



left to right Roger Warner (standing), Ernie Kuhn, Dayton Maxwell, Carol Mills and Harold Davler at Book Signing Party for Roger Warner and his book BACKFIRE at the Bangkok Vientiane restaurant in Falls Church, Virginia 28 September 1995.

Dear Larry:

Have been intending to write to you for some months but, being retired now, I just never seem to have any time to do anything. Instead of moving back to Ohio, which I had always thought I would do, we decided to stay in the Washington area where most of our friends live, or pass through on home leave. We bought a new house a new section of northern Stafford County, just south of Quantico Marine Base. We can actually hear the live exercises, choppers fly around the area, and it seems just like home at Houei Kha Moun in Sam Neua!

The following is a pot pourri of various related or unrelated events/information. I include people's names but have no idea how other people feel seeing their name associated with a event and reported by someone else. You be the judge. I apologize for not exercising more editorial restraint. However, I have written just as the ideas came I into my head. Maybe something will be useful for your Khao Lao.

- For several years I have been corresponding with a writer, Roger Warner, on a book he was writing for Simon & Schuster on Laos. Roger basically covers the period late 1950s through early 1970s. He bases the book around whom he considers the key players in the war in the north only (if you want the south see below); namely General Vang Pao, Bill Lair, Pat Landry, Vint Lawrence, Ted Shackley, General Richard Secord (over inflated his role). Tony Poe, Fred Branfman, Ambassador Bill Sullivan

and Pop Buell (Pop's family gave Roger access to all of Pop's letters). Many of us in USAID appear, if not in the text, at least in the footnotes and in the acknowledgments. The book was published by Simon & Schuster in July or August with the title **BACKFIRE The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam**. It got good reviews (despite the sensationalism in the title. Roger's thought was that the war involved the whole USG and not just the CIA, thus the title titillates rather than informs) and sells (or did) for \$25 or \$22.50 depending on the store here in Washington.

- In order to help Roger I suggested that he have a book signing at a Lao restaurant, the Bangkok-Vientiane, owned by a friend of ours. The biggest problem was going to be getting word out to people. Remember when we met at LeeAnn and Herb's house a couple of years ago you gave Sharon Jones a copy of your mailing list. She had given me a copy as I was trying to find some people. Anyway, I suggested to Roger that he contact you for permission to use the list. I do not know if he did or not but it was used as one of the sources for addresses. Anyway, over 80 people came to meet Roger and listen to him give an illustrated slide show on Laos. He only brought 35 books and promptly ran out which ticked me off because he could have sold more. Anyway, I enclose a copy of the announcement for whatever use you may have for it. The best part though was that people were reunited in many cases for the first time in years. Dee (Dick) Quill, Carol Mills, Bernie Wilder, Dayton Maxwell, Tom Ward, Anne Bradley, Jack Williamson, the Huxtables, Carol Snowden, Gary Bisson (Air America lawyer and exVP), Hugh Tovar and Doug Blaufarb, Broadus Bailey, and John Tuck, among others. John drove in from Ohio and Carol Mills had just arrived from Korea. Many others wrote or phoned me days and weeks later saying that they had been out of town when the invitation arrived and would have come. Other, like Gordon Ramsey had a gig, Bill Luken's wife is ill and Norm Sweet physically **does not** go out so he said. Anyway it was an interesting night and I highly recommend the book because it is full of people that all of us knew and events that many of us participated in.
- There is another book entitled **SHADOW WAR The CIA's Secret War in Laos** by Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison. This one costs 50 bucks and is published by Paladin Press. It is available through the book service that Fritz Benson runs. Conboy's book is big and has lots of good photos. It cover all of Laos from the 50s down to the 75 end. The authors claim to have interviewed 600 people. Maybe, but there so many groups of 600 some got left out...me for one. I have found the sections on Sam Neua and some of the Xieng Khouang stuff to be totally wrong. Naturally this, in my mind, casts doubts on the events and material that I was not involved in, like the south. Although I think that the book may be the last comprehensive book done on the war(s) in general in Laos, one must read it with caution. There are major errors in the book.
- Fritz Benson has the Conboy book and another named **CODENAME MULE** by James Parker (case officer at Long Chieng in the early 1970s during the operations on



left to right: Joanne Buechler, Jack Huxtable, Marge Huxtable, Sharon Jones and Tom Ward at the Bangkok-Vientiane restaurant.

the PDJ) in his catalog ASIA BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA. His latest catalog # 14 has 403 books listed, mostly old books out of print. The address is:

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- The September issue of Natural History Magazine, published by the American Museum of Natural History, had an article on the jars of the Plaine des Jarres entitled "Laos Keeps its Jars". I have no idea what the title means. Anyway, the article is full of inaccuracies, misspelling of towns, wrong ethnic groups in Xieng Khouang, misspelled names of semi-historical people, and the like. I wrote to the magazine pointing out the mistakes, citing references where they could verify my comments...four pages worth. I received a form letter saying that they appreciated the **opinions** of their readers. That was three months ago. There has been no statement in the past three months acknowledging that the authors of the article were careless or ignorant of their topic. I have spoken with several people locally, including the Lao Ambassador, who all agree with me. I am in the process of now writing to some of the board members and other editors of the magazine to complain. Also I am canceling my subscription, which has two more years to run. I have lost all faith in the creditability of the magazine.
- Another book was published this Summer that I was involved with. The Library of Congress and Department of Defense published a new area handbook on Laos. About 6 or 7 photographs taken by me are in the book. The cover of the book contains a drawing of boats on the Mekong which was taken from a photo of mine, as are several other drawing for chapter headings. I get credit for the photos but not for the drawings! Also the editors have used a very crazy (non)system of spelling for Lao names and placenames. I asked the Lao Ambassador, who was at our house for Thanksgiving dinner, if the government had officially changed the spelling of placenames. He said that there has been no change and that the Library just devised its own system! I showed him a copy of Jim Chamberlain's excellent article, actually a book review, in the Journal of the Siam Society a couple of years ago on spelling of Lao words. He and his staff agreed that Jim's article was correct.
- We had the Lao Ambassador and some of his staff over for Thanksgiving dinner. He is a very interesting individual. He has been in the U.S. for three years and expects reassignment in the near future. One of his biggest problems now is the cost of maintaining the staff...eleven altogether...in Washington. The Embassy chancery is a beautiful building up on S Street which is on a hill. The rear garden looks out over the city.

