I'll use my three months of leave without pay and go home.

Somehow, I got the antenna up. Then I was told I would stay the night because no plane can fly me back to Vientiane. I began to suspect I was being tested.

I got hungry. Joey invited me to eat inside a tent. A table held a few

plates of very tough buffalo meat. I chewed it silently, unable to carry on a conversation with young, somber Lao officers who were talking with Joey in Lao.

Inside another tent, I was given a cot and a mosquito net for the night. With me were American helicopter pilots and their crewmen. It was good to be able to talk again, in English, mostly about car engines. I was tired but I could not sleep. War zone sounds kept me awake.

Bang! Bang! – gunfire right inside our tent. I dove under my cot. "What's going on?" I cried out. An American voice cursed back: "Damn rats!" Flashlights swept up and down. How was he able to see rats in the dark?

My next assignment was Savannakhet in the south. Ah, what a charming town, the French colonial buildings, the serene flow of life. On one of my return assignments there, a milk-run C46 taxied to a stop from the runway; the door opened. A Filipina, whom I later learned, was OB nurse **Thelma Villamar** stepped out. I said to myself, now here's a woman I would not mind marrying. Two years later we got married.

Jun worked with the Electronics Maintenance Department of Air America in Laos from January 1966 to November 1969. He now lives in 507 East Clifford Circle, Anaheim, California 92802; tel. 714 750 4338. Email: jilustrisimo@sbcglobal.net

So, WHAT'S NEW IN THE OLD COUNTRY?

For Mekong Circle members, the year 1975 marked the end of their Laos adventure. With the installation of a new Lao government and the departure that year of all foreign aid personnel (that's all of us), a chapter in our lives had closed. What happened since then? Here are a number of key events and developments that maybe of interest to us who still carry an enduring affection for the country and its people. Did you know:

■ That the Lao population today of 5.3 million is 42.4% under 15 years old? This means almost half of them have no experience with Filipinos or no knowledge that once upon a time Filipino doctors and nurses treated their parents or grandparents, that Filipino agriculturists taught crop rotation and swine breeding, Filipino technicians taught skills in health care, machine maintenance, nutrition, the English language, accounting, and a multitude of other hands-on trades. The Lao population who remember those days, those 65 and over, comprise only 3.5%.

■ That when the number of Filipino expatriates living in Laos reached about 900 in the mid-60s, they comprised the largest Filipino overseas resident population in Asia or perhaps anywhere else in the world at that time. Compare that with 2002: there were 889,881 overseas Filipino workers, or OFWs, as the Philippine Labor Department calls them. They remit \$7.5 billion a year to the Philippines.

■ That the Lao-US dollar exchange rate in 1975

was 1250K to \$1. Today, it hovers at \$1 to 10,600K. A bottle of Beer Lao sells for 3000K to 7,000K, depending on where you buy it, from a Vientiane sidewalk vendor or from the bar of the sumptuous, expensive Settha Palace Hotel..

■ That on December 2, 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (the official name of Laos) was proclaimed by Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane inside a gymnasium of the former USAID compound in Vientiane. He lived in the compound until his death in 1992 and is now revered as the country's national hero. A memorial and museum in his honor near Km. 6 on the outskirts of Vientiane is worth a visit. Among the artifacts shown – a replica of his room in a cave in Hua Phan province where he had lived as head of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

■ That for fiscal year 1975 (October 1974 – September 1975), the U.S. had appropriated \$24 million for economic aid, and another \$36 million for fiscal year 1976. Both grants were cancelled. In 1995, it resumed a very small aid program. For fiscal year 2004 total Laos aid requested by the U.S. State Department: \$4,350,000 (from \$5 million in 2003). The main aid donors are now Japan and Australia.

■ That the fall of the Royal Lao Government in 1975 sparked an exodus between 1975 to 1992 of 360,000 Lao, about 10% of the population. The first to flee were RLG officials and the "Westernized elite". Ordinary villagers fled between 1977 and 1981. By the end of 1992, about 305,000 have permanently resettled, mostly in Thailand, the U.S. and France. The U.S. 2000 population census counted 168,707 ethnic Lao and 169,428 Hmong.

