

Operation Brotherhood photographer Lapitan dies at 87



Sergio Lapitan passed away, Feb. 19, 2003 at 2:50 in the morning, his wife Sounthaly said. He was 87 years old.

Serge was among the pioneers in establishing Operation Brotherhood in Laos. Assigned as a photographer in 1959, he worked with the 1950s-1960s tools of the trade in use then -- flashbulbs and fixed double-lens reflex cameras -- a far cry from the filmless, digital, automatic exposure, automatic flash, zoom and multi-lens cameras of today. Yet it was a wonder to watch him load film and pop bulbs in a flurry of hand movements that could match the speed of today's cameras.

He may have also pioneered his own 1/2 hour instant photos years before this technology emerged.

You will remember those photo shoots at Wattay airport, when hordes of us would send off homegoing volunteers.

Serge would shoot a roll, dash to his motorcycle, roar back to the OB House, duck into his darkroom, mix his chemicals, develop the negative, dry, press and cut the prints, then roar back to Wattay, and hand over envelopes with 8 by 10, black & white prints, somewhat still damp, as the intercom announced boarding time (Joe Barcelona, in his mock French accent, would repeat: "Attangshong!Attangshong! leh aviong lilipad nah!").

The volunteers, clutching the envelopes, knew they contained what maybe the best souvenir to bring home of their Laos years -- beaming young faces of their colleagues, many of whom they may never see again.

Serge stayed in Laos till 1975. At one time, he was the "housefather" for residents of OB House.

On the side, he freelanced as a correspondent for the news wire service United Press International.

He married OB practical nurse Sounthaly Somchay in Vientiane in October 1965. They settled in Chicago, Illinois in 1976 till 1998 where Serge found a job in a metal fabrication shop while Sounthaly was a home care registered nurse. In 1998 they moved to Kirkland, Wash.

Serge had been very ill for the last three years, suffering from Parkinson's disease, arthritis and prostate cancer. In addition to Sounthaly, 60 years old, he is survived by daughters Laureen, 37, a registered nurse and social worker; and Tricia, 32, a lawyer.

Some of Serge's cremated remains will be carried by Sounthaly next month to Vientiane for Buddhist services. She and Serge had visited her mother there in 1995 and 1997.

Kop chai lai lai, Serge, for the memories. We cherish them in our photo scrapbooks.