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Welcome to the 36th Issue of Our Newsletter



Landlocked between six countries, Laos' geographical location made it a pawn among outside powers intent on pursuing their own ideological, political and military interests during the Cold War years 1954-1975. The flags of that period belong to North Vietnam, South Vietnam, China, the USSR, Thailand, USA, Philippines, Cambodia. Britain and France.

How Filipinos in Laos Joined the Cold War

"From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent," England's former Prime Minister Winston Churchill warned at a speech at Westminster College on March 2, 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, USA.

In its poetic cadence (Churchill is famously an esteemed orator – "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat" ... "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall never surrender!") – he named the places in Central and Eastern Europe that have fallen behind the curtain – Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest and Sofia. They have fallen "not only to Soviet influence but to increasing measure of control from Moscow." He warned of "communist fifth columns" in these places and the expansionist schemes of the Soviets. In the later part of his speech, he alerted his host U.S. President Harry S. Truman that "the outlook is also anxious in the Far East."

Russian leader Joseph Stalin denounced the speech as "war mongering". So, less than a year after the British, Ameri-

cans and Russians allied to defeat Hitler in 1945, they have drawn the battle lines of another confrontation that would be called the Cold War. Some historians say Churchill's 1946 "iron curtain" speech was the opening volleys of another global conflict that will last for 50 years. It will entangle millions, kill countless lives, consume monumental mounds of money. While the super power antagonists, the USA and the Soviet Union, did not directly engage in a shooting "hot" war, their proxies — non-super states that chose sides — were drawn into a war arena that was far from cold. One of them was Laos, in Churchill's Far East, a landlocked, poor, sparsely populated Buddhist Kingdom. It is about the size of Britain (population 66 million) but with only three million people in 1956.

When John Kennedy took over as President in 1961, flashpoints had already flared on several cold war proxy fronts. Cuba had established a Communist regime; the Dominican Republic was simmering; the Congo was a battlefield; the Soviets threatened a Berlin blockade. But outgoing president Dwight Eisenhower told Kennedy that the situation in Laos posed the



An ECCOI technician (in cap) on a field site to train Royal Lao Government (RLG) armed forces

most threatening to America's policy of containing Communist expansion. Indeed, in his first press briefing on foreign policy on March 23, 1961 he stood in front of Laos maps showing how patches in red (Communist) shades, were spreading into larger and larger sizes. Eisenhower had briefed him earlier that Laos was "the cork in the bottle...whose loss will begin the loss of most of the Far East." Kennedy declared that his administration will not allow this to happen. Extending the metaphor, he said Laos, the "cork" will not be the first domino that will knock over the surrounding countries of Cambodia, South Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, invoking once again the "falling dominoes" scenario that was one of the bedrocks of U.S interests in southeast Asia.

Kennedy had reason to worry. He inherited from Eisenhower what a study said was a "confused, complex, and intractable situation. Laos was a victim of geography. It is hardly a nation except in the legal sense. It lacked the ability to defend its recent independence. Its economy was undeveloped, its administrative capacity primitive, its population divided both ethnically and regionally, and its elite disunited, corrupt, and unfit to lead."

France had ruled Laos as one of its colonial Indochina states for 63 years as part of the French Union with Cambodia and Vietnam. Born as an independent state in 1953, Laos emerged right when the cold war had just ignited in that region. France had just lost North Vietnam a year earlier (the First Indochina War of the 1950s). North Vietnam was backing across its border a Communist-inspired Lao insurgency against the new government by guerrillas known as the Pathet Lao (PL). As the U.S. saw it, the weak Kingdom could easily fall next, the tipping domino. Hence it placed the full force of its resources behind the Royal Lao Government (RLG). The proxy fronts had lined up – PL/North Vietnam vs RLG /USA. In the background, supplying their share of resources – China and the Soviet Union to the PL side; France, Thailand, South Vietnam lined up with the US. The Philippines chose to side with RLG in ways that will be described here.

Strengthening the under-equipped, under-trained, under-paid, poorly led RLG armed forces was the first urgent order of business. Indeed even before Kennedy sounded the alarm in 1961 against the PL and North Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration

had recognized as early as 1950 the advances of the PL against RLG forces. The insurgency had its genesis in 1947 and by the early 1960s it held sway over large swaths of the country's territory.

