

4/11/07

Larry, your copy.
Pete Frontecillo



**Mekong Circle
6th Reunion
Florida & The Bahamas
August 11 - 14, 2006**



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
AUGUST 11-14, 2006 FLORIDA & BAHAMAS

Program

August 10, 2006, Thursday	4 – 9 pm	The Florida Mall Hotel Orlando, Florida Registration, Reception, Baci Welcome Ceremony Heroes Ballroom, Mezzanine Level, Salon 1
August 11, Friday	1 pm	Start boarding Royal Caribbean's "Sovereign of The Seas" Port Canaveral, Florida
	5 pm	Depart Port Canaveral
	8 – 9 pm	Reception hosted by Tess Papa Boloros Lounge Mixed drinks and snacks Dancing
August 12, Saturday	11 am	Arrive Nassau, the Bahamas On-shore excursions / tours
	3 am	Leave Nassau
August 13, Sunday	Morning Mass	(Fr. Lucien Bouchard, O.M.I., former missionary to Laos) Time and place to be announced
	7 am	Arrive CocoCay Island, Picnic & Other Activities
	2 - 5 pm	Mekong Circle Membership Meeting The Mariner & Navigator Rooms Aboard Ship
	5 pm	Leave CocoCay Island
August 14, Monday	7 am	Arrive Port Canaveral



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
AUGUST 11-14, 2006 FLORIDA & BAHAMAS



Pete & Lewie Gonzales with grandchildren Alexandra and Julia Hoyes, Alessandra, Daniela, Anthony and Giovanna Capobianco, Ariana Gonzales

We have our memories and deeds of the past
We have our families to share the present
Let us live forward for the future.
Let us create more memories for ourselves and
our families on this Reunion cruise.



Best wishes from
Dr. Pete Gonzales
Chairman, 6th Reunion



*MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
AUGUST 11-14, 2006 FLORIDA & BAHAMAS*

HOW THE MEKONG CAME FULL CIRCLE

Between 1957 and 1975, Filipinos came to work in another Asian country that is largely unknown today to most people. The country is Laos. Bounded on all sides by its neighbors - China and Myanmar (formerly Burma) in the north, Vietnam in the west, Thailand in the East and Kampuchea (Cambodia) in the south, its landlocked geography is unique in southeast Asia.

It has another distinctive feature. A river called Mekong, winding down from its source in the Chinese southern highlands of Tibet and emptying south into the Vietnamese delta , marks its border with Thailand. At 2,600 miles (4,180 kms) end to end, it is the longest river in that region.

By 1965, there were an estimated 900 Filipinos working and living in Laos. Many came by way of Bangkok, capital of Thailand, and as they planed over or were ferried across the muddy waters of the Mekong, they knew they had arrived in Laos. They were doctors, nurses, social workers, nutritionists, agriculturists, dentists, engineers, accountants, administrators, secretaries and technicians of all skills - from radiob operators and military advisers to artists and architects. They were mostly young, single, flushed with the excitement of their first overseas posting. Today they would be called "overseas Filipino workers" - OFW - the term commonly tagged to the more than seven million Filipinos working across the globe beginning in the 1970s. The pioneering OFWs in Laos knew each other as "kabayans" - compatriots - who happened to work for different employers but were recognizable by the cultural baggage that make them Filipinos. Most lived in Vientiane, the Lao capital along the Mekong, a city small enough to keep their community intact over the years.

That community fractured in 1975 when a Communist government won control of the country and the foreign companies that employed the Filipinos terminated their operations there. The Filipinos dispersed across the planet, most returning to their homeland. Some found their way to the USA.

In 1976, about 50 of them who settled in California reunited into a group called Mekong Circle USA. Officers were named to serve one year terms beginning March 20, 1976. They chose the residence of accountant Tony and nurse Tacing Atienza at 45551 Prospect Avenue in Los Angeles as its "temporary headquarters."

Mekong Circle USA's early ambitions were modest, among them "to provide transportation (to incoming Filipino members) from airports and bus terminals and ...accommodations to out-of-town members" said their first newsletter of May 1976. In truth, Mekong Circle's reason for being was also spelled out in the Newsletter: "socials will be conducted every two months..." And so, a rotation of potluck get-togethers at each others' residences consumed much of that formative period.

On May 20, 1995, to mark the 20th anniversary of their exodus from Laos, more than 280 members (now including Lao, Thai and American colleagues) celebrated a dinner dance at Baldwin Park's Marriott Hotel organized by Narding Hilario and his wife Bella.

By the time of its second reunion in July 1998 (organized by Pol Custodio) in Los Angeles and in July 2000 in San Francisco organized by Bik Marquez, its membership ranks had reached out to Filipino Laos expats in Australia, Canada, Europe, the Philippines. Mekong Circle USA was transformed into Mekong Circle International. It had gone global.

The various parts that form our Association were born in Laos. There were three major groups: one composed of technicians employed by airline companies - Air America, Bird & Sons, Continental Air Services; civilian advisers with Eastern Construction Company in Laos or ECCOIL training the armed forces of the Royal Lao Government; foreign aid personnel with the United States Agency For International Development; and Operation Brotherhood (OB) volunteers, mainly health care and social development workers. There were other Filipino workers - teachers, construction contractors, musicians and a pilot - few in numbers but very much a part of the Pinoy community.

What follows are snap shots of the major groups. In the next pages are their short histories.

AIR AMERICA'S aircraft first began flying over Laos in 1957. By the mid-1970s, "the airline had some two dozen twin-engine transports, another two dozen short-take-off-and-landing, known as STOL, aircraft and some 30 helicopters," wrote William Leary in a history of the airline. "There were more than 300 American and Thai pilots, copilots, flight mechanics and airfreight specialists flying out of Laos and Thailand." Many of these non-flying personnel were Filipinos, estimated at 200 at one time by a former Air America Filipino accountant. The airline, contracted by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, ended its operations in Laos in 1974.

BIRD & SON, an American company, supplied and flew many of the STOL aircraft. Like Air America, the company was contracted by the U.S. government to support its operations in Laos. Filipino technicians assisted in maintaining the planes.

Continental Air Services, a subsidiary of the U.S.-based company Continental Airlines, bought Bird & Son in August 1965. About 100 Filipinos, mostly mechanics based in Vientiane, worked for CAS.

ECCOIL, a private firm based in Manila supplied Filipino specialists beginning in 1959 to the Lao government to teach their military personnel ordnance, maintenance, communications, logistics. In 1962, an international agreement to a "neutral" Laos called for the pullout of all foreign military advisers. In that year 424 ECCOIL advisers left.

OPERATION BROTHERHOOD (OB) first 13 volunteers arrived in Laos on January 7, 1957. Within five weeks, 44 volunteers were assigned to five provinces. When they left in 1975, more than 400 had served there, staying an average of two years.

USAID-LAOS economic assistance program took root in 1954 shortly after the country became independent from its colonial French administrators. The program provided American civilian advisers and vast amounts of material for road building, agriculture, education, refugee relief and public health. Its offices in Vientiane were staffed with an estimated 175 Filipinos who provided support and technical services. USAID terminated its operations in 1975.

It should be noted that during the 15 years Mekong Circle members served in Laos, the country, once called the Kingdom of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol, suffered throughout that period all the horrors associated with the Indochinese wars - the French vs the Vietminh, followed by the Americans vs North Vietnam. With a mere three million inhabitants, mostly subsistence farmers, they were savaged by intensive bombing campaigns, civil war, coups and counter-coups, resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees, deaths by the thousands, decimation of mountain tribes. Hemmed in by a Cold War conflict waging a hot ground and air war, the kingdom was a helpless pawn among the combatants, unable to defend its borders. In the midst of this turmoil, Mekong Circle members lived their Lao experience.

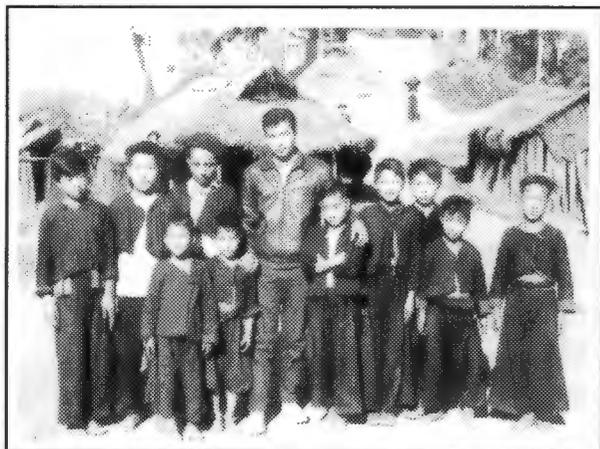
AIR AMERICA
CONTINENTAL

Non-
combatants
on the Front
Lines

Accounts of the Laos air war, from 1962 to 1975, report that by the mid-1960s, when major military activities between the combatants began to really ratchet up, the combined aircraft inventory of Air America, Bird & Son, and Continental Air Services exceeded the number flown by any other regularly scheduled commercial airline in Asia. They flew supply and transport missions. Key to their maintenance were Filipino aircraft technicians.

Documentary films of an American base in Long Tieng in Xieng Khouang province, show its skies and its tarmacs with flocks of C-130s, Douglas DCs, Curtiss C-46s, Pilatus Porters, Turbo Porters, Dornier Do28s, Beech Barons, Beech Twin Bonanzas, Twin Otters, Helio Couriers. Also in the American fleet: a pair of Scottish Aviation Twin Pioneers purchased by CASI from Philippine Airlines (where most of the Filipino technicians were recruited from). Bell and Huey helicopters, of course, were everywhere.

C-46s were the workhorses for transporting USAID and OB personnel and supplies. Regular "milk-runs" brought the mail and medicines to some provincial stations accessible only by air from Vientiane. There



Art Linchangco, an Air America electronic technician visiting one of the northern highland provinces that are the homeland of the Hmong, is surrounded by village youngsters.

is no record of Filipinos who served as AA or CASI pilots. (Combat missions on jets and propeller-driven fighter planes flown by American and Thai pilots took off from Thai airbases on strafing and bombing sorties of Lao targets).

