

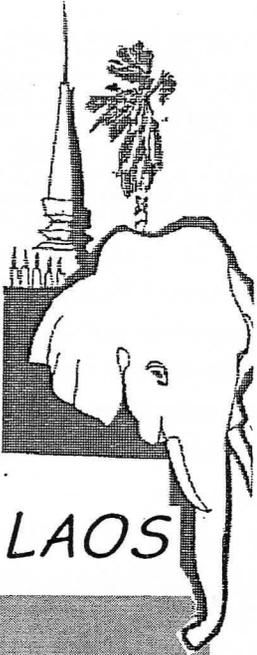
MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

SEPTEMBER 2005

145-60 Helma Avenue, Ohio 45013 USA

www.mekongcircle.org



LAOS

Our
2006
Reunion
will be
in
Florida
Aug. 11
to
Aug. 14.

Details
inside
and more
to
come.

I WANT MY HISTORY !

We devote much of this issue (the 10th in an occasional series that began in 2002) to books, both fiction (novels) and non-fiction (memoirs). Their subject: Laos. And we wallowed during this lazy summer in page after page after page of it.

Why this focus, one may even say, fascination — with this country? If there is one thing, one thread, one link, that binds us members of this Mekong Circle together, it's our Lao experience. That's where we met, lived, worked, served. That's where a number of our colleagues lost their lives. And where a part of our lives today was shaped. And why we keep coming back to it every newsletter issue.

Even now, almost four decades after the last of us left Laos, something turns on when we catch mention of the country in a newspaper headline or a TV newscast. Because the mentions come rarely, the jolt they give can be intense. Imagine then how the memories cascade when a book's setting is the world you once inhabited. The characters are, as fiction goes, figments of the imagination. And the plots maybe monumentally absurd. Still, the place names, the anecdotes in the memoirs particularly — so true to your experience — resurrect and stir a life you thought forgotten.

This brings us to a point about this newsletter which in many ways is both history and memoirs. One can say the focus on Laos is too much. In publishing research there is a methodology called "content analysis." Let's apply it to the last 10 issues. For every one Lao name mentioned there are perhaps ten Filipino names. Too much?

Then there is the weighty focus on OB. By virtue of its numerical dominance in the current membership roll, the charge is true. And until we get some input, now virtually non-existent, from our non-OB members, they risk becoming figments of the imagination. As they say in Tagalog "parang wala tayong pinagsamahan". So, kuwento naman. We welcome even the most absurd memoir simply because it is your Lao experience, your voice, your life. This newsletter can serve more purposes than merely as a promo piece for our reunions. True, accounts of birthdays, grandchildren christening, and so forth, may not be historic earthshakers for most Mekong Circle members. (It is, if it's your 70th and your 10th grandchild). But we believe our historical roots in Laos, our past there and glimpses of its present, need to be remembered and recorded every now and then. If you don't like history, so be it. You are free to cancel your free subscription to the Newsletter.

--- J. "Pete" Fuentecilla

MEMBER NEWS

CONGRATULATIONS to Fr. Lucien Bouchard, OMI, who marked his 50th year as an Oblate priest on June 17, 2005. The anniversary was marked among his parishioners in Karimantan Barat, Indonesia. Years before, he was in Thailand, ministering to refugees from Laos. He himself fled Laos in 1975, after the Communist takeover. "They don't like missionaries. They murdered an Oblate priest in 1960 in the Ban Ban area," he tells us. Ban Ban in northern Sam Neua also happened to be his missionary grounds for 13 years (out of 19 years altogether in Laos) among 150,000 Hmong and other tribes. During that time he made visits to the OB team in nearby Houie Sai, marrying Dickie and Cely Labao there (as well as Bik and Baby Marquez in Vientiane). He now stays in Fauton, Massachusetts (tel. 508 880 3065).

ON THE SICK LIST (or Recovering): Bert de los Reyes, at St. George Public Hospital, Kogarah, Sydney, Australia; Tricia Lapitan, in Seattle, Washington. Tricia (daughter of the late Serge and Sounthaly) had returned from Phuket, Thailand last month to take a look at the Tsunami aftereffects.

REMEMBERING Amor Valiente-Cook: Los Angeles members gathered July 23 at the residence of Bill Cook, husband of the late Amor Valiente, to mark the first anniversary of her death. Present were Narding & Bella Hilario, Joe and Jojo Barcelona, Romy and Racquel Pestanas, Fidel and Wilma Padayao, Philip and Jessie Cruz, Lito and Adoring Gomez, Pol & Cita Custodio, Ilde and Pining Torres, Manding and Cecile Datu, Phounsouk Sisouphone, Carming Aquilar, Joe and Sonia Ambrosio, Bouchuey Orense, Bounong Vongsavanh.

