

Welcome to the 28th Issue of our Newsletter



Scenes from “Pistang Pinoy 2015” celebrating Philippine Independence Day June 14, 2015 at the Philippine Embassy grounds in Vientiane, Laos. Ambassador **Belinda Ante** is at top right.

Carrying On Where We Left Off: Today’s Filipinos In Laos

When **Rodolfo “Rody” Sanchez** landed at Wattay airport in Vientiane on September 17, 1965, he was arriving as the first resident consular officer of the Philippine government. “There were no porters, no customs officer on duty. It was eerily empty,” he said, nothing like what an “international” airport should look like.

He had received his orders to leave his post as political officer in Burma (now Myanmar) to open an Embassy in Vientiane for the incoming first resident Philippine Ambassador Felipe Mabilangan. Burma was classified by the Philippine Foreign Affairs Office as “50 years behind times”. What could Laos be?” he thought with apprehension. To play safe, he instructed his family in Burma to return to the Philippines while he checked out his new posting.

There was a reason for the forlorn look of the airport in 1965. No one, unless he had to, would wish to come for an extended stay. There was a civil war raging, a real hot one with people dying during this Cold War period, pitting combatants and their proxies for control of a newly independent country.

On one side was the Royal Lao Government, its patron the U.S. government and its allies Thailand and South Vietnam. On the other side: an insurgent Pathet Lao and its allies North Vietnam and China.

His briefing notes on Laos cited Operation Brotherhood as a good introductory source on the country. So off he went to the OB office in That Luang.

“There I met my first Filipinos in Laos — **Jovito “Vitoy” Naranjo**, the project manager and his assistant manager **Bonifacio “Boni” Gillego**. They jokingly said that they mistook me for a drug company salesman. Then and there I felt that Laos was going to be a pleasant assignment after all.”

The assignment involved looking after the consular needs of “my constituents” – a sizable population of Filipinos employed by, in addition to OB, the United States Agency For International Development (USAID), the Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL), the charter airlines Air America, Con-

tinental Air Services, Bird & Sons, teachers, contractors – altogether close to 900 persons. They composed one of the largest expatriate group in Laos and perhaps in the Southeast Asian region at that time. Most lived and worked in the capital. OB teams outside Vientiane were posted in provincial capital towns, most located along the Mekong River valleys.

The Filipinos of the mid-1960s and 1970s were spared the carnage of the war zones outside the capital. Because

this third-world city of 60,000 people had few amenities, they indulged heartily with communal celebrations, notably birthdays, in their quarters or in restaurants. OB members resided in a private house and in an apartment in That Luang near their hospital. ECCOIL personnel occupied an apartment near the Wat Simuong Buddhist temple. USAID Filipinos clustered in a compound in Nahaidio where 22 families lived in duplex residences. Marriages among and between the group members flourished. During the 18-year period of their sojourn, 83 couples took their marital vows — that's 166 singles. As a result marital "ninongs" and "ninangs" (godparents or sponsors) extended the family ties beyond Laos after they all left in 1975..

Nahaidio "became a popular gathering place at the back area that was shaded by a big tree," remembers Connie de la Pena-Frias, "eating potluck lunches together. The camaraderie was close-knit and we treated each other like relatives". Employment contracts had loosened to allow spouses (and children) to join their husbands. A Philippine School of Laos opened in 1967. On January 1, 1965 a grand celebration marked the birth of the Filipino Association of Laos. Its lineup of officers included representation from all the major groups. It even found a spot for the one and only Filipino pilot **Jose Blanco** flying with the Royal Air Lao national airline.

For some of the men, mahjong and basketball tournaments between these groups and an hour or two to watch the floor show at the Vieng Ratry night club were welcome breaks. The all-Filipino night club band preferred the snappy cha-cha beat to the slow moving lamvong. At the clubhouse of the American Community Association inside the USAID compound, another band of moonlighting Filipinos played American tunes in the recreation hall — **Romy Pestanas** on the harmonica, guitarist **Fidel Padayao**, **Celso Orense** with the maracas and **Virgilio Conception** on the drums.

At one time, about 25 men organized golf outings to the National University grounds outside the city environs. The make-believe "green" was scrubby mounds and trees. They started with about half a dozen men playing three holes and sharing three clubs. They called their group the "All-In-One Golf Club." Rody had hoped golf would lure away men who took up cockfighting with fervor that the Lao authorities frowned on because of the heavy betting. "I failed in that mission. Worse, I learned later after my term that an official of our Embassy was the most ardent sabungero' (cockfighting aficionado)".

