

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

MAY 2007

145-60 Helma Avenue, Hamilton, Ohio 45013 USA

www.mekongcircle.org

LAOS

Our
2008
Reunion
will be
in
Manila,
The
Philippines
on
Nov.
7, 8 & 9.
Hold
these
dates!

Welcome to the 16th issue of our Newsletter !

Depression and at times desperation strikes when our Mekong Circle Newsletter file folder lies on our desk, as slim as our physique. You open it, and there's hardly anything there to write about for the next issue (due a week ago). Past pleas for material fall mostly on deaf ears. (But oddly enough, you have been generous in donating cash to keep it going). Imagine therefore our unbounded joy when a fat package arrives from Oklahoma, mailed by Eve Guevara, who was visiting there her sister Nemia Altura-Ramos. There were news clippings, memos, letters, bylaws, monthly reports, incorporation papers, surveys, contracts, protocols, a diary. They spanned the years 1959 to 1966. In this issue we reprint some of them.



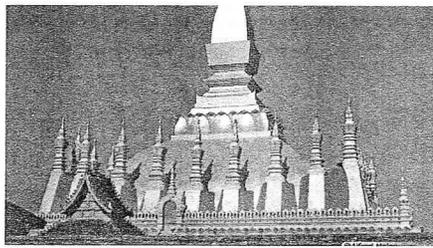
We had asked our colleague Larry Woodson who produces his newsletter "Khao Lao" how he manages to receive chock-full of news everytime from former USAID-Laos and International Voluntary Service members. He replied: "One thing is I only publish once a year. Second, I tell everyone on the list of 330 'Old Lao Hands' that I will not contact them for news. It is up to them ! The newsletter comes out the first Saturday of February. News should arrive prior to January 1st. Thus a lot of Christmas cards with the news. Finally it is strictly by voluntary donation. Some send one dollar and a few send \$100. I never ask for more or less. And for the final, final comment. When the money stops coming, the Khao Lao dies a peaceful death. Since no new 'Old Lao Hands' are generated, 'an extinct bird lays no eggs.' May the last person leaving the room please shut off the light."



The dates you see on the left are "tentative", our Philippine chapter colleagues advise us. But the month is definite. When we visited them February 2007 in Manila as they outlined reunion plans (see photo below), there was talk of a three-day event that would include a dinner and cultural program at a metro Manila hotel, and an out-of-town excursion to a historical site. Plus a side trip to Laos on the way back to North America. Philippine hospitality is legendary. So get set for yet another outstanding reunion.



At a meeting February 2, 2007 in Manila of Mekong Circle Philippines, from left Pete Fuentesilla (visiting from the USA), Ben Revilla, Jovit Revilla, Frisco San Juan, and Dom Menguito.



NEW AMBASSADORS APPOINTED

His Excellency **Phiane Philakone**, who was Laos Ambassador to the Philippines for five years, has been reassigned to the USA in February 2007. During his term in Manila, he had attended an annual reunion of our Mekong Philippines chapter. In April 2002 he helped organize the state visit



Ambassador Philakone bidding farewell to President Arroyo

to the Philippines of then Lao Prime Minister **Bounhang Vorachit**. Replacing him in Manila in April 2007 is H.E. **Leuan Sombounkhan** who had served in Singapore and was chief of mission in Indonesia from 2001 to 2006. A note for our 2008 reunion: Manila and Vientiane had agreed that tourist visa fees are waived for citizens of both countries. Mekong Philippine members with ordinary passports has one more benefit to take advantage of when we plan a side trip to Laos during our November 2008 reunion.

STOP CORRUPTION DAY

During the first week of December 2006, the government Lao News Agency reported that 500 participants attended International Anti-Corruption Day in Vientiane. Organized by the government and the United Nations Development Program, the event could be characterized as yet another "Hurray, Let's Celebrate _____ Day" (fill in the blanks) that the UN, it seems, has checked off every day of the calendar. But we thought the Vientiane event was unexpectedly eyebrow-raising. The UNDP resident representative took the occasion to remark that the Lao government was among the most corrupt in the world. To say so in private was okay, because everybody in and out of Laos says so. But to announce it openly to the faces of some of the highest ranking government officials present was quite another. To be sure, the UN rep was quoting from the 2006 ranking of the Transparency International. Its annual poll draws on "multiple expert ... perception of public sector corruption in 163 countries." Laos ranked 111 from the bottom, in equal standing with nine other countries. (The Philippines, together with 7 others, scored worse, at 121st place). That states like Laos (who with North Korea, China, Vietnam, and Cuba are among the world's only other remaining single-party states) suffer from endemic government corruption is not news. But they would rather keep it quiet. So why did Laos herald what's not news on their own news agency? Perhaps the open admission was a message to the party members attending the anti-corruption event. They derive 80 percent of their budget from foreign aid-giving agencies. These have called on the government "to take leadership in the financial management improvement process." Translation: stop the corruption already or they'll

stop the aid altogether.

