

Welcome to the 39th Issue of our Newsletter



Ban Houie Sai, Laos. The Tom Dooley Hospital shown in 1962 above was staffed by Operation Brotherhood (OB). In 1969. In 1972 a 50-bed new hospital replaced it and over the years up to 1975, among those who served there were Pedro Joaquin, Lolly Sevilla, Sofia Deza, Dickie Labao, Guadalupe Goma, Ben Tagaro and Augusto Celis. They are standing in 1972 on the stairs at the back of their living quarters partly shown on top of the photo.

OB Field Teams : Where Lifetimes Were Fully Lived

On May 29, 1975, passengers boarded a Royal Air Lao plane from Vientiane's Wattay airport on a flight to Bangkok, Thailand. As they crossed the Mekong River, the border that separates Laos from Thailand, they peered out the plane's window and took a last look at the capital city, expanses of green paddy fields around it. For some of them, Vientiane had been home for almost two decades that they were now leaving for good.

Aboard were 41 Filipino members of Operation Brotherhood (OB) and one Lao passenger. They were the last batch to fly out. Over the prior three weeks, OB's travel officer **Ato Paglinawan**, had been hustling to obtain seats for previous batches but was able to book only six to eight Filipinos at a time. Decades of civil war were coming to end. And the victorious Communist anti-government faction was on the march to take over the city. The Lao government could no longer assure the safety of foreign aid personnel, OB among them. Indeed, nervous Lao residents, apprehensive about their future under a new regime, were fleeing the city, initially in trickles of high-ranking government and armed forces, followed by waves of middle class urbanites and rural peasants. Vietnamese and Chinese merchants joined the exodus. A number of OB members chose to stay, said Paglinawan, among them an accountant, a nurse, a

physician and a dentist.

The 41 Filipinos represented the wide range of skills they brought with them 18 years earlier when the first group of volunteers arrived in 1957 at the invitation of the Jaycees of Laos. At any one time, some 110 to 120 of them—from nutritionists to engineers, nurses and social workers -- lived and worked in 19 locations all over the kingdom, most serving two-year contracts. Altogether, some 601 of them had spent a good part of their young formative years forging lasting friendships among themselves and the Lao.

Vientiane was their portal into transformative experiences in the city and in the provincial villages and towns. In the latter places, they found the culture and lifestyle surprisingly similar in many ways to their provincial birthplaces in the Philippines. Living dormitory-style, some stayed months as a member of a field team. Others rotated from one location to another. A full team roster would include physicians and nurses staffing a clinic or a hospital, backed up by livelihood specialists in food production and health education.

Eight field teams were evacuated in 1975. Many had been in operation a decade or more. Their team members surely

felt the heartache of leaving a lifestyle they had grown to like after an extended stay. Those who volunteered to sign up for multiple contract renewals experienced various field situations, for better or worse, and hence that much more memorable.

Having the largest bed capacity and patient load, the Vientiane site was not only a field team but also the administrative center. For new members, it served as the portal to the country and the people they will heal and teach before their assignment to remote provincial stations and deeper immersion to the real world most Lao inhabit. Here's how the field teams stacked up in the longevity scale, from opening date to 1975 when OB terminated operations.

Vientiane 18 years (January 8, 1957 to May 1975).

Sayaboury 15 years (November 22, 1960 – May 1975)

Paksong 14 years (January 14, 1957 – May 1971)

Kengkok 11 years (January 1964 – May 1975)

Vang Vieng 11 years (October 2, 1964 – May 1975)

Attopeu 10 years (January 1958 – February 23, 1968)

The two field teams that joined the 1975 pullout were Pakse (established in 1968) and Ban Houei Sai (1972). Fifteen volunteers composed the first Vientiane team: physicians **Paterno Almendral**, **Maximo Baltao**, **Pedro Joaquin**; nurses **Editha Bermejo**, **Ligaya Dagdagan**, **Petra Duruin**, **Patria Padre**; nutritionist **Felisa Urbana**; social worker **Melinda Gaborne**; fisheries technician **Leodegario Santos**; community development worker **Teodoro**

Cariaga; administrators **Salvador Agbayani**, **Fruto Bingcang**, **Reynaldo Maglaya** and **Melgre Granada**.

