

Welcome to the 27th Issue of our Newsletter



Filipino flight mechanics with Air America pose May 1967 in front of one of the planes they service in Savannakhet. From left , **Antonio Perez**, **Gene Hernandez**, an unidentified Thai, **Romy Areza**, unidentified Thai.

They Kept the Planes Flying

On the second floor of the Eugene McDermott Library of the University of Texas in Dallas, a bronze plaque hangs in its Special Collection Department which holds among its collections University of Aviation Archives. The plaque engraves the names of 242 men — “air crews and ground support personnel of Civil Air Transport, Air America, Air Asia and Southern Air Transport who died while serving the cause of freedom in Asia from 1947 to 1975”.

Among them are 17 Filipino flight mechanics and engineers, their names followed by the dates when they died in Laos. “You will note that people of many nationalities are listed in the memorial,” said **Leon V. LaShomb**, Chairman of the Board of Air America Club during dedication ceremonies May 30, 1987. “All employees whether mechanics, radio technicians, sheet metal workers, supply staffs, clerks, laborers, supervisors or air crews are listed.” Most were American pilots and crew members. And among the non-Americans, there were also Thais, Vietnamese, Taiwanese and Lao.

Missing mention in the plaque are two other Laos-based airlines, which also employed Filipinos. These were Bird & Sons and the Continental Air Services, Inc. (CASI). Bird & Sons, an American construction company had been operating in Laos since 1960. It was bought out in September 1965 by CASI, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the U.S.-based airline Continental Airlines. CASI absorbed some 350 employees, about 100 of them Filipinos, and 22 aircraft.

How many CASI Filipinos lost their lives is not known. But veterans of Air America, are ever mindful that their services have not been fully acknowledged by the U.S. government (unlike the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. that honors more than 58,000 service men). Their anger goes hyper at the **Mel Gibson** 1990 action-comedy movie “Air America” that portrayed their pilots as a “wildly unprofessional menagerie of party animals, including a few borderline psychotics” wrote William Leary, a historian at the University of Georgia.

According to Leary, Air America’s substantial presence in Laos began in 1959. By 1973, its workforce totaled 1,615, of which only 208 or 13 percent, were Americans. In that year, it listed 49 Filipino operational personnel. Most were technicians staffing aircraft workshops, tuning plane instrumentation, maintaining buildings, supervising warehouses, servicing remote navigational outposts.

Of the 17 Filipino casualties in the memorial plaque, eight were flight mechanics. Based at a Thai airforce base in Udorn, in northeast Thailand about 41 miles from Vientiane, they serviced the aircrafts that fly on “upcountry” sorties into Laos. Some would accompany the Thai or American pilots, “to load and unload food, ammunition and soldiers throughout Laos often under adverse conditions and enemy fire” wrote **Stephen Nichols**, author of “Memoirs of Air America Flight Mechanics”.

A majority died during rescue missions of downed pilots

in enemy territory. "I found the Filipino mechanics to be industrious, knowledgeable and friendly," said **Jack Jolis**, recalling a helicopter flight he took with a Filipino "kicker" (or Air Freight Specialist as they are officially described).

"Every single Filipino Air America guy I had the privilege of working with whether as kicker or in any capacity, was a thoroughly outstanding dude." Their high mortality rate — accounting for more than half of the 15 mechanics named by Nichols, testified to the hazards of the job.

Cornelio "Pappy" Pascual's helicopter flight to Ban Peung on the Plain of Jars, was hit by gunfire and exploded, killing him on August 1, 1964. On the same Plain, **Montano Centeno** and his American helicopter pilot crashed, killing both on July 17, 1969. **Alfredo Alor's** helicopter was hit by ground fire and crashed on **May 19, 1972 in Khong Se-done**. **Feliciano Manalo** was instantly killed on July 16, 1972 when his helicopter was fired on while evacuating wounded soldiers near Pakse. **Romeo "Cris" Crisol-ogo's** helicopter crashed into trees and burst into flames, killing him on April 9, 1966. **Ceferino Nabung**, captured by the Pathet Lao on December 6, 1960, died a month later. **Juan Solita**, captured on December 1967 when enemy troops overran his radio outpost in Phalane, was released in April 1968. **Bernardo Dychitan** and **Baltazar Reyes** both died in aircraft-related incidents in 1968. Two flight mechanics died in traffic accidents — **Jaime Torres** in Savannakhet, and **Antonio Calderon** in Vientiane.

Both Air America and CASI flew missions called "milk-run" flights that ferried provisions and personnel to USAID provincial stations. When the bombing campaigns over the northern provinces intensified between 1965 and 1973, displacing thousands of Hmong tribal people, these milk-runs became their only lifeline for food and basic necessities.

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 Udon).

One or two technicians would rotate for one to two weeks in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Ban Houie Sai, Saravane, Attopeu, Pakse.

