

MEKONG

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Welcome to the 31st Issue of Our Newsletter



View of Vientiane, looking east, from the top of Patuxai Monument, on Lane Xang Avenue

Returning To Vientiane: It's Not What You Remember

In 1961, as our plane crossed the muddy waters of the Mekong River that marked the border between Laos and Thailand, I looked out the window for my first glimpse of Vientiane, capital of Laos. I had flown out of Manila, transferred to another plane in Bangkok, then onwards to Vientiane. From the air, both cities unfolded the standard panorama of modern Asia — tall buildings, looping highways, street grids, apartment clusters. Tucked around a bend of the river, Vientiane or what one can see of it from a dense cover of foliage, was mainly trees, surrounded by rice paddy fields. Here and there, golden temple spires, poke out of the green cover. Eye-blinding sunlight bursts when it hits their tops. Green, lustrous green, shimmering green was the overwhelming sight.

So, there I was, finally on the ground, 23 years young, thrilled with my first overseas job, a two-year contract to serve as Information Officer for Operation Brotherhood Laos (OB), a development aid program. And there was nobody to meet me at the airport. A heavy-set man named **Sergio Lapitan**, who happened to be there, took me behind his motorcycle, huge as a rhino (I learned later that he was a professional photographer on assignment for OB and that the office was not informed of my arrival).

Eager to help a fellow Filipino colleague, “Serge” decides to give me a bikeseat tour of the city on the way to the OB office. We roared along this way and that way, up north, down south, then sideways. It took all of 10 minutes. That should give

When Histories Come Together

When the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane, Laos was contemplating how to highlight the 60th anniversary in January 14, 2016 of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, a video documentary came to mind. Not just any documentary. It so happened that on January 7, 1957, two years after the exchange of diplomatic credentials, a Filipino volunteer medical team had arrived from Manila. Called Operation Brotherhood (OB), it was sponsored by a civic action group known as the Philippine Jaycees. On March 7, 2018, the 20-minute video premiered at the Lao Plaza Hotel in Vientiane. Appropriately, it is a collaboration of the Embassy, the Lao government, the San Pedro Laguna Jaycee chapter and Mekong Circle association, to which former OB volunteers, both Lao and

Filipino, belong.

And so we thought this coming together of historic events deserve retelling in this issue of our Newsletter. In the following pages, we describe the Vientiane of our youth, whose streets we will walk on again come November for our 12th reunion. It was the gateway through which 602 OB volunteers entered the Kingdom. Who were we to devote a part of our young lives in an 18-year long sojourn? Here's a list of each and everyone inside.

Because our official records are missing, we piece our history from secondary sources that we trace inside. Our names speak volumes in place of lost records. Our non-OB colleagues do have their own histories to tell that we documented in previous issues of our Newsletter. We will hear them too.

you an idea that the “city”, 60 years ago, was really a country town, not a metropolis. A single major street, Lane Xang Avenue, ran from the That Luang temple to the Patuxai war monument. The town’s perimeter is a vast patchwork of ricefields and thatch villages.

My two-year stay stretched to six years, yet in that time, Vientiane of the 1960s, stuck to its reputation in news reports as “laid-back”, “slow-paced,” and “one of the sleepest countries on earth,” and “surely one of Southeast Asia’s most languid capital.” As late as 1993, a New Yorker magazine writer described it a “capital of no special beauty, since most of its buildings are decrepit and badly in need of paint.” An even later piece, February 2017, tells of its “thick atmosphere of colonial decay, dingy villas, lugubrious Banyan trees.” The Patuxai “looks like a squat, ill-proportioned version of the Arc de Triomphe topped by an astonishing wedding-cake structure resembling an Oriental palace with Byzantine spires and Gothic gargoyles. When you climb to the top of it, the buildings of Vientiane, all of which are small and unimposing, seem to disappear beneath the tropical foliage.”

When reading accounts of Vientiane the city, let us be mindful that much of them are from the eyes of Westerners. They have seen Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Tokyo, Hongkong — dazzling jewels of the exotic Orient — and rightly so when compared with Vientiane of the 1960s. The Vientiane of that decade and up to its “liberation” in 1975 by the communist insurgents Pathet Lao stagnated under France’s undemanding rule and was kept alive by Western foreign aid. Except for three episodes of internecine squabbles between rightist Lao generals, the city was largely spared the terrorist bombings, ruin and carnage of the civil war that savaged the countryside. Western visitors swoon over the French relics of baquette and leafy boulevards lined with frangipani, and barefeet, bald monks in their orange robes. Implicit is their desire that it should remain a colonial relic and not morph into the bustling commercialism of Bangkok.

In the 1960s, Vientiane had 5 banks, 6 hotels, 2 hospitals serving a population of about 160,000 residents. Its commercial core along Pang Kham road, was free of the wild clutter of neon signs, billboards and other eyesores that blight other much

bigger Asian capitals. There were few cars. Pedal-powered samlos and bicycles cruised the open streets. As one measure of how things have dramatically changed, the Vientiane Vehicle Control Unit counted in June 2017 more than 824,917 vehicles. They consisted of 55,819 cars, 24,828 SUVs, 29,896 vans, 31,202 trucks, 1,930 buses, 340 tuk-tuks (gasoline-powered tricycles), and 564,788 motorbikes. Go to YouTube, type “Vientiane city” in the search bar and see for yourself why the “Lao People’s Democratic Republic” or PDR, the official short country name that jokers translate to “Please Don’t Rush”, no longer describes Vientiane.