Fr. Miguel Bernad was able to document in his book "Filipinos In Laos" the histories of 13 field teams beginning with Vientiane and up to 1966 Attopeu. For his account he had full access to nine years of OB official files that are now missing.

What happened after 1966? The record of Another source were newsletter issues of our Balitang Laos and The Volunteer published from 1964 to 1973 in Vientiane. This source forms a second section of the book.

Ban Houei Sai, the youngest field team, began work on March 19, 1969 when a band of four volunteers chosen from the Attopeu and Paksong teams took over a 25-bed hospital formerly run by **Tom Dooley**, an American physician. It was one of three clinics he set up in Laos before he died in 1961. It was financially supported by the U.S.-based philanthropic Dooley Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Physician **Felix Romero**, dentist **Alfredo Reyes**, nurse **Romeo Agbayani** and medical technologist **Potenciano del Rosario Jr.** composed the pioneering field team.

On June 14, 1972, a new, USA-built 50-bed hospital was inaugurated. The OB staff included physicians **Pedro Joaquin**, **Jose Ballesteros**, **Felix Diaz**; dentists **Benjamin Tagaro** and **Rinaldo Bac-**



The OB Sayaboury Hospital in 1969

ardo; nurses **Enrique "Dickie" Labao**, **Sofia Deza**, **Guadalupe Goma**, **Minerva Erese**; medical technologist **Araceli Isidro**; nutritionist **Lourdeline Sevilla**; fiscal and supply officer **Conrado Calangian**; engineer **Narciso Erilla**.

"There is always something new, something different and something fresh" about the town of 6,000 residents across from Chiang Kong in Thailand on the western side of the Mekong River, said a feature in the July 1972 issue of The Volunteer. In truth, one can soon tire of visiting its two distinctive landmarks -- the Chomkao Manilat Buddhist temple and the very dilapidated shell of Fort Carnot on a hilltop, built three decades ago to stop any invasion from the Thais.

"There was an old French chalet next to the hospital which served as our quarters and office" said Dickie. "Next door was the residence of **Col. Khamphay**, the regional armed forces commander. Adjacent to this cluster of buildings was the residence of the governor who happened to be the brother of the king! We were on top of a hill overlooking the town and the Mekong river."

(For a fuller account of how the

new hospital did not almost come to be, see “Tragedy In Paradise: A Country Doctor At War in Laos” (1999) by Dr. **Charles Weldon**. He oversaw the OB-USAID contract from 1963 to 1974. “The Ban Houei Sai Hospital Saga” on pages 257-267 tell of the drama behind the scenes. His 284-page memoir (available from Amazon) has two full chapters on OB and several references to it in the other chapters. Read review on page 7).

A New York Times correspondent visiting the town in August 1971 described the fort “with its covering of lichen and tropical decay...looking more romantic, perhaps, but no more menacing than when it failed to deter the Thais from briefly seizing and thoroughly looting the town just before a kind of peace” came to its colony in 1945.

“When the bugle calls in the midafternoon, a garrison of (Lao) soldiers straggles out, some carrying their babies and followed

by their wives. Few foreigners live here, unlike the rest of government-held Laos, where they abound. Only four American civilian advisers are here, some Filipino physicians run a hospital and Italian priests of a Roman Catholic mission. The war is not far from here but seems to respect well-established lines and remains quiet.”

Today, a bridge across the Mekong built in 2013 links the town with Chiang Kong, turning it into a gateway to the province’s popular ecotourism draws. Travelers entering from Thailand board long boats from here for a two-day leisurely cruise on the river to the former royal capital of Luang Prabang. They have sleeping cabins, serve Lao and Western cuisine, and drinks, drop by riverside villages for passengers to imbibe local culture. Inland, a 1,060 – square kilometer nature preserve is home to tigers, leopards, black bears and the black-crested gib-

bon. Its most attractive feature is the “Gibbon Experience.” Adventurers stay on thatched treehouses, perched 130 ft high above thickly forested hills. Play Tarzan as you swing to and fro from steel ziplines stretching 1500 feet or longer, connecting the treehouses.

