

Welcome to the 38th Issue of our Newsletter



From Our Archives: Coming Full Circle

This is the photo taken on May 21, 1995 at the Santa Fe Dam Recreation Area, in Irwindale about 20 miles west of Los Angeles, California, USA. It memorializes a picnic marking the first reunion of Mekong Circle. The day before, some 280 of them celebrated at a dinner dance at the Marriott Hotel at nearby Baldwin Park.

Twenty years earlier in 1975 they had lived and worked together in the Kingdom of Laos, an ocean away in mainland Asia. Over almost two decades these Filipinos, Thai and Lao forged lasting friendships serving as healthcare, engineering, administrative, technical aid workers in a war torn country suffering the spillover conflict raging in neighboring Vietnam. In 1975, they were compelled to leave by insurgent guerrillas that took over the central government. They dispersed across the planet. Many emigrated to the U.S.A.

In 1976, about 50 of them settled in California and reunited into a group called Mekong Circle USA, invoking the 4,880-mile long river in Laos that flowed down from its source in the Tibetan highlands of China to the Vietnamese Delta. They chose the residence of a Filipino accountant Tony Atiena and his nutritionist wife Tacing at 4551 Prospect Avenue in Los Angeles as its "temporary headquarters."

The group announced modest goals. Among them was to "provide transportation (to incoming Laos expats) from airports and bus terminals and accommodation to out-of-town members" said their first Newsletter of May 1976. More importantly, its reason for being was also spelled out in the Newsletter: "socials will be conducted every two months...", continuing a cherished ritual of their Laos sojourn.

And so, a rotation of pot-luck get-togethers at each other's residences consumed much of that formative period. By 1995, a critical mass of members emerged to seriously consider about a real reunion outside one's living room. An organizing committee headed by Narding Hilario and his wife Bella brought together former employees of Laos-based United States Agency for International Development, Operation Brotherhood, Continental Air Services, Bird and Sons, Air America Laos, Eastern Construction Company in Laos, the U.S. Embassy. Committee members were Joe and Jojo Barcelona, Sr., Philip and Jessie Cruz, Bill and Amor Valiente Cook, Pol and Cita Custodio, Nonong and Fe Garcia, Jun and Claire Ilustrisimo, Celso and Bouchuey Orense, Romy and Raquel Pestanas, Watana Panutai, Cecile and Manding Datu, Monching and Nits Romano.

By the time of its second reunion in July 1998 in Los An-

geles, followed in July 2000 in San Francisco, its members came for subsequent biennial reunions from expats in Australia, Canada, Europe, the Philippines. In November 2018, they returned for the first time to their roots in the Lao capital of Vientiane for the 12th edition of their gathering.

“Those of us who were in Laos in the 60s are mostly likely in our 60s today,” said Red del Rosario, an accountant in New Jersey, USA during our 2004 reunion, the 5th, in Chicago, Illinois USA. “We may have lost some hair, and even some teeth, but not the memories. How sweet they are !”

By 2018, the 60-year olds were in their mid-or-late 70s at a point when creaking knees and ageing respiratory systems discouraged flying off to the various venues of previous reunions. While most were held in American cities, there were offshore celebrations in Manila and on the Caribbean island of the Bahamas.

While the toll on these nostalgic binges are mediated by their once-every-two-years schedule, health issues and deaths pruned attendance. Some also figured that Laos memories renewed by physical hugs at one or two occasions can now be reinforced by Facetime on Facebook or via an internet browser. Reaching out digitally can be as fun as physical hugs

The circle came to a close in Vientiane in 2018 where our adventures began almost two decades ago. We thought this is the opportune time to dig into our archives that recorded some of our more indelible histories.

We reprint remarks given by Vincent “Bik” Marquez, our ultra-dedicated Treasurer in November 5, 2002 when he led a group tour of 11 members to Vientiane at a welcome reception hosted by Philippine Ambassador Mario Galman.

Mekong Circle’s expats numbered some 1,000 at its peak in the mid-1960s in Laos. The largest component

were health care and village development personnel, close to 600, who over 18 years served in 19 stations across the Kingdom. Called Operation Brotherhood but known most widely as OB by the Lao, by their medical work, their legacy is defined from the April 2016 issue of our Newsletter — “An Official Accounting Of A Health Program.”

To attend the 2018 reunion in Vientiane involved a long haul for those with aging bones, coming from as far away as Canada, Europe and the U.S.A. But there was this feeling in their hearts — “It’s now or never.” The images (and flavors and scents) of long ago had to be savored again, perhaps for the last time. When was the first time? We remember them in this essay from the December 2019 issue — “Remember Vientiane? It Takes Some Effort.”