Indeed the physical landscape of the city has been completely transformed as I found out when I returned for my first visit in 2002, a wandering lost soul, seeking familiar sights of 30 years ago. When Mekong Circle returns on November 2018 for our reunion, the city that was our home base for 18 years is another planet altogether. The OB House, for example, at the corner of Nong Bone and 23 Singha Road, still stands there, the front façade looking much as it did some 60 years ago. But the OB Annex building across the street is something else today. Google has a magical mapping tool called Google Earth that you can manipulate with your mouse to do 360-degree views of the corner, on a street level. Alas, almost nothing there to remember, whichever way you guided the arrow.

“Look! look!” said **Manding Datu**, excitedly pointing at the OB Annex wraparound balcony during his 2008 visit. It took some effort to imagine the entrance foyer, now a cluster of street-front noodle shops and a convenience store, where I lived on the second floor, dorm-style with six men. It had squat toilets and three 55-gallon drums of bath water. In 2008, the noodle shop had taken its space.

If you open YouTube and type in on the Search bar, let’s say, Paksong or Sayaboury or Attopeu, Vang Vieng and other places dear to your hearts, be prepared to be amazed. You lived and survived months there, under one roof, forging lifelong friendships (and meeting your future spouses). Watch the video clips now, tons of them. for each place. That world of long ago has vanished. When it is said that “the more things change, the more they stay the same”, it does not always happen. This deeply saddens us who want our relics, our memories intact for the ages. Be brave.



2 The Operation Brotherhood Vientiane office and hospital staff in That Luang, 1960s. Top photo: OB House on Nong Bone Road.

**OPERATION
BROTHERHOOD LAOS
Filipino Personnel
1957 - 1975**

Administrators

Alba, George
Alejo, Joe
Arellano, Oscar
Bautista, Isagani
Benesa, Leonides
Beyer, William
Bingcang, Fruto
Bustamante, Orinico
Cardenas, Jose
David, Jose
Deguzman, Isabel
Esquivel, Evangeline
Fuentecilla, Jose
Gillego, Bonifacio
Granada, Melgre
Javier, Alberto
Maglaya, Reynaldo
Martell, Manuel
Morales, Salvador
Naranjo, Jovito
Noblejas, Edilberto
Ongsiapco, Luis
Paredes, Jesus, Jr.
Peralta, Carlos
Salazar, Dionisio
Santiago, Antonio
Severino, Rodolfo
Villamater, Domingo

**Administrative Assistants
& Secretaries**

Alberto, Lourdes
Asis, Ning
Ballo, Sonia Morales
Barawidan, Daisy
Bernardino, Fe Siguenza
Bulan, Bella
Calagian, Tirona Florentina
Canaling, Elenita
Cobangbang, Socorro
Cordero, Nenita
Cruz, Lydia de la
Dandan, Reynaldo
Esquivel, Angelina
Figueroa, Josefina
Lagamon, Wilfredo
Litonjua, Amado
Luarca, Grace

Macalinao, Antonio
Maning, Pamela
Paglinawan, Santiago
Palma, Lydia
Ramos, Connie
Reyes, Armando
Silos, Herminia
Tirona, Florentina
Tupas, Fe
Von Heiland, Mila

Fiscal / Supply Officers

Agbayani, Salvador
Agustin, Antonio
Casal, Carlos
Calagian, Conrado
Capili, Victor
Custodio, Apolinario
De Guzman, Artemio
Domingo, Bayani
Extremadura, Noel
Fabie, Antonio
Fidelino, Florencio
Garcia, Brigido
Gomez, Lucio
Honasan, Edmundo
Hortel, Alex
Lagleva, Pedro
Pacis, Jovito
Pagulayan, Orlando
Panajon, Augusto
Rosario, Lauro del
Samonte, Renato
Sebollena, Renato

**Social Workers /
Community Development**

Alforque, Greer
Agbayani, Cionita
Bacordo, Dominga Jamero
Bautista, Olivia
Belicena, Belen Gaborne
Calaguian, Domingo
Cariaga, Teodoro
Domingo, Carmen
Galera, Manuel
Hamada, Amy
Libanan, Cecilia
Limcuaco, Lucita
Lopez, Cecilia Gloria
Maglaya, Carola Mabilog
Maduma, Teresita
Monserrat, Asila Palma
Ocampo, Rosemarie del Rio
Palma, Melecio

Ramirez, Luzbella
Severino, Caridad
Sison, Melinda
Talatala, Renato
Tapia, Josephine Flores
Villarica, Penelope

