

# MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

AUGUST 2018

216-27 SPENCER AVENUE, QUEENS VILLAGE, NEW YORK 11427 USA

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## Welcome to the 33rd Issue of Our Newsletter

A river to catch fish, woodlands to hunt game, and nearby paddies to farm — for a majority of the Lao, these remain their timeless world, intact, that we once shared with them.



## Returning To Laos: What Our Early Years Were Like

*This is Part 2 of a series that began in our May 2018 issue — “Returning To Vientiane: It’s Not What You Remember.” As we prepare for our November 2018 reunion in Laos, we are returning to a place and a time that bear little resemblance to a cherished interlude in our young lives. How much has changed? We reprint here (slightly edited) a feature from our 2014 reunion journal.*

“Bo pen yang” — It’s among the first Lao phrases we pick up during our early years in the country. It can mean anything from “Never mind” and “Let it be” to “Don’t worry about it” and “Cool it, Dude.” The late **Romy Pestanas**, a Filipino accountant with the United States Agency For International Development (USAID) who arrived in 1957 to work in Vientiane learned how to let things take its course at that time when “we had to boil our drinking water.” It was a newly independent country, shortly after France, its former colonial administrator, let it loose from its Associated States of Indochina empire (along with Vietnam and Cambodia). By the time Romy left in 1975, the tap water was ok, the USAID compound included a clubhouse, a swimming pool, restaurant, bar, and an air-conditioned movie theater.

Such amenities were non-existent 18 years earlier

when Romy and two other accountants — **Seb Eusebio** and **Ernie Hernandez** — arrived from Manila December 1, 1957 to staff the United States Operations Mission (USOM), the precursor to USAID. It was a hardship post that demanded the “bo pen yang” attitude. “We were advised in Manila that we need to be in the best of health, and were ready to accept risks,” said **Fidel Padayao**, who arrived a week later. They lived in a neighborhood called Nahaideo, sharing rooms in a two-story apartment building, taking turns cooking their meals, and feeling they had reached the end of the world. They were the first Filipinos to abandon the comforts of their Manila homes for a long-term assignment in Laos.

They joined a USOM staff of five Americans in 1954. The aid mission faced a gargantuan task in taking over from the French. At a 1959 hearing of a U.S. House of Representatives committee, it said:

“Conditions in Laos were characterized by a primitive state of the economy...lack of (local) personnel trained in government and business affairs... The support of a relatively large standing army, the furnishing of essential civilian government services, were considered beyond

the capabilities of Laos and hence were assumed by the United States. In this situation, it hurriedly organized in January 1955 an economic and technical aid mission to administer the various elements of a large-scale program.”

And so, in a hurry to round up administrative help, USOM reached out to Manila where the call for accountants and other skilled office personnel was sounded. In due time, there were radio technicians, mechanics, rural development workers, teachers, agriculturists and a host of other technicians, settling down in Vientiane. Romy, Seb and Fidel easily made the first cut among 35 applicants because as former employees of USAID in Manila, who else could be more qualified to transfer their skills to USOM Laos. Likewise, the Filipino engineers recruited from the Philippine-based U.S. Naval Base in Subic and the U.S. Clark Air Force Base in Angeles City had the right stuff to run and teach the Lao American supplied hardware. Other so-called “third-country nationals” were locally hired Thais and Vietnamese. But Lao nationals with the required technical and administrative skills were in short supply.

In the four-year period 1955-58, the U.S. economic aid program had cost \$166 million, financing some 20 projects, from teacher training to agriculture. It was during this same period that Air America, a charter airline and Manila-based Eastern Construction Company recruited Filipinos for local assignment. Thirteen Operation Brotherhood (OB) personnel had arrived on January 7, 1957. An estimated 100 direct hire Americans were staffing USAID from 1958 to 1960. By July 1959, 41 USAID Filipinos “occupied positions as engineers, automotive and diesel mechanics, electricians, accountants and clerk,” said a report. “Their contribution continues to be of high order particularly in imparting to the Lao technical knowledge and skills about electricity, engineering, masonry, painting and carpentry.”

By 1968, the official U.S. Embassy list of U.S. residents totaled 1,752 which included 450 USAID personnel, U.S. Embassy personnel, 800 dependents, 240 mostly with Air America, 53 with Continental Airlines, 33 missionaries. **Elden Erickson**, a U.S. Embassy officer 1956-58 said: “I was the economic section in Laos. No secretary, no typewriter, no window in my office. I was it. My only claim to fame there was that I decided what the gross national product of Laos was and it stuck for at least a number of years. I invented that.”

It was also tough going for another diplomatic mission. **Philip Malone**, posted to a three-man British Embassy in Vientiane in 1959 lived a “rudimentary... hand-to-mouth experience...(living) in a bed-sitting room in a small house in the middle of a rice paddy field. Since the phone system did not always work, the best way to contact somebody was to get on my bicycle and go around to see

persons.”

The U.S. Congressional hearings of 1959, convened primarily to determine how American aid money was being spent or misspent in Laos, uncovered “organizational weakness...minimum controls” in administering a \$50 million-a-year program. Most telling, the report found personnel morale “at a low ebb.” Among major reasons cited were “insufficient housing, overcrowding, lack of privacy, lack of essential facilities, e.g., medical care, household equipment, water, light, recreation, and restricted local market in foodstuffs.”

Let **George Alba**, former OB assistant project manager, tell how it was in 1958 Vientiane (. no,not presented during the hearings):

“We lived ‘barracks-style’ in the small house in Nong Douang. Downstairs was the clinic, a reasonably spaced dining room which also served as the living room wedged by the foot of the stairs. The entire floor upstairs was the sleeping quarters. To string up our mosquito nets, we had to climb over cots and beds. When a string snapped, it was like a whole tent falling on our heads. It had to be resourceful architect **Bing Bingcang** who had to scrounge for a bed by the little front balcony where he slept, the only relief during hot nights.

