

the laos book project



1 May 1985

The enclosed material introduces the Laos Book Project. Since April 1984, the Chairman of the Editorial Board, Harry Carr, and I, have worked towards the production of this unique book. For me, it has been a full-time endeavor.

To date, I have corresponded with nearly 300 people to solicit written narratives or accounts that would fit into the book's concept. I now have 35 manuscripts and the promise of 38 more to come. More names and addresses are coming in each week. In addition, effort will be made to conduct personal taped interviews as well.

The last three American ambassadors to Laos, William H. Sullivan, G. Mc Murtrie Godley, and, Charles Whitehouse are participants and boosters of the project. Their accounts, and those of other selected contributors, have been excerpted as representative of the range of material available for such a publication.

I feel that we are now at the point where a publisher would be interested enough to give this potential book serious consideration. As editor, I am fully prepared to devote all the time and energy necessary to assure a publisher my fullest cooperation and a quality product.

Sincerely,

Ron Philip Pulcini

enclosures

INTRODUCTION

The American involvement in Laos in the 60s and 70s was the third ring in the spectacle that was the Vietnam War. Unlike the command structure and support groups in Saigon, which carried such abbreviated names as MACV, COMUSMACV, MAAG, CORDS, OCO, JUSPAO, the amalgam of agencies and contract groups in Vientiane were primarily civilian in nature; by and large, they were subordinate to political and economic dictates rather than military exigencies. The entire program was simply referred to as The Mission. And from 1965 to 1975 it was at its peak in expenditures and personnel.

Some of the personnel were "classified": CIA employees and members of the US military who backed the Royal Lao Army and Air Force with weapons, training and air support. The majority were State Department career officers, technical experts in numerous fields, administrators, secretaries, clerks, instructors and volunteers. Many of them worked with counterparts in various Royal Lao Government ministries to help move the country into the economic mainstream in Southeast Asia that was struggling to shift out of first gear. The men and women who took on this assignment found their work challenging, and, at times, more exciting than they bargained for. The permanent evacuation of dependents from Vietnam in 1965 did not apply to Americans in Laos, allowing them to live reasonably normal domestic lives. This factor may have contributed significantly to the excellent relations the two countries had with one another - the Lao people were able to see Americans in a context they could identify with: family, children and home. A few Americans never bothered to take advantage of this; likewise, the same could be said of some Laotians. But it is interesting to note that many Mission employees stayed on for more than one two-year tour. The pay was certainly attractive, but then, there was a quality about Laos and the Laotians that seemed to compel a number of Americans to remain there as long as possible.

Perhaps a total of 10,000 Americans worked with The Mission to Laos between the years 1965-1975; in any one year as many as 2,000 lived there - including dependents. The ones who lived "up-country" were subject to ambushes, tropical diseases and air crashes. Indeed, some died in unfortunate circumstances. In the capital of Vientiane, there were floods, coups and a plethora of unskilled drivers. The survivors of those heady times may be the only Americans who have some idea of the anguish which Laotian refugees felt in leaving their country. Both have meaningful and engaging stories to tell.

DESCRIPTION OF THE LAO BOOK PROJECT

The goal of the project is to produce an original collection of non-fiction accounts by Americans who worked with The Mission, as well as Laotians who had contact with them, between 1965 and 1975. What makes their stories unique is that, in a curious fashion, they are peripheral Vietnam Veterans. Their experiences, and the residual feelings they were left with, are certainly as valid; to a large degree they are more instructive. And whereas similiar books about the Vietnam War have been written strictly from the American point of view, this book offers further scope by introducing ways in which the Laotians regarded their American counterparts.

The contributors describe, in personal terms, events, characters, or vignettes that best capsulize their most vivid impressions about their work, Laos, Laotians, or, conversely, Americans. Observations of social, religious, political and military concerns are part of this. But the book does not expressly seek to address US policy, or examine documents related to it. However, because of positions certain contributors held, doing so is a natural part of their narrative. Contributors are being selected from a cross-section of job and professional levels as well as consideration to where they were stationed in the country. The book's structure and organization reflects these various divisions.

Because of budgetary considerations, written accounts are preferable. Realistically speaking, a number of contributors will have to be interviewed and taped - some are simply unable to break out of "writer's block," while many legitimately feel insecure about using English as a second language on paper. The Editor of the project is fully prepared and capable to accomplish this task. A proposed budget of travel and related expenses is available.

Target readership is diverse: individuals seeking to educate themselves about the Vietnam War era and foreign policy; those wishing to understand America's commitment to certain countries in Central America - as background; and most definitely, the built in audience of Americans and Laotians who shared a common experience.

Narratives and interviews run anywhere from 1200 to 3,000 words. Depending on how severly edited these accounts are, the finished manuscript will run from 450 to 650 pages (double-spaced, 250 words per page). Working full-time, the Editor can have it ready in one year.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE EDITOR

Ron Philip Pulcini has written a novel set in Laos (NO CAUSE FOR REJOICING) for which he is seeking a publisher. He has begun a second book, TRIESTE, a novel about right-wing terrorism in northern Italy. And since September 1984, he has been corresponding with nearly 300 people who lived and worked in Laos. He has published in the Los Angeles Times and Expressions magazine and has supported himself by free-lance and contract writing since his years in Southeast Asia.

Ron worked in Laos for five years (1965-1970); prior to that, he lived and worked in Cambodia and Vietnam for two and a half years. As a member of International Voluntary Services, Inc., he performed alternative service to the draft doing community development and teaching English. On a USAID contract in Laos, he co-authored a grammar text book, and, later, on contract to USIS, he was acting Director of the Lao-American Association. After resigning from USIS, he worked as a travel agent with a private company in Vientiane.

An accomplished singer/songwriter, Ron performs in restaurants and bars which helps to pay the bills. He is married to Elinor de Lancey Pulcini, a high school chemistry teacher. They live in northwestern Montana near the entrance to Glacier National Park.

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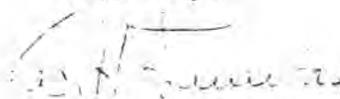
Ron Philip Pulcini informs me that he is seeking financial assistance from various organizations to enable him to complete a writing project on which he is embarked. The project entails the collection of a series of written and oral statements concerning the intensive American involvement in Laos during the 1960s and 1970s.

While most American contributors to this collection will write their statements, it will be necessary to obtain statements from Lao participants through tape-recorded interviews. Most Lao who will be interviewed in this fashion are refugees who have left Laos and live in scattered locations in the western world.

Mr. Pulcini, as director of this undertaking, will have to visit these Lao refugees, explain the purpose of the project, and conduct the interviews in a uniform manner in order to elicit the sort of recollections that are needed to complement those being assembled from Americans.

As a former American ambassador to Laos during the period under review, I endorse Mr. Pulcini's project and believe it will be a valuable record of our national experience. I am confident Mr. Pulcini is professionally qualified to carry out the interviews he proposes and believe a contribution to his endeavor will be a responsible investment in a historical document important to our posterity.

Sincerely,



William H. Sullivan
President

WHS/vh