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 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 by the Filipinos for regular checkups and refueling of their generators.

At very remote sites, diesel fuel would be parachuted down. **Art Linchangco** (of Tehachapi, California) who served as an EMD technician from 1962 to 1967 had taught Hmongs to watch over the unmanned equipment between his weekly visits. Normally such a visit was a one-day affair -- 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, which hopped to dozens of radio shacks during their Laos tenure, included **Joe Parco**, **Epigenio Hernandez**, **Joe Mendoza**, **Dante Flaviano** and **Honorato Tapang**. There were some close calls. At one site during the mid-1960s, Art and **Ernie Rigidor** were among the last evacuated by helicopter before the station was overrun by the enemy. Aircraft mechanic **Jun Ilustrisimo** (now living in Anaheim, California) remembers another tight escape. After two weeks at a site in the south, he was eager to get out of there on the eve of Christmas 1968.

"I was having a problem flagging a ride back. Finally a Helio Courier was available. The pilot said that the strip was getting dark but I got in anyway. Five hours later, I was told the site was destroyed. Three Thai radio operators were killed".

It was in Taiwan where Jun found himself summoned 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 long posting, he helped train Lao aircraft mechanics to obtain their U.S. Federal Aircraft Agency licenses. CASI closed its Laos operations in 1972. A year later, a cease-fire agreement among the combatants signaled the end of the war. On June 3, 1974 an Air America plane crossed the Mekong river into Thailand, marking its last flight out of Laos.

During its 17 years of service about 200 American personnel died there. At the dedication of an Air America plaque 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." (This is adapted from "Filipinos in Laos")



Mountain top communication stations that need regular maintenance visits from EMD technicians.

An Official Accounting of a Health Program



The main entrance to the USAID compound in Vientiane in the 1960s

The U.S. government stepped into the shoes of France to administer Laos when the former colonial power lost its Indochinese possessions (Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia) at the end of World War II. It was not the best of circumstances to come to the aid of a newly independent country. It was poor, had the barest essentials in technical skills, infrastructure, and little sense of nationhood. Worse, it was mired in a civil war. Whatever meager resources it had or obtained were drained to suppress a local insurgency fueled by the Cold War.

The U.S. looked at major sectors – agriculture, economy, education, roads -- to focus its initial non-military aid program. The health sector, it determined in 1963, suffered in the “inability of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) through its rudimentary civilian health services to provide medical care and health support to areas disrupted by the insurgency.” In 1964 its Vientiane-based Agency for International Development (USAID) put in place a Public Health Division (PHD). This became the launching pad of its Village Health Program. VHP in turn contracted Operation Brotherhood (OB) into its sector.

Ten years later, a government audit reported that VHP had spent \$36.1 million by September 1974 before the program was terminated in May 1975 when a Communist regime took over the country. In that time, the VHP-OB program operated in tandem to the RLG’s national

health services, a virtual parallel network. But it had vastly more bountiful resources – in money and skilled people and material stuff. Moreover it had far greater reach to regions the government could not or would not serve such as in the more remote locations of the OB teams. In effect, it surpassed the RLG’s war-hampered weak efforts in providing health services to its people.

What bang did the U.S. get for its bucks? Mindful that it was U.S. taxpayer money that paid for it all, there had to be some kind of accounting. It came in two official reports – “Termination Report USAID Laos” issued January 9, 1976; and “Project Appraisal Report – PHD-VHP-OB International” for the period 1957 to 1975. (Both are available online).

The first report analyzed each aid sector – their history and outcomes – in 366 pages. The Public Health Development sector took 11 pages. This second report called PAR, only six pages, is actually an official form, the kind where questions and responses are filled in within prescribed boxes. It focuses on the OB component within VHP. Curiously, it spans a longer period beginning in 1957, and it figured that \$28 million was “obligated” in that time. (The Termination report covers 1964 to 1974 and placed the costs at \$36.1 million).

PAR is confident in its appraisal: “On the whole, the (VHP) project was admirably carried...There

is no question that, in humanitarian terms, the project was highly successful. It saved the lives of many and prevented and relieved uncountable suffering. If the Vientiane had won the war, there is no doubt that this medical support program would now be considered a model for future medical support programs in insurgency situations.”

Whether as band aid or model, the program reports tallied numbers that accountants would relish:

- “By 1965, A.I.D., either directly or through contract with OB, was operating a widely dispersed network of health stations with eight rural hospitals and about 180 rural dispensaries. The system was providing about two million out-patient visits and caring for over 25,000 in-patients per year.

“The cost of medical care was quite low considering medical treatment was based on modern medical western world concept. Cost per patient hospital day was about six dollars in the mid-60s, rising to about 12 dollars by 1975.

- In 1975, total cost was about \$5 million per year, funding seven hospitals with a total bed capacity of 850. AID operated the Ban Xon hospital in Xiengkhuang province; OB staffed six hospitals – Pakse, Kengkok, Vientiane, Sayaboury, Vang Vieng and Ban Houei Sai. During its 18-year

service from 1957 to 1975 it had 19 stations all over the country.