The war intruded into their cocooned lives several times. In 1960, after a coup d'etat by a Lao paratroop battalion captain seized the city, a counteroffensive by a general resulted in a three-day pitched battle in December within the city that destroyed buildings and killed an estimated 1,000 people, mostly civilian. In 1963 two Lao generals squared off their forces in an intramural fight for power. OB accountant **Neddy Natividad** caught in the crossfire, was killed by a rifle bullet at a street checkpoint.

In 1975 the close-knit world of the Filipino community shattered when the victorious Pathet Lao took over the country and ordered all foreign aid workers to leave. The Philippine Embassy closed in 1980 and for the next 18 years the ambassador in Bangkok took charge of Philippine affairs. In 1997 when Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Philippines resumed appointing resident ambassadors, among them **Mario Galman** who in 2002 launched the Balik-Laos project of former Filipino expatriates.

Seventeen Mekong Circle members returned that year to visit their homes of long ago that had shaped their youthful lives. During a courtesy call with the Minister of Health, he officially invited the return of the OB medical program. In 2004, another group of 27 members took their turn. By that time a new influx increased the Filipino population to about 200. A pioneer was **Gina Alicando**, a manager of the Novotel Hotel (now the Mercure). Laos had veered away from a socialist economy and Gina experienced its capitalist growth that slowly nurtured private enterprise and lured increasing numbers of Filipino professionals.

Nestor Deguman, together with his Lao wife Noi, opened a restau-

rant named, what else — "Mabuhay" (Long Live)— located, where else — in front of the Embassy on Phontan Road. (It has since closed but in 2002 Noi cooked up a passable "sinigang"). **Pete de Leon** was a consultant to the Electricite du Laos. **Bless** and **Jun Miego** managed hotels. **Blesilda Calub** headed an office of the International Rice and Research Institute. **Tess Banaag** and **Luzviminda Balleteros** run Lao garment factories. **Kier Obiar** works for a German company that lays communication networks across mountainous terrains. Filipino teachers staffed English language schools attended by children of the Vientiane-based diplomatic corps and non-governmental associations.

Ambassador **Elizabeth Buensuceso** welcomed the second Balik-Laos group with a garden party on the Embassy grounds. She came aboard for her first ambassadorial posting only a few weeks before Laos hosted the 10th ASEAN summit, barely enough time to prepare for the arrival of attending president **Gloria Arroyo**. The next year, she had to line up events to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. That took easier than she thought because her Lao diplomatic colleagues still held fond memories of the khon Pilipin (Filipino) tan mohs (doctors) and naimohs (nurses). They were old enough to remember OB. Today, half of the population is under 25 years, born years after the Filipino exodus with no memories of their Filipino visitors of long ago.

The Filipino community gets together during birthdays, anniversaries, national day, Christmas and other holidays," Buensuceso said. She also held prayer services at her residence, "offering potluck fare of lechon, pinakbet, sinigang, biko, leche flan. On such occasions, (we) hold Bible studies and sing Christian and secular songs using the modern invention called the 'Magic Sing' ".

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) have discovered Laos. But, said Buensuceso, "because their contracts were already signed when they are in Laos, they did not pass through duly approved procedures and requirements of the Philippine government such as conformity with minimum wage rules and provision for medical and life insurance. Thus most of the problems they encounter stem from lack of safeguards on their work conditions."

OFWs in Thailand, many of them English teachers, have chosen the Thai Embassy in Vientiane as the most convenient for their “visa runs” to renew their work permits. Another woman ambassador, **Marilyn Alarilla**, replaced Buensuceso in 2009. And yet another lady, **Maria Isleta**, took her turn of tour duty in November 2011. Like Buensuceso, she was assuming her first ambassadorial post and then found herself in the whirlwind of preparations for President Benigno Aquino and his entourage, arriving for the 9th Asia Europe Meeting in Vientiane in 2012.

The Filipino community now numbered about 520. “Nineteen percent work in the mining sector,” she said. “16 percent are teachers, 11 percent are consultants in education, health, agriculture and banking; 10 percent are connected with the hotel and hospitality industry. There are also accountants, heavy equipment operators in mining, engineers and nurses.

She named the more notable

ones — **Dr. Ruben Lampayan**, a water management specialist; **Dr. Cecile Lantican**, coordinator of the non-governmental agency Family Health International; **Dr. Bernadette Gonzales** develops school and vocational curriculum for the Lao Ministry of Education; **Tomas Africa**, former head of the Philippine National Statistical Office assists the Lao government’s census projects; **Marilyn Manila** trains rural women in microfinancing. A large group of some 77 Filipino engineers — geologists, metallurgists, surveyors, supervisors — are employed by foreign mining companies, such as by the \$241 million, Australian-owned gold-silver-copper company Phu Bai. Others are helping build dams over the Mekong River’s tributaries.