“Someone had fashioned for us a night table from an old shipping crate, the only piece of furniture one would see. We had a small 2.5 KVA generator that coughed dead at 10 o’clock, and that was that. To catch up with one’s reading or report, we used flashlights and candles. Or else, we would call ( generator technician) **Viring dela Rosa** — “Please, one more hour. “ The night sounds were horrifying — there were 10 of us snoring, groaning, muttering, thrashing in sleep in a ten-by-twelve meter room.

“Later, we transferred to a more spacious house. Since there was a water problem, we went around without a bath for days. Everybody smelled of lotion or sweat with lotion. Our white clothes turned beige after the first washing. Rain was a blessed event. Everyone stripped off to bathe in the rain.

“Everyone walked to the office, the market, to shop, to church, to Vieng Ratry, to the Post Office, to Lang’s soupe-chinoise shop.”

Most accounts by visitors describe Vientiane in the late 1950s (population about 50,000) as a “slow-paced” and “charming big town”, not really a metropolis. Those were the kindest complements when they compared it to the other “exotic” French colonial outposts of Hanoi or Phnom Penh. The “charm” exuded from the numerous Buddhist temples and the dilapidated, mustard-yellow stone government buildings, relics of the esthetics of colonialism. (Vientiane 2014 is sometimes labeled as Bangkok 50 or 60

years ago. Translation: less hectic, less materialistic, far fewer people - - 210,000 vs. 9.3 million — and less pushy. For long-term residents such as **Edmund Williams**, a U.S. Embassy political officer in 1976, a year after USAID pulled out, “the Lao themselves, if you had any dealings with them are among the most charitable, generous, warm, lovely people, absolutely gorgeous people.”

Many Mekong Circle members lived and worked in the city for the duration of their two-year contracts. If they and other expats found living conditions there as “primitive”, let them live for months on end in isolated provincial capitals as a good number of OB personnel did. In Vang Vieng, nurse **Pet Santarina** woke up by early light to rush to the market before the first patients arrived at the dispensary in order to grab the day’s fresh produce before they ran out. Her local staff taught her what veggies from the forest floor were edible.

The Sayaboury team insured themselves from starvation by maintaining vegetable gardens on the clinic grounds. Agriculturist **Pol Daulo** raised pigs and poultry. Two doctors and three nurses shared a house typical of Lao homes in the provinces — thatched roofing, bamboo slats for floor and sidings. They hauled their water from a well in a nearby Buddhist temple. An outback bathroom constructed of galvanized iron sheets had gasoline drums to store water. In Keng Kok, Dr. **Pilo Ocampo** did his laundry by the river. In Paksong’s cold climate, you get instantly freeze-dried with the first douse of bath water from a pail. In Nam Bac, Dr. **Alex del Carmen** performed surgery on a dining table, lighted from a lamp salvaged from the headlight of a C-47 plane that had crashed at the end of the dirt runway, and to which he had rigged a 17-volt battery. At Sam Neua, nurse **Abner Jornada** baked bread that he would exchange for wine, butter, cheese and bottled pickles with Canadian representatives of the International Control Commission monitoring a ceasefire treaty between

*Indelible memories from our Laos experience: the mighty Mekong River (below) and to us, mainly Christians, our introduction to the Buddhist religion, and discovering its many similarities to our faith.*



Laos’ civil war combatants. OB medical team trekking to surrounding villages would meet along the mountain passes horse caravans carrying Chinese-made kettles, plates, matches, beer. Team members flying out to Phonsavan shared space with cackling chickens and ducks.

You were lucky to get an outbound plane every time. More likely it’s a full day or two on standby beside the airstrip — “your mind played tricks,” said George. “After many, many hours, you thought the buzzing of a bee was the sound of a plane.” Air America electronics technician **Jun Ilustrisimo** was stranded for a week atop a mountain ridge in northern Vientiane, a helicopter unable to pick him up in the thick mist and foul weather.

Embedded in nurse **Petra Sismaet**’s memories are the trips on the Mutya Ng Mekong (The Lady of the Mekong), a 40-ft long barge powered by a 50-hp diesel engine. For 50 days and nights in 1959, she, another nurse, two doctors, two Lao aides and two Lao crewmen, motored down the Mekong River, from Vientiane to Thakhek and Savannakhet and back up, stopping by the riverbanks to do open-air clinics. They slept and ate onboard and were treated to the ageless panorama of village riverside life sustained by Mother Mekong.

Xieng Khouang, Paksong, Attopeu — in remote places like these where a dirt air strip and occasional deliveries by Air America “milk run” flights provided the only lifeline to the outside world, Mekong Circle members have stories to tell of evenings when sleep came early after chess sessions and picture jigsaw puzzles and cricket sounds outside a very, very dark night. No internet broadband. Those were the days long gone but not lost, not ever, as the tragic lovers Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman told each other in that classic movie “Casablanca” -- “We will always have Paris.” Make that Saravane or Ban Houie Sai.



# Last Day in Laos

May 29, 1975 – The last trip out of Laos for 41 Operation Brotherhood members took place on an open top truck, the kind that hauls bulk goods or construction materials. A railing on three sides prevented anyone from falling out. Bodies and baggages packed the space and the floor. There was an air of gaiety among the passengers as the truck sped towards Wattay Airport. If not for the baggages, it looked like they were going on a field trip or to picnic out of town.

