



Mekong Express Mail

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The Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood, Inc.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

TLCB Rice Helped Flood-Battered Ban Yao

Based on A Report From Jim Michener, in Laos

One of the most satisfying endeavors of the TLC Brotherhood has been to raise funds to help poor and disabled children in the Thailand, Laos, Cambodia region in memory of those military and civilians engaged in the Secret War who did not come home. The project described below, the TLCB's response to disastrous floods in Laos that wiped out a village and destroyed the economic basis of two others, is an example of the TLCB's Assistance Fund at work in Southeast

Asia. A single-engine prop plane flying in a straight line would have covered the distance between Vientiane and Vang Viang in less than 15 minutes. Overland, on August 24th, it took two vehicles three hours. One carried Phetsavang Sounnalath, the Lao director of the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO). The other carried Jim Michener, TLCB's Assistance Committee representative for Laos. The former is the son of a deceased supreme commander of the Lao army. The latter flew generals in Vietnam during the war and has chalked up a decade living in Laos.

At the height of the rainy monsoon season, unusually heavy rains brought disaster to several mountain villages in central Laos. Unlike anybody could remember, landslides took out a section of Route 13 North and buried others. Tumbling trees wiped out miles of wires. Flash floods obliterated the village

Where a village once stood: remains of Ban Yao, in Vang Vieng District. Villages in nearby Kasi District were affected by the same August flood.



at Ban Yao. Like useless bookends, the bridges at its entrance and exit are all that remain.

Because nothing was there, it seemed incongruous when police stopped the two vehicles at the first bridge. 500

meters later, at the second bridge, the tragedy was laid bare. Homeless villagers peered down at the foundations of houses that no longer existed. Eerily, masonry steps rose from the ground to nowhere. Phetsavang and Jim got out of their vehicles. They looked back at the first bridge. All was open ground. The full measure of the disaster then struck them.

This Lao-American cooperation was the brainstorm of US Charge d'Affaires a.i. Susan Sutton. Jim had approached her about how TLCB might help the villages, after reading about

See *Secret Peace*, page 2



Above: Jim Michener and Lao Officials, who are accepting emergency rice donated by the TLC Brotherhood for Ban Yao flood relief.

Dues for 2002—

payable as of January first.

See page 12 for details--how much, where to send it, when the deadline is.

Secret Peace, continued from page 1

their plight in local papers. Knowing them both, Susan suggested to Jim that Phetsavang might be the best contact for channeling TLCB assistance to villagers stricken by natural disasters. Their military backgrounds providing an automatic starting point, Jim and Phetsavang immediately hit it off. Phetsavang, before their first meeting was over, revealed that he has an American brother-in-law living in the States who served in Thailand during the Vietnam War.

Near the end of the second bridge, Jim and Vang Viang's district governor, sitting on small chairs, chatted away. Not only did the villagers lose their homes, but their rice paddies were overlaid by untold tons of mud that was up to two meters deep. Across the road, the 5,000-foot peaks of Pha Tongching scraped the sky. Looking like summertime ski slopes, brown swaths, kilometers long, the remnants of landslides, ran down mountainsides.

Pepsi and fried bananas were served. Chickens darted between feet (some bare) and the legs of benches and stools. One at a time, villagers came forward, hands pressed together before their faces, bowed slightly, and paid respect to the district governor. Most left with a fried banana. Watching from the shadows, older children stood with smaller children balanced on hips.



"Near the end of the second bridge, Jim and Vang Viang's district governor, sitting on small chairs, chatted away."

Half an hour later, surrounded by emerald mountains scarred by fresh brown landslides, Phetsavang and Jim stood on the other side of the road with representatives of the provincial government as TLCB's assistance (tons of rice, household goods and field implements) was acknowledged, then accepted. It was significant that Ban Yao was not even on the map before disaster struck. Leaving their slash-and-burn culture behind, these villagers—descendants of Yao, Meo and Khmu tribesmen—had descended the slopes not that long ago and taken up the wet-rice cultivation of the Lao people. The more isolated the people, the more they are cut off from customary channels of assistance, the quicker TLCB will help. For the villagers in Ban Yao, seeing was believing.

A similar ceremony conveying TLCB assistance was repeated at 5 PM in Kasi, the next district north. Luckily, houses



"Ban Yao was not even on the map before disaster struck."

there were not destroyed but rice paddies were buried under silt more extensively than at Ban Yao. A sort of truck stop for those hauling cargo to Luang Prabang, people tend to pass through Kasi rather than linger. But linger Phetsavang and Jim did, the district governor hosting a dinner in their honor at 7. Because of a power failure the table was lit by candles stuck in the tops of Nescafe ice coffee cans. As toasts were made, rice whiskey passed the lips of 14 guests. Outside, coming south from a mountainous passage, battered buses stopped. Boys ran from the restaurant with buckets of water, pitching them at overheated wheels and brakes, the steam rising higher than the nearby rooftops.