In quick steps, the US intervened. On December 23, 1950, it signed an agreement to transfer military aid to French advisers training RLG forces. In December 1954, it established a United States Operations Mission (USOM) in Vientiane to organize economic assistance and within it a Program Evaluation Office (PEO) to handle military aid. Staffed by retired military officers, PEO advisors dressed in civilian clothes were dispatched to RLG units to monitor distribution and use of military supplies. There were also uniformed officers of the US Army – majors and lieutenant colonels – who served in each of Laos' five military regions as PEO advisors, wrote Joseph Celeski in his 2019 book "Special Air Warfare and the Secret War in Laos." USOM personnel expanded from a dozen to over a hundred by December 1957.

At 25,000 men, beefing up the morale and capability of Lao armed forces was deemed crucial. As a gesture of its commitment, a first check of several million dollars was given in 1955 to meet the Lao military payroll. Then a program of intensive training commenced, all paid from military funds. In 1958 the PEO sent Lao staff officer trainees to the US. Neighboring Thailand, a key proxy ally and the country most nervous to a PL / North Vietnam victory, set up training centers, where some 1,400 Lao paratroopers trained in one of six sites located all over Thailand.

Kenneth Conboy, in his book "Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War In Laos" wrote that at about this time, the US sought "more cost effective training programs in Southeast Asia. In particular, the PEO leaned heavily on the Philippines. Beginning in 1958, two classes of trainees were sent for Scout Ranger instruction at Fort McKinley in Manila; 23 more were scheduled for infantry training during 1959. In addition, select officers were flown to the Philippines for counterinsurgency seminars."

On January 9, 1959 PEO's Deputy Controller Henry Wilkins signed a Memorandum of Agreement with a Manila-based company Eastern Construction Company Inc. (ECCOI) and its General Manager Frisco F. San Juan for ECCOI to provide logistical support and technical assistance to the Lao armed forces. PEO had opted for local on-the-job training, "a method proven successful (for) technically unskilled, agrarian societies," said historians Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton in their book "The U.S. Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War In Northern Laos 1954 - 1973."

To PEO, the credentials of ECCOI for the task ahead were solid. Organized in 1954 as Freedom Company to instruct South Vietnamese military personnel, its Filipino technical staff had been retired Philippine armed forces personnel with experience as guerrilla fighters during the Japanese occupation of the country. Others had served with crack Scout Ranger regiments that had excelled in counterinsurgency operations during the Philippines' successful suppression of the Communist Huk guerrillas in the 1950s. San Juan was a former National Commander of the Philippine Veterans Legion who could recruit a large, experienced pool of military technical trainers.

By mid-1959, 103 ECCOI personnel had arrived in Laos.

In 1962, when it terminated its operations, their personnel roster listed 424 employees.

What is remarkable about the listing is the extensive diversity of skills represented. From generic job titles such as inventory technicians and electrical engineers, there were corrosion control specialists, aircraft airframe mechanics, artillery repair, diesel mechanics, armament mechanics, architectural engineers, parachute riggers, packaging and preservation specialists, explosive ordnance disposal specialists, turret/lathe/drill press machinists and so on. Supporting them were administrative staffs —specialists in office work, record-keeping and supply procedures who knew what it took to keep things rolling.

There were also English language instructors. Anthony and Sexton had noted that in the beginning of the ECCOI program, it “inched along for two years due chiefly to language difficulties. This in turn dampened the motivation of the trainees. Although most of the Filipinos could speak English, few of the Laotians could. To help clear the English language hurdle, ECCOIL (and occasionally United States Information Service personnel) conducted language training with the technical instruction.”

The first contingent of ECCOI personnel was headed by Alfonso “Pons” Enriquez, a reserved infantry colonel with the Philippine Armed Forces. Primo Doreza was assigned as an Ordnance Group Supervisor heading a group of 70 Filipino technicians when he arrived in 1961. The other technical groups were Air Force, Engineering and Signal.