For former team members of the 1970s who wish to visit this new world of Houei Sai 2020, here are the internet links:

Mekong Smile Cruise : www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJCGQ1u8fno. After this video, read the posted comments and photos of Western tourists.

The Gibbon Experience www.gibbonexperience.org.

For views of what the town looks now after half a century of change, type “Ban Houei Sai Laos” on the Google Search bar, then click on “Images.” Page after page appear of recent photos, including the remains of Fort Carnot . Whatever else you remember of the town may have vanished to Nirvana

Welcome Your Excellencies !

His Excellency **Songkane Luangmuninthone** presented his credentials as Laos’ ambassador to the Philippines on March 11, 2019. He held various foreign service posts, among them as Deputy Director General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with the Permanent Mission of Laos to the United Nations. He earned masters degrees in public policy from the National University of Singapore and in Public International Law from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. At a reception November 25, 2018 at the Lao Plaza hotel hosted by the Philippine Embassy for our Mekong Circle reunion celebrants, he dropped a remark that aptly belonged to the occasion—“I am an OB baby, born in the Vientiane Hospital.”

During his confirmation hearing in October 2019 as U.S. Ambassador to Laos, H.E. **Peter M. Hammond** cited his previous diplomatic assignments in Laos in a 29-year long career, among them as Consul

General in 1997 to 2000, and again from 2008 to 2011. Most recently he was Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. He was joined at the hearing by his daughter Faye “who knows full well the challenges of growing up in the frequent-moving Foreign Service life. Faye had already attended five different schools in four countries by the time she reached 2nd grade.”



Ambassador Luangmuninthone (last row, right) hosted a New Years party January 2020 at his Manila residence to members of Mekong Circle Philippines. 3

NOTABLE NOTES

Cannot Believe Your Eyes

The more things change, the more they are the same”, so goes the saying. Well, not really. Indeed, not at all, after you log on to YouTube and search for Paksong or Attopeu or Sayaboury and any one of those 19 places where you were assigned 50 years or more ago. We were told that only the OB Sayaboury clinic still stands in the same compound where a newer hospital has risen.

Many of our provincial stations were located in provincial capitals or the larger towns along the Mekong River valleys. In those olden days, “capital” can mean a one road earth strip, lined by few stores; a stone structure that housed the governor’s office; the main temple; an open market; a food stall or two; a swarm of thatch-roofed houses on stilts along the perimeter. Now fast forward to 2020. Oh my Lord Buddha ! Is this what the town looks today ? Yes dear, eat your heart out. The overwhelming sights are concrete commercial structures, a testament to the relentless advance of market capitalism in a nominally Communist regime.

Where is that adopted home where you shared work and play under one roof, where you first laid eyes with rapturous enchantment on your spouse-to-be ? Gone, my dear. Those who joined our November 2018 reunion in Vientiane suffered waves of nostalgic loss for familiar landmarks, now mostly vanished, that they had treasured in photo albums, like artifacts entombed in amber.

YouTube offers multi-megabytes of present day Laos, in two-minute snippets or hour-long travelogues. As one example of how Vientiane, the capital, has transformed from our 1960s era, type “Walking In Vientiane” in the search bar. At two hours and 29 minutes long, uninterrupted by ads, it follows the cinematic style of documentarian Frederick Wiseman. No drone panoramic views of the must-see landmarks (Patuxai Monument, That Luang stupa, Wat Phra Keo, etc).

The video takes you on this urban trek that begins somewhere on a sidewalk beside the Bank of Indochina in the central business district. The handheld no jerky-herky camera takes in a wide-angle, 180-degree eye-level sweep . It is your point of view, no panning, no narration, no music, no jarring closeup zooms, no jump cuts, no computerized visuals. In effect, it’s the view of a GoPro miniature video camera strapped around your forehead. You trudge step after step on the sidewalks, crossing the streets, your shoes crunching gravel, pausing at crosswalks, the only sound is the roar of passing vehicles. You cross parking lots, outdoor restaurants, retail shops, English and Lao signage abound. Turn street corners with no idea where they will lead. It is not the structured walking tours put together by guide books. Despite its length, it weaves a hypnotic grip. If you can manage to keep up with the video, you come to the end



of a leafy street along the Mekong river. There are no more buildings and few scooters and vehicles zipping by. You have completed a walking journey of a city that at one time you knew intimately, but is now a stranger.

