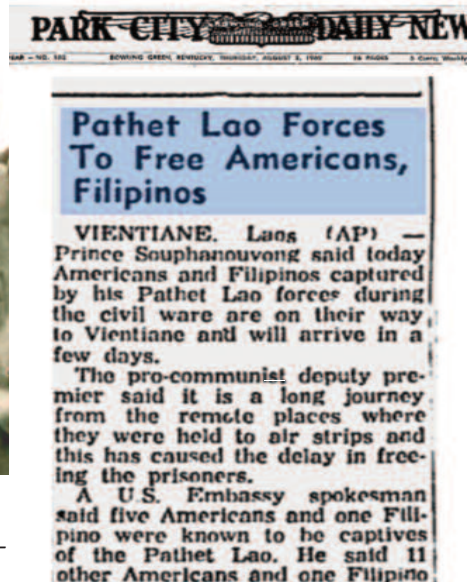


Welcome to the 51st Issue of our Newsletter



Freed in 1962 the doctors pose with OB administrative officer Carling Peralta (in checkered shirt). From left, Teoflo Ocampo, Juan Reyes and Genaro Aguilar.



Associated Press report August 2, 1962



He Won't Call Them "Prisoners of War"

In a banner headline on the front page of the Manila-based newspaper "Daily Mirror", October 4, 1960, an Associated Press dispatch from Vientiane said "FILIPINO GROUP CAPTURED BY PATHET LAO GUERRILLAS." It was yet another development that a bloody war in a poor, sparsely populated Asian country can snare innocent bystanders. And that there are no holds barred and all are fair game in an arena where conflict frontlines are as fluid as the monsoon rains.

Ever since Laos obtained its independence from France in 1954, the country has not experienced one day of peace until a ceasefire was proclaimed in 1973. Japan had occupied it, North Vietnamese and American interventions made it a Cold War pawn, a half-dozen coups foiled any stabilizing governance.

Most destructive of all, the Lao vs Lao civil war had inflicted some 200,000 deaths (in a population of only three million) and displaced 300,000 into refugees. The Filipino group were three doctors who had staffed since July 1958 an Operation Brotherhood (OB) hospital in the northern town of Sam Neua, capital of Houphanh province. They attended to both the war wounded and the refugees inside contested territory between the anti-government guerrillas and the Vientiane-based government. A government army garrison provided a measure

of security.

By the first week of September 1960, reports filtered in that the Pathet Lao were on the move towards the town. By September 16, gunfire sounds could be heard by town residents. OB headquarters in Vientiane sent a plane to evacuate the female team members -- nutritionist **Rossini Fuentes**, social worker **Penny Villarica**, and nurse **Susan Gaddi**. Male physicians **Teofilo Ocampo**, **Juan Reyes** and dentist **Genaro Aguilar**, decided to stay with their patients. By September 27, the garrison realized that it was no match for the advancing guerrilla force and decided to surrender. Indeed on September 28, Sam Neua fell.

At dawn of that day, the three doctors were on their way south. First by jeep which they abandoned at a washed out bridge, then by horseback, and then trekking under constant rain over rough, muddy trails that blistered Ocampo's feet. At a small village of Muong Peun, about 37 kilometers from Sam Neua they were seized by the Pathet Lao and were returned to the town, six days after they fled.

A three-decade "struggle for independence" is how Lao historians describe their experience with the French colonialists, Japanese occupiers and the American interventionists. Their

struggle was prolonged by the participation of various outsiders with vested interests – North and South Vietnam, China, Thailand, Russia – abetted by the main homegrown competitors. In this interlocking conflicts, even noncombatants found themselves in harm's way. Hence the capture of the three doctors. In another conflict zone in Kengkok, a southern town in Savannakhet province, an OB team there evacuated hours before the Pathet Lao took it in October 1972. (*See Mekong Circle Newsletter, September 2020*).

A group of four Catholic missionaries, belonging to the French-based Oblates of Mary Immaculate, had also struck out by foot from the town towards the safety of a village called Ban Ban. Hardy trekkers, they overtook the Filipinos. The priests had good reason to flee. One of them, American **Lucien Bouchard**, told us that the Pathet Lao had a "no-prisoners" policy towards missionaries whom they suspected as spies. "They and us were in the same business, trying to win hearts and minds." As many as a dozen captured priests, serving remote areas, had been executed over the course of the civil war.

