

## Welcome to the 50th Issue of our Newsletter



*A sign in front of the Operation Brotherhood hospital being built in Vientiane in 1960*

## JC Laos: Bringing Civic Spirit To A New Country

While it is generally known that OB (Operation Brotherhood) in Laos was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), beginning in 1961 and until it terminated its activities in 1975, much less is known about how it came to Laos in 1957. Its U.S. government funding identified it as an official American aid project to the Lao government. Its staff of Filipino administrators, health care and village development technicians indicated that the Philippines, its government or a Manila-based private nongovernmental organization, was somehow among its sponsors. And its close association with Lao

government officials and military officers, on national and local levels, gave the impression that it was an officially directed program. In truth, it was all that, plus one more — that it was a band of young Lao men with a strong sense for civic service who paved the way to bring OB to their country.

OB medical stations (there were 19 across the country) carried signs that proclaimed OB's origins by three emblems — the USAID handshake, the three-headed red elephant and white parasol of the Laos state symbol, and then there is that peculiar shape of

a triangular shield bearing a globe and the letters JCI. The latter is the logo of Junior Chamber International, also known as Jaycee or JC.

Like their counterparts such as the Lions Club and the Rotary Club, JCI is a worldwide association devoted to community service. Founded in 1915 in the state of Missouri in the USA, it counts 160,000 plus members from about 124 countries who come from every level of a member country's residents – business, government, professional. It organizes programs to build leadership skills for community welfare. A national level chapter organizes local chapters as well as regional international groups. From these conferences collegial ties are forged among members across national borders. At its annual World Congress, it chooses a project that all national chapters pledge to support with funds and other resources.

An earlier version of OB Laos called OB Vietnam was initiated as a JC Philippine project, then adopted as an JC Asian Regional effort, and finally endorsed as its international relief program in October 1954. This launched an outpouring of volunteers, materials, food, clothing for millions of Vietnamese refugees of the Indochinese War of the 1950s (see Mekong Circle Newsletter October 2020 *"Before OB Laos, There Was OB Vietnam. Here's the Story."*)

When the first batch of 15 Filipino volunteers arrived in Vientiane during the first week of January 1957, it was a joint project of JC Philippines and JC Laos whose seeds were planted as early as June 1954. That year, JC Laos was still non-existent. As **Fr. Miguel Bernad, S.J.** reconstructs the sequence of events leading to its birth in his book *"Filipinos In Laos"* (2015), it all began with a letter from a Filipino, **Benjamin Baluyot**, secretary of JC Asia to a Lao **Thepathay Vilaihongs**. He was following up on a "casual" meeting in Hong Kong between Vilaihongs and **Oscar Arellano**, a Filipino architect, vice president for JC Asia and

prime mover of OB



Vietnam. Vilaihongs, familiar with OB Vietnam, expressed interest in the JC movement that inspired it. In his reply to Baluyot, he welcomed the formation of a JC Laos. Other letters from JCI officials encouraged him. One came on July 1954 from a JC Vietnam member who knew Vilaihongs. It said "As you may know **Inpeng Suryadhay** is a member of the District of Columbia Junior Chamber of Commerce at the present time." Inpeng had joined the Jaycees during his stay in Washington as a member of the Lao diplomatic staff.

On April 11, 1956, JC Laos was formed in a meeting in Vientiane attended by 11 founding members. Its officers were Inpeng as president; **Khamphai Abhay** as internal vice president; **Khamchan Pradith** as external vice president; **Tianethone Chantharasy** as secretary-general; **Crosnier de Briant** as Treasurer. (That year, Laos had just emerged as a colony of France and these JC pioneers quickly emerged as influential members of the new sovereign country: Khamphai as Minister of Health; Inpeng as Minister

*Visiting Vientiane in 1965 JCI Vice President for Asia Neil Hattaway from New Zealand is flanked by Tianthone Chantharasy (left) and Vientiane chapter member Pete Fuentecilla*

of Justice; Tianethone as Deputy Foreign Minister; Khamchan as first secretary to the Lao Embassy in Washington DC. It adopted the name Youvasamakhom. It received formal approval as an organization from the Royal Lao Government on September 14, 1956 and granted full-fledged membership of JCI in November. On top of its first agenda – how to bring in and finance an OB Laos as it prepared to leave Vietnam at the end of 1956. Inpeng and Tianethone had visited Saigon and witnessed how OB's program there can serve their people. Organizing a JC Laos was the first step.