SOCCER: LAOS VS THE PHILIPPINES

This is old sports news but worth noting. The two teams took on each other November 12, 2006 at qualifying matches held in Bacolod City, Iloilo province in the Philippines during the 6th ASEAN Cup Football Championship. This biennial regional version (started in 1996) of the World Cup is a big deal in Asia even though not one of the regional teams qualified for the 36 spots at the cup's quadrennial tournament. The latest ranking of the International Football Federation has Laos in 172nd place and the Philippines at 191st. The Philippines edged out Laos in their November 12 match. There is another no-hands-only feet-and-head sport the Filipinos and the Lao excel and that they should play with each other – the "sipa" in Tagalog, or "takor" in Lao.

RULES FOR THOSE NOT TOILET-TRAINED

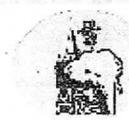
During the 17 years (1958 to 1975) that OB maintained two residences in Vientiane's That Luang district, some 411 volunteers spent part of their two-year (or longer) tenure there. Their average age was 30. And for most, it was their first overseas assignment. No longer raging with hormonal urges, some inclinations still needed to be reined in as these house rules reveal from our undated archives:

"Conduct Off The Job

1. Frequent nightclubbing. Nightclubbing on ordinary days will not be allowed except on special occasions for which the prior approval of the Team Director or Project Manager is to be obtained and provided that the personnel concerned return to their quarters no later than 12 midnight. It may be allowed only on Saturdays, Sundays, holidays and night preceding these days provided they return to OB quarters at designated curfew hours.
2. Gambling, betting or participating in other games of chance whether in the OB compound or elsewhere.
3. Excessive drinking of intoxicating liquor.
4. Going to places of ill-repute or associating or fraternizing with persons of questionable reputation.
5. Discussing the political situation of the host country lest we be exposed to severe criticism.
6. Indiscriminate and excessive borrowing of cash and/or use of credit in stores. We have to protect the credit reputation of our organization and personnel.
7. Notorious misconduct such as brawling, boisterous behavior or creating disturbances that might result in personal resentments and mutual dislikes.
8. Making false or malicious statements against other workers, supervisors, or other officials with intent to harm or destroy reputation, authority or official standing."

A section from Rules & Regulations:

2. Use the toilet properly.
3. Siesta time: 12:30 pm to 1:45 pm



MEKONG PHILIPPINES IS OFFICIAL !

Three sets of officers have been named – 15 incorporators for their Securities & Exchange Commission listing; six chapter officers and six Board members. The SEC incorporators are **Frisco San Juan, Domeng Menguito, Sonia Ballo, Jovy Revilla, Ben Revilla, Toti de la Paz, Jun Belicena, Fred Reyes, Bing Bingcang, Ely Nadal, Fred Mendoza, Mike Palacpac, Eve Guevara, Ruben Layug** and **Johnny Asuncion**. The association was formally incorporated on April 4, 2007.

Chapter officers are: **Frisco San Juan** (Chairman), **Domeng Menguito** (Vice Chairman), **Sonia Ballo** (Secretary); **Toti de la Paz** (Treasurer); **Belen Belicena** (Assistant Secretary); **Jovit Revilla** (Assistant Treasurer). Board Trustees: **Frisco San Juan, Domeng Menguito, Sonia Ballo, Toti de la Paz, Ben Revilla, Bing Bingcang, Jun Belicena**.

All international members are invited to their annual get-together on November 10, 2007 at the residence of Jovit and Ben Revilla in Los Banos, Laguna. Contact: email benjovrev@yahoo.com. Tel. 011 63 49 536 1290. Tentative dates for our 2008 international reunion are Nov. 7, 8 and 9 (Friday to Sunday). With a full force of the chapter's leaders in place, we shall soon be hearing from them about the arrangements for our 7th reunion in Manila. They welcome any suggestions from all of us to make this event, the first reunion across the Pacific Ocean.

CONGRATULATIONS

To **Jovy Revilla**, named to the Hall of Fame at the Mary Johnston College of Nursing in Tondo, Manila on February 13, 2007 in recognition of her many awards in nursing received over the last 50 years; the college celebrated its 100th year during the ceremony.

To **Menchu Domingo Kirk**, who earned her Master of Science in British Social Anthropology and Development in December 2006 from the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is back in Berkeley, California working on her book "Laos 1965 Feminist Consciousness and Social Critique" and at the same time teaching at the San Francisco University School District.

84th birthday greetings to **Dr. Alex del Carmen** who first arrived in Laos in 1958 and was assigned to Nam Bac a remote town in Luang Prabang. Visiting the team, the late **George Alba**, a former OB Assistant Project Manager, watched "resourceful Alex perform surgery on a dining table...for an OR lamp, he had salvaged the headlight of a C-47 that had crashed at the end of the runway...rigged it to a 17-volt battery....made a nice reading lamp too." Immigrating to the USA in 1975, Alex now lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee and since retiring in 1995 now helps his wife Lynne manage their Asian goods store. They have 12 grandchildren.

