

Welcome to the 48th Issue of our Newsletter



Coming ? The Great Lao Novel... in English

This Newsletter, like most association publications, has been, since 2002, a chronicle of the lives of a group of expatriates who spent years in Laos during the second Indochina War of the 1950s to 1975. Now living in the USA, Canada, Thailand and the Philippines, their accounts tell of marriages, deaths, births, anniversaries, reunions. Remembrances of our Lao experience. Shared memories that forged lifelong friendships nurtured by unusual times. Surely, there's ample stuff that should find expression in literary forms – a novel, or short stories. But it is not happening.

It's close to half a century after the war ended. Google has oodles of titles on Lao history, Lao economics, Lao culture. There are enough memoirs in English to last you another year of enforced pandemic seclusion. In our September 2005 and December 2005 Newsletter issues, we reviewed six of these, written by American CIA operatives and U.S. military personnel, infused with that "I-was-there-this-was-how-it-was" flavor. One

book is by Filipino ordnance specialist Primo Doreza, assigned as a trainer to the Lao armed forces, from 1959 to 1969. In "From Panay to Laos And Beyond", self-published in 1994 in Manila, only 31 pages of his 224-page memoir describes his Laos assignment, perhaps the only Filipino-authored work of this genre. I am plugging once again our very own Mekong Circle publication project "Goodbye Vientiane" by Penelope Flores (2004, Philippine American Writers and Artists, USA). It has collected 41 personal accounts by as many Mekong Circle members of their 18-year Laos sojourn.

Take any recent academic title, flip to the profuse bibliography and footnotes, then wonder where that oft-repeated phrase about Laos, that "little-known, secretive country" came from. But there is one black hole that exists in the publication cosmos – the Lao novel, in English, by a Lao writer. Almost fifty years of a diasporic existence by an estimated half a million Lao refugees and immigrants now living in English language-domi-

nant America, Canada and Australia should have produced one such work.

There are quite a number of Lao-authored memoirs, in English, and they fit the three-act narrative of escape, then struggle for livelihood, finally assimilation. Alas, no Lao that we know about has transformed that experience into an English novel.

In Laura Manivong's "Escaping The Tiger" (2010, from HarperCollins, USA), she fictionalized her family's refugee experience, from Laos to Thailand to Kansas, USA. But it's more memoir than a novel.

Perhaps we expect too much of our fellow diasporic Lao community. The cultural historian John Docker wrote that "diaspora is a sense of belonging to more than one history, to more than one time and place, to more than one past and future." To express that in novelistic form can be daunting indeed.

Yet at least one American-Vietnamese novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen has achieved this in his Pulitzer Prize 2016 fiction winner "The Sympathizer" and has proudly named some six other Vietnamese who have written English language novels based on the war that ravaged their country and lives. That same war, spilling across its borders, had upended Lao lives and spawned the first generation of broken lives. Among them were graduates of our nursing school in Vientiane who settled in the USA beginning in the early 1970s. They were reluc-

tant to tell me the horrid conditions they endured in refugee camps in Thailand and their hard road to new lives. It is their children, the second generation, who are now giving voice to their repressed memories in the form of memoirs.

Those who have decided to tell all are not writers but former diplomats, soldiers, clerks, housewives, students, among them. Their experiences live on in memoirs such as "Seri Lao: An Anthology of Lao-Australian Refugee Writings" (2007, Casula Powerhouse, Australia).

While our "Goodbye Vientiane" is mostly a record of humorous misadventures, Seri Lao are heart-wrenching displacement stories of the Lao who settled there, about 10,000, between 1980 and 1985. Most end on a happy note. A Lao scholar Mayoury Ngaosyvathn credits the "tolerance and benevolence of Australian society as a whole." In contrast, she writes, "it appears that the Lao communities resettled in France or in the USA have encountered more demanding, less accommodating environments." One the book's editors, Prakiane Viravong, is the husband of Sriphanon Viravong, a graduate of our OB Nursing school in Vientiane. She and a schoolmate Phousavong Praseuth, live in Australia. The book, in Lao and English, is available from Amazon.