They knew this day would finally come. Shortly, the anti-government Pathet Lao would take over the country. Their security could no longer be assured. A month earlier, plans had already been put in place to pull out. The southern field team members – Pakse, Kengkok, Attopeu – were the first to be airlifted to Vientiane, followed by the northern teams in Sayaboury, Vang Vieng and Ban Houie Sai. Over the following weeks, groups of six to eight members flew out to Bangkok as airline seats became available on Royal Air Lao. On May 29, seats for all remaining 41 were confirmed. They were the sixth batch, recalled **Ato Paglinawan**, the OB travel officer.

It was by all accounts an orderly departure at Wattay. The airport was not a scene of chaotic bedlam, of frantic, fleeing people shown on worldwide news two weeks earlier storming the United States Embassy gates in Saigon to clamber onto evacuation helicopters ahead of the incoming North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops.

“The airport looked as normal as any other day,” remembers medical technologist **Val Handog**, no harassment, no heckling demonstrators. About 20 visibly emotional Lao personnel from the OB Vientiane Hospital – nurses, maintenance and housekeepers – clasped their hands together in that “wai” gesture, bidding their departing colleagues “sok dee, lahkohn” -- good luck and goodbye.

A few days earlier, when some 800 Americans of the U.S. diplomatic and foreign aid mission, were evacuating, “the public humiliations inflicted on the departing personnel forced to leave behind everything they could not carry aboard a plane were excessive by any standard,” reported a section of the Country Study Area Handbook Series on Laos issued in 1994 by the Federal Research Division of the U.S. Library of Congress.

If there was some uneasiness among the Filipinos that they maybe treated similarly, this could have been evoked by the spectacle of 10,000 demonstrators at a May Day workers rally in Vientiane. Described by observers as part of



*The 250-bed USAID hospital in Sam Thong, 90 miles north of Vientiane city. In 1964-65 OB sent supplementary medical staff on temporary assignments to attend to war refugees.*

mounting waves of protests orchestrated by the leftist Pathet Lao against the Lao government in the city and other provincial capitals, the demonstrations railed against U.S. influence and the so-called rightist Lao elites, the Abhay's, Sananikone's and Champassak's allied with the U.S. against the leftist Pathet Lao. OB was known to be friendly with high ranking government officials.

The evacuations heralded the endgame of an 18-year struggle on Lao soil between ideological forces of the Cold War that entangled outside combatants, principally the U.S., Thailand, North and South Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union. Caught between them, the Lao who at heart wished to be left alone as a “neutralist” buffer, endured torment of unremitting scale.

“By the time a ceasefire was declared in 1973, over two million tons of bombs had been dropped on the Pathet Lao zones or more than two tons for every inhabitant, wrote historian **Martin Stuart Fox**. “The destruction was horrific. Almost all of the 3,500 villages under Pathet Lao control had been partly or wholly destroyed. Loss of life on both sides can only be guessed at but 200,000 dead and twice that number wounded would be a conservative estimate.”

Conflict between the combatants peaked between 1966 and 1969. During that period, the losses when viewed “proportional to the population of Laos, would be considered, I think, larger than the losses sustained by any other country on the face of the earth,” former American Ambassador to Laos **William Sullivan** told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in October 1969. With a population of a mere three million at that time, Laos he said, “has suffered and suffered beyond measure of other countries in bearing the burdens of trying to defend itself.”

Another product of the prolonged

carnage were the refugees, up to 370,000 at one time, again a vast number in proportion to the population. Uprooted from village to village as their ancestral lands changed occupiers between the combatants, their fate was all too evident to OB when its medical teams went treating at refugee camps.

At Sam Thong, a mountain-top major refugee center in northern Vientiane, where they helped staff a USAID hospital, nurses **Dickie Labao**, **Bert de los Reyes** and **Romy Agbayani** saw the war decimate an ethnic group, the Hmong. Deprived of their traditional farming livelihood, they survived on airdropped rice supplies.

The Pathet Lao victors inherited a devastated country. Poor already at the beginning of the war years in 1955, it emerged in 1975 more destitute and with less skills to rebuild. When they took over, so many Lao, estimated at 350,000, fled over the years; a generation with an educational base was lost to the exodus. Ten years that followed of failed economic Marxist policies sunk the country deeper into poverty.

Today, even after the new government has embraced market capitalism, the road to full recovery is long way ahead. Twenty years of destruction, witnessed on the ground by the Filipinos, will take a long time to heal.

For Dickie Labao, the last flight out of Laos was one of his saddest moments. As the plane flew over the Mekong River into Thailand, the thought crossed his mind, when will he ever see this place again. He came to Laos 21 years young, stayed eight years, was posted in five various field teams. “I grew up there, met my wife and married there.”

In years past, OB sendoffs at the airport were typically fun events, with much jesting and teasing. It was not that way on that final farewell in May 1975.

On January 1964, an OB medical team started work in the town of Kengkok in the central province of Savannakhet. It is located some 54 kms. east from the provincial capital of the same name which is the country's second largest capital after Vientiane, 450 kms to the northeast. The town is sometimes described as straddling the cross roads of communication between Thailand's city of Mukdahan in the west across the Mekong from Savannakhet and Hue-Danang in Vietnam to the east.

To the Filipino who grew up, say in San Felipe, Zambales province or in Piddig, Ilocos Norte province, both in the Philippines, she would find the Kengkok of the 1960s not much different from her hometown. Dirt roads. Bamboo fences strung together with twine. Crowing roosters announce the morning hour. Pigs

root freely in the yard. Home is roofed in "hipa" fronds just like the Filipino "bahay kubo". Many Lao homes built on stilts, to the height of a man, have handlooms under them. Lush trees shade the yard, where in a corner, the water buffalo waits to be led to the paddy fields.

The 3,000 residents of Kengkok are bound to the rhythms of a marginal, subsistence life. The Filipino, newly assigned to Kengkok, finds an underwhelming culture shock. In many ways, it feels, looks, moves, like her rural hometown of Piddig or San Felipe.