When active hostilities ceased in 1973 between the leftist guerrillas and the rightist government, the agreement called for a 60-day period to exchange prisoners. The Pathet Lao revealed that it held "various foreign nationals (Australian, British, French, Thai, West German)" according to the United States Central Intelligence Agency in a 1992 report. At a news conference after the accord signing, a high ranking Pathet Lao, Phoumi Vongvichit when asked about prisoners of war, replied "Do not call them prisoners of war. I call them people who were captured and held during the war. Their number, nationalities and identities you will learn when they are released."

Later it supplied the names of 591 prisoners –562 military and 29 civilians. (The U.S. Defense Department recorded that from 1964 to August 1973, there were 288 missing Americans and five captured in Laos.) To be sure, non-combatants who took sides accepted the risks of capture, if not death.

Filipino aircraft technicians with Air America, chartered by the U.S. government for its Laos operations, suffered 10 casualties in plane crashes. Former Filipino armed force trainers with Eastern

Construction Company in Laos, contracted by the U.S. Defense Department to teach the Lao armed forces, found themselves in the frontlines. There are no published casualties among them during their 1959 – 1962 deployment.

In August 17, 1962, the Pathet Lao had released in Vientiane five Americans and one Filipino, **Lorenzo Frigillana**. A mechanic with Air America, he was swept up in the December 1960 firefight in Vientiane between a rightist General Phoumi Nosavan and a neutralist Philippine-trained Lao paratroop commando Kong Le. When Kong Le retreated out of the city, Frigillana was his captive. The other Filipino mechanic, **Ceferino Nabung**, was reportedly shot dead. Frigillana, as far as we can determine, was the first and only Filipino prisoner of the war.

One of the five Americans was camera correspondent Grant Wolfkill with the New York City-based National Broadcasting Corporation. Captured by the Pathet Lao in May 1961 when their helicopter crashed about 40 miles north of Vientiane, he wrote a 377-page book "Reported To Be Alive" (released 1965) about his 15-month imprisonment. Said a New York Times review: "There were times when they felt more dead than alive...They were kept during one period in a tiny, filthy, rat-infested room in a hut without light. They were locked in stocks. They were marched on rotting feet without adequate food, clothes or medicine. They suffered fever to the point where they seemed to be out of their minds, dysentery until they bled internally".

At one prison camp named La-trang, lo and behold, Wolfkill met Frigillana who was being held with 50 to 60 Lao prisoners. "Friggie", according to Wolfkill, was posing as a Lao.

"Who are you anyway? You are not Laotian, are you?" (Grant wrote).

He grinned. "No. Me. I'm Filipino. I was a mechanic for Air America. Frigillana understood quite a bit of Laotian...(He) said it was really rough on us, much rougher on us than on him. He felt sorry for us. He would try to slip us more food but it was difficult."

The guards were harshly abusive to the Americans, knowing they were military personnel. But they were just as cruel to civilians Wolfkill and Frigillana.

In the Kong Le-Phoumi three-day battle of Vientiane, Frigillana told Wolfkill

that he and another Filipino aircraft mechanic were "reading comic books while holed up in a bomb shelter. Kong Le troops came in and took them...He (Frigillana) was passing as a Laotian – his dark skin and short physique permitted this guise. And it was probably necessary for his survival."

When informed that all six prisoners will soon be released, Wolfkill wrote that "Friggi bubbled with ecstatic incoherence. He was so happy, happy so – Oh! So happy. 'Jesus Lord' he said, shaking his head, grinning, nervously wiping sweat from his face." Frigillana had survived more than eight months of merciless captivity.

Upon arrival in Vientiane aboard a Soviet helicopter, "all six appeared to have lost considerable weight" an Associated Press dispatch said. Planes were waiting for them for onward flights to Bangkok, and in the case of Frigillana, to the U.S. Clark Air Force base in the Philippines. We could not track down his current address.

In Sam Neua, the three doctors were detained in a house, where in a separate room government soldiers were held. "News of our capture had spread, and in the following days, women came to our door bringing cucumbers, fruits, rice, cigarettes and blankets," said Dr. Aguilar. "We had stacks of food supplies, more than we could consume in 15 days." They were not abused in any way. After all, the doctors were aware that some of their captors could very well have been previous patients.

On the sixth day, a Pathet Lao commandant announced "we have decided to set you free." Left unsaid, their capture had generated a flurry of appeals, from Philippine president Carlos Garcia and Lao Prime Minister S.Phouma.

On October 14, a plane arrived to fly them to Vientiane. On the road leading out of town, groups of residents did the "wai" wishing well gesture, clasped hands on their faces. They said "we will take care of your hospital till your return".