A measure of how the Lao reservoir of goodwill for the Filipinos remains deep is reflected in their outpouring of donations for the Filipino victims of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in November 2012. From an anonymous donor who gave \$5 to the Lao government’s \$50,000 donation, a total of \$247,843 in

cash and pledges were given. The resident Filipinos themselves organized all sorts of fundraising events: **Carlo Bacalla** of Don Bosco Laos sold T-shirts at a bikeathon; Catholic nuns **Jessie Encio**, **Mila Azucena** and **Cora Jegillo** of the Sisters of Charity sold stuff at a flea market; **Bernadette Gonzales** organized a “Dine For A Cause” at the Mercure hotel where patrons were serenaded and bought paintings by Lao artists, the proceeds given to the typhoon fund. **Jo Mita’s** pastry shop donated half of her store’s sales during the donation drive.

On September 2014, **Belinda Mariano Ante** was appointed the newest Ambassador, the fourth successive lady chief of mission. She assumes her post in time to mark the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Philippine government was among the first to recognize Laos on January 14, 1955, newly independent from France. This year the Filipino community is estimated to have topped 700.

Celebrating the Lao New Year Outside Laos

By some estimates as many as 10 percent of the Lao population fled their homes beginning in 1975. That’s about 350,000 persons, by any measure a huge chunk of an already underpopulated country. The exodus is four decades old, more than enough time for the uprooted to sink new roots in all the places in the planet where they started new lives. That includes unloading all the cultural baggage they carried with them — the khao niaw, baci, sinh, tam som, lamvong, phi. But one practice they left behind is the massive dousing from buckets of water on pedestrians and vehicle passengers during three steamy days in April of the Lao New Year. You can’t do that in the streets of San Francisco or Toronto.

The water purification ritual still goes on, poured from silver bowls poured on the statues of the Buddha inside the wats. Indeed, all roads lead to the temple grounds where the full-day festivities begin and end. Where large Lao communities have clustered worldwide, a wat has risen, some 80 of them in the U.S. It is one revered item in their cultural bag that speaks of their devotion to a faith their Marxist homeland once tried to extir-



Lao residents in Minnesota gather on the grounds of a temple for boun pee mai.

guish and failed

Filipino members of Mekong Circle, non-Buddhist all, celebrate their January 1 new year in all their Westernized forms. Not so the Lao. Go to YouTube, click on their April 2016 events and view videos from Rockwell, Texas to Baldwin, Georgia; from Syracuse, New York and Temple, Pennsylvania to France and England. There are some glimpses of Western ways — the barbecue, the fashion shows, the motorized floats. Lacking a wat setting, celebrants rent a hotel ballroom with

a disco ball flashing from the ceiling as matrons do the line dance. But if you wish to savor tradition, make your way to the nearest temple via Google Maps.

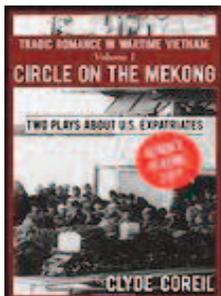
Join the street parade — cymbals, tambourines, khene; faces smeared with white powder; hooting and clapping, sinhs and jeans, lamvong-ing on the street; vendors; ethnic dances, Heineken and Coors. Not quite like the boun pee mai you remember in Kengkok or Sayaboury but oh, the faces, the colors and the sounds, you are there. On your PC monitor, watch how joyously the survivors of cruel separations relive a festive tradition, across time and space.

Summer Reading About the Mekong

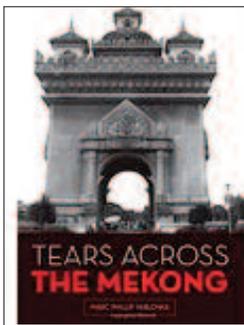
History and politics tend to dominate the field of Lao books published in English. Their publishers know that the small market they target consist mainly of hard core academics and scholars; hence new Laos titles are few and far between. New books on China, Japan and India gush out each year like a monsoon deluge from the catalogs. Laos is just too "exotic" (translation: unknown, remote, small) to bother with. So, let's welcome some titles for your summer reading before they blink out with the fireflies. The setting of the first one is not Laos, it's actually Vietnam, but we chose it to lead off the list lest you think it's title is about our Association, which it is not.

"Circle On The Mekong: Tragic Romance in Wartime Vietnam" (Infinity Publishing, April 2013) is one of two plays in the volume. A summary of the "imagined fiction" reads: "An American priest becomes romantically entwined with Joplin whom he rescues from the bars and becomes a close friend of the family which includes Uncle Bon, a monk who has developed a Buddhist-Christian temple on an island into a refuge from the world and the war."