- By the 1973 ceasefire, VHP employed 650 Lao while OB had 550 Lao workers. Those with health related titles included nurses, medics, medical supply and logistics, medical technicians such as laboratory and x-ray technicians. Many learned their skills from OB training programs.

The last flight and a teary farewell

To consolidate its control, the new Communist government expelled all foreign aid agencies and their personnel. Their safety could no longer be assured. On May 29, 1975, a Royal Air Lao flight took off from Wattay airport to Bangkok, carrying 41 OB workers. There was an air of gaiety among the passengers. If not for the baggages, it looked like they were out for an outing to Nongkhai, a border town in Thailand across the river, or a picnic on the grounds of Dong Dok University.

*Weeks earlier, plans had already been put in motion to pull out. The southern field teams in Pakse and Kengkok were the first to be airlifted, followed by the northern teams in Sayaboury, Ban Houie Sai and Vang Vieng. **Atto Pagnawan**, travel officer, coping with limited plane tickets, hustled small groups over the weeks, six to eight persons to a flight, as seats became available.*

Thirteen Filipinos composed the pioneering team that arrived in Vientiane on January 7, 1957. About 411 came and went over 18 years. The May 29 group would be the final flight, the sixth batch. Some 20 Lao OB workers from the Vientiane hospital – nurses, maintenance, technicians – clasped their palms together in that prayer fashion, misty eyed, waving “sok dee” and “lahkohn” – good luck and goodbye.

Spreading the Word

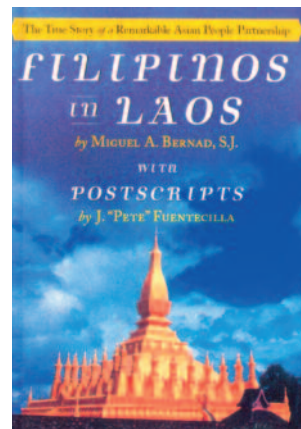
It has been a good year for us in reaching out to the academic world in order to spread knowledge of our past work in Laos. Little is known about our history and it has been one of our founding goals to correct this. One target has been scholars of Asian history. And in 2015 a number have taken notice. Among their references about us in their publications:

- A favorable review of our book “Filipinos in Laos” is in the Fall 2015 journal of the Paris-based French Association for Southeast Asian Studies which has 300 members. A quote from the reviewer – “it is a (work) which would be a shame to deprive researchers, especially as witnesses of that time are rare.”

- “Genesis of the Hmong-American Alliances” published in the latest Hmong Studies Journal referenced our medical aid to Hmong refugees. Published online since 1996, the Journal is accessed in libraries around the world.

- “Indochina War Refugee Movements in Laos, 1954 – 1975: A Chronological Overview Citing New Primary Sources” lists in its bibliography the following sources – Balitang Laos, Filipinos In Laos, and Goodbye Vientiane. These are our publications that readers can follow up. Written by **Frederic “Fritz” Benson**, former USAID refugee aid worker, his deeply researched piece is in the 2015 Special Issue of the Journal of Lao Studies (San Francisco, California). Fritz was a guest speaker at our 2014 Las Vegas reunion and also authored the Hmong Studies Journal history.

- “Researching The Lao Health Sector” a presentation delivered by **Kathryn Sweet** to the Women’s International Group in Vientiane which meets monthly. Her talk in November 2015 at the Monument Bookstore summarized her



University of Singapore doctoral dissertation on the history of medicine in Laos from colonial times to 1975, a period that covered the OB-USAID health program. Kathryn emailed us – “It was a full house. The overall response was very positive; it was a very diverse audience... I received a lot of good questions at the end, suggesting that the audience was engaged and wanted to know more.” Kathryn attended our 2010 reunion in Anaheim, California during which she interviewed our Lao and Filipino attending members as part of her dissertation field work in the USA. Her research also took her to France, Australia, the Philippines. In Laos among those she interviewed were former OB Lao nurses.

- “Filipinos In Laos” – the updated 2015 edition was released by Amazon’s CreateSpace publishing unit in April 2015. They have been promoting it on their website, including postcard-sized ads in the New York Times. We distributed press releases to American universities with Asian studies programs, to non-governmental foreign organizations doing development work in Laos, to Lao associations based in the USA and to embassies in Southeast Asia. Announcements of its release were also sent to journals specializing in Asian affairs. A posting by LaoFab, an online discussion group composed of government officials, donor agencies, development experts and academics about the availability of the book reached 3,600 subscribers. It is safe to say that the 34 book sales Amazon has reported so far, most were ordered online from this multinational group. Not yet a best seller, yes, but the journey to a thousand miles (sales?) begins with the first step.