POLYNESIAN SURPRISE party for Tacing Atienza on her 65th birthday on August 14 in their Corona, California home. Grandchildren and their classmates at the Pacific Island Dance School performed. Tacing and Tony's residence was the first headquarters of Mekong Circle USA at its founding in 1976. Another California (Walnut) surprise birthday celebrant on Sept. 2: Helen Eusebio Torres (daughter of Seb and Lody Eusebio). Helen, 50, is Administrator at Home Care of America.

WELCOME BACK: To Chanthone Chinyavong, former OB Lao nurse, who spent six weeks in Laos last month, visiting provinces, among them Sayaboury. The OB

Hospital there is gone, she says, replaced on the same grounds at a spot opposite the OB location, by a government hospital. Welcome back also to Sivilay Sivongsay, OB Lao nurse and Mekong Circle Board Member, who during two weeks in Vientiane last February gathered 13 former classmates from our School of Practical Nursing. She briefed them on our proposed project to seek practicing Lao nurses for training abroad to upgrade their nursing skills.

NEWSLETTERS ONLINE: All 10 issues, including this one, has been posted on our website (www.mekongcircle.org). To read or print out an issue, go to "Reports" and choose the issue. Each of the issues is between 3 MB and 5 MB in size, so they can take longer to download depending on your connection speed. Because the pictures were scanned directly from printed copies, the website photos are not the best. We're studying ways to improve them.

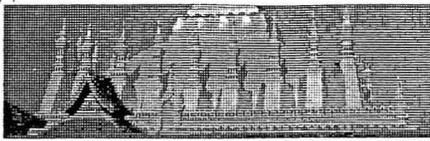
POEMS FROM TROUBLED LANDS. Connie Frias, our member from Ontario, Canada has published a 96-page paperback collection of poems: "Collection of Peacekeeping-Inspired Poetry". Here is a description from Authorhouse, the publisher: "This book depicts the love of nature and people by this author who worked for the United Nations and its peacekeeping operations in three troubled countries of the world. The 19 poems in this collection are of varied subjects. During her leisure time while she was temporarily assigned to those troubled countries, she devoted herself to writing articles and poems just as a brain twister. In this book, the author talks of the various inspirations that led her to write the poems. After retirement from the United Nations, this author started to gather and compile all her poems some which are filled with emotions as a mother and as a friend. Some are tributes to famous people and international personalities; some are delightful and pleasant; and some are of ordinary living and love of nature. Each poem tells a story and the book is very informative to read — one that you will not put down until you reach the conclusion. A must read book!"

Published in March 2005, the book is available from www.booksamillion.com and from www.amazon.com. Price: \$9.95. For more details Connie can be reached at 905 277 9596 or email at frias9596@rogers.com

ADD TO YOUR DIRECTORY

Since our reunion in Chicago in August 2004, there have been more registrants in our website "Guestbook". Those of you who received the 2004 Directory may want to add these names. Remember these are persons who filled out information into our website. Puring de Jesus, our Membership Coordinator, has other updates. Many of the Guestbook entries wrote in comments which you may wish to read. Click on "Membership." Then, click "View The Guestbook."

Vilma Manalo Gorre	1029 Holliston Circle, Las Vegas, Nevada 89108	Tel. 702 944 9574	
Greg Spratt	8047 East Factory Road, West Alexandria, Ohio 45381		Crew Chief, Sam Thong
Rick Swaggart	3119 Circle Hill Road, Alexandria, Virginia 22305	571 227 3719	Refugee Relief, USAID
Martha Domondon Marfori	2876 Cypress Circle, Fairfield, California 94533	707 422 3416	General Services Office, USAID
Paul White	3919 Moss Drive, Annandale, Virginia 22003	703 946 4910	Refugee Relief, USAID
Donald Dugan	11275 NW 51 st Street, Coral Springs, Florida 33076	954 255 6222	Public Health, USAID
Elenita Canaling-Verano	5452 W. Calimyrna St., Fresno, California	559 275 6208	Operation Brotherhood
Robert L. Van Nest	1751 Forest Blvd., Jacksonville, Florida 32246	904 905 0970	International Voluntary Services (IVS)
Joann & John Esser	5301 Portsmouth Way, Madison, Wisconsin	608 244 3088	International Voluntary Services
Minerva Erese-Will	6481 68 th Ave. North, Pinellas Park, Florida 33781	727 544 1878	Operation Brotherhood
Mac Thompson	P.O. Box 5, Thanyaburi, Pathum Thani 12110, Thailand		Refugee Relief, IVS and USAID