But, wrote Fr. **Miguel Bernad** in his "Filipinos in Laos" history (2015), they have not returned. It was the end of the Sam Neua operation that had involved a total of 39 Filipinos and had lasted a little over two years from July 1958 to October 1960." Sam Neua remained in Pathet Lao control till the end of the civil war in 1975

Souvenir Ads: Once More With Feeling

Our reunion souvenir program not only memorializes the event. It comes with the expected messages –

Greetings To All !

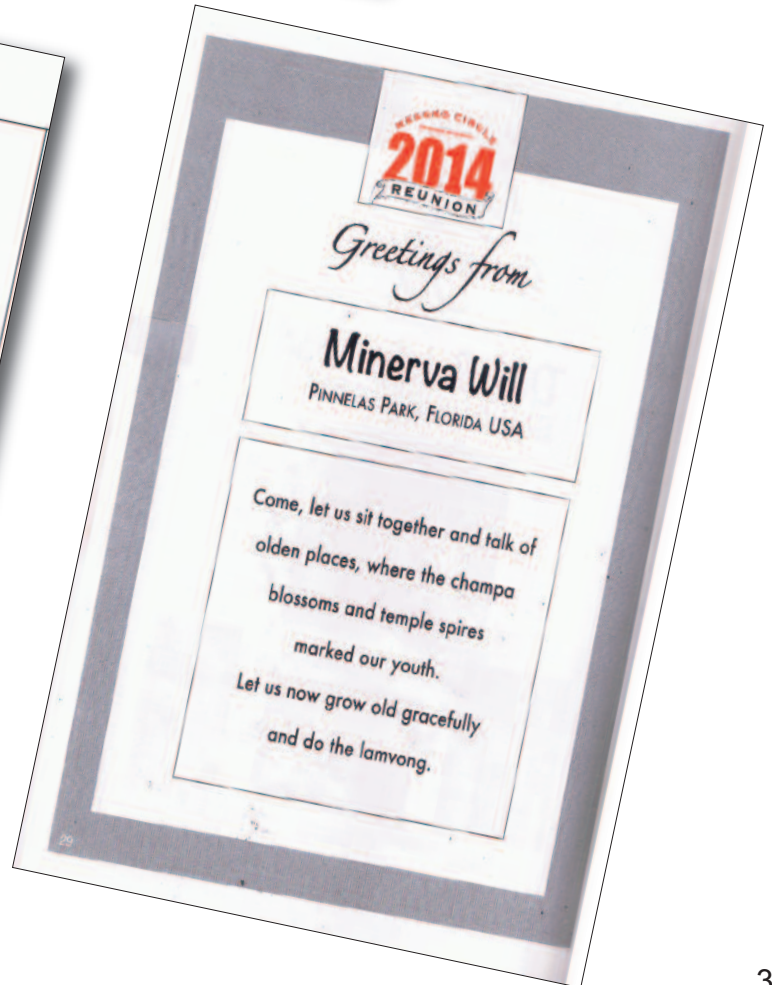
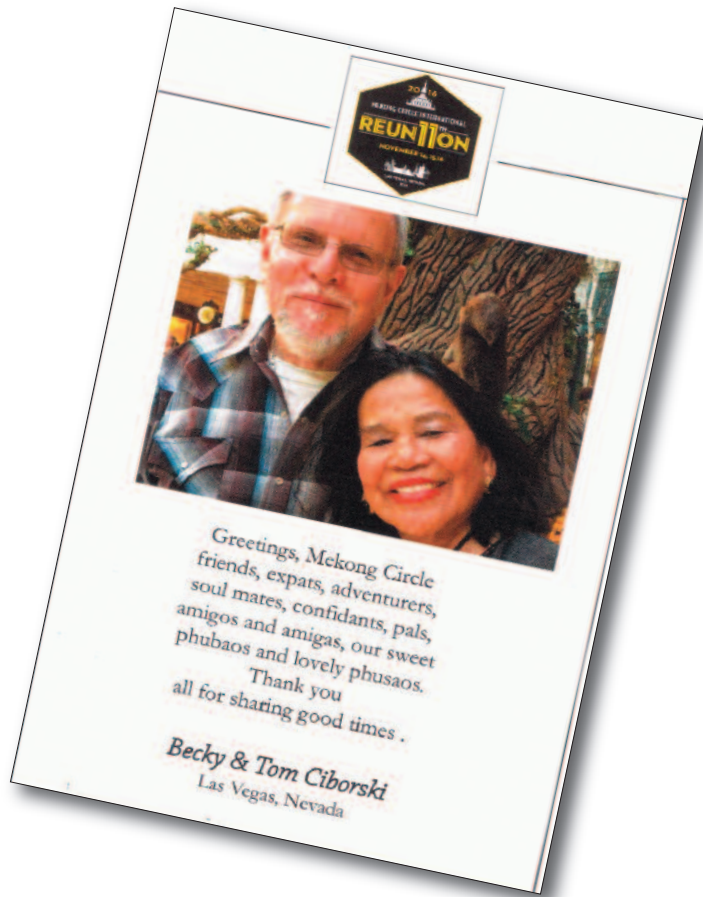
Congratulations !