“Our primary mission was the education of our (Lao) counterparts in the proper use, repair, maintenance and resupply of American-made vehicles and armaments,” Doreza wrote in his 1994 memoir “From Panay To Laos And Beyond.” A retired Philippine Army major, Doreza had trained at the U.S. Ordnance School in Aberdeen, Maryland. At the end of his assignment in September 1962, a U.S. commendation certificate recognized his supervision of 135 ordnance technicians...under times of stress...unusual and difficult conditions.”

Along with this massive infusion of technical advisors, training and hardware, the U.S. introduced Green Berets – special forces trained for unconventional warfare, employing counter insurgency tactics to combat PL guerrillas. By August 1959, it had 12 eight-men “Hotfoot” teams on the ground, a total of 100 men serving six-month rotations. When that operation ended, another took its place in 1961 – “Operation White Star” – about 400 men, assigned not only to engage in jungle firefights but also to train tribal men, especially the mountain-dwelling Hmong of northern Laos.

One cannot but admire how the U.S., when it sensed that its interests were threatened, could instantly marshal targeted responses. It did not stop with military aid. It also deployed an economic aid program that in two decades beginning in 1955 had consumed more than \$896 million in 20 years. (The Washington Post reported on June 16, 1975 that “military assistance ran to at least 10 times the AID budget.”)

The economic aid funds were disbursed by USOM’s successor, the U.S. Agency For International Development (USAID) and encompassed practically all sectors of Lao life – agriculture, industry, mining, transportation, health, police, community development.



Entrance to the U.S. Agency For International Development (USAID) compound in Vientiane in the 1960s.

There was another dimension to the economic aid programs. They were “intensively operational and AID employees were directly involved in normal host-country service and maintenance operations” said a USAID report. Hence the Americans worked shoulder-to-shoulder with so-called “third-country nationals”, mostly Thais and Filipinos, to implement the projects onsite. The Filipinos, almost all of them college-degreed, and experienced in their fields, provided the vital support network necessary.

Fidel Padayao, a USAID employee estimated that at one time the Filipino roster peaked at 175. “We were mostly engineers and accountants,” the latter, about 20, forming the largest group in USAID, said Romy Pestanas, a Filipino accountant. “There were perhaps 80 Americans working with USAID then.” But as the aid program amplified into a vast bureaucracy that touched almost every layer of the Lao government and into every province, personnel grew in large numbers. Some observers compared it to a parallel government to the RLG.

Though most of the Filipinos were posted in the capital city of Vientiane, others followed up aid projects in the provincial capitals, providing the support staff to oversee the construction of schools, roads, health care clinics, the logistics of supplies and services.

A 1959 USAID report said that “the 41 Filipinos now with USOM occupy positions as engineers, automotive and diesel mechanics, electricians, accountants and clerks... Their contribution continues to be of high order, particularly in imparting to the Lao technical knowledge and skills about electricity, engineering, plumbing, masonry, painting and carpentry.”

In addition to the ECCOI and USAID Filipino contingents, there were two other large Filipino groups that joined the RLG/U.S. side. To transport enormous amounts of military and economic aid stuff across mountainous, densely forested terrain with few passable roads, the U.S. contracted three private American airlines – Air America, Continental Air Services and Bird & Sons. Servicing these fleets of aircraft that ranged from one-seater Raven spotter planes to huge, multi-engine transports as well as helicopters, more than 300 Filipino flight, avionics and maintenance engineers were hired beginning in 1962. With their English language proficiency and familiarity with U.S.-made aircraft, they were highly valued by the Americans who also hired Thai and Taiwanese technicians. The Filipinos did not pilot delivery or combat missions which the Thai pilots did. (Thailand’s very active but mostly unpublished combat role in the air and on the

ground reflected its sense of vulnerability posed by its long, shared Mekong River border with Laos). They and the Filipinos maintained not only aircraft but also radio transmission sites at many Hmong mountain top outposts.