Medical Records Librarian

Camaganacan, Mauro
Esquillo, Celia

Maintenance / General Services

Alano, Eugene
Angeles, Alfonso
Asuncion, Felimon, Jr.
Barcelona, Jose, Sr.
Belicena, Cornelio, Jr.
Canlas, Edmundo
Castro, Paulina de
Corcuera, Santiago
Dacanay, Gerry
Dahlen, Roy
Delaon, Fortunato
Dela Rosa, Severino
Erilla, Narciso
Espino, Rodolfo
Estrada, Ildefonso
Fernandez, Juan
Fidellaga, Valeriano
Garbanzos, Tomas
Infante, Daniel
Jornada, Faustosito
Juachon, Jose
Karingal, Francisco
Lapan, Conrado
Lapitan, Sergio
Llado, Norberto, Jr.
Malapitan, E
Nerona, Presidio
Nieves,
Nosa, Felix
Pabustan, Eduardo
Pacífico, Rodolfo
Pesino, Lorenzo
Siguenza, Lorenzo
Togado, Nestor
Yengko, Flaviano
Zamora, Reynaldo

Agriculturists

Araneta, Rafael
Asuncion, Juanito
Barsales, Petronilo
Batoon, Ireneo
Bolo, Inocencio

Cariaga, Teodoro
Daulo, Leopoldo
Dimayuga, Ernesto
Fajardo, Sabina
Flores, Deogracias
Flores, Diomedes
Gallego, Valentin
Gonzalvo, Agapito
Guieb, Casimiro
Montserrat, Roberto
Palacpac, Miguel
Paras, Anacleto
Reyes, Eriberto
Sanchez, Artemio
Santos, Leodegario
Tamayo, Fidel
Valera, Felix

Nutritionists

Arcay, Brigida
Asuncion, Leonora Torralba
Atienza, Tiburcia Buniao
Arzaga, Zita
Bamba, Hernani
Banaglorioso, Fe
Banzon, Lina Jimenez
Barrato, Sonia
Carmona, Nita
Cezar, Lourdes
Cid, Gladys Tabano
Cruz, Anita
Delapaz, Leticia Villacorte
De Los Reyes, Teofista Razalan
Erfe, Victoria
Espinosa, Josie Nantes
Estacio, Erlinda
Ferrer, Nila
Fres, Virginia
Fuentes, Libertad
Fuentes, Rossini
Gerardo, Benita
Marinas, Concepcion Caldoza
Marquez, Melinda
Masibay, Linda
Natividad, Bella Flor
Mondragon, Teresita
Paluay, Editha Habacon
Ramos, Rosalinda Sanchez
Rabago, Adelaida
Ramos, Sally Lumigued
Ravelas, Lorenza
Razalan, Opie
Sevilla, Lourdelina
Sobrevinas, Irene Diaz
Sudomiano, Francisca
Torralba, Leonara

Veron, Lina
Urbano, Felisa

Accountants

Andres, A
Ambrosio, Jose
Atienza, Antonio
Asi, Rufino
Ballo, Delfin
Cruz, Felipe Jr
Dimaunahan, Renato
Esteban, Romeo
Hebreo, Denis
Hilario, Leonardo
Mapua, Renato
Marquez, Vicente
Mendoza, Alfredo
Mendoza, Cesar
Nadal, Nicanor
Natividad, Bienvenido
Navera, Federico
Ocampo, Gervasio
Reyes, Fernando
Rodriguez, Francisco
Roque, Purification
Rosario, Redentor del
Sabado, Fernando
San Mateo, Oscar
Sayong, Salvador
Sazon, Antonio
Suarez, Bayani
Tabano, Luis
Tabuga, Johnny
Victa, Antonio
Yorro, Rey

Medical Technologists

Aguilar, Encarnacion Barba
Bala, Oliva
Deogracias, Caro
Espiritu, L
Evangelista, Adriano
Canonizado, Emmanuel
De los Reyes, Ruben
Del Rosario, Potenciano
Del Rosario, Jun
Guevarra, Jose
Handog, Valeriano
Isidro, Araceli
La Torre, Jernegal
Ledesma, Sol
Madrinan, Tom
Punzalan, Gloria
Ramos, Jess
Reyes de los, Ernesto
Reyes, Enrique

Rosales, Dolores
Tapia, Pedro
Villaroman, Rodolfo

Visual Aids / Artists

Arca, Leonardo
Laygo, Zenaida
Lareza, Leila
Liwag, Antonio
Sobrevinas, Felixberto

Health Educators

Agbay, Victoria Villanueva
Arcay, Virginia
Castro, Aurora
Hamada, Amelia
Limcaco, Lucita
San Juan, Catalina
Soriano, Medardo

Pharmacists

Aberin, Evangeline
Calalang, Juanita
Maypa, Romeo
Punzalan, Gloria

Dentists

Aguilar, Genaro
Aguilar, Conrado
Alcasid, Anselmo
Azcarraga, Simeon
Bacordo, Rinaldo
Bejar, Corazon
Bermejo, Edith
Elizaga, Cesar
Encarnacion, Pedro
Espinosa, Abraham
Granada, Natividad
Ham, Jaime
Leyran, Cesar
Lopez, Jose
Ramirez, Francisco
Rejante, Fausto
Reyes, Alfredo
Robles, Nelly
Santos, Florencia de los
Supina, Julio
Tagaro, Benjamin
Torres, Adriano
Sanchez, Napoleon