Curriculum Misses The Lao

On September 2018, California Governor Gerry Brown signed into law an education curriculum that would teach in

schools the history of Indochinese refugees to America. The curriculum would extol the gallantry and sacrifices of the Vietnamese, the Cambodians and the Hmong in their struggle against Communism during the Indochinese wars of the 1960s-70s. It would tell the horrific experience of mass deaths – the drownings of Vietnamese boat people, the Cambodian genocide, and the decimation of the Hmong tribal guerrillas of the CIA “Secret War”. There was one major omission: who will tell the side of the Lao ?

In an Executive Session of the U.S. Senate on January 10, 1968, American Ambassador to Laos **William Sullivan** was asked about the performance of the Laotian armed forces who were allied with the U.S. in defending the country against North Vietnam and the insurgent Pathet Lao. Sullivan replied:

“ We should understand that on occasion the Lao Army in its performance, the Lao are suffering about 2,000 killed a year. Now, 2,000 killed out of a population of two and a-half, three million, would be something equivalent, if my mathematics is not too rapid, but something equivalent to better than a hundred thousand Americans killed a year relative to our operation, so it is no joke to them.”

Historian **Martin Stuart Fox** wrote that over the 1955 to 1975 Indochina war period, 200,000 Lao lives were lost, 30,000 of them Hmong-Lao. The 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,” Sullivan told the U.S. Senate on October 1969. “It has suffered and suffered beyond the measure of other countries in bearing the burdens of trying to defend itself.”

When news of the California law reached Laotians in the state, they were profoundly distressed by the oversight. It “specifically ignores a group of Southeast Asians, compromises the integrity and accuracy of historical facts, as well as current and future community cohesiveness”, said a statement they issued.

Bobbie Oudinarath, a resident of San Diego and a refugee herself who together with her young siblings fled Laos to a refugee camp in Thailand, said. “I still remember the night we escaped and crept down the cliffs of the Mekong River and my parents telling me ‘Ok, we need to be quiet. We’re playing games.” It was a perilous game of evading Communist patrols on

the Lao side of the river, she told LAlist, a website about Los Angeles.



About 70,000 Lao live in California and 7,000 in the Los Angeles region. Mindful of this large community, she helped mobilize it into a lobbying group called LaoSD and started a campaign to include the Lao

in the curriculum. On September 5, 2019, after a year of online petitions, visits to their legislators and town hall gatherings, an amended bill was passed by the State Legislature. When added to the original 2018 version, California's K-12 public school students will begin learning by 2024 a bypassed piece of history. For the Lao, a larger lesson has already been learned.

"This last year not only woke us up. I think it also stimulated us to be more involved in the political arena," Oudinarath told LAlist. "That's the bigger picture win."

Here Come The Bean Counters

Every 10 years, the USA counts the inhabitants of the nation – the demographics of age, residence, education, kinship and other personal data that you can fill out in five minutes online. We did our own census of our association in 1995 as part of our first reunion in California, USA. It listed 193 U.S.-based names with addresses -- Filipinos, Lao, Thai and Americans, including 15 from Canada and one from the U.S. Virgin Islands (the late Dr. Felicidad "Laling" Endriga). Updates over the years increased the number to more than 450, including nine from Australia, 81 living in the Philippines and 75 Lao residents in the USA.

Filipinos accounted for more than half of the total, reflecting our large representation in Laos-based companies during the 1960s and 1970s. The Lao come second in the directory, mostly our co-workers in Laos. Many agree that the 450 names in our directory are an undercount. Consider that the roster of Filipino personnel with Operation Brotherhood (OB) in Laos had already 601 names. The shortfall in the names is attributed to missing addresses.

Filipinos from Laos began settling in America as soon as they left in 1975. Many chose California, close to a hundred immigrants. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that in 2015 there were over 3.8 million Filipinos here. Immigration by the Lao came in waves beginning in 1975, the year the Communists took over the country. By virtue of its intervention in the Laotian conflict, the USA uprooted so many of its inhabitants to seek refuge elsewhere. Between 1975 and 1992 more than 123,000 ethnic Lao and 108,000 primarily Hmong who allied with the U.S. during the war years were admitted as refugees. About 50 of the Lao were graduates of the OB School of Nursing in Vientiane, part of more than 140 who completed a two-year course. They compose some of the most active members of our association.