If not a Lao novel, what about Lao fiction short stories? Yes, they are available, albeit translations from Lao to English. They offer expectations, snippets if you will, of an emerging Lao novel. Most

quoted is "Mother's Beloved - Stories from Laos" (1999, University of Washington, USA) by Outhine Bounyavong. "Freeing Birds" is a 2011 collection by prolific writer Bounthavong Xomxayphol. You can Google English extracts.

If the Pulitzer is the U.S. top literary fiction award in English, and the Booker Prize is England's, the Giller is Canada's. Canadian-Lao Souvankham Thammavongsa was born 43 years ago in a refugee camp in Thailand, then settled in Toronto with her parents when she was a year old. In 2020 she was awarded the Giller Prize, winning over 4,000 entries for her short story collection "How To Pronounce Knife." It came with a US\$100,000 check.

An equally outstanding feat is the publication of her two-page short story "Good-Looking" in the March 1, 2021 issue of the weekly, one million-subscriber U.S. general interest magazine *The New Yorker*. The chances of getting a short story published in the magazine is one in 40,000 according to some reports. "A writer who publishes a story in *The New Yorker* is given unprecedented and unmatched validation", says Daniel Wallace, himself a published writer but whose fiction submissions were rejected 30 times by the magazine.

If Thammavongsa prefigures a bright literary talent beyond short stories (she is already a multi-awarded poet in English) our hope springs eternal for that Great Lao Novel ...in English.



A Changing Set of Faces on Historic Grounds

The Operation Brotherhood (OB) central base in Vientiane was a compound in the That Luang district, on the eastern part of the city. It enclosed the Administration Building, an Auditorium, the 100-bed hospital, the School of Nursing classroom and the maintenance workshops. One day, sometime in the early 1960s, photographer Sergio Lapitan rounded up all Filipino administrative and medical staff on the parking lot beside the Administration Building. His

photo has assumed historic legacy. In 2002, the hospital and the office building had been razed.

Vientiane was the first stop, the portal through which incoming volunteers arrived (over 600 in 18 years) from the Philippines. It served as their orientation to the country's people and culture. This gathering could be the only time they were all bunched together before their deployments to their provincial stations.

PHOTO BELOW: Late 1960s, Vientiane

First row, from left: Jess Ramos, medical technologist; Dr. Alfonso Lim; Dr. Urduja Yoro; Dr. Simeon Azcarraga; Dr. Raul de Jesus; Amor Valiente, nurse; Vilma Valenzuela, nurse; Bella Natividad, nutritionist; Greer Alforque, social worker; Mauro Camaganacan, medical records.

Second row, from left: Dr. Jose Ballesteros; Florence Tolentino, nurse; Jade Daza, nurse; Helen Esmeralda, nurse; Victoria Aranta, nurse; Connie Lim, nurse; Dr. Rinaldo Bacordo; Josefina Pablo, nurse; Dr. Mila Uranza; Dr. Lina Delica; Fe Nonan, nurse.

Third row, from left: Narsing Erilla, maintenance; Oscar Agbayani, nurse; Bernardo Nantes, nurse; Celso Nieves, maintenance; Concordia Aquino, nurse; Jose Guevara, medical technologist; Alberto Songalia, nurse; Esther Mahinay, nurse; Dr. Harold Pia; Dr. Luis Manlapig; Dr. Antonio Encarnacion; Dr. Tong Lao; Renato Sebolena, accountant; Henry Nano, nurse. Last row (by himself) Lorenzo Siguenza, radio operator.



PHOTO LEFT Early 1960s, Vientiane

First row, from left: Edith Habacon, nutritionist; Ester Torres, nurse; Vicenta Calderon, nurse; Jesusa Yap, nurse; Josefa Naranjo, nurse; Philippine Ambassador Modesto Farolan; Jovito Naranjo, administration; Belen Gaborne, social worker; Bonifacio Gillego, administration; Isagani Bautista, administration; Fruto Bingcang, architect; Bert Javier, administration; Daniel Infante, administration.

Second row, from left: Dr. Pedro Palu-ay; Gus Panajon, administration; Edith Savady, administration; Lucy dela Cruz, administration; Violeta Labayen, nurse; Cecilia Lopez, medical records; Thelma Villamar, nurse; Petra Sismaet, nurse; Melecio Palma, administration; Dr. Antonio Soto; Purificacion Roque, accountant; Leila Lareza, artist; Dr. Felix Romero; Federico Navera, accountant.