Physicians

Abad, Jose
Acorda, Feliciano
Agbayani, Salvador
Almendral, Paterno
Angelo, Concordia Alon
Alagar, Orlando
Arriola, Rodolfo
Azul, Sisinio
Assidao, Pedro
Babasa, Benjamin
Balbarin, Corazon Juinio
Balbarin, Lilia Baladad
Ballesteros, Jose
Baltao, Maximo
Banzon, Godofredo
Banzon, Jesus
Barros, Francisco
Baura, Elias
Bermejo, Edita
Buenaventura, Mila
Cabrera, Gil
Cala, Benjamin
Comia, Leovigildo
Castillo, Gonzalo
Celis, Augusto
Chipeco, R
Combalecer, Rafael
Datu, Jesus
De Jesus, Raul
Del Carmen, Alex
Diaz, Felix
Decena, Arsenio, Jr.
Ebarle, George
Elane, G
Endriga, Felicidad
Escueta, Crisostomo
Estrella, Hernando
Francisco, D
Flores, Miguel
Garde, Rodolfo
Gonzales, Pedro
Garcia, Benjamin de
Gotico, Rusty
Guevara, Primo
Hallares, Gil
Hilao, Jaime
Hizo, Arturo
Humabad, Hadji
Ilejay, Hadji
Jardino, L
Joaquin, Pedro
Lao, Tong
Ledesma, Basilio
Lim, Alfonso
Lim, Eduardo

Luna, Lina Delica
Mabunga, Roger
Madrinan, Nestor
Manlapig, Luis
Maranon, Dominador, Jr.
Medina, Cesar
Medina, Delfin
Mendoza, Catalino
Menez, Antonio
Morales, Carlos
Ocampo, Teofilo
Oransa, Mila
Ortiz, Ramon
Ortiz, Simeon
Pablo, Ramon
Padilla, Reynaldo
Paglinawan, Ramon
Palisoc, Jose
Paluay, Pedro
Panis, Marciano
Pia, Harold
Panis, Marciano
Penafior, Delfin
Parreno, Teodoro, Jr.
Purugganan, Gregorio
Reyes, Juan
Raymundo, Leonardo
Romero, Felix
Saquing, Romulo
Santos, Fernando
Sanchez, Jose
Sanchez, Antonio, Jr.
Salomon, Levy
Suguitan, Demetrio
Sotto, Antonio
Tantoco, Alejandro
Tapiador, Lina
Train, Facundo
Valiente, Crispin, Jr
Victoria, Arturo
Villahermoso, Ricardo
Vito, Reynaldo
Wycoco, Victorino
Yorro, Ding
Zuniga, Arturo

Registered Nurses

Abad, Gilbert
Abad, Angelina
Abad, Oliva
Abes, Jovita
Abling, Milagros
Acevedo, Mien
Abling, Milagros
Adriatico, Adoracion

Agbayani, Ester Advincula
Agbayani, Myrla
Agbayani, Romeo
Aguilos, Maria
Albay, Elisa
Alejo, Mely Kagahastian
Alon, Evelyn Subong
Ambrosio, Sonia Zuniga
Antolin, Zenaida
Aquino, Concordia
Arante, Victoria
Areola, Constancio
Asis, Urbana
Azul, Virginia Guzman
Baltao, Loreta Amante
Banaglorioso, Fe
Belen, Marion
Beltran, Maribel
Brainer, Violeta Agustin
Brondial, Teresita
Buenaventura, R
Cabatuando, Dorie Urquico
Caballero, Cynthia
Cabrera, Jovita Abes
Caceres, E
Calderon, Vicenta
Canonizado, Jane
Capili, Sining
Caraan, Priscilla
Caras, Lourdes
Castillo, Clarita Duran
Castillo, Teresita
Castro, J.
Casuga, Lucretia
Cava, Linda
Comia, Wilhelmina
Constancio, Areola
Conte, Lydia
Constancio, Areola
Cortes, Consolacion
Cruz, Jesusa Yap
Cruz, Felicidad
Cruz de la, Lourdes Reyes
Cruz de la, Imelda Caro
Cuenca, Rosario
Dagdayan, Ligaya
Datu, Cecilia
Daza, Jane
Daulo, Catalina
Dayawon, Purita
Degay, Mary
Degawan, Narcisca
De Guzman, Isabel
De la Cruz, Evelyn
Delaon, Lolita
Delapena, C