An aggressive membership drive recruited members from major towns of the kingdom, making Youvasamakhom "a truly national organization," said Bernad. "From the start it was an international group. While the great majority were native Lao citizens, there was a sprinkling of members from among the foreign residents: Chinese, Vietnamese, French, Americans – and later Filipinos. (Indeed, the March 1965 issue of *Bulletin Jaycee*, Volume 1, No. 1, listed 58 members of the Vientiane chapter alone; the next issue September 1965, Volume 1, No. 2, listed 51 names. Almost all community sectors – armed forces, business, government – were represented, many of high rank. It reflected a recognition that a JC membership can pave the way to both social and professional advancement.

With a formal structure and leadership in place, JC Laos undertook projects jointly with other national chapters. Thirteen Lao women completed further secondary studies in Bangkok in collaboration with JC Thailand; ten disabled Lao war veterans received medical rehabilitation in Saigon with the help of JC Viet-

nam. The Vientiane chapter successfully implemented three city projects in 1965. Two hundred donated gasoline drums, painted with its JC logo, served as trash containers all over city streets. A children's playground rose along the Mekong River near the Lane Xang Hotel. Twenty street signs fashioned from iron plates on steel posts identified major streets. Money sourced from fund raising events included cultural presentations, film shows, donations from businesses and foreign foundations, embassies, *soiree musicales* and *soiree dansantes*.

On October 23, 1965, the Vientiane chapter organized a *soiree de gala* at Lane Xang Hotel in Vientiane, attended by some 700 guests that was soon billed as the social event of the year, raised substantial funds for victims of the Taal volcano eruption in the Philippines that killed 500.

*Revue de la Presse Lao* (August 28, 1965) commented in part: "At this

moment when our country is plunged in war and when people are busy with their own affairs, the initiative of the Jaycees provides us with an inspiring example of a small group dedicating itself to the public good... That the Jaycees should have been able to make functionaries, the military, and so on, participate in public works is truly a sign of change in Laos. We salute this new spirit and congratulate the Junior Chamber for this incredible but true success story."

JC Laos' crowning achievement with JC Philippines was OB Laos. Its founding leaders and most of its charter members had to flee Laos when a new government took over in 1975, governed by a Communist ideology that mandates only one entity, the Party, and not any private group — Lions, Rotarians, Knights of Columbus or Jaycees — can lead its citizens. Most, if not all members in the 1965 JC list belonged to the government power elite, or the rightist faction, and sworn enemies of the victorious leftist revolution-

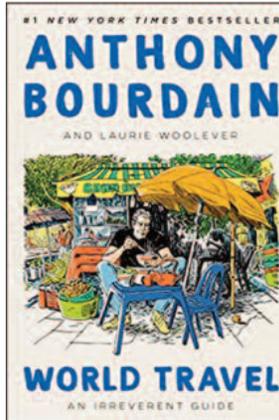
ary faction. Those foolish to take their chances with the new regime were rounded up into concentration camps, Khamchan among them, who languished there for 15 years before dying.

Inpeng died in Paris on October 22, 2011. Tianethone and his family live in Australia. He was the last president

**Notes:** During the early 1960s, as an expanding civil war consumed the country, the JC succumbed to an extended inactivity. Resuscitated by Tianethone in 1965, a surge of new members included many from OB. Among them **Dr. Primo Guevara, Armando Reyes, Jose Fuentesilla, Leonidas Benesa, Cesar Mendoza, Redentor del Rosario, Felipe Cruz, Jr., Antonio Sazon, Leonardo Hilario, Renato Mapua, Dr. Vic Wycoco, Alberto Javier, Jr. Jovito Naranjo, Jr. and Isagani Bautista** were elected officers. In the same year, OB joined the Lao chapter representatives at regional conferences in Bangkok, Manila and Sydney, Australia.



As the hospital building neared completion, a larger sign emphasized JC Laos sponsorship. OB personnel shown, from left, social worker Penny Villarica, Dr. Primo Guevara, social worker Belen Gaborne.



*Anthony Bourdain, host of his TV travel series “Parts Unknown” has lunch with a villager in Laos in 2017. At left is his field notes on the countries he visited, published in April 2021.*

## Visiting a Lovely Bombed Out Village

Towards the end of “Parts Unknown: Laos”, **Anthony Bourdain** enters a village in a remote region of the northern province of Xiengkhouang . It is 2016, but the village looks the way it has been for generations. Thatch huts. Bare earth footpaths. Thick bamboo groves. Dogs running loose.