PLANT POWER IN NUEVA ECIIJA

Mel Granada, former OB project manager, emailed us his business plan for developing a 456-hectare land in the village of Aulo, Palayan City, Nueva Ecija, the Philippines, into a plantation. At the ripe age of 70, he says, "I am doing my bit to create a Green Philippines," in this case by growing a plant called jatropha. The seeds of this plant yields more than four times as much fuel per hectare as soybean, and more than ten times that of corn. A hectare of jatropha produces 1,892 liters of biodiesel fuel. Currently jatropha biofuel is supplementing fossil fuel in oil-poor third world countries. Steeped in OB ideology (from his days in Laos and Vietnam), Mel sees the Hacienda Verde de Aulo as the core of a livelihood project that will sprout a farmer's con-

sumer cooperative, a microfinance lending bank, and a health center. To know more, contact him at melgranada@hotmail.com.



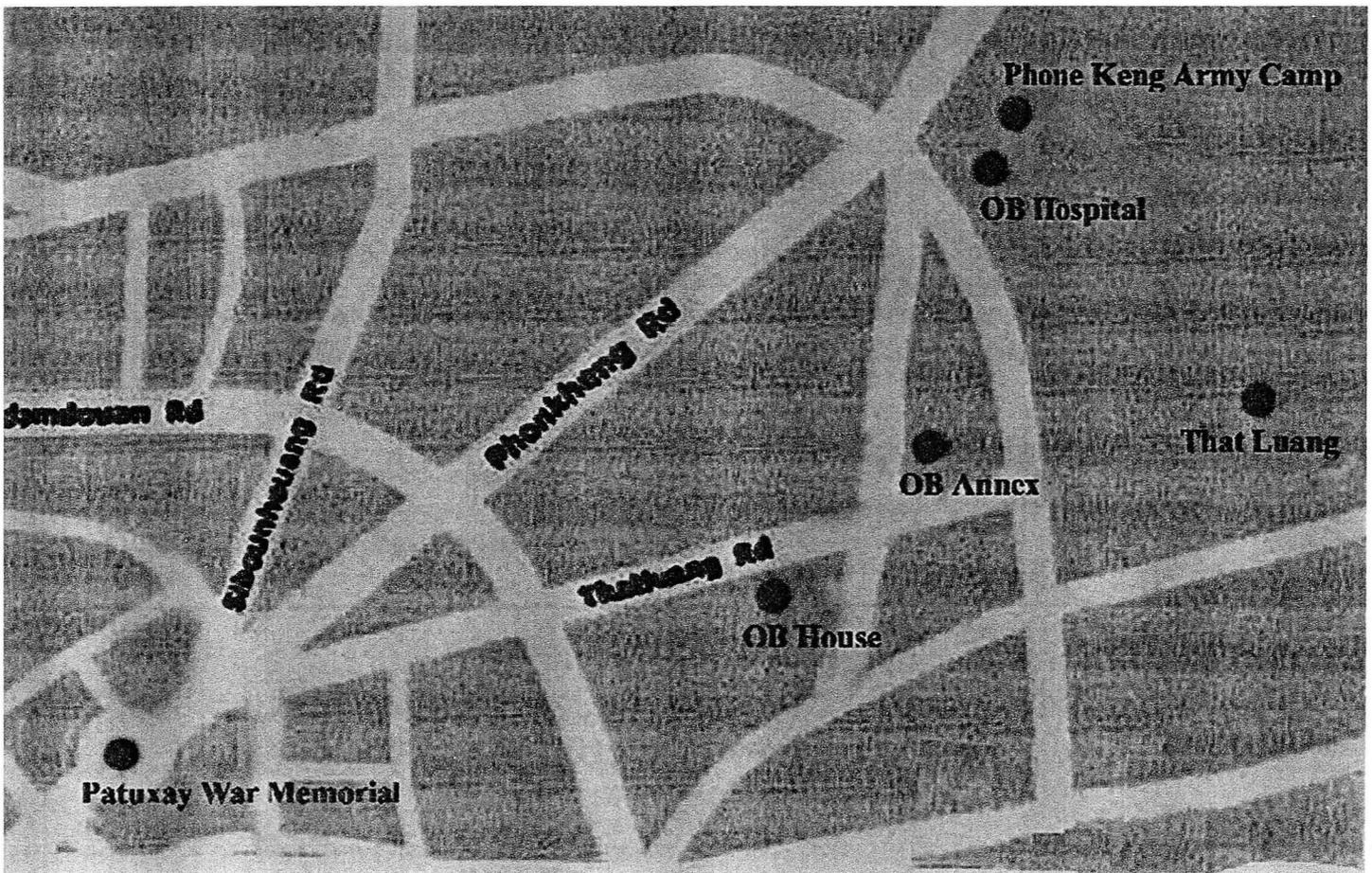
MEET OUR PHILIPPINE COLLEAGUES

Following their October 28, 2006 annual reunion in Los Banos, Laguna, here are our members who will be putting together our 7th international reunion in Manila in 2008. First row, left to right: **Sonny Caro, Pete Lagleva, Tony Victa, Carolyn Rentoria, Federico Rentoria, Johnny Asuncion, Ruel Guevara**. Second row, sitting: **Antonia Rana, Nitz Bingcang, Jovit Revilla, Frisco San Juan, Domeng Menguito, Deo Caro, Mel Granada, Fruto Bingcang, Ben Revilla**. Back, standing: **Eve Guevara, Mely Cuyno, Yette Layug, Ely Nadal, Hermie Nadal, Violy Evangelista, Puring de Jesus** (visiting from the USA), **Sonia Ballo, Kasy Lagleva, Ley de la Paz, Toti de la Paz, Fred Reyes, Baby Asuncion**.