Delapena, C
De los Reyes, Roberto
Del Rosario, Manuel
Demiar, Jerry
Desa, Sofia
Deus, Genoveva
Dimaunahan, Vivian Galang
Dulyunan, Mario
Dumadaug, Cecilia
Duran, Clarita
Elizaga, Soledad
Erese, Minerva
Esco, Janet
Esmeralda, Angelina
Espino, Jane
Estrada, Agustina
Fadul, Imelda
Fernandez, Josefina
Franciso, Crispina
Furraganan, Pamela
Gaddi, Jesusa
Galanido, Rizalina
Galvez, Fe
Gentilizo, Lydia
Goma, Guadalupe
Gonzaga, Trinidad Buyco
Garde, Patricia
Gavero, Lorna del Rosario
Gonzales, Liwayway
Gorospe, Rosalia
Guevara, Eva
Guevara, Felicitas Rigor
Guzman, Virginia
Hababag, Helen
Honor, Julia
Ignacio, Leonora
Jaro, Belen
Illumin, Juli
Ilustrisimo, Thelma Villamar
Jamero, Dominga
Jaro, Belen
Joaquin, Aurea Marinas
Jornada, Abner
Jose, Felina
Kagahastian, Florence
Killongan, Marcelo
Labao, Enrique
Labayen, Violeta
Laurico, Jack
Lim, Connie Sebollena
Lim, Loreta
Linan, Evelyn
Lincangco, Eufrocinia
Liwag, Virginia Perlada
Logao, Lolita
Lopez, Violeta

Lozano, Visitacion
Lumiqued, Diosdado
Maranon, Marilyn Acevedo
Macababad, Leonora
Macabenta, Eugene
Magtoto, Andrea
Mahinay, Ester
Malolos, Amparo
Manahan, Lolita
Maro-on, Isabelita
Martirez, Rene
Matila, Raquel
Mendoza, Linda
Merritt, Myrna
Montoya, Felicidad
Mortell, Teresita
Monserate, Celsa
Munar, Linda
Nano, Henry
Nantes, Bernardo
Naranjo, Josefa
Naranjo, Ofelia
Navera, Felicitas Montoya
Nepomuceno, Soledad
Ngitngit, Felomino
Nonan, Fe
Omengan, Florence
Opiniano, Norma
Ortiz, Corazon
Palao, Thelma
Pablo, Sally Gorospe
Pablo, Josefina
Padayao, Wilma Jerusalem
Padilla, Agustina
Padre, Patricia
Palisoc, Germana
Partible, Concepcion
Pasaporte, Edgar
Pineda, Myrna
Ponce, Antonina
Pumaren, Fanny
Puruganan, Fe
Puruganan, Pamela
Ramos, Nemia
Ramos, Candida
Ramos, Fortunato Cantos
Ramos, Rustico
Rendajo, Julio
Revilla, Jovita
Reyes, Lourdes
Reyes, Melanie
Romeom Ancema
Romero, Emma Gamao
Rosario, Loreta del
Rosario, Manuel del
Sabaot, Fe

Saguisi, Flor
Salarda, Violeta
Santarina, Florida
San Miguel, Norma
Savellano, Isabel
Sazon, Corazon
Sebastian, Romula
Sismaet, Petra
Songlia, Alberto
Sopedia, Julian
Sotio, Consejo
Tabuga, Ester
Tayaban, Rebecca
Terciano, Rufinita
Tesoro, Patria
Tolentino, Florence
Tolentino, Myrna
Tongacan, Pacita
Torres, Esther
Ubungen, Rosario
Valencia, Laurentina
Valenzuela, Vilma
Valerio, Gloria
Valiente, Amor
Valdecantos, Leonora
Villanueva, George
Villacorte, Marcela
Viray, Primo
Yater, Felisa
Yumul, Germana

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Kelley Papa, and J. Pete Fuentecilla*

597 Stories To Tell

That's how many Filipinos served with OB Laos from 1957 to 1975. The first group arrived in Vientiane on February 7, 1957. They were physicians **Paterno Almendral, Maximo Baltao, Pedro Joaquin**, and **Fernando Santos**; nurses **Ligaya Dagdayan** and **Patria Padre**; nutritionist **Felisa Urbano**. (A month earlier, an OB Vietnam team of three persons came to test the waters for the incoming OB Laos batch -- Dr. **Jesus Banzon**, nurse **Petra Duruin** and **Josefina Figueroa**, a secretary. They staffed an open-air clinic for a week during the That Luang festival.

Within weeks, 40 volunteers were dispatched to four provincial stations. Nine persons left Vientiane on January 14 for Paksong; on January 26, nine went to Nhommarath; on February 6, seven persons went to Muong-Sai in Luang Prabang province; on February 16, nine persons went to Xiengkhouang; six were left in Vientiane to serve the clinic at That Luang. A humanitarian mission envisioned to last only three months would, over 18 years, bring into its ranks dozens of multidisciplinary teams.

Over that same time, they were deployed in 19 locations across 12 provinces in the Kingdom. Their assignments would last from a year to over a decade, some staying extended periods in remote regions, fully immersed in Lao culture and way of life. As well, communal living in spartan environments placed a premium on flexible interpersonal re-

lations. In some ways, it was college dorm life beyond four walls, into villages and towns under one roof, a transformative experience during one's most impressionable young years. Said accountant **Tony Victa** in an email, "Thank you OB for meeting my future wife," OB nurse **Fenny Terciano**.