An American bearing gifts is still an American, and there was some tension around the table. The moment being so light in the dark, Jim asked the governor if he had any relatives in the US. Considering that pockets of dislike for Americans remain, it was a daring question. With a smile, the governor admitted to having next-of-kin in Colorado. His admission brought smiles of acceptance from everybody and all semblance of formality

"An American bearing gifts is still an American, and there was some tension around the table."





Above: Jim Michener (tallest) and Ban Yao village officials listen as Lao PDR party official reads certificate of appreciation and acceptance of rice from TLCB.

melted instantly away. Jim observed that the Secret War had become the Secret Peace. Everybody laughed, and somebody decreed, waving another bottle of rice whiskey, that all would drink a toast to the Secret Peace.

All in all, it was a very Lao day, one that proved that “brotherhood,” by any definition, is alive and well in Laos.



Send Us Hobos! “Sandies” In Vietnam

Many of us worked on, or with, or flew, the wonderful Skyraider, so we thought Brothers might appreciate this story, from an account by new member Bruce Hoon, a pal of Bill and Gay Tilton’s from 35 years ago in Georgia.

Bruce lives in Crestview, near Fort Walton Beach. He went to renew his acquaintance recently with Ken Beard, the mayor of nearby Destin. Ken once flew A-1Es in Vietnam, with the callsign “Hobo.” While they were chatting, Ken told Bruce about having dinner with an Army Ranger recently, and stumbling on a remarkable coincidence. As he and the Ranger reminisced about the war, the Ranger related to him an action one dark night in August of 1966 when some Hobos came to his rescue. He asserted that if they hadn’t been there he probably would not be sitting in Destin, Florida, having dinner in 2001. Ken was astounded, because the Ranger described an action in which *he* had been the Hobo lead and Bruce Hoon was the FAC!

As it happens, after the action Bruce recommended the Hobos for decorations, and Ken still had the document, which he showed to the Ranger. (A DFC was awarded.)

As told by Bruce, the action started around noon on August 2nd, 1966, when a Ranger patrol (of the 2nd Battalion, 35th Infan-

...if they hadn’t been there he probably would not be sitting in Destin, Florida, having dinner in 2001.

try, 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division) encountered the perimeter of the base camp of an estimated battalion of the North Vietnamese Army. They immediately came under heavy attack. With the help of three airstrikes that afternoon they managed to deter the enemy while attaining a more favorable location to defend themselves. By midnight their perimeter was still holding, but the weather was getting worse and the enemy was not letting up in their attack. The patrol was going to be overrun.

Bruce was a Forward Air Controller in the 21st TASS, sent on scene to try and get some help to the Army Rangers. Captains Ken Beard and Peter Hegseth, of the 1st Air Commando Squadron, scrambled as Hobo 01 flight, early on August 3rd, to see if anything could be done to save the beleaguered patrol.

There was plenty of trouble, besides a determined enemy. When Ken took off, his landing gear remained hung—it would not budge! The situation was further complicated by an erratic and unreliable airspeed indicator. But with troops under attack, Ken and Peter pressed on, keeping silent about lead’s aircraft problems.

When they arrived in the target area more problems confronted the Hobos. As Bruce put it in his recommendation to the 1st ACS commander: “The weather was unsuitable for tactical fighter operations due to a heavy overcast, layered clouds below and a fast moving fog bank about to engulf the target. It was further complicated by the darkness of the night and the confusing light of illumination flares being dropped approximately four miles north over another unit.”

At this point the Hobos got help from the ground. Using a simple GI flashlight to signal, the patrol commander (Ken’s recent dinner guest) indicated their position beneath the clouds! Also, a long-burning ground illumination flare had earlier been dropped in the vicinity of the enemy fire. Anyone who has flown night actions can picture the confusing lights, the weird and spooky shadows in and around the clouds, and disorientation caused by the lack of visual cues that pilots rely on near the ground.

To get the air attack started, Bruce marked the enemy area, and the ground flare helped the Hobos to see the mark. Immediate and heavy enemy fire did the rest! Bruce said it looked like a “Chinese New year.” As soon as they opened up, Ken knew where to strike, and they went into the guns with three napalm passes, blanketing the source of the ground fire.