MEET OUR SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA COLLEAGUES

The photo above did not make it to the February 2007 issue of our Newsletter where we announced that the chapter named their new officers. (But we posted the photo on our website). Here shown meeting January 13, 2007 at the residence of Jun Ilustrisimo in Anaheim, California, are: sitting, left to right **Fidel Padayao** (chapter and international president); **Tacing Atienza** (secretary); **Cecile Datu** (treasurer); **Pol Custodio, Joe Barcelona**. Standing: **Jun Ilustrisimo, Claire Ilustrisimo, Tony Atienza, Carning Aguilar, Adoring Gomez, Wilma Padayao, Jojo Barcelona**. Back row: **Manding Datu, Lou Ilustrisimo, Lito Gomez**.



The Battle of Vientiane

By the mid-1960s, the Filipino community in Laos had reached a peak. A large part of the estimated 900 technicians lived and worked in the valley towns along the Mekong nominally under the control of the Royal Lao Government. The battles that pitted the various combatants – RLG, Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, American, Hmong and Thai forces – raged mostly in the northern provinces and the southern byways of the Ho Chi Minh trail. For most of the 1960s and early 1970s, the Laos war was a very distant thunder. We remained insulated from the carnage – no suicide bombers, no street fighting, no urban terror. (It was estimated that during the war years, 200,000 Lao lost their lives). Vientiane, the capital, a large town of about 60,000 residents where most of us lived, was a safe cocoon. A leisurely style of life prevailed.

On February 3, 1965, the easygoing calm was shattered. A split

between RLG generals broke into the open. One side led by General Phoumi Nosavan, commanding the city's police forces wearing yellow neckerchiefs, squared off against General Kouprashith Abhay, the regional Army commander whose troops sported blue neckerchiefs. Each set up defensive barricades across the city. One of the army commander's holding position is a sprawling camp at the back of the OB Vientiane Hospital. It became a primary artillery and mortar target of the opposing force. Indeed, the junction of That Luang road and Phone Keng, where the OB House and the OB Annex were located, emerged as a key battlefield. Soldiers clustered on the corners and among the buildings in the area, including the OB Annex.

For the first time, OB Vientiane personnel experienced the war at its very doorsteps. We have two eyewitness accounts. One is a diary by **Leo Benesa** as well as a description by **Pete Fuentesilla**. Here are excerpts:

Wednesday, 3 February 1965

● At this writing, it is 3:30 in the afternoon, so the battle is roughly three hours old. Shells exploded and bursts of gunfire are still going on. This is being written here in the OB Administration Building on Phone Keng road. I myself was at the OB House when it all started, just after lunch about 12:30. The whole lot of us who were there during the artillery and mortar barrage sought shelter in the room of **Boni Gillego**.

● **Gus Panajon** had come from the hospital driving the ambulance to pick up nurses **Puring Dayawon**, **Vicky Labayen** and medical records librarian **Menchu Domingo** from the OB Annex around which were deployed soldiers with yellow scarves

● The target of the shells near the house was the ordnance depot at Phone Xayu army camp 500 or so yards away from the That Luang intersection towards the war memorial. It was hit several times, judging from the billowing smoke. The

guns must have been fired from the Army Phone Keng army camp, barely behind the hospital.

● **Vitoy Naranjo** had just come in right now, saying a shell hit his front fence and that pieces of shrapnel tore into some parts of the house. The 30 Filipino personnel were in two groups, one to stay in the hospital, the other in the house. The House group: **Vitoy** and wife **Joji**, together with their three kids; **Semie Azcarraga**, **Oro Zuniga**, **Manding Reyes**, **Philip** and **Jessie Cruz**, **Puring Roque**, **Fe Siguenza**, **Ernie** and **Ofie de los**

Reyes (who were honeymooning from Attopeu), **Cesar Mendoza**, **Fred "Tunku" Navera**, **Red del Rosario**, **Manding Sabado**, **Oscar San Pedro**, **Nita Cordero**, **Josie Flores**, **Sonia Morales**, **Edong Pabustan**, **Danny Torres**, **Serge Lapitan**, **Joe Barcelona**, **Leo Benesa**, **Wilma Padayao** and **boy Roger** and **Leila Lareza**.

- The hospital group: **Gani Bautista**, **Primo Guevara**, **Vic Wycoco**, **Pete Palu-ay**, **Lina Tapiador**, **Baby Alon**, **Toots Calderon**, **Cecile Datu**, **Violy Labayen**, **Bolet Agustin**, **Lorna Gavero**, **Mario Dulyunan**, **Puring Dayawon**, **Cora Portugal**, **Edith Habacon**, **Menchu Domingo**, **Deo Caro** and wife, **Tony Sazon**, **Leony Arca**, **Lory Pesino**, **Gerry Dacanay**, **Gus Panajon**, **Pete Fuentecilla** and **Romy Maypa**.

