

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

JANUARY 2019

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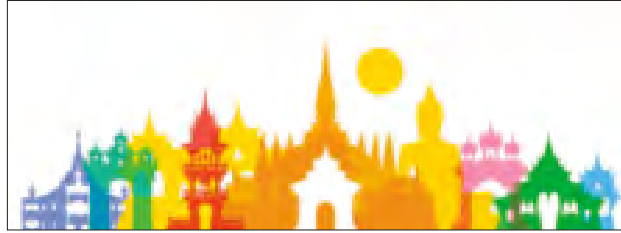
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Welcome to the 34th Issue of Our Newsletter



— *Vientiane* ❖ *Laos* —





Mekong Circle 12th Reunion

Vientiane, Laos November 21- 25, 2018

November 21, 2018 (Wednesday)

12:00 noon Registration: Crowne Plaza Hotel, Vientiane
6:30 p.m. Reception / Buffet Dinner / Program at Crowne Plaza Hotel

November 22, 2018 (Thursday)

10:00 a.m. Courtesy call on Dr. Som Ock Kingsada, Vice President, Lao Front for National Development
City Day Tour: Wat Sisaket and Wat Simmeuang
Noon Lunch: Kua Lao Restaurant
City Tour: Wat That Luang ; Cooperative Orthotic & Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE)
4:00 p.m. Rededication of the Mekong Circle Memorial, Philippine Embassy
Baci Welcome Ceremony, Philippine Embassy
5:30 p.m. Dinner at the Philippine Embassy, Vientiane

November 23, 2018 (Friday)

10:00 a.m. Courtesy call on Prof. Dr. Bouanpeun Xaphouvong. Lao Vice Minister of Information, Culture, and Tourism
10:30 a.m. Visit to the Annual Tea Party at the International Center for Training and Cooperation (ICTC), Vientiane
Noon Lunch: Tamnak Lao Restaurant
2:00 p.m. Courtesy call on Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bounkong Syhavong, Lao Minister of Health
2:30 p.m. City Tour: Carol Cassidy Weaving & Textile Center
Afternoon Dinner: Suntara Restaurant

November 24, 2018 (Saturday)

9:00 a.m. City Tour: Buddha Park and Lao Women's Disabled Center

November 25, 2018 (Sunday)

5:00 p.m. Dinner hosted by the Philippine Embassy, Lao Plaza Hotel

Note – A number of attendees flying from Manila will be joining us in Vientiane after arriving from Luang Prabang. There are free times in above schedule for you to explore other sites and events such as the That Luang festival going on this week.



November 25, 2018, Lao Plaza Hotel, Vientiane, Laos dinner reception hosted by the Philippine Embassy

A “Perfectly Timed” Reunion

From North America, four Mekong Circle members arrived from Canada, two from New York, two from Maryland, one from Virginia, two from Texas, two from Oklahoma, one from Florida, four from California, two from Ohio. From the Philippines – 27, among them six kids belonging to two Naranjo family clans that composed 11 persons. Altogether, 50 from overseas (see list below) joined more than 50 Laos-based reunion committee members and their guests for our Vientiane celebrations.

Myrna Merritt Lachenal, who missed the last 11 reunions said that the Laos reunion “timing was perfect. It made me realize so many wonderful things about myself, about others, about life, about God.” Perhaps that gave her the courage, the only tour participant, to scale the scary top of the domed “pumpkin” structure at Buddha Park. But how to explain her move during dinner November 23, to join the singer on stage at Suntara Restaurant to duet “What A Wonderful Life”, by Louis Armstrong, the American jazz musician.

“It was the first time after the death of my husband that I sang and specially this song. And it came so spontaneously as I was with all of you in Laos.” Myrna joined Operation Brother-

hood in 1967 and for the next three and a half years served as nursing service supervisor and nursing instructor at Ban Houie Sai, Sayaboury, Khong Sedone, Paksong. In 1973, she immigrated to Geneva, Switzerland, earned graduate degrees in education and psychology, “met the man, an engineer, who became my husband for 40 years, had two sons.” She is a board member of a United Nations-affiliated, Geneva-based health promotion alliance. “A full life !” said her email.

In Vientiane she roomed at Crowne Plaza Hotel with **Minerva Eresa-Will** (Florida) who recalled living through three life-threatening “false alarms” – when orders to evacuate their OB stations were aborted because reports of Pathet Lao incoming insurgents proved wrong.

“We were told that the PL chose stormy, dark nights to overrun a target. And that we should only carry with us the minimum necessities. I loved my radio. I attached a note: “Dear Pathet Lao, please take care of my radio.” It was Myrna who developed the lesson plans that Minerva and Lao OB nurse graduate **Nithaya** used to train their hospital assistants.

