

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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WWW.MEKONGCIRCLE.ORG

Welcome to the 35th Issue of Our Newsletter



This is November 2008, not our November 2018 reunion in Vientiane, Laos, in front of the Philippine Embassy. Philippine Ambassador Elizabeth Buensuceso is in front row, 5th from left.

Two Homecomings, A Decade Apart

On the evening of November 13, 2008, the heavy metal gates of the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane, elaborately forged in black and gold curls, opened. A stream of guests, lined up to a table set up beside the driveway, to sign their names. About 70 guests, the Lao women in their glittering sinh, some Lao men wearing the Filipino formal Barong Tagalogs, crowded into the foyer. The welcome “baci” ceremony proceeded.

Then, all spilled out to the spacious garden. Tables are decked in white and blue cloth; a warm breeze; the first stars flicker on a clear sky; a DJ spins his first melodies. A limousine glides up and Ambassador **Elizabeth Buensuceso** emerges. Buffet Lao cuisine and lamvong-ing took up the rest of the evening.

Flash forward 10 years, November 22, 2018. Same setting. Baci in the foyer. Al fresco dinner on the same garden. This time another lady Ambassador,

Belinda Ante, welcomes the guests. In the decade that has transpired, how the past is always present was an unerving experience to those who had attended both events.

Ambassador Buensuceso had welcomed 27 Mekong Circle visitors from the Philippines, the USA and Canada, returning for their first visit to Laos, a homecoming of sorts, after 40 years. Ambassador Ante stood as host to 47 members who came to celebrate our 12th reunion, deeply mindful that this could be their only chance to visit a country that had shaped them profoundly some 50 years ago. Now in their late 70s, as memories fade fast, it was now or never to relive them in three dimensional reality.

“In 2008 I met a lot more of our Lao co-workers,” remembers **Lollie Vinzon**, a former Operation Brotherhood nurse, who joined the 2018 reunion, fly-

ing from Virginia, USA.

Another nurse, **Minerva Erese-Will**, from Florida, USA, said that if a 40-year absence from Vientiane was a head-turner the first time in 2008, “it was another 360-degree turn in just another 10 years. More houses. More vehicles. More buildings. The congestion ! I wish I had more shopping time.”

When we arrived for the 2008 “Return To Laos” trip, the city had already dramatically transformed from the 1960s and 1970s that we remember it during our 18-year sojourn. Compress all that into a five-day schedule that stirred fond memories and tugged at heart strings. The OB House in That Luang – still there, in 2008 and in 2018. The OB Hospital – gone since 2002. Likewise the USAID compound. Also intact — the apartments at Rue Sakharine , where Air America Filipino engineers lived. A modern mall had replaced the open air Talat Sao morning market. The mall’s jewelry aisles were a short walking distance from our hotel, hence several visits were not spur-of-the-moment raids by the ladies. Top 2008 shopping queens – **Penny Flores** and **Wilma Padayao**.

The 2008 itinerary served as the template for the 2018 version, with a few tweaks. In 2008, we boarded a long barge for a sunset dinner cruise on the Mekong River; a public reading session of our books “Filipinos In Laos” and “Goodbye Vientiane” was held at Monumental Books; at a tour of Mahosot Hospital, we dropped off a surgical instrument as a donation. In the same month, the week-long That Luang’s great three-in-one festival -fair- pilgrimage “boun” unrolled each evening, the 2018 edition a far larger, more cacophonous, more intensely commercial version. And at the end of the week, some 2018 members flew to Luang Prabang, inspired by a similar side-trip by the 2008 adventurers.

But why not go beyond the royal capital ? Former OB Lao nurses **Sue Malaythong**, **Sivong Sivilay** and **Vanessa Thongma**, all from California, with their husbands in tow, hired a van to visit Attopeu, Kengkok and Paksong, to see for themselves whatever happened to our OB clinics there.

“I am sad to tell you they are all gone. Just bare ground. Even Sue’s ancestral home in Attopeu was gone,” Vanessa reported. “Somewhere between Paksong and Attopeu, we got lost in the night, in a remote, uninhabited place. Oh my God, oh my God. We were really scared. Then another vehicle appeared and led the way to safety.”