The cover consists of a grainy photograph which the author, Clyde Coreil, took and "needs a word of explanation." It shows the monk seated on a platform of stacked wood, built like a funeral pyre, two ten-gallon plastic cans of gasoline at both ends. Coreil is described as holding a Master of Fine Arts in playwriting from Carnegie Mellon University and a PhD in linguistics from the City University of New York. Did Uncle Bon immolate himself? What happened to the tragic romance? To find out, go to Amazon.com and purchase a copy for \$13.95.

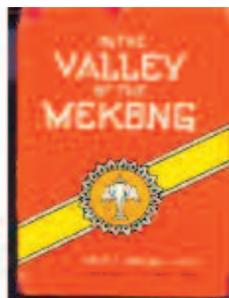


"Tears Across The Mekong" (Figueroa Press, April 2016) profiles the personal lives of a number of Lao and non-Lao who lived through the civil war. Among them is a former government army officer, a teacher, a



farmer, a Hmong guerrilla, a Lao T-28 pilot. A full chapter is devoted to Fr. **Lucien Bouchard**, an American missionary serving highland tribes. There have been other books in English that have collected the voices of the Lao diaspora, recalling their wrenching exodus and painful settlement in new homelands. Most are tales of resurgence and fulfillment. This book expands on the resilience of the human spirit, a cliché of the immigrant experience, but still an inspiration with every telling. The tribal Hmong recruits of the CIA against the North Vietnamese figure prominently among those that the author **Marc Yablonka**, a journalist and a military historian, interviewed. The "tears" of his book symbolize the sad fate that doomed this fighting force and his admiration for their sacrifice. The book is also available from Amazon.com

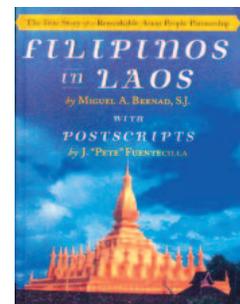
"In The Valley of the Mekong: An American in Laos" (St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970). This is the first of two memoirs written by Fr. **Matt Menger**, a missionary with the French-based Oblates of Mary Immaculate (It has missions in the Philippines). His second, **"Slowly Climbs The Sun"** was published in 1973. Arriving in 1956 in Laos as the order's first American missionary, Fr. Menger offers in one anecdote after another a unique perspective -- a closeup, from his face-to-face, on the village-level interaction with the Lao -- at the birth of the newest third-world country, emerging into the 20th century. He arrived at the historic moment when a small, poor country unwill-



ingly and helplessly got entangled with Cold War conflicts. Coincidentally, Mekong Circle members arrived on the scene only a year later. Hence these two books recount for us a life that we lived through ourselves. Fr. Menger's stories -- personal and profound -- stir up our own "coming-of-age" memories when we were young and brave and maybe even a bit reckless. Get Fr. Menger's books from Amazon before they go out of print.

"Filipinos In Laos" (CreateSpace Publishing, 2015). We had informed you that the paperback version of our book was first issued in April 2015. Now an electronic edition has been available since May 2016 for downloading by those with Amazon's Kindle ebook reader. This means we earn royalties from two sources -- paper and digital.

Ebooks have been a growing segment of publishing, reaching a new audience because they are cheaper, in our book's case \$6 compared to the \$12 paperback. The digital version is available to Kindle owners in the U.S., U.K., Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Brazil, Mexico, Canada and India. No need to pay additional shipping and handling costs which can discourage paperback buyers. Another bonus -- Kindle owners who are subscribers to Amazon's Kindle Unlimited service that allows them to read as many ebooks as they want can download our book free. The more the world knows about our history, damn the royalties, they're peanuts anyway when compared to our priceless goal of propagating our legacy.



The Archives Are Alive With Our Histories

To mark the historical highpoint of our 10th reunion in October 2014, we had produced, in keeping with the digital age, a set of CDs. One disc collected all 46 issues of our Operation Brotherhood bimonthly newsletter mimeographed from 1964 to 1996 in Vientiane. The other digitized 24 issues, from 2002 to 2013 of our Mekong Circle Newsletter. It describes our Association's activities in the USA and the Philippines. (To buy copies, email fuentecila@aol.com). We are happy to report that these CDs have found their way among the library collections of U.S. universities with degree programs in Asian studies.

Among them is the University of California in Irvine. In addition to the CDs, its Southeast Asian Archive collection includes our two books -- "Filipinos In Laos" and "Goodbye Vientiane". To access the archive, go to <http://uci.worldcat.org>. Then type "Operation Brotherhood Laos" on the search bar.