From Overseas, Defying Time and Age, Seeking Our Historic Roots

Agustin, Tony	Espinosa, Mary Grace	Mapaye, Rafael	Naranjo, Nenet
Agustin, Jr., Tony	Fuentecilla, Pet	Menguito Jr., Dom	Naranjo, Noah
Alcala, Mary Jane	Fuentecilla, Pete	Menguito, Dom	Naranjo, Zen
Altura, Lirio	Guevara, Eve	Menguito, Jeanne	— Ramos, Nemia
Altura, Rey	Guevara, Loren	Nantes, Josie	Ramos, Rusty
Belicena, Bing	Hernandez, Ella	Naranjo, Ellen	Reyes, Bert
Belicena, Dennis	Hernandez, Gene	Naranjo, Jansen	Reyes, Melanie
Belicena, Jun	Labao, Dickie	Naranjo, Joji	Sivilay, Sivonxay
Capili, Sining	Labao, Cely	Naranjo, Jonah	Sobrevinas, Bert
Capili, Vic	Lachenal Merritt, Myrna	Naranjo, Josel	Thongma, Vanessa
dela Paz, Letty	Madadi, Joyce	Naranjo, Justin	Will-Erese, Minerva
dela Paz, Toti	Malaythong, Sam	Naranjo, Mark	
Elises, Leny	Malaythong, Sumatra	Naranjo, Matthew	

Remembering Our Departed Members

At our Crowne Plaza reception November 21, we honored two of our departed members – **Bounthan Oudom**, (76) a former OB Lao nurse, Vientiane resident, retired from Mahosot Hospital ; **Bik Marquez**, (74) our long-serving, California-based Treasurer. Both passed away in 2017. The ballroom stage was flanked, on pedestals, with their portraits and copies of their biographies. Bounthan attended our 2010, 2012 and 2014 U.S. reunions.

Let us recall excerpts from Bik's remarks on November 3, 2002 when he led 11 of our members from the USA and Canada on a week-long "pilgrimage" to Vientiane, a "Balik Laos" project initiated by former Philippine Ambassador **Mario Galman**. He said:

"The last time I was in Laos, I was 34 years young, my hair was dark, I was single. Today, I have a son and a wife whom I met and married here. We came together on this trip to revisit a country and its people where a large part of our lives took shape and substance. It has all come true—all those baci strings during my years have promised me good things. They promised me health and wealth and a wonderful family. They all happened. Thank you baci spirits.

"To our Lao guests here. Let me say it another way—greetings to our Lao

hosts ! Many years ago you invited us. We were your guests. You were our hosts. You knew us as "khon Filipin". Every Filipino on the street was either a "tan moh" or a "nai moh", a doctor or a nurse. We served in your hospitals, clinics, refugees, orphanages, farms and schools and villages. This was at a time when Asians working with Asians was not the usual way to do international assistance. It was indeed a new experience for us in Mekong Circle. It is unforgettable. It was precious. Truly it was a gift, to know you and to be able to live a part of our lives here. Saying "thank you" now will never really reflect the depths of our feelings for you and your country. Laos was our home at one time. It is always a great feeling to come home. Kop chai lai lai."

Let's also acknowledge the favors provided by our Filipino compatriots employed by Crowne Plaza, our venue for our registration reception. Opened in January 2017, the hotel is one of dozens of modern, new business and boutique properties that cater to increasing Laos tourists (expected four million this year). A Philippine Embassy 2016 census counted 1,588 resident Filipinos in Laos, 42 of them working in hotels (see Mekong Circle Newsletter, January 2017). **Geraldine "Gigi" Roque** is a senior sous chef at Crowne Plaza; **Raymark "Emack" Santos** is a chef, and **Julie Ann Jaruda** is Banquet Supervisor who set up our reception room to our liking,

and threw in some free, large liter soda on each table. Emack can whip up that "tap-silog" omelet only your Mom can do. We also bumped into a Hard Rock Café Filipino chef, taking out an order of pad thai from a three-table, plastic stool chair sidewalk snack place near Wat Inpeng. He should know where the cheap but good eats are in this city of street food. We did not catch his name but spot him flashing the "V" sign in Filipino **Mikey Bustos'** YouTube travel series on Vientiane, his first visit in 2008. Check him out. He's funny.

Our hotel-based reunions in the USA (10 out of 11) traditionally starts with the singing of the Philippine and Lao national anthems, then a prayer, followed by a recitation of the names of the recently deceased. We began our celebrations in 1995 when we were in our late 20s and early 30s. The roll call of the departed lengthen each time we gather, a testimony to mortality. In 2016, 57 registered in Las Vegas; in Chicago in 2004, we reached 310, the most ever.

By our count, about a dozen from the USA wanted to fly to Vientiane. Reality set in when they realized that wobbly knees and aging 70 - and 80 -year-old cardiovascular systems can no longer sustain the rigors of trans-Pacific travel and walking tours. They started to drop out. Our Philippine-based colleagues, perhaps made of harder stuff, and encouraged by a shorter travel time, defied age in order to attend. Bravo !

November 22, 2018

Looking For His Buddha

Bert Sobrevinas and his wife **Irene** (both from Canada) arrived in Vientiane on March 10, 2006 from a holiday in Thailand and Malaysia. It was their first return, having served with Operation Brotherhood in the late 1950s, he doing illustrations for OB's training programs, and she as a nutritionist at the OB Vientiane Hospital in That Luang. The day they arrived in 2006, Bert had missions to accomplish.