2 The 2008 event was memorable in other ways.

Among the local guests to the baci were former OB Lao nurses, other hospital and USAID technicians. Former OB nurse and Vientiane resident **Bouthan Oudom** remarked how this was no ordinary call to the spirits to reunite with souls returning from afar. This, she said was actually the first time that they themselves, the local employees, were able to get together after the sudden, so sad parting of their Filipino coworkers 40 years ago at Wattay airport. Nurse **Fely Navera**, from California, hugged her student nurses last seen as teenagers, now matronly looking wives. “The world is truly round. We meet again,” she said, misty-eyed, who could have imagined ?

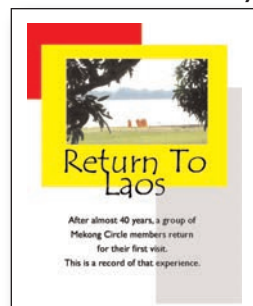
Bouthan headed, together with Vientiane residents **Sivilay** and **Sivone Urai Chandara**, the outreach effort that beckoned former colleagues living in Thailand and the Lao provinces. She passed away in April 2017. At the 2018 reception at Lao Plaza, an obituary and her photo on a pedestal at the ballroom honored her dedication to Mekong Circle. She had attended two of our U.S.-based reunions.

For a detailed report of the 2008 “Return To Laos” visit www.mekongcircle.org. Click on “Reports” under “Resources.”

The group was composed of **Ed and Edith Pasaporte**, **Fidel and Wilma Padayao**, **Pining Torres**, **Peachy Holgado**, **Penny Flores**, **Fely Navera** and daughter **Fides**, **Manding and Cecile Datu**, **Rey Zamora**, **Art Lingchangco**, **Jun and Claire Ilustrisimo**, **Pinky Casher**, **Bon and Baby Datu**, **Vanessa and Phaiboon Thongma**, **Khun Somsack**, **Becky Ciborski**, **Minverva Erese-Will**, **Lollie Vinson**, **Sue Malaythong**, **Sivilay Sivongxay**, **Pete Fuentesilla**.

Related report, see below:

“Welcome To The 34th Issue of Our Newsletter. Special Issue January 2019, on Our 12th Re-Vientiane, Laos”, accessible from www.mekongcircle.org union



How Flight Mechanics Deliver “Soft” and “Hard” Goods From The Sky And On The Ground

Flight mechanic Montano Centeno, with hat, on a mountain top refugee site. He died from a helicopter crash delivering relief supplies.



The passing of **Angie Angelo** last March 2019 in Irving, Texas, USA brings to mind a group of Filipinos who served in Laos as flight mechanics but whose work has remained mostly unnoticed. Documentation of their service is difficult to trace and appear as snippets in records that are available.

Filipinos are best known for their work in Laos as medical personnel. Over 18 years, from 1957 to 1975, out of about 600 volunteers with Operation Brotherhood (OB) who served there, more than half were nurses and physicians, such that to the Lao, OB and “khon filipin” as we were called, were identical. There were many other Filipinos during that period, almost 900 by the mid-1960s – contractors, engineers, teachers, accountants – applying their much needed special skills to a newly emergent country in the grip of a civil war.

Filipino aircraft engineers, for example, tended to fleets of commercial and military airplanes. One was a pilot named Blanco who flew with Royal Air Lao, the government airline. Most were employed by chartered U.S. government and private companies. Largest employer of Filipinos among the former was Air America, owned by Pacific Corporation, a private American company, and operated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency; Continental Air Services and Bird & Sons, also private, Laos-based companies, hired Filipino mechanics.

In a 1973 report, two years before it ceased Laos operations, Air America’s workforce totaled 1,615 – 208 (13 percent) of them Americans, 25 percent so called Third Country Nationals comprised of Thais, Taiwanese and Filipinos. Fifty were Filipino engineers staffing maintenance shops, power facilities, ground and airborne signal instrumentation.

And then there were the flight mechanics and engineers – American, Thais and Filipinos. “There has been very little written about Air America flight mechanics” writes Allen Cates, a flight mechanic himself, for their website Air America Log. “The military called them crew chiefs, combat air crewmen or load masters. They soon became masters of many trades. Helicopter flight mechanics performed many of the jobs in big bird (fixed wing) planes. Very often, after a full day’s work, a flight mechanic job was just beginning. While the pilot went to his quarters to take a hot bath, eat a hot meal and relax, the flight mechanic was performing scheduled or unscheduled maintenance on his aircraft. Usually this work was conducted outside, with poor light-

ing and primitive conditions. The incentive to do a good job was part of his work ethic because the next day he has to fly in the bird he maintained.”