Third row, from left: Renato Mapua, accountant; Cornelio Belicena, Jr., maintenance; Roberto Monserrat, agriculturist; Deogracias Caro, medical technologist; Antonio Sazon, accountant; Philip Cruz, accountant; Leonardo Arca, artist; Dr. Victorino Wycoco; Dr. Antonio Mendez; Dr. Sisinio Azul; Dr. Adriano Torres; Romeo Maypa, pharmacist; Jose Fuentesilla, administration; Eduardo Pabustan, maintenance; Gerry Dacanay, maintenance.



First reunion, OB School of Practical Nursing, August 6, 2006, Chicago, Illinois, USA, with teachers and administrators Front row, kneeling Dado Lumingued and Manith Sanguansack. Seated, from left Wilma Padayao, Pet Duruin, Gina Liwag, Cecile Datu, Ampie Malolos, Joji Naranjo, Fely Navera. Back row, from left At Photvath, Vito Naranjo, Sounthary Lapitan, Noun Vongphrachanh, Khamsy Siharath, Pettie Sayasan, Chanthay Luangrath, Syphone Phengnorasinth, Chanthalom Phouang malay, Vanessa Thongma, Malivanh Thepsouvanth, Phousouk Sisouphone, Phikoun Ackathai , Sameu Chonthipe, Chuang Chonthipe, Sivilay Sivongsay, Rabiab Vilayhong. Not in photo but were present: Joy Xayasouth, Khambai Rajavongsak, Sumatra Malaythong, Khemphone Vongphakdy, Chanthamalay Pathammabou, Saiten Chantaraj, Viensay Pathammaboun.

How Our Lao Colleagues Made It

When a new Communist government took over Laos in 1975, it told all foreign aid technicians to leave, OB Filipino members among them. They dispersed across the planet, applying their skills in places like the Middle East and Africa. Many jetted their way to America. With their college degrees in healthcare, business, engineering and other professional fields, and steeped in American culture, they hit the ground running, so to speak, and settled easily into middle-class American life.

Not so with our Lao colleagues. Fearful about their future in the new regime, they fled their country. During its last year in 1975, OB staffed six medical outposts with some 126 Filipinos and 564 Lao. Among the latter were OB-trained practical nurses and auxiliaries in the dental, laboratory, pharmacy, X-ray, dietary and other hospital functions. Our crowning achievement among the trained corps: the more than 140 Lao nurses, the first to complete, in three cohorts from 1961 to 1969, the country's first and only two-year practical nursing course. They are among those in the photo below, along with their auxiliary colleagues and teachers. It was their first school reunion, August 6, 2006 in Chicago, Illinois, USA, forty years after their graduations (see photo). Thirty six had settled in the USA; two in Canada, two in Australia, three in France, one in England. Most moved to Thailand. The others remained at their posts, two of them rising to become nursing department heads at Mahosot, the country's premier hospital; another earned a medical degree.

For many, there were no jet flights across the Pacific; instead they risked perilous crossings at night on canoes over the Mekong River's strong currents to Thailand, clutching young children. "We arranged for two canoes. We split the children, one with me in one canoe, the other with my husband. This way, if one canoe capsizes, the other has a chance to make it" a nurse told me. Then followed months, years in inhospitable refugee camps, enduring daily indignities, waiting for resettlement.

In the U.S, the healthcare skills and the English they learned from their Filipino mentors got them jobs as aides in nursing homes. Others picked up factory assembly jobs. At least four went on to gain U.S - licensed RN degrees. One furiously driving challenge pushed them – schooling opportunities for their young children.

In a 2010 survey of the Laotian diaspora, Ms. Phitsamay Uy, a Lao assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts, traces the migration at

the end of the 1973 Lao civil war. The largest group found refuge in Thailand, followed by the U.S. and France. The first wave, from 1972 to 1974, consisted of upper-class, elite Lao; the second wave, from 1974 to 1978, were middle class, mainly professionals and military personnel; the third wave beginning in 1979, were working class villagers and farmers, who represented the majority of refugees in the U.S. In total, the 2010 census counted 232,130 Lao in the U.S.