■ That among the "refugees" who found their way to the U.S., their reunions are periodic events. There's the once-every-two year gatherings of our Mekong Circle; the American School of Vientiane (next reunion is on July 22-35, 2004 in Boise, Idaho; contact is Inez Hopkins 208 336 4746); the yearly Air America reunions; the recent Continental Air Services, Inc. reunion (see page 7). On January 17, 2004, Lao residents in the USA who used to work for USAID, the U.S. Embassy, OB, International Volunteer Service, Continental and Air America came together for a dinner dance in a community center in Adelphi, Maryland. More than 200 attended from all over the country, a few from France. This was their second reunion since 1995.

THE MOTHER OF ALL REUNIONS

For those who want to savor once more the full flavor of a Lao festival, one event is highly recommended. Each year, during the July 3-4 independence day weekend, as many as 20,000 Lao through the grounds of Wat Lao Buddhavong on 3043 Catlett Road, in Catlett, Virginia, about 45 minutes southwest of Washington D.C. (tel. 540 788 4968)

"We expect 100 vendors," said a temple spokesman. But it's not just another outdoor mall event. There will be "lamvong" dancing, cultural shows, exhibits, food. "Like a mini-boun That Luang," said Walter "Ty" Voradeth, a former OB Lao bookkeeper, who now resides in Queens, New York and who relishes going there to bump into old friends from Laos. Similar sentiments draw many other Lao to the event.

The wat, built in traditional Lao architecture on 58 acres and dedicated in July 1993, is the main temple serving the Lao population of Washington DC, Virginia and Maryland. Built with their donations, it attracts devotees from other Eastern states and from Canada. To view the wat, click on their website: www.watlao.org. It has travel directions.

SPLASH! SPLASH! SPLASH! IT'S THE LAO NEW YEAR

**Sokdee pee mai Lao tuktuk khon !
Happy Lao New Year to all!**

That greeting will ring to one and all this April in Laos when they celebrate there the passing of the old year and the advent of the new one. The transition will take three days – April 13, 14 and 15. While we who live in the West mark the passage in ten seconds (via a count-down on New Year's Eve, Dec. 31, in Manhattan's Times Square), why do the Lao take so much longer. Simply because the Lao, when he celebrates his holidays, do it the old fashioned way – leisurely in multi-day extensions. Indeed, their nine major festivals of the year, all of them with spiritual overtones, are commemorated from dawn to dusk, and at times through the night. Their village bouns, held two to three times a year inside the temple grounds, usually last three nights.

Lao mythology is another reason for spreading out the new year celebration. The first day, April 13, is when the spirit of the old year departs. It's called Song Karn Pai or Sang khan luang (literally "goddess goes"). The second day, designated Meu Nah, is the interim period before the new goddess has arrived. It is therefore a godless day – not the best time to do strenuous work (you'll pull a muscle) or to have sex (the child will grow up to be a brat). On the third day, Song Karn Khun, the "goddess rides in", and the new year actually starts. Custom demands that the Lao goes to

his temple to do "tak bat" —offer alms and food to the monks.

The Lao pee mai is unique, not only because of its 72-hour duration, but from the water-throwing mayhem that occurs. Also known as the Water Festival, surviving it is an experience that Mekong Circle members rank among the most memorable during their stay there.



Art by Leony Arca (OB)

Water is the universal symbol for purification. It's the element of choice during the Lao new year festivities. "We wash away all the evil things so that we will have wonderful lives and prosperity," Mr. Khamla Phuangsavat, vice-chief of student affairs at Sangha College, is quoted in the *Vientiane Times*.

"Water throwing is to cleanse people from possible spitefulness, greed and personal obsessions," writes Somsack Pongkhao in the newspaper.

What's not said is the extremes to which celebrants dispense with the water. It seems the entire city of Vientiane is armed with a bucket of water and a bowl. Expect to stay drenched all day. And bear it with good cheer. You are being purified and expected to return the blessing.

As with all the festivals, each pee mai day starts with a visit to the wat. The Buddha statues are washed with perfumed water. The runoff is collected and then used to pour gently on the elderly members of the family and on friends and neighbors. There are baci ceremonies in homes, all around town, followed by extended family get-togethers for food and drinks. That's how it is traditionally done.