Perhaps the most visible, to the Lao, component of the Filipino assistance to the RLG and the U.S. camp is the medical aid program of Operation Brotherhood (OB). Over 18 years from 1957 and its pullout in 1975, over 600 professionals, half of them health care personnel, served in 19 sites across 12 provinces. At any one time, contracted to serve two-year terms, 100 physicians, nurses, social workers, medical technologists, dentists, engineers, spent months or years living under one roof in remote provincial locations. Guided by the belief that curative medicine did not address the root causes of disease, namely poverty and ignorance, the program employed agriculturists, nutritionists, social workers and health educators in a holistic, disease prevention approach to its medical program.

According to Australian Kathryn Sweet, in her doctoral dissertation to the National University of Singapore on the history of medicine in Laos, “the dimensions of (OB’s) 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.”

“You can see,” she noted “that the OB story is but one piece of a much larger jigsaw puzzle. However it is unique in Lao history — an organization working consistently over 18 years — and perhaps in Filipino history.” In her dissertation she sought to put together Laos’ “jigsaw” network of health care programs, those run by OB, USAID, RLG and the PL, each with its own sometimes competing agendas, hence its title “Limited Doses: Health & Development in Laos 1893 – 2000.” She argued that in the end each program did not fully fix or cure a very sick system.

The influx of Filipinos coincided with Lao political developments of that period which compelled the U.S. to initiate its intervention. The Filipinos, aware or not, were brought into a counterinsurgency plan called Operation Booster Shot conceived by the U.S. Negotiations had begun between RLG and the PL to form a coalition government that would lead to elections for a National Assembly in 1958. Despite already spending as much as \$1.4 million by 1955 in economic aid, the U.S. worried that RLG candidates were going to do poorly against PL candidates, especially in the rural areas where RLG lacked visibility of its staff and services. Fleets of Air America transports delivered rice, salt, building materials, medical supplies to these



Operation Brotherhood’s (OB) medical activities served in 19 sites across 12 provinces during its 18-year long program.

isolated areas. It so happened that in some of these places, OB operated outposts and as such were visible proof that the RLG cared for its residents.

Nonetheless, the PL won enough seats to upset the RLG ruling elite. They forced the resignation of the Prime Minister and ejected the PL. Hostilities that were suspended during the election period broke out again, followed by coups and countercoups. To end cycles of crisis governments between the three groups, conveniently labeled — a “rightist” RLG, a “leftist” PL, and a “neutralist” faction — a 14-nation Geneva conference convened in 1962. A key provision expelled all foreign military advisors, “all foreign regular and irregular troops, foreign paramilitary formations” in order for Laos to maintain a “neutral” standing among the competing proxies.

Facing loss of their assets, two signatories to the agreement never intended to abide by it. North Vietnam retained its forces in Laos; the U.S. withdrew its White Star special forces but continued with its paramilitary training and arming of Hmong guerrillas. ECCOI and Air America’s Filipino technicians returned to the Philippines (Some of the latter were rehired by USAID). To hide that they were violating this provision, both countries kept their continuing war “secret”. This portrayal stuck for years even as the mounting deaths and publicity became widely known. Laos was always the secret war; the simultaneous Vietnam war on its eastern border was open for all to see.

USAID provided the cover for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Laos that managed its side of the secret war. After the fall of the RLG to the PL in 1975, the literature on CIA’s work in Laos has unclassified ample information through the years. YouTube has uploaded hours and hours. On the internet, the search words “secret war”, “CIA” and “Laos” strung them together automatically. But much still remains classified. How many CIA operatives onsite? How much spent on an operation often described as the largest, most successful paramilitary CIA project, the model for counterinsurgency. Its contracted budget with ECCOI? The Air America payroll for its Filipino employees? (It was well known that the CIA was the chief “customer” of the airline).

One of the open sources that gave a peek at CIA and USAID ties was from hearings held before the Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the U.S. Senate. Held on



In sites such as Paksong in the south, OB's civic action projects focused on training local villagers in livelihood skills. Trainees are shown behind the Filipinos on the front row.

April 13, 1972, the secret session summoned top representatives from USAID and the U.S. State Department to review "AID Activities in Laos". Before their appearance, they were given a set of eight questions to address. The No. 5 question focused on its Village Health Program (VHP), under which OB was a component:

"What are the purposes of the VHP? How does it differ from the Operation Brotherhood program? Are the purposes of either program classified? If so, why? Is the VHP funded in part by the CIA? What role does the CIA play in the operation of the program? To what CIA program does the VHP relate?"

