

## Remembering “OJay”

On October 28 this year, Oscar J. Arellano would have been 94 years old. He was 57 when he died in 1974 of a heart attack in Spain on his way back to Manila after his visit to Laos. Founder and prime mover of Operation Brotherhood to Vietnam in 1954 and its transfer to Laos after three years, his visit to Vientiane (which someone described as visitations) would mark not only the last of his numerous appearances as OB President. In a year’s time, OB Laos would also end its mission.



Addressing a gathering of OB Vientiane personnel on July 19, 1974, Oscar recounted his courtesy call on King Savang Vatthana.

“Last night, I was watching the sunset in Luang Prabang and I was thinking of what His Majesty the King told me in our interview earlier in the morning. We met again, after all these years, and I guess we are both older now and not as young as we once were. I could not help but think that both of us were walking towards the sunset. This is the ultimate goal of all of us – to walk towards the sunset.”

Oscar and the King first met when OB arrived in the kingdom in 1957. During that entire period Laos, a small mountainous country of three million people, did not relish one day of peace. A war between outside powerful nations, of which it did not want a part, spilled into its borders, engulfed it and stunted its growth. A civil war within its own borders was tearing its people apart. Oscar was pained that this man reigned over “a divided house” in all the time that OB served there under his royal patronage.

“During these 18 years, you have served people irrespective of race, color, creed and political convictions and for this there must be pride in all of you,” he told the Filipinos. “We served those whom we call enemies as well as those whom we call friends.” He reminded them that for every one that was chosen to volunteer, “20 were screened. You were chosen because it was felt you had it in you to be able to give and share what you know with the Lao. There was in you the burning curiosity to learn, to share and to impart.”

The King so deeply appreciated their service, he bestowed over time royal awards to 26 Filipino volunteers, including Oscar, a tribute perhaps no single foreign nationality has ever achieved in such numbers. The awards were not earned cheaply. During almost two decades in Laos, ten OB volunteers died there.

“I have personally observed your work in different areas. Operation Brotherhood is the type of assistance which we welcome and of which we would like to have more because it is the kind of help that does not cause our country to lose honor,” the King had stated. “We wish that we could have more of this kind of help.”

An architect with a generous girth and twinkly eyes, Oscar was referred to by his office employees as Ojay (short for his initials OJA). These same employees were many times hapless, captive listeners to his voluble tendency to expound on boundless ideas for OB’s socio-economic projects. These presentations (in an era without Power Point) were accompanied by his intricate, criss-crossing diagrams on paper. But it was this gift for persuasion (and his leadership roles with the Philippine Jaycees and their influential members) that helped launch OB Vietnam, OB Laos and OB Philippines.

In another one of his visitations in 1964, he delivered one of his memorable orations. Excerpt: “Not very many people understand OB because they think it is a medical effort. They think it is an agricultural effort. They think it is a social effort. What they do not realize is that OB is a training for leadership. What they do not seem to realize is that someday, from the ranks of all of you and the Lao who are as much a part of OB, leadership will arise. OB is an experience by which each and everyone of us will realize how important everyone of us is, how all of us are useless unless we share what we know, and learn from others what there is so much to learn.”

(Text by [Pete Fuentesilla](#))