The OB team staffed a 15-bed hospital. One day in October, as a visitor, we observed the life of the team:

## A Day in the Life Of A Field Team

**Nang Khamchanh, Nang Tong sai and Thao Khamkheuang** are in their late teens and early twenties, freshly graduated from the OB School of Nursing in Vientiane. Some two months ago, they had left families and friends in Vientiane to join the Filipino team in Kengkok.

The morning starts with Dr. **Rusty Gotico**, nurses **Bert de los Reyes, Mary Degay** and Nang Tong sai, going from bedside to bedside of each patient, reading their charts, taking new orders. In the dispensary, arriving by foot and bicycles, the sick are beginning to crowd the benches and the corridors, waiting for the doctors to complete their rounds. In the dental clinic, Dr. **Emeng Alcasid's** drill is already humming.

Nang Khamchanh has strapped behind her bicycle her black nurse bag and a large brown envelope containing the records of newly-born infants whom she is going to visit for postpartum care.

OB-trained driver-mechanic Thao Ouh is checking the team's jeep's oil, gasoline tank, tires to prepare it for the grinding trip to Ban Bak and Ban Sithong, two villages scheduled for their weekly visits. Dressed in shorts and a checkered shirt, a stethoscope tucked inside a hip pocket, team director Dr. **Johnny Reyes**



From left, Dr. Bingbing Alagar, Dr. Ben Garcia, nurse Bert de los Reyes and Dr. Emeng Alcasid. In front of the team living quarters.

climbs into the jeep and disappears down the road out of the hospital compound.

To get to Ban Bak, five kilometers away, take the dirt road to Savannakhet. Somewhere along the right side of the road, there is a cave-like opening among the dense tall bamboo groves. Johnny plunges the jeep into it. The opening is the entrance to a winding dirt path canopied with thick bamboo and trees, leading to the village.

To get to the next stop, Ban Sithong, seven kilometers away, go back to the Savannakhet road, then swing into another opening in a bamboo grove. It opens into a bull cart path to the village. It's surprising to see that there are humans and homes tucked within these wilderness. There are people in each village already waiting for Johnny in the thatch house on stilts that serves as a clinic in each village.

Johnny returns after lunch time, along with a man, burning with fever, vomiting, horrible sounds coming from his throat. He is brought into the hospital. The man is accompanied by a relative carrying a thin mattress and clothing.

Lunch is true Filipino cooking by Mary. Her Lao cook helper has learned the various regional dishes of the Filipinos.

Early in the afternoon, an invitation to a "baci" for a newborn child is attended by Nang Khamchanh and Thao Khamkheuang in one of the village

homes that they have serviced and where Rusty had earlier delivered the infant. Happy parents murmur words of appreciation as they tie white cotton strings around the wrists of the Lao nurses.

In the hospital office, a dozen mothers sit through a demonstration in bottle feeding, one of weekly lessons in child care and home nursing conducted by Mary, assisted by "**George**" Phimmasone, an interpreter.

Emeng has returned from the capital town with a jeep-load of supplies flown in from Vientiane, as well as with that most precious item of all: mail from home. He is at once the most popular man in town.

In the lengthening shadows of a golden, warm afternoon, Johnny reads through memos and reports from the Vientiane headquarters. Bert and Emeng swipe badminton shuttlecocks on the grass beside the hospital, their bare shoulders glistening with sweat. The diesel generator has been switched on. As dusk falls, the hospital lights up, the brightest object in the entire town.

After dinner, there is a letter to answer, a pocketbook to resume reading. An old scratchy, vinyl record spins too fast and out of tune. Deep darkness falls fast in Kengkok. Sleep comes easily, lulled by the sounds of chirping crickets and croaking frogs.



*That was one day in the life of a field team. No internet, no bowling alley, no Walmart. But towards the end of that year, December 24 to 27, 1964 the entire town and team life experienced grand, celebratory events. Here is another visitor's -- administrative officer **Leo Benesa's** -- diary of that time. The occasion -- the opening of a new market with a boun. Edited excerpts from the December 31, 1964 issue of our Vientiane fortnightly publication "Balitang Laos".:*

## 24 DECEMBER 1964

We reached Kengkok (from Savannakhet) after 52 rather bumpy kilometers. First glimpses of OB Hospital and quarters through a grove of trees, possibly teak, part of the sprawling hospital compound.

The Kengkok ensemble -- Team Leader Dr. **Cesar Medina**, Dr. **Rusty Gotico**, nurses **Marlene Jamero**, **Mary Degay** and **Bert de los Reyes**, dentist **Anselmo Alcasid**. Renewed acquaintance with Lao nurse **Soumontha Viengluang**, graduate of the OB School of Nursing in Vientiane. The team is unique in having an International Voluntary Service American housemother, **Carol Falk**, a small, bouncy, bespectacled Bachelor of Science in Home Economics graduate and a native of Priest River, Idaho, USA. Carol is assisted by **Ladda**, a Thai girl of Cezanneque proportions.

We hurriedly set up an OB photo exhibit imported from Vientiane at a Fair booth in the market. In the evening, at a Christmas eve party, a guest accordionist **Lloyd La Vaux**, from New York, entertained guests, among them from USAID-Savannakhet, the town luminaries and army officers. Coming in like a sudden gale late in the evening was **Prince Boun Oum**. Lechon was served, together with a lone turkey roast and a number of delicacies. After dinner, dancing to a solitary plunking of a guitar and spirited singing.

Cesar's "barkada" of young army officers left way past midnight, well-fortified against a cold night with generous and potent doses of San Miguel beer, Scotch and lao-lao.