Filipino AA and CASI technicians tended the planes at Wattay airport; others would stay for one to two weeks to maintain aircraft at landing sites, called LS. These were airstrip bases hacked out of mountain-top jungles, scattered throughout the country from Luang Prabang to Attopeu.

Another set of AA technicians composed the Electronics Maintenance Department (EMD) who installed and maintained ground-based navigational stations and their power equipment. Many of these were located on small LS outposts, requiring weekly servicing. A typical station was equipped with ultra-and-high frequency communications gear capable of air-to-ground and ground-to-ground communications. The manned stations would have Thai radio operators on 24-hour duty. Unmanned stations are visited for regular checkups and refueling of their generators. Where sites are inaccessible by air or trail, diesel fuel containers would be parachuted.

Art Linchangco who served as an EMD technician from 1962 to 1967 had taught Hmongs at an LS outpost to watch over the unmanned equipment between his visits. Normally such a visit was a one-day chore. A chopper would drop him in the morning, then fetched him out before the end of the day.

"At one mountain top site, the weather prevented a pick up. The bad weather lasted days. Then I had a terrible sinus problem. I slept in the village chief's house for a week. I kept a vigil at the airstrip, for the weather to clear, before I was lifted out."

Art's team members, who like him, hopped to dozens of LS places during their Lao tenure included Joe Parco, Efigenio Hernandez, Joe Mendoza, Dante Flaviano and Honorato Tapang. There were some close calls. At one LS during the mid-1960s, Art and Ernie Rigidor were among the last evacuees by helicopter before the station was overrun by the enemy.

Electronics Technician Jun Ilustrisimo remembers another tight escape. After two weeks at Lima 69 in the south, he was eager to leave on the eve of Christmas 1968 in order to return to Vientiane as he promised his fiancée.

"I was having a problem hitching a ride back. Finally a Helio Courier seat was available. The pilot said the airstrip was getting too dark and that he may have a hard time taking off. But I got in anyway. Five hours later, I was told the site was attacked. Three Thai radio operators were killed. One Filipino named Sorita was captured but was released five months later."

Getting stranded at an LS was always an occupational hazard. Jun describes how it happened at Skyline Ridge, a station with a breathtaking view of the Plain of Jars valley in Xienghouang province. "We were socked in by bad weather for 21 days. We ran out of food. Finally, I and my Thai radio operator decided to walk down the mountain to Sam Thong in the valley. It took four hours."

Why did they wait that long atop the ridge? "After a while the C rations made us throw up" he explained. Sam Thong, a major base, was visited three to four times a year by aircraft mechanic Angie Angelo to service the cargo planes there. Each visit would last two weeks.

It was in Taiwan where Angie was called for an interview after he received a tip from a fellow FEATI aeronautical engineering graduate that an "Air Asia" company was hiring aircraft mechanics. After he passed the employment tests, he arrived not in Taiwan but in Vientiane on January 1962 and discovered that Air Asia was actually Air America. He was one of 60 Filipinos together with about 60 Chinese from Taiwan and Hongkong who comprised the Regional Maintenance Department. During his nine-year stay in Laos, he helped train Laotians to become aircraft mechanics well enough for them to obtain their U.S. Federal Aircraft Agency licenses. AA and CASI planes were flown mainly by American pilots; flight mechanics were a multinational crew but more Filipinos were hired because of their hardworking reputations, said Ernie Felix who managed personnel administration for both AA and CASI.

Being non-combatants, few Filipinos suffered war-related deaths. Two died in "helicopter line training flights" - Ernesto Reyes and Montano Centeno. Three others died in accidents -- Ray Castillo, Augusto Calderon and Baltazar Reyes. CASI closed its operations in 1972. A year later a ceasefire agreement among the combatants in Laos signaled the end of the war. On June 3, 1974, the last Air America plane crossed the Mekong into Thailand. During its 17 years in Laos, 100 Americans, mostly pilots, died there. At the dedication of an AA plaque at CIA headquarters in Virginia USA in May 1988, an official said: "The aircrew, maintenance and other professional aviation skills they applied on our behalf were extraordinary. But above all, they brought a dedication to our mission and the highest standards of personal courage in the conduct of that mission."

ECCOIL

A
Remarkable
Diversity of
Skills

When ECCOIL pulled out all their Filipino personnel in 1962 in accordance with an international agreement to withdraw foreign military advisers and forces from Laos, there were 462 advisers in the company's roster.

What is remarkable about them is their diversity of skills. From generic job titles such as inventory technicians and electrical engineers, there were corrosion control specialists, aircraft airframe mechanics, aircraft engine mechanics, small arms specialists, artillery repairmen, diesel mechanics, armament machinists, architectural engineers, parachute riggers, packaging and preservation specialists, track vehicle repairmen, welder instructors, ordnance parts specialists, turret / lathe / drill pressmen, English instructors, and so on. Supporting them were squads of office support personnel - specialists themselves in record-keeping and administration who knew what it took to keep a vast machinery rolling. During those years they were there, the largely unskilled Lao armed forces, locked in a guerrilla war with the North Vietnamese and with the homegrown Communist Pathet Lao, needed all the help they could get.

This was not the first time the Lao armed forces had turned to the Philippines for training expertise.



ECCOIL radio technicians with their Lao trainees (those in uniform) who are Royal Lao armed forces communications personnel.

Beginning in 1958, it had been sending trainees to Scout Ranger School at Fort McKinley in Manila. Lao officers were flown in for counter-insurgency seminars. In 1959 the U.S. contracted ECCOI, then known as the Freedom Company, to conduct full-scale training in Laos.

ECCOIL's credentials for the job were sterling. It was already instructing military personnel in South Vietnam where their services were rated as "highly effective." Started in 1954, Freedom Company's instructors were either former guerrillas against the Japanese occupiers in the Philippines or former Philippine Army personnel with "extensive combat experience against the Huk guerrillas in the Philippines" said a memo from a Pentagon expert in counterinsurgency. ECCOIL's head Johnny "Frisco" San Juan, was a former National Commander of the Philippines Veterans Legion who could tap an experienced military manpower pool for its recruits.

On January 9, 1959, San Juan signed a Memorandum of Agreement with Henry Wilkins, deputy controller of the Plans Evaluation Office, a U.S. aid unit in Vientiane, to provide Filipino advisers. Within that year, 75 of them had arrived. They were headed by Alfonso "Pons" Enriquez, a reserved colonel with the Philippine Armed Forces.

"They were dispatched all over the country," remembers Ernie Felix, who was also recruited from Manila to serve as finance officer. "I traveled to Savannakhet, Pakse, Luang Prabang, the Plain of Jars, Sayaboury every 15 days" in his job as paymaster from 1960 to 1963, distributing kip allowances. Their main base in Vientiane was a hotel-type apartment building near Wat Simuong where two to three advisers would share a room.

During their relatively short stay in Laos, published accounts of their work are hard to find. The rare references, however, speak volumes. Here for example is an excerpt from U.S. Congressional hearings on U.S. AID's operations before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations of the House of Representatives held from March to June 1959. The question was asked about instruction conducted by the Philippines. Charles Shuff, a Department of Defense deputy assistant secretary for International Security Affairs, replied: "There are also...some Filipinos who came to Laos, and by the way, are strangely absorbable in Laos, for reasons that I can't explain, who have done some instruction work in Laos."

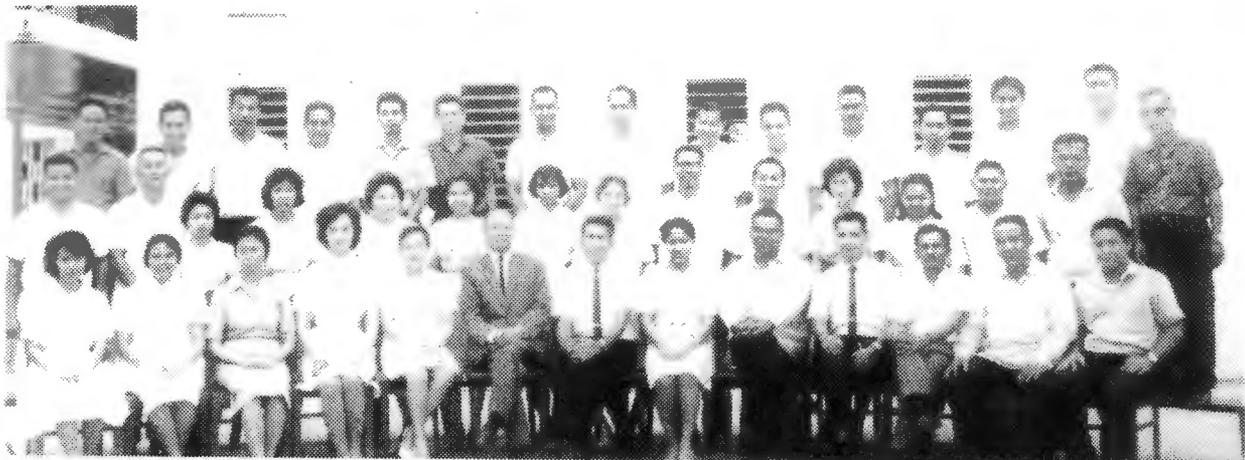
Perhaps someone should tell Mr. Shuff that Asians helping Asians is not a strange concept among Filipinos in Laos.

OPERATION BROTHERHOOD

The "Tan Moh" and the "Nai Moh"

During the 18 years of Operation Brotherhood in Laos, 411 Filipinos had served there, in 11 of its 16 provinces. Their average age was 30. "For each of us who is here, 20 were screened," Oscar Arellano, chairman, told them during a visit to Vientiane in July 1974. When the Filipinos left in 1975, OB employed 768 Lao.