One measure of the scope of this extraordinary experiment in development aid is to look at their job titles. Here it is below. Updated from a previous count of only 411, they were pulled from various sources -- Bernad, the "Postscripts", the Vientiane-published newsletters "Balitang Laos" and "The Volunteer" and our association "Mekong Circle"; from the personal records of Fruto Bingcang, Joe Barcelona Sr., Ato Paglinawan. OB founder Oscar Arellano once remarked that only one out of 20 applicants was accepted.

Because it was conceived primarily as a medical assistance program, the skills of the volunteers leaned heavily on curative medicine -- physicians, nurses, medical technologists, dentists, pharmacists. They account for 65 percent of the total, 51 percent of them physicians and nurses. However, curing sick bodies without attending to lifestyle conditions, were band-aid solutions. Hence, community development activities by agriculturists, nutritionists, teachers and the like, in their hosts' homes and villages, were equally important.

Accountants	31
Administrative Assistants	27
Administrators	28
Agriculturists	22
Dentists	23
Fiscal / Supply Officers	22
Health Educators	6
General Services	36
Medical Records Librarian	2
Medical Technologists	22
Nutritionists	39
Pharmacists	4
Physicians	101
Registered Nurses	205
Social Workers	24
Visual Aids / Artists	5
	597

Note: Because OB's official records are missing, some names maybe missing (see feature below) in the listings.

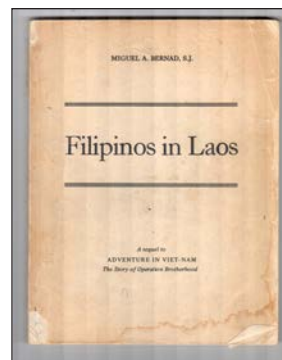
Searching For Our Own Story Tellers

When historians comb primary sources to document their narratives, some are blessed with ample archival records. Such was the case with Fr. **Miguel A. Bernad's** "Filipinos In Laos." Its 1974 draft, 173 pages typeset on 6-inch by 8 1/2-inch yellowing paper (photo, right) traces the history of Operation Brotherhood Laos beginning in 1957. It ends in a detailed account of the deaths by drowning of three OB field personnel on the Sekong River in the province of Attopeu on April 10, 1966. The aid program continued to operate for nine years before it was terminated in 1975. These last years would "form the subject of the next sections...which remain to be written" he wrote in a preface to the draft.

They never got written, overtaken by political events in Laos that impelled the withdrawal of OB personnel some 60 years ago.

But the 15 chapters of his 1957 -1966 volume, contained a remarkable wealth of names, places, events, so meticulously documented it compares with the historical epic of his earlier work "Adventures in Vietnam", a monumental 562-page account of OB Vietnam in the war-torn country from 1954 to 1956 before it moved to neighboring Laos.

While Fr. Bernad had a rich trove of OB Laos material to construct his early history, that cannot be said of its last decade. In fact, no records can be found. OB Vientiane headquarters had dutifully shipped on a regular basis all files to OB Manila where they were stored in its Malate office



(Syquia Apartments, at M.H. del Pilar St.) and presumably transferred in the 1970s to offices in Herran St., Sta. Ana, Manila. When he died in March 2009 in Cagayan de Oro City, the Philippines, where he taught at the Jesuit Xavier

University, his staff found no OB records among his voluminous works as historian and scholar of Philippine affairs. And when OB Manila closed its offices in 1975, the last of its employees, former secretaries and accountants, most now deceased, offered leads to locate them. They led nowhere. One said she remembers three to four, five-drawer steel cabinets.

So how do we retrieve a lost decade without original or primary historical material? One turns to second-

ary sources, such as Dr. **Charles Weldon's** memoir "Tragedy in Paradise." He devotes two chapters on OB from his point of view as Chief of the Public Health Division of the United State Agency of International Development that funded OB beginning in 1963.

Another way is to spend considerable effort rummaging through boxes of documents at university and government archival libraries. That's how Vientiane-based Australian researcher **Kathryn Sweet** completed her doctoral degree dissertation from the National University of Singapore on the history of Lao medicine. She includes a section on USAID - OB partnership in Laos' health sector. Her OB files, largely derived from USAID records, adds to the agency files and field reports collected by **Frederick "Fritz" Benson**, a former USAID Laos refugee aid worker, that he has posted online at the University of Wisconsin's (USA) Southeast Asian Images & Texts website (<http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/seait>). Enter the keywords "Operation Brotherhood" and you will come up with 63 "hits" or references to OB.

Yet another way is to talk to participants of that period and then weave their intimate stories of lifelong friendships forged under unusual circumstances. The result are two books by Mekong Circle members -- **Penelope Villarica-Flores's** "Goodbye Vientiane: Untold Stories". The other is a section named "Postscripts", appended to Fr. Bernad's 1974 draft, authored by **Jose "Pete" Fuentesilla**. The compiled edition was published in 2015 and takes the history to 1975. (It is available from Amazon in softcover and electronic formats). In addition, our occasional Mekong Circle Newsletter (31 issues as of May 2018) which began publication in 2002 provides historical snippets from newly available documents.

With our later records missing, and Fr. Bernad's sequel never written, he admits that "the story told in (his) book is incomplete. It deals mostly with its beginnings... There would have been much more that was worth telling... But at least what was done in the early years is a story worth telling."