- The Asia Society and the Embassy recently co-hosted a slide lecture and display on Lao textiles by Carol Cassidey. Carol has a textile business in Laos. Her material is silk and the work is done on looms in an old house she has in Vientiane. The work is exquisite, but expensive. It is marketed in the DC area by Susan McCauley's Mekong River Textiles in Silver Spring, Maryland. I think the Chao Phya Gallery in DC may also have some pieces from her. At the time she had some of her weavers in New York for a demo of some kind. Phaythoune and I met Carol a few years on a visit back to Laos. Carol also remembered our two daughters who spent the summer of 92 in Vientiane.
- On 01 December the Laos Embassy hosted an "Independence Day" reception at the Marriot Hotel. Good turnout. The "real" party with "lamwong" etc. was later at the Embassy for the "insiders". Didn't end until the wee hours of the morning.
- Georgetown University in conjunction with a company called Mekong Pacific hosted a half day symposium on investment opportunities in Laos and Cambodia. Excellent turnout of bussiness people, World Bank people, USG retirees etc. Lao government seem to be making the right moves to open up the economy especially for foreign investment. The Thai are still the biggest investors. Lack of interior infrastructure hindering some opportunities...but maybe that is not so bad from an ecological standpoint. Lao Ambassador said that the government is supportive of eco-tourism, but is disappointed that no American company has really shown interest in developing its own tourism structure. American going there now can buy their tickets here, but the actual tourist companies are local. Of course SODE Tours, a company owned by my wife's cousin, has pioneered the tourist industry, especially into the interior and more remote places. The Ambassador said that Laos expects to receive this month UNESCO approval for the center of Luang Prabang city, Wat Phu and T'at Luang to be put on the UNESCO world heritage listing. The PDJ, if I remember correctly, is not a UNESCO site, but is a Lao national treasure site.
- Relations between our two countries seems to be on the upswing. Cooperation on locating the remains of MIAs has done much to help. Last year (summer 1994) NBC, produced a documentary on the attack on Phu Pha Thi and the subsequent loss of 14 or 15 American radar technicians (covered in detail by both Warner and Conboy, although parts of Conboy's story are highly inaccurate, particularly as it pertains to the immediate post attack. Their primary consultant who went with the NBC team was Tim Castle, author of **In the Shadow of Vietnam**. (Tim is a retired Air Force officer who at NKP as an enlisted man, later after college was with the JCRC and also taught at the Air Force Academy). I was an unpaid consultant on the program and they used some of my movie film in the program. Also received my name in the credits at the end. Anyway, the government allowed NBC to actually go up on the top of Pha Thi to "look" for MIA remains. In the program NBC claimed that they had "solved" the mystery of the missing men, which of course they did not.

I would encourage people to visit Laos. The government of today is not the same as the one in 75 or 80 or even 85. Things are changing. It is still "communist" but thinly so. Phaythoune and I have been back three times and always find people in the most remote places who pull out photos of children, cousins, brother, sisters etc. in the U.S. One trip to Laos started just as the Gulf War bombing was getting hot. On the plane going into Laos was a young Lao woman wearing a tee shirt with a large American flag and the words "THESE COLORS DON'T RUN". I rest my case.

I have been getting the itch to write something on Laos. There is no book that even comes close to portraying what USAID did, USIS, IVS, etc. Everything that has been written inflates one group's efforts, for example the horrible books The Ravens and Air America by Robbins. Even Warner and Conboy focus on the war, but not how it was supported by other agencies, nothing about monetary stability and on and on. Many of the people who have the background and knowledge are getting old, lets face it. Several have died recently. Shortly there will not be many left who were in the policy positions.

There is also a group that I am calling the New Lao Hands (NLH), as opposed to most of us Old Lao Hands (OLH). The NLH are the people who lived /worked in Laos only in the post 1975 period with World Bank, Asian Development Bank, IMF, road contractors etc. and assume that prior to 1975 Laos was in a vacuum. The following comments have all come in conversations:

- The USAF bombed all the bridges south on Route 13
- The Vientiane Times, which began publication last year, is the first English language newspaper ever in Laos
- The Lao Beer brewery is the first "industry" in Laos (what about 333, Pepsi, cigarettes, tire recapping plant, furniture industry, etc.?)

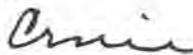
Do I sound bitter? Maybe.

I was just interrupted by the door chimes...Art Schoepfer and his wife Southai and son Andrew, dropped in on their way to Fairfax and eventually Boston for Christmas. First that had seen them since they moved to Florida.

Anyway, the NLHs know little about Laos so they gush over home cottage-kinds of things. Weaving is a big item now. Enough of this.

Larry, if you get back this way again let me know and we can hopefully get together. Saw John Williams as well as Wayne Johnson when they were here on business a while back. Card came today from Herb and LeeAnn. Haven't read the entire letter, but I did see Herb in October when he retired.

Regards:



Ernest Kuhn