## 25 DECEMBER, CHRISTMAS DAY.

Felt an odd sense of displacement without Christmas Mass. No church nor priest in the area. Mid-morning, hospital is busy. People get sick even on holydays. Boun in market place in full swing. Attraction inside OB booth: a microscope. Children swarming like birds.

Night. Bright lights from a huge army generator for all the booths. Boys tried luck at a low-high numbers game.

Lamvong: round and round and

round with the lovely and demure phusaos of Kengkok and the surrounding villages. Our group sat with very friendly and sincere Chaomuong (district head) at table. Cesar at another table with his "barkada" from the Christmas eve party, who were out to pay him back in kind, swimmingly. He survived and even drove us back to quarters.

## 26 DECEMBER 1964

Morning. OB part of the welcoming line for His Highness **Prince Souvanna Phouma**, Prime Minister. He was shaking hands with **George Phimmason**, our Lao interpreter, who was dressed in Barong Tagalog (the Filipino male formal wear). "Glad to have you with us," said the Prince in English. "How are you?" "Very fine, thank you, your Highness, said George, equal to the occasion.

A ribbon was cut, and off flew a cluster of balloons. Tour of booths. His Highness dallied for a while inside the tiny OB booth, asking questions. Booth later judged 4th best in the fair behind Lao First Aid, USIS and IVS.

Afternoon. Team at "battle stations" for Prime Minister's expected visit to hospital. Instead, because of crowded schedule, His Highness went off to Ban Bak and Ban Sithong where OB has dispensaries. Unexpectedly, U.S. Ambassador **William Sullivan** and USAID Director **Charles Mann**, who had accompanied the Prince to Kengkok, showed up and made a quick tour of facilities.

Night. Once more at the boun, Rusty reated us to broiled chicken and beer. Place windswept and cold, like a wintry tale.

## DECEMBER 27, 1964

Saw Prime Minister off. At airfield, met Prince Boun Oum, who invited us to lunch. Everybody, including Carol Falk, thought he was joking. But the Prince, Inspector General of the Realm, does not joke about such things.

"I just saw Prince Boun Oum at the market place and he says he is waiting for you," Ladda announced after lunch. And so, off we rushed to have another one, without Carol, who was sunning herself on the wet grass, all swathed in a mumu-type robe.

Lunch with the Prince was a fresh water turtle, boiled, with paws as big as human hands, liver the color of ebony, plus all the Lao trimmings, including lao hai, the color of pea-green, hidden in its green depths, many volts of electricity. A veritable post-Christmas feast. For after-lunch entertainment, the Prince played the violin and some haunting melodies on the bamboo khene. For the absent Carol, the

Prince wrapped the huge turtle's head in a newspaper, with a letter wishing her the proverbial tortoise's longevity.

Afternoon. The OB basketball team walloped the Teachers 42-20, becoming the new Champions of Kengkok.

Night. Chaomuong and some guests at a small intimate party at the house. Mary serving as bartender, seated at the sofa. Strange bartender: somehow she managed to have all empty bottles secreted away immediately. Occasion also served as a showdown between star singers, visiting engineers **Lory Pesino** and **Boy Estrada**. Result: a draw.

With flair and gusto, the Chaomuong, who was enjoying the after-effects of a highly successful boun highlighted by the presence of famous personages, sang his own quota of songs, like everybody else, including Carol and Soumontha, Mary and Marlene and even the atonal Rusty. We accompanied the lamvong singing, while the rest walked in majestic pairs to its rhythms by drumming with our hands on the cover of the ice container and on tops of chairs. Towards midnight, our friends said goodbye and good night, with the Chaomuong promising another get-together, this time at his house.

*Epilogue : Emeng Alcasid, Johnny Reyes, Cesar Medina, Leo Benesa and Bert de los Reyes -- all have passed away. Rusty Gotica practices in Williamsburg, Virginia. **Linda Cava Alcasid** (who later joined the team) watches the grandkids in Aurora, Illinois. Marlene Jamero tends to her garden in Des Moines, Iowa, retired from her 26-year nursing service at the Broadlawn Medical Center in Des Moines. During her six-years with OB (Vientiane, Kengkok, Sayaboury), Kengkok memories remain indelible.*

*"I celebrated my 20th birthday there. We consumed eight bottles of whisky, I know, because I paid for them. During boun festivals, the Lao men preferred to practice their Western dance steps with us Filipino nurses, rather than the lamvong with their Lao wives. My shoe heel got caught between the wooden planks of the stage while dancing with Prince Boun Oum. I was awarded a royal decoration by the King."*

# Tales of Survival and Success

When the Pathet Lao took control of Laos in 1975, waves of Lao, uncertain and fearful of their future under the new regime, fled the country. It is estimated that 10 percent of the inhabitants at that time, or some 350,000 settled in Thailand, the USA, Australia, France and other countries. The forced migration lasted over 10 years .

The first wave was composed of the elite class, highly vulnerable to reprisal, -- high ranking government and military personnel. They were followed by those who stayed after the takeover, but joined the exodus between 1976 and 1979. These were ordinary villagers, low-level government workers and soldiers. Among them were our Lao OB nurses.

Because U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia played a major role in uprooting the inhabitants of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, they turned to America as their first country of refuge . Between 1975 and 1992, the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement admitted 108,400 Hmong and 123,500 Lao. We were able to track the addresses of 52 out of the 145 graduates of the OB School of Nursing in Vientiane — 36 in the U.S., two in Canada, two in Australia, three in France, one in England. Most of the other graduates had settled in Thailand, the most convenient country of asylum.

Some had stayed on to staff the Vientiane Hospital before it was torn down in 2002, then moved on to its replacement, or to Mahosot, the country's premier acute care hospital. Among those who stayed, two became doctors, and two became top nurse managers at Mahosot.