First stop, visit the OB House in That Luang, a two-story stone building, its rooms partitioned for dormitory-style accommodation. "My initial studio was a corner inside the men's bedroom that I shared with three accountants on the

right side of the stairs to the second floor. It was quite spacious as I remember. Later on, a small studio was built at the end of a hallway at the hospital."

It was there that he, with two Lao trainees, began work in October 1960 on a life-sized Buddha, seated in the lotus position, carved from acacia. In December they presented it to the That Luang temple. It can be argued that it was the first Buddha collaborative sculpture, a product of Filipino and Lao skills. On that March day 46 years later, "I was redirected to another wat – Phra Keo," he said, then ' I was redirected to yet another temple, Wat Sisaket.' Both temples stand diago-



In 1960, Bert (bottom) and his two trainees began sculpting a wooden Buddha that was presented to Wat That Luang. Photo from Manila Bulletin newspaper, February 1, 1961.

nally from each other. Both are historic repositories of the country's deep allegiance to its dominant faith. But what distinguishes the 1824 Sisaket, from dozens in the city, is the number of Buddha statues it houses (see photo right). One count is listed in a small sign tacked to a post -- 10,134. They are tallied by size -- small, medium, large. They sit or stand, row upon row upon row, along the corridors and in every nook and cranny. They are made from wood and stone and clay and bronze.

"When Irene saw the collection, from a foot small to very tall ones that reach the ceiling, she gave up following me," Bert said. "While walking on the perimeter of the main altar, I noticed a familiar looking Buddha in front of the central Buddha but partially hidden behind the votive offerings. I looked for distinctive features to verify that it was my Buddha." It was.

"It was surprisingly well preserved after 46 years, completely refinished and numbered. Photographs were not allowed so we looked for the curator, showing him a newspaper clipping from



the Manila Daily Bulletin (February 1, 1961, see page 4) about it. He became very interested and happily allowed us to take one photo. Unfortunately, with his limited English, we were not able to talk about it. He cleared some of the clutter of offerings in front of the statue so we would have a better view of it. My only disappointment was that my two young Lao assistants were not around when I took that picture."

Fast forward to November 22, 2018, the second day of our week-long reunion in Laos. Three temples are on the tour itinerary, Wat Sisaket topping the list. Bert scrambles out the van, walks up the stairs to the arched, ornately carved

doors, removes his shoes and disappears inside together with other tourists. Moments later, he reappears. His statue was no longer where it was a dozen years ago.

Could it be among the hundreds and hundreds lined up along the hallways? Only one way to find out. Three times he goes round and round. There is an urgency, almost a desperation in his steps. Finally he gives up. Our tour guide was dispatched to make inquiries. He was told that all statues made of wood were being moved to other temples. But where? They don't know. Bert's face saddens.

Relax, we said. Acacia wood lasts for ages. Somewhere your hardy Buddha reposes in sublime nirvana. "To search for it could be another good reason for another Laos trip," he responds, not really uplifted. In 1966 Bert settled in Toronto, retired from a design studio he co-founded. Irene passed away in 2015. They have three children --- Marco, a real estate agent; Carlo an English teacher and graphic artist in Japan; Malou is a professional violinist. They have three grandchildren.



Behold, Vientiane 2018

The Chau Anouvong Park and Promenade along the Mekong River. Shoppers crowd the Night Market tents which open from 5 pm to 10 pm.

Our reunion in Vientiane in November 2018, its 12th edition of a biennial event that started in 1995, was my fourth visit to Laos. I first arrived in 1961, 23 years young, then left after six years. In 2002, thirty five years later at age 64, I returned for a two-week visit. Hoping that the past would always be present, it wasn't so.

Under a searing summer sun, I was a lost soul wandering strange streets, looking for familiar landmarks. Only three were intact -- the That Luang stupa, the Patuxai Victory Memorial and the OB House.

During two more visits in 2008, the city had totally 5

transformed yet again. "The more things change, the more it is the same." No, it ain't so. The temple shrine and that garish copy of the Arc de Triomphe stood where they were, this time bounded by brick walkways, planters and plazas. Everything else was another planet.

Forward to 2018, and behold, one thing had truly changed. On Thanom Fa Ngum street, stretching along the Mekong river, is a promenade and park called Chau Anouvong. An American journalist who has traveled many times to Laos, describes it in the August 2015 issue of National Geographic:

"Once a series of mud banks and sand pits, it is now an inviting esplanade, almost two miles long, complete with exercise machines and jogging paths – and parking spaces for those family sedans and SUVs. Every evening brings a throng: the lovers, the jugglers, the laughing children, the break dancers. Musicians perform and exercise gurus offer classes, as the immense disk of the setting tropical sun turns itself into a blurry horizontal streak, and the hubdub is illuminated by the neon tubes on the vendors' pushcarts and the shifting beams of motorcycle headlamps."