As flight crew members, flight mechanics “provided another set of eyes and ears, and often aided in decision-making, but in effect was a passenger and forced to accept the consequences as determined by the pilot,” Cates wrote. In another website account, John Kirkley, a “kicker” or “Air Freight Specialist” loads what he calls “humanitarian” supplies or “soft rice — live pigs, chickens, water buffaloes, white rice and passengers”, delivered mostly on remote mountain top refugee sites. “Hard rice” loads were “ammunition, howitzer shells, rockets and bombs and aviation gas.”

“No one was closer to the wounded, the dying, the wretched and the poor than the flight mechanic,” Cates adds. “They saw it; they smelled it and they felt it. There was no way they escaped unscathed, even though the scars were not always visible.” Indeed six Filipino flight mechanics died on such missions.

“Ground mechanics were often sent into Laos to perform maintenance on downed aircraft in enemy held territory. The Filipinos were dedicated and hardworking but they received little recognition,” he wrote.

Airborne mechanics often accompanied Air America planes as “kickers” dropping supplies onto refugee sites. These missions, not as hazardous as recovering downed aircraft or pilots, rose in increasing numbers when waves of refugees, fleeing intermittent guerrilla clashes, are displaced several times. An Air America Log describes “air-delivering 10 million pounds of rice and related commodities a month, mostly by free-fall airdrop, but some by landed delivery, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year” — by any measure, a massive operation. This is the “humanitarian work” that Dr. Joe Leeker documents in his Air America history that is mostly overshadowed by Air America’s clandestine ties with the CIA in Laos.

We asked a former Filipino flight mechanic Frank Barangan, now living in the Philippines, to describe several of the missions he accompanied. In 1966 he flew with teams to recover downed Air America helicopters in Laos. Here is his account.

My first aircraft recovery was an engine change in northern Laos. The engine was in a muddy field four to six inches thick. The engine change went smoothly. We assembled an A-frame over the new engine and pulled out the airframe of the helicopter to match its height. Luckily some wooden planks were available nearby that prevented the A-frame from sinking into the mud. We replaced the engine in two day's time. I tasted sleeping in outstation first time, in a mountain site designated LS-20 Sam Thong. My shoe soles separated I lost some tools in the mud. I didn't have any extra shoes and had to fasten a safety wire around them that prevented me from getting my feet injured.

Another mission was the recovery of a UH-34D helicopter. The chopper lay on its right side with all the blade debris scattered around and the stronger part of the blades still attached. The copilot window stood high on the ground while the captain's window, still attached, was probably broken underneath. I assumed the crew managed to get out of the chopper through the copilot's window. It was decided to recover this chopper a month after it fell when the place was finally under control with friendly troops.

Before we could disembark from

the helicopter we checked for mines that could have been placed under the chopper body. Soon afterwards they gave us the thumbs up signal to start our work. I didn't have the full confidence of stepping around the place and every step I took I expected a loud bang. We tied the main rotor head with nylon belts and hooked it up to a cargo hook. We tied a parachute to the tail to stabilize its flight as it was towed by a Sky Crane copter. We had air cover above the area against bandits.

Another UH-34D recovery in northern Laos. I remember I brought along a magneto, battery, and a magneto timing instrument. The Air America helicopter that brought us there kept the main rotor engaged while waiting for us to do our job. This meant the place was too dangerous to shut down. Above, a pair of T-28's fighter planes roamed around flexing their muscle. Before doing anything, it was customary to check and disconnect the battery and test the battery switch position. The battery cover was already removed, and there was a written message on it saying, "America go home" After replacing the magneto, a new battery was connected. I went up to the Captain's seat and tried starting the engine. There were cranking sounds but no start. The engine was not responding. I went

down again and tried to time the magneto the second time.