How did our former students, almost a third of them, manage to make it to the USA? What were the circumstances of their departure and settlement ? Here was a group with the parameters of an ideal demographic study. They were virtually the same age and education (sixth grade). They survived the wrenching experience of flight and of starting a new life in a country foreign to their culture. Nothing comparable had been researched. One 1995 compilation of oral histories "sampled" 130 Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese refugees. Only seven of them were Lao. Another 1998 survey of 150 refugees likewise covered a broad "universe" of respondents with few similari-

ties. Their intent was to illustrate that the refugee experience touches one and all, regardless of similar or contrasting backgrounds.

By focusing on a very specific respondent sample of very similar characteristics, our study would reveal findings different from these other surveys. A mailed questionnaire was sent to the 43 U.S.-based addresses; 13 responded, or 28 percent. Here's what we found out from our survey:

- Eight of the 13 nurses, after fleeing across the Mekong, languished in Thai (from three to six years). It should be noted that in followup conversations, many would rather not describe their harsh lives in the

times had to be planned in careful detail.

As one of them told us "we arranged for two canoes. We split up, my husband with our young son in one canoe, I and our daughter in the other one. If anything bad happens to one canoe, hopefully the other will make it across."

- Seven were sponsored out of the refugee camps by American religious groups.
- Only four were able to continue their careers in nursing fields . It is known that six other refugees who were not among the respondents, obtained their RN degrees in the USA after their arrival.
- The nurses gave much credit to the

to the church groups in helping them hurdle initial resettlement problems — from finding jobs to housing. These were the two immediate concerns not only of most Indochinese refugees but also of the Lao nurses. But the latter's education and skills gave them a headstart in building new lives.

- Their cherished longterm goal was the education of their children.

All in all, it can be said that our Lao nurses have successfully integrated into American society much earlier than other refugees. Language and nursing skills learned from their Filipino mentors as well as substantial assistance from church groups, were contributing factors. (For a full copy of the study, which was presented at the First International Conference on Lao Studies, May 20-23, 2005 at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, USA, email

fuentecila@aol.com)



camps.

- The nurses were in their early 20s when they sought refuge in the USA. In 2005, when they were surveyed, their ages ranged from 53 to 62.

- All except one fled with their very young children. Eight were accompanied by their spouses. They told of hazardous river crossings on moonless nights across the Mekong River to Thailand. Because both banks of the river were guarded by government border patrols, crossing points and

*Photos: Above, graduating class of 1963-65 School of Nursing in Vientiane with their teachers and OB Administrators.*

*Below, some of the 26 graduates who attended the first reunion of all six cohorts on August 6, 2006 in Chicago, Illinois during the 5th reunion of Mekong Circle. From left, At Potovath, Noun Vongphrachanh, Syphone Phosay, Phikoun Keomahathai, Sivilay Sivongxay, Phounsouk Sisouphone, Khamsy Siharath.*

*Rabieb Vilayhong-Roy, a 1965 graduate of the OB School of Nursing, fled on a boat across the Mekong River from Vientiane to Thailand in December 1975, clutching her four-year old daughter and a five-and-half-year old son. A short time earlier, her husband, a police colonel, was among those rounded up by the Pathet Lao. After a stay in Bangkok as a refugee, her family was sponsored by Catholic Charities for resettlement in the USA, arriving in Chicago, Illinois in August 1976.*



*In 1985, she was sent by the Illinois Department of Public Health's Refugee Program, for whom she works, to visit a refugee camp in Thailand. Here is a condensed excerpt from her report that we first published in the March 2005 issue of our Mekong Circle Newsletter.*

## *Former Refugee Visits Refugee Camp, Mourns Lost Home*

The 141-acre Panat Nikhom camp is located 120 kms. southeast of Bangkok in the province of Chonburi. Established in 1980, the camp population fluctuates between 13,500 and 18,500. Seventy percent are Kampuchean, 24 percent Lao (lowland and Hmong) and six percent Vietnamese. Housing is constructed of bamboo or asbestos board with tin roofs. A number of buildings serve as offices, clinics, warehouses. The United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees coordinates provision of food, charcoal, household articles, camp infrastructure. It assists foreign governments in the selection of refugees for resettlement.

A nurse, Carole Moran, with the American Refugee Committee (ARC), said I was the first former Lao refugee to visit. Some 17 voluntary aid agencies provide language training and cultural orientation to prepare the refugees for their new life. There are vocational courses in typing, welding, electricity, auto mechanics, sewing and knitting. Some 1,950 refugees are employed as interpreters, office clerks, teachers, carpenters, electrician, medical assistants. They receive about 10 baht or 45 U.S. cents a day. The camp population is predominantly women and children. Many of the children are undernourished. A number came up to me and complained of insufficient food and water, of their dimming hope to come to the U.S. soon.

The camp is an extremely busy place. In a single month, 7,000 to 8,000 refugees, many from other camps, are processed here as a transit center for predeparture resettlement. Births occur at 60 to 90 infants a month. The ARC believes that a majority of refugees are mentally and physically ill and should not be allowed to go to other countries until

they are well.

While at Panat Nikhom, I observed a large group of people confined inside a tall fence. They were not allowed to roam about the camp as others were. They had escaped from Laos to Thailand in 1978, resettled to China in 1980, but found life there was not what they had been told. They had no jobs, no medical care and not enough food. They were so unhappy that all 303 of them began walking from China back to Thailand.

Refused entry, they walked to Burma, but were also turned back to Thailand. Eventually they found themselves at Panat Nikhom. Their faces - men, women and children - were very unhappy. Almost all who came up to me mentioned suicide. They are having trouble coping with anxiety, depression, stress and emotional problems.