We welcome your comments to include among our archives.

An Official Accounting of a Health Program



The main entrance to the USAID compound in Vientiane, Laos in the 1960s

When France lost its colonial possessions—Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia — in 1954, the United States government stepped into Laos to administer a vast aid program. It was not the best of circumstances to come to the aid of a newly independent country. Laos was poor, had the barest essentials in technical skills, infrastructure, and little sense of nationhood. Worse, it was mired in a civil war. Whatever meager resources

it had or obtained were drained to suppress a local insurgency fueled by the Cold War.

The U.S. looked at major development sectors – agriculture, economy, education, roads -- to focus its initial non-military aid program. The health sector, its survey said, suffered in the “inability of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) through its rudimentary civilian health services to provide

medical care and health support to areas disrupted by the insurgency.” In 1964 its Vientiane-based Agency for International Development (USAID) put in place a Public Health Division (PHD). This became the launching pad of its Village Health Program. VHP in turn contracted Operation Brotherhood (OB) into its sector.

Ten years later, a government audit reported that VHP had spent

\$36.1 million by September 1974 before the program was terminated in May 1975 when a Communist regime took over the country. In that time, the VHP-OB program operated in tandem to the RLG's national health services, a virtual parallel network. But it had vastly more bountiful resources – in money and skilled people and material stuff. Moreover it had far greater reach to regions the government could not or would not serve such as in the more remote locations of the OB medical teams. In effect, it surpassed the RLG's war-hampered weak efforts in providing health services to its people. VHP-OB's vast scope supplied about two-thirds of the health care services of the country,

What bang did the U.S. get for its bucks? Mindful that it was U.S. taxpayer money that paid for it all, there had to be some kind of accounting. It came in two official reports – "Termination Report USAID Laos" issued January 9, 1976; and "Project Appraisal Report (PAR)– PHD-VHP-OB International" for the period 1957 to 1975. (Both are available online).

The first report analyzed each aid sector – their history and outcomes – in 366 pages. The Public Health Development sector took 11 pages. The PAR section covered only six pages. It is a tabular form, the kind where questions and responses are filled in within prescribed boxes. It focuses on the OB component within VHP. Curiously, it spans a longer period beginning in 1957, and it said that \$28 million was "obligated" in that time. (The Termination report covers 1964 to 1974 and placed the costs at \$36.1 million).

PAR is confident in its ap-

praisal: "On the whole, the VHP project was admirably carried...There is no question that, in humanitarian terms, the project was highly successful. It saved the lives of many and prevented and relieved uncountable suffering. If the Vientiane regime had won the war, there is no doubt that this medical support program would now be considered a model for future medical support programs in insurgency situations."

In truth, as the 1976 report said USAID's health development program "despite its name, was not a development project in the sense of building a lasting institutional base for a long term health delivery system. It was created...in response to humanitarian, military and political needs." Or as the Washington Post reported in a dispatch from Vientiane on June 16, 1975 after USAID's withdrawal, "the real mission (of its multi-sector aid) was not to improve the life of ordinary Laotians but to help support the country's anti-Communist forces in their battle against the (insurgent) Pathet Lao.

Whether as band aid or model, the program reports tallied numbers that auditors sought to satisfy tax expenditures

● "By 1965, A.I.D., either directly or through contract with O.B, was operating a widely dispersed network of health stations with eight rural hospitals and about 180 rural dispensaries. The system was providing about two million out-patient visits and caring for over 25,000 in-patients per year. "The cost of medical care was quite low considering medical treatment was

based on modern medical western world concept. Cost per patient hospital day was about six dollars in the mid-60s, rising to about 12 dollars by 1975.

● In 1975, total cost was about \$5 million per year, funding seven hospitals with a total bed capacity of 850. AID operated the Ban Xon hospital in .Xiengkhuang province; O.B staffed six hospitals – Pakse, Kengkok, Vientiane, Sayaboury, Vang Vieng and Ban Houei Sai. During its 18-year service from 1957 to 1975 O.B. had 19 stations all over the country.

● By the 1973 ceasefire, VHP employed 650 Lao while O.B. had 550 Lao workers. Those with health related titles included nurses, medics, medical supply and logistics, medical technicians such as laboratory and x-ray technicians. Many learned their skills from O.B. training programs.