After finding out that the timing was properly made, I went up the cockpit and cranked the engine again — twice, maybe thrice. Then suddenly incoming mortars came in with a loud bang deafening my eardrums. Two rounds hit to the left of the tail cone and one just a few meters aft of the tail, while two rounds or so landed far away. I saw our guards pulling back in front of us to the thick foliage. From the cockpit, I hurriedly jumped out to the ground on to the right main tire, barely missing the support rod of the main landing gear. I hit the right tire with my body and right forearm. I went up and galloped like a horse over the stumps of fallen trees. The helicopter was stretching its leg ready to take off. I thought they would leave us that moment. I was the first one to jump aboard with the other guy following. I left behind my tool box, timing instrument, battery and the old magneto. From above, as we gained altitude I could see traces of smoke where the mortars struck. After we were clear of the area, our escort planes bombed the surrounding hills and later destroyed the downed chopper as well, with billowing smoke and fire. We hovered for about thirty minutes before flying away."

On Some Missions: Death and Hunger

In "The Memoirs of Air America Flight Mechanics", American author Stephen Nichols recounts getting an order to bring Filipino colleagues to change out an engine in one of their helicopters. The aircraft was not inside the maintenance hanger but on a field in Muong Sui at the northern edge of the Plain of Jars, in enemy territory.

"It was hot and humid. The job was straight forward and we started work right away. I found the Filipino mechanics to be industrious, knowledgeable and friendly. By the third day, we had run out of food and my clothes were filthy from the oil, grease, grime and sweat. The Filipinos shared their food with me, which was something like pickled chicken. I did not ask. It tasted good.

"On the fourth day, the job was done and we were waiting for a pilot to fly our rehabbed helicopter and us back. By this time we had without food for two days. We all decided to walk to a nearby village to see if they had a place to eat. We followed a trail through the jungle to a small village that had thatched huts including what could loosely be called a restaurant. It had several tables with chairs and a dirt floor. The proprietor, a young Lao woman, did not appear interested in our Thai money but was persuaded to accept American dollars. It was obvious that she would have preferred gold or silver. Although I was starving, I was still leery of what type of food we would find in a remote village. We felt safe with an order of soup. The soup was served in a bowl crusted over with food like an unclean dog's dish. Flies were landing on the rim including one fly that had been swatted, its guts hanging out. I ate all except the fly. It was the best damn soup I ever had."

In his book, Nichols has listed 91 flight mechanics, with 37 Hispanic names, presumably Filipinos. Of these, five were listed as "killed in action" and whom we later confirmed were Filipinos. Stationed at a large airbase in Udorn Thani province in Thailand, their orders to go "upcountry" meant flying some 20 minutes across the Mekong River to drop "soft" or "hard rice" in Laos.

Cornelio "Pappy" Pascual's helicopter flight to Ban Peung on the Plain of Jars was hit by gunfire and exploded, killing him on August 1, 1964. On the same Plain, Montano Centeno and his American helicopter pilot crashed, killing both on July 17, 1969. Alfredo Alor's helicopter was hit by ground fire and crashed on May 19, 1972 in Khong Sedone. Feliciano Manalo was instantly killed on July 16, 1972 when his helicopter was fired on while evacuating wounded soldiers near Pakse. Romeo "Cris" Crisologo's helicopter crashed into trees and burst into flames, killing him on April 9, 1966. Ceferino Nabung, captured by the insurgent guerrilla group Pathet Lao on December 6, 1960, died a month later. Juan Solita, captured on December 1967 when enemy troops overran his radio outpost in Phalane, was released in April 1968.

(Timothy Castle, a Laos airwar historian, wrote in "Shadow War" that between 1969 and 1973, about 186 Americans died in Laos, about 35 percent Air America pilots).

Our Mekong Circle association has several retired Air America flight engineers, now living in the USA. Canada and the Philippines. Among them are **Jun Ilustrisimo, Art Linchangco, Nor Tapang and Dom Menguito.**

Historian Says Laos Service Demanded Physical and Emotional Stamina

In the May 2019 issue of our Mekong Circle Newsletter, we devoted three-and-half pages to a list of OB volunteers who served in Laos from 1957 to 1975. In all 597 names and their job titles were listed. It is the first compilation ever, an effort to record what we can gather from various sources, but not from the official files of OB which have been missing since it ceased its work in Laos in 1975.

Vic Lagleva was the first to call our attention to his absence from the Registered Nurse column. Other names to add are Editha Bermejo, RN; Julian Sopenfia, dentist; Tomas Garbanzas, administrator; Leolegario Santos, fisheries technician. This is a work in progress. We began with some 400 names. The new total of 601 misses the humanity of faceless names that scholars are now defining.