Well, we thought, such lyrical prose demanded confirmation after the passage of three years. With sunset only a

few hours ahead, it was worth a stop, said our guide, although it was not in our itinerary. We parked at one end of the street which also happened to be the entry to the Night Market street bazaar. **Dickie** and **Cely Labao** (Texas), followed by **Melanie** and **Bert Reyes** (Ohio), **Gene** and **Ella Hernandez**, **Joyce Madadi** (all from Canada) and **Pet Fuentecilla** (New York) plunged into the haggling horde. Forget the sunset. Under dozens of collapsible red tents, heaps of flea market stuff on foldable plastic tables -- trinkets, fake Louis Vuitton bags and Chanel No. 5 perfume and Beer-Lao T-shirts and sneakers. The market unfolds at five in the afternoon, then folds up at 10 pm. The promenade is actually a massive levee to contain the Mekong from flooding the city. A low headstone said it was a South Korean-funded project. (The city's commercial streets are smothered with Samsung billboards).

Yes, on the promenade there were joggers and teenagers hawking bottled water and children chasing each other and lovers. No jugglers, break dancers or musicians. Maybe tomorrow. But there is no denying the relaxing effect of twilight's golden glow, the "magic hour" on an open riverfront vista.

Two elderly women, carrying

knapsacks, offered a half-hour manicure and a backrub for 10,000 kip (\$1.17).

Paeng Mapaye (California) took the offer -- "It's a bargain." Paeng came to Laos in 1959 as a graphic arts technician with Eastern Construction Company. He was hired in 1963 by the United States Agency For International Development as a press and publications supervisor; then joined the exodus in 1975 of foreign aid technicians

A score of women, in leg tights, followed the Zumba instructor, vigorously gyrating on a makeshift sound stage. Across the Mekong, its waters so low sandbars overgrown with weeds dotted the river to the Thailand side, the sun slowly dipped in the blazing colors we remember. As we watch it disappear and gloom descends, the night market sparkles; the string lights of the open riverside restaurants glow; barbecue smoke from the roadside food stalls rise like mist. Fading memories of 50 years ago cascade, remembering the old Vientiane we loved, now gone, this 21st century incarnation in its place. We try with some painful effort to keep the past from oblivion.

—J. "Pete" Fuentecilla

The memorial stand, rededicated November 22, 2018, (photo at right) was first unveiled in November 2002. From left, Pete Fuentecilla, Dr. Som Ock Kingsada, Ambassador Belinda Ante. The metal bronze plate read:

Tribute To The Filipino Pioneers In Lao PDR

"This marker is unveiled today November 7, 2002 in honor of Operation Brotherhood volunteers and other Filipinos who pioneered humanitarian and development work in Laos from 1957 to 1975. And unselfishly committed their lives in the service of the Lao people and of humanity. This marker also symbolizes the lasting partnership and friendship between the Philip pines and Lao PDR in the spirit of ASEAN solidarity.

Done in Vientiane Lao PDR, on November 7, 2002 in the presence of Philippine Embassy officials headed by Ambassador **Mario L. Galman**, representatives of Mekong Circle and other guests."

During those 18 years, our research tallied among the deceased 10 Air America Laos technicians, 11 Operation Brotherhood personnel, one engineer with Overseas International Construction Company. Here are their names:

Abner Jornada, Bienvenido Natividad, Aurea Joaquin, Violeta Salarda, Emmanuel Canonizado, Cesar Medina, Noel Extremadura, Brigido Garcia, Rodolfo Villaroman, Wilhelmina Comia, Sisinio Azul, Augusto Calderon, Ray Castillo, Montano Centeno, Romeo Crisologo, Ernesto Cruz, F.C. Manalo, Ceferino Nabung, C. Pascual, Baltazar Reyes, Jimmy Torres, Alex Claravall.



The OB dead were nurses, accountants, medical technologists and physicians. The Air America casualties were mostly flight technicians and engineers.

Wrote **Fr. Miguel Bernad, S.J.** in his "Filipinos In Laos" history released in 2004, and updated in 2015: "Because the Filipino people were poor and could not give as much material or financial aid as other countries, their contribution of personal services was often undervalued. Yet the expenditure of human energy and dedication, sometimes even unto death, can be as great a contribution, even if not quantifiable."

November 23, 2018

A Landmark Gone, Another Is Intact

The 11-person Naranjo family entourage was led by **Joji Naranjo**, wife of deceased former OB project manager **Vitoy Naranjo**. She, together with Vitoy and social worker **Bing Belicena**, were the first expats to return to Laos in March 20 -28, 2002 after our 1975 exodus. At that visit, the OB Hospital displayed a sign "Ministry of Health, Maternal and Child Health Center." It had been closed. They walked through empty wards -- rusting beds, dusty tables, deserted nurses stations, discarded patient chart clipboards. A 100-bed facility that had served thousands of patients over 40 years waited to be razed to the ground. Beside it, through the closed doors of the Administration Building, they glimpsed chairs, tables and typewriters stacked together.