Now Ken had no weapons left except his 20mm cannon, and the fire was diminished but not stopped by any means. Further strikes were going to be necessary, but now Ken’s landing gear problem came out. In this configuration he was unable to de-

See **HOB0**, next page

press those guns far enough to fire on the target. The solution he and Peter worked out was brave—and effective. Ken made dry passes to draw enemy fire, with Peter observing where the muzzle flashes appeared. Then Peter made his “twenty mike mike” passes on the remaining guns. Each defenseless pass Ken made, with his gear dragging and guns useless, was agonizingly slow. But with each of these makeshift attacks the opposition grew weaker. Finally the Ranger patrol leader confirmed that all enemy action had ceased!

The Ranger patrol had taken heavy casualties, and the fog bank had by now blanketed their position. Thanks to the Hobo’s action, they would be able to hunker down where they were for the rest of the night, in relative safety. This was fortunate because by now the fog had made further air attack impossible.

Over the next two days U.S. Army patrols combed the area. They found 145 NVA bodies, where they probably would have found an annihilated Ranger patrol if it had not been for Bruce and those A-IEs.

As Bruce told the 1st ACS commander, the Army appreciation for this action was best illustrated by the fact that units calling for close air support no longer merely requested airstrikes. They called for the FACs to “send Hobos!”



MEM Interviews

Mike Conboy

MEM: We understand you were in charge of Air Force hiring of Thai workers for two years. When was that?

Mike: August of 1967 until August of ’69.

MEM: How many employees did you hire in that time?

Mike: It rounds off to 18,500.

MEM: Wow! Obviously you didn’t do that all by yourself. Did they give you a staff of personnel specialists?

Mike: No, I had to hire them. I had a staff of 186 Thai doing the recruiting, taking applications, making placements, scheduling training, and handling problems. All my employees were Thai except for one TCN, or “third country national.” He happened to be from India.

MEM: We understand the jobs paid well; you must have been overwhelmed with applications.

Mike: You have to understand the importance of economic and cultural differences, and I’m sad to say that our military leaders had little appreciation for either. I know they had their war-fighting jobs to do, and perhaps most of them didn’t see social sensitivities in the host nation as being a high priority. That may have been part of the reason we did not end up with a positive outcome.

At any rate, the first problem we had involved compensation. Most Thai applicants had grown up in a purely barter and subsistence economy. To them, our wage of 15 cents per hour was a breathtaking opportunity to become wealthy. I still shake my head at the suggestion one Air

Force officer attempted to force through, that would have required us to pay these employees the current US minimum wage. That was a lot less than it is now, but would have done great harm to the Thai economy and who knows what it would have done to the social structure?

MEM: I suppose that was a general who suggested the raise?

Mike: No, it was a lieutenant colonel [spoken with an evil grin].

MEM: With money like that there must have been many moral temptations.

Mike: It depends on whose moral code you are referring to. We were constantly dealing with allegations of kickback. That is, people kept saying that Thai applicants were buying jobs, and each time there was a specific accusation we had to investigate it.

MEM: And were they.

Mike: Of course. That was not considered immoral in Thailand. It was considered normal business, and it happened all the time.

MEM: Why didn’t you just accept it and move on.

Mike: Get serious! We were Americans and had no intention of bending our rules to fit someone else’s views of life. But in fact I *did* try it. One of my tasks was to write the regulations for civilian employment in Thailand. I tried to write them to fit the culture, which seemed the right thing to do. So I wrote a provision for applicants to pay a certain nominal sum to get the job. This was just too much for our embassy, though, and it got removed during their approval review. Of course the practice went on, but was never acknowledged.

MEM: That sounds fairly innocuous, but probably some worse abuses grew out of the presence of so much money.

Mike: Oh yes, many things happened. Direct compensation wasn’t the only trouble-maker. Knowing that few, if any, military members spoke Thai, the workers’ ability to at least understand some English was so important that the Air Force offered a bonus to applicants who could demonstrate some ability. This led to formation of a network of professional “appliers” who spoke English. Once they got hired, and paid their bonus, somehow they always had to substitute a “relative” while they went off on important business, from which they never returned—until the next job application.

MEM: I suppose it worked out all right, so long as the supervisors spoke English.

Mike: Not really; I’m sorry to say, all the supervisors were required to be Americans, which led to some very distorted relationships. Because the pay was so generous by Thai standards, highly educated citizens were attracted, including professionals. So we had houseboys who were professors, working for airmen who had just barely graduated from high school and had no idea who they were supervising. But the employees had subtle ways of keeping up their spirits under these circumstances. For instance, if a supervisor made some unreasonable demand or acted officiously, the Thai might reply “Yes, suh!” If pronounced properly, that

Continued next page

word means “stupid” in Thai language.

MEM: You were a civilian over there. Did you have your family along?