Truly, much more can be told, if we

can find our very own records. And if truth be told, the official records will also reveal the personalities that made OB service a memorable experience.

Former OB Operations Officer **Mart Martell** who passed away in December 2013 wrote: "What a melting pot OB was. I think of the various 'characters' we had. Names maybe changed to protect the guilty. I'll probably make money by writing a book and they'll pay me NOT to mention them." He added "what might be of interest to readers of your Mekong Circle Newsletter would be the number of marriages brought about by the propinquity in the Laos environment. Familiarity breeds contempt; but just as often, familiarity breeds consent; or at least familiarity breeds attempt."

Mart was referring to the marital couplings among personnel during and after their Laos sojourns. Some 90 unions have been tracked, among and between OB members and other Filipino expats working in Laos (see Mekong Circle Newsletter, January 2011 issue).

Remembering A Mostly Forgotten History

Sometime in August 2015, **Mark Rivera**, while visiting Laos, was invited by Philippine Ambassador **Belinda Ante** for dinner at her residence in Vientiane. Mark was vice president of Community Affairs of the Junior Chamber International (usually known as Jaycee or JC) of the San Pedro Portal Key, Laguna province, Philippines.

In a few months, on January 14, 2016 to be exact, will mark the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Philippines and Laos. The Philippines was among the first countries to recognize Laos as a sovereign nation in 1954, free from France's colonial rule. During those six decades, three Lao Prime Ministers and three Philippine Presidents had exchanged state visits. Memos of understanding on trade, cultural, labor and technical cooperation were signed.

Celebrating diplomatic milestones with some event, usually a reception, is standard practice. The Ambassador "mentioned Operation Brotherhood and requested we do a project on this." Rivera told us. "That is how the idea of the documentary started. Our Jaycee chapter in San Pedro decided to accept the challenge."

That it was quick to accept is rooted in the knowledge of how OB Laos began. It



"Filipino Pioneers In Laos" premier in Vientiane

was the Philippine Jaycees who sponsored the first team of medical volunteers that arrived in Vientiane in January 1957. An OB doctor, the late **Primo Guevara**, came from San Pedro. His wife Eve, an OB nurse, led an entourage of 11 family members on a visit on March 2016, among them two of her children, **Leny** and **Raul**, both born in Laos. It was Eve's first return visit after leaving 40 years ago with one-year old Leny. "This was where it all started," Leny said, arriving in Vientiane. "A peaceful

place, so laid back."

In October 2015, Rivera and Ambassador Ante met with Mekong Circle Philippines in Manila to brainstorm the documentary. Also present were San Pedro city mayor **Lourdes Cataquiz**; Jaycee officers **Aaron Cataquiz**, **Edeng Cataquiz**, **Lorenz Dela** and **Carlo Delantar**. They were joined by Mekong Circle members **Jeanne** and **Dom Menguito**, **Manding** and **Cecile Datu**, **Denis** and **Bing Belicena**, **Eve Guevara** and **Monique**

Granada.

In May 2016, **Alice Labaydan**, a production manager of Masterpiece Media, Inc. met with consul **Jose Morales** of the Philippine Embassy. Her company is a Manila-based video production and training company doing an animation series in Laos. Learning about the documentary project, she pitched her company to produce it. "We were greatly inspired" she wrote Rivera, "this is a touching story worth telling...It will strengthen the bonds of friendship between the two nations."

In due course, potential directors were named, a script outline was developed. "I know there are scores of amazing stories we can feature," Labaydan said. "We are talking roughly about two decades. We have limited time. It will be a difficult task to choose" among those to be interviewed. Twelve Filipino and Lao subjects were lined up, residing living in the U.S., the Philippines and Laos.

There was a time when producing a documentary, could be done as a hobby. Indeed some 50 years ago, OB dispatched a film photographer with a 135 mm, black and movie camera, to make the rounds of the field stations. His orders were concise – take shots of doctors doing their curing, the nurses doing their caring, the agriculturists digging, the nutritionists teaching Lao mothers, the public health nurses vaccinating in the refugee camps. The negatives were developed in Manila, positive copies bundled to Vientiane. For two months, a young journalist, handcranking a cut-and-paste film editing machine on a table in a porch of OB House in That Luang, spliced together a one-hour story. It was shipped to Manila for what is known as postproduction finishing. Then, for reasons unknown, he never heard what happened to it. That was his first and last career as a film editor.

Today, there are iPhones with wizardry computer power to record full length feature films. And drones that shot the overhead sweeping images in the opening scenes of the documentary. That's the easy part. Doing a version circa 2016-2017 faces new challenges, like scrounging for photos within a 1957-1962 timeframe, tip-toeing delicately around post-1975 Lao politics that forbid certain images, or recording sensitive interview statements about the pre-1975 regime, or skirting copyright use of old National Geographic magazine photos of Laos or YouTube video clips.

By January 2018, a first "draft" cleared the Lao Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. It was agreed all along that the Lao would be the primary audience, hence the audio comes in Lao, English, some Tagalog plus Lao subtitles. After OB left in 1975, an entire Lao generation has grown up not knowing about these bands of fellow Asians who lived (and died, 11 of them) in their country.