In November 20, 2002, when we stopped by to look, both structures were gone. Bulldozer tracks on the freshly turned up earth traced an empty space. The water tower hovered in one corner like a silent sentinel. The triangular white façade of the National Assembly building shone in the far distance. A green plastic fence across the street hid what was then the Silver City compound -- two-bedroom housing units for United States aid and diplomatic personnel. We were told that it was now occupied by the Lao government's security offices.

The site, at one end of Phone Keng Road, was not on our 2018 tour stops... and for good reason. The entire stretch of the street was a chaotic bedlam of people, vehicular traffic and an orgy of capitalistic commerce. It was the last day of the three-day That Luang festival, the city's (and country's) grandest all-in-one religious, cultural and shopping fair. It looked like all of the city's 783,000 plus residents had decided that day to cram into the city's 824,917 vehicles (including

340 tuk-tuks) in order to picnic on the grounds of what is now called Xayxetha Park. Nonetheless, how do you contain the primeval urge of our reunion participants to see for themselves what remains of a deeply cherished landmark that holds transformative memories of their Laos experience. Please, please, they implored, let's do a drive by, a brief sighting for pining hearts. As the van crawled foot by foot through the jammed street in front of the park, we saw masses of humanity taking over every inch of the grounds. No way to stop to pluck a blade of grass to bring home as a memento.

Denied to relive a historical moment, we turned around. Less than a fifth of a mile away, a two-story concrete house stands at the corner of Nong Bone Road and 23 Singha Rd. A sign said that this is a government office that monitors the city's water quality. Go back during the early 1950s when it was known as the OB House, the ancestral home, if you will, where hundreds of young men and women shared bedrooms, celebrated birthdays in a dining hall, played basketball in a cemented court facing the street. It was a transit stop before deployment to provincial field stations, staying for perhaps a month or years (see photo page 12). But in that time, lifelong friendships were nurtured and formed. In the 1960s, student Lao nurses lived in a dormitory behind the house. During the course of their two-year training, they too would bond with their classmates and their Filipino nurse instructors who lived only steps away.

Look out from the second floor porch. From there, some 10 minutes walking distance, the golden spire of the That Luang stupa rises. On an ordinary day, it is a serene vista that rolls out to the temple

Top: Xayxetha Park, where the OB Hospital was located. Below, Bert Sobrevinas, in November 2018, stands in front of the parlor on the second floor of OB House.



gates. But on November 22, 2018 the day we huddled on the foyer of OB House, whatever memories we relished were overwhelmed by the cacophony outside of the festival sounds. Even so, we got our souvenirs -- cell phone pictures of our living, intact past.

During our courtesy calls to government ministers, we handed over our own souvenirs to our hosts. To **Dr. Som Ock Kingsada**, Vice President of the Lao Front for National Development, we thought it most appropriate to give a copy of "Medicine: The Definitive Illustrated History" (photo below and on page 12). A physician himself who did rounds at the OB Vientiane Hospital, we dedicated the book to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Health Sciences.

The Minister of Health, **Dr. Bounkhong Syhavong**, received a copy of "The Complete Human Body: The Definitive Visual Guide" At 500 pages and almost 10 lbs heavy, it was dedicated for the library of the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Health Sciences

From left, Douangchammy Vouthisouk, Bing Belicena, Pet Santarina, Bert Sobrevinas, Dom Menguito, Ambassador Belinda Ante, Pete Fuentecilla, Myrna Lachenal, Dr. Som Ock Kingsada, Jeanne Menguito, Mimala Pathoumsad, Sonevilayvanh Panyasili, Latsamy Vongnalath, Sivone Urai Chandara



Mekong Circle Laos: The Legacy Lives

Lao core members of our Vientiane-based organizing committee included Douangchamy Vouthisouk, deputy director general of the National Institute of the Arts of the Lao Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism; Latsamy Vongnalath, head nurse of the Outpatient Department of Mahosot Hospital; Sivone Urai Chandara, a former head nurse at Mahosot Hospital; Mimala Pathoumsad, former head of the Foreign Relations Department at Setthathirath Hospital and Sonevilayvanh Panyasili, deputy head of the Pediatrics Department at Mahosot Hospital.

Mahosot, the country's premier 460-bed hospital, has had long enduring ties with Operation Brotherhood's Vientiane hospital's nursing staff. In-service training exchanges for Lao nurses began in the 1960s. Sivone was a graduate of the OB School of Practical Nursing in Vientiane. Douangchamy started as a janitor with the OB Sayaboury Hospital before completing the two-year OB nursing course in Vientiane.

Imprisoned for a year in the 1970s by the new regime, he was set free by his jailers, recognizing that the same remarkable skills which vaulted him from janitor to nurse can serve their agenda in the arts. He was sent to Bulgaria, Thailand and Nepal to learn culture promotion. He orchestrated the dance numbers presented at the November 25 reunion dinner at the Lao Plaza Hotel. Latsamy and Sonevilayvanh had attended our 2014 and 2016 reunions in Las Vegas, Nevada, transfixed by the swaying, singing fountain waters of the Bellagio Hotel. Nothing like this in Vientiane, eh? But can Las Vegas outclass those bizarre stone sculptures at Vientiane's Buddha Park? (see above). Can you spot Myrna Lachenal on top of that "pumpkin" thing?