Photos Recall A Diplomatic History

In 1954, barely a year after Laos gained full independence from the colonial rule of France, the Philippine government was among the first to establish diplomatic relations on January 14, 1955 with the new country. How to highlight its 60th anniversary in 2015?

On January 20 last year at the Mekong Riverside Hotel in Vientiane, the capital, guests sampled Philippine cuisine that included ukoy (fried shrimp fritters), lumpiang sariwa (fresh spring roll), sinigang na salmon (hot and sour salmon soup), kare-kare (beef stew in peanut sauce), pork adobo and halo-halo dessert (mixed fruits in shaved ice, smoothie style). Home-cooked is primary at Filipino parties even at diplomatic anniversaries. During those six decades of bilateral relations, three Filipino Presidents and three Lao Prime Ministers exchanged state visits. Educational, cultural, labor and technical cooperation agreements were signed..

As the anniversary year drew to a close, what do you do for a grand finale? With another party, of course. And this time, Filipino cuisine was not the main fare, but a photo exhibit, mounted on the walls of a reception room at the Mercure Hotel on December 28, 2015. Guiding the guests as official hosts were Philippine Ambassador to Laos **Belinda Ante** and **Mike Rivera**, a vice president of the Philippine Junior Chamber (Jaycees) chapter of San Pedro, Laguna province.

The Jaycee presence underscores a historic footnote to the occasion.

In 1956, a year after the Philippines formally established diplomatic ties with Laos, a group of 11 Lao and foreign residents founded the country's first national Jaycee chapter. They had visited what was then the neighboring country of South Vietnam. They were very impressed with the village development projects being carried out by multinational volunteers from the international chapters of the Jaycees among the Vietnamese refugees who fled North Vietnam when the two countries were partitioned. Called Operation Brotherhood (OB), the project was organized in 1954 and carried out by the Philippine Jaycees.

When the Laos Jaycees learned that the emergency program was pulling out in 1956, it requested its transfer to Laos under their banner. On January 7, 1957 the first team of volunteers arrived in Vientiane. Within that year, eight teams fanned out to six provinces, many of them in remote outposts of the mountainous, heavily forested kingdom. By the time the program ended in 1975, altogether 411 Filipinos had served two-year or longer contracts.

The theme of the December photo exhibit -- "Remembering Operation Brotherhood" -- showed in black and white the doctors and nurses doing their curative thing, while their colleagues -- the nutritionists, agriculturists, social workers, engineers, educators, did their health maintenance thing. It had been some 40 years since their mass exodus in 1975. In addition



Philippine Ambassador **Ante** (middle) at photo exhibit. Among the guests were Vice Minister of Health Dr. **Som Ock Kingsada**, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs **Khamphao Ernthavanh** and Director **Bounleuan Boupha** of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism.

to OB, the Filipino expats included technicians and aid administrators employed by Vientiane-based companies such as the United States Agency for International Development, Eastern Construction Company, Air America and Continental Air Services. Twenty two Filipinos had died during their 18-year sojourn there. Half of Laos' seven million population were born after 1975, knowing virtually nothing about their work. The Jaycees of San Pedro thought some memories may stir, during the two days of the exhibit, among those who still remember.

Indeed, as a followup, they plan to produce in 2016 a video documentary. It will supplement a new book edition of "Filipinos In Laos", released in 2015 and now available from Amazon.com.

Oral Histories To Record Fading Voices

Whenever we gather for our biannual reunions, when we hug and cheek-kiss, and laugh ear-to-ear, some lines from a poem come to mind:

"I grow old, I grow old
I shall wear the bottoms of
my trousers rolled.
Time to turn back and descend
the stair
With the bald spot in the middle

of my hair
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin !")

It's from **T.S. Eliot's** "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", a poem that we, high school teenagers when we were introduced to it, found funny at that time, because teenagers don't grow old, we were immortal, we were cool. Well, when our gathering unrolls

its 11th edition this November 2016, there's opportunity to roll back the years.

Vinya Sysamouth, executive director of the Center For Lao Studies, (www.laostudies.org) has offered to bring to our Las Vegas venue his Lao Oral History Archive (LOHA). His Center, based in San Francisco since its founding in 2006, runs a number of programs to promote interests in the

US for all things Lao. Each summer it brings groups of Lao and American students for a two-month study tour in Laos. Once every three years it organizes an International Conference on Lao Studies which brings hundreds of multinational scholars together to present recent research (Mekong Circle has attended three of them; the fifth one is this July 2016 at Thammasat University in Bangkok. We have submitted abstracts about Mekong Circle work for presentation). It publishes a respected peer-reviewed journal. And last year it opened Lanxang Kingdom, a "pop-up" restaurant of authentic Lao cuisine in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. It says that "for decades, Lao food has been marketed as and mistaken for something

LAO
ORAL HISTORY
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were losing their stories of tragedy and resilience." the project brings tape

else other than Lao." Translation -- Lao salad is "Tam Som"; Thai salad is "Som Tam", is that clear now?