Immensely joyful !

Forward To The Next One!

The copies are treasured mementoes and ,it must be said, their paid ads did much to meet our expenses.

Here are the more memorable messages from our 10th(2014) and 11th (2016) celebrations.



How We Almost Revived Our Medical Aid Project



The Balik Laos tour group in Vientiane in November 2002, from left seated Anthony de Jesus, Fenny Victa, Tony Victa, Anita Marquez. Standing from left Lydia Palma, Consul Raul Dado, Bik Marquez, Ambassador Mario Galman, Puring de Jesus, Raul de Jesus, Gene Hernandez, Jig de Jesus, Estrella Hernandez, Ciony Ljungar, Cora Victa.

When the East Coast chapter of Mekong Circle agreed to host our August 2-4, 2002 reunion in New York City, it would be the fourth edition in a tradition that began in 1995. Our California chapter launched it that year in Los Angeles, again in 1998, followed by San Francisco in 2000. The New York/New Jersey/Pennsylvania chapter, in accepting the challenge to outdo their West Coast colleagues, faced us with a formidable hurdle – how to convince members to fly to New York, a city still in a lockdown, fearful mood, less than a year after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Okay, so we'll hug and laugh and drink and exchange tales of our shared experience in Laos. We did that in California thrice over already, didn't we?

And so the East Coast reunion organizers came up with a sunset cruise aboard a double deck yacht on the Hudson River. There was music and dancing and food and booze. And that giddy feeling of gliding on sun-dappled waters, a skyline backdrop of Manhattan's skyscrapers, unspooling on the horizon, a warm breeze caressing our receding hairlines. The strains of Blue Danube humming in your mind. Hah, wasn't that quite a change over California's dinner dances in sterile hotel ballrooms?

But wait, there's more. At the reception in the morning of August 2 at the Hotel Pennsylvania in Manhattan, after the welcoming "baci" ceremony, the floor was cleared, long tables and chairs were setup, classroom style. A handout titled "Presentations" was distributed. What's

this, some faces frowned. Can we just huddle and talk of our expat times? The handout listed eight topics, among them proposals for a package tour to Laos, a website, a book, and a medical mission to Laos.

Starting the session, former Operation Brotherhood project manager **Vitoy Naranjo**, his wife OB nurse **Joji**, and OB social worker **Bing Belicena** narrated, with slides, their 10-day visit in Vientiane in March 2002. They were followed by an overview of the state of affairs in his country by Ambassador Alounkeo Kit-tikhoun, of the Permanent Mission of Laos to the United Nations. Hawaii-based **B.J. Reyes**, journalist son of OB agriculturist **Bert Reyes** and OB nurse **Melanie**, described our website he was building. And at the bottom of the page, a proposal to send a medical mission to Laos.

The idea was to arouse enthusiasm from a captive 167 celebrants (it would be another two years to assemble a sizable audience) to back the proposals and think beyond the biennial merrymaking and nostalgic wallowing. Somehow it worked. A group of 17 members embarked on a one week "Balik Laos" (return to Laos) visit in November 2002, their first after almost three decades when they left in 1975. A full-service website went online, strengthening our bonds and telling the world who we are and what we do. Our book "Filipinos In Laos" became available in 2004 at Amazon (the second 2015 edition offered an electronic format as well).

And the medical mission? The signs had bode well that it would be very welcome. In October 1997, during a state visit by Philippine Fidel Ramos to Laos, he recalled the years when hundreds of Filipino doctors, nurses and other professionals "served in Laos under the banner of Operation Brotherhood." That visit resulted in a memorandum to "exchange doctors, nurses, experts and health professionals...in order to cooperate and ensure success by the (Lao) people, especially women and children to adequate public health services, with particular emphasis on the area of primary health care." This agreement was reaffirmed at a reciprocal state visit of Laos Prime Minister Khamtay Siphandone to Manila in December 1998 and again during the April 2002 state visit of Laos Prime Minister Bounhang Vorachit.