Each volunteer typically stayed for two years. How was that time spent? First stop is Vientiane. For the health care personnel, the 100-bed hospital and its patients provided their first look at the kind of people, diseases and procedures that they will encounter. The OB House and the OB Annex, some 15 minutes walk away, introduced them to dormitory life -- shared bedrooms, a communal dining room and bathrooms, and the revelation of personal idiosyncracies and the sharing of personal



A GATHERING OF THE LARGEST TEAM

The Vientiane team maintained a 100-bed hospital in the capital city and a School of Nursing. It was also the first stop for incoming members before they are assigned to provincial outposts. **First row, left to right:** Edith Habacon, nutritionist; Pining Torres, nurse; Toots

Calderon, nurse; Jessie Yap, nurse; Joji Naranjo, nurse; Philippine Ambassador Modesto Farolan; Vitoy Naranjo, project manager; Isagani Bautista, administration; Fruto Bingcang, planning & construction; Bert Javier, administration; Danny Infante, planning & construction. **Second row:** Pete Palu-ay, physician; Gus Panahon, supply technician; Edna Savady, supply technician; Lucy de la Cruz, supply technician; Violy Labayen, nurse; Cecilia Lopez, medical records; Thelma Villamar, nurse; Petra Sismaet, nurse; Mel Palma, administration; Tony Soto, physician; Leila Lareza, illustrator; Felix Romero, physician; Fred Navera, accountant. **Third row:** Rene Mapua, accountant; Jun Belicena, engineer; Bob Monserrat, agriculturist; Deo Caro, medical technologist; Tony Sazon, accountant; Philip Cruz, accountant; Leony Arca, illustrator; Vic Wycoco, physician; Tony Menez, physician; Sining Azul, physician; Danny Torres, dentist; Romy Maypa, pharmacist; Pete Fuentecilla, administration; Edong Pabustan, maintenance; Gerry Dacanay, maintenance.

effects (toothpaste and cosmetics). While many of the office personnel stayed posted in the capital for their entire term, most of the doctors and nurses circulated to two or three of the provincial outposts, called field teams, staying at each site for three months to a year. It is during these postings that the bonds of enduring relationships are forged, and where transformative experiences alter young lives. And where, isolated from large towns, they are immersed in Lao life (80 percent of the Lao, even now, still reside in these rural, remote regions).

A picture of field team life can be glimpsed from this account (slightly edited) in the OB newsletter *Balintang Laos* (September 15, 1965) of a day in the Kengkok team, in the southern province of Savannakhet. Team members had moved in on January 1964 to staff a 15-bed hospital about 35 miles from the provincial capital, also named Savannakhet.

Nang Khamchanh, Nang Tongesai and Thao Khamkheuang are in their late teens and early twenties, freshly graduated from the OB Vientiane School of Nursing. Less than two months ago, they left relatives and friends in Vientiane to join the Filipino team already there.

A morning starts with Dr. Rusty Gotico, nurses Bert de los Reyes, Mary Degay and Nang Tongesai, going from bedside to bedside of each patient, reading their charts, jotting new orders. In the dispensary, arriving by foot and bicycles, the sick are beginning to crowd the benches and the corridors, clutching newly-issued pink outpatient cards, waiting for the doctors to complete their rounds. In the dental clinic, Emeng Alcasid's drill is already humming.

Nang Khamchanh has strapped behind her bicycle her black nurse bag and a large brown envelope containing records of newly-delivered infants whom she is going to visit for postpartum care. OB-trained driver-mechanic Thao Ouh is checking a "jeepney's" oil, gasoline supply, tires to prepare it for the grinding trip to Ban Bak and Ban Sithong, two villages that are scheduled for their weekly visits. Dressed in shorts and a checkered shirt, a stethoscope tucked inside a hip pocket, team director Dr. Johnny Reyes, climbs into the jeepney and disappears down the road out of the hospital compound.

To get to Ban Bak, five kilometers away, take the dirt road to Savannakhet, the provincial capital. Somewhere along the right side of the road, there is a cave-like opening among the dense tall bamboo groves. Johnny plunges into it. The opening is the entrance to a winding path canopied with thick bamboo and trees, leading to the village. To get to the next stop, Ban Sithong, seven kilometers away, go back to the Savannakhet road, then swing into another opening in a bamboo grove. It opens into a bulcart path to the village. It's surprising to see that there are humans and homes tucked within these wilderness. There are people in each village waiting for Johnny in the thatch house on stilts that serves as a clinic in each village..

Johnny returns after lunch time, along with a man, burning with fever, vomiting, horrible sounds coming from his throat. He is brought into the hospital. The man is accompanied by a relative carrying a thin mattress and clothing.

Lunch is true Filipino home cooking by Mary. Her Lao cook help is learning the various regional tastes of the Filipinos.

Early in the afternoon, an invitation to a baci for a newborn child is attended by Nang Khamchanh and Thao Khamkheuang in one of the village homes that they have serviced and where Rusty had earlier delivered the infant. Happy parents murmur words of appreciation as they tie white cotton strings around the wrists of the Lao nurses.

In the office (one room in the long dormitory building), a dozen mothers sit through a demonstration in bottle feeding, one of weekly lessons in child care and home nursing conducted by Mary, assisted by "George" Pracheon, an interpreter.

Emeng has returned from Savannakhet with a jeep-load of supplies from Vientiane and with that most precious item of all: mail from home. He is at once the most popular man in town.

In the lengthening shadows of a golden, warm afternoon, Johnny reads through memos from the Vientiane headquarters; Bert and Emeng swipe badminton shuttlecocks on the lawn beside the hospital, their bare shoulders glistening with sweat. The diesel generator has been switched on. As dusk falls, the hospital lights up, the brightest object in the entire town.

After dinner, there is a letter to answer, a pocketbook to resume reading. An old scratchy, vinyl record spins too fast and out of tune on a turntable. Deep darkness falls fast in Kengkok. Sleep comes easily, lulled by the sounds of crickets.

USAID - LAOS

Support Staff with the Right Stuff

Fidel Padayao remembers the day he left Manila for Laos - December 7, 1957 - one among the first batch of about 35 recruits from the U.S. Agency For International Development. Others in the group whom he remembers were Wenceslao Eusebio, Monching Romano, Virgilio Concepcion, Romy Pestanas.

More recruits came from other Philippine-based American employers such as the U.S. Veterans Administration Office or Clark Air Base in Pampanga where Celso Orense and another 10 to 15 more were hired from.

Their choice for Laos made sense. Who better to help staff an economic aid program in a neighboring Asian country but Asians themselves with aid experience already under their belts.

Two years earlier, the U.S. government had decided to expand its aid program in Laos. It had established its U.S. Operations Mission, and later that year in 1955, set up a Program Evaluations Office within USOM to handle military assistance.

By the time USOM Laos had transformed into USAID Laos to focus on non-military aid, Fidel and his associates had grown in numbers. He estimates that they peaked at 175 at one time.

"The Filipinos were mostly engineers and accountants," the latter about 20, forming the largest group, said Pestanas. "There were perhaps 80 Americans working with USAID then. But as the aid program ballooned into a vast bureaucracy that touched almost every layer of the Lao government and reached into remote provinces, the American administrators realized there were not enough trained Lao to implement it.

"The program was intensively operational and A.I.D. employees were directly involved in normal host-country service and maintenance operations," said an evaluation of the 21-year program that eventually cost \$896 million. The Filipino recruits, almost all of them college-degreed and experts in their fields, provided the vital administrative support network necessary. Though most of them were posted in Vientiane, others followed up aid projects in the provincial capitals, helping oversee the construction of schools and roads, and the provision of supplies and services."

"We were fluent in English and Lao," said Fidel, serving to bridge the American overseers with the locals. Qualified local help was so scarce that when ECCOIL Filipino technicians were ordered to leave the country as a result of the Geneva 1962 Laos neutrality agreement, they were hired by USAID in Manila and dispatched back to Laos. Rafael Mapaye, a former USAID accountant, estimates there were as many as 50 such returnees.

Dr. Charles Weldon, assigned in 1963 to head the Public Health Division, wrote in his memoir "Tragedy in Paradise": "At that time there were only about 30 Americans in USAID Laos, and half of them were stationed in the field. Because there were so few Lao with English language ability of office skills, most of the non-American employees were Filipinos.

That included his secretary Esther Cordova whom he described as "a petite, pleasant looking lady."

When they first arrived in 1957, the Filipinos were lodged in four houses in Nahaidio, a short distance from what would sprawl into a number of buildings comprising the USAID compound. The complex included a social club known as ACA - American Community Association.

"It was rough, those early days," Pestanas remembers, "We had to boil our water. We felt very remote from civilization. Few if any paved roads."

1 Sharing rooms, dormitory-style, for extended months, it was easy to forge lasting bonds among themselves.

PIONEERS

Late 1920s - Two Filipino pilots land in Seno, Savannakhet province, in a refueling stop from Manila enroute to Madrid, Spain. They were attempting to match a Madrid to Manila flight by two Spaniards. Laos that time, together with Vietnam and Cambodia, comprised France's Indochinese colonies.

1956 - Angel Cordova and his wife arrive in Vientiane from Manila, the first Filipinos to staff the United States Operations Mission (USOM), precursor to USAID Laos.

1956 October 20 - Operation Brotherhood Vietnam staff members Jovito Naranjo and Fruto Bingcang arrive from Saigon to begin a three-month survey of Laos in preparation for the transfer of OB to Laos upon invitation of the Lao Jaycees.

1956 November - OB Vietnam volunteers Dr. Jesus Banzon, nurse Petra Duruin and secretary Josefina Figueroa staff a first aid clinic for one week during the That Luang festival to gauge Lao response to its medical activity.

1957 January 7 - Thirteen OB volunteers arrive in Vientiane, Laos

1957 - First group of USOM Filipinos arrive from Manila

1957 - Air America airline begins operations, hiring Filipino aircraft technicians.