ASIA'S BEST BEER

With 99 percent of the market in Vientiane or any place else where beer is served in the country, it's the only brand available. Fortunately, BeerLao (or "bialao" as it is locally pronounced) tastes good, very good in fact. So good it has been winning international beer taste awards (yes they have such competitions) - in New Zealand in 2002, Belgium in 2003 and Paris in 2004. It recently received a quality award in New York in 2005. If your work or pleasure brings you all over Asia, you may already know why it has been chosen Best Local Beer by Time Asia magazine's annual selection of the Best of Asia. (see its Nov. 22, 2004 issue where it also lists the Best Street Food, the Best Ramen Outside Japan, the Best Beach, the Best Budget Hotel, and so forth -34 bests in all; for Best Animal Encounter, the magazine chose swimming with the "butandings", tame 15-meter whale sharks in Donsol, 540 kms. south-east of Manila). BeerLao, brewed in Vientiane, is fermented from French malt, German yeast and hops, and local rice and spring water. Lao Brewery Company produces more than 90 million liters of it a year. Exports go to eight countries - Canada, France and the USA among them. But you can die of thirst looking for it outside Laos. We did find a distributor in Wisconsin who agreed to sell - but not deliver - crates of it for our Chicago reunion in 2004. No Mekong Circle member volunteered to carry them across state lines and risk arrest for unlicensed interstate commerce.

MANY PLACES OF SPIRITUAL REFUGE

When the Communists took over Laos in 1975, an estimated 350,000 Lao and Hmong fled the country. More than 123,000 lowland Lao found refuge in the USA. They did not cluster into communes such as the Vietnamese in Orange county in southern California or the Hmong clans in St. Paul, Minnesota or the Cambodians in Long Beach, California. Dispersed across the USA, they built wats or Buddhist temples where they settled. Today, there are 79 Lao wats in 32 states, a testament to their deep devotion to their religion. Nineteen wats are in California, where the largest number of Lao have settled (55,426 according to the 2000 census). There are 10 wats in Canada, 9 in Australia, 8 in France and one each in Germany and New Zealand. For a listing, go to <http://members.dancris.com>. Full addresses and contact numbers are included. When hurricane Katrina devastated Louisiana this month, more than 100 Lao and Cambodians sought shelter at Wat Thammarrattanam of New Iberia in Broussard.

BIG BROTHER COMES TO VIENTIANE

No, not the Politburo. It's cameras - the kind strapped to traffic light poles that can snap photos of your license plates when you run red lights or commit other driving

infractions. City authorities announced that the cameras will be installed at 26 intersections beginning in November 2005. A Third World country employing First World technology to solve its traffic problems is very uncharacteristic of its famous "bo pen yang" attitude. What's going on? Road fatalities and injuries in Vientiane are now topping the hospital charts. And if you have been to Vientiane recently, the cause are those kamikaze drivers on motorcycles. Another twentieth century technology is also propagating at a fast clip there. Laos now has 180,000 cellphone users. By 2010, it projects 700,000 users (in a country where more than 80 percent of the 5.3 million inhabitants live in remote provinces).

A RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR A FARMER-EDUCATOR

Sombath Somphone becomes only the second Lao recipient of what is considered the Nobel Prize for Asia. Given to him on August 31, 2005 in Manila at ceremonies that honored five other outstanding Asians, Somphone's Community Service Award was for his work as founder in 1996 and director of a non-profit training center. Its young volunteers fan out to 14 of the country's 17 provinces to teach various livelihood skills and sustainable technologies. They range from fuel efficient stoves and use of organic fertilizers to the growing of mulberry tea, brown rice, bananas, pineapples, as well as marketing and the management of small businesses. Sombath earned degrees in education and agriculture at the University of Hawaii in 1980. In 1967, the first Lao RM Foundation awardee (for Government Service) was Keo Viphakone, the Commissioner of Rural Affairs. OB's social workers such as Belen Gaborne Belicena had worked closely with him in the relief and resettlement of refugees. Now in his 80s, he was visited last August in Vientiane by a niece Chanthone Chinyavong, an OB Lao nurse, currently residing in Virginia. OB itself was an RM Foundation awardee in 1958, the first in the category of International Understanding, for its services to refugees in South Vietnam.

NO MORE VISA FEES

Here's another reason to go on your "sentimental journey" back to Laos: Philippine citizens holding ordinary passports are exempted from entry-exit visa fees. Lao entry visas normally cost \$30 and exit visas are \$10. The Philippine government is reciprocating by waiving visa fees to Lao visitors. On another diplomatic front, the two countries signed last July an agreement to send Filipino experts to Laos to provide training in labor administration, occupational safety and health, expansion of employment opportunities for women.

These Months Years Ago

September 17, 1965: Consul Rodolfo Sanchez, first resident consular officer, arrives in Vientiane to open first onsite chancery for the Philippine Embassy.

October 26, 1965: Ambassador Felipe Mabilangan, first resident Chief of Mission, presents his credentials to Laos King Savang Vatthana.

October 1957: International Cooperation Agency (a precursor to the U.S. State Department's Agency For

International Development) agrees to provide funds to continue OB operations.