Our Lao nurses in the second

wave were in their teens when they bid “pai dee, sok dee” (goodbye and good luck) to their Filipino colleagues. At their reunion, now in their matronly years, they hugged and hugged, misty-eyed, proudly telling stories of grownup children. The just concluded 2020 U.S. demographic census will most likely show that this second generation, many of them U.S -bred professionals, has fulfilled their parents’ dreams and rewarded their immigrant sacrifices.

—J. “Pete” Fuentesilla

Expats Speak Out About Pre-Revolution Vientiane

Farangs throng the Talat Sao morning market

From a population of 45,000 in 1950, Vientiane had swollen to around 156,000 in 1973. This was the period when massive economic and military U.S. aid poured into the country to stave off Communist incursions. As one result, a conspicuous foreign presence prevailed in the city -- Chinese, Vietnamese and Indian merchants; diplomats from East and West ideological persuasions; large contingents of American aid administrators (about 1,700) and French residents (2,000). Include in the count some 900 Filipino aid technicians in the mid-1960s.

In 1971, an English language weekly, the sampled the comments of this expat communities. It posed the question “What Do You Enjoy About Laos and What Don’t You Like About Living Here?” Here were selected responses from unnamed expats, edited for length and clarity as published in the December 19, 1971 issue:

An American Teacher

“I enjoy the climate and working with the Lao. They are sweet, a pleasure to work with, and for a teacher this is paradise. Once you like the Lao life, you hate to give it up. I believe in the one world concept. We share differences, not argue over them.”

A Filipino Secretary

“Laos is very similar to the Philippines, in weather, customs and traditions. The food is pungent and hotly seasoned. I enjoy everything really, but the traffic, the policemen need more training. My other



complaint, some of the people here who know a little think they know a lot.”

A French Man

“I like Laos because it is quiet and not rushed. The people are joyful and so polite. I wish we could go out into the country. But only as far as Wattay (the airport).”

A Young Australian

I like being here. I have been working in another Asian country that compares unfavorably with Laos. There was too much rush-rush, too much pressure and competition. I cannot get some of the things I want and like. But I can really get along without them. My interest in the happenings in this area outweighs any negatives.”

A Thai Shopkeeper

“I like Vientiane because there is less confusion than Bangkok, particularly with traffic. There is less thievery here. The

people are friendly.”

An Indian Shopkeeper

“Vientiane is a quiet, nice place to live in, but not forever. We will return to India. But a man can have a good time here. We like the freedom and the people. We have a pleasant relaxed time with our customers.”

A British Lady

“I like living in Laos because of the lack of pressure that exists elsewhere. In most other places where we have lived there were mammoth bureaucracies. We like the nice temperament of the people. In all the years we have been here, I’ve never had an angry or ugly word directed at me by a Lao. The main minus factor in my particular case is the lack of stimulation. You do not receive ideas if you are not where the action is. And I could not get a job here.”

If you have a nostalgic afternoon to spare, scroll through the Vientiane News archives at the Arizona State University (<https://repository.asu.edu>). Type “Vientiane News” in the search bar. Go to the Nov. 12-18, 1974 issue and read details of this headline: “Kittens Born as Rats in Houkhong Province”. In the May 6, 1973 issue, catch this ad: “Come and enjoy our music at the Le Vientiane Bar. Playing every night is an all-Filipino band. Marcy at the piano. Chiquito at the drums. Smooth blending of Boy Marco Briones at bass and guitar. Nelson Dureza sings too”.

Memoirs On Laos by Western Writers

In the September 2005 issue of our Newsletter, we decided to play literary critic. The “secret” war in Laos that historians date from 1954 to 1973 was no longer secret. That gave participants the space to write about it. The writers were mostly American pilots, Special

Forces servicemen, diplomats, Central Intelligence Agency operatives. We picked out three accounts out of seven to review below. Read the other four in our December 2015 issue.

We start off with a novel by a British, one of seven in his prolific series. Not exactly a memoir, but it has enough local details to evoke authenticity.

Memoirs by Lao writers in English are already available as we noted earlier in this issue.