The situation of the refugees haunts me constantly. It bothers me so much that I almost wish I had not gone back to see their living conditions. I know that few will be accepted by other countries and they will probably never be able to go back home again.

I made the trip to Thailand in order fulfill both personal and professional objectives, and to visit my family that I had not seen for 10 years. I was able to visit my family and to speak a familiar language once again. I feared that if I did not get to Thailand soon I would not see my mother again.

On April 10, 1985, I went up to Nongkhai, the border town across from Laos. I was so close to my homeland. But it hurt me deeply to see it and not able to go there. I saw my tears dropping. Finally I turned my back on my former home and told myself that there was nothing I could do about this. I renewed my vow to make as good a life as I can for myself and my children in my adopted country, the USA.

*Arriving penniless in Chicago in 1976 with two young children, Rabieb was hired as an aide in a nursing home at \$2.45 an hour. Four years later, she began work as a public health specialist for refugees with the state government in Springfield, Illinois. She retired after 22 years.*

*In 1992 she married Ron Roy, an American computer manager. Rabieb made good her vow to insure an education for her children. Her daughter is completing a college course in child development; her son is studying business management at a university. Rabieb passed away on April 27, 2011. At picture below she stands at extreme right during the first OB Vientiane nursing school reunion in Chicago, Illinois, USA in 2008. "I wore this dress only twice, during my wedding and at this reunion," she said. The nurses are joined by their Filipino teachers (front seated) and OB Project Manager "Vito" Naranjo (back row, second from left).*



# Boni, the Exile



Before Bonifacio “Boni” Gillego was spending days within the archives of a U.S. military library in St. Louis, Missouri, before he was a fugitive in the Visayas region, the Philippines, fleeing martial law hunters of President Ferdinand Marcos, before he was appointed by President Cory Aquino to head the first Commission to track the hidden millions of dollars and Western artwork stolen by the Marcos regime, before he was elected for three terms as Congress representative, before all of that (and several other incarnations that will be described here in a short while), Boni was in Laos.

Between 1962 and 1968, he served in various capacities with Operation Brotherhood Laos— as Assistant Project Manager, as acting Project Manager, and finally as Executive Officer of the OB Manila office. On January 31, 1966, in a goodbye letter to take his post in Manila, he said “at no time in my combined 25 years of government and non-governmental service have I found a camaraderie so close, so warm, so intense, so familial” as his four years with OB members in Laos.

In 1971, as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention drafting a new constitution, he was alarmed at the increasing militarization of the government under President Marcos. He should know, being a retired major army intelligence officer. From the convention floor and at many gatherings he spoke against the “misuse and abuse” of military funds.

Consequently when martial law was declared in 1972 he was high in the 2,000-name dragnet list that rounded up legislators, journalists, activists and other Marcos critics. Warned in time (it’s nice to have your own intelligence informants ) soldiers missed him by a few hours when he fled his home in Katipunan Avenue, Quezon City. Thus began his life on the run for six years, from Bicol to Samar during which time he was branded a sympathizer of the communist New People’s Army. He did consider himself partial to “leftist” ideas. (Was it the result of his training in 1953 sponsored by the U.S. government at the John Hopkins University School for Advanced Studies in Washington D.C.? The subject of his study tour: international communism).

Much later he told me that the training was his “reward” from former President Ramon Magsaysay for his part in breaking up the Taruc –Lava anti-government “Huk” guerrilla movement of the 1950s.

Boni finally made it out of the Philippines via the “back door” southern route taken by other notable anti-Marcos fugitives, hopping from— from Tawi-Tawi to Sabah, to Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Washington DC. “I boarded Singapore Airlines in my T-shirt,” he said. He promptly joined the Movement For A Free Philippines (MFP), one of the major anti-martial groups led by former Senator Raul Manglapus (whose wife and two sons had escaped earlier via the same route). For the next 14 years, he lived the life of an exile, cut off from his family, at one time working as a security guard and as a hotel accountant. His major MFP accomplishment was exposing as fake the war medals allegedly awarded by the U.S. military for Marcos’ guerrilla record against the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. He turned over his research files from

various U.S. military records libraries to the New York Times and the Washington Post. Both published front page stories. Enraged, Marcos began his U.S. campaign to portray MFP's lobbying against American military aid as endangering U.S. interests in the Philippines. It was at this time during the mid-1980s that the Marcos-friendly administration of Ronald Reagan yanked the welcome mat from under the Filipino exiles. FBI surveillance and interrogation of key MFP members intensified. Agents visited Boni at his Arlington, Virginia residence for some "polite" questioning.

Then, the EDSA People Power Revolution of 1986 erupted, followed by Boni's appointment as Executive Director of the Philippine Commission on Good Government in New York; then, consul of the Philippine Consulate in Honolulu, Hawaii; finally as Sorsogon province congressman.

Why do I recall at this time these highlights of Boni's career? Because this month 13 years ago on August 1, 2002, we remember his death at the age of 81 in Quezon City. These episodes and many more are described in fuller detail in my recent history: "Fighting From A Distance: How Filipino Exiles Helped Topple A Dictator." But the book barely mentioned his OB service. It did not seem relevant to his exile years that would come much later.

Boni would not have agreed. He occupied a room on the ground floor of the communal OB House in Vientiane, near the Mess Hall. A voracious, fast reader, he could toss off a book or two before falling asleep. Thus one can be certain he would still be awake if you wished to discuss some very personal matter. In his goodbye letter he wrote:

"Etched in my memory will always be the faltering steps, the knock at the door, the sigh of anguish, the sob of despair, the troubled face of the depressed and the heartbroken. Somehow I feel rewarded and completed as one who has given solace to one in distress as you leave my room with more confident steps, heaving a sigh of relief and betraying in your face, once dark with the pall of gloom and heavy with the weight of sadness, a hint of a smile, however tentative or fleeting....I shall remain as ever your counselor and friend."