At the premier March 7, 2018 at the Lao Plaza Hotel, former OB workers clustered at a photo display set up in the ballroom. They peered closely at the faces, at a time and place a long, long time ago.

"I think the show was sometimes pretty emotional as so many of the elderly Lao ladies were chatting and looking at the pictures," said Stefan Scheerer, who joined diplomats, government officials and development aid workers at the viewing.

Kathryn Sweet, who completed a dissertation of Lao medical history from French colonial times to 2000 (including OB's role) noted that "the main legacy of OB's assistance are shared memories. Progress in the health sector and the passage of time is gradually erasing the traces of OB's presence."

Well, not quite. The clinics and hospi-

tals and the demonstration farms and the classrooms are long gone. But former OB Lao workers -- there were more than 500 -- when OB left, fewer in numbers now, and aging into their late 70s or 80s like their Filipino colleagues, are certainly still around, in their hometowns where OB had served. Indeed, two of them were featured in the documentary and were present at the premier.

Dr. **Som Ock Kingsada** remembers, as a student doctor and then as a staff physician at the OB Vientiane Hospital, honing his skills with Filipino doctors **Jose Sanchez**, **Raul de Jesus**, **Gil Cabrera**. "Lots of surgeries," he says, "no time for lunch." He rose to become Deputy Minister of Health. Nurse **Sivone Urai Chandara**, a graduate in her teens of the two-year course at the OB Practical School of Nursing in Vientiane, credits her rise to become Nursing Chief at the country's Setthathirath Hospital to the strict mentoring of her Filipino teachers. "At our morning rounds, they were quick to pinch my behind if I fail to do something not right."

At 20 minutes and 37 seconds, "Filipino Pioneers in Laos" recalled a forgotten history to remember. Ambassador Ante told the audience that the film covered the early years from 1957 to 1962 when OB "was a purely Filipino initiative" that laid the foundation of a unique Asian partnership.

An insert in the DVD case quoted Fr. Miguel Bernad's epilogue: "There is much talk in diplomatic language about friendship among nations. That is friendship in the abstract. What happened in Laos was friendship in the concrete, not of one government with another, but of one people with another."



The 20-minute video was uploaded to YouTube on April 3, 2018. To view it, type "Filipino Pioneers in Laos" in the Search bar. A news report of the March 7, 2018 premier, 4 minutes long, that was posted by the Lao National Television can also be viewed on the site.



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About Mekong Circle



The Mekong River in Asia flows down its 2,703-mile length from its source in Tibetan China to the Mekong delta of Vietnam, coursing through six countries as it drains into the South China Sea. Its longest route flows through Laos.

WELCOME TO OUR REDESIGNED WEBSITE. LOG ON TO:

www.mekongcircle.org



Between 1957 and 1975, more than a thousand Filipinos worked and lived in Laos. As engineers, teachers, health care personnel, administrators, they served as development aid technicians in the first successful model of Asian-to-Asian partnership.

After their 18-year sojourn, they dispersed to countries as far apart as Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the United States. In 1995 they formed in California, USA an association of expat Laos workers. They hold biennial reunions, publish books about their work in Laos, distribute a Newsletter, organize fundraisers for emergency disaster relief in the USA and the Philippines. From donations, they fund scholarships and ship educational materials to primary schools in remote villages.

Mekong Circle welcomes all who wish to join their activities. There are no membership requirements or fees. Unpaid volunteers organize its programs.

From this website, see who we are and what we do. Contact us to learn more.

When you log on, these are the opening pages of our new design. At left is the "About" page that tells who we are and what we do. At right illustrates how to navigate the sections that compose the entire site.

This new site retains the major parts of the old one. But it has consolidated them in the sections or tabs lined up as shown ---"About", "Update and News", "Resources", "Donate", "Contact Us".

A major section is "Resources." When you click on it, a drop down menu appears. Choose and click on a topic to open its contents:

- **Publications** -- descriptions of three books: "Filipinos In Laos", "Goodbye Vientiane" (both authored by our members) and "Tragedy In Paradise" that tell the background of our association.

- **Newsletters** -- full reprints of all 30 previously published issues since 2002. An index provides names of all those cited in every issue as well as a listing of features of each issue. As each new issue is released, we will post it on this page.

- **Reports** --has three parts : (1) a final report of the

U.S. Agency for International Development of its public health program in Laos which employed many of our members during our service there; (2) a diary of the 2008 Return To Laos tour; (3) how a new generation of Filipinos continue our legacy there after we left in 1975.

- **Archives** -- selected notable association events
- **Obituaries** -- remembering the lives of a number of our colleagues.

- **Photos** -- a collection of our activities throughout the Kingdom from 1957 to 1975.

Our website was first launched online in July 2001, put together by Eriberto "BJ" Reyes Jr.. His maintenance of the site, his generosity of time and expertise, are unmeasurable. Our deep appreciation and heartfelt thanks also go to James Park who voluntarily redesigned our site. Open the other tabs to view their contents. We welcome your comments and letters at our "Contact Us" page or email fuentecila@aol.com.