Another repository is the William W. Sage Collection on Laos 1894 to 1975 at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona. The collection consists of 28 boxes related to Laos -- manuscripts, photos, audiotapes. In Box 13, Folder 3 to 4, there's a photo

of the late USAID agriculturist **Ben Revilla** teaching a class in Houie Kong, circa 1968-69. In Box 4, folder 18, there's a copy of a 1967 issue of *Bali-tang Laos*; in Box 3, folder 17, a copy of a 1969 issue. So, if you wish the tactile experience of handling their yellowing pages instead of downloading the issues from the CD, book a flight to Tempe. It's a cozy university campus, neither too expansive nor small and site of the 2nd International Conference on Lao Studies that Mekong Circle attended in 2007. To access our records, go to <http://azuarchives.online.org>

A Second Generation Member Visits Vientiane

How to savor the city where your parents met and lived for an extended time, their lives so transformed they returned for visits? Well, in the case of **Dennis**, 40, son of **Bing** and **Jun Belicena**, who had only two days to experience his first visit, one way is to go the rounds of the local eating and watering holes..

Upon arriving in the evening of May 23, 2016, his host **Lena Sakonhnhom**, youngest daughter of a former Lao Ambassador to the Philippines, brought him to *Kop Chai Deu* for dinner -- papaya salad, sticky rice and chicken barbecue. The restaurant was a former French colonial two-story villa which renovated its rooms into several eating areas. (When a group of us lunched there during our 2008 Return to Laos tour, the lunch buffet spread was a bountiful feast of European, Japanese, Indian and Chinese dishes, and the Lao delicacies -- *khao phun*, fried grasshoppers and crickets.

The next day, lunch from a street food stall -- a steaming, fragrant bowl of "feh" noodle soup, spring rolls on the side. After dinner at a *Sundara*, a Mekong riverside restaurant, drinks at the *79Pub* where the local *BeerLao* reigns supreme. The

next day, breakfast at the *Joma Bakery Cafe*, known to expats as the local Starbucks and their favorite place to chill out. "I recommend the quiche," Dennis said. This was followed by a two-hour luncheon cruise on a riverboat, then dinner at *Hard Rock cafe*. "I was surprised at the many Filipinos working there," he said. In between getting oneself stuffed, there was some time to survey the mandatory ancient cultural sites -- Buddha Park, the *That Luang stupa* -- as well as a swing through 20th century institutions such the *Talat Sao mall*. The *Patuxay Arch*, the local version of Paris' *Arc de Triomphe*, was a must-see. "My parents tell me that **Uncle Fred Mendoza** slept one night on one of the top landings," said Dennis (a tall story that has to be confirmed).

Dennis received the customary "baci" welcome ritual at *Wat Simuang*. A monk invoked wishes of a delightful tour. One place he saw that was not around during our 2008 visit was the *Lao-Asean Hospital*, a private, modern 30-bed hospital, and judging from its website, illustrates how far the city has upgraded its health serv-

ices from the 1960s when the 60-bed *OB Hospital* in *That Luang* stood as the only private hospital in the city. Also serving as tour guides were **Lena's** cousins **Mee** and **Malayvanh Sybountham**. **Lena's** mother **Ambassador Malayvieng Sakonhnhom's** first overseas posting was *Manila* in 2011. During her term, *Mekong Circle Philippines* members were often on the guest list for Embassy functions. **Lena** studied at *De La Salle University* in *Manila* and is now with the *World Bank office* in *Vientiane*.

"The city reminds me of *Jaro* in the 1980s", said **Dennis**, referring to the town in *Iloilo city* in *Panay*, home

province of his parents. The food is in some ways similar. *Geckos* (no, they are not edible) seem to be everywhere. **Dennis** thanks all who made his short visit memorable by the *Philippine Embassy staff* -- **Ambassador Belinda Ante**, **Third Secretary J.C. Morales**, **Administrative Assistants Lilia Bayod** and **Jamela Macalino**.