USAID responded that the VHP supplied U.S. personnel and local employees to three hospitals and some 200 small scale medical stations. It contracted OB, it said, to staff six hospitals not covered by VHP. "These hospitals are open to all comers, but most military personnel go to their own facilities; and because of their location, the OB hospitals do not handle many paramilitary or paramilitary dependents. CIA reimburses AID for that pro rata share of our health programs...to paramilitary personnel and their dependents. CIA does not play any direct role in the administration of these programs however."

A "sanitized" 26-page open transcript of the hearing released July 30, 1972, contained financial tables that traced how the streams of disbursement funds from three sources – USAID, Department of Defense and the CIA — sometimes pooled together in overlapping complex ways. In a preface to the printed transcript, Senator Stuart Symington, the subcommittee chairman, vented his anger at deletions demanded by USAID and State before the release of its sanitized version. (This version is now online) He concluded that AID Laos was never intended by the Congress to be the "administering agent for military assistance programs" but it did so. Indeed, Congress had to hold the hearings because media reports had begun whispering about the secret war before the Geneva accords and CIA's role in it.

"I do not believe that the Congress ever intended that the CIA should be engaged in maintaining paramilitary forces or in caring for and feeding paramilitary dependents. The activities and funds of these two agencies in Laos are so mixed that it

must be impossible for Lao officials to know whether they are dealing with AID or with CIA," Senator Symington said. The hearing "documented how AID, the Department of Defense and CIA activities are so intertwined to reveal a confusing pattern of funding arrangements."

In researching OB's history, Sweet said that "without a doubt, the CIA was helping fund the VHP because the project was providing basic medical care to 'their people' in the mountains. Documents show that OB was helping to train medics for VHP, providing interim doctors and other medical staff and providing medical care in OB facilities to people normally covered by VHP during emergencies."

The "interim" staff referred to OB physicians and nurses supplementing for short periods American staff at USAID's 150-bed hospital in Sam Thong in northern Vientiane province, a Hmong refugee center as well as a CIA base.

Sweet adds "from 1969, OB's budget was coming from USAID's Maternal and Child Health & Family Planning project," so U.S. funding was coming from at least two USAID projects, probably three U.S. government agencies—USAID, Department of Defense and CIA."

Her research showed that OB moved onto a USAID contract beginning in 1964 as part of the VHP and that over the years there was some operational and financial overlap between these two components of its Public Health Division sector. So, where did funds come before 1964 and after OB began work in 1957? After two weeks rummaging through files at the U.S. National Archives and Records Agency in College Park, Maryland, she discovered that much USAID Laos information were still restricted.

Because its own files of that period were missing, OB could not provide any leads. When it pulled out in 1975, along with all foreign aid agencies after the PL takeover, all its records from 1957 onwards could not be located in its Manila headquarters. Researchers have to rely on official USAID reports, one of which was its last funding request to Congress for \$ 6,921 million to pay for 1976 OB expenses. The cover sheet was dated May 1975, the exact month and year OB and USAID terminated and ceased funding its Laos operations.

The shadow of CIA partial funding of OB has always hovered over the history and reputation of a supposedly humanitarian, purely medical aid project.

Mart Martell, a former OB administrative officer in Vientiane from 1959 to 1962, wrote in an email to this author: "One item I can tell you with regard to us, being told that we were mere CIA puppets. My response has always been —yes, so?—my tone ranging from breezy to patronizing, depending on whether the other party is a good friend or some illiterate yahoo trying to sound knowledgeable. It is a matter of fact and an open secret among the Yanks in Vientiane that OB was financed by the CIA via conduits like USOM, AID and PEO. Where else did you think our salaries, supplies, vehicle, food and shelter came from? Not from Jaycee International. And I'm sure there are OB folks who would proudly admit that OB was a CIA grantee as if that would elevate them in the inquirer's eyes."