There was another dimension to the A.I.D. program. Because of the war, Laos experienced over a 30-year period of constant military and political turmoil, severe shortages in Lao trained personnel to implement the aid programs. As a result, in the case of O.B.'s health activities, Filipino personnel were directly involved, shoulder-to-shoulder, face-to-face with their Lao counterparts. Those assigned for months on the village level nurtured bonds with the population beyond imparting skills. Fully immersed in local life, they discovered how very similar were their cultures in many ways.

A highlight of our fifth reunion in Chicago, U.S.A.in 2004 was the first reunion of the graduates of the O.B. Vientiane School of Nursing. The two-year course graduated more than a hundred Lao students. This was their first gathering after 35 years.Here are some of them with their Filipino nurse educators.



A Great Feeling To Come Home



The last time I was in Laos, I was 34 years younger, my hair was dark, I was single. Today I have a son, and a wife whom I met 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 here have promised me good things. They promised me health and wealth and a wonderful family. They all happened. Thank you “baci” spirits.

Let me address my remarks to certain participants at this event.

To His Excellency Ambassador Mario Galman and Consul Raul Dado of the Philippine Embassy - This “Balik Laos” program was conceived here by you. It was announced at the 4th Mekong Circle reunion in New York City last August. Our group today is the first wave of what is hoped will become a continuing influx of visiting Filipinos who worked here during the 1960s and 1970s. It is a two-year program that will culminate in a celebration in 2004 marking 50 years of Lao - Philippine diplomatic relations. This is a wonderful vision of Ambassador Galman. When we return home we will do our utmost to encourage our other members to come and visit. This is truly a historic event and we are honored to be part of it.

To the Filipino community in Laos – I am told that there are about 200 “kabayans” – compatriots - who are living and working here. During our time in the mid-60s, there were an estimated 900 Filipinos in Laos, most of them in Vientiane. It was quite a large foreign community

in a small city of perhaps 150,000 residents. Indeed there was a Filipino Association of Laos. I brought with me some issues of their newsletter. Quite a number of you I am told work with the local offices of United Nations agencies. It is always heartwarming to know that Filipino com-

patriots render the kind of good work we did at one time here. On a personal level, I thank Gina Alicando of Novotel Hotel, a Filipina herself, who has been most helpful in arranging the logistics of our visit. I also extend our thanks to the staff of the Vientiane Philippine Embassy for their warm reception at Udon Thani airport and for making our visit a very pleasant experience. “Mga kababayan, mabuhay sa inyong lahat !”

Finally, to our Lao guests here. Let me say it another way - Greetings to our Lao hosts ! Yes, many years ago, you invited us. We were your guests. You were our hosts. You knew us as “khon filipin”. Every Filipino in the street was either a “tan moh” or a “nai moh” - a doctor or a nurse. We served in your hospitals, clinics, refugee camps, orphanages, farms and schools. 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 each of us in Mekong Circle. It is unforgettable. It was precious. Truly, it was your 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.



Bik Marquez (third from left) passed away on November 30, 2017 in California. He was 74 years old.

Philippine Embassy officials Ambassador Galman and Consul Dado pose with the tour group he led in 2002 to Laos. They were Gerard de Jesus, Rufinita Victa, Tony Victa, Anita Marquez, Josefina Pablo, Purificacion de Jesus, Lydia Palma, Raul de Jesus, Cionita Ljungar, Anthony de Jesus, Linda Savangsy, Corazon Victa.

Remember Vientiane ? It Takes Some Effort



The Patuxai Victory Memorial in Vientiane honors those who died during the war years

The best spot to take in an aerial view of Vientiane is to climb the 55-meter high Patuxai war memorial. Built between 1957 to 1968 as a copy of Paris's Arc de Triomphe, it stands on one end of Lane Xang, one of the city's main east-west avenues that leads to the That Luang stupa at the other end. Go up the spiral staircase to a platform where a panoramic view of that part of the city stretches to the horizon.

A tourist in 2017 describes the buildings, "all of which small and unimposing, seeming to disappear beneath the tropical foliage." Look west towards the commercial center, and another observer noted that the city "lacks a sense of monumentality associated with other socialist capitals, or perhaps to put it more accurately, it lacks of sense of socialist monumentality." In other words, Vientiane, the capital of a nominally Communist country, did not display the massive edifices – offices, apartments, plazas, memorials -- that occupy the former socialist capitals of Eastern Europe.

Look down from the platform – there's a large fountain, winding brick walkways, huge round concrete planters, cement benches. None of these were in place in 1961 when I first arrived at a time when the city was entering the era, beginning in 1955, of the American period that would last till 1975. Indeed it is said that Patuxai's cement, intended by U.S. aid for the airport, was diverted to build it. Guide books gleefully called it the "vertical runway." True or not, the joke is symbolic of a time when the city underwent an enormous building boom as a result of gigantic infusions of American economic and military assistance.