- The road between the House and the Hospital is no-man's land. But our vehicles, flying Red Cross flags quickly printed by artists **Leila Lareza** and **Leony Arca**, together with their trainees, ply this road back and forth.

- The yellow scarves attacked Phone Keng last night and in the process set fire to Phoumi's villa and drove the blue scarves out of the area.

Thursday, 4 February 1965

- At the hospital, the night began with a dinner of rice and Spam eaten inside a dim kitchen. Dr. **Primo Guevara** had ordered most of the lights of the hospital facing the Phone Keng camp turned off. The corridor floors were crammed with prostrate patients and watchers in the wards. Patients flung their mattresses under their beds.

- Nurses **Romy Agbayani** and **Rustico Ramos** who was sick of malaria, the other of a viral infection, had built themselves some sort of bomb shelter with extra mattresses inside Room 2. As gunfire began bursting, they hastily jumped down and crawled under their beds. Four patients and their watchers entered their room and flung themselves on the floor.

- Because the hospital was nearest the Phone Keng camp, it was also the best vantage point to watch the battle. From atop a steep water tower, you could see where the shells hit the camp (a **WHAM!**) then dust and gray smoke all at once. Around the That Luang grounds, residents raced into the villages behind their great shrine, followed by hordes of dogs which ran erratically until finally deciding to follow the humans.

- By 7:30, the sounds took on a new intensity.

Shell fire pounded more incessantly on the camp, each explosion reverberating inside the hospital walls. Hospital occupants crouch because they could hear the whistle of the shells above the roofs before hitting their targets.

- The shell barrage was followed by the savage stutter of all sorts of guns, of varying tempo, sound and echo. **Primo Guevara**, reporting by walkie-talkie to Vito at the Main House said: "It's so noisy as New Year's eve here." From the second floor of the Administration Building, one could see the fiery path of tracer bullets, and the flames of buildings blazing (Phoumi's house and that of an office within Silver City and 2 buildings inside Phone Keng). Gunfire continued till 9:10 pm, then slowly withdrew into the distance.

- Of the 14 brought in so far (soldiers and civilians) one soldier has died. (*Editor's note: Time magazine reported on Feb. 12, 1965 that 60 died during the fighting, most of them civilians*).

- One of the glass panes in the Operating Room was shattered by the force of shell explosions in Phone Keng. All the glass panes were cracked and shattered in the Dental Clinic.

- There are some bullet holes in the Nursing Office, one side of which also received the brunt of a mortar shell explosion a meter or two away.

- An interesting visitor to the hospital this morning was **Major Somchit**, an OB friend. He had gone to the hospital for treatment of red eyes ("I have not slept for four nights" he said. He is an old friend of the OB Paksong people. What was a little macabre was that Somchit was the artillery officer directing the artillery traffic yesterday and last night against the adjoining Phone Keng area.

"You were just shelling and shelling," Director of Nursing **Toots Calderon** who knew the Major in Paksong, sort of chided him, probably thinking of the last powerful explosion. "Yes, I was a little worried I might hit the hospital. But I saw to it that all the shells fell beyond," he said. His 105 howitzers were firing from That Khao, some kilometers away towards the Mekong.

Friday, 5 February 1965

- A number of local help (janitors, cooks and carpenters) have not returned so far, so that the Filipinos have been organized into work details scrubbing hospital floors, helping in the kitchen, in the house and hospital, washing dishes, cleaning garbage cans and cuspidors, and so on. **Edith Habacon** is in charge of the house kitchen with the help of **Puring Roque** and male practical student nurses, who all stuck with us during the crisis, while most of the female practical student nurses who have relatives in Vientiane left.

- It started to rain, not just a drizzle but rain about 3 this morning, after so many dry weeks and bright skies so that the morning is clear and rainwashed. The soldiers are still deployed about the wat beside the OB Annex when we went over to look the place up. Breakfast was boiled eggs, coffee and dried fish, the "dilis" type. Both Lao and Filipino personnel shared these, for the kitchen help had not come back to cook their separate dishes.

- Vito went over to USAID to talk to Dr. **Russell Andrus**, Project Advisor for OB. Dr. Andrus was very glad to know that OB had stuck to its post like a true field hospital. In fact, he was quite proud, "You are doing fine where you are," he said when Vito asked if there were any plans for evacuation. Because if there were, OB would have asked to stay because of the patients in the hospital. All this was done in the teeth of a threat



A Lao soldier guards a roadside checkpoint in That Luang.