“Uncle, can you prepare a meal for us?” His young guide /interpreter (and obviously his government escort/minder) asks a 60-year old farmer (but looking a worn 75). They squat around a square wooden table a foot high from the earthen floor. His dimly lit hut is fashioned from woven straw mat walls and a thatch roof. The farmer proceeds to boil bamboo shoots and chicken meat. The meal is simple but the conversation is complex. Bourdain was not in a happy-talk mood. He came to seek answers to questions that made his minder uncomfortable. Snippets:

**“Bourdain :** So tell me, what was it like during the war years in your village?

**Farmer:** They came, the planes, almost everyday. Some of the bombs did not explode. I picked one up and threw it over a fence. It exploded. Look. (He lifts his shirt to show an abdomen with ridges of scars). Many children got wounded. I was taken to a hospital.

**Bourdain:** American doctors ? Where did they come from? C.I.A ?

**Interpreter:** Uh, this is not a question...I think...

**Bourdain:** If you do not want to explain, no need to do so. But here on the one hand, Americans dropping bombs, blowing up children, your houses. And he tells me that doctors came to treat the people who got injured. I mean, all of the bombing, all of the deaths, all of the suffering, what do you think it was all for ? Is he angry?

**Farmer:** I don’t know what the reason was. It does not matter. They hurt us. But they also helped and supported us.”

His village lies near the Plain of Jars, one of the most bombed places during the 1964-73 massive airwar unleashed by the U.S. to stop North Vietnamese incursions and insurgent anti-government Pathet Lao guerrillas. Estimates say more bombs were dropped on Laos than the combined tonnage on Germany and Japan during World War 2. That calculates the country’s three million inhabitants as the most bombed ever on a per capita basis. Some 20,000 have been killed or maimed by unexploded bombs since the war ended in 1973. No doubt his village had harbored the Pathet Lao which made it a target for bombing missions. Even now, Bourdain says, in Xiengkhouang’s mountainous regions, remnants of Hmong tribesmen trained and armed by the C.I.A. as their foot soldiers against the Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao still survive in its wilderness.

“Parts Unknown Laos” is one of 104 hour-long episodes that aired on U.S. cable and TV broadcast outlets from 2013 to 2018. The multi-awarded series rede-

fined what a travel documentary should and should not be. Each focuses on a country, more often a non-touristy town or city, in a delightful mix of history, culture, cuisine. His commentary is effusive, profane and incisive. "I like atmospherics" he told the New York Times. "I don't want a list of the best hotels or restaurants. I want to read fiction set in the place where you get a real sense of what that place is like." To sample his unique perspective, go to YouTube or Netflix, pick from the series a city you lived in for a time. So you thought you knew what there was all to know about it, eh? Well, Bourdain discovers for you what the guidebooks and you missed altogether.

Some of his Laos field notes stir old but true stereotypes. Excerpts: "From the first time I heard of Laos, I was hooked and filled with a desire to see the place. Once a story book kingdom of misty mountains and opium...The thick unmoving air. The smell past rice paddies. Water buffalo. What feels like another century...so pretty, just incredible, lovely, a food crazy place and generous people."

If all that sounds a bit much, watch this Series 9, Episode 3 (an earlier series "No Reservations" on Laos was shot in 2008). The 2017 images are as enchanting as he said (The series has won awards in cinematography an editing). Widely celebrated as a chef, he employs the local cuisine, shot gorgeously in succulent colors, of each episode as the main entrée into his musings on local history and culture..

Bourdain committed suicide in June 2018. In April 2021, a production colleague compiled into a book "World Travel: An Irreverent Guide", his field notes from the more than 100 places the series featured. Luang Prabang and the Plain of Jars made the cut among the 43 countries chosen (as well as Cebu and Manila in the Philippines).

"Most Americans aren't aware of Laos, much less of the secret war there,

or the scale of the problems left behind. And this is sad and wrong" he wrote. "Laos, like I said, is beautiful. It is a place, despite its government's archaic policies and behavior, worth visiting and experiencing. It is and feels like a gentle place where one encounters many kindnesses. The wounds of war are still fresh in Laos, and still causing harm, both physical and psychological. The sooner they are healed, the better for those who live there, and the better for us who have to visit it.

### Notes :

Season 9, Episode 3 on Laos is no longer available from Netflix or free from YouTube or CNN. Nonetheless check to see if it is again accessible. You can view several excerpts or trailers, each lasting a minute or less from [www.explorepartsunknown.com/destination/laos](http://www.explorepartsunknown.com/destination/laos). For a full copy, buy for less than two dollars a downloadable digital file from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhDXSdf\\_zDs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhDXSdf_zDs).