*Ernie, second from top left, shares a meal with, among others, **Bill Comia, Primo Guevara, Fred Reyes, Pet Sismaet Duruin, Fidel Padayao.** Ernie at right in Saigon in the 1960s*

A Filipino Newsmen Remembers the Guns of August and Christmas Homesickness in Laos



When Ernie Mendoza arrived in Laos in 1960, the country had taken the limelight on the international news stage. A newly elected American president John Kennedy, at a news conference in front of a map of Laos, warned that Communism cannot be allowed to take over the country. It was his first foreign policy stand. A few months later it was actually a Philippine-trained Lao paratroop captain, **Kong Le**, who took over the country by staging a coup d'état against the government. A counter-coup by a General spawned the first of several bloody spats between warring Lao factions. The elements of a perfect news storm were in place— an ideological war, insurgent guerrillas, mercenaries, a border conflict with North Vietnam, and rumors of a U.S.-sponsored “secret” army somewhere in the north. A swarm of correspondents from all the international news agencies descended on Vientiane – Agence France Presse (AFP), the American-owned Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI). Ernie represented the British agency Reuters. As many as 50 correspondents from agencies, newspapers and magazines competed to file stories. News agency reports appeared on the pages of

their newspaper clients worldwide, including the Bangkok Post, the only English language daily newspaper available to us in Vientiane. Time and Newsweek were there too as well as the American major broadcast outfits— NBC, CBS and ABC. CNN was not yet born, neither satellite or cable. No matter; not having TV receivers in our quarters, we lived in an information black hole.

At 20, Ernie joined Reuters, a major British international news agency after graduating in 1958 with a journalism degree from Ateneo de Manila. After short stints in Singapore, Manila, London and New York, he was posted in Bangkok with “fireman” responsibilities for the Southeast Asian region. That meant on 24-hour call to cover breaking news in the region as well as in India, Indonesia and Japan. “I must have spent five months in Laos altogether between 1960 and 1965,” Ernie remembers. He may have been the only Filipino correspondent covering Laos. He retired in London in 2000 where, free at last from “firemen” responsibilities, he keeps busy taking courses in Chinese, French and Italian as well as upholstery.

I was 22 years old the first time I flew into Vientiane aboard a British Royal Air Force cargo plane with seats facing the rear. It was a good introduction to a kingdom, commonly described as “backward”, living in the past. I had come from Manila and caught the plane at Bangkok’s Don Muang airport as it loaded relief supplies for a traumatised city after the battle for Vientiane in December 1960. I had been sent to relieve Reuters Correspondent Bruce Russell who witnessed the fighting between the rebel paratroopers of Captain

Kong Le and the forces of right-wing General **Phoumi Nosavan**. Kong Le’s men were driven out of the capital.

That was the start of my annual trips to Vientiane from Bangkok where I was posted in 1962. Christmas 1960 was a sad and uncertain time in Vientiane with clouds of war over the capital. Many foreigners had fled to Thailand. The head waiter at the restaurant of the Hotel Constellation, where foreign correspondents stayed, had a bulging back pocket which

contained all his money, ready for a quick evacuation if the fighting resumed.

Where to spend Christmas Eve? I dropped in at the Operation Brotherhood hospital where **Mart Martell** had just returned from a meeting at United States Operation Mission where he was told to check that OB’s gas and fuel supplies were adequate and well protected. He invited me to the staff Christmas party. I have rarely seen such a welcoming bunch. The sense of danger coupled

with homesickness, particularly intense at Christmas, made us all drink a bit too much. One nurse became hysterical and a doctor had to sedate her. Mart drove me back to the Hotel Constellation the next morning.

On every visit to Vientiane I have always dropped by the OB Hospital for a delicious Filipino meal and a chat with the staff. I remember once listening to an interesting discussion among the young Filipino doctors on the incidence of throat gonorrhoea in former French Indochina.

Hotel Constellation, also known as Hotel Constipation among the foreign press, was owned by Maurice Cavalerie, a charming French-Chinese entrepreneur who had run import-export businesses in Hanoi, Dalat and Saigon. He was always glad to oblige foreign newsmen and would ask, when you settled your bill, what amount he should put on your receipt. His barman would stack up the drinks receipts and when he had collected enough he would tie them with a rubber band and ask the people sitting around the bar: "Whose turn is it to have this lot?"

It was easy to make money on the black market. The unofficial rate for the Laotian kip against the U.S. dollar was usually five times more than the official rate. Luxury goods were cheap for foreigners paying with kips bought on the black market. All the Indian shops on Vientiane's Samsenthai main street were happy to change dollars at the black market rate. I bought a couple of cameras in Vientiane cheaper than in Hong Kong or Singapore.

But the lure of the currency black market was not enough for some foreign correspondents. The AFP man, whose family had returned to Paris, tried hard to get expelled by writing negative stories about the government. But each time he was about to be expelled there was a change of government. AFP had another problem. One AFP correspondent decided to investigate why he was constantly being beaten by AP, Reuters and UPI. After handing in his copy at the post office, he went to a window in the back to see what the telegraphists did with it. He saw one telegraphist read it and then

hand it to the next man. It was transmitted only after all six telex operators had read it. AFP was filing in French – the only foreign language understood by the Laotian telegraphists who were trying to keep abreast of the latest news.