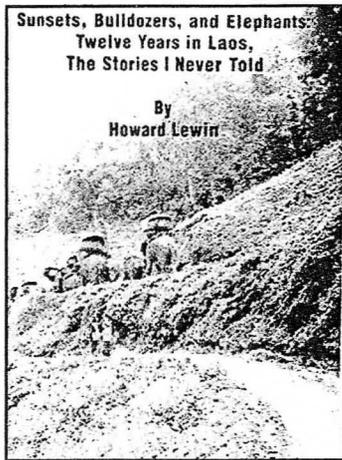
of a counterattack by the blue scarves who have retreated to some 20 kms away. If they do, it will have to be through Phone Keng which is the only approach to the city in this part of town.

- Lunch period. The expected counterblow did not materialize so that to all appearances the battle of Phone Keng, of which we were more than grandstand spectators, is over.

SUGGESTED READINGS

“Sunsets, Bulldozers, and Elephants: Twelve Years in Laos, The Stories I Never Told,”

by Howard Lewin, a young American engineer wrote to answer that BIG question that he posed to himself: “How did I get here and what am I doing in this place.” In 406 pages, he proceeds to



give us some answers. In a preface to his book about his years (1963 to 1975) with International Voluntary Services and with the US Agency For International Development, he writes: “This is the story of my experiences, what I did, and what I accomplished. It is the story of how I went from a master’s degree in history to a reasonably competent but not so civil engineer. It is also a story about men and women who performed daring deeds, and about people who pushed to the limits their physical, mental and survival instincts. It is about people who

served their country with great distinction. Let there be no mistake on this, most of the people who went to Laos were dedicated, hardworking, intelligent people. Anyone who lived and worked in rural Laos during this time has a similar story to tell. In a way this is their story too.”

Mostly though, it is Howard’s adventures building roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and the like – the badly needed infrastructure of a country at a time when it was being fractured by decades of war. Howard’s job took him all over the kingdom, supervising one building project after another over an extended period. Hence he has lots of stories to tell (see excerpt below). And because they took place at a time and a place that we shared during part of our lives, they stir memories of our own vivid sunsets and emotional bulldozers. Included are 105 pages of photos. To get a copy send a \$24.95 check to Howard “Howie” Lewin at 3928 West 139 St., Hawthorne, California 90250. Tel. 310 679 2485.

(Howie and Gus agree to help a villager in Muong Kha, Borikhanh province, build his house. Excerpt):

“What Gus and I were unprepared for in this housing construction was that each post put in place required a greeting to the new house spirit, and each post had a spirit, ergo, each post required one shot of laolao for everybody. There were 16 posts in this house !

After 16 shots of laolao, we had the floor up, but not the rafters and cross beams. Then to our chagrin, we discovered that each rafter had a spirit as well. The last thing I remember, I was hanging by one arm from one of the rafters, reaching down for some thatch so I could pass it up to the guy above me. And that’s all I remember. I was out cold for two days. Apparently I passed out, lost my grip, and fortunately fell in some bamboo so I didn’t hurt myself. I was stoned ! They carried me to the IVS house and to bed. When I woke up two days later, I wish I hadn’t. I had a headache like you would not believe and I don’t usually get headaches. I was sick. Oh, was I sick.

All of the villagers (who help build the house) went through this laolao drinking exercise with apparently no physical harm. I don’t know how. Maybe they are used to the stuff. I just don’t know. All I know is that I was in deep shimskey.

In his first trip outside Vientiane upon arrival in Laos, Howie

attended a party at OB Sayaboury, which he describes as “a stalwart band of Filipino doctors and nurses. This organization provided the only modern medical facility in the whole of Sayaboury province as well as in many other provinces throughout the country.”

“**Juth Pakai**” translated as “new thought” or “new thinking” is distinguished in many ways: it is the first bilingual academic journal ; it is regularly published (unlike some Lao general-interest association English language magazines that make an impressive first issue splash, then sink after the third or fourth issue); it is freely downloadable in English or Lao from the internet. It was launched in February 2004 by the Vientiane office of the United Nations Development Program. All eight issues so far can be read at www.undplao.org.

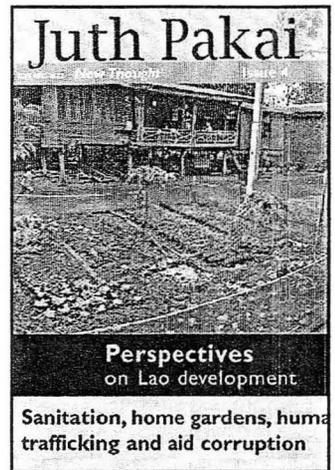
Targetted at “national and international development practitioners, government officials, staff from bilateral and multilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGO), journalists, academics, researchers,” its editors seek written contributions from “anyone with a keen interest in Laos.”

Because of this reader diversity, the features avoid the dense, jargonese of technical journals. For a sample, read the feature on aid corruption in the 4th issue. Mekong Circle members worked for NGOs some three decades ago. The feature describes some startling changes today and brings to mind that “the more things change, the more things stay the same.”

