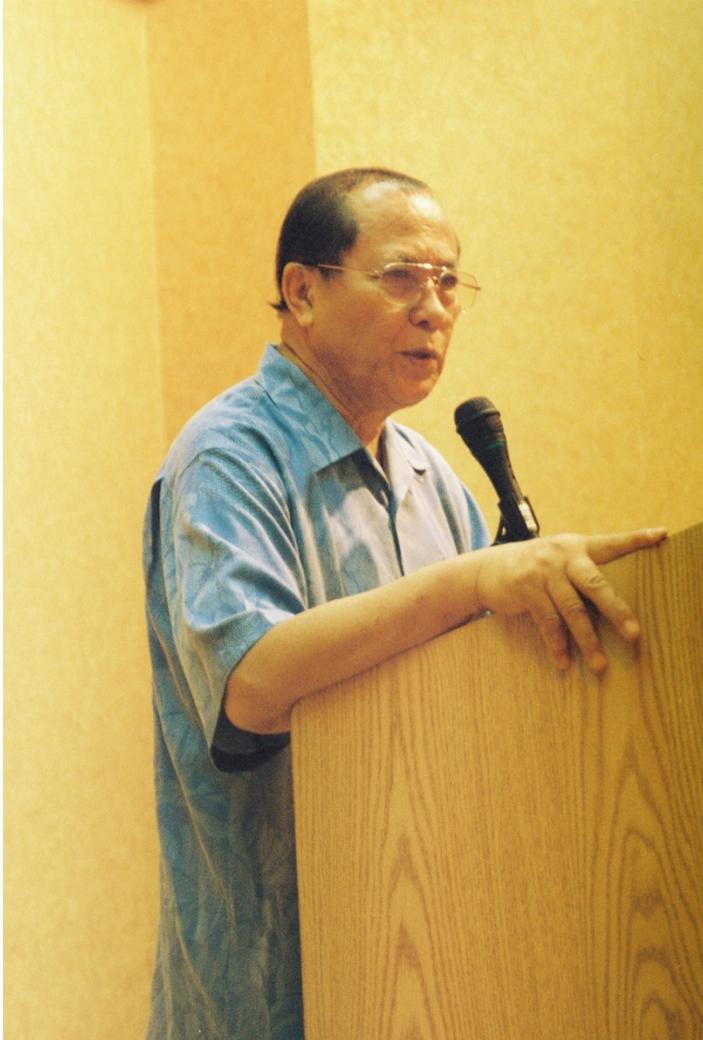


Pete Gonzales, OB Physician, 79 years old



Dr. Pedro I. Gonzales, a surgeon with Operation Brotherhood Laos, passed away July 28, 2013 in Kissimmee, Florida. He was 79 years old. At 26 years old, his first OB assignment upon arriving in Laos in 1959 was in Sam Neua, capital of Huaphanh province about 338 kms from Hanoi, capital of communist Vietnam. (Today, the distance can be covered by car in five hours). At that time, the road between these capitals was virtually impassable, in a mountainous, heavily forested northern region. Because the province borders Vietnam, and Sam Neua is the closest Lao town to Hanoi, it is contested territory between the Royal Lao Government and the Vietnamese supported insurgent Pathet Lao. In effect Pete and his OB team members in Sam Neua served a town and its outlying villages whose political allegiance, if they professed any, was uncertain as skirmishes erupt every so often at the height of

this Cold War history. The team had their evacuation bags ready just in case the shooting got real close. In October 1960, just when the town had pooled resources to build a structure that would serve as the hospital, the Pathet Lao captured the town. Female team members had flown out, barely ahead of the advancing guerrillas, who captured three of the OB doctors -- dentist Gene Aguilar and Drs. Juan Reyes and Teofilo Ocampo. After six days, they were set free.