Broken Remains of War



with the bombies, thinking they were toys.

One widely shared statistic overwhelms all – more than two million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos from 1964 to 1973 during the Vietnam War. That's equal to a planeload every eight minutes for nine years. Not all exploded. They lurk beneath the ricefields, set off by the nudge of a plow or a footstep. Years after the bombs stopped falling, they continue to maim and kill.

One way to view our 18-year (1957 – 1975) service in Laos is through the lens of a prolonged ruinous war that cost some 200,000 Lao lives on both sides...and twice that number in wounded in a poor country of three million. During that period, Laos did not experience a year of peace. In Vientiane and other provincial valley towns where most of us were stationed, we were spared the carnage. But we were on-the-ground witness to the conflict's effects on civilians whom we attended to in refugee camps, field hospitals and orphanages.

There is no starker evidence of war's collateral damage than to survey the artifacts at the Cooperative Orthotic & Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) at Khu Vieng street, one of our tour stops. Crude, handmade, wood and plastic replacements for lost limbs hang from the rafters; tennis ball – sized "bombies" that spew shrapnel; remnants of unexploded ordnance known as UXO (photo left).

We emerge from a video screening room, unable to erase from memory horrible images of UXO - mutilated children who played

November 25, 2018

Our Enduring Ties With Their Excellencies

Our 12th reunion should rightly be memorialized as perhaps the crowning achievement of our signature event. We have come full circle from our origins, in no small measure to the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane. Our partnership with the Embassy began with our welcome for the first resident Philippine Ambassador **Felipe Mabilangan** on October 26, 1965. In prior years, our envoys based in Bangkok represented our interests. By the mid-1960s, the Filipino population in Laos had topped 900, the largest overseas group at that time.

In 2002, Ambassador **Mario Galman** hosted the first batch of “Balik Laos” returnees. In 2008 Ambassador **Elizabeth Buensuceso** welcomed the second Mekong Circle group of 27 with a garden party on the Embassy grounds. In March 2016 Ambassador **Belinda Ante** invited to dinner an 11-person family group led by **Eve Guevara** who returned for the first time after 40 years. A birthday cake was lit (Eve’s 80th). The party also marked the March births of sons **Raul** (born in Laos) and **Rene**.

In 2018, Ambassador Ante, with ample assistance from vice consuls **Jose “JC” Morales** and **Iris Caranzo**, organ-

ized four major events for our reunion – on November 22, the traditional baci welcome ceremony in the Embassy, followed by a buffet dinner, then a rededication of the Mekong Circle memorial stand at the corner of the compound.

On November 25, our 5th and final day, she invited to Lao Plaza more than 100 guests - Mekong Circle International, Mekong Circle Laos, Mekong Circle Philippines – to an evening of Lao food, fine wine, brief speeches, a showing of the March 2018 video it coproduced “Filipino Pioneers in Laos”. A photo exhibit of our early years in the Kingdom was mounted. **Sam Malaythong** (California) tried to cap it all by leading a lamvong procession but the line petered out halfway around the ballroom (there was no band, no dancing) and because most participants really preferred to take selfies and group photos, and to exchange anecdotes of long ago.

“Oh my, oh my,” exclaimed **Souk Phavanh**, a former nursing aide (1973- 1975), and Vientiane resident. “I have misty eyes remembering our years together.” An-

other OB Lao nurse at Mahosot, **Thong Xong Mixa**, agreed “I want to return to those days.”

Many more Excellencies (the diplomatic and ministerial kind) were present to pose selfies with. **Yong Chanthalangsy**, former Lao Ambassador to France; Minister of Health Dr. **Bounkhong Syhavong**; Dr. **Som Ock Kingsada**, vice president of the Lao Front for National Development; **Songkane Luangmuninthone**, who will be named Ambassador to the Philippines next year. He remarked as a by-the-way – “I am an OB baby, born in the Vientiane Hospital”. The Minister of Health, Dr. Syhavong, offered his anecdotal bit - - “I lived in the Nahaidio district of the city as a student. The Filipinos there loved cockfighting. I had my first penicillin injection at OB.”