LOHA is targeted at Lao residents in the U.S. , many thousands of whom joined the exodus out of Laos beginning with the Communist takeover of the country in 1975. The Lao refugees "have witnessed the rapid assimilation of their children and grandchildren into mainstream American culture, at the cost of losing valuable cultural traditions, family structures, language, and history," says its website. This was distressing to Vinya who feared that now 40 years after the first wave of refugees , "many

recorders, video cameras and an exhibit to events where the Lao, young and old, tell and hear their stories. We invite our members to participate. Our Lao nurses in America have tales to tell of survival and success that we have documented in our books and website. T.S. Eliot would have loved to hear them. Here is another excerpt from his poem

"Shall I part my hair behind?
Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers
and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing,
each to each."

Obama to Laos Across Time, Space and War

Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower was U.S. President in 1957 when Mekong Circle members first arrived in Laos. The global Cold War was at its coldest, but Laos was a simmering spot where a local Pathet Lao insurgent group allied with North Vietnam and the Soviet Union faced up against a Vientiane government the U.S. had decided to support. There have been nine Presidents after Ike – Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Clinton, Bush 1, Bush 2, and Obama.

In Laos, we lived through a hot civil war right through 1975 when Nixon abandoned it. Come September this year, **Barack Obama** will be visiting Vientiane, the first sitting U.S. President to do so. Some say he will come to make amends. During the Nixon years, the U.S. military flew 580,000 bombing missions on the Ho Chi Minh Trail that cut through southern Laos into South Vietnam and the Plain of Jars of eastern Vientiane, making Laos the most heavily bombed country on a per-person basis. Forty years after the war, more than 30 percent of the bombs lie unexploded in farmlands, and when triggered, continue to maim and kill. About 100 Lao have been killed by them, 40 percent of them children.

A Communist country, Laos remains an ideological enemy. Yet last March Obama visited Communist Cuba. If he crossed the watery divide only 90 miles between Havana and Key West, Florida, surely the 8,517-mile

distance between Vientiane and Washington D.C. is testimony that he will go the extra mile (lots of them) to offer apologies..

A number of his most high ranking administration officials recently did these rare visitations – **Hillary Clinton** in July 2012, the first by an American Secretary of State in 57 years. She stayed four hours. Another State Secretary, John Kerry, came for a two-day meeting in January 2016. Historians remind us that John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's State Secretary, was actually the first person of the same rank to visit in 1955. They wrote that he came bearing a \$10 million check to pay the salaries for a 25,000-men Royal Armed Forces that he wanted beefed up to fight the Pathet Lao. That was a huge sum in those days. In the years to come billions more dollars were spent in both economic and military aid.

As one gesture that the wounds of war should be addressed, the U.S. has been funding a program to clear the unexploded bombs. It has tripled funding to \$15 million a year and the American Ambassa-

dor **Daniel Clune** said that he "expects Obama to further increase that" during his visit.

He adds "the U.S. and Laos have a difficult history and for a period the relationship was antagonistic. However the people of Laos have warm feelings toward the people of the United States. That is partly because there are around 600,000 Lao-Americans living in the U.S. In a country of six million people, it means one out of every 10 live in the U.S. , which as a practical matter means that just about everybody in Laos has a relative in the U.S." Count among them members of our Mekong Circle.

Obama will arrive during the annual summit of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is the second time Laos will host this major event, attended by the chief executives of the region. A building boom in the city is one indication that their country, always belittled as poor, has the resources to stage it. Driven by mining and hydropower exports, it has enjoyed seven to eight percent economic growth over a decade, doubling its economy since 2006.

Obama's historic presence will bring the world spotlight to Vientiane in much the same way that he swung it to Havana. The U.S. is not an ASEAN member – a small matter in his grand scheme of things, among them that his "pivot to Asia" will be one of his lasting legacies.



U.S. State Secretary **Hillary Clinton** looks at prosthetic devices for bomb victims during a visit to Vientiane in 2012.

Back to Their Beginnings

When Thai Airways landed March 21, 2016 at Wattay International Airport in Vientiane, after a three-hour flight from Manila, aboard was a family of 11 persons led by **Eva Guevara**. It was her first return after some 40 years to a country and a people that had transformed her young life. She was a nurse married to her late husband **Primo** who was a doctor, both of them serving with the Operation Brotherhood Laos medical program from 1959 to 1964.