A huge impetus came during a courtesy call on November 6, 2002 by members of the "Balik Laos" group to the Minister of Public Health Dr. Pomnek Dalalay. Right then and there he invited the return of the OB medical program. Leaving his office, the group did not know exactly how to react, the invitation was unexpected. "We were on cloud nine," remembers accountant **Puring de Jesus**. An official letter from Dr. Dalalay addressed to **Vicente Marquez**, head of the visiting group, came on June 6, 2003:

"This is to formally invite the Mekong Circle to assist the Lao PDR in providing health care to people in and out of Vientiane, Lao PDR. Hopefully the ini-

tiative began by the late Ambassador **Mario Galman** will bear fruit in the near future, enhancing cooperation between Lao PDR and the Philippines. To this end, the Ministry of Health offers its full support.”

The “initiative” the Minister mentioned referred to the “Balik Laos” project that Philippine Ambassador Mario Galman actively promoted before he passed away in April 2003.

On November 7, 2002, **Jose “Pete” Fuentecilla**, arrived in Vientiane, flying from New York to Bangkok, Thailand, switching to an overnight train to the city. As a member of the organizing committee of the New York 2002 reunion that proposed the medical mission, he was tasked to flesh out the details. From 1961 to 1967 he was an OB administrative officer and this was his first return after 35 years. The public health landscape had changed considerably over that period during which he had visited OB provincial outposts as part of his job. If he had to compose a proposal, he had to start from scratch.

Over 12 days, he met with Lao doctors, toured the three major Vientiane-based hospitals – Mahosot, Setthatirath and Friendship, reunited with former OB Lao nurses now employed at these hospitals. The Ministry of Health provided two officials and a vehicle to visit the government hospital in Vang Vieng, 80 miles north of Vientiane, formerly staffed by OB. Consul **Raul Dado** from the Philippine Embassy tagged along.

Dr. Champeth, the 42-year old medical director, greeted him “You are my first Filipino since I left Paksong many years ago” where OB had a hospital, in the southern province of Champassak. In another interview in Vientiane, an American doctor volunteering with a non-governmental organization updated him on the quality of health care in the country.

On February 18, 2003, a “Sum-

mary” 20-page proposal was submitted by Marquez to Dr. Dalaloy, and a copy to Ambassador Galman. It described a four-year contract by a rotating team of four Filipino doctors and eight nurses, to help staff, for a start, four medical government sites, two in the north and two in the south of the country. They will do clinical work, conduct inservice training, accompany outreach “mobile” health teams. Three “implementing agencies” were identified – the Ministry of Health, the government of the Philippines and Mekong Circle. “Financing will be provided by the Ministry of Health who will seek donor sources,” it said. Appendices detailed timetables, a Plan of Work and estimated costs.

Mekong Circle files indicated that the proposal circulated to people at the Laos Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila, the Vientiane office of the World Health Organization. Among the files were orientation materials for the volunteers, service contracts, and a form letter calling on former OB Lao nurses residing in the USA to join the mission. A number of retired OB Filipino nurses enthusiastically signed up. Dr. **Pete Gonzales** from Kissimmee, Florida, USA said he would have liked very much to go, but because he had bad knees, he will instead send a donation.

An email from the WHO resident representative said that he discussed it with the Deputy Director of the Cabinet of the Ministry of Public Health. An email from our Manila-based Mekong Circle affiliate **Fred Mendoza** said he met with an Undersecretary at the Foreign Affairs department. **Antonio Canbangon Chua**, the new ambassador who replaced Galman wrote that “the Philippine Embassy will be available to assist you in your effort...on the matter of this medical mission.”

Weeks, months passed and nothing more was recorded in the files. It

seemed that a black hole had devoured the document. Then in 2004, Laos took a turn on the world stage. It would be hosting for the first time the 10th annual summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Hundreds of diplomats, journalists, top level businessmen from ten ASEAN members would descend on the capital from November 29 to 30, among them their chief national executives. Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo would be attending. Here was an opportunity to resurrect the medical mission proposal, in a drastically shortened format.

Wouldn’t it be a grand gesture to highlight President Arroyo’s summit attendance by inviting a group of Mekong Circle Filipino surgeons to perform some procedures at Mahosot hospital? Call it a PR stunt, but when and where else would an opportunity of this scale emerge to project the spotlight on Mekong Circle.