Kathryn Sweet, in a conference January 9-11, 2014 in Manila on The History of Medicine in Southeast Asia, has drawn a composite portrait of the OB volunteer. Her field work included interviews with former OB members living in the U.S. and the Philippines. Excerpt below. She also compiled the table at right.

“The slogan ‘Asians helping Asians’ also masked another important difference between Laos and the Philippines: the fact that the Philippines was a relatively prosperous, developed nation in comparison to Laos, which in the mid-1950s was considered to be one of the world’s poorest nations. This situation ensured that although OB’s activities involved cooperation between two formerly colonial, developing nations in Southeast Asia, it was not an exchange between equals. It involved a flow of technical assistance from a moderately poor country to a very poor country, in which the Philippines, or more specifically the Filipinos of OB, had the upper hand in terms of salary, skills and experience in comparison to their Lao counterparts.

As such, the desire of young Filipinos to work for OB in Laos, with its mix of glamour and hard slog, was likely to have been motivated by more factors than goodwill alone. The assignment was attractive to many, despite Laos’ status as a war-zone, as it offered a chance to travel and work overseas, in the role of an expatriate and foreign expert, on a special passport. From the mid-1960s it was also well-paid, as US dollar salaries effectively doubled on conversion into pesos when remitted to the Philippines. The work and the living conditions pushed the limits of their technical training, and demanded high levels of physical and emotional stamina.

During contracts, OB staff circulated from one station to another, enabling them to visit more parts of Laos than many Lao nationals ever had. They flew in and out of the rural OB stations in small aircraft, and later in larger transport planes on USAID routes known affectionately as “the milk run.” Due to the shifting Royal Lao Government/Pathet Lao frontline, several OB teams were evacuated by air when the fighting got too close. During and after land battles, medical staff could be run off their feet, providing emergency care for the wounded who were helicoptered into OB hospitals for treatment. In many instances,

staff had to improvise because the required medical instruments or medications were not available in remote locations with few modern conveniences.

Many OB staff found the work in Laos deeply satisfying, and renewed their contracts several times over. At least one forfeited a green card to the United States to remain in Laos. Another former nurse who stayed for more than a decade recalled, “My family didn’t understand, but then, they had never been to Laos.”

In these circumstances, the attitudes of OB staff to the cultural adjustments they had to make concerning, language, food, the low education levels of their Lao colleagues, the basic living and working conditions (eg: the lack of electricity and running water), the poverty of the local community, and the lack of cleanliness they encountered, were marked in equal parts by amazement, pity and frustration. Their attitudes were also remarkably similar to those of other international workers in Laos, whether ‘Asian’ or not.” *(continued on page 8)*

OB stations 1957-1975

1957	6	VTE, PSG, NML (closed), MXY (closed), XKG (closed), BBN, NBK, TKK, ATP
1958	8	VTE, PSG, BBN, NBK, TKK, ATP, XMN, XGN
1959	7	VTE, PSG, BBN, NBK (closed), TKK, ATP, XMN, XGN (closed), PSL (closed), XBY
1960	4	VTE, PSG, BBN (overrun), TKK (closed) ATP, XMN (overrun), XBY
1961	4	VTE, PSG, ATP, XBY
1962	4	VTE, PSG, ATP, XBY
1963	4	VTE, PSG, ATP, XBY
1964	6	VTE, PSG, ATP, XBY, KGK, VVG
1965	6	VTE, PSG, ATP, XBY, KGK, VVG, SRV
1966	6	VTE, PSG, ATP, XBY, KGK, VVG, SRV (+ M Phiang activities but no facility)
1967	6	VTE, PSG, ATP, XBY, KGK, VVG, SRV
1968	6	VTE, PSG, ATP (overrun), XBY, KGK, VVG, SRV (overrun), PKS
1969	6	VTE, PSG, XBY, KGK, VVG, PKS
1970	6	VTE, PSG, XBY, KGK, VVG, PKS
1971	6	VTE, PSG, XBY, KGK, VVG, PKS
1972	6	VTE, PSG (overrun), XBY, KGK, VVG, PKS, HXY
1973	6	VTE, XBY, KGK, VVG, PKS, HXY
1974	6	VTE, XBY, KGK, VVG, PKS, HXY
1975	6	VTE, XBY, KGK, VVG, PKS, HXY