Indeed the emotion of the moment, the rush of swelling memories, so overwhelmed her she admitted to breaking down right there at the airport. Her accompanying children, in their 40s and 50s, would have understood. Here they are at last, a place their parents never tired of telling them about. **Leonora “Leny”**, the eldest, was born there. **Raul**, also born in Laos, is now a practicing neurologist in Texas, USA. Two other brothers joined the trip – **Ruel**, another doctor who staffs the Guevara’s two medical clinics in Laguna, Eva’s home province; **Rene**, a diving enthusiast, who manages a tourist resort in Calatagan, Batangas; grandson **Chino**, a registered nurse; grandson **Jiggy**, a mechanical engineer; grandson **Jason** a college junior at Ateneo University. Rounding out the group were Leny’s husband **Nelson Elises**, an executive with San Miguel Corporation; **Loren**, a registered nurse and Eva’s adopted daughter who staffs the clinics; **Jean de Ocampo**, Rene’s girl friend and her son **Karl**.

As they rode a van provided by the Philippine Embassy to tour the city’s sights, another wrenching experience hit Eva. She had landed on another planet, she swears. All the cherished mementoes she dearly longed to revisit – the OB House, the OB Annex, the OB Hospital at That Luang – all forever gone. Forgive the Lao driver, perhaps born after 1975 when these buildings were razed, and he had no clue where the original sites were located. Oh, well, there’s shopping to do at Talat Sao, which stocked more Thai and Chinese goods than there were in the 1960s.

At a dinner hosted by Philippine Ambassador Belinda Ante at her residence, a birthday cake was lit to mark Eva’s birth anniversary (80th) and those of Raul and Rene, both born in March like their mother, truly a memorable month for all.

“This was where it all started,” Leny said, barely a year old when her parents returned to the Philippines. “I would bring my boys back, to appreciate the history before development, modernization, high rise buildings and stress catch up with it. A peaceful place, so laid back.” She notes however that vehicular traffic, so



The Guevaras in Vientiane, from left: Leny, Nelson, Ambassador Ante, Eva, Rene, Loren, Jason. Back row: Embassy consul Morales, Ruel, Raul, Karl, Chino, Jiggy

heavy for a small city, can be “undisciplined.”

Let Us Remember

Among those who passed away in 2015 (that was reported to us):

Bill Comia; Lita Custodio; Ludy Eusebio; Phikoun Keomahathai; Sengkham Bounleuth; Irene Diaz Sobrevinas; Josie Flores Tapia; Arthur Evangelista; Leonora “Baby” Asuncion.

Antonio Cabangon-Chua, former Philippine Ambassador to Laos died March 11, 2016 in Manila. Appointed in April 2003 by former Philippine president Gloria Arroyo, he served for one year in Vientiane during which he brought a delegation of Filipino investors as Chairman of the Philippine-Laos Business Council. His ALC Group of Companies made him one of the wealthiest businessman in the country with holdings in insurance, automotive, banking, education, hotels and real estate. His media properties include various platforms – in print, such as magazines and newspapers (Business Mirror, Pilipino Mirror, Philippine Graphic), and in broadcast (CNN Philippines, Radio Philippines Network, Aliw Broadcasting Corporation). He was 81 years old.

Visiting the Homeland

Recent visitors to Manila : **Asil Monserrat; Seb Eusebio; Bella and Nards Hilario; Bert Sobrevinas** who visited **Joji Naranjo** in Jaro, Iloilo; **Pol Custodio** (reportedly fully ambulatory, recovered from the vehicle accident in California); **Minerva Erese-Will; Pet Duruin** whose 90th birthday party was hosted by **Nati Granada**.

The Years Pass, Not the Heritage

Apart from our Association, Mekong Circle members continue to forge ties with their provincial or school or hometowns in the Philippines. **Red del Rosario** (Cherry Hill, New Jersey) will return for his high school

reunion which is why he cannot attend our Mekong Circle November 2016 reunion.

Becky Ciborski and classmates from her nursing class at the University of the Philippines (UP) reunited last year. In May 2015 **Menchu Domingo-Kirk’s** 1955 Baguio City High School toasted their 60th anniversary graduation year.

Another sort of celebration wants to trace our roots. Come join our “Grand Ifugao Ammungan” says a Facebook posting from Becky. It’s not till April 2017 but a global search for Filipinos whose ancestors come from the provinces around the mighty Cordillera mountain range takes time. The event will be in Las Vegas where “Manang Becca” is our resident expert on the city and its culinary fare. She and **Pat Gonzales** (of Los Angeles, California) scouted the venues for our 2014 Las Vegas reunion. Here’s one Facebook tip from her – “M Resort has one of the best buffet, 200 dishes. Crab legs only for Friday dinner. Saturday and Sunday, all day. Worth the trip from the strip.” The restaurants return the favorable rating. For Valentine’s Day April 2015, M Resorts and Red Rock Casino sent her boxes of chocolates. Silverton Casino gave “genuine” CZ diamond earrings; and Bruit champagne from Palmas Casino. And flowers from husband **Tom**.