Mike: Oh yes, Barbara and our four kids and a 1966 Buick were all there, along with our Pekingese. We rented a place in a new part of Bangkok, where they were meeting the American demand for housing in a very haphazard fashion. The road out there was more or less a widened cowpath, or I guess you would say a water buffalo path. Barbara had to learn to deal with the local economy pretty quick, because my job was 80% travel.

MEM: I’ll bet she did! Where did you travel, Mike, and how did you get around?

Mike: I directly supported the six main USAF bases plus Don Muang. That would be Takhli, Udorn, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon, Korat, and U’Tapao. Most of the time I rode the C-130 “Klong Hopper.” Sometimes I tried other hops, but that didn’t always turn out too well.

MEM: Being away so much must have caused you some problems.

Mike: Yes, it was hard for Barbara particularly at first, while she and the kids lived in a Bangkok hotel for three months while we waited to get a house. But on the other hand it was not so bad around the house because we hired a staff. This was not so much because Barbara needed the help, nor because it was so inexpensive. Primarily it would have been an insult if we had not hired a staff.

The biggest problem it caused me was when they moved us while I was away. I arrived home to find the house wasn’t there anymore! The local government had

decided to widen our road to help Bangkok meet the American demand for housing, but nobody could reach me to let me know. Barbara didn’t know where to phone even if the phone system had been reliable enough to use, which it seldom was. They had moved her and torn down the house to make room for a real street.

MEM: Well did you ever take the family on your trips?

Mike: Not legally. Barbara was permitted to travel outside of Thailand as a tourist, but within the country she and the kids were supposed to stay within Bangkok’s city limits. One time we took our huge Electra and tried a little surreptitious trip in the country. Unfortunately the road we

picked narrowed down to a path smaller than our street, until we could go no further. Local villagers who had never actually seen

any car before crowded around, and I was worried about getting into real trouble about this adventure. Fortunately we got back to Bangkok without coming to the attention of the authorities.

Of course much worse things happened. I think it was in 1968 that a huge lumber yard across the Mekong near Nong Khai burned up. In the ashes they found vast quantities of aircraft parts—even complete engines. As they investigated the black market system they even discovered a tunnel under the Mekong between Thailand and Laos.

Mr. Conboy lives in Silver Spring, Maryland. He is now an employee of the International Broadcast Bureau, a U.S. Government agency in Washington.



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(dues payment: See page 12)

Vichit Mingrachata and Post 10249

Many members will notice the shifting emphasis of our Assistance efforts to Laos and to our very active work near Nakhon Phanom through John Middlewood. What has become of the activity centered in Udorn? What about Thare?

Tommy Thompson was quartermaster of VFW Post 10249, AFTN Memorial Post prior to suffering a massive and nearly fatal stroke. Tommy had become a legend in Northeast Thailand as he helped needy people, particularly children, and aggressively recruited new members for VFW. Tommy's long-time Thai helper, Vichit Mingrachata, known sometimes as Khun Whisit, has carried on Tommy's Assistance work, which he had been helping with for many years.

Aided by former Post Commander Forrest Williams and former Adjutant John Oles, Vichit has found many projects where our help has made a wonderful and sometimes desperately needed contribution in various schools near Udorn. Last year Vichit continued a tradition by appearing once again as Santa Claus at Thare Orphanage—a treasured role we assume he will play again this year.

We are particularly grateful for the critical help afforded Vichit's efforts by Dale Wages, who was elected Post 10249 Commander this past July 1st, after having served for a long time as Post Service Officer. Not only has Dale helped enormously with our English/Thai communication challenge, but he has accompanied Vichit on a number of visits and Assistance trips.

Examples of the TLCB/VFW team activities include a delivery, in May, of 20 sets of school uniforms to very poor children at Ban Yang Low. It is socially and academically vital to these poor children to be able to have at least one complete school uniform, which often is the best and most cared-for clothing in the family. In June Vichit and Dale, and others in Post 10249, delivered 150 pairs of rubber shoes to Nonghai Boy's Home students.

Independently, on behalf of the rest of the Assistance Committee (and all the rest of us), Vichit has delivered a quantity of milk, rice, and other needed items in special cases he has discovered and reported to the committee.

A new initiative Vichit and Dale were working on as this went to the MEM editor, is at a new school in Ban Non Sawan, 53 miles from Udorn. The wife of new Post Adjutant Bert Marvohl attended this school 40 years ago. This ambitious project will cost TLCB nearly one thousand dollars, and will provide a typewriter, five bookshelves, ten fans, forty chair and table sets, and some bicycles and balls. All items will be purchased at negotiated prices that are truly bargains. As at the schools John Middlewood is helping, these items will directly improve the lives and the education of these very needy children.

We look forward to continued success of the TLCB/VFW cooperation, led by Vichit and Dale.