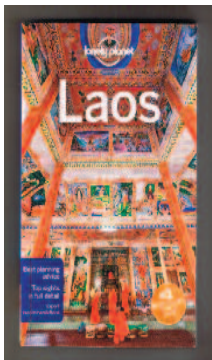
The hospital said yes, but did not follow up with an official announcement. As the time rushed towards the hectic, massive runup to the summit days, it became obvious that the idea was shunted aside. Once more, like the larger mission proposal, it fell into the maw of the black hole.

Note: Ambassador Kittikhoun, in a presentation titled “The Idea of Laos”, on TEDx, described how Laos’ recent history shaped its destiny. Its geographical location, linked to its powerful neighbors Thailand and Vietnam, and as the centerpiece of the 1960s-1970s ideological Cold War in the region, made it a pawn and earned it the distinction as the “most bombed country” in history. A weak buffer state, it must struggle mightily to take every opportunity to survive. Listen to his 15-minute talk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dr-RkXVSfR-s>). Or type “The Idea of Laos” on the YouTube search bar. It was uploaded on December 20, 2016.

Notable Notes

No Longer The Road Less Travelled

Lonely Planet, that bible of the backpack generation, has released its 10th Laos edition on June 2020. First published in 1994 by an Australian-based company, the newest version will astound the young Europeans who fell insanely in love with the



pristine wonders of a country that was really out of the way. Not anymore. Having visited Vientiane four times in the last decade, we have seen how the city has transformed dramatically since our times there in the 1960s. The new

tourist hordes, stylishly sandaled (unlike the footloose hippies of old) can sample modern amenities found in Bangkok or Manila.

The 4th edition (2002) listed Vieng Latry (renamed the Vienglatry Mai, “mai” for new) as “the most popular place in town” for nightclubbing. It was dropped in the 2010 edition, replaced by ten clubs “popular with Vientiane’s beautiful people.” About medical services, each edition sticks to the notion that Vientiane’s “medical facilities can leave a lot to be desired, so for anything serious make a break for the border and the much more sophisticated hospitals in Thailand” (2017, 9th edition). Maybe so, but it is evident that the writers had not visited the updated services at the Mahosot or Setthatirath hospitals..

“Pioneers” Video Getting More Views

“Filipino Pioneers in Laos”, uploaded in April 2018 to YouTube, has been racking up more views, 4,318 when we accessed it October 21, 2021. A joint production of Mekong Circle and the Philippine Embassy in Laos, it is the first full-length documentary on Operation Brotherhood Laos, from its origins in 1957 to the reunions of its expats in the 2000s. DVDs were given out during our 12th (and last) reunion in Vientiane in November 2018. Read some of the 17 viewer comments on the site.

A more recent upload (August 27, 2021) on the site is “In Laos, Medical Missions On The Mekong”. Type this title on the YouTube search bar to open a 10-minute video of what we called “River Mobiles” – expeditions up and down the Mekong River in the late 1950s on a river barge equipped as a floating clinic. On it, a medical team of an OB doctor and nurses, Lao medical assistants and a Lao boat crew, would sail to riverfront villages, disembark to conduct health care activities to the residents. The video was compiled from photos discovered by the children of the OB doctor, Filipino Rodolfo Arreola, who led one of these missions. Some trips would last as long as eight weeks in one go. The barge, named “Mutya Ng Mekong” (the Lady of the Mekong) was their home for all that time. They were treated to a timeless riverine Lao way of life, of thatch huts and barefoot children, that today is fading as modernity breaks into their isolation.

Why Are We Surviving the Pandemic?

As we get close to the second year of this Covid19 virus pandemic, there is some comfort to learn that we have not received any reports of Covid related deaths among our ranks. But there is the anxiety, the dread that we belong to that highly vulnerable group of the aged. When we first embarked on our Laos adventure in 1957, we were in our 20s and 30s.

Now as we reach our late 70s and early 80s, we remember historian **Kathryn Sweet’s** remarks in 2014 at a Manila medical history conference. She said that during our 18-year Lao sojourn, “the work and the living conditions pushed the limits of (our) technical training and demanded high levels of physical and emotional stamina.” Could that experience partly explain our survival rate, we the first generation after our exodus from Laos in 1975? Our second generation is in their 50s. Our third generation, the grandkids -- kids? – heck, they are in college already. Their origins can be traced to the many nuptials on Lao soil, some 90 in all, a substantial number among the 602 members of Operation Brotherhood (see *January 2011* issue of Newsletter for

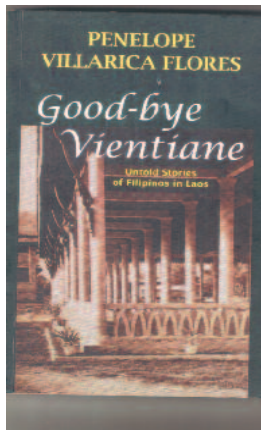
a listing). A number of us were stricken with malaria, an endemic condition in Laos. Its virus lives on within us. But here we are, hanging on.