The post office messengers had an uncanny way of tracking you down. A telegram was once delivered to me at the Vieng Ratry nightclub at 9 p.m. After the battle for Vientiane the post office was closed and we had to cross the Mekong river to Nong Khai in Thailand to transmit a story. Another way of sending out news was by courier to Bangkok. Airline passengers were sometimes treated to the sight of 20 or so correspondents furiously typing away at the airport lounge to catch the Royal Air Lao flight to Bangkok. The Japanese correspondents were a competitive, divided lot. The Asahi Shimbun reporter once asked to put his dispatch with mine in a sealed envelope for the departing Yomiuri correspondent to take to Reuters Bangkok. I do not know how the Yomiuri man found out but he politely declined to take my envelope unless I removed the Asahi stuff.

Coalition negotiations in the Plain of Jars in northern Laos between rightists, neutralists and the Pathet Lao leftists were a logistical challenge for the foreign press who were allowed to fly there on planes of the ICC (International Control Commission) consisting of Canada, Poland and India. Peter Arnett of AP and I volunteered to stay behind to organise the transmission of news to the outside world. At the airport Peter and I nearly busted a gut heaving a latecomer, the enormous and renowned Richard Hughes of The Sunday Times (London), aboard the DC3 after the ladder had been removed. When the mailbag arrived from the Plain of Jars we made sure that the AP and Reuters dispatches were the first to be transmitted.

I spent about a month each year in Vientiane. Some newsmen could not bear to stay that long. After AP and Reuters reported government air raids on the Pathet Lao in the north, one British newspaper correspondent eager to return to the home comforts of Hong Kong was asked by his office about the raids.

He cabled: "Agencies unreliable rebasing Hong Kong as scheduled." His editor cabled back: "Since agencies unreliable please stay Laos." Most of the time we relied on stringers or part-time reporters to cover for us. We once had a Shan princess stringing for Reuters in Laos. In Phnom Penh our stringer was a Frenchman who was one of Prince Sihanouk's speech writers. He knocked on my door at the Monorom Hotel at 6 a.m. one fateful morning to announce: "Kennedy est mort."

From my Bangkok base, I often flew to Saigon to stand in for Reuters correspondent Nick Turner when he was off base or to help out during times of crisis. The government of President Ngo Dinh Diem disliked negative foreign press reports on the progress of the war. Diem's lobbyists in Washington derided the Saigon press corps as too young and inexperienced to give an accurate picture of events. Reuters' Vietnamese reporter Pham Xuan An was widely regarded as the most well-informed journalist in Saigon. He held court at our office in the Vietnam Press Agency compound, receiving a string of callers, many of them peasant women with conical hats, whom he introduced to me as relatives, friends or friends of friends.

Towards the end of 1964 I was told to take over the Saigon bureau after Nick resigned and An left Reuters to join Time magazine. It was a hectic period. The U.S. started bombing North Vietnam and the first American and South Korean combat troops landed. There was talk of China entering the war as it did in Korea 15 years before. I felt it was time to move on and left Saigon in 1965 for the greener pastures of Europe and Latin America. In London I was asked by Reuters managing editor Stuart Underhill, worried about the mounting cost of the Saigon operation, if the U.S. military build-up meant the war would end soon. No, I said and recalled An's view that the Viet Cong would see it as a sign of growing U.S. impatience. The war raged on for another 10 years. After the communist takeover in 1975 An was officially identified as a Viet Cong intelligence colonel and I realised that many of his visitors had probably been Viet Cong couriers.

When Finally It Was Time To Go, Reluctantly

May 1975 – some will remember the exact day. Others only the month and the year. All knew that the time had come to leave. Whether your sojourn was the standard two-year term or much longer, 18 years in the case of those pioneering Filipinos who arrived in 1957, it was the end of the line. A new Communist government had taken over the country and gave notice that all foreign aid personnel were no longer welcome.

A number of them decided there were compelling reasons to stay, even as the uncertainties of the new political and military situation drove hundreds of thousands of Lao across the Mekong River to Thailand and points beyond. Flor Saguisi, for example, a male nurse, stayed put. He joined OB in 1960 and during the next 15 years served with medical teams all over the kingdom, from the north (Vang Vieng, Vientiane, Sayaboury) to the south (Pakse, Paksong, Khong Sedone). At Khong Sedone, in the province of Wapikhamthong, he married Somphone a Lao-Chinese in 1972.