1959 - Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL) advisers begin training Royal Lao Armed Forces personnel

1961 - Filipino residents in Laos estimated to reach 500

1964 August - Philippine Speaker of the House of Representatives Cornelio Villareal is the highest ranking Philippine government official to visit Laos.

1965 - Filipino residents in Laos estimated to reach 900

1965 January 1 - Filipino Association of Laos inducts its first officers and Board directors.

1965 August 28 - Continental Air Services begins operations, hiring Filipino aircraft technicians.

1965 September 17 - Consul Rodolfo Sanchez, first resident consular officer, arrives to open Philippine Embassy office

1965 November - First Philippine Pavilion participation at That Luang festival in Vientiane

1975 - All remaining foreign aid workers and advisers leave Laos upon ascension to power of the Pathet Lao. On May 29, the last group of 41 OB volunteers flew out from Wattay airport.

1976 - March 20 - Mekong Circle organized in Los Angeles, California, USA

1995 May 20 - First reunion of Mekong Circle in Los Angeles (followed in 1998 in Los Angeles; 2000 in San Francisco; 2002 in New York City; 2004 in Chicago; 2006 in Florida and the Bahamas, aboard a cruise ship).

2002 November 3 - Eleven former OB and USAID employees, accompanied by their relatives, arrive in Vientiane for a one-week group tour, their first return since 1975. During a courtesy call with the Lao Minister of Public Health he invited OB to resume its medical program.

2002 November 7 - Philippine Ambassador Mario Galman unveils on the Embassy grounds in Vientiane a plaque honoring all the Filipinos who served in Laos from 1957 to 1975.

COMING HOME



Highlight of the November 2002 Balik Laos visit of the Mekong Circle members was the unveiling of a plaque shown in the middle of this photo. Flanking it, standing from left, are Lydia Palma, consul Raul Dado, Bik Marquez, Ambassador Mario Galman, Jojo Pablo, Puring de Jesus, Raul de Jesus, Gene Hernandez, Jij de Jesus, Estrella Hernandez, Ciony Ljungar and Cora Victa. Seated in front, from left: Anthony de Jesus, Fenny Victa, Tony Victa and Anita Marquez. Other Balik Laos visitors not shown were Linda and David Savangsy and Somsack Sayborivong.

Remarks by Bik Marquez at a "salo-salo" at Hotel Novotel, Vientiane, hosted for the visiting Balik-Laos members, November 5, 2002

I have to say, right from the beginning that personally this must count as one of my most emotional journeys. My Mekong Circle companions strongly feel the same way. That is why I choose to read my remarks rather than break down for loss of words.

The last time I was in Laos, I was 34 years old younger, my hair was dark and I was single. Today I have a son, and a wife whom I met here. We came together on this trip to revisit a country and its people where a large part of our lives took shape and substance. It has all come true – all those baci strings during my years here have promised me good things. They promised me health and wealth and a wonderful family. They all happened. Thank you baci spirits.

Let me now address my remarks to certain participants at this event..

To his Excellency Ambassador Mario Galman and Consul Raul Dado of the Philippine Embassy. This Balik Laos program was conceived here by you. It was announced at our 4th Mekong Circle reunion in New York City last August. Our group today is the first wave of what is hoped will become a continuing influx of visiting Filipinos who worked here during the 1960s and 1970s. It is a two-year program that will culminate in a celebration in 2004 marking 50 years of Lao-Philippine diplomatic relations. This is a wonderful vision of Ambassador Galman. When we

return home we will do our utmost to encourage our other members to come and visit. This is truly a historic event and we are honored to be part of it.

To the Filipino Community in Laos: I am told that there are about 200 kabayans who are living and working here. During our time in the mid-1960s, there were an estimated 900 Filipinos in Laos, most of them stationed here in Vientiane. It was quite a large foreign community in a small city of perhaps 150,000 residents.

Indeed there was a Filipino Association of Laos. I brought with me some issues of their newsletter. Quite a number of you, I am told, work with the local offices of United Nations agencies. It is always heartwarming to know that Filipino compatriots render the kind of good work we did at one time here.

On a personal level, I thank Gina Alicando of Novotel, a Filipina herself, who has been most helpful in arranging the logistics of our visit. I also extend our thanks to the staff of the Vientiane Philippine Embassy for their warm reception at Udon Thani airport and for making our visit a very pleasant experience. Manga kabayan, mabuhay sa inyong lahat !

Finally, to our Lao guests here. Let me say it another way: Greetings to our Lao hosts ! Yes, many years ago, you invited us. We were your guests. You were our hosts. You knew us as "kon Filipin". Every Filipino in the street was either a Than Moh or a Nai Moh – a doctor or a nurse. We served in your hospitals, clinic, refugee camps, orphanages, farms and schools. This was at a time when Asians working with Asians was not the usual way to do international assistance. It was indeed a new experience for each of us in Mekong Circle. It is unforgettable. It was precious. It was your gift –to know you and be able to live a part of our lives here. Saying "thank you" now will never really reflect the depths of our feelings for you and your country. Laos was our home at one time. It is always a great feeling to come home.

Kop chai lai lai.



Erected in a corner of the Philippine Embassy front yard in Vientiane, a plaque honors the Filipinos who worked in Laos from 1957 to 1975..

First Reunion Of Our Lao Nurses



Attending the reunion of the OB School of Nursing were, front row (kneeling) guest Dado Lumingued and Manith Sanguansack. First row seated: Instructors Wilma Padayao, Pet Duruin, Gina Liwag, Cecile Datu, Ampie Malolos, Joji Naranjo, Fely Navera. Back row, standing: At Photvath, OB Project Manager Vitoy Naranjo, Sounthaly Lapitan, Noun Vongphrachanh, Khamsy Siharath, Petje Sayasan, Chanthly Luangrath, Syphone Phengnorasinh, Chanthalom Phouangmalay, Vanessa Thongma, malivanh Thepsouvanh, Phounsouk Sisouphone, Phikoun Ackathai, Sameu Chomthipe, Sivilay Sivongsay, Rabieb Vilayhong Roy. Not in photo but who also attended: Joy Xayasosuk, Khambai Rajavongsak, Sumatra Malaythong, Khemphone Vongphakdy, Chanthamalay Pathammaboun, Satién Chantaraj and Viengsay Pathammaboun.

On the morning of August 6, 2004, at our 5th reunion, Chuang Chonthipe planted himself in front of the Mekong Circle reunion registration desk at Hyatt Regency Hotel in Chicago. Registration would not open till an hour later.

"I wanted to be the first to meet my former classmates," he said, as he recalled his anticipation. That morning he would come face to face with some of his classmates of 1963, the year he and 26 others completed a two-year course in practical nursing at the Operation Brotherhood School of Nursing in Vientiane. His class is unique in several ways. It is the first of six nursing batches over four years. Twelve of his classmates have settled overseas, the majority of them in the USA. Now after almost four decades, he will be reunited with four of them for the first time. Noun Vongphrachanh would arrive from Canada; Petje Sayasan and Chanthly

Luangrath would be coming from Tennessee; Sounthaly Lapitan, from Washington.

Later that morning, when they and graduates from other years gathered in a hotel suite, together with husbands, wives, children and grandchildren, the suite door opens. Malivanh Sananikone Thepsouvanh, class of 1965, enters. There are squeals of delight and a rush of outstretched arms, and lots of hugging. She had come straight from her night shift at a nursing home in Chicago. There was no time to waste in order to see faces, particularly 1965 classmates who came for the reunion -- Syphone Phengnorasinh (now a resident of Virginia), Joy Xayasouk and Rabieb Roy (Illinois) and Khamba Rajavongsak (Pennsylvania). Also present in Chicago were auxiliary nurses Manit Sanguansack, Satién Chantaraj and Viengsay Pathammaboun.

Altogether 20 former graduates from different

classes came for this historic event - the first ever get-together from a time and place of long ago. Their school had closed after graduating its last class in 1969. In 1975, uncertain of their future with the new Communist government that took over their country, many of them joined the Lao exodus across the Mekong river to Thailand and beyond - France, Canada, Australia and the USA. Others stayed on to assist the French-trained Lao doctors at the OB Vientiane Hospital after the departure of the Filipino staff in the same year. Out of 145 graduates, Mekong Circle has tracked down the addresses of 36 in the USA, three in France, two in Canada, one in England. The rest presumably have settled in Laos or Thailand.

Two and a half years after the first team of Filipino doctors and nurses started seeing patients in 1957 in an open air clinic near the grounds of the That Luang national shrine in Vientiane, a brand-new hospital was dedicated on June 1960, a short distance away. It had 60 beds and various diagnostic and auxiliary services. But it sorely lacked skilled Lao help to assist bedside nursing, ran lab tests, prepare X-ray readings, help in the dental, pharmacy, outpatient and dietary sections.

In particular there was critical short staffing in nursing aides. Hence even as the foundations of the new hospital were being laid, a quick course to train them was started by Filipino nurse Petra Sismaet Duruin. Within a year they were ready and assisting the Filipino doctors and nurses. Nonetheless, the crush of patients and plans to expand bed capacity foretold the need for more helping hands. It was time to think about an extended course to turn out more capable Lao nurses, not only for Vientiane but for the provincial hospitals where OB had assigned their personnel.

The two-year program began in 1961. In essence, it was an intensive shortened version of the five-year Bachelor of Nursing curriculum that the Filipino nurses had completed for their Philippine licenses. The chosen Lao nursing students knew they were a special lot. Competitive entrance tests winnowed only the best applicants. In the 1950s and 1960s, Lao nurses were trained abroad - in Hanoi, Saigon or Bangkok. And most were auxiliary one-year trained nurses. The OB School of Nursing was the only school in the country that conducted a full two-year course.

Dormitories behind the OB House, a 10-minute walk from the hospital served as their home for two years. Those recruited from the provinces looked to the day after graduation when they would return there to help staff the OB hospitals. Each highpoint of their training was marked with ceremonies - the candle lighting, the capping - finally the graduation group photo, all of them lined up in their starched uniforms, diploma in hand, proudly beaming.