November 1966: First Philippine government Pavilion participation at That Luang festival

November 4, 2002: Eleven former OB and USAID employees, together with relatives, arrive in Vientiane for a one-week group tour. It is the first large group to visit after all foreign employees left Laos in 1975. During a courtesy call on November 7 with the Lao Minister of Health, he invited OB to resume its medical program.

December 26, 1956 : Laos Jaycees invite OB to transfer its work to Laos for a period of six months after OB Vietnam completes its relief work there in the same month. (On January 7, 1957, the first 13 volunteers arrive to staff a clinic in Nong Duang, Vientiane).

Source: "Filipinos In Laos" (Books By Bookends, 2004)

End of the year notable dates for the Lao government:

August 23, 1975: "Uprising Day", the seizure of Vientiane City by Communist-organized demonstrators of 20,000 residents.

December 2, 1975: Founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

FICTION & MEMOIRS WITH LAO SETTINGS

There is no lack of books, in English, about Lao history or Lao economics or Lao culture or Lao politics. Take any serious study, then scan the back pages at the plentiful references and bibliographies it reviewed, and one wonders where the oft-quoted remark about this "little-known, secretive country" came from. There is one topic, however, where a real black hole exists - Lao fiction in English, or more precisely, fictional novels with Laos as the locale or where the main characters are Lao. No doubt, these works, like black holes, are there. But locating them in the literary cosmos takes some astronomical doing.

But lo and behold, we found three such novels. We were curious how and why the authors chose the country which one reviewer described as a "setting unique in Western fiction." Note that he said "Western" because it so happens that all three were written by Western authors - two Americans and one British. Where is that novel in English by a Lao author with a Lao setting and Lao characters. While the search proceeds for this rarity (if it exists at all), let us take a short look at these three existing works.

The Coroner's Lunch

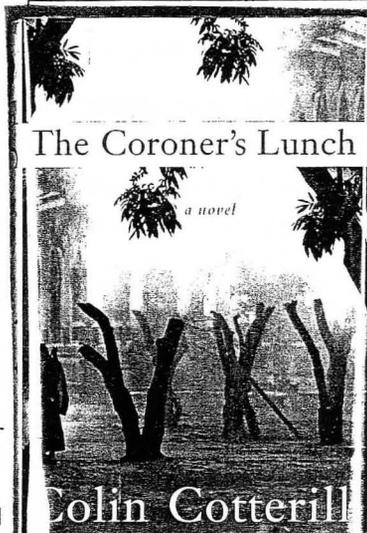
By Colin Cotterill

Publisher: Soho Press (New York)
257 pages; published 2004

Time frame: 1976, a year after the Communist government has taken over the country.

Plot: Dr. Siri Paiboun, who tended mostly to the war-wounded in the northern jungles of Sam Neua, is vested with "responsibility" by the Politburo by being named chief (and only coroner) of the country. At 72 years old, and knowing virtually nothing about forensic medicine, he had looked forward to retirement. "He needed responsibility, like he needed another head," - the doctor, we soon

discover, openly displays a sarcastic attitude at the regime. He has become disillusioned at the bureaucracy and the inefficiency. Within a month of his appointment, several high-profile cases - or corpses - are brought to his poorly equipped morgue. One is the wife of a high ranking senior Party comrade (she had been poisoned, the doctor finds out, and not from parasite infestation from "lap" meat as he is made to understand); three Vietnamese officials are reported drowning victims (but really murdered, he finds out, one of them by being thrown out of an airplane into a water reservoir in what looks like an



international plot). In short order, a mistress is strangled (not a suicide, he finds out); a neighbor he lives with is blown to pieces, his autopsy reports are stolen, and he is the target of an assassination attempt. What the heck is going on? The bewildered doctor is at his wit's end trying to put two and two together. With the help of a close friend (a comrade who also harbors disdain at the Party), they are able to do so. The assassin's mastermind (husband of the poisoned woman) kills himself; the spy behind the international plot is

unmasked. At the end (literally the last two pages), Dr. Phaiboun falls in love.

Why A Laos Setting?

The author, born in London "has lived in Laos" the book jacket says. For how long and doing what, are not indicated. But he writes details about Vientiane to show he had a sharp eye for local color. Some nitpicking details: he spells Lan Xang Hotel (without the "e"). Likewise, against all standard nomenclature, he sticks to calling the river Mekhong. Although the war memorial on Lan Xang Avenue is known by a variety of names, he sticks to Anusawari instead of

the more common Patuxai. Do residents actually do tai-chi slow-motion calisthenics in its shadow as he says? And during the That Luang festival, were there really "five-legged goats and three-breasted women to entertain the crowd"?