Reports from Vientiane seem to indicate that tradition is breaking down. Water inside plastic bags are hurled at drivers and motorcyclists; there's ice in the water, or dye, cassava flour and basil seeds. Motorcycle riders bearing water guns and pumped hoses engage in water combat. "Dozens of drivers end up in intensive care" the *Vientiane Times* reported, citing 8 deaths and 141 injuries last year, mostly teenagers. "Today's celebrants don't care much for the temple," it added.

No less than the Prime Minister sounded an alarm, advising the revelers to "refrain from drinking too much."

— by J. "Pete" Fuentesilla

FIRST REUNION OF OB LAO NURSES

When Mekong Circle members gather in Chicago for their fifth reunion, the celebration will also be the first get-together of the graduates of the OB School of Nursing. The school in Vientiane, Laos graduated its first batch in 1963. When the last class, its sixth, completed the two-year course in 1969, there were altogether 136 graduates that we can account for from graduation photos and from the pages of *Balitang Laos*, OB's newsletter.

Invitations to their reunion (cover shown here) were mailed out March 16, 2004 to 48 graduates for whom we were able to track down full addresses. Like their Filipino colleagues, our Lao nurses have settled all over the planet. There are three in Australia, two in Canada, three in France, one in Belgium, one in England. Thirty nine nurses are all over the USA, from California to Pennsylvania. Most have stayed in Laos and Thailand. Unfortunately, we have but three full addresses for those in Laos.

What happened to many of our unaccounted for Lao nurses? We don't know. In 1975 when OB Filipinos left Laos, together with all foreign aid workers in the wake of a Communist takeover of the country, our Lao nurses stayed on to staff the OB hospital in That Luang. Unstable conditions under the new regime's early years took its toll on the hospital – the stocks of medicines dwindled, salaries were cut, then left unpaid for

months, personnel drifted away. Uncertain of their future, many of our Vientiane-based nurses joined the exodus across the Mekong river. The fate of their co-graduates who were assigned to the OB provincial hospitals cannot be determined yet. We know of nursing assistants (not Vientiane graduates but locally trained personnel) from OB Sayaboury who have settled in the USA.

Thirty five to 40 years ago, our Lao nurse recruits were mostly 17-year old giggling sixth graders who took on the goal to learn life-saving skills. They knew they were the chosen few from many applicants who took the screening tests. Their Filipino teachers — nurses turned educators — compressed their five-year BSN college curriculum into a two-year OB nursing program that was heavy on practical clinical skills learned on the ward floors of the Vientiane hospital. In time, a number of the graduates proved so talented they themselves served as instructor-assistants in the classroom and in the wards.

Because they roomed together for two years in dormitories behind the OB House, a 10-minute walk from the hospital, they formed close bonds that had to endure when historical events tore them apart. Today, those we have contacted are parents and grandparents. A number of them in the USA have earned full RN degrees.

Come August in Chicago, our Lao nurses will reunite with schoolmates for the first time in four decades. There will be a lot of giggling.

The reunion organizers, representing different graduating classes, are:

- **Sivilay Sivongsay** (2141 Idahome St., West

Covina, California 91791; tel. 626 331 4607)

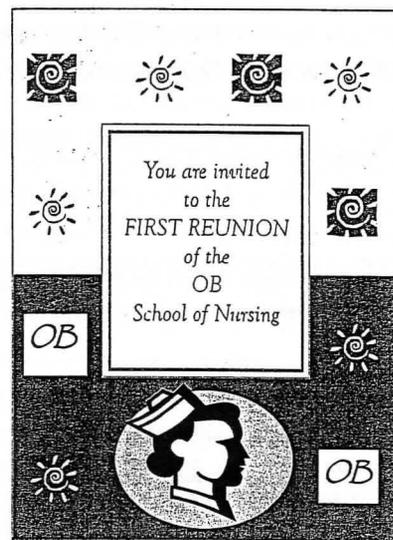
- **Khamsy Siharath** (4451 San Joaquin St., Oceanside, California 92057; tel. 760 433 3735)

- **Rabieb Vilayhong Roy** (2035 South Wiggins, Springfield, Illinois 62704; tel. 217 698 8335)

- **Chantalom Phouangmalay** (1207 Lone Oak Trail, Aurora, Illinois 60506; tel. 630 897 2971)

- **Phoukham Phaengpong** (501 Mark Lane, Downingtown, Pennsylvania 19335; tel. 610 518 2521)

- **Phikoun Keomahathai** (2210 Fontaine Ave., Charlottesville, Virginia 22903; tel. 434 245 5263).