Martell, who passed away in December 2013, knew OB history first hand. He was in South Vietnam in 1954 when the

Flight engineers and technicians maintained fleets of aircraft chartered by the U.S. for its Laos operations



country was partitioned into North and South at the end of the First Indochina War of the 1950s when France was defeated by the north. Close to a million Vietnamese poured into the south, fearful of living in a Communist north. Oscar Arellano, a Filipino architect and officer of Junior Chamber International, a social services organization known as Jaycees, with international chapters, sounded the call for an emergency medical refugee relief project. Chapters responded with cash donations, volunteers and supplies. The Philippine government endorsed it heartily. Most of the volunteers were Filipino nurses and physicians. Community development workers such as agriculturists, fishery experts, public health nurses, also volunteered. A major cash contributor was the CIA which employed it as a Cold War weapon to back its client the new South Vietnamese government against North Vietnam's stated goal of uniting the entire country under its Communist flag.

When the project ended in 1956, the Jaycees of Laos requested its transfer to their country. Programmed to run for only six months, it was sustained, like OB Vietnam's early months, with private donations as well as with CIA funds. Blazes of favorable media coverage inspired donations but omitted CIA references. The U.S. saw its value to deter the PL by building up the RLG's sorely inadequate Lao health care system. In addition it wanted OB to replicate in Laos its counterinsurgency role in South Vietnam. In 1964 USAID took over full funding of OB. In one of its last annual reviews called "Project Appraisal Report" it dated OB funding earlier, from 1957 up to 1975, and computed total costs at \$28 million over that period. That came to an average of \$1.64 million a year over 17 years.

While ECCOI and Air America were without doubt components of the U.S. military aid program, funded by the CIA and the U.S. Department of Defense, OB's place in its economic goals can be fuzzy. It was many things to many people – relief aid, livelihood projects, training. Surely, it started out as a purely medical effort to supplement a very dysfunctional local health care system. But beyond that, the U.S. used it as early as 1957 to counter the PL's insurgency expansion. In a telegram from the U.S. Embassy in Laos to the Department of State in November 15, 1957, the Ambassador "regarded auto defense, civic action and Operation Brotherhood projects of a special nature with high priority." It followed up in another telegram January 24, 1958 requesting a \$500,000 fund for "two additional OB teams for six months and for village-level project to insure that the effects of the program on the public mind were lasting." An earlier telegram June 3, 1957 told the State Department that "we must somehow keep civic action and Operation Brotherhood programs in forefront of battle for progress in 10 loyal provinces."

Auto defense referred to arming village-based militias.

Civic action would drill wells in drought areas, bulldoze simple roads linking villages, construct school buildings, repair temples, and provide building tools and medical aid. It called this Operation Booster Shot and launched it in 1958 to back RLG candidates for the National Assembly elections. Another view saw OB as a developmental model – its training of Lao healthcare workers and operation of many clinics – that

endured to the 2000s even after the Filipinos had left.

"Interestingly, allegations about OB's CIA links have not continued to be highlighted within Laos," Sweet said at a conference on the History of Southeast Asian Medicine in Manila in January 2014. "While the U.S. and Thailand and nongovernmental organizations from these countries continue to be reminded of their less-than-noble role in their interference in Laos' affairs, OB and the Philippines appear to have avoided this awkward issue. It maybe partly due to the recognition that medical services, regardless of which agency was funding their provision, were both needed and gratefully accepted." And because of its long service, over time, OB outgrew the counterinsurgency label.

That the CIA link is now an open fact was expressed at a gathering of about 100 former OB and USAID Filipino and Lao workers in November 2018 at its 12th biennial reunion in Vientiane, the first time it was held there, with high government officials in attendance. Recounting OB's Laos work, main speaker former Ambassador to France Yong Chanthalangsy, and a respected historian, delivered a detailed OB history, from its Jaycee sponsorship to the initial funding by the CIA. There were no audible gasps or sidelong, conspiratorial glances in the audience when the agency's name was uttered.