Rejoice! It’s Your Ethnic Month

In 2009 the U.S. Congress declared, in its mysterious wisdom, that henceforth every October will be celebrated as Filipino American month. Why October? History says that during the Manila-Acapulco oceanic trade from 1565 to 1815, Spanish Galleon ships would cross the Pacific. One of the ships somehow landed in what is now Morro Bay in California, USA on October 18, 1587. Notice that date? America was not yet America, which it became only in 1776. Aboard the ship were Filipino sailors, taken from the Islas Pilipinas colony of Spain. When the Filipinos set foot on Morro Bay, “it is the first time that people of Asian descent (came) to modern day California” according to the Filipino American National Historical Society. It says that in 1763, the first Filipino **permanent** settlement in the U.S. emerged in the St. Malo Parrish of today’s Louisiana state of the U.S. Again, note that the year precedes the birth of America. Today there are close to four million Filipinos in the U.S., the second largest Asian American group in the nation.

Now let’s compare these historical tidbits to our Lao colleagues in America. There is no Lao American month, not yet, and perhaps not ever. Their numbers, at 254,000 according to a 2019 census, are miniscule compared to the Filipinos. They are the newest immigrants. In 1975 when the Communists took over their country, almost a third of its three million inhabitants fled. Largest refugee numbers settled in Thailand, followed by the U.S. and France. (Let’s skip for the moment that the U.S. intervention in the Lao civil war generated the waves of refugees).

The Filipinos took many decades to take their place in American society. The Lao have arrived less than 50 years ago. Almost all as refugees, they start their climb up from the lowest rungs. We worked with them in their country, we know first hand their resolute spirit. Their American-born and raised children now number almost 120,000. The 2019 census data show they are stepping up fast.



Untold Stories. Read Them Now. You Maybe In It.

On October 15, 2005, in the Clarion Hotel in San Francisco, **Penny Villarica Flores** signed books at a reading of her newly released volume "Goodbye Vientiane: Untold Stories of Filipinos in Laos." Here are excerpts from her oral histories. They have been edited for space and clarity. Penny, seated at left, was a social worker with Operation Brotherhood in Laos. At the signing shown here were the late **Bik Marquez** and his wife **Anita**. (*penelopevflores@gmail.com*)

We had to immediately evacuate. We had to cross a river spanned by a spindly bridge of mangrove branches and bamboo lashed together with vines. I remember that nurse Cecile Datu froze in her steps over the slippery one bamboo pole plank. It swayed at every movement. Somebody had to come and guide her. Later, in a clearing, I heard the drone of a helicopter. I knew it had orders to pick us up. However the clearing was almost hidden from view. From my emergency kit we were always instructed to have in our backpacks, I took a flare and lit it. Our location was identified and in a few minutes the Thakkek team was lifted to safety.
—*Nurse Marilyn Bautista Raguini, sometime in 1958, OB outpost in Thakkek, central province of Khammuan*

One of my earlier duties was to make regular payroll deliveries to technicians stationed all over the country. After an accident in the northern province of Luang Prabang which killed three technicians, I was told to accompany their remains to Manila. I had to identify them in a Bangkok hospital. Accompanied by the Philippine consul, the caskets were affixed with consular seals. We were in a frighteningly dark morgue illuminated by candlelights. This experience has lingered with me.
—*Ernie Felix, accountant with Eastern Construction Company in Laos which supplied Filipino technicians to train the Lao government armed forces.*

It was getting late in the evening, getting

hungrier by the minute. We newcomers looked for a place to eat. All the main street restaurants had closed. Down an alley we saw a small eatery. A naked bulb hanging low over a couple of plain tables and benches. All I wanted was fried eggs. No fancy menu. Besides we could not speak Lao or read the menu. The owner did not speak English. No problem. I started acting as a hen, flailing my arms like wings. I made clucking sounds, running around in circles, scratching the bare earth. Then I squatted on the floor and with my thumb and forefinger, forming a round object, I showed it emerging from my behind. The woman whispered to another older woman. They disappeared behind a curtain of beads over a door leading to the kitchen. Soon, out came fried eggs on a plate of rice.
—*Celso Orense, Transport Division, U.S. Agency for International Development, Vientiane, 1967*