The 2020 census is expected to increase the number of the Lao-American diaspora from an estimated 265,000 in 2008. When President **Barack Obama** visited Laos in September 2016, the American ambassador at that time remarked on the significance of the first ever American president to set foot on the country. Said Ambassador **Daniel Clune**, "The U.S. and Laos have

a difficult history and for a period the relationship was antagonistic. However the people of Laos have warm feelings toward the people of the United States. That is partly because there are around 600,000 Lao-Americans living in the United States. In a country of six million people, it means one out of every 10 live in the United States, which as a practical matter means that just about everybody in Laos has a relative in the U.S." So, by his estimate, the 2020 census would add another 355,000 to the Lao-American diaspora.

Settling Down and Writing About It

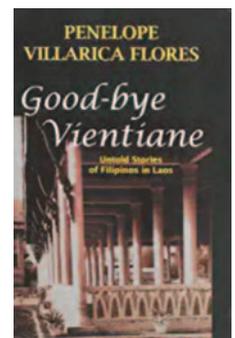
The literature on the Lao-American diaspora is not as extensive as those on the Filipino-American. One reason is because the latter have been here much longer and are far more numerous. A compilation by **Mark E. Pfeifer** with the Texas A & M University in Corpus Christi, Texas, USA of selected scholarly Lao-American studies published up to the year 2000 counted 38 books, book chapters, theses, dissertations and journal articles. The topics covered health, economics, arts, education. In contrast, there have been 213 works by and about the Hmong-Americans.

"There is far less work being done on Lao-Americans than the Hmong in just about every realm of research" he said. "The large increase in Hmong-American studies has been driven by a sizable number of Hmong-Americans, particularly professors and graduate students at American universities".

Pfeifer's selected works from both diasporas are listed at his website www.hmongstudies.org. Since then, there has been a rise in the number of Lao-American works. Partly inspired by U.S.-based advocacy groups such as the Center For Lao Studies (CLS) in San Francisco, California, they have produced authoritative wide ranging research. We presented a paper on our OB-trained Lao nurses who immigrated to the USA at the CLS 2005 conference in Illinois, USA (see August 2018 Newsletter, page 7)

A study on the same subject is a Masters thesis by Ms. **Vongchanh Indavong** that she completed August 2009 on "The Lao-American Diaspora and Its Changing Relations With The Ethnic Homeland." Focusing on a Lao community in Columbus, Ohio, USA she traced the immigrant experience – from escape to struggle to stability – that our own Lao nurses went through.

In 2015 Mekong Circle released the second edition of "Filipinos in Laos", a historical account of our work in the Kingdom. Another contribution in English is "Goodbye Vientiane: Untold Stories of Filipinos in Laos". Some may protest how a compilation of personal anecdotes, mostly funny, should count among scholarly works on the social and physical sciences related to Laos. Well, after wading through a 10-page study of Lao-Americans in the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* ("Individualism, Collectivism and Delinquency in Asian-American Adolescents"), you need a break, for heaven's sake. So, grab this "Goodbye" anthology by **Penelope Flores**. Then immerse yourself in tales of gallantry, dedication, foolishness, each anecdote no more than a page or two long. The titles tell all – "I Never Gained Weight in Laos"; "Mr. Moneybags"; "How The Frog Ate The Moon"; "How I Got Out Of The Hostage



Crisis”; “How I Met My Wife”.

Said Editor Flores “I am sure that once this volume gets in print, it will serve as the core pebble dropped in a pond where the ripples will generate increasing concentric ripples.” Rippled, it did. Published in 2005 by the Philippine American Writers and Artists, Inc. (San Francisco, California) and released at our 2006 reunion, copies run out. There’s a used copy at Amazon selling for \$30. Perhaps Penny has spare copies at home available for less than that. Call her at 415 584 8340. (Our other book has paperback and ebook versions at Amazon). The paperback lists for \$18.