Coroner's Lunch, in essence, is a whodunit. The hero doctor, looked upon by the villains (officious government officials) as near senility to easily hoodwink, thwarts their evil schemes. He struggles against shortages of the most basic equipment and supplies. His morgue lab at Mahosot Hospital was hardly better equipped than the meatworks behind the morning market. His microscope belongs in a museum. His chemical stocks are nil; the color photos in his pathology textbooks are blurred from age. Mahosot, so short of medicine, was prescribing herbs.

Laos in 1976 (the time of the novel) had just emerged from 50 years of warfare. In truth it was beset with severe shortages, among them food and talent (most of the skilled Lao had fled). Cotterill (he must have been there during this period) sprinkles his first novel with comical accounts of Vientiane's daily life under Communism. His message is clear. Dr. Paiboun's common sense science and detective intuition can defeat ideology anytime.

Bottom line: The plot is contrived but the jabs against Politburo pettiness are hilarious gems.

Memorable line: the Doctor's new love object "combs her hair in the style of Imelda Marcos, complete with lily." (page 256).

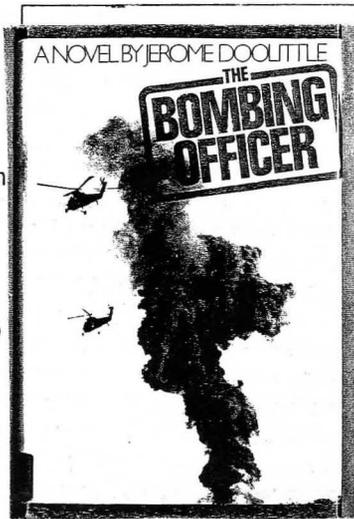
The Bombing Officer

By Jerome Doolittle

Publisher: E.P. Dutton, New York
257 pages; published 1982

Time frame: 1964, start of American intensive bombing campaign of Pathet Lao areas

Plot: Fred Upson, a 29-year old junior diplomat, is newly assigned to the American Embassy in Vientiane as Air Force Liaison Officer. He takes over a job known as the "Mad Bomber". This is how he describes his job to his Lao lover: "Under the rules of engagement, Laos is carved up into little patchwork pieces. Here you can bomb,



here you can't. Here you can bomb sometimes with some kinds of bombs, but not other times. Over here, you can dump your bombs in this patch of empty jungle, if you weren't able to drop them on your target. Apparently the pilots would just as soon not land with a full bomb load, because if there is an accident or a hard landing or something, you blow yourself up." In short, because he picks out the targets for the pilots, he was the "bureaucratic equivalent of Zeus", the

Roman god who smites his enemies with thunder-

bolts. In time a bureaucratic war brews within the Embassy, under another set of rules of engagement. On one side are the warmongers - the State Department, CIA, Army and Air Attaches - pitted against the good guys who feel the bombing is doing more bad than good - USIS, AID, the Political Section, the Press Attache. The American ambassador is portrayed as a real jerk. One of the good guys is an American, Lao-fluent refugee aid worker of the International Voluntary Service. Upson, who at first was on the side of "the U.S. Mission" (all the parts above) begins to shift his allegiance to the good guys. He finally realizes, after a visit to a refugee camp of Lao displaced from the bombing sites, that the bombing campaign is all wrong. He steals classified documents about bombing mishaps and gives them to a New York Times reporter, effec-

tively dooming his promising diplomatic career. He also loses his Lao lover.

Why A Laos Setting

In Laos, the American Mission commanded an air force, an army, an economy, an entire country really," said an Embassy person. To keep several divisions of the North Vietnamese army pinned down in Laos trying to funnel men and arms down the Ho Chi Minh trail to South Vietnam, the U.S. truly had to own Laos from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. Doolittle says that in his book, "the large historical

events happened just about as I described them...though I have felt free to rearrange geography and chronology here and there." The local references are by and large authentic - the wares sold at Talat Sao, the White Rose brothel, the Boun Bang Fai rocket festival, the CIA bases at Plaine Des Jarres and Long Tieng, Alternate 20, Air America. More persuasive are the descriptions of Embassy office bureaucracy and as well as the jargon of managing a war from a desk - Lima sites, SGUs, POL, LOCs, Ravens, Barrel Roll, Arc Light Missions. They

can only come from someone who officially served inside during the period covered by the novel. Doolittle did work inside it is not clear whether he was the Mad Bomber.

Bottom line: The focus is on the American characters, not the Lao. The ending is melodramatic.

Memorable line: "How do you get (San Miguel) beer from the Philippines to the Plain of Jars in the middle of the war?" Upson asked. "Black market from our PXs in Vietnam. The stuff finds its way to North Vietnam and then they bring it down here."