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To read recent past issues of our Newsletter, log on to  
.http://www.mekongcircle.org/  
Full pages available online of the  
May 2018 (No. 31) and June 2018 (No. 32) issues.  
Your comments are welcome to fuentecila@aol.com.

Mekong Circle International was organized in 1975 in California, USA and is approved by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service as a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. Its founding members served as technicians and advisers in education, public health, engineering and development aid. An affiliate, Mekong Circle Philippines, is based in Manila. [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org)



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## Mekong Circle 12<sup>th</sup> Reunion

Vientiane, Laos November 21- 25, 2018

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Update No. 5 July 5, 2018

Dear Members and Friends

Some notes to consider as we put together details of our 12<sup>th</sup> Reunion:

### 1. Visit Laos Year 2018

The Lao government has launched beginning last year this campaign to attract 5.2 million tourists, up from 4.8 million in 2017. The campaign is coordinating with different government bodies and the private sector in promoting various activities such as cultural festivals and traditional events. To view a comprehensive lineup of events, log on to this website – [www.tourismloas.org](http://www.tourismloas.org)

### 2. Boun That Luang – November 18 - 22, 2018

At this same site, there is a description of the country's grandest festival when you click on the November calendar. Most of us are familiar with this three-day event which this year coincides with our week in Vientiane. The festival grounds are merely minutes away from our OB living quarters and so we remember what it's like – not just a massive spiritual event also a cultural feast as well as a huge trade fair. This short descriptive essay is a useful refresher to plan for your visit.

The convergence of The Visit Laos Year 2018 campaign and Boun That Luang during our visit can mean that accommodations are expected to be tight. **So, it is advisable to book early your rooms at Crowne Plaza thru Khiri, our travel agent, in order to hold your reservations.** The city now has hundreds of hotels and guest houses but seeking one online that combines amenities we want with affordability can be overwhelming. Here's a look at Crowne Plaza's features -- <https://thepointsguy.com/reviews/crowne-plaza-vientiane-laos/amp/>

### 3. More Laos Videos to Binge On

It's been quite a while, a very long while since our 1957-1975 sojourn in Laos. So, in our June 2018 Mekong Circle Newsletter that we emailed you, we recommended two videos to bring you up to date since then. Here are two more:

a) "Asia From Above: Exploring the Land of a Million Elephants"

Shot in 2014, this is Episode 4 of Season 1 of a series that includes Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. 42 minutes  
[https://www.amazon.com/Laos/dp/B073XZ7ZX9/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=instant-video&ie=UTF8&qid=1530798023&sr=1-1&keywords=asia+from+above+laos](https://www.amazon.com/Laos/dp/B073XZ7ZX9/ref=sr_1_1?s=instant-video&ie=UTF8&qid=1530798023&sr=1-1&keywords=asia+from+above+laos)

b) "Go Inside Luang Prabang"

For those planning a sidetrip to this cultural capital, here is a three-minute travelogue produced in the gorgeous style of National Geographic magazine. Click  
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/destinations/asia/laos/louangphrabang-world-heritage-site/>

Here are the three previous videos from our June 2018 Mekong Newsletter. The first two were produced by the late celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain. Click on the links to open them.

1) "No Reservations Laos" in 2008. 43-minute. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2ifxwt>

2) "Parts Unknown Laos" in 2017 (Season 9, Episode 3). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1aDVCiUR\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1aDVCiUR_I)

3) "The Mekong River with Sue Perkins" Episode 3 -- <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2b2xfo>

Attached are the Booking Form and the Itinerary from Khiri Travel.

**To: Khiri Travel Laos**

No. 130 Unit 8 Saphangmor, Saysethat District, Vientiane, Laos PDR

**Subject : Confirmation to Book with Mekong Circle Reunion Tour  
Vientiane, Laos, November 21-25, 2018**

Full name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephones: Home \_\_\_\_\_ Cell \_\_\_\_\_

Fax \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Names of companions attending with you and relationship

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship \_\_\_\_\_ Tel. \_\_\_\_\_  
( spouse, son, daughter, friend, etc.)
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship \_\_\_\_\_ Tel. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship \_\_\_\_\_ Tel. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship \_\_\_\_\_ Tel. \_\_\_\_\_

Number of hotel rooms to reserve at Crowne Plaza: \_\_\_\_\_ Khiri Travel will reserve your room.

Date of arrival \_\_\_\_\_ (leave blank if not yet booked. Inform us of final flight details.)

Date of departure \_\_\_\_\_ ( leave blank if not yet booked. Inform us of final flight details)

**LAST DAY TO BOOK: SEPT. 29, 2018**

Credit card (circle)    Visa    Mastercard    American Express    Other \_\_\_\_\_

Number \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration \_\_\_\_\_ Security code \_\_\_\_\_

**Package tour per person US \$517 + \$28.85 (5% bank fee) = \$545.85 x No. \_\_\_\_ of persons = \_\_\_\_\_**

I authorize Khiri Travel to deduct this amount from my Credit Card account.

I understand this charge covers the 5-night, 6-day package tour per person and is inclusive of 5 nights at Crowne Plaza Hotel, double occupancy room, with free breakfast and a two-day tour of the city of Vientiane as well as a reception dinner arrival at the Hotel.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Email or fax this booking form to **sales.laos@khiri.com** Fax **856 21453 832**  
**Include a copy of the page of your passport that shows your photo and issue dates.**

Khiri Travel Laos, Tel. 856 21 908 888  
Stefan Scheerer, General Manager, Cell 856 20 599 40036 Emergency No. 856 20 5552 6840