(In the invitation, we printed the graduating photos of classes 1964, 1965, 1968 and 1969. Does anyone have class photos of 1963 and 1967. Pls. email to fuente-cila@aol.com or mail to 216-27 Spencer Ave., Queens Village, New York 11427 USA).

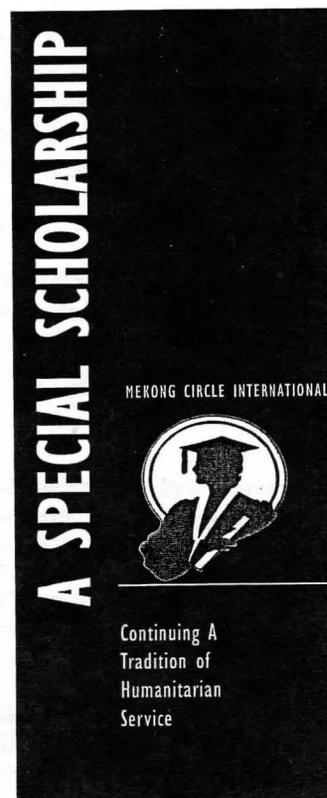
ISKOLAR NG MEKONG IS LAUNCHED

We delivered the first check in the amount of \$1,200 to Siervas de San Jose, a religious congregation based in Quezon City. The beneficiaries will be four young women in their first and second years of their college studies. They are residents of a center for abused and abandoned women operated by Siervas, called the Tahanang Paghubog Mother Bonifacia. The center cares for 16 women residents aged 12 to 25. It survives through donations and proceeds from its dressmaking shop.

If you will remember, a scholarship project was one activity Mekong Circle agreed to undertake at our 2002 reunion in New York City. A committee began a small fund-raising drive to start it off with some

seed money for a modest beginning. Let's extend our thanks to the generosity of **Marie Aguilos, Anita and Bik Marquez, Fenny and Tony Victa, Chabeng and Steven Fajardo-Swift, Conse Sotio, Vilma Valenzuela, Cora and Tony Sazon, Puring and Raul de Jesus, Pet and Pete Fuentecilla, Edith and Red del Rosario.**

To increase the number of beneficiaries, the Committee is expanding its fund-raising campaign to the full membership and beyond. It will also look for other Philippine-based foundations with whom it can partner to pursue educational projects. A brochure (cover shown here) has been designed and a mailing will begin this month. Expect your copy soon. It describes in more detail our partnership with Siervas, profiles of our first scholars, and details on how this scholarship project is being managed. Your comments (and your generosity) would be very appreciated.



SEARCHING FOR A REAL LAO RESTAURANT

There's a restaurant in lower Manhattan named Kin Khao – to eat rice, in Lao. But don't expect anything Lao. The menu is entirely Thai. A review by 10 Best City Guides on the Internet praises its "famously potent vod-as...and its tasty, unique banana splits". Nothing can be more un-Lao in taste.

Another restaurant in the same neighborhood – Mangez Avec Moi eat with me, in French – offers not French but Thai, Vietnamese and Japanese cuisine. It so happens that some of the staff are Lao who will gladly whip up a traditional Lao dish (if the ingredients are available) as they did for me when I ordered "sin heng" dried beef jerky strips to chew on with beer.

Then, there's the Forest Thai Cuisine in Staten Island, one of the boroughs of New York City. As the name says, the food is Thai, but the cooks are Lao (hence you can order a Lao dish not listed in the menu) as well as Italian or adobo, because one of the cooks is a Filipino who is the boyfriend of one of the Lao owners. If you wish to drop by call 718 876 9888 for travel directions.

Such are the surprises of searching for a Lao restaurant in New York City where I live and where there are no real Lao restaurants with real Lao som shredded papaya salad, no sticky khao niao rice, no khao phun noodles on the menu, much less the fiery lao-lao rice wine fermenting in clay pots and straw reeds.