At our November 2018 Mekong Circle reunion in Vientiane, we dropped by COPE, the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise. A museum, the crude prosthetic devices on display are cruel reminders of the ravages of war on the living. A U.S.-based foundation raises funds to assist the survivors. Visit their website [www.legaciesofwar.org](http://www.legaciesofwar.org).

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## From our Archives

**Rodolfo Sanchez** arrived in Vientiane September 17,1965 to assume his post as the first resident consul of the Philippines. In his absence, consular affairs of Filipino residents in Laos were coursed through the Philippine embassies in Bangkok or Saigon. With a swelling Filipino expat population of close to a thou-



sand, the post had the largest overseas Filipino community at that time. In his black bow tie and white Fiat sedan, he was a familiar face attending to the needs of his "constituents" — Filipinos employed by various organizations in the city. "I recall, rather proudly, that I had a first-name relationship with many of them," he told us. He said that during his two-year term, he met the best and the worst of Filipinos, as could be expected. "My Laotian assignment gave me the learning experience that I would need in my profession. I was to find out that working with expatriate Filipino communities is not the easiest job in the world."

In large measure the Filipino reputation in Laos is exemplary. Newly assigned Filipino ambassadors, when making the customary rounds of Lao officials, have reported the very warm, sincere receptions and constant references to the 18-year long service of Operation Brotherhood personnel. But there are reminders, anecdotal perhaps, that all was not always fine and dandy. Consider these internet exchange from Lao readers about the release in 2004 of our book "Filipinos In Laos".

### From "Fisherman"

Trying to sell a book about Filipinos is just like sitting in front of a computer in Minnesota trying to lecture a Canadian about the "correct leadership" of the Lao PDR. Can you give me a good reason why we Laotians should buy this book? Some Filipinos may have fallen in love with Laos, especially the young sexy girls but they were there for one and only one reason: the American green bills. They were paid many times more than their local counterparts for doing the same shit. That's why. Some of them even went overboard and screwed the local wives and consequently had their dead bodies shipped back to Manila in plastic bags.

### From "Pao"

At least one family member of mine was saved by the doctors and nurses at the OB Hospital. So there is something to be thankful.

**From "Fisherman"**

I have nothing against OB. You may not realize that Filipinos/Filipinas at OB represented only a very small fraction of Filipino population in Laos. They were doctors and nurses and were good people. There were also Filipinos working for USAID, Air America, Air Continental, etc. many of whom were uneducated, cocky and used the little money they made to break up many good Lao families.

**From "drsouk"**

Sabaidee Pete and Fisherman. The Filipinos that I remember were men drinking, running after women, perhaps some were good guys but I don't remember them. The Lao still call "OB" the hospital near That Luang.

**From "Noiy"**

C'mon Fisherman. I can't believe what I read in your post! What's the rudeness for? Let's be grateful and civilized towards

those who helped us. Don't look only on the negative side of things. Whoever paid the bills, that's not the point. What I can remember is those Filipinos were physicians, dentists, nurses and English teachers who came to help those poor Laotians. The fact that you had never been helped by these people, at least I, my relatives and other poor Laotians, had. What happened to us Laonorks\* lately? Are we just a bunch of primitives or what? (\*Laonork = overseas Lao).



Front page story in The New York Times tells how the U.S. government misled the public to expand the Vietnam War

## How We Got Into The Pentagon Papers

*Secret study also reveals the role of Filipinos with Operation Brotherhood and Eastern Construction Company to counter insurgency*

'On June 13, 1971, the New York Times began the first installment of what became known as the Pentagon Papers. Fifty years later, the news media in America recall the event in a blaze of pride at the triumph of the freedom of the press. The U.S. government had held up for 15 days the next installments on the grounds that the documents based on the story were top secret, were stolen and that publica-

tion threatened national security. The Times took its case to the U.S. Supreme Court which ruled that the public had a right to know the truth and should continue publication. Nineteen other newspapers began publishing excerpts.

What are the Pentagon Papers ? It's a massive trove of documents — 3,000 pages of analysis and 4,000 pages

of original government files. Together, they weighed 46 pounds. It was put together beginning in June 1967 by 36 analysts, military and academics, commissioned by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. It was conceived as a deep study of the ongoing U.S.-Vietnam war that had already killed some 45,000 American troops. Completed on January 1969, its findings, kept secret,

were not released. One of the analysts, disturbed by what he learned and hoping that the study would end a controversial war if it was leaked, provided the Times with a copy. Over three months in a suite of guarded rooms at the Hilton Hotel in Manhattan, some 50 writers, editors and researchers excerpted and summarized the study. Fearful that at any moment, the Federal Bureau of Investigation would barge in and seize the documents, they were instructed to keep mum about their project.