"Look, look, they have traffic lights," exclaimed

Penny Villarica-Flores, returning for the first time in 2002, some 40 years after her sojourn in 1959 as a social worker with Operation Brotherhood (OB) in the remote northern town of Sam Neua. In the late 1950s, the city's 70,000 inhabitants coped with inadequate housing, poor communications to the provinces, deficient city water supply. Pedal-powered samlors had no use for traffic lights. At our OB Annex apartment in That Luang, three 55-gallon gasoline drums of water fed from a truck, and a plastic bowl was our bathroom. Another expat OB nurse Minerva Eresa-Will, joining our November 2018 reunion in Vientiane, seeing the jammed clusters of buildings - "too many, all over" – was astounded at how only 10 years during her earlier visit, the city's landscape had sprawled its environs into village-like suburbs.

Why do I indulge in these remembrances of things past? In "Vientiane: Transformations of A Lao Landscape", (2007), three social scientists describe the history of a small out-of-the-way city in a small out-of-way nation. Vientiane's "urban past has rarely been an object of attention by scholars," they wrote. "Laos, in fact, is continually portrayed as a rural backwater marginal to the dynamic trends affecting most of the Southeast Asian mainland." They traced the city's growth through three periods – French colonial (1893 to 1954); the American intervention (1955 to 1974); and finally as the Pathet Lao capital (1975 and onwards). The French chapter is titled "Land of the Lotus Eaters." The decadent term, said a British journalist, "conjured visions of long afternoon siestas spent with an accommodating Lao or Annamite

(Vietnamese) mistresses. The scent of opium fumes mingled with heavy perfume of jasmine never seemed far removed." French officials and army men generally considered Vientiane a "dead end posting." But to other colons, it was an earthly paradise..."one vast Taiti where life was not only comfortable but also stupefying boring."

The very few massive architecture of Vientiane serve historic milestones. The That Luang stupa, for example, recalls the past splendor of the 14th century. It is the national insignia that stood before the advent of the French. The Patuxai translates to the Victory Gate. During our time in the 1960s, it always looked as an unfinished work in progress. Its unmistakable replica of Paris' Arch is said to aspire to the visions of Laos' French-educated elite. With the ascent to power of the Pathet Lao in 1975, it now memorializes the lives sacrificed for what they call the 30-year struggle against the French, the Japanese and the Americans. The "vertical runway" challenges is their way of challenging the agenda of the pushy American "colonizers".

The American period, titled the "Arena of the Cold War" chapter in the book, was of personal interest because I lived in the city from 1961 to 1967, right smack when the global war was at its coldest -- actually raging hot, in the case of Laos. People of various nationalities, civilians and combatants -- Vietnamese (north and south), Lao, Thai, Americans were dying by the hundreds of thousands. Vientiane itself was spared the carnage, except for three short-lived, internecine coups and counter-coups among Lao military war lords. The mountainous, thickly forested hinterlands were the preferred bloody conflict arenas.

The "Transformation" authors write that the almost two-decade American flood of aid money produced a completely artificial air of prosperity to the city, bringing new goods and services, and fostering insidious corruption. It had devastating effects on the Lao economy, deepened dependency on the U.S. government. In two decades, it changed not only the landscape but the way of life of the residents in a way that 60 years of French occupation did not, according to the authors.

New houses, cinemas, a bowling alley, luxury car dealerships, nightclubs, pricey consumer goods on shops catered to a small, exclusive class of Lao army and political elite and expatriates. The majority of the city's population (156,000 by 1973), swollen by war refugees and provincial migrants drawn to aid-infused work opportunities, remained poor, existing on the physical and social fringes of the city. This played into the hands of the Pathet Lao who portrayed Vientiane as an American den of corrupting influence on Lao culture and dignity.

We lived through this American period mostly as employees of Vientiane-based U.S. government agencies and contractors to American private companies. The pioneers were accountants from Manila, recruited in 1957 to staff the aid agencies, followed by Filipino health care personnel and technicians

training the Lao armed forces. By 1965, there were some 1,000 Filipino residents. Arriving barely three years after the country emerged from French rule, we witnessed its enormous efforts to modernize in the midst of a civil war. Life in the city before their deployment to provincial outposts was a rite of passage. For many Filipinos, young and impressionable as they were then, it was as well a transformative experience that shaped their later lives after they left at the beginning of the Pathet Lao 1975 era. How else to explain the 110 marital couplings of that period between and among the Filipino groups?