The Ammungan invite (that’s Ilocano for “gathering”) should interest Menchu who organized last December an Ibaloy Studies Conference because of “a seeming lack of Ibaloy studies as compared to studies on the Ifugao, Bontoc, Sagada and Kalinga.” Attention Mario (that’s **Mario Dulyunan**, our own Ifugao former OB nurse now living in Texas, USA). Menchu is research affiliate of the Cordillera Studies Center at UP Baguio. When not doing the rounds of the Las Vegas Strip, Becky goes on road trips. The latest was a multi-day “Grand American Southwest” swing last September with **Pinky Casher** through New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah.



Mekong Circle Philippines members hold up our November 2016 reunion invitations during a meeting last week of March at the Galleria Robinson in Manila. From left side of table around to front right: Cecile and Manding Datu, Eva Guevara, Jun Belicena, Dom Menguito, Toti and Letty de la Paz, Denis Belicena, Bing Belicena, Sonia Ballo, Jeanne Menguito.

An Easter Sunday Birthday for Fr. Luke

Let's greet **Fr. Lucien Bouchard** (below at right, with the late Pete Gonzalez) a happy, healthy 87th birthday.



For 18 of those years he was a missionary in Laos, an American priest of the French-founded Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). At the age of 26 he was assigned his first mission in 1956 in Hmong tribal territory between Luang Prabang and Xieng Ngeun. If that last place sounds familiar it's because an OB team was located there in the mid-1950s. From his base in Sam Neua, his first converts were these mountain-dwelling villagers who grew to know him so well they gave him a Hmong name – Vaj Xwm – “King of News.” Sam Neua, a town in the northern province of Xiengkhouang, also happened to be another OB team site that he visited regularly. Other OB field teams to whom he spread the Gospel lived and worked in Sayaboury, Attopeu, Paksong and Ban Houie Sai. Is it any wonder then that “Fr. Luke” was our special guest for our 2006 Mekong Circle reunion in Orlando, Florida and aboard the cruise ship to the Bahamas? He had stayed at **Pete and Lewie Gonzales’** Kissimmee home in Florida. They organized

our 2006 reunion.

Expelled in 1975 by the new Communist regime, Fr. Bouchard continued his missionary work in Indonesia for 28 years, trekking dense forests and mountain trails as he did among the Hmong highlands of Laos. Now retired (at the Oblates Residence, 486 Chandler St., Tewksbury, Massachusetts 01876), he turned 87 on March 27, 2016, sublimely happy that his Laos years had been fruitful. The current Lao bishop was his high school student in Paksane. And **Pope Francis** has announced the coming beatification of the first OMI martyrs in Laos – an Italian priest and a Hmong catechist – both killed in 1960. There are now an estimated 42,000 to 45,000 Catholics in the Buddhist country and around a dozen Lao priests. Foreign missionaries are still not welcome.

Filipinos Helped France Colonize Vietnam



Researching our roots in French Indochina, we were referred to the archives of the National Library of the Philippines. There's a copy of a 12-page “lecture” stored there since 1929. It was delivered before the students of the National Teachers College. The speaker: **Eulogio B. Rodriguez**, known as “Amang” Ro-

driguez, the longest serving Speaker of the Philippine Senate in the 1960s, at about that time when Mekong Circle members were arriving in Laos right after the country received its independence from France in 1954. The lecture – “The Services of Filipino Soldiers in Foreign Lands During the Spanish Regime” -- retells how in 1858 Spain (at that time the colonial ruler of the Philippines) supplied 300 Filipinos to an armada of 14 French gunships with 3,000 troops to help its ally France invade Vietnam (reportedly to avenge the murder of Spanish missionaries by the Vietnamese). The Filipinos, “fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with French forces distinguished themselves in the battles of Saigon, Ka Koa, My Tho and Bien Hoa”, it is recorded. Shocking truth, eh? – that we helped France colonize Vietnam (until it lost it in 1954 as well as its other Indochinese possessions – Laos and Cambodia). More shocking news – in 1596, about 90 Filipinos also joined a Spanish expedition to Cambodia, in a failed attempt to subjugate the country. In another account, a historian met a Filipino in Vietnam who “confessed that it was only when the Philippine revolution began in 1896 (against Spain) that he realized how wrong he and the other Filipinos were in helping the French against the Vietnamese who were, after all, only defending their own country.” A side note – “Amang” was replaced as Senate president by **Ferdinand Marcos**. The rest is history.

French troops and Filipinos landing in Danang in 1858 that began their colonial conquest of Vietnam.

Feeding The Homeless in the “North Jungle”

Tricia Lapitan (photo at right) arrived in the U.S. from Laos in 1976 when she was three years old. Now as a lawyer with the Seattle Municipal Court in Washington state, part of her work is “reading hundreds of police reports. I found that the number one thing people steal in Seattle is food.”

Going to and from work, she sees the hungry, mostly homeless, in the streets and doorways. She would give out some breakfast bars and sandwiches, until she realized there was more that could be done. And she knew what it was like to be hungry. Arriving in Chicago, Illinois as a child with her parents “we were poor.” This December, a charity she founded will celebrate its 10th anniversary.