Ohngmo Pilipin, Where Were You?

There is a thinning sliver of Vientiane’s population today who may still remember the Philippine hospital – Ohngmo Pilipin, or more popularly called the Ohngmo OB. It is doubtful whether they are familiar with the initials and the history behind it. They are in their late 80s or 90s. There is another generation of Lao, almost a third of the six million-plus people, in their 20s, born after the 1975 revolution, who have never heard of this hospital. Neither do they know about the Filipino staff who, together with all foreign aid personnel, were told to leave the country that year.

The hospital was located in the junction of Phone Keng and Nong Bone streets in the northeast That Luang district of the city. Opened on June 30, 1960 with 60 beds, it stood there for 42 years, expanding over time to 100 beds, as a tertiary-level general hospital and clinical setting for OB Lao student nurses and other auxiliaries. It was also the portal through which hundreds of Filipino health care personnel entered for their orientation to Lao life before their assignments to provincial medical outposts.

In 2002, the government declared it “too obsolete” and or-

dered it demolished. Before the wreckers did their work, former OB Project Manager “Vito” Naranjo with his wife nurse “Joji” and social worker “Bing” Belicena, returned in March 2001 for their first visit in 26 years. A new sign proclaimed it “Ministry of Public Health Maternal and Child Health Hospital.” In fact, it was not that at all. It had closed. Peering behind windows, they saw beds and bedside tables stacked against the wall in the medical-surgical wards. At the deserted nurses’s station, patient charts inside their metal binders lay on the counters. It was so sad, Joji remembers.

On November 9, 2002, a “tuktuk” brought me to Phone Keng Road. An empty expanse of newly turned earth was all that remained of the hospital site. The water tower rose in one corner like a brooding, spectral sentinel, and beyond it, the triangular façade of the National Assembly. Tractor tracks crisscrossed the bulldozed earth. Broken pieces of ceramic tiles scattered here and there – artifacts of the wash sinks? A Lao woman said that she heard of plans for a park. For a time it was a soccer field. Then an item in the Vientiane Times of March 2, 2005 quoted a city official “If the money is found, the park will be finished in five months. We’ve had plans for this park for the past three years but we’ve been waiting for the funding to come through.” It would cost \$666,000.

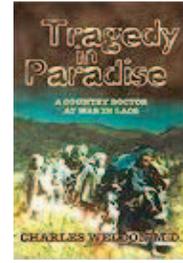
We saw the park in full luxuriant greenery on November 23, 2018, the third day of our one-week 12th reunion. Or, more accurately, we saw masses of Lao residents occupying every inch of its grounds. It was the last day of the three-day That Luang Buddhist festival. As everybody knows, this annual

boun is the mother of all bouns in boun-addicted Laos. The centerpiece of the festival is the That Luang stupa, located right on the park. We can bet that if we had asked any of the celebrants what used to stand on the lawns where they were now picnicking, they would have no idea. No historical marker. No signage. No memories.



During our 2018 reunion in Vientiane, former Operation Brotherhood member Bert Sobrevinas visited Xayxetha Park in That Luang. In one corner of these grounds, the OB hospital stood for 42 years.

Globetrotting Doctor Found His Place in Laos



After graduating together from medical school in 1951, **Charles Weldon** and **Patricia McCreedy** married, practiced in rural southern Louisiana, USA, lived in a “comfortable home, financially successful with three lovely, healthy children.” After nine years, they “were frustrated by increasing boredom.” Thumbing through a medical journal, they saw an ad seeking a public health officer and a pediatrician in American Samoa. They applied and soon were battling tuberculosis, filariasis and high infant mortality among 35,000 islanders inhabiting a 76-square mile Pacific Island some 2,500 miles from Hawaii.

Despite “our great success in combating the evil forces of disease and pestilence”, enjoying wonderful happy hours of family picnics, snorkeling and TV-free evenings, “we decided to seek other fields to conquer in the suffering third world,” he wrote in his memoir. In 1963, Charles accepted a position as Chief of the Public Health Division of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Laos. Landing in Vientiane, the capital, “the drive into town gave us an exotic view of lush, tropical buildings filled with a mass of brilliant flame trees and bougainvillea, several beautiful Buddhist temples, and thick-walled masonry houses in need of paint and repairs. Our sojourn in Laos had begun.”