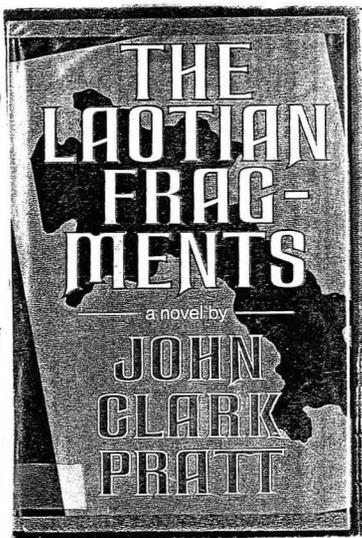
The Laotian Fragments

By John Clark Pratt

Publisher: Viking Press (New York)
245 pages; published 1974

Time Frame: 1965, when bombing campaign intensifies against North Vietnamese in Laos

Plot: U.S. Air Force Major William Blake volunteers to serve as head of a group of pilots known as the Ravens. They fly small, one-engine observation planes, skimming almost at tree-top levels to spot concentrations of enemy war materiel and men. Then they call in U.S. jets from Thailand to bomb the targets. Their main base and home during their one-year tour is at Long Tieng, on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars. It is the nerve center (and also Hmong ancestral heartland) of the CIA's interdiction war against the North Vietnamese. During his six-month service there, Blake compiles a sort of diary containing his thoughts, his missions, his interactions with superiors and his pilots. He reveals the constant bickering among "Company" (CIA), State Department bigwigs in Vientiane, Air Force biggerwigs of the Seventh Fleet, and with Hmong General Vang Pao on how to



conduct the air war. Despite hundreds of bombing sorties, the North Vietnamese capture, one by one, CIA's mountaintop bases on the Plain. At one point they laid an 11-day siege on Long Tieng itself. On land and on the air as a Raven pilot, Blake witnesses all these, recording in passionate detail the futility of his (and by extension the U.S.'s) efforts and ultimate defeat.

Why A Laos Setting.

Novels that frame their fiction within a period of recent history strive for a certain measure of authenticity - the "I-was-there-really" attention to detail - because readers are still around who were really also there. (Tell me, were you under the Cavite balcony when Aguinaldo raised the flag?) In the case of Blake's "The Laotian Fragments," the fragments consist of documents, strung together in chronological order, that are both real and made up. The U.S. Senate hearings and the Bangkok Post and the Washington Post newspaper reprints are authentic. We learn from the 1966 hearings that there were 125 airmen, secretly assigned as civil-

ians, to the U.S. Air Attache Office in Laos, 21 of them as Ravens (This was top secret before the Senate hearings). The reconstructed tape recordings, memos, transcripts, teletype messages contain military jargon that must have been based from the actual hard copies. The airborne intercom between a circling Raven and ground controllers are so real you feel you are there flying beside Blake, laying down target coordinates. That's because the author, pictured on the book jacket in full jet cockpit gear, was a combat pilot in Vietnam and was himself a Raven spotter in Laos.

Bottom line: A nonfiction 1995 CIA account we reviewed in the March 2005 issue ("Codename Mule" by James Parker, Jr.) described Long Tieng life by an operative manager on the ground. It was authentic as far as it went. Pratt's account went farther. Employing an unconventional story-telling device, his fiction broke the bonds of invention.

Memorable line: "Teletype message, AOC 20A (Long Tieng) to OUSAIRA (Office of US Air Attache) Vientiane, 5 January: There's a baci next week by the little guys (Hmong guerrillas) for one of the Company (CIA) men. Who pays for the scotch? Us (Ravens) or the Company? Reply soonest. It's a matter of supply as well as principle." (page 72-73)

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THESE

There is no shortage of memoirs, deeply personal accounts of life in Laos, written in English. We made brief mention in the March 2005 Mekong Circle newsletter of Fr. Matt Menger's anecdotes as a missionary in Laos from 1957 to 1967 in his "In The Valley of the Mekong." Four other volumes are recommended:

"In A Little Kingdom" by Perry Stieglitz (M.E. Sharpe, 1990) 280 pages (with photos). Written by a former Cultural Attache with the American Embassy in Vientiane, it collects amusing stories of social life in Vientiane of the 1960s and 1970s, his courtship and marriage to a daughter of the Prime Minister. His passionate defense of his father in law's neutralist policies against the latter's local and international enemies is noteworthy.

"Laos A Personal Portrait From The Mid-1970s" by Judy Austin Rantala (McFarland & Co., 1994). 254 pages. Life in Vientiane as a wife of a USAID education consultant from 1971 to 1975. Chapter 21 titled Last Days in Laos is particularly revealing on how Americans in their Km. 6 suburb survived the capture of Vientiane by the Pathet Lao and their mass evacuation.

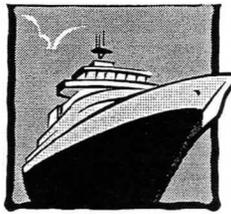
"Tragedy In Paradise: A Country Doctor At War In Laos" by Dr. Charles Weldon (Asia Books, Thailand, 1999). 284 pages (with photos). While the

accounts of Menger, Stieglitz and Rantala are largely in a light vein, Dr. Weldon's memoir is more history than autobiography. Much of the book is devoted to his work with the Hmong refugees from 1963 to 1974 and as head of the Public Health Division of USAID. There are two full chapters on Operation Brotherhood.

