

Remembering Those Who Died on Laos Soil

On November 25, 1968, an Air America C-46, under charter to the U.S. Agency For International Aid, took off in mid-afternoon from Savannakhet on a northbound flight to Vientiane. On board were 28 passengers and crew, some of whom boarded in Pakse. A U.S. Embassy Bulletin said that “after takeoff from Savannakhet, (the plane) suddenly had trouble and lost altitude. The plane struck a tree, tearing off a wing and fuel tanks, which caught fire and burned. The fuselage flipped over and hurled into the ground, about two kilometers from the airstrip. The fuselage did not burn. This was about 1536 hours.”

Only two passengers survived. The 26 fatalities were Thais, Americans, Lao, French and Vietnamese. Five were Filipinos – **Alex Claravall** a civil engineer with the Overseas International Construction Company (OICC); **Baltazar Reyes**, a mechanic with Air America, and three personnel of Operation Brotherhood: accountants **Noel Extremadura** and **Brigido Garcia** and medical technologist **Rodolfo Villaroman**.

“Never before has tragedy struck so appallingly,” said the Acting Director of the U.S. Aid Mission to Laos Albert Farwell. “They were doing their jobs and all knew their jobs were as dangerous as they were necessary, urgent, important and rewarding.”

Dangerous it was for OB applicants who were advised that because Laos was a war zone those who were single were required to submit parental consent to go to Laos if they were accepted. Indeed there was a preference for unmarried applicants. Except for one accountant who was shot dead by a Lao soldier at a street checkpoint in Vientiane during a coup d’etat event, all of the other OB workers succumbed from heart attacks, drownings and accidents. In September 1960, the Pathet Lao detained two physicians and one dentist when they overran the northern town of Sam Neua where an OB team maintained a medical outpost. They were released after three days. Some outposts were evacuated by plane a day or two before these were captured.

The Filipino casualties when tallied with previous fatalities in Laos amounted to 24 – eleven from OB, 12 Air America, and one OICC. A plaque stands in one corner of the grounds of the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane, honoring all those, living and dead, who served in Laos from 1957 to 1975. The OB dead were **Abner Jornada, Bienvenido Natividad, Aurea Joaquin, Violeta Salarda, Emmanuel Canonizado, Cesar Medina, Noel Extremadura, Brigido Garcia, Rodolfo Villaroman, Wilhelmina Comia and Sisinio Azul**.

Air America casualties were aircraft mechanics **Ray Castillo, Augusto Calderon, Baltazar Reyes, Ernesto Cruz, Montano Centeno, Jimmy Torres, Romeo Crisologo, F.C. Manalo, C. Pascual, Valeriano Rosales, Ernesto Cruz**. Some maintained planes in Vientiane while others were based at Air America airfields in Thailand, principally in Udorn.

Wrote Fr. Miguel Bernad, S.J. in his “Filipinos In Laos” history, released in 2004: “Because the Filipino people were poor and could not give as much material or financial aid as other countries, their contribution of personal service was often undervalued. Yet the expenditure of

human energy and dedication, sometimes even unto death, can be as great a contribution, even if not easily quantifiable.”