American expatriates, the largest foreigners at 1,200 in 1973 (about 1,000 French) administering their vast aid programs, remember their sojourns vividly. "It was a super posting and the experience will never be forgotten," was one comment to a 2012 New York Times travel feature on the city. Said another "It is its own separate, authentic place, and how many places can you say about that? That's where its charm lies."

The stereotypical accounts of 1960s Vientiane, that it is "laid-back," "sleepy," "slow-paced" were true in many ways, and therein lies its charm. Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore, Phnom Penh were frenziedly modernizing. With the city's revenues close to bare, and American aid largely spent on pursuing the war, Vientiane took its leisurely time. And oh, how good those times were. So good indeed that groups of Mekong Circle members took turns to return and relish them. In 2002 there were 11; in 2008, coming together from the Philippines, Canada and the USA, 22 spent a week in the city and Luang Prabang. And for our 2018 reunion, 50 from overseas arrived to show spouses and children where their adventures of long ago began. In between these large pilgrimages, couples returned again...and yet again. I, for one, visited four times over a decade, and each time the city had morphed closer into Cubao in Manila or a mini-Bangkok. The endearing charm is wilting. The frangipani blossoms on some tree-shaded boulevards, the soft muffle of a drum from a temple, the steaming feh noodle bowls, the grass meadows of the That Luang grounds, a boat silently slicing the muddy waters of the Mekong -- sure, you can still experience them, in patches, glimpses, sounds, but fewer of them and fading fast. There's a telling comment from one reader that touched us during our November 2018 reunion. "I remember thinking that Vientiane would always be the place that I could say: 'Yeah, Vientiane is great but you should have been there when...' Everything has changed and the pace of change is really fast." Said another: "I could go back in an instant if I could."

Maybe not. The Vientiane that you and I knew is no more.

-- J. "Pete" Fuentecilla (fuentecilla@aol.com)

The First Casualty. 21 would follow

The account below was written by journalist Maximo Soliven for the Manila Times (date not known but probably in 1958) under the headline "They Called It Brotherhood."

I met Abner Jornada in February. He was passing through Saigon on his way to Laos to serve a second tour of duty with Operation Brotherhood. He had left his wife and two children behind in the Philippines to return to his work in the jungle.

Abner, a male nurse, had first joined O.B. in March 1958. His first assignment had been, significantly enough, in Sam Neua, where the current fight-interrupted a few weeks ago. A brief vacation in the Philippines over, he was going back.

"Why do you do it?" I asked him. "Why do you stick with O.B.?"

Abner smiled and shook his head. "I don't know."

After a while, he added in his Ilongo-accented manner of speaking. "Maybe I wanted to prove myself I can do it. I think it is because I have a feeling about it, the feeling that I am doing something."

In March the following month, I turned up at O.B. headquarters in Laos itself. Abner and a six-man group were on the eve of departure for a new destination. They were leaving to open a new O.B. clinic in Phong Saly,

"Where the heck is Phone Saly?" I asked innocently.

They dragged out a map of Laos and pointed out a spot in the far northwest. My eyed glanced upward above the pointing finger They were going to be right next door to Red China.

On April 15, Abner was dead. Who had killed him? Not the Communists but a great typhoon. Strong gusts of wind and rain had torn the roof off a brick building which housed the O.B. team in that remote wilderness settlement. Part of the wall had crumbled and fallen on Abner, injuring him fatally.

Here is a list of the deceased:

Abner Jornada, Bienvenido Natividad, Aurea Joaquin, Violeta Salarda, Emmanel 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.



In one corner of the Philippine Embassy grounds in Vientiane, a memorial stands to honor Filipinos who worked and died in Laos from 1957 to 1975. During that period, 10 Air America flight technicians and engineers lost their lives, 11 Operation Brotherhood nurses, accountant, medical technologist and physicians, and one engineer with the Overseas International Construction Company.

While villagers looked on and wept, his team mates brought his broken body back to Vientiane. Accompanied by grieving Laotian officials, they flew him home to Manila to find a final place in the Libingan Ng Mga Bayani.

Over the casket, Colonel Oudone Sananikone, Secretary of State for Social Welfare and Public Health, pronounced his nation's farewell

"We have come to bring Abner home to his country, his people and his family. Our gratitude to Abner, to his family and to the Filipino people who send their sons, daughters, brothers and sisters to help our people in their hour of need, will remain forever. Because of Abner and Operation Brotherhood, the Philippines will always be dear to us. The Filipino people should be very proud of what a few have accomplished. This casket contains more than the remains of a dear friend. It also contains the heart of our people."

MEKONG

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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.
mekongcircle.org