Just as exultant were their teachers - nurses turned educators. Several were present at the 2004 reunion - Wilma Padayao, Pet Duruin, Gina Liwag, Cecile Datu, Ampie Malolos, Joji Naranjo and Fely Navera. (Other school instructors were Minerva Erese, Norma Opiniano, Lolit Delaon, Pat Garde, Jovit Revilla and Vilma Valenzuela). In their late teens when they were students, our Lao nurses are now in their late 50s or 60s, are parents and grandparents. Most had only sixth grade credentials when they began their training. Eight of those who settled in the USA earned RN degrees, thanks to an OB curriculum patterned after the U.S. practical nursing licensure; others found employment as nursing aides.

Their journey from That Luang to Chicago took detours that involved perilous night time escapes across the Mekong river, extended, dehumanizing stays at austere refugee camps in Thailand, and the wrenching immigrant struggle to plant roots in their second homes in America. Did you land at O'Hare airport, with four kids, a year to four years old, as several of them did? The transition was so much easier for their Filipino counterparts who emigrated here by jet plane. They had college degrees, fluent in English, comfortably familiar with American culture. That the Lao nurses were able to surmount immigrant hurdles is a tribute to their tenacity and the skills they brought with them.

That day in May 1975 when our Lao co-workers at OB Vientiane Hospital tearfully sent off at Wattay airport their Filipino colleagues for their final trip out of Laos, it would have been unimaginable that they would meet again.

Wrote Chanthalom Phouangmalay, class of 1967, to Cecile Datu, after the Chicago reunion: "Dear Madame Cecile, I will always remember with gratitude your part in making me who I am today."

RECORDED MEMORIES

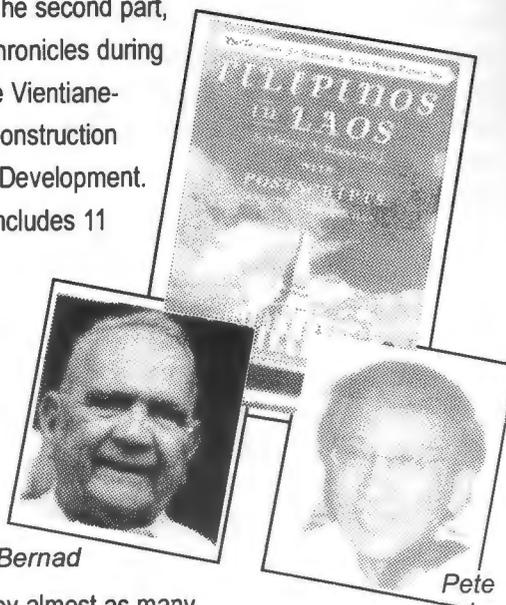
Penny Villarica Flores, addressing our 2000 reunion in San Francisco, California, lamented the lack, indeed the absence, of a record of our 18 years of service in Laos. Wouldn't it be wonderful, she sighed, if we had a book, to show our children and grandchildren of our youthful exuberance. Wouldn't it be nice to come away from our biennial reunions clutching a souvenir, more lasting than memories of a night of partying and lonesome souls reuniting ?

Well, we now have two volumes. And a website. Plus a newsletter.

In August 2004, at the Chicago reunion, we released "Filipinos in Laos". Then in October 2005, "Goodbye Vientiane" was published. On July 10, 2001, www.mekongcircle.org was launched into cyberspace. Our newsletter's first issue was dated March 2002. In addition, the reunion souvenir program journals, five so far, are treasured albums of photos and personal essays.

Rejoice, Penny - see how your lament has unleashed a print and electronic output to overload our memory neurons.

"Filipinos in Laos" is a two-part volume. The first, written by Filipino historian Fr. Miguel Bernad, S.J., covers two years (1957-1959) of Operation Brotherhood's beginnings in Laos. The second part, written by J. "Pete" Fuentesilla, continues the OB history and also chronicles during the same period (1957 - 1975) the work of Filipinos employed by the Vientiane-based Air America, Bird & Sons, Continental Air Services, Eastern Construction Company, the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Agency For International Development. The 233-page book, printed in large pocket book softcover format, includes 11 pages of photos and a 12-page index of 400 names- Filipino, Lao, Thai, Americans - mentioned in the book (yours may be in it). Also contains a chronology of Filipino historical dates in Laos. To order your \$20 copy, contact Long Dash Books, 89 Walnut St., Montclair, New Jersey 07042 USA. email: longdash@gmail.com. Phone 973 746 5496. Pete can be reached at fuentesilla@aol.com

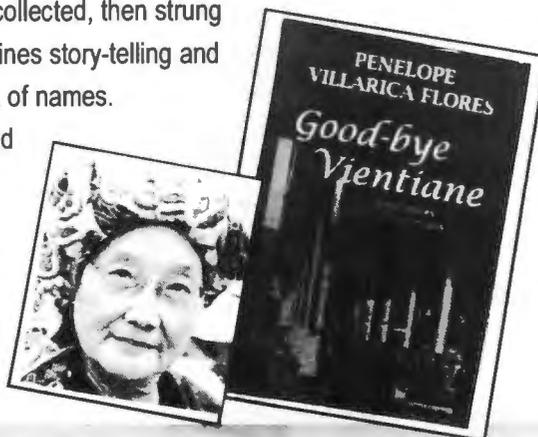


Fr. Bernad

Pete

"Goodbye Vientiane" is a memoir, actually 41 personal accounts by almost as many Mekong Circle members of their Laos experience. Each is a recollection of an event, an encounter, a slice of life lived with affection for a country and a people. They were collected, then strung together by Penny Villarica into a "braided narrative that combines story-telling and history." The 210-page, softcover book also contains an index of names.

Noteworthy is a marriage grid -- a table that charts who married



Penny

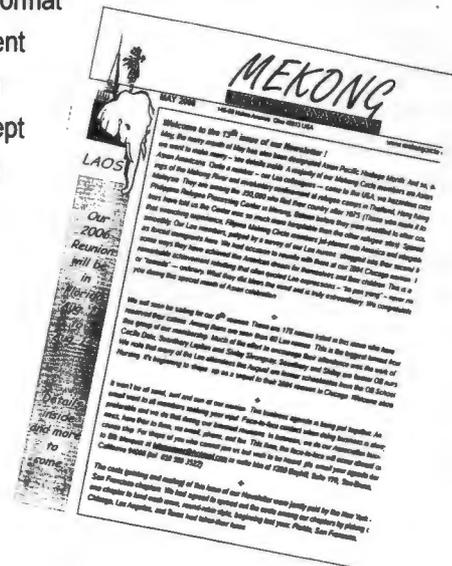
whom, the couplings among OB, USAID, Air America, ECCOILpersonnel - that's 83 pairs or 163 individuals, who met each other in Laos (you and your beloved can be in it). To order your \$15 copy, contact Edwin Lozada, care of Philippine American Writers and Artists, P.O Box 31928, San Francisco, California 94131 USA. email: www.carayan-press.com. Penny can be reached at pflores@sfsu.edu.

Our website www.mekongcircle.org is maintained by B.J. Reyes, son of Mekong Circle members Bert & Melanie Reyes of Olmsted Township, Ohio. A journalist based in Honolulu, Hawaii, B.J. is so attached to our website that when he travels he carries his laptop computer with him so that he can post happenings wherever he is. Our site contains a photo album where members have uploaded pictures of our reunions as well as visits to Laos. Photos of the Vientiane OB hospital are the last photographic records of the building before it was torn down in November 2002. His email: webmaster@mekongcircle.org



B.J.

Mekong Circle Newsletter has metamorphosed from a promotional 4-page flyer for our reunions to as many as 12 pages in some issues. It has finally settled, during the last issues, into a format that blends "Member News" and "Historical Notes" with essays and current events. The links to Laos are its anchor. The February 2006 issue has an index of all features from March 2002 to December 2005. All issues (except the first two) are reprinted in our website. All members are encouraged to submit articles. To contact the editor: fuentecila@aol.com



Hmong Health Beliefs and Practices

By Penelope V. Flores

While in Laos from 1958 to 1961 I was assigned for a time to the post of Social Worker and Educator cum House Manager-Nutritionist in Sam Neua, an Operation Brotherhood Laos post, a town in the northeastern province of Houah Phanh bordering China. Assigned to the same post earlier were Dominga Jamero who opened a kindergarten class followed by Irene Diaz-Sobrevinas, who was the best House Manager and served the most sumptuous dishes wherever she was posted, and Rossini Fuentes (Mommy Rose), who loved to play a mean game of chess and beat everyone else, including the OB Chairman Oscar Arellano. The social worker/house manager who came just before me was Zita Arzaga who stayed briefly for a week and requested a transfer. Sam Neua was really a "lonely outpost" as Peachy Jose Holgado and Lewie Cruz Gonzales wrote our book "Good-bye Vientiane". I was the

last one to occupy this post as Social Worker because the station was forcibly closed due to the town being overrun by the Pathet Lao in 1960.

Dominga was a trained Social Worker. Irene, Rossini, and Zita were trained nutritionists. At that time I was working as part of a socio-economic medical team of 2 doctors, 3 nurses, a dentist, (Reynaldo Bacordo), an agriculturist (Art Sanchez), and an engineer (Danilo

Infante). I was the anomaly in the group. My training was that of a school teacher. However, I prided myself in being the only one certified to teach the Kindergarten class. I was happy in my job teaching pre-school, opening an Language English language school for the community and city administrative officers, and providing social work services to the patients and the medical staff. Among my jobs was to play the role of cultural broker, in other words to be the cross-cultural channel between the medical staff and the patients' families.