One Thai restaurant where authentic Lao food can be ordered is in Charlottesville, Virginia. Thai 99 at 2210 Fontaine Ave. (tel. 434 245 5263) is owned by (surprise ! surprise !) Phikoun Keomahathai, former OB Lao



Phikoun Keomahathai in her Thai 99 restaurant in Charlottesville, Virginia, one of three restaurants she owns and manages.

nurse, class of 1963. It's one of three restaurants she owns and manages in Virginia where she tells me her "specialty is khao phun, which is listed on my menu as Thai 99 platter. And I can mix you laap", a ground meat dish. She also recommends her "Drunken Noodle" (choice of chicken, pork, beef or shrimp stir fried noodles with onion, chili, pepper, basil leaves).

The name derives from a generous mixture of pungent spices that fries your cerebellum. Phikoun's other restaurants are Thai 992 (at 915 Garden Boulevard, Charlottesville, tel. 434 964 1212) and Thai 993 at 21 Wards Worth, Lynchburg, tel. 434 528 2855). At Thai 99, the original, you can be sure Phikoun's Lao touch is always available because she lives on the second floor of the restaurant building. – J. "Pete" Fuentesilla

WAITER, BRING US THE KHAO NIAO AND THE PAH DEK

Unlike innumerable Thai restaurants which have conquered mainstream American palates the way Chinese, Indian, and Japanese eating places have done, Lao eating spots elsewhere are few and far between. A search on the Internet comes up with the following sites below. Mekong Circle members who live near them are requested to sample their dishes and tell us if they are the real thing:

Alaska
Lao's Restaurant (300 West 36 Ave. and C St., Anchorage; tel. 563 8335). Restaurant review excerpt from the Anchorage Daily News: "I was impressed by the assortment of Lao specialties which had more than a dozen soup and noodle items and many dishes that were named Lao-something or other."

Washington DC
Bangkok-Vientiane (926 A West Broad St., Falls Church; tel. 703 534 0095). Excerpt from The Washington Times: "food at this family-run storefront has a real homey quality".

Pennsylvania
Vientiane Café (4728 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia; tel. 215 726 1095)

Wisconsin
Vientiane Palace (151 West Gorham, Madison; tel. 255 2848)
Lao Laan-Xang (Willy St., Madison; tel. 608 280 0104). Excerpt from a review: "Great homey environment. Check out the walls of the women's

bathroom."

● *Vientiane Noodle Shop* (3422 W. National Ave., Milwaukee; tel. 414 672 8440). Excerpt from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel review: "unpretentious 36-seat atmosphere to sample the fresh, sometime spicy, sometimes sour flavors in which the Laotian people take special delight."

Canada

● *Banh Lao* (1127 St. Mary's Road, Manitoba, Winnipeg; tel. 253 8080). Excerpt from a review: "raw herbs and vegetables are extremely common in their cuisine which is more rustic than Thai food."

● *Round of Applause Lao-Thai* (930 Decarie Boulevard, Ontario, Montreal; tel. 747-4805). Excerpt from French review translated into English: "the best Laotian restaurant in the city... full of fish sauces...and odorous roots, unknown and fantastic grasses...the establishment is held by an adorable and jovial family."

THE MEKONG CIRCLE COOKBOOK

Recipes from 25 countries, more than 100 in all, have been compiled and ready for printing. They include some Lao dishes. The committee hopes to make the book available during our Chicago reunion.

Committee members Linda Masibay, Gladys Tabano, Jocce Nantes, Ofie de los Reyes, Lollie Sevilla Vinzon and Ciony Agbayani Ljungar thank all who submitted recipes.



If it's April in Laos, it must be the Lao New Year. To mark the occasion, OB artist Tony Liwag (who lives in Illinois with OB wife nurse Gina) depicts two Lao dancers. The color versions can be downloaded to your computer for printing if you contact him at Liwag@aol.com.

A "TERRIBLE" REUNION



That's the name of the hotel (really!) in Las Vegas, Nevada where some 120 veterans of Continental Air Services Inc. came together on Feb. 20 and 21, 2004 for their first reunion.