The analyst had good reasons for its unauthorized release. The study found that over three decades of White House administrations presided by presidents John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, their assertions that the war was winnable was a big, big lie. Thousands more Americans and millions of Vietnamese would die before the guns would fall silent in 1973. The revelation engulfed the country in widespread fury.

In the Philippines, the Pentagon Papers did not elicit as much furor until a closer reading revealed a small section in the mass of pages. Among Manila's influential opinion makers, the war was an ideological battleground. A strident leftist movement claimed that Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and his compliant Congress were complicit with the Americans in an immoral conflict by dispatching a Philippine engineering non-combat battalion, paid by the U.S., to assist the Vietnamese armed forces. When activists got copies of the Pentagon Papers, they zeroed in on a three-page section. It said that the U.S. was already employing Filipino resources right on the ground in Vietnam as early as 1954.

The section was a memorandum written sometime in July 1962 by U.S. Brigadier General Edward Lansdale, an expert on guerrilla warfare, submitted to Kennedy's military adviser, a list of assets for "unconventional warfare" that the U.S. could avail of in South Vietnam. Lansdale was no stranger to counterinsurgency specialists. He is credited as chief

adviser to Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay's campaign to suppress the leftist Huk movement of the 1950s. In his three-page memo, he recommended expanding the capabilities of two Filipino groups already active in Vietnam's civil war — Eastern Construction Company and Operation Brotherhood.

Eastern Construction, he wrote "now furnishes about 500 trained, experienced Filipino technicians to the Governments of Vietnam and Laos, under the auspices of MAAGs (MAP) and USOMs (ICA) activities. Most of these Filipinos are currently augmenting U.S. military logistics programs with the Vietnamese and Lao Army. They instruct local military personnel in ordnance, quartermaster, etc. maintenance, storage and supply procedures. MAAG chiefs in both Vietnam and Laos have rated this service as highly effective. CIA has influence and some continuing interest with individuals."

"Most of the cadre (of Eastern Construction Company) had extensive combat experience against the Communist Huk guerrillas in the Philippines," he wrote. "This cadre can be expanded into a wide range of counter Communist activities, having sufficient stature in the Philippines to be able to draw on a very large segment of its trained, experienced and well-motivated manpower pool" said part of his memo.

On Operation Brotherhood, he wrote that "this private Filipino public service organization (is) capable of considerable expansion in socio-economic-medical operations to support counter-guerrilla actions. It is now operating teams in Laos under ICA auspices. It has a measure of CIA control...The concept was to provide medical service to refugees and provincial farmers in South Vietnam as part of the 1955 pacification and refugee program. Initially Filipino teams, later other Asian and European teams, served in OB in Vietnam. Their work was closely coordinated with Vietnamese Army operations which cleaned up Vietminh stay behinds and started sta-

bilizing rural areas."

ICA (International Cooperation Administration) was the precursor to USOM (United States Operations Mission) which in turn became USAID (United States Agency for International Development. MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) trains foreign armed forces and MAP (Military Assistance Program) facilitates military equipment aid. Lansdale also listed other non-US military assets already in place in South Vietnam. These included Thai commandos known as PARU. He also mentioned the Hmong in Laos that have received counterinsurgency training from U.S. Special Forces.

To anti-American elements in the Philippines, the Pentagon Papers was a prized propaganda coup. In the highly-charged atmosphere of the Cold War and the Vietnam War, they branded any overt non-combat assistance to Laos, from OB to the IVS (International Volunteer Service), Asia Foundation and many other foreign aid groups as really covert CIA plots.

Eastern Construction trainers arrived in Laos in 1959 and were withdrawn in 1962 when a Geneva international agreement on Laos neutrality forced all foreign military advisors to leave. Some 400 Filipinos had served there over that period.

USAID assumed full funding of OB beginning in 1964 although another study said that in prior periods its "stream of disbursement funds came from three sources — USAID, the Department of Defense and CIA." Because of its long service in Laos, 18 years up to 1975, (and two years in Vietnam 1954-56) OB outgrew its counterinsurgency label. "It maybe partly due to the recognition that medical services, regardless of which agency was funding their provision, were both needed and gratefully accepted," said Kathryn Sweet, a Vientiane-based development aid specialist.

# 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. Past issues of our News can be accessed from our website [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org). (Click on "Resources".) Your comments are welcome. Send to [fuentecila@aol.com](mailto:fuentecila@aol.com)*