Our classmates came from all over Laos – Paksong, Vang Vieng, Sayaboury, Kengkok, Kong Sedone. Living together, dormitory style. The girls dormitory was across the driveway from the boys' dormitory. The East Wing was occupied by the first year cohort; the West Wing by the second year students. After two years of taking classes under our OB teachers, studying hard and working together in the hospital in Vientiane, and staying together in the dormitory, we developed a very close relationship as brothers and sisters. After our graduation we were sad to see some of our classmates go back to their

own provinces to serve as auxiliary staff to the OB hospitals there.

—*Phounsouk Sisouphone, OB School of Practical Nursing, Vientiane, Class of 1969*

I worked with the U.S. Information Service in Vientiane. One day I was on a C-47 plane full of foreign correspondents, about 22, to visit the southern town of Attapeu, which skirts the Ho Chi Minh trail. There was an OB Hospital there. I was eager to talk Dr. Pete Joaquin whom I knew was posted there. I saw a number of wounded soldiers. Dr. Pete said it did not matter whether the wounded were Royal Lao government soldiers or Pathet Lao guerrillas. Their blood is the same red color. Dr. Pete noticed our haggard and rumpled looks. He asked me if we have had anything to eat. "Well, I answered, "this is war, man. We hadn't had a bite since yesterday." Dr. Pete whispered to a Lao associate. Then he announced. "You are all invited to lunch. Come back in an hour".

We could see bombing raids in the distance. Flares. This is no place to get food anywhere. In a little while, we were called into a dining area. I expected a tin can of biscuits. There was a spread of food. Omelet, turkey breast, sausages, Spam, corned beef, honey cured ham, Alaska salmon, sardines in olive oil tomato sauce, chili peppers. And a bottle of Chianti. Dr. Pete is as rotund as his smile. Now I know he dines like a prince, opening his personal larder to a bunch of commoners.

—*Wattana Panutai*

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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New York 11427 USA

It was the summer of 1970. We were alerted that Vietcong guerrillas from South Vietnam would be coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail, parts of which wind down near where we staffed an OB hospital. "Get ready at Paksong airstrip for evacuation to Pakse" said the radio message. Pakse is about 50 kms. away. There was a mad rush for our emergency backpacks. We were ready to go. What if we got caught? I was visibly agitated until one of our Lao kitchen helpers approached me.

"No need to be afraid," he said. Should the Vietcong overrun us here, they'll only find patients and nursing aides in the hospital. No Filipinos. You'll be a Lao patient and I'll be the Lao nurse aide. His plan was a role reversal. He would stand by my bedside and I would be propped up in a bed and he would watch over me. I was so awed by this gesture.
— Erlinda Masibay, nutritionist, Paksong, Champassak province

There were many parties in Vientiane. Lao officials, American friends would toast each other with jiggers of rice wine — lao lao or lao hai. I suffered from a kind of stomach ulcer and so I when the jigger comes my way, I would pass and raise instead a glass of milk, a "Bear" brand, the only one locally available. Our hosts understood my reluctance.

I have not encountered really drunk Lao. When they do get high, they would gather cooking utensils from the kitchen and begin dancing the lamvong, banging out ladles, pots and pans. Never have I seen drunken brawls in all my six years of stay there.

— There was an emergency surgical procedure to be done. Our plasma supply would not be enough in case we needed more. Everyone in the team was told to be on standby. To insure additional supply, I went to the house of the Christian Missionary Alliance in town. It was lunch

time and the pastor's family was having lunch. I explained the situation. He grabbed his shirt, hopped into our jeep and rushed to the hospital. "Now that was a charitable act of Ministry to leave lunch," I thought.

— Erlinda Masibay, Sayaboury province

We took over the clinic that American Dr. Tom Dooley left in Ban Houie Sai. One day I went to look at his living quarters. The house was built from brown bricks. Wide windows. Green shutters. I was assigned to his bedroom. What an honor, to sleep where the famous Dr. Tom Dooley slept. I began cleaning it up. Guess what I saw. A snake coiled near a wall. I would be sleeping with a snake at my bedpost. I had plenty of nightmares, sensing a family of snakes all over the room.

— Erlinda Masibay, Ban Houie Sai, Sayaboury