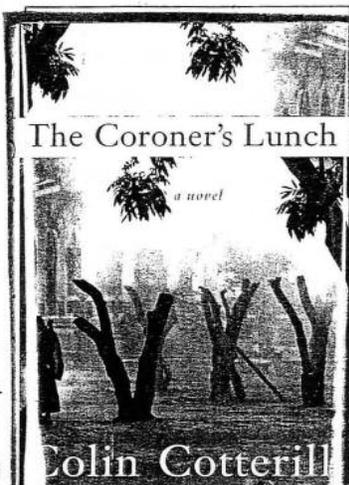
The Coroner's Lunch

By Colin Cotterill
 Publisher: Soho Press (New York)
 257 pages; published 2004

Time frame: 1976, a year after the Communist government has taken over the country.

Plot: Dr. Siri Paiboun, who tended mostly to the war-wounded in the northern jungles of Sam Neua, is vested with “responsibility” by the Politburo by being named chief (and only coroner) of the country. At 72 years old, and knowing virtually nothing about forensic medicine, he had looked forward to retirement. “He needed responsibility, like he needed another head,” – the doctor, we soon

discover, openly displays a sarcastic attitude at the regime. He has become disillusioned at the bureaucracy and the inefficiency. Within a month of his appointment, several high-profile cases – or corpses – are brought to his poorly equipped morgue. One is the wife of a high ranking senior Party comrade (she had been poisoned, the doctor finds out, and not from parasite infestation from “lap” meat as he is made to understand); three Vietnamese officials are reported drowning victims (but really murdered, he finds out, one of them by being thrown out of an airplane into a water reservoir in what looks like an



international plot). In short order, a mistress is strangled (not a suicide, he finds out); a neighbor he lives with is blown to pieces, his autopsy reports are stolen, and he is the target of an assassination attempt. What the heck is going on? The bewildered doctor is at his wit's end trying to put two and two together. With the help of a close friend (a comrade who also harbors disdain at the Party), they are able to do so. The assassin's mastermind (husband of the poisoned woman) kills himself; the spy behind the international plot is

unmasked. At the end (literally the last two pages), Dr. Phaiboun falls in love.

Why A Laos Setting?

The author, born in London “has lived in Laos” the book jacket says. For how long and doing what, are not indicated. But he writes details about Vientiane to show he had a sharp eye for local color. Some nitpicking details: he spells Lan Xang Hotel (without the “e”). Likewise, against all standard nomenclature, he sticks to calling the river Mekhong. Although the war memorial on Lan Xang Avenue is known by a variety of names, he sticks to Anusawari instead of

the more common Patuxai. Do residents actually do tai-chi slow-motion calisthenics in its shadow as he says? And during the That Luang festival, were there really “five-legged goats and three-breasted women to entertain the crowd”?

Coroner's Lunch, in essence, is a whodunit. The hero doctor, looked upon by the villains (officious government officials) as near senility to easily hoodwink, thwarts their evil schemes. He struggles against shortages of the most basic equipment and supplies. His morgue lab at Mahosot Hospital was hardly better equipped than the meatworks behind the morning market. His microscope belongs in a museum. His chemical stocks are nil; the color photos in his pathology textbooks are blurred from age. Mahosot, so short of medicine, was prescribing herbs.

Laos in 1976 (the time of the novel) had just emerged from 50 years of warfare. In truth it was beset with severe shortages, among them food and talent (most of the skilled Lao had fled). Cotterill (he must have been there during this period) sprinkles his first novel with comical accounts of Vientiane's daily life under Communism. His message is clear: Dr. Paiboun's common sense science and detective intuition can defeat ideology anytime.

Bottom line: The plot is contrived but the jabs against Politburo pettiness are hilarious gems.

Memorable line: the Doctor's new love object “combs her hair in the style of Imelda Marcos, complete with lily.” (page 256).

The Bombing Officer

By Jerome Doolittle
 Publisher: E.P. Dutton, New York
 257 pages; published 1982

Time frame: 1964, start of American intensive bombing campaign of Pathet Lao areas

Plot: Fred Upson, a 29-year old junior diplomat, is newly assigned to the American Embassy in Vientiane as Air Force Liaison Officer. He takes over a job known as the “Mad Bomber”. This is how he describes his job to his Lao lover: “Under the rules of engagement, Laos is carved up into little patchwork pieces. Here you can bomb,



here you can't. Here you can bomb sometimes with some kinds of bombs, but not other times. Over here, you can dump your bombs in this patch of empty jungle, if you weren't able to drop them on your target. Apparently the pilots would just as soon not land with a full bomb load, because if there is an accident or a hard landing or something, you blow yourself up.” In short, because he picks out the targets for the pilots, he was the “bureaucratic equivalent of Zeus”, the