Eleven years later, on the afternoon of July 4, 1974, he “slipped out to the airport, alone, and took the plane to Bangkok. It was a gray and gloomy day and the monsoon was in full force. I’m sure my fellow passengers were wondering why this foolish man was weeping alone. The Lao episode was over. We had lost.”

So ends his memoir, “Tragedy in Paradise” written 25 years later. What was lost? More than a decade administering a health care program in a country that for all practical purposes had next to nothing to care for its sick and the dying. When he arrived, the 3.5 million inhabitants were in the grip of a vicious civil war, going on eight years, killing 2,000 combatants a month, sapping the pathetically inadequate medical resources – personnel, equipment, supplies, financing, infrastructure. As one result, epidemics, high mortality, avoidable diseases, ravaged young and old in a new Asian country already ranked among the poorest in the world. Seeing all these, “was without doubt an important factor in my decision to stay for such an extended period of time. It marked the beginning of my love affair with Laos and the Lao people,” he wrote. “Being able to provide a medical service where there was such a desperate need was a dream come true for any doctor devoted to his profession...I felt that I’d found something I’d been seeking all my life.”

When Dr. Weldon reported for duty in 1963, its Public Health Division took over a Village Health Program (VHP) that had begun funding Operation Brotherhood. OB had arrived much earlier in Laos in 1957 and by 1964 it had seven medical teams, 112 Filipino and 263 Lao personnel. The VHP-OB program

operated in tandem to the Royal Lao Government’s Ministry of Health. But it had vastly more bountiful resources – in money, 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 where OB teams were assigned. By 1965, Weldon’s VHP-OB network stretched over eight hospitals, about 180 rural dispensaries, providing about two million outpatient visits and caring for over 25,000 inpatients per year.

“Over my many years in Laos, I found myself in an ambiguous and almost schizophrenic role,” he writes. “One day I would sit around the table in the Ministry of Health with the Minister and his staff, planning a new, U.S.-financed hospital or discussing a contract to bring in technical expertise to upgrade the lab at the medical school. The next day I’d be in a war in the middle of the jungle, running a medical program that had a budget three times that of the Ministry of Health.”

The base of the jungle war is in a valley called Sam Thong in a northern region of thickly forested mountains, the ancestral heartland of the Hmong tribe. Here he built a 250-bed hospital, with X-ray, laboratory and surgical capacity serving a tribal community whose men were trained and armed by the Central Intelligence Agency as a “secret army” of guerrillas to battle North Vietnamese and the insurgent anti-government Pathet Lao. Another base 10 miles south called Long Tieng was CIA’s logistical center for its fleet of combat aircraft that projected its airpower all over the country and North Vietnam.

While much of Laos’ lush natural landscape enthralled Dr. Weldon, Sam Thong was a “squalid, collection of ramshackle-bamboo-and-thatch buildings, one of the most unattractive places in Laos.” Yet, because of its strategic military importance to U.S. security interests, it and scores of remote “bamboo” dispensaries serving tribal allies over widely dispersed hinterlands took much of his time to check up on. His memoir abundantly recounts both horrifying and hilarious adventures visiting these hilltop sites, in most cases available only by helicopter.

By the 1970s, the tide of war began to turn against the Lao government. Sam Thong and Long Tieng were overrun in 1970. The Hmong force was slowly decimated. One hilltop village after another was displaced. Thousands upon thousands of Hmong found themselves yet again fleeing temporary enclaves.

“An air of cynicism and distrust permeated the relationship between the Americans and their Lao counterparts,” he wrote. “It was the most painful and depressing time of my life.” After leaving Laos, Dr. Weldon lived and worked in Haiti, Cambodia, South Korea, Saudi Arabia. In 1979 he moved to the Philippines where he volunteered with the Catholic Services as medical coordinator providing health care to Lao refugees in Thailand. He married **Nipaporn Singhustita** who worked in Laos for Thai Airways and settled in the northern Thai province of Chiang Rai. He died there on November 26, 2002. He was 82. 7

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

216-27 Spencer Avenue, Queens Village
New York 11427 USA

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