“**Filipinos in Laos**” and “**Goodbye, Vientiane**” – yes, we’ll keep our association books in your radar screens. At the 2nd International Conference of Lao Studies, May 3 – 6, 2007 at the Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, we paid \$65 to rent a table at the exhibitor’s hall. There we displayed copies of both our books. As you can imagine, the flocks of people (of the kind Juth Pakai tries to reach), who stopped by had that look in their faces that said: “what, what, Filipinos in Laos?”. When? Where? Why? How? Who? The few copies we brought as display samples were eagerly bought, especially after the presentations that the authors (see next page) gave together in one session. No laolao at the receptions, Howie. But the sight, during the dinner-cultural program, of a dozen Lao women, each dressed in the dazzling colors of Lao ethnic tribes, is as stunning as the first jigger shot of shimskey.

Have you ordered your copy yet of “Filipinos in Laos”? It was issued in 2004. To order, contact Long Dash Books (49 Orchard St. Hackensack, New Jersey 07601 USA. Tel. 201 342 1000; email: longdash@gmail.com). It has been updated (first printing contained some errors) and the photos enlarged.

“Goodbye Vientiane -- Untold Stories of Filipinos in Laos” was published in 2005. To order, contact Philippine American Writers and Artists Inc. P.O. Box 31928, San Francisco, California 94131 USA; email: pawa@pawainc.com). Or contact Penny at 415 584 3962. There is a section in the book that illustrates in tabular chart all the marriages between and among Mekong Circle members of OB, Air America, CASI, USAID and Eccoil. In all 102 couples. Ah, those were the days when our hormones were raging, our average age was 30, and field team life was so lonely...or cozy.



Supporting The Secret War by William Leary, a professor of history at Georgia University. Accounts of the Laos air war, from 1962 to 1975, report that by the mid-1960s, the combined aircraft inventory of Air America, Bird & Son, and Continental Air Services exceeded the number flown by any other regularly scheduled airline in Asia. These Laos-based planes, unlike the combat planes that flew out of Thailand on sorties into Lao airspace, flew supply and transport missions. Key to their maintenance were Filipino aircraft technicians. At the website of veterans of Air America, some 39 books about their exploits are listed. And hardly any mention the Filipinos. (We compiled our own short, very short for lack of records, history of Mekong Circle employees of these airlines that appeared in the April 2004 issue of our Newsletter).

For a concise history of Air America, Leary takes us through its beginnings in 1950 to June 3, 1974 when the last Air America plane flew out of Laos and "the company closed its doors on June 30, 1976." Only 14 pages long when printed single-spaced from the web, his history of the legendary airline is also an excellent overview of Laos political and military events of that period. Leary's account first appeared in "Studies in

Intelligence" Winter 1999-2000 issue and can be read online at www.cia.gov/csi/studies/winter99-00/art7.html

Termination Report USAID Laos 1954 -1975 is a 366-page, single-spaced typewritten history of its \$896 million economic program. There were an estimated 175 Filipinos who were employed by the program in Laos. It is an exhaustive, meticulous record, crammed with numbers and acronyms, yet surprisingly a very readable history. Each of the aid programs -- education, agriculture, refugee relief, public works, public health (including OB) -- is analyzed. It can be compared to a company annual report to its shareholders (the taxpayers) and as such it presents a balance sheet. The bottom line? The company tried mightily to do good but there were too many bad things in the way. For one thing, the air war against the North Vietnamese funneling through Laos, took precedence over everything.

The report can be ordered from Development Experience Clearinghouse, 8403 Colesville Road, Suite 210, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910 USA. Ask for document PN-AAX-021. Price: \$54.66 (includes shipping and handling).

NOTES FROM A LAOS CONFERENCE IN ARIZONA

Mekong Circle took advantage of that rare opportunity to spotlight our existence to an audience focused on Lao affairs. The occasion was the Second International Conference on Lao Studies held May 3 to 6, 2007 at the campus of Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, a suburb of the state capital Phoenix.

■ The international gathering of 225 participants, half of whom were Lao, were treated to more than 100 presentations. There was a topic to meet anybody's deepest interest in Laos, from textile design and dam building to Hmong culture and unexploded ordnance (did you know that there were more bombs dropped on Laos during the years 1964 to 1973 by the USA than were dropped on Germany and Japan combined during World War Two? Ten to 30 percent did not explode. When a farmer's plow jarred them or children think the tennis ball-sized cluster bombs were playthings, they detonate. More than 50,000 have been killed and as many maimed since 1975.

■ At the exhibitor hall where U.S.-based Lao associations and vendors offered brochures, CDs, books, sinhs, leaflets, Mekong Circle displayed copies of our "Filipinos in Laos" and "Goodbye Vientiane" on our exhibitor table. Brochures about the books and our association were spread out for the taking. "Oh, OB ! OB!" two Lao women excitedly squealed after scanning the books. Said one: "I am an OB baby, born in one of your hospitals. Normally our mothers gave birth at home. But since your hospital came to town, they went to OB."

■ Lao conference participants of a certain age (perhaps 60 and above) instantly knew our OB affiliation. Others of another generation (like squealing young women who left Laos when they were toddlers) hardly know much about us. "Ohbee who?" said their puzzled looks.