Some 60 years ago, at the height of the Second Indochina War of the 1960s, the reaction would have been different. At that time, the global competition heightened between the ideological camps, each wielding various tools in their arsenal, propaganda among them. China blasted the U.S. for interfering in Laotian affairs, only months after the 1957 arrival of OB teams, branding OB as an imperialist tool. OB's two-year tenure in South Vietnam was widely known as a CIA operation conceived by CIA counterinsurgency adviser Edward Lansdale. The publication in major U.S. newspapers of the classified Pentagon Papers in 1971 exposed how the U.S. government got involved in Vietnam. Lansdale's recommendations in the Pentagon study to use OB and ECCOI as counterinsurgency assets, was propagandized by anti-American activists among Manila's students and intellectuals, as the CIA's dark side. They also highlighted U.S. Senate hearings that revealed CIA's assassination plots, support for autocratic regimes, funding of anti-Communist organizations and publications. Cohorts of OB Filipinos of the 1950s and 1960s, the iceist of the Cold War years, were expoaed to an unsavory portrait of the agency. How they absorbed it all has never been fully explored.

There are those who felt that their Laos service can be counted as their contribution to the downfall of the Soviet Union. They say that after all, the agency did help to win the Cold War without resort to a devastating hot war.

In an interview in Manila with military historian Max Boot in his book "The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam", ECCOI head Frisco San Juan told Boot "I knew we were being helped surreptitiously by the U.S. government, but I believed in what we were doing. I believed in the fight against Communism. Why should I feel guilty about getting U.S. government help? I wasn't betraying my country." San Juan died on February 18, 2019.

Richard Helms, CIA director from 1966 to 1973, wrote in his 2003 memoir "A Look Over My Shoulder" — "Our paramilitary operations in Laos were conducted by some 200 Agency staff and contract employees. We had fulfilled our mission and we remain proud of it. We had won the war!" One of the paramilitary missions was to keep one to two divisions of North Vietnam tied down in Laos so that they would not infiltrate via the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos into South Vietnam to fight the Americans there.

The war in Laos is sometimes described as a benign "sideshow" or a "shadow war" of the bloody one raging across its eastern border where millions, civilians and military, died. In Vientiane, there is a landmark monument, a bizarre copy of Paris's Arc de Triomphe, called Patuxay, the Victory Gate. It is a victory won at an enormous cost. A three-decade long struggle that engaged the Lao with French colonialists Japanese occupiers and Cold War combatants took 200,000 Lao lives (30,000 Hmong among them) in a country with only three million inhabitants. One account said that by the shooting war's end in 1973, 728 Americans had died in Laos, mostly Air America personnel. The death toll among Filipinos counted 21 — eleven OB and the rest Air America technicians, perishing in accidents and non-combat incidents.

The Jesuit Filipino historian Miguel Bernad, who described OB's Laos service from 1957 to 1961, said "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."

The many thousands Lao deaths, when viewed "proportional to the population would be considered, I think, larger than the losses by any other country on the face of the earth," said former U.S. Ambassador to Laos William Sullivan. "It has suffered and suffered beyond the measure of other countries in bearing the burdens of trying to defend itself."

Sources from Mekong Circle Newsletter issues below. The history above is based in part on the following features written in 2003 – 2004 in the Newsletter. Click on each link to open the files. They have all been updated with new information and published in the 2015 edition of "Filipinos in Laos", coauthored by Miguel Bernad and J. Fuentesilla. The book is available from Amazon.

About Filipinos With USAID Laos (November 2003)

http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/november_2003.php
"They Could Not Run It Without Us"

About Eastern Construction Company ECCOI (January 2004)

http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/january_2004.php
"A Remarkable Diversity of Skills"

About Filipinos with Air America, Bird & Sons, Continental Air Services (April 2004)

http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/april_2004.php
"Non-combatants On The Frontlines"

About Operation Brotherhood Laos (June 2004)

http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/june_2004.php
"The Lao Knew Us As OB"

Related Document

USAID Project Appraisal Report, Public Health Development 1973 – 1975

http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Reports/usaid_final_report.php

Related Video – "Filipino Pioneers in Laos (20 minutes, 2018, YouTube)

<https://youtu.be/Krpp9mT1YGc>



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Mekong Circle International was organized in 1975 in California, USA. 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, the Philippines.
www.mekongcircle.org