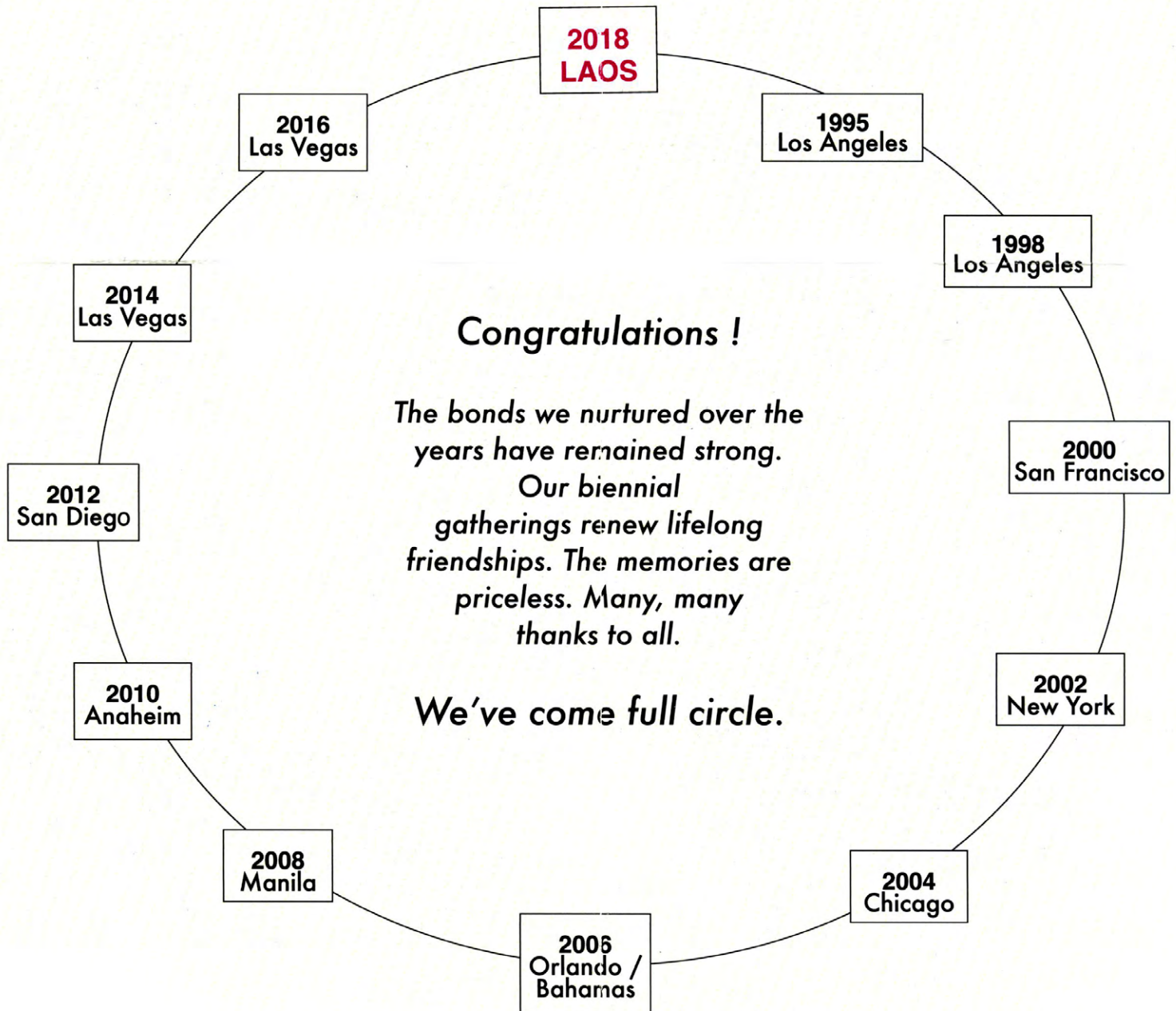
Two days earlier, at a grand all-day food and cultural festival sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the International Center For Training and Cooperation, one of our tour stops (free ethnic Southeast Asian snacks) our Philippine delegation delightedly reunited with former Lao ambassador to the Philippines **Malayvieng Sakohn-inhom** (2011 –2015). Among the “cultural” shows – line dancing (not lamvong) by all spouses of resident Ambassadors.



Baci welcome ceremony November 22, 2018 at the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane. More photos are posted in YouTube by the Embassy. 9



VIENTIANE LAOS **MEKONG CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL** **12TH REUNION** **NOVEMBER 21- 25, 2018**



Mekong Circle was organized in 1975 in California, USA as a nonprofit 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. Contacts : 216-27 Spencer Ave., Queens Village, New York 11427 USA (email fuentecila@aol.com) / 901 Sneath St., Suite 125, San Bruno, California 94066 USA Fax 650 589 3357 / 20 Barcelona St, Merville Park, M. Manila, Philippines. (email chinet_gauddah@yahoo.com) Comments on this issue are welcome. Send to fuentecila@aol.com. For more on who we are and what we do, visit www.mekongcircle.org.

Luang Prabang: Aperitif and Dessert Before and After Vientiane

Google “Laos” in any internet travel site, and “Luang Prabang” pops up in the listings, 11 times out of 10. Indeed one of the more popular travel guides of the New York Times listed it No. 1 among its “The 53 Places To Go In 2008”. And in its 2018 selection, it made the list again, albeit in No. 52, but still a major ranking where the annual competition for the “best” global hot spot is fierce. In the 2003 book “1,000 Places To See Before You Die”, Luang Prabang is No. 2 in Laos, after Wat Phou in Champassak province. No. 3 is a pricey cruise down the upper Mekong on a teak houseboat. The sights and pleasures of Luang Prabang, which we sampled in 2008 are too well known to document here. One account says there are 32 temples all over the city.

