



Angie Angelo: Flying Safe the Skies of Laos

Our association, Mekong Circle, formed 24 years ago in California, USA, counts among its members some 200 Filipinos who were employed by chartered airlines based in Laos. They were flight engineers and mechanics, among the 900 other Filipino foreign aid professionals who worked in that country from 1957 to 1975.

Irineo "Angie" Angelo was a 24-year old 1958 graduate of aeronautical engineering from FEATI University in Manila when a classmate tipped him off about an Air Asia company seeking licensed aircraft mechanics. He applied, passed the interview and soon found himself ordered in 1962 to Tainan, a municipality in Taiwan, for orientation. That's when he was told that Air Asia was actually one of the airline companies owned by the United States Government that did the hiring for yet another U.S. government airline -- Air America -- flying the skies of Laos..

He arrived in Vientiane, Laos' capital city, in 1962, right when Cold War combatants were shedding blood and treasure to pursue their ideological interests. In one camp stood Thailand, South Vietnam and the USA; in the other, North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union. In the middle was their prize -- a newly independent (from France), poor, mountainous, sparsely populated (three million), Third World country. It was the strategically located domino, which if toppled, would bring down the other dominoes -- Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines -- into the Communist camp, or so the USA feared.

Angie did not realize it then when he reported for duty in January 1962 that this second Indochinese War (the first was between the victorious North Vietnam over France in 1954) would last till 1975 and cost many thousands of lives, mostly Lao, among them 22 Filipinos. Though civilian non-combatants, the Filipinos were in harm's way.

Consider Angie's employer, Air America Laos (AAM), which by now everybody knows was chartered by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to run the largest paramilitary operation in the world in Laos (the "Sec War") at that time. According to CIA Laos historian William Leary, the CIA aircraft inventory, by the summer of 1970, included two dozen twin-engine transports, another two- dozen short-take-off-and-landing (STOL) planes,

and about 30 helicopters. It employed more than 300 pilots (mostly American), flight mechanics, and so-called air freight specialists. By 1973, when a ceasefire temporarily lessened firefights, only 49 AAM Filipinos remained from its peak of 200 in the early 1960s.

As a ground crew technician maintaining fixed and rotary wing aircraft, Angie was spared the dangers that killed colleagues who flew with the planes on hazardous missions -- transporting troops and refugees, emergency medical evacuations, rescuing downed airmen, inserting and extracting Ho Chi Minh Trail road watch teams, flying airdrops, photoreconnaissance, and other clandestine sorties.

Angie and his team's specialties were the big transport planes -- C47, C46, C45, C123. Others were assigned to fix helicopters. Filipino avionics experts tended to the instrumentation. In the nine years maintaining fixed wing aircraft, he was able to train 22 Lao to earn their mechanics licenses. Maintenance duties included long layovers to repair grounded aircraft in various provincial airfields. Or right in ground zero conflict zones such as the CIA-Hmong guerrilla northern bases at Sam Thong and Long Tieng battling Communist Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Angie says he had his share of trekking through Laos's inhospitable hinterlands, "pulling leeches out of my legs."

An American pilot, C.J. Abadie, Jr. in a debriefing report, wrote "Our Filipino flight mechanics and ground crews were outstanding and worked longer hours. They get the helicopters ready to go in the morning, flew with us all day, loaded and unloaded cargo/wounded/bodies, pumped fuel with a hand pump and checked and greased the helicopters at the end of the day's flying."

Wrote pilot John Train, who flew helicopters from 1965 to 1968, the "AAM maintenance personnel kept our aircraft in such excellent flying condition. In my opinion, the FMs (flight mechanics) were the unsung heroes responsible for the reliability that our lives depended on."

Mekong Circle members of Operation Brotherhood (OB) took this for granted. They were shuttled in and out to their remote medical outposts on those C46s and C47s the engineers worked on daily. These carried their lifelines of food, supplies and most precious of all -- letters.

Angie emigrated to the USA in 1971 with his wife the former OB doctor Concordia Alon. They were married in Vientiane in April 1966. They settled in Texas where Angie worked as Quality Control Inspector for Southwest Airlines and TranStar Airlines. They have two sons -- Michael of Bossier City, Louisiana and Orland of Irving, Texas as well as six grandchildren. He passed away March 16, 2019 at the age of 81 in Irving, Texas. Messages can be sent to Dr. Angelo at 2718 Timberview Drive, Irving, Texas 75060 USA.