Then and now: Bob Harris (the cigar) and customers



In 1966, left, as seen in our last issue, Bob Harris shows a customer some merchandise in his newly-opened Military Clothing Sales Store at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base.

Right: This September, at Fort Walton Beach, Gerry Gaida looks at a pair of boots he bought at NKP from Bob Harris in 1966! Gerry wore them to the banquet, but he said they are too tight now. Bob's "cigar" was produced by Gerry on the spot, when Bob revealed that he no longer smokes them. He didn't smoke this one either.



Dave Cloud Memorial Quilt Won By Stranger— Or Was It?

The TLC Sisterhood made up another of their superb reunion quilts this year, and decided to dedicate it to the memory of our Brother, David Cloud, who passed away just over a year ago (November 18, 2000) while waiting for a suitable lung transplant.

This lovely quilt was raffled off, as readers of MEM well know! Ticket sales were brisk: \$1228 from the mail and \$418 at the reunion was donated to TLCB Assistance through this loving effort.

At the reunion we learned that the largest single block of tickets—by far—was purchased by Dave's widow, Jane Cloud, who reportedly told one Sister, "I just *must* win that quilt!" This news spread among board members and those who attended at Fort Walton Beach. Many were heard to say they really hoped to win the quilt so they could make sure Jane got it. John Sweet, who usually officiates at fund-raising

Continued next page

activities like raffle drawings and memorabilia auctions, raised the question of what to do if someone who was unaware of the situation were to be the winner, since many tickets are sold to complete strangers. The plan was to have John ask that person if they actually wanted to win the quilt or if they bought the tickets as a contribution. If the answer was favorable, he was then to explain the meaning to Jane Cloud and offer to mail the quilt in the winner's name to her. It seemed like a reasonable approach, but it didn't work.

The winning ticket was drawn at the banquet on September 29th, from a box at the head table. We all looked around in puzzlement when John Sweet read the winners' names: Dave and Cyndi Pressler. Nobody knew who they were! A cell phone was produced at one table and the number was called. John got on the phone when Dave Pressler answered, over in Belton, Texas.

The conversation was fairly short, and it certainly must have seemed strange to Dave Pressler, who made it perfectly clear to John that they did indeed want the quilt itself and had no interest in donating it, or even in selling it, as John tried suggesting, to "some woman who was willing to buy it if they didn't care to keep it." And so Rosie Wheatley and her helpers prepared to invoke Plan B: a replica in miniature for Jane.

But a replica was not needed after all. It turns out the Presslers are old and dear friends of Dave and Jane Cloud, as explained in touching detail in a long message forwarded to the Sisterhood net by Jane on November 1st. Since 1979 Dave Cloud had been important in their lives! And now the quilt is home with Jane, where it was meant to be from the first!

Said Cyndi: "My husband David...answered the phone. He came back to tell me he just had the strangest phone call. As soon as he mentioned 'won the quilt' I was wide awake, my mouth dropping open and in shock! ...now David Cloud is once again touching our lives and sending us his love as he always did during his stay on Earth." Cyndi had recently lost her own father and says she knows he is safe, but "I wait for one of those days when my Dad's presence was very strong. And, then—when the news came in about the quilt, the first thing I heard was: 'your Dad is just fine and I'm sending you a gift since we didn't get to see each other before I left.' I don't know what you believe but I know that without a shadow of a doubt, God's hand is present and I am overjoyed that two people I love very much were able to be with me again."

Cyndi then explained her intention to wrap her husband and herself in the quilt to "feel Dave's love once more," then send it directly "home where it belongs...to that same woman Mr. Sweet spoke of...our dear friend and sister—Jane... The receiving of this quilt has been as fresh spring water in a desert...and to David Cloud: welcome to Texas!"

Dave and Cyndi Pressler's email is: cyndi@eibiz.net. Their address is 1113 Lindsey Cr., Belton, TX 76513.



Don't Miss the Next Issue:
March, 2002.
Submit change of address ASAP.

How Assistance Works in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia

Here in our comfortable USA we drop a check in the mail and have faith at least a small part of it will help somebody, sometime. At the other end things are very literal and very specific. For example, John Middlewood explains the reality of providing locally available goods in Thailand. He says if the schools buy the items, "a little gets added at each level, and by the time the items get to the schools, they have cost the school 3 or 4 times the actual purchase price." For example a school will pay 700 or 800 baht for a soccer ball (about \$20). John can purchase the same ball for just 175 baht! In Assistance we always try and make our funds provide the most benefit possible—to the *kids*, not the merchants!

John says winter is very cold this year (in Laos as well as Thailand, says Jim Michener, from Vientiane). Many Thai youngsters are taking their school naps on cold concrete floors. So John is preparing a list of mats and used coats to purchase for them.