Roman god who smites his enemies with thunder-

bolts. In time a bureaucratic war brews within the Embassy, under another set of rules of engagement. On one side are the warmongers - the State Department, CIA, Army and Air Attaches - pitted against the good guys who feel the bombing is doing more bad than good - USIS, AID, the Political Section, the Press Attache. The American ambassador is portrayed as a real jerk. One of the good guys is an American, Lao-fluent refugee aid worker of the International Voluntary Service. Upson, who at first was on the side of “the U.S. Mission” (all the parts above) begins to shift his allegiance to the good guys. He finally realizes, after a visit to a refugee camp of Lao displaced from the bombing sites, that the bombing campaign is all wrong. He steals classified documents about bombing mishaps and gives them to a New York Times reporter, effec-

tively dooming his promising diplomatic career. He also loses his Lao lover.

Why A Laos Setting

In Laos, the American Mission commanded an air force, an army, an economy, an entire country really," said an Embassy person. To keep several divisions of the North Vietnamese army pinned down in Laos trying to funnel men and arms down the Ho Chi Minh trail to South Vietnam, the U.S. truly had to own Laos from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. Doolittle says that in his book, "the large historical

events happened just about as I described them...though I have felt free to rearrange geography and chronology here and there." The local references are by and large authentic - the wares sold at Talat Sao, the White Rose brothel, the Boun Bang Fai rocket festival, the CIA bases at Plaine Des Jarres and Long Tieng, Alternate 20, Air America. More persuasive are the descriptions of Embassy office bureaucracy and as well as the jargon of managing a war from a desk - Lima sites, SGUs, POL, LOCs, Ravens, Barrel Roll, Arc Light Missions. They

can only come from someone who officially served inside during the period covered by the novel. Doolittle did work inside it is not clear whether he was the Mad Bomber.

Bottom line: The focus is on the American characters, not the Lao. The ending is melodramatic.

Memorable line: "How do you get (San Miguel) beer from the Philippines to the Plain of Jars in the middle of the war?" Upson asked. "Black market from our PXs in Vietnam. The stuff finds its way to North Vietnam and then they bring it down here."

The Laotian Fragments

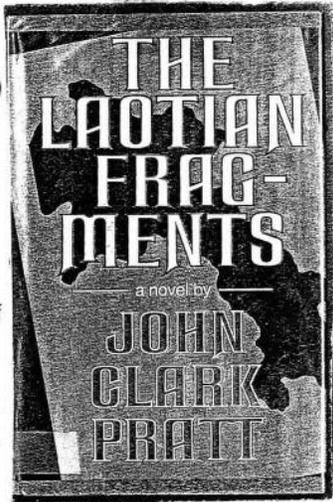
By John Clark Pratt

Publisher: Viking Press (New York)

245 pages; published 1974

Time Frame: 1965, when bombing campaign intensifies against North Vietnamese in Laos

Plot: U.S. Air Force Major William Blake volunteers to serve as head of a group of pilots known as the Ravens. They fly small, one-engine observation planes, skimming almost at tree-top levels to spot concentrations of enemy war materiel and men. Then they call in U.S. jets from Thailand to bomb the targets. Their main base and home during their one-year tour is at Long Tieng, on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars. It is the nerve center (and also Hmong ancestral heartland) of the CIA's interdiction war against the North Vietnamese. During his six-month service there, Blake compiles a sort of diary containing his thoughts, his missions, his interactions with superiors and his pilots. He reveals the constant bickering among "Company" (CIA), State Department bigwigs in Vientiane, Air Force biggerwigs of the Seventh Fleet, and with Hmong General Vang Pao on how to



conduct the air war. Despite hundreds of bombing sorties, the North Vietnamese capture, one by one, CIA's mountaintop bases on the Plain. At one point they laid an 11-day siege on Long Tieng itself. On land and on the air as a Raven pilot, Blake witnesses all these, recording in passionate detail the futility of his (and by extension the U.S.'s) efforts and ultimate defeat.

Why A Laos Setting.