That's quite a good turnout, close to half of CASI's roster in Laos during its peak days flying its planes during the 1960s. During that time, about 100 Filipino flight mechanics and office support personnel worked for CASI. Five Filipinos were at the Las Vegas reunion – **Ernie Felix, Tessie Alon, Nonong Garcia; Angie Maralit and Nits Romano** (at right, above photo), are shown above with pilot **Capt. David Kouba**. Most of the other attendees were pilots together with their wives.



Mekong Circle California met for their Christmas party December 7, 2003 at the residence of Tacing & Tony Atienza in Corona. Front row, from left: Cecile Datu, Wilma Padayao, Ester Demias, Tacing Atienza, Cita Custodio, Raquel Pestanas and Jojo Barcelona. Back row, from left: Jake Demias, Tony Atienza, Fidel Padayao, Manding Datu, Romy Pestanas and Pol Custodio.



MEKONG CIRCLE PHILIPPINES

A gathering on February 7, organized by Jovit and Ben Revilla in their Los Banos, Laguna residence featured pusit and balut sa puti, among the goodies, as well as a cake with an elephant (not a real one). In Manila, with Fred Mendoza hosting, welcomed visiting US members Cecile & Manding Datu (California), Lily and Dick Abad (Illinois), Raul de Jesus and son Jiggy (Wisconsin). Present at the March 28 event were (from left, seated): Bing Bingcang, Mel Granada, Frisco San Juan, Jovit Revilla, Nita Bingcang, Sonia Ballo. Standing, from left: Tony Agustin, Gani Bautista, Ben Revilla, Fred Reyes, Odie Cruz, Pet Sismaet, Bing Belicena, Jun Belicena, Lily Abad, Fred Mendoza, Pat Gonzales and Dick Abad.

UPDATE: 2004 CHICAGO REUNION

- Aug. 6, 7 & 8, 2004. Only four months to go ! Be sure you have marked these days on your calendars.
- June 30, 2004: Deadline to send in your registration fees (\$100 person). Can't find your registration form? Download and print it out from www.mekongcircle.org (click on 2004 reunion).
- You can send your Registration form **without** any check. You can send the fee later.
- May 1, 2004: Deadline to send your advertisements and messages for the souvenir program. \$120 for a full page; \$70 for a half page. We have received ads from Gel dela Cruz, Bik Marquez, Lydia Palma, Novotel Hotel (Vientiane, Laos), Rusty & Nemia Ramos, Jojo Pablo, Gomez/Raquini (California), Frias/Tapang (Canada), Edith & Pete Paluay. Mekong Circle New York has reserved 4 pages of the centerfold.

REGISTRANTS AS OF APRIL 1, 2004:

Canada: Tanny and Judy Ariola, Connie dela Pena Frias, Gene and Estrella Hernandez, Ken and Ciony Agbayani Ljungar, Ato and Offie Naranjo Paglinawan, Honor and Brenda Mercado Tapang. **Philippines:** Sonia Morales Ballo, Jun and Bing Gaborne Belicena, Nita Bingcang, Anastacio and Odie Cruz, Mely Marquez Cuyno, Eve Altura Guevarra, Ruben and Marita Eusebio Layug, Fred Mendoza, Ben and Jovit Revilla, Col. Frisco San Juan, Isabel Savellano, Pet Duruin Sismaet, Manny Taberdo. **California:** Joe and Jojo Barcelona, Meds dela Cruz Caro, Pinky Sabaot Casher, Pol Custodio, Manding and Cecile Salarda Datu, Gel and Virgie dela Cruz, Nonong Garcia, Adoring Adriatico Gomez, Clem and Pat Tesoro Gonzales, Juan and Lourdes Alberto Ilaw, Jun and Claire Ilustrisimo, Bik and Baby Angeles Marquez, Fely Montoya Navera, Jojo Pablo, Fidel and Wilma Padayao, Marilyn Bautista Raguini, Bouadeng and Khamsy Siharath, Phousouk Sisouphone, Chantha and Sivilay Sivongsy, Pete Tabor, Vanessa Thongma, Tony and Fenny Terciano Victa. **Florida:** Miner Erese Will **Hawaii:** Steve and Chabeng Fajardo Swift. **Illinois:** Dicknoi and Lily Marinas Abad, Ernie and Offie Razalan delos Reyes, Steve and Myrna Pineda Garcia, Amphone Manivong, Linda Masibay, Henry and Dolly Rosales Nano, Jocee Espinosa Nantes, Pete and Edith Habacon Paluay, Phoxay and Chanthalom Phoungmalay, Ronald and Rabieb Vilayhong Roy, Louie and Gladys Cid Tabano. **Indiana:** Laling Endruga **Michigan:** Romulo and Isabel Pascua **New Jersey:** Boni and Evelyn Subong Alon, Red and Edith del Rosario, Teddy and Lydilla Parreno, Tony and Cora Portugal Sazon, Conse Sotio **New York:** Marie Aguilos, Pete and Pet Santarina Fuentesilla, Amphie Malolos, Vilma Valenzuela, Walter Voradeth **Ohio:** Tony and Gina Perlada Liwag, Joe and Lina Deluca Luna, Bert and Melanie Dumadaug Reyes **Oklahoma:** Rusty and Nemia Altura Ramos **Pennsylvania:** Evangeline Aberin, Bac and Joy Bacordo, Cesar and Linda Ramas Mendoza **Tennessee:** Alex and Lynne del Carmen **Texas:** Clarence Acacio, Rene and Vivian Galang Dimaunahan, Lolit Manahan Stark **Washington:** Bob and Asil Palma Monserrat, Lydia Palma **Wisconsin:** DJ and Puring Roque de Jesus, Cil and Tessie Brondial Mendoza