There are pros and cons for this discrepancy

of specialized training. The con was that I did not have the proper academic discipline of the social worker nor nutritionist. The pro is that not having been trained in these particular disciplines, I can very much break all the rules to do a lot of unconventional things that mattered much to me. In this case, I went in for the educational and ethnograph-



OB doctor Primo Guevara holding outdoor clinic during the 1960s. Such "mobile clinics" reached into isolated Hmong villages in the north.

ic perspective of the job. I developed this curiosity of wanting to know the cultural health beliefs of the Meos, also known as Hmong who were admitted to the hospital. Every morning, I joined Dr. Pete Gonzales and Dr. Johnny Reyes, and nurses Eve Altura Guevara, Cecile Salarda Datu, and Peachy Jose Holgado doing their rounds.

I observed huge numbers of family members

always hovering around and even sleeping in the hospital wards. As a participant observer, I joined Cecile in her public health dispensary clinic visits in the villages. There, I interviewed many patients and tried to give meaning to their confusing experiences by putting myself in their shoes interpreting and reconfiguring out the strange Western medical practices that enfolded the lives of the patients in Sam Neua.

Meo Belief System for Being Sick

All the families I interviewed really believe that a family member got sick because a benevolent spirit had been disturbed by actions such as:

- Urinating on a rock that looks like an animal.
- Urinating on a house siding.
- Kicking and or urinating on the house posts.
- Washing laundry in a lake inhabited by a spirit dragon.
- Digging a well in a spirit's house or place.

I could not help but think that maybe we should change the building signs in old Manila buildings that men consistently ignore, reading "Bawal Umih Dito" (Urinating here is prohibited) into "Magkakasakit ka nang Malubha pag Umih ka Dito." (You'll get seriously ill if you urinate here.) It could work.

Beliefs on the Loss of Soul

It is absolutely necessary for maintaining health and happiness to have the life soul reside in one's body. This is the true rationale behind the Laotian Baci ceremony. The string tied to wrists symbolically prevents the escape of the life soul. This life soul can be separated from its body through several factors, among them too much of one thing: anger, grief, and fear. In many instances too much curiosity can bring illness. Too much wanderlust can make the soul separate and leave the body.

In this connection, Meo mothers create the "soul-retaining" clothing. Sacred threads are used. A new born baby is not considered a full member of the human race (and Meo clan) until the ceremony called "soul naming" is held. Normally, this is the 3rd day after birth. Cloth carriers are embroidered with soul-retaining motifs such as a pig pen, a symbol for enclosure. Meo babies are dressed in intricately embroidered hats which when seen from a birds' eye-view might fool a

malevolent spirit into thinking that the child is a flower. Babies wear silver necklaces fastened with soul shackling locks. The babies' soul can easily be drawn away by bright colors, sweet sounds, and fragrant smells. It could be frightened away by a sudden loud noise like slamming doors. The baby's soul may leave if the baby is sad, lonely, or insufficiently loved by its parents. The newborn babies' life-souls are especially prone to disappearance. Why? They are so small, so vulnerable, and they are poised between two realms: the domain of the unseen from which they had just traveled, and the domain of the living.

Spirit , Come Back

I was so naïve when I came to Sam Neua. At my kindergarten class' first meeting, I noticed frayed strings tied around a 5-year old's wrists. Armed with a pair of scissors, I snipped off the filthy strings because I reasoned that it was unsanitary and it carried germs. I did not anticipate the irate parents who explained that because of my ignorance and stupidity I have let loose the children's life souls and thus invited the malevolent spirits called the dah to enter the child's nature and make them prone to sickness. They hired a "spirit medicine man", a Shaman to invite the pupils' souls back, chanting, "Come back, come back." Our cook Pheng, sacrificed a chicken, and requested the good spirits to put more sense into this Filipino teacher's thick cranium. As expected it coaxed the errant souls to return to my pupil's bodies.

Medical Practices and Conflicting Models

I was surprised at the stream of contradictory beliefs between our Western trained personnel and the Meo parents and their health practices. Here are some examples:

- Taking herbal medicine is more prestigious than hospital treatment. Patients come only when the sick is beyond help from their local cures.
- Western doctors take so much blood from their patients. According to the Meos, the body contains a discrete amount of blood that the body can not replenish. Ergo, repeated blood sampling in the hospitals may be fatal.
- Doctors take urine and feces which they keep in attractive tiny bottles and display these on glass

shelves to examine and admire.

● It is the Meo's belief that if people lose their vital organs after death, their souls cannot be reborn into a new body and thus, the spirit may take revenge on the living relatives. Rumors persist that US trained doctors eat the livers, kidneys, and hearts of the Meo patients. When I asked how they got this misinformation, Dr. Alex del Carmen suggested that this idea may have originated from surgery forms that have a line item where it asks patients to donate their internal organs.

● After one dies, Western trained doctors open up the head and take out the brains and the body is cut into little pieces. This may be a partial definition of an autopsy.

The Shaman and the Western-trained Doctors

● Shamans never undress their patients; whereas doctors in the hospitals ask patients to take off their clothes.

● Shamans seldom touch their patients' body. Doctors touch their patients too intrusively. Sometimes they dare to put their fingers inside a woman's private parts. When people are unconscious, their souls are released; therefore giving patients anaesthesia may lead to illness or death.

● A Shaman may spend as much as eight hours in a sick person's home administering to the sick body and distressed soul; whereas doctors force their patients, no matter how weak they are, to come to the hospital. And when there, the doctor might spend only 20 minutes at their bedside.

● Shamans are always polite and never needed to ask questions. Doctors on the other hand ask too many rude and intimate questions about the patients' lives, right down to their excretory habits and even sexual practices.

● Western hospitals take pictures of your soul and spirit (X-ray), a horrible practice. Souls are insulted if we take their pictures.

● Surgery means that the body is cut or disfigured (or that it loses its parts). It also means that the body will remain in a condition of perpetual imbalance. The damaged person will not only become frequently ill but may be physically incomplete during the next incarnation. This is the reason why surgery is really taboo.

Speaking of Childbirth Practices

Cold foods during the post partum period make the blood congeal in the womb, instead of cleansing it by flowing freely. (Yet, in maternity wards, cold drinks are OK.) Thirty days following childbirth, a special food is given to the mother consisting of hot steamed rice, chicken boiled with water steeped in five special herbs. Any woman who does not observe this will develop itchy skin and all kinds of gastro-intestinal diseases in old age.

I remember that when I first gave birth to my twins, Norman and Raymond, my mother made me drink a concoction she specially prepared for me. I ask why a physician's spouse, my father Jose Villarica MD, would resort to such an herbal cure, and she said this will aid me in lactation as it did to her. Child-bearing customs are hard to eradicate in any culture.

Illness as the Effect of the Environment

● In Meo country, one can get sick by being hit by a whirlwind or a change in weather. In my grandmother's list, bad wind-- nahipan ng masamang hangin -- is a cause of illness.

● Having bird droppings fall on one's head will make you sick. My grandmother has a deadly version: if you let a bird sit on your chest, and it leaves droppings you will die of Bangungut; in medical terms the Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome.

● To the Meos, pointing one's finger at the full moon will make you sick. Similarly my Impong Menang says, if I stayed too long out in the night and the bright full moonlight shines on my wet hair I will become mentally sick -- "loka-loka." I have no idea why I should be walking around with wet hair in the still of the night.

● Don't step on an ant hill. It could be the abode of a spirit. My Lola will do one further by saying out loud "Tabi po, Nuno" when she passes by a termite mound hill in order to appease and ask permission from the spirit (punso) that resides there.

I wish I had taken more field notes and had taken my Meo ethnography study more seriously when I was posted in Sam Neua. I am indebted to my interpreter, Bounlieng, and to my bibliographic source: "The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down" by Anne Fadiman.

HALCYON DAYS IN LAOS

When I look back at those halcyon days spent in Laos, my senses are overwhelmed by the power of the feelings that come flooding back after all of these years. Things that happened forty years ago are as fresh as if they happened yesterday. Those of us who worked in Laos developed a heartfelt sense of family. We were in a unique situation in a venerated, albeit troubled kingdom - a land of a million elephants and the white parasol of Buddhism. Whether we were American, Filipino, Thai or some other nationality, we became friends - the kind of friendships that have lasted a life time. Mekong Circle is one of the ways those friendships are kept vibrant.



THE PEOPLE OF LAOS

When I looked through the last Mekong Circle publication, the one thing that I found wanting in an otherwise excellent document was pictures of the people we went to Laos to serve. Whether we worked with the Lao, the Hmong or others, we encountered extraordinary kindness and human warmth. I treasured my relationships with the Lao and Hmong. I also treasured my relationship with the Filipinos who worked with Operation Brotherhood, the contract airlines, USAID and other programs. I dedicate these pictures from Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua to all of you for your friendship, loyalty and professionalism.

Text & photos by Paul E. White (Laos 66-73)



MY JOURNEY BACK TO LAOS

by Tricia Lapitan

I have crossed the Mekong River so many times ... in day-dreams and images formulated from the black-and-white photos my father left behind, in the descriptions of other travelers, movies and books depicting this three-quarter-mile stretch of muddy, slow-moving water. Finding the courage to return to Laos has me searching for the images to compare to what I see now, but everything that has led me back cannot prepare me for how I feel.

It's been more than 30 years since my family left communist Laos, crossing in haste to escape the war. Like many, we traveled in the opposite direction to the safety of other countries like Thailand and the United States. I am the last to make the journey back. The child within my heart remembers, even if my eyes do not. I cannot fight the tears, seeing how close I am to the place of my birth, coming home again after being away for so long.

No one expected me to have a memory of this place; I was only 3 when we left. Remembering very little has its advantages. The country is in the process of redefining itself. The People's Democratic Republic of Laos is working hard to transform its once-negative image in order to attract international investors and tourists. The new Laos boasts endless economic possibilities and cultural experiences like no other. After more than three decades in isolation, Laos welcomes the world. The reinvention (funded almost entirely by foreign aid) has created a precociously balanced cityscape of opulent government and commercial buildings against the decay of schools and family housing. In the distance of the rice fields, simple huts are overshadowed by three-story mansion sprawls along the road to Vientiane.