"Another Quiet American: Stories of Life In Laos" by Brett Dakin (Asia Books, Thailand, 2003) 278 pages. The newest and in some ways, the most absorbing of the memoirs because it replays what some of us his age (23 when he came to Vientiane), underwent ourselves in our own coming-of-age saga. A new graduate of Princeton University, Dakin volunteers in 1997 for low pay to work (with no relevant experience) for two years with the Lao Ministry of Tourism. His portraits of the people, Lao and Westerners, he works and lives with, are mostly warm hearted. His potshots are reserved for the highly paid Western consultants of international aid agencies. While some Western memoirists have a tendency to write with a patronizing, even arrogant tone about non-Western ways and culture, Dakin's insights are respectful. The last page of his book carries a message we Mekong Circle members are well aware of: "But I know that my time in Laos was far more than a two-year break. It remains an integral part of my life today, here and now, and the person I have become. The way I think about the world. And my place in it." All four books are available from www.amazon.com.

REUNION

August 11-14, 2006
Florida & the
Bahamas



UPDATE

CABIN RESERVATIONS STILL OPEN

By the time you get this issue of the Newsletter, the deadline extension (to Sept. 12 from August 30) for reserving your cabin has passed. But despair not. Our travel agent Tess Papa has advised us that you can still reserve your cabin by sending your \$100 (per person) deposit after Sept. 12. The discount Mekong Circle cabin rates, however, will no longer apply. As soon as she receives your deposit check, she will check the new prevailing rates with the cruise line Royal Caribbean International.

She will then call you back. You have two choices: a) if you are not happy with the new rates, she will return your deposit check; b) if you accept the new rates, authorize the reservation deposit. Make your decision soonest. Cabin space get booked fast.

ONE DAY SHORE EXCURSION

Our four-day cruise itinerary includes one day on land. We disembark on CocoCay in the Bahamas on August 13, 2006, a Sunday. It is a private 140-acre island playground reserved for cruise passengers of Royal Caribbean. It invested over \$20 million in aquatic facilities, nature trails, restaurants, bars, shops. For the physically challenged, there's a Castle Cove where one side is for rock climbing and the other for sliding; two 25-foot floating trampolines, "slidewalks," aqua logs. For those who do not want to be challenged at all, (that's most of us aged 60 and above) just sit back and sip a tropical drink at several shady sanctuaries. Or build up your abdominal muscles (fat?) from a beach barbecue at no extra cost. Or tan them by floating on a foam mattress on the beach. For more activities on the island - parasailing, scuba diving, snorkeling, kayaking - take a look in www.destinations.com/royal_caribbean.

CRUISING AND HURRICANES

Hurricane Katrina's wallop at New Orleans has understandably made us edgy about cruising during hurricane season. It's a long 11 months away to our reunion, yet should we worry? "The reality is that statistically speaking the chances that your particular voyage is going to be affected by a hurricane are very slim," says the website (www.cruisecritic.com) of the Independent Traveler. "Cruise lines have been operating in the Caribbean for years," it adds "and have, by virtue of experience, specific hurricane/tropical storm emergency response plans in effect. These

cover everything from designating a bridge officer as the weather monitor during the season to outfitting ships with state-of-the-art satellites. Another independent cruise website www.cruisereview.com says that "re-routing an itinerary to escape a hurricane or tropical storm is common. Cruise ships can outrun a storm as a storm moves at about 8-10 knots while a cruise ship can reach speeds of up to 22 knots."

To get updates of weather conditions as our sailing time nears, you can check the National Hurricane Center of the National Weather Service (www.nhc.noaa.gov). Tony Liwag is not a bit concerned. For the last two years, he has been building at his backyard in Cincinnati, Ohio, all by himself, a sailboat the size of a Royal Caribbean cabin bed (okay, maybe a foot longer). He never sailed before and he does not know how to swim. He and wife Gina will go on the cruise (but he will not check in the sailboat).

NEW TO CRUISING ?

The two cruise websites above as well as www.royal-caribbean.com carry lots of advice on what to expect on a cruise. Moreover, each Mekong Circle passenger will receive a ticket booklet in sufficient time which has all of the information you'll need. Linda Mendoza does not have to worry about seasickness (she got it during the yacht trip around Manhattan at the 2002 New York reunion). Cruise ships carry so many types of anti-nausea medication, it's overkill (oops wrong word). Anyway, those giant ship stabilizers fins - yachts don't have them --can tame those rough waves.