John has written us about some of the kids we have helped. As many know, John Middlewood is a teacher, and so he likes to use Assistance as an academic tool of encouragement and guidance whenever he can. Among over a dozen students who came in to NKP from their villages every Saturday for extra English tutoring, John tells us about Panida, Siniluk, and Jintana, all 6th graders at Ban Naralchakai School, which is about 6 miles from NKP city. These kids are 11 or 12 years old.

Panida's father is a day laborer and her mother contributes by making purses. They earn just enough to feed their family of 5, so food TLCB gave to Panida let her parents spend a little spare money to pay some bills. Panida wants to go to college

See **Middlewood**, next page

Clockwise, from upper right: John with Samart, Siniluk, Panida, Apichai, and Jintana.



so she can become a teacher there in one of the little villages, which means she must win a rare scholarship. We know she is serious: she works so hard she is top in her class.

Siniluk's mother died and her father moved away, remarried, and will have nothing to do with her. She now lives with her poor grandparents and two cousins. The whole family shared and greatly appreciated a food package from TLCB. Like Panida, Siniluk is striving hard to win a scholarship so she can become a teacher.

Another hard worker is Jintana, who coordinates the Saturday English tutoring program. Her dearest dream is to become a doctor, but Jintana knows that is probably impossible and has scaled back to hopes of becoming a nurse in the village health program. Her family (7, including parents and grandparents) is supported by the meager earnings of her father and grandfather, and now an older brother who had to drop out of school. As rice farmers these men only work 4-5 months per year, for the most part. Jintana believes that somehow her mother will find the money for her to get the training required to be a nurse. TLCB has, in a small way, removed some of the financial impediment from Jintana's dream. In a large way our encouragement is driving her on.

A much younger student, Apichai is just 8, and is in 3rd grade. He doesn't mention his father, but says he lives with his mother and grandmother, along with a younger brother, an aunt, and a cousin. If he had not received our clothing he would have to wear discarded clothing to school. He hopes to work in a bank, but his grades are not competitive for college scholarship.

Samart is a TLCB success story in the making! Without our help, Samart would have had to return to his village (Nong Sai, 50 miles from Sakhonakorn) like his rice-farmer brother and unemployed sister, without completing school. Samart came to NKP after grade 9 to attend high school under a special program for low-income students, at the Community Agricultural College. But Samart's support from his family was running out, and without our help he would have dropped out of high school one semester short of graduation. Thanks to the \$25 per month scholarship we are providing him, Samart can afford the food and school fees and supplies he needs. In 2002 he will be the first in his family to graduate from high school! Samart's future plan—and his dearest dream—is to continue his education at the Community Agricultural College and to help his family improve their status with the agricultural science and management he could learn there.

About a year ago Dan Decker, now working on his own Ph.D. in Texas, suggested we Brothers could leave an enduring legacy through some sort of scholarship program. Maybe it is time for someone to take a new look at Dan's idea.



The TLC Sisterhood

by Linda Norway

The TLC Sisterhood was formed shortly after the 1999 Call to the Wall reunion in Washington, DC. Annell Decker thought that the TLC wives and significant others would benefit by having a way to get to know each other and keep in touch throughout the year. She recruited Donna Bartholomew and I to talk to other ladies at the reunion about creating an informal mail list of our own and we began collecting e-mail addresses. So, in Sept. '99, we began collecting new friends as well.

We are all from diverse backgrounds. Some of us were 'career' military wives, while others had no connection with the military. Some of us only knew that our hubbies were members of a group of old military buddies, but knew little about it or SEA. Others are active in military and veteran causes. Our one initial bond is our guys and their service in SEA. Now, we have bonded as friends as well.

As we added new members, we began to discuss the rapidly approaching 2000 reunion in Colorado Springs and what we could do to more fully participate as a group. Rosie Wheatley suggested a quilt raffle to raise money for the children at Thare, an orphanage in Thailand long supported by the TLC. The signature quilt was a great success and the quilt raffle has become an annual tradition. Naming the winner of the quilt is the event that closes our annual reunion banquet.

As the year progresses to our next meeting at the Wall, we'll be discussing ideas for fund raising. Several of our ladies are quite accomplished at needlework and crafts and have donated their creations for the annual auction. Plans for next year's

Guys, we'd love to have your ladies join us. For more information or to sign up, please e-mail me at diamondg@cfl.rr.com or send a blank email to: tlcsisterhood-subscribe@yahoo.com

quilt were in the works before we even left Fort Walton Beach in September and we hope to make next year even bigger and better for the kids at Thare.