■ Penny Flores and Pete Fuentesilla were featured speakers at one pre

sentation. We flashed black and white photos of us nursing and curing and distributing seedlings and helping build latrines and teaching nutrition. And we told tales, culled from "Goodbye Vientiane" of young, fearless and adventurous Filipinos. Then we signed copies of our books for buyers. In the audience were librarians from universities with Asian studies degree programs. Indeed ASU, if you will look at their website (www.asu.edu), has one of the most extensive collection of Lao archives in their Center For Asian Research. Its Hayden Library Laos collection contains three issues of our "Balitang Laos" newsletter. The Southeast Asian bibliographer of the University of Wisconsin library at Madison has asked us for a complete set of our Mekong Circle Newsletter as well as photos. "I think your materials would make a great addition" to our collection, said Larry Ashmun.

■ Laap, tamsom and kao niaow graced the buffet tables, along with burritos, during the receptions. A film festival of documentaries on Laos and two museum exhibits offered diversions from the heady presentations. The closing ceremony featured the Royal Lao Classical Dance troupe, imported from Nashville, Tennessee (see picture below). To insure their art will not fade away when the dancers fled Laos in 1975 to the Nongkai (Thailand) refugee camp, they began training their children there. Arriving in America in 1980, the troupe is now composed of second and third generation dancers with names like Monica, Kimberly, Tiffany, Alisia, Arden. What happened to names like Noi and Sengkham?

■ The first international conference which drew 350 registrants from 16 countries was held May 20 to 22, 2005 at the Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. Six Mekong Circle members attended. Three gave presentations. The 3rd conference will be in 2010 in Khon Kaen, Thailand.





Survived A Battle But Not Time. One of the last photos of the OB Vientiane Hospital taken in March 2001 during a visit there by **Joji Naranjo**, an OB nurse, above. The sign says "Ministry of Health, Maternal and Child Health Hospital". Before that, it was renamed "Setthathirath Hospital" in 1973, replacing the "OB Hospita I - Laos Jaycees - USAID" sign that stood

by its entrance. Opened as a 60-bed hospital in 1960, it was demolished in 2002, ending almost 40 years of service. During the 1965 battle of Vientiane, mortar and artillery shells whistled over the hospital roofs towards an army camp behind it. The shock waves shattered glass panels and windows inside the buildings.

HOME SWEET BAHAY KUBO

For most OB members of Mekong Circle, the OB House on Phone Keng road, and diagonally across it, the OB Annex on That Luang road, were their first quarters upon arrival in Vientiane. The dining room, the bedrooms, the communal bathrooms, the laundry room, the corridors and the stairs - they remain embedded in our memories as much as the homes we grew up in. In truth they became our second homes. And for those who were assigned during their entire two-year terms in one or more of the field teams, yet another third home tucked its own corner in their consciousness.

*Before That Luang, our original cradle was a house in Nong Duang in 1957, the year OB arrived. It was located on the road to Tha Deua, at a time when the amenities of living -- running water and 24-hour electricity, for example -- were non-existent. The late **George Alba**, a former OB assistant project manager, remembers below in an issue of "The Volunteer" an OB newsletter.*

Vientiane. We lived "barracks-style" in the small house in Nong Douang. Downstairs was the clinic, a reasonably spaced dining room which also served as the living room wedged by the foot of the stairs. The entire floor upstairs was the sleeping quarters. To string up our mosquito nets we had to climb over cots and beds. When a string snapped, it was like a whole tent falling on our heads.

It had to be resourceful **Bing Bingcang** who had to scrounge for a bed by the little front balcony where he slept, the only relief during hot nights.

Someone had fashioned for us a night table from an old shipping crate. The only piece of furniture one would see. We had a small 2.5 kva

generator that coughed dead at 10 o'clock pm. And that was that. To catch up with one's reading or reports, we used flashlights and candles. Or else we would call to engineer **Viring de la Rosa** "puwede ba, isang oras lang."

The night sounds were horrifying. Yes there were 10 of us snoring, groaning, muttering men thrashing in sleep in a 10-by-12 meter room. Later we transferred to a more spacious house. Since there was a water problem, we went around without a bath for days. Everybody smelled of lotion and sweat or sweat and lotion, any which way. Our white clothes turned beige after the first washing. Rain was a blessed event. Everyone one whatever he or she was doing, stripped off and bathed in the rain. Nutritionist **Lily Fuentes** would leave her cooking.

We also alternated in the evenings going to the Hank Miller's and Jeff Cheek's (both of USOM, the precursor to USAID-Laos) for refreshing showers. **Vitoy Naranjo** and **Mart Martell** timed their turns at past eight o'clock at night. They returned to their quarters slightly high and happy after raiding the Miller's. We followed suit with accountant **Rene Mendoza**, having discovered their secret.

We had a station wagon, for some reason called "Teresa". It had a broken, tilted front seat. Rene, who had learned to drive for the first time, careened all over the traffic-less city. One night he returned dripping wet. The station wagon had broken down. This was 1958, the hottest, driest year experienced in Laos. Everyone walked to the office, to market, to shop, to church, to Vieng Ratry, to the Post Office, to Lang's for "soupe chinoise."