The Luang Prabang of our olden times (where we did



medical missions) is not the Luang Prabang of the 2000s. A number of our reunion members had booked flights to the city before and after our Vientiane celebrations. They were **Dom** and

Jeanne Menguito; Jun, Bing and Dennis Belicena; Toti and Letty dela Paz, Mary Espinosa, Mary Alcala; Eve Guevara and an entourage of relatives – **Loren, Lenora, Lirio, Rey. Joji Naranjo**, clutching a cane in one hand, and holding on to nephew **Matthew’s** 10-yr old shoulder with the other hand, joined son **Josel’s** family (wife **Ellen**, 7-yr **John Mark**, 4-yr old **Justin** and 10-month **Jansen**).

Another son **Jonah** flew with her and his family (wife **Nenet**, 16-yr old **Zen** and 9-yr old **Noah**). A multigeneration journey to tell Jansen when he’s old enough.

Coordinating it all was Jeanne Menguito, president of our Mekong Circle Philippines, a seasoned traveler of the region since when it was known as Indochina. She and husband Dom, a former aviation engineer with Air America Laos, have visited Vientiane several times as they roam Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

To one and all : we owe you many joyous memories.

Our reunions are organized by Committees which in turn are led by Chairpersons. We list below the Chairs for each biennial event. Their Committee members, scores of them, too numerous to name here in this space, have each invested time, talent and finances. To them and the Chairs, we salute their dedication and express our heartfelt gratitude for keeping our Association thriving over four decades.

1995 — **Bella & Narding Hilario** (North Hollywood, California, USA)

1998 — **Pol & Cita Custodio** (West Covina, California, USA)

2000 — **Jojo Pablo & Bik Marquez** (San Francisco, California, USA)

2002 — **Sas & Alita Sayong ; Pete Fuentecilla; Red del Rosario** (New Jersey; New York, USA)

2004 — **Raul & Puring de Jesus; Pete & Edith Palu-ay** (Illinois, USA)

2006 — **Lewie & Pete Gonzales** (Kissimmee, Florida, USA)

2008 — **Ben & Jovit Revilla; Sonia Ballo; Frisco San Juan; Dom & Jeanne Menguito** (Manila)

2010 — **Jun & Claire Ilustrisimo; Joe & Jojo Barcelona** (Los Angeles, California, USA)

2012 — **Sam & Sue Malaythong; Khamsy Siharath; Sivilay Sivongxay; Pat Gonzales** (California, USA)

2014 — **Pat & Clem Gonzales; Bik Marquez** (California, USA)

2016 — **Penny Flores; Menchu Domingo-Kirk** (California, USA)

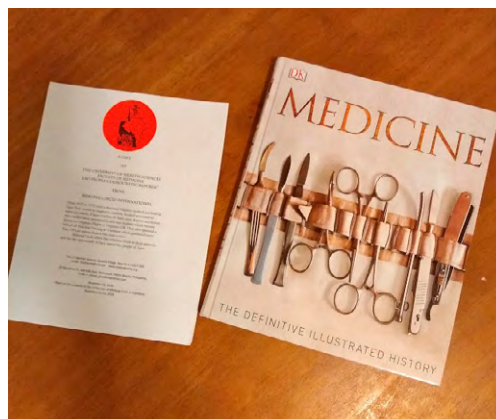
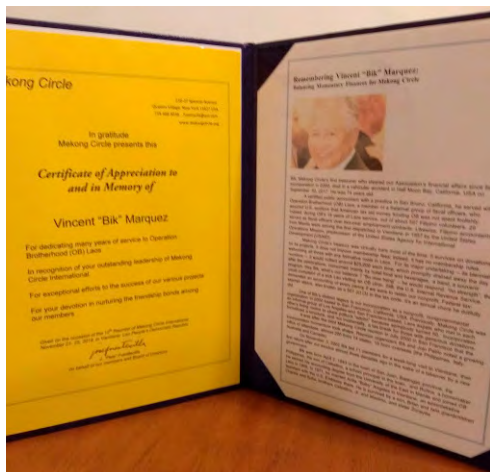
2018 — **Dom & Jeanne Menguito** (Manila); **Latsamy Vongnalath, Sivone Urai Chandara, Douangchamy Vouthisouk** (Laos); **Pete Fuentecilla** (USA); **Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines** (Laos)

For previous Mekong Circle Newsletters features related to this special issue, read from www.mekongcircle.org:

“Returning To Vientiane: Not What You Remember” May 2018

“Great Affection For A Landmark, Now Gone” June 2018

“Returning To Laos: What Our Early Years Were Like” August 2018



Places and memories and keepsakes we left from our Laos reunion:

- A memorial certificate for Bik Marquez
- Medicine Reference Book for the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Health Sciences (shown with our Mekong Circle dedication page.)
- The OB House in the 1960s. In November 2018, the second floor veranda porch and the fence remain. A new entrance foyer has replaced the front with the Red Cross sign.