Abbreviation of locations

ATP Attopeu	BBN Ban Ban	HXY Houei Sai
KGK Kengkok	KSD Khong Sedone	MXY Meuang Xay
NBK Nam Bak	NML Nhommalath	PKS Pakse
PSG Paksong	PSL Phongsaly	SRV Saravan
TKK Thakhek	VTE Vientiane	VVG Vang Vieng
XBY Xayabouly	XMN Xam Neua	XGN Xieng Ngeun
XKG Xieng Khouang		

NOTABLE NOTES

New Ambassador To Manila

It is customary to reserve a table for special guests at sit-down dining events. And so it was on November 25, 2019 at the Lao Plaza hotel in Vientiane at the reception hosted by the Philippine Embassy for our 12th Mekong Circle reunion. The special guests were **Yong Chanthalangsy**, former Lao Ambassador to France; **Dr. Bounkong Syhavong**, Minister of Health, and **Dr. Som Ock Kingsada**, vice president of the Lao Front For National Development.

Joining them were Philippine Ambassador **Belinda Ante**, seated right beside Mr. **Songkane Luangmuninthone**. "Please meet the Lao Ambassador-designate to the Philippines" she said. "He will assume his post in January 2019." By the way, he said, noting the occasion of the evening, "I was born in OB Vientiane." He will leave his post as Director General of Economic Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Before that he was the Deputy Permanent Representative of Laos to the United Nations, based in New York from 2008 to 2011. He had served as Second and Third Secretary at the Lao Embassy in Bangkok. He completed masters degrees in Public Policy from the National University of Singapore and Public International Law from Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

Well done, Fr. Nestor

In March 2011 Mekong Circle adopted two schools as our educational project in the town of Sta. Maria, Davao del Sur province, in the southern island of Mindanao. Around 200 primary level children sit inside thatch-roofed, bare earth, classrooms located on mountain tops too remote for government outreach. A Catholic diocese stepped in, hired teachers, conducted literacy classes for the adults, initiated vegetable growing projects. Coordinating all these is **Fr. Nestor Lisondra**, a Catholic priest with the Digos Diocese in Davao City who has been ministering to one of the island's indigenous tribal groups, beset by poverty and civil insurgency. We spent a week with him in Davao in May 2017.

Over time, we have been sending your cash donations, and "Balikbayan" boxes of school supplies, clothing, and books — close to 3,000 titles. On February 2, 2019, Fr. Nestor emailed us — "The schools have been formally turned over to the Department of Education. They are now running the schools. The one in Ilian was renamed after the donor of the land Leonila Elementary School. Kitorok is now the Maligon Elementary School. The teachers are now salaried by the government. I am simply happy to have fulfilled my dream to help the children have their own schools." For photos of the schools and a fuller report, open the "Donate" page on our website. www.mekongcircle.org

Calling Nurse Volunteers

So the kids have moved out. The grandkids no longer need you. You're drawing retirement benefits. The gardening is no longer a pleasure. Your knees are still supple. And your nursing skills remain intact. So, consider volunteering at the Lao Friends Children's Hospital in Luang Prabang province. Opened on February 2015 independently of the adjacent government provincial hospital, it treats up to 20,000 patients a year. It is equipped with ancillary services — laboratory, operating room, pharmacy, radiology.



An education center teaches mothers nutrition, family planning, disease prevention. Apart from its Lao staff of 48 nurses, 24 doctors and various auxiliary technicians, (photo above) it has hosted medical volunteers from Japan, Canada, England, Germany, Myanmar, India and the United States. They are paired with the local staff to pass on their experience and to conduct in-house training. The hospital has announced the need for nurses to volunteer in July and August. Its website www.fwab.org (click on "Become A Volunteer") Operational funds come entirely from donors, local and international.

We had the occasion to meet a Lao Board director at its 17th annual gala fundraiser at Edison Hotel in New York City May 15, 2019 (fundraisers are also held in Tokyo, Hongkong, Vientiane and other locations). **Alex Synoukham Chanthasoto**, 57, is married to Filipina **Nieves Baquiran**. A software developer in New York City, he fled Laos in 1975 as a teenager, drifting on a banana trunk across the Mekong River to a Thai refugee camp. Both now live in Norwood, New Jersey, USA.