Over the last two years, we've shared a small part of our lives with each other, and when we get to the reunions, we greet each other like old friends. To paraphrase the words of one of our sisters, Phyllis Hughes, "The bonding between us grew as we supported each other's needs. We've shared more than just funny chit-chat. We have laughed and cried together. This [quilt] project joins us at the hip and brings us even closer to our men because it is for a cause they, too, believe in."



Left: Sound lab in a school in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. The sign on the front (left photo) says "Donated by TLCB." This project has provided an important improvement to the education system of the region.

The Lao Baci Ceremony (Pha Khouane)

by Kham P. Manivāñh

Baci is an all-purpose traditional ceremony for almost every celebration from birth to the end of life, new born, new year, wedding, going away, home coming, recovering from illness, wounds or surgery.

The Baci ceremony is performed by a person who knows the chanting and mostly acts as a Brahman. The chanting varies with the meaning of the event. The main preparation is the “Pha Khouane” or “Pha Baci” (Pha, the plate that holds the cone) which is a cone shaped like a stupa (temple), and usually made of banana leaves. It starts as a quite large, sharp cone that is followed down by many smaller

Right: typical Baci Ceremony

cones, then decorated by colorful flowers. White strings, long enough to wrap around the wrist and tie a knot, hang on pieces of mostly bamboo sticks (barbeque skewer-like), blended in between the flowers, below the cone which holds raw rice grains and fruits and others edible goodies, in particular the boiled chicken. The Brahman holds the long string at one end, passes over the Pha Khouane, and leads the other end of the string to the main recipient of the Baci. If for a wedding, the Pha Khouane should be in pairs (also the chickens), which represents both the bride and the groom.

The wedding “Pha Khouane” come in pairs and are quite large, as shown in the photo. The groom was Lt. Mark Inthirath, Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) T-28 pilot’s son, and the bride was the daughter of my friend, Lt. Sithamma Homsavad, H-34D



RLAF pilot, who escaped from the re-education camp with me (but that’s another story).

The Brahman starts the ceremony at a propitious time, which he determines the ancient way (I wonder how they do that). Starting with invitation to Buddha, Guardian Angels and Good Spirits (ancestors, relatives etc.), the chanting begins similarly but becomes different at some point according to what event is being celebrated. As it becomes close to the end of the chant-

“I think if that bullet, instead of the shrapnel, had struck me, I would not write this today.”

ing, the Brahman will say “Ma yeu khouane euy”(which means, call back the morale, the spirit, the wealth and the health of the recipient) and every body will repeat that phrase.

The Brahman then will tie the wrist of the most respected elder, along with the pair of candles and flowers, plus his official fee (whatever is appropriate to his reputation and performance, and what the recipient can afford; there is no specific amount). Then the Brahman will tie the wrist of the recipient followed by the seniors of the family and friends. During the wrist tying the recipient will receive goodies like money, boiled eggs, candy, fruit, and maybe a shot of liquor (could be “Lau Lao,” home brew local liquor, or expensive import whisky). At the wedding some elder celebrity might peel a boiled egg and split it. Accompanied by sticky rice he or she gives it to the bride with the left hand and the right to the groom, which I believe represents the unity of the newlyweds.

After most people tie the wrists of the recipient, it is customary for whoever has the idea to make some good wishes among relatives, friends, and guests. Most of the words that are said during the wrist tying are wishing the person good luck, good



Above: wedding Baci ceremony

see BACI, next page

BACI, from previous page

health, prosperity, longevity, advancement in their job, promotion, and whatever that person might wish to have come true. If the Baci were a farewell for foreign study, it would include wishes for a safe trip and to bring back civilization and modern life to help develop the country.

The ceremonies mostly last about two hours, usually starting around 10:00 am and ending at noon, or from 4:00 pm and ending at 6:00 pm. Then the Brahman will conclude and close the ceremony, the "Pha Khouane" is placed in some undisturbed place or in the newlywed's room in the case of a wedding. All of the participants then are invited for lunch or dinner, might be followed by a dance, depending on the event and the host's planning. Late arrivals might ask for the strings to be tied to their wrists and offer their wishes, but also expect penalties of shots of liquor or whisky from host and friends. Most of the elderly like to leave after lunch or dinner and let the young, and those who still *think* young, have their fun.

At the typical "Pha Khouane," in the picture, my sister led the families' request for pardon and forgiveness from wrongdoing, intentionally and unintentionally.

One Baci was particularly significant for me. At the end of 1968 I was hit by 14.5 mm AAA at Phou Phathi (LS-85). I was on medical leave for 2 weeks, and I went back to flying duty on the 13th day without a recheck or approval from medic. When I landed I was confronted by the wing and base commanders, asking who authorized me back on flying status. I replied that I already proved with one mission that I can bomb and strafe the hell out of those bad guys who tried to kill me, without any difficulty or less efficiency. They shook their heads and walk

away (smiling.)