Things are different here compared to the nine other countries of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. With a population of less than 5 million, Laos holds the status of being the least-developed nation in Southeast Asia, as well as one of the poorest in the world. Its 1997 ASEAN membership to the alliance signaled hope. Open dialogue on trade, politics and economics between the members means good news for the entire region. However, Laos has a long way to go before it catches up. Very little has changed for its people.

Schools and hospitals are few, and those that exist are scarcely funded and inadequately supplied. The population's literacy rate remains under 50 percent, with 37 percent of the country's educated choosing to live abroad. The Lao currency, although stabilizing, has never fully recovered from the 87 percent depreciation that resulted from the Asian financial crisis of the late '90s. Exports continue to be minimal due to a mostly agricultural economy. With no rail system, poor road conditions and only limited telecommunications, Laos lacks infrastructure. Electricity is not available in all areas or available at all times, and the media remain under the exclusive control of the government.

Heavily dependent on foreign aid, the country wants to move toward economic independence. The push to attract investors and tourists alike is evident by a rush of new construction. The capital city looks modern, with more cars, office buildings, banks, storefronts and luxury hotels than ever before. An extravagant convention center completes the look.

The reformation also includes plans to push away from traditional exports with the recent proposal to develop more hydroelectric power for sale to Thailand. Energy production is expected to lead the country's transition to a market system. However, there are concerns.

Although the government has opened its once-closed borders, it worries about the future, citing overcrowded cities and the westernization of its neighbor's youth as examples. These dramatic changes also signal problems for rural communities and the sustainability of natural resources. To make way for the new Nam Theun 2 dam, indigenous populations will be relocated and wildlife knowingly sacrificed.

Things are different here. Thirty years have barely passed, making Laos even more mysterious than ever before. Life in the capital city is a sleepy mix of progress and a laid-back attitude; I am somewhat comforted by that. The ancient temples (wat), with their strong, elegant symbols of Buddha, balance the modernized landscape. Sticky rice (kao neawow) and fish remain staples of the Lao diet, which also includes crisp French bread. Stopping for Beer Lao on the way home is a local afternoon ritual. And the Morning Market (Talaat

Sao) remains the city's main shopping area, as it was when I was a child.

The explosion of colors from Lao silks hanging from every corner of the market forces one's eyes to look at them. The ancient art floods the market in tunnels of texture and intricate weaves of gold and colorful threads. Across the aisle and seemingly on the other side of the world — the chess set I need to buy. I study the set, hand carved from bone and decorated with etchings depicting the local landscape.

"Taw dai?" I ask with the confidence of a local despite my North Face backpack and Merrell sandals.

"Saam loy saow ha pan kip," he says, looking for signs of my seriousness through the glass.

I motion to my cousin, who is unsuccessfully trying to bargain the price of a handbag from a girl barely the age of 12. I reach for Lao money recently acquired from the currency exchange and tucked away in three separate pockets. As I was flanked by soldiers with guns, my US\$100 was converted with alarming speed once I presented three forms of identification. Together, the Lao bills are as thick as a brick.

When I have nothing more to say, he stands up and repeats, "Saam loy saow ha pan kip."

I continue to stare at the rainbow-colored currency, trying to reconcile 325,000K. Being of modest means all my life, and at times worse, I have never had to count out an amount this high. I am now being pressured to sort through the myriad of bills totaling more than 1 million kip and come up with the right combination. I need to see the amount on paper in order to comprehend it. In distress, I begin to laugh.

My cousin suggests, "Baht." The salesman performs the conversion without a calculator and announces the new price. 1300B. I switch from kip to baht then back to dollars so I know what I'm actually paying (about \$30 in kip and \$32 in baht). He also switches dialects to Thai, but my cousin is unsuccessful at bargaining down the price. Baht is exchanged for merchandise, and shortly after collecting my purchase, I feel lucky to be a tourist.

It would take the average citizen months to save for this chess set. A typical daily wage is \$2.50. One is considered well-off to travel across the Mekong to buy goods not sold in Laos. Foreign currency (baht or dollars) is the preferred tender — even for the government, which defiantly marks its territory by washing the wheels of every vehicle crossing the Friendship Bridge from Thailand.

Fortunately, travelers are eager to unravel the mystery of the culture, making tourism the fastest-growing industry in Laos. Foot traffic is brisk at the borders and several airlines have expanded flight schedules to accommodate the increased demand.

It is also fortunate that foreign aid continues to be steady and targeted to the people's needs. Countries including Australia, Thailand and Japan have donated millions to help build schools and roads. However, foreign aid must be filtered through the Lao government by law without the requirement of an exact accounting. These conditions have crippled the ability of many international organizations to provide substantial relief or develop humanitarian programs that meet goals.

In Vientiane, progress happens very, very slowly, and progress is not always achieved through expansion. A government sign outlines plans to tear down historic Talaat Sao to make way for a more spacious and modern facility. It is this type of dichotomy that puts Laos at yet another crossroads in its history.

Laos can evolve into an independent nation with a vital economy. However, staying true to its namesake of a "democratic republic" cannot include illusions of freedom. The needs of the people must come first.

Revitalization has to include a commitment to social welfare, education, health care, open access to information and the preservation of resources.

I don't remember very much, but I always heard happiness whenever my parents spoke about this beloved country. It was one rich in religious tradition and embracing of other cultures. It was a country beautiful in its landscape of lush tropical forests, grand temples of worship and royal palaces. The young sought advice from their elders. Children had a choice of schools. Foreign embassies played an active role in foreign aid through partnership. Free enterprise flourished and politics was a popular subject because of fair elections. Leaders were motivated only by their love for the country, thus inspiring the Lao people to be proud and hopeful.

This is the Laos I hope to see emerging ... like the one in my father's photos.

Tricia S. Lapitan is a freelance writer, attorney and aspiring novelist residing in Seattle, Washington. She is the daughter of the late Sergio Lapitan, OB photographer and Sounthaly, an OB nurse. This article first appeared in Northwest Asian Weekly in November 26, 2005. She can be reached at tslapitan@yahoo.com.



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
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**Warmest Greetings
from
Ilde & Pining Torres
to all our
Mekong Circle
colleagues**

*Sylmar, California
USA*

From the windy city of Chicago to the
sunshine state of Florida, may you all have
a very enjoyable cruise and fellowship
together. I will be missing your joyful
company. But I'll be thinking of you.



Linda Masibay
Chicago, Illinois



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*At Photsavath, Sivily Sivongxay, Cecile Datu, Phounsouk
Sisouphone and Chanthamalay Pathammaboun
at the 2004 Chicago reunion*

**Congratulations to the
Florida Reunion
Organizing Committee
& Greetings to all
Mekong Circle
Members.**

*Cecile & Manding Datu
West Covina, California*

**Welcome All
to Our
6th Reunion !
Enjoy !**



Ampie Malolos
Kissimmee, Florida



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Tony Jr., Cora, Tony and Richie

**The Sazon family wishes
all members
another memorable reunion.**

Woodbury, New Jersey

**Let's Remember.
Let's Rejoice !**



Marie Aguilos
Woodside, New York



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
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Mekong Circle is dedicated to providing members with a full complement of resources, ideas and services. Thanks to its leadership, we receive regular news from our Newsletter, book publications, our website and now -- a cruise in the Bahamas !

**Congratulations to the
2006 Reunion Organizing Committee
and my best wishes for a very enjoyable cruise.**



Penelope Villarica Flores

San Francisco State University
San Francisco, California

*Penny in an Indonesian headress.
From June to December 2005, she served as a
Teacher Training Advisor in Indonesia
under a USAID contract.*



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
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Sambai Dee and Mabuhay Kayo
from
Mekong Circle Philippines

**We wish you another stupendous
reunion that we intend
to surpass at the next one.**



Our chapter in the Philippines has been holding their own reunions -- on October 7, 2001, June 7, 2003, February 7, 2004 and January 8, 2006. Photo above is from the 2003 reunion hosted by Jovit and Ben Revilla at their Los Banos, Laguna residence. Among those present: His Excellency Laos Ambassador Phiane Philakone and his wife, Nick and Lita Bustamante, Mehelinda Sison, Baby and Johnny Asuncion, Edna Savady, Ben Tagaro, Ody and Dave Cruz, Eve Guevara, Jun & Bing Belicena, Violy Evangelista, Yvette Layug and Nene Rubio.



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
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Aloha from Honolulu, Hawaii

from the

Fajardo - Swift family

To

Mekong Circle & its 6th Reunion

Enjoy the sand & the surf & the sun.

(We've got all that here every day.)



*First row, from left: Nenet, Zen, Julia, Rhonda, Joji, Vitoy
Back row: Jonah, Joshua, Josel, Nemesio, Jacob*

**Congratulations on another
exciting reunion !**

**May we keep enjoying the
company of good friends.**

The Naranjo Family



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
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Picnic during the 2000 San Francisco 3rd Reunion

Sambai Dee !

**The Northern California Chapter of
Mekong Circle
wishes all our members
a joyous
2006 reunion**

Anita & Bik Marquez

San Francisco, California



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Cruising the East River of Manhattan during the 2002 New York City 4th Reunion. From left: Fe Casher, Ciony Ljungar, Vilma Valenzuela, Conse Sotio, Evelyn Alon, Jojo Pablo.