HOTEL where all activities will be held: Hyatt Regency Chicago, 151 East Wacker Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60601 Tel. 1 800 233 1234 or 1 312 565 1234.

- Rate per night is \$139 a room plus tax. This discount rate applies for Mekong Circle members for the nights of Aug. 5,6,7, 8 & 9, 2004. Members who want to reserve rooms should ask for the Mekong Circle Group Rate.
- Cut off-date for reservations at our discounted rate is July 17, 2004. After this date, rooms and prices will depend on what are available.
- Each room has either two double-beds or one king-size beds for two-person occupancy. Maximum occupancy per room is four persons. If you are bringing along other companions (a third or fourth person), the rate for each additional person in the same room is \$25 per person each night.
- Each room has high-speed Internet access, computer data port as well as the usual amenities – two telephones, color TV, coffee maker, hair dryer, iron and ironing board.

TRANSPORTATION

Hyatt Regency uses its Airport Express shuttle van to bring their guests to and from the two airports that service Chicago – O'Hare and Midway. Cost is \$17 one way per person and \$29 round trip from O'Hare. It's \$11.50 one way and \$20 round trip from Midway.

We are working on less costly limousine service. You will be informed. For driving instruction, call the hotel or check their website.

REUNION PROGRAM (All activities at Hyatt Regency)

Friday, August 6, 2004 – 8 am	Registration opens
5 pm	Baci Welcome Ceremony
6:30	Buffet Dinner
	Business Meeting
Saturday, Aug. 7	- Morning Bus & Boat Tours
12 noon	Lunch for sons and daughters of members*
6 pm	Dinner Dance
Sunday, Aug. 8	11:30 am Picnic at Zion, Illinois

Registration fee pays for all hotel meals (buffet dinner on Aug.6, lunch and dinner dance on Aug. 7). Tours are on your own.

Check our website www.mekongcircle.org for more information as they become available.

*Second generation registrants: Gerrick Abad, Rene and Maricar Belicena Badillo, Dennis Belicena, Bobby Bingcang, Anthony de Jesus, Jij de Jesus, Ryan dela Pena, Justin and Noi Kosila Derkash, Claire Dimaunahan, Loren Guevarra, Raul Guevarra, Ruel Guevarra, Marilou Nano, Minelli Nano, Vincent Nantes, Fides Navera, Lyssa Paluay, Kelly and Neryssa Ramos Pearson, Jocelyn Bingcang Ramos, Rhia dela Pena Ramos, Rustico and Jane Ramos, Adam and Debbie Navera Reed, Divina Gracia San Juan, Henry Stark, Glayn Tabano, Louther Tabano, Rhoda dela Pena Tran

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