During that decade, Heroes For The Homeless, has tallied what donors have given out – 72,789 sandwiches, 33,823 cups of cocoa, 28,318 bottles of water, 31,733 hard-boiled eggs, 30,613



snacks. Not only food but some of the basic necessities the homeless need – hygiene kits, clothing, sleeping bags, blankets, tents – that volunteers carry to remote places from the city center. One place is called the North Jungle in Kings County where the homeless cluster in tents beneath the I-5 overpass highway and along the wooded slopes of Beacon Hill. Emergency medical personnel are among the volunteers, offering information on the city’s social services. In Kings

County nearly 9,000 persons, 15 percent of them families, are homeless, according to one survey, out of 23,000 in the state. Poverty is the leading cause of homelessness, not mental illness or substance abuse.

The charity schedules monthly trips, reaching 700 clients each time. Cars fan out to three sites, crammed with supplies donated by partner groups such as local businesses, community organizations and churches. Tricia welcomes donations at their www.heroesforthehomeless.org. Take a look at a video on this site that follows the volunteers at work.

She is the daughter of the late Sergio Lapitan, Operation Brotherhood photographer and Sounthaly Somchai, a former OB nurse. Visiting Laos for the first time in 2006, she wrote “The child within my heart remembers, even if my eyes do not. I cannot fight the tears, seeing how close I am to my place of birth, coming home again after being away for so long.” Tricia can be reached at lapitan@live.com.

Ramon Magsaysay Award Goes To A Lao Nurse

The 2015 Ramon Magsaysay award, sometimes known as the Asian Nobel Prize, and named after a legendary Philippine president, was conferred August 2, 2015 in Manila to a Lao nurse whose accomplishments would be hard put to match by Mekong Circle’s nurses (some 266 plus Lao and Filipino, the largest profession in our ranks).



Fleeing at the age of 13 the civil war hostilities of her mountainous home province Hua Phan in northeast Laos, Kommalay Chanthavong and her family trekked for weeks in 1961 to Vientiane city. It was a respite from bombs and bullets. But not from the dire poverty of rural families like hers abandoning their village farming livelihood. She earned a diploma in nursing from the Ecole des Infirmiers et Infirmieres in Vientiane, then trained at Sriracha Hospital in Thailand. When a Communist government took over the country in 1975, economic conditions, already bad because of the war, took a turn for the worse, especially for the un-schooled, war-displaced rural women desperate for work in the city.

But Kommalay knew something about the women. They were highly skilled silk weavers, a craft learned from a young

age (she at five) from mothers and grandmothers. With her meager savings, she bought hand looms and gathered 10 women into a cooperative called the Phon-tong Weavers.

What happened next over the years is a tribute to ingenious homegrown entrepreneurship. She now oversees 450 weavers working from homes in 35 villages. She set up a marketing arm called Camacrafts to sell its products. To supply the silk raw material she manages a silk farm – 3,000 villagers in five provinces planting acres of mulberry saplings, the ultimate source of the silken textiles.

Sericulture is a highly intensive labor that we had the chance to witness during a 2004 trip to a Luang Prabang silk weaving village. Here women maintain orchards of mulberry trees, mix dyes, raise the silk worms, spin the silk threads, embroider the clothing. It’s very dependent on local labor and local resources. The main labor machine is a hand loom powered by foot pedals operated under the home. The dyes are boiled from barks and leaves in backyard vats.

Says Kommalay, “silk production and weaving have created livelihoods for young women in their rural villages, thus reducing the need to flee to large towns in search of work.” To view (and order online) her silk scarves, shawls, silk cloth, silk protein soap, bags and cushions, log on to www.mulberries.org.

Grant Evans (1948 - 2014): He Did Not Write First Drafts

We cannot go unrecorded in the pages of our Newsletter the passing of one of the most eminent observers of Lao affairs. Grant Evans was an Australian anthropologist and sociologist, not a trained historian but his “Short History of Laos: The Land In Between”, published in 2002, is a definitive reason for concluding that the writing of history does not always have to be left to historians” wrote a colleague. How we wished this book and many other incisive books on Laos he wrote were available during the 1960s.

There was such a paucity then of knowledgeable stuff . Of course there were tons of journalism published at that time — a raging civil war at the height of the Cold War commanded ongoing reporting in mainstream newspapers. But as it is often said, journalism is only a first draft.

“Of course, journalists cannot be expected to be experts on all countries and situations, which is why they ring up academics like me who are considered experts in their field. But then I find myself quoted by people I have never spoken with, and misquoted.” Grant said in 2003.

We had occasion to meet him at the First International Conference on Lao Studies in Illinois in 2005. I sought his advise on how to get our “Filipinos In Laos” book translated into Lao and receive official permission for local distribution. Said he, wisely: “Prepare to pay a bribe.”



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