**The East Coast Chapter of
Mekong Circle
celebrates our 6th Reunion
and wishes all members
all the blessings that come with
keeping memories alive
and friendships true.**



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
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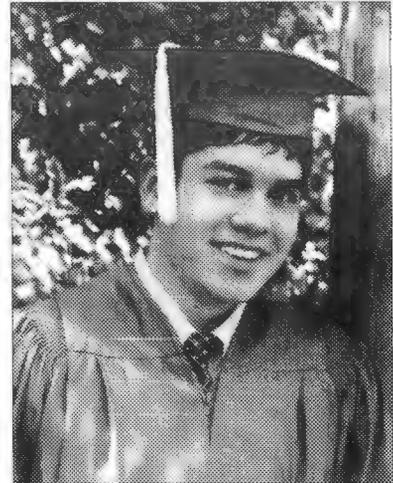
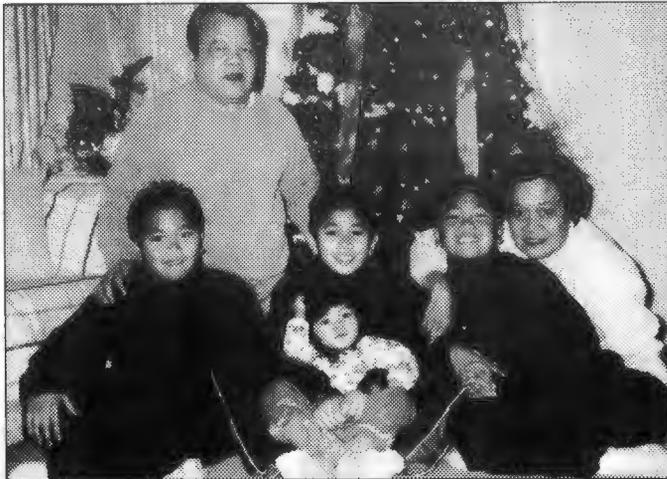
*Picnic
during
the
2004
Chicago
Reunion*

**Greetings
&
Best Wishes
from the
Chicago
Chapter
of
Mekong
Circle**





MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
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The Padayao family: Fidel (top), grandchildren Kevin, Ryan, Erik and Janelle and grandma Vilma. Right photo: grandson Mitchell

**Congratulations to
Pete & Lewie Gonzales
and the
Florida Organizing Committee
of our 6th Reunion.
Let's keep the good times
(then and now) rolling along !**

Vilma & Fidel Padayao
Fontana, California

REMEMBERING

“...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.”

— from the first part of “Filipinos in Laos” history by Fr. Miguel Bernad, S.J., about Operation Brotherhood from 1957-1959. The following list of OB volunteers who died in Laos spans the period from 1957 to 1975:

Abner Jornada

Bienvenido Natividad

Aurea Joaquin

Violeta Salarda

Emmanuel Canonizado

Cesar Medina

Noel Extremadura

Brigido Garcia

Rodolfo Villaroman

Wilhemina Comia

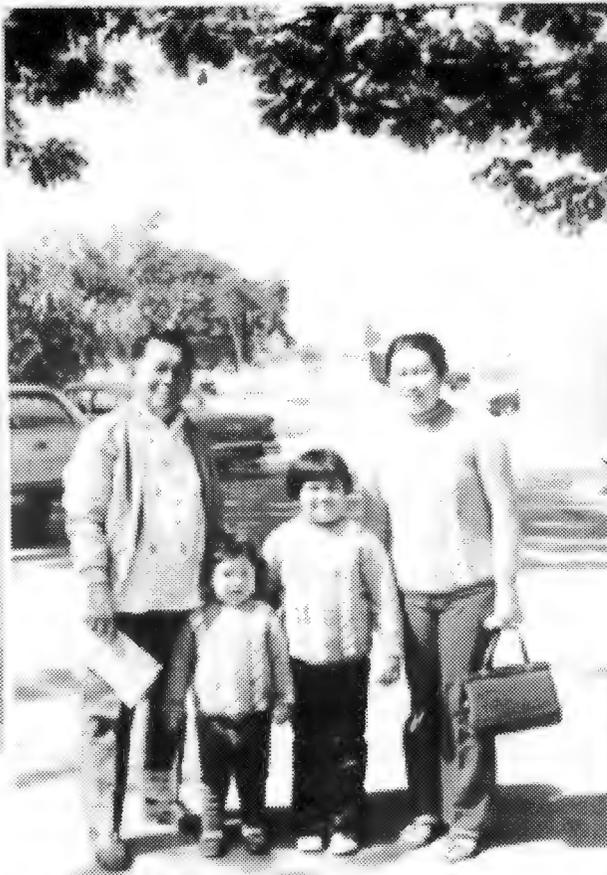
Sisinio Azul

CONGRATULATIONS MEKONG CIRCLE!



from the
Lapitan
Family

*Seattle,
Washington*





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Sambai Dee from the Siharath Family

Oceanside, California

Khamsy Siharath, RN
OB School of Nursing (Vientiane)
Class of 1964

Oceanside Rest Home **Residential Care for the Elderly**

Khamsy Siharath, RN
Licensee



Siera Navasak, BSW
Administrator

4451 San Joaquin St.
Oceanside, CA 92057

Lic# 374601975

Bus: 760-433-3736
Fax: 760-433-3736
Email: Oceansideresthome@cox.net



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Sambai Dee & Best Wishes For A Grand Reunion



Chantha Sivongxay, Sivilay Sivongsay (OB School of Nursing 1969); Soud Khamvongsa, Sisamay Vannasing(West Covina, California)

I shall always remember how a large part of our lives was shaped by the adorable people and a lovely country where we were all together at one time.

Jojo Pablo

San Francisco, California

*Our Heartfelt Greetings on the 6th Reunion of
Mekong Circle International*
from the **PALMA-MONSERRAT FAMILY**



*Our pride and joy...
Grandchildren
Gabriel and Isabelle Monserrat*



Bob & Asil Monserrat



Lydia Palma



Rey & Irma Monserrat



Alex & Grace (M) Bernardo



*For the Year 2006-2007, Magenta Travel Group
is pleased to announce the following departures:*

2006:

July 1-9: 8-days Salsa in Rio de Janeiro and Tango in Buenos Aires from \$1249 plus tax. Flight from Miami, hotels and sightseeing per itinerary.

July 28-31: 3-nights Bahamas cruise on RCCL Sovereign of the Seas from Port Canaveral. From \$300 plus port charges and taxes. Call for details.

August 11-14: 3-nights Bahamas cruise on RCCL Sovereign of the Seas. From Port Canaveral. From \$250 plus port charges and taxes.

October 1-15: 15 -days Spain plus Lourdes and Fatima with Fr. Ray. Call for details.

October 7-20: 14-days Marian Shrines of Portugal, Spain, France & Italy with Fr. Jose Munoz and Fr. Miguel Gonzales. \$1890 plus airfare. Call for details.

October 20-29: 10-days Holy Land plus Egypt Extensions. \$2198.00 Land and Air from Orlando. Fr. Ermelindo DiCapua, of San Giovanni Rotondo Spiritual Director.

December 9-14: Guadalupe Shrine and colonial Mexic. \$1399 plus airfare.

December 21-27: Christmas in Rome with midnight mass in St. Petersberg. Call for details.

2007:

January 27-February 12: Manila and Beyond. Go back to your roots and re-visit those places: atihian in Iloilo, Boracay, Ilocandia, Subic, Tagaytay, Metro Manila. Fully Escorted. First Class hotels and sumptuous meals. Extension to China, Bangkok or Hong Kong. reserve your space because it is filling up.

April 30-May 10: Shrines of Italy with extension to Medjugorje or Greek Isle Cruise

May 10-23: 14-days Spain and Portugal with Fr. Peter Puntal. Call for details.

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*Left to right: Michelle & Aidan Hillmeyer, B.J. Reyes, Ryan Hillmeyer,
Melanie & Bert Reyes, Patrick, Pat & Patty Hillmeyer
(not shown: Emil Reyes)*

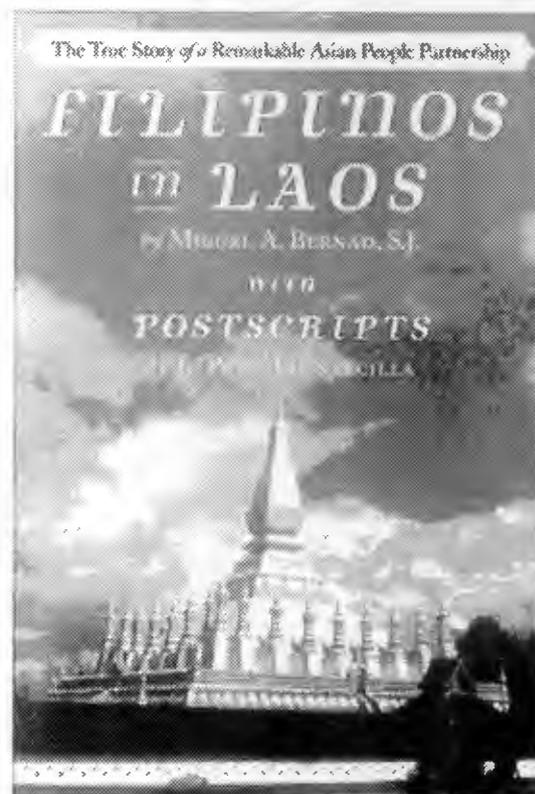
Our Best Wishes to Mekong Circle on their 6 th Reunion.

*The Hillmeyer & Reyes Families
Cleveland, Ohio*

Do you have your copy to show your children and grandchildren ?

The first history of Filipinos who served in Laos from 1957 to 1975. They include those who were employed by Air America, Bird & Sons, Continental Air Services, ECCOIL, Operation Brotherhood (OB), the United States Agency For International Development - Laos. It's 233 pages include 11 pages of photos and a 12-page index of more than 400 names -- yours, perhaps, among them.

To order: Long Dash Books
49 Orchard St., Hackensack, New Jersey 07601
Tel. 201 342 1000 email: longdash@gmail.com





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**Mabuhay
&
Sambai Dee !
from the
Southern California Chapter
of
Mekong Circle**

**Let's keep the good times rolling
now and everytime
we come together.**

Pol Custodio
Baldwin Park, California



MEKONG CIRCLE 6TH REUNION
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Phikoun Keomahathai, RN (second from left, 1964 OB School of Nursing graduate), with daughter Nitnoy, RN; sons Dr. Nok and Eddie.

**Wishing Every One A
Very
Enjoyable, Unforgettable
Reunion !**

Phikoun
Charlottesville, Virginia