Within three years of its arrival in Laos in 1957, OB had opened 12 sites, Sam Neua, the 9th, on August 1, 1958, its northern most outpost. The first team members "lived, treated their patients, and stored their supplies in tents," according to Fr. Miguel Bernad's history "Filipinos In Laos." When Pete joined the team, it had moved its living and work areas into the provincial governor's residence. Nonetheless, spartan living in "cold, cold, cold" and rainy weather was the norm as well as sparse local foodstuff and occasional deliveries of mail and supplies by plane from Vientiane. Indeed a plane was the only way to get in and out of the town to Vientiane or one of the other larger provincial capitals. On his second day in Sam Neua, Pete hit the ground running, so to speak, on his feet for eight hours performing surgery, as this 1959 account from Penny Villarica-Flores, social worker, remembers (please open attachment). In another account by Rod Severino, an OB administrator, we see Pete, the surgeon, delivering an infant (open attachment). All in a day's and a night's work for the new kid.

"He was quietly competent and unassuming", said Mart Martell, an administrative officer. He earned his medical degree from the University of Sto. Tomas in Manila, then practised for sometime in Jolo in the southern island of Mindanao, the Philippines. "We were neighbors at P. Guevara St. behind the University when I invited him to join us," said Alex del Carmen, OB's medical director, in Manila recruiting doctors at that time. After an interview with OB chairman Oscar Arellano, Pete flew to Laos, not fully aware what communal life, OB-style, would be like in one of the country's most isolated spots. Pete served in a number of other provincial outposts before immigrating to the USA with his wife the former Felicidad "Lewie" Cruz, an OB nurse. He spent his residency with the Booth Memorial Hospital in Flushing, Queens, New York (now called the New York Hospital Queens). From 1969 to 1970 he served in South Vietnam and retired as a reserve lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Medical Corp. In Kissimmee, Florida where he had settled his family, an unexpected call in August

1990 ordered him to report for active duty with Operation Desert Storm, the multinational war to liberate Kuwait from Iraq. "He did not think they would call him because he's 56," the Orlando Sentinel newspaper quoted Lewie. "He said 'I'm over the age.' " In fact reservists can be summoned till the age of 60. Lewie thinks Pete was picked out because of his experience treating battle trauma patients in Vietnam. While waiting to be shipped to the Middle East, Pete was assigned for several months to the Cutler Army Community Hospital at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. The war ended before he saw active duty in Kuwait.

In 2004, our Association hatched a grand idea. On the occasion of the visit that year of then President Gloria Arroyo to attend the 10th ASEAN Summit Conference in Vientiane, why not send a small team of doctors and nurses for a two-day medical and nursing seminar at Mahosot Hospital during the Summit? . Wow, it would be a PR bonanza for Mekong Circle. Would Pete donate some funds to do it? Yes, of course. He would like to go himself, he told me, but his knees were going bad. The previous Philippine Ambassador to Vientiane, Mario Galman, was his nephew. A flurry of faxes, email and calls followed between Mekong Circle USA, Mekong Circle Philippines (Fred Mendoza), our Philippine Embassy in Vientiane (Consul Raul Dado), the Ministry of Health in Vientiane, the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila. The grand idea -- good intentions and a generous donor notwithstanding --could not cut through the bureaucratic tangle that mark high profile diplomatic events. It seemed no one wanted to attend to a bunch of do-gooders at a time when the biggest gathering of Asian leaders descended on the city. Laos was Summit host for the first time. The training project sunk into the abyss.

Pete accepted another challenge in 2006 -- to host our 6th biennial reunion. It's no small matter to organize this event when your chapter has only a handful of members. But Pete and Lewie hatched their own grand idea. Let a cruise ship and a travel agent handle all the tangled details. It was a spectacular success: 186 members attended the Orlando hotel reception, of whom 179 boarded the three-day cruise to the Bahamas. It was an exhilarating change from our usual hotel-based festivities.

Pete worked for 35 years at Kissimmee's Osceola Regional Medical Center. He retired in 2008 and joined a private practice group, specializing in surgery. He and Lewie have three children and seven grandchildren.

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By J. "Pete" Fuentecilla, August 3, 2013; fuentecila@aol.com