OB team members in the capital of Vientiane, despite the sporadic intramural fighting between Lao armed force factions, were spared the carnage of the war raging in the provinces. In May 1970, North Vietnamese soldiers captured the Plain of Jars and then went on to take the towns of Attopeu and Saravane where OB had teams. They were retaken by the government. In May 1971, Paksong was



Flor, left, with Eve and Primo Guevara

seized but the Lao army regained it in September. In late December the Vietnamese took back Paksong. Such was the nature of the see-saw war that kept the country in constant turmoil. Hoping that at some point hostilities will cease, Flor invested in real estate. This was one reason he did not want to leave. It was a bad move. His properties in Pakse and Khong Sedone were bombed and burned in all the fighting.

When Paksong fell in 1974, the OB team was relocated to Pakse to staff a newly built USAID Maternal and Child Health hospital. The next year, the new government took over. The OB staff left and Flor stayed for two months, without pay, to help staff the hospital. Then he and Somphone moved to Vientiane, staying with his wife's relatives.

"I applied at Mahosot hospital" he said because he was told it needed a nurse anesthetist. For three months he waited for a decision. He was rejected. He thinks the new regime's antipathy with

USAID and OB's ties with it was the reason. Finally he knew the time had come to leave. "It was getting scary. People were being picked up." As an employee of a U.S. contract company, the U.S. Embassy gave visas for him, Somphone and their son Nathaniel, a year and half old.

Next stop: Columbus, Ohio and a job as a surgical technician with Grant Medical Center. "I wanted to obtain my U.S. RN license by going back to school but I had no money and I had a family to feed," he said, echoing the hardships of new immigrants. "I was not an Indochinese refugee qualified for government assistance."

The hospital was his first and last job, staying for 38 years until his retirement in 2008. His son obtained a bachelor's degree in business administration from Ohio State University and now works as a financial business analyst with an insurance company based in Columbus. Somphone passed away in 2013.

At 84, "I tend to my rose garden, my son and nine-year old granddaughter live not too far from me. I break into Lao songs every once in a while. I still speak Lao very fluently," a feat that has gone very rusty among us, after our own exodus 40 years ago.

Another Top Asian Award To Laos

For the second year in a row, Laos wins one of Asia's most prestigious honors, the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation, sometimes known as the Asian Nobel Prize. Last year a Lao nurse who built a silkworm textile weaving cottage industry was cited for building a remarkable village cottage industry that we described in our April 2016 Newsletter. (page 9).

This year, the awardee is a

group called the Vientiane Rescue Team (VRT). To describe its work as an ambulance when it first started six years ago would be like calling yourself a board-certified neurosurgeon for placing an ice pack on a forehead concussion. At that time, their "ambulance" was a used car that they overhauled, engine and all, and over the months fitted it with a stretcher, an oxygen tank and first aid kits. It was sorely needed. Unhelmeted motorbike riders zip at kamikaze speeds through increasingly traffic-clogged streets, contributing to one of the region's highest road fatalities. VRT's founder Sebastien

Perret, a French paramedic, rounded up volunteers, trained them and begged for donations. He remembers: "There are hundreds of non-governmental organizations in Laos, and hundreds of people dying on the roads every year in Vientiane but nobody was interested to fund our project." Today, thanks in part to donations from a foundation and a bank, VRT is no longer just a "cart" carrying the injured to hospitals. The limbs and lives VTR has saved have truly earned it its well-deserved recognition.

OUR
11TH
REUNION

REGISTER NOW AND RESERVE YOUR ROOM

Date : November 14, 15 & 16, 2016 (Monday to Wednesday)

Place : Flamingo Hotel, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA



3555 Las Vegas Boulevard South, Las Vegas, Nevada 89111

At \$36 per night, we expect the hotel rooms we have reserved to be booked fast. So, reserve now because this rate is only valid till October 15, 2016. After this date, prevailing, higher rates will be applied. Call 888 373 9855 and give our Mekong Circle group code SFMEK6 or reserve online at <https://resweb.passkey.com/go/SFM>

Name _____ Number attending including yourself _____

Address _____

Telephone _____ Cell _____ Email _____

Reunion registration fee \$ 150 per person

Please send this registration form and check payable to Mekong Circle :

Vincent "Bik" Marquez, 903 Sneath Lane, Suite 125, San Bruno, California 94066 USA

2016 Reunion Mekong Circle Organizing Committee Chairs:

Bik Marquez, Tel. 650 589 3522 Fax 650 589 3357 email bikmarquez@hotmail.com

Penny Villarica-Flores Tel 415 584 8340 email penelopevflores@gmail.com

Menchu Domingo-Kirk Tel. 510 365 5834 email mcarmendk@sbcglobal.net