The following weekend was my Baci for recuperating from the gunshot wounds on my left chin below the ear lobe and my neck. The bullet came through the front canopy (missed the propeller), cut my helmet chin strap and my parachute rip cord, then went through the one inch thick armor plate and cracked the rear canopy, making a hole I could easily stick my helmet through. I think if that bullet, instead of the shrapnel, had struck me, I would not write this today.

The Baci was held at my (Army colonel) uncle's house to accommodate all the guests: 13 of the Royal Lao Army and RLA general, a large number of seniors officers, and other high ranking civilians and dignitaries. VP (General Vang Pao) came down from 20-A and spent two hours, then went back to the front lines with the words: "See you tomorrow, son."

For me that was a big event that no wedding could compare to. I was really proud that so many did really care for me. I gained a lot of recognition and reputation from that, since I was the first one who survived injuries in the T-28 fighter plane. So far I was the only "Lucky son of a Gun." Many of my friends didn't have such luck.

All-in-all, Baci is an all purpose tradition and an all occasion traditional celebration for Lao people. Thailand has a similar custom, especially in the Northeast, known as Isan. I believe that some of the TLCB members received a farewell Baci ceremony before their States-bound trip; especially those who served at 20-A (Long Tieng). I witnessed and participated in some of the Continental Air Services and Ravens' Baci hosted by VP.



Return to SEA 2002

By Les Strouse

A group of retirees living in Thailand is in the process of organizing a reunion type get together for any and all of those who were stationed and/or worked in South East Asia, as well as families and guests. We are expecting participants from Air America, CASI, USAID, SKY, IVS, TLCB, ACA, American Legion CP1, and other veterans of this area. It is pretty much an open house.

The dates are the 27th, 28th and 29th of September 2002. This time frame was chosen to take advantage of off-season hotel and transportation rates. This reunion will be a three-day event with a banquet featuring an international buffet as the only organized event. Our purpose is to get those who would like to return to SEA to do it on an organized basis and at the same time make it possible to meet and mingle with new and old friends who have a common interest. It is expected that a large contingent of our former Thai colleagues will also be in attendance.

The venue will be in Bangkok at the Ambassador Hotel on Sukhumvit Road. The Ambassador is a good three star hotel that is centrally located and has a full list of amenities. Current

rates are from US\$25, which will be good three weeks before and after the reunion. A SkyTrain station is within easy walking distance (Yes, after 25 years we now have an elevated, light rail system!). Shopping and dining are within easy walking distance.

We are planning on having a registration desk in the hotel lobby, a hospitality suite and country store as well as an in-house travel agent to handle any side trips that attendees may desire. Trips to Udorn, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, the Plaine des Jarres, and Saigon are being organized. Attempts are being made to make a deal with a major airline to get special discounted airfares but this still remains to be seen. The latest Internet "best deal" was via NWA from the West Coast to Bangkok for US\$499.

For information on tours, check this URL: <http://www.thaitourism.com/sea2002/index.html>

We need some input from the group so that we can get an idea of how many people we can expect and have a better position for negotiations.

Please drop an email to Les Strouse at les@loxinfo.co.th letting us know:

1. if you are definitely planning to be there,
 2. giving it serious consideration;
 3. just thinking about it,
- as well as how many people would be in your party, and any other tour interests.



American Experiences With Baci and Pi

by Gerry Frazier

Baci involves tying strings around the wrists of those soon to depart in order to retain good spirits and repel bad ones. As the strings are tied, good wishes are spoken for the traveler. When our son Tom was born (in Udorn) we were surprised a few days after he and Sue came home, when a local priest/shaman/spiritualist walked into our apartment and began with little more than a greeting to perform a ceremony over the baby. There was chanting and magical (or so they looked) gestures. At one point in the ceremony, the priest (for lack of a better term, although he was not a Buddhist

priest—he was wearing a red checkered loincloth—not a saffron robe), pulled out two small lengths of sewing thread; one white, one red. Using only the thumb and forefinger of one hand, he wrapped the two threads loosely together, forming a slender candy-cane red and white spiral, then—still with two fingers—tied the two threads in a square knot around the baby’s wrist. He ceremoniously blew on the string and on the head of the baby, presumably to blow away bad spirits. After five minutes or so, he concluded his business and departed with no more formality than when he had arrived.

I assumed this was a normal sort of thing for newborns in Thailand, and asked Sue why she hadn’t told me this was going to happen. It turned out she was as surprised as I was, but we could both tell it was a special event, with no obvious bad implications. It turned out the housegirl who watched over the apartments where we were living had arranged this