MORE LOGISTICS

Hotel : The Florida Organizing Committee is scouting for a hotel convenient to all points for incoming reunion participants. Ideally it will be close to the nearest airport (Orlando International) and our embarkation site (Port Canaveral). Those who want to come a few days early to savor local tourist attractions (Kennedy Space Center, the Everglades, Disneyworld), would want the hotel not too far from these sites. The Committee has pinpointed a suitable hotel and will negotiate rates. It is also being considered as the site for the reception before we board the ship.

Transportation: Members will arrange for their own travel to the

Florida hotel. The Committee will provide full information on local transportation from airports to the hotel and from the hotel to Port Canaveral. Those driving can access Mapquest and other websites for travel directions.

Program : Details will be announced.

Members Who Have Reserved Cabins

(as of August 30, 2005)

Abad, Angelita	Keomahathai, Adul	Reyes/Melanie
Abad, Gilbert	Keomahathai, Phikoun	Salarda, Patricio
Aberin, Evangelina	Kittisack/ Bobby	Sanguansack, Mani
Aguilos, Maria	Kittisack/ Boulaphanh	Sareerat, Dallas
Alcudio, Ma: Luz	Kittisack/ Doungchanh	Sareerat, Dillon
Alcudio, Quentin	Kosila, Chester	Sareerat, Simmaly
Bacordo, Joy	Kosila, Noi	Sareerat, Vanavit
Bacordo, Raul	Ladara, Khamsaou	Sayaphone, Boone
Bacordo, Rinaldo	Ladara, Rath	Sayasan, Phetje
Bacordo/Erika	Lapitan, Sounthaly	Saythong/Dustin
Barcelona, Jose	Liwag/Antonio	Saythong/Lisa
Barcelona, Josefina	Liwag/Virginia	Saythongkham, Kayla
Barsales/Pete	Luangrath, Cindy	Saythongkham, Moe
Bouthavong/Bounoum	Luna, Jose	Sazon, Antonio
Bouthavong/Inpanh	Luna, Lina	Sazon, Antonio Jr.
Brenzikofer, Lamphone	Mak, Cynthia	Sazon, Corazon.
Cage, David Jr.	Malolos, Amparo	Sermpongpan, Sumitra
Cage, Thongkhoun	Marquez, Anita	Sheridan, Gindala A.
Casher, Fe	Marquez, Brian	Sihapanya, May
Chinyavong, Anongsinh	Marquez, Shelley	Sihapanya, Nhot
Chinyavong, Chanthone	Marquez, Vicente	Siharath/Bouadeng
Chomthipe, Chuang	Matila, Racquel	Siharath/Khamsy
Chomthipe, Sameu	Mekong Group	Sisouphone, Phounsouk
Chomthipe-Sheridan, Lamphone	Mendoza, Alfredo	Sithisaiya, Khampheng
Chookitngam, Malee	Mistri, Khammone	Sithisaiya, Smith
Ciborsky, Rebecca	Mistri, Thongsai	Sivongxay, Chantha
Custodio, Apolinario	Naranjo/Josefa	Sivongxay, Sivily
Datu, Angelito	Naranjo/Jovito	Tapia, Pedro Jr.
Datu, Cecilia	Orense, Bouchouey	Tapia, Josephine
Datu, Estelita	Pablo, Josefina	Thongma, Phaiboon
Datu, Orlando	Pacson, Remedio	Thongma, Vanessa
Foster, Esperanza	Pacson, Rosario	Valenzuela, Amelia
Frias, Anecia	Padayao, Fidel	Valenzuela, Nestor
Fuentecilla, Florida	Padayao, Wilma	Van Lee, Jessica
Fuentecilla, Jose	Papa/Teresita	Van Lee, Justin
Gonzalez, Felicidad	Pathammaboun, Sivay	Virabong, Prakiane
Gonzalez, Pedro	Pathammaboun, Viengsay	Virabong, Siphanon
Guevara, Eva	Phengphong, Phoukham	Volaraph, Omsin
Guevara, Felicitas	Puangmaly, Chantalom	Volaraph, Oudone
Guevara/Joe	Puangmaly, Phoxay	Volaraph, Soonpree
Hefferon, Penny	Ramos, Jesus	Vongphakdy, Kim
Hefferon, Rosemarie	Ramos, Nemia	Vongphakdy, Tayemphanh
Hefferon, Kevin	Ramos, Rustico	Vongphakdy, Thongkhiane
Hillmeyer/Patricia	Reyes, Gloria	Vongphrachanh/Noun
Hillmeyer/Ryan	Reyes, Emil	Voungsaly/Soutsada
Hillmeyer/Aidan	Reyes/Eriberto D.	
Hillmeyer/Michelle		
Hillmeyer/Patrick A.		
Hillmeyer/Patrick R.		

MEKONG CIRCLE
145-60 HELMA AVENUE
OHIO 45013 USA