Happy New Year, Lao-style, in Connecticut, USA

It is celebrated for three days in April and according to the lunar cycle, it falls during the second week this year. The large Lao diaspora in the USA, estimated as many as 600,000, will congregate in their wats (temples) to spend a full day of merit-making, parades, sampling the food and shopping Lao-made stuff.

From our long sojourn in Laos, we are well familiar with the color and the sounds of this celebratory event, the really big one in even the smallest village. So off we went April 15 to the Buddha Ariyametaram temple in Morris, Connecticut, about two hours by car north of New York City. While most wats in Laos rise in the middle of a walled compound, Morris' main temple, distinctive steep sloped roofs, occupies the center of an open green expansive meadow. Smaller buildings, similarly embroidered in gold, green, red eaves and brackets, cluster around it.

Surprise! — we bump into **Tongsai Mitsri**, OB nurse graduate of 1965, a Connecticut resident. She pats my expanded abdomen, remembering I suppose, her slim English teacher 54 years ago at the nursing school. There is something missing — where is the water dousing wild orgy? Not here. Instead, someone comes to you, a small cup of scented water in one hand, dipping her fingers in it, then gently sprinkling droplets on the back of your neck, murmuring wishes of good fortune and health for the new year. Now open your smart phone to YouTube and watch how bands of roving pick up trucks in Vientiane, packed with soaked celebrants, wage water battles using high powered pump guns, spraying one and all. During our times in the 1960s and 1970s plastic buckets and bowls were the weapons of choice.

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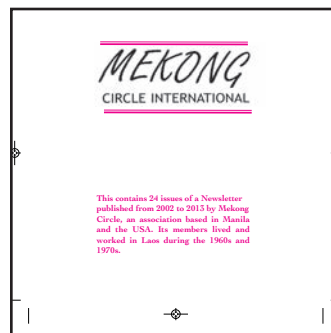
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Former Refugee Visits Refugee Camp
Boni. The Exile
Update No. 5 (July 2018) Laos Reunion

January 2019

Special Issue : 12th Reunion, Vientiane, Laos
A "Perfectly-Timed" Reunion
Remembering Our Departed Members
Looking For His Buddha
Behold, Vientiane 2018
Tribute To The Filipino Pioneers
A Landmark Gone, Another Is Intact
Mekong Circle Laos: The Legacy Lives
Broken Remains of War
Our Enduring Ties With Their Excellencies
Making Full Circle of All Our Reunions
Luang Prabang: Aperitif and Dessert
To One and All We Owe You Many Joyous Memories
Keepsakes and Memories



This list will be added to the features from March 2002 - December 2013 already contained in the CD (left) released in 2014. Full text of all features can be read from www.mekongcircle.org. Click on "Resources" then "Newsletters."

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.....Stamina for Laos Service

The table illustrates how over 18 years, the medical program covered much of the country. According to Sweet, the dimensions of its contribution to the health system of Laos went beyond the reach of its presence. First, OB's small hospitals were most often located in provincial towns, as opposed to the larger government hospitals in the major towns. Hence they delivered health care services to underserved Lao and ethnic populations essentially out of the government's reach.

Second, using the hospital as its base, health teams fanned out on regular "mobile" outdoor clinics and public health projects to villages surrounding their base stations. Thirdly, the training programs they conducted for Lao in their base stations produced a large cadre of skilled or semi-skilled health care personnel that were in short supply. This allowed delivery of health care while the government trained its own corps of doctors, nurses, laboratory assistants, medics and other auxiliary workers. Fourth, the construction and equipping of hospitals and dispensaries, and the practical demonstration of how such facilities could be effectively run is an established element of international development cooperation.

"Health facilities do not disappear into exile when a political regime changes," said Sweet. "In fact the new regime Pathet Lao made use of the OB hospitals in Vientiane and numerous provincial and district locations for several decades until 2000."

Related Feature: Our book "Goodbye Vientiane – Untold Stories of Filipinos in Laos", published in 2005, compiles anecdotes of their expat life in the 1960s, as related to Penelope Flores, an OB social worker. In the anecdote "How I Eluded The KGB", the narrator is not Casto Pingul but Mario Morales. For a copy email penelopevflores@gmail.com