Novels that frame their fiction within a period of recent history strive for a certain measure of authenticity - the "I-was-there-really" attention to detail - because readers are still around who were really also there. (Tell me, were you under the Cavite balcony when Aguinaldo raised the flag?) In the case of Blake's "The Laotian Fragments," the fragments consist of documents, strung together in chronological order, that are both real and made up. The U.S. Senate hearings and the Bangkok Post and the Washington Post newspaper reprints are authentic. We learn from the 1966 hearings that there were 125 airmen, secretly assigned as civil-

ians, to the U.S. Air Attache Office in Laos, 21 of them as Ravens (This was top secret before the Senate hearings). The reconstructed tape recordings, memos, transcripts, teletype messages contain military jargon that must have been based from the actual hard copies. The airborne intercom between a circling Raven and ground controllers are so real you feel you are there flying beside Blake, laying down target coordinates. That's because the author, pictured on the book jacket in full jet cockpit gear, was a combat pilot in Vietnam and was himself a Raven spotter in Laos.

Bottom line: A nonfiction 1995 CIA account we reviewed in the March 2005 issue ("Codename Mule" by James Parker, Jr.) described Long Tieng life by an operative manager on the ground. It was authentic as far as it went. Pratt's account went farther. Employing an unconventional story-telling device, his fiction broke the bonds of invention.

Memorable line: "Teletype message, AOC 20A (Long Tieng) to OUSAIRA (Office of US Air Attache) Vientiane, 5 January: There's a baci next week by the little guys (Hmong guerrillas) for one of the Company (CIA) men. Who pays for the scotch? Us (Ravens) or the Company? Reply soonest. It's a matter of supply as well as principle." (page 72-73)

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THESE

There is no shortage of memoirs, deeply personal accounts of life in Laos, written in English. We made brief mention in the March 2005 Mekong Circle newsletter of Fr. Matt Menger's anecdotes as a missionary in Laos from 1957 to 1967 in his "In The Valley of the Mekong." Four other volumes are recommended:

"In A Little Kingdom" by Perry Stieglitz (M.E. Sharpe, 1990) 280 pages (with photos). Written by a former Cultural Attache with the American Embassy in Vientiane, it collects amusing stories of social life in Vientiane of the 1960s and 1970s, his courtship and marriage to a daughter of the Prime Minister. His passionate defense of his father in law's neutralist policies against the latter's local and international enemies is noteworthy.

"Laos A Personal Portrait From The Mid-1970s" by Judy Austin Rantala (McFarland & Co., 1994). 254 pages. Life in Vientiane as a wife of a USAID education consultant from 1971 to 1975. Chapter 21 titled Last Days in Laos is particularly revealing on how Americans in their Km. 6 suburb survived the capture of Vientiane by the Pathet Lao and their mass evacuation.

"Tragedy In Paradise: A Country Doctor At War In Laos" by Dr. Charles Weldon (Asia Books, Thailand, 1999). 284 pages (with photos). While the

accounts of Menger, Stieglitz and Rantala are largely in a light vein, Dr. Weldon's memoir is more history than autobiography. Much of the book is devoted to his work with the Hmong refugees from 1963 to 1974 and as head of the Public Health Division of USAID. There are two full chapters on Operation Brotherhood.

"Another Quiet American: Stories of Life In Laos" by Brett Dakin (Asia Books, Thailand, 2003) 278 pages. The newest and in some ways, the most absorbing of the memoirs because it replays what some of us his age (23 when he came to Vientiane), underwent ourselves in our own coming-of-age saga. A new graduate of Princeton University, Dakin volunteers in 1997 for low pay to work (with no relevant experience) for two years with the Lao Ministry of Tourism. His portraits of the people, Lao and Westerners, he works and lives with, are mostly warm hearted. His potshots are reserved for the highly paid Western consultants of international aid agencies. While some Western memoirists have a tendency to write with a patronizing, even arrogant tone about non-Western ways and culture, Dakin's insights are respectful. The last page of his book carries a message we Mekong Circle members are well aware of: "But I know that my time in Laos was far more than a two-year break. It remains an integral part of my life today, here and now, and the person I have become. The way I think about the world. And my place in it." All four books are available from www.amazon.com.

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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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. Past issues of our Newsletter can be accessed from our website www.mekongcircle.org. (Click on "Resources". then scroll down to "Newsletters".)
Your comments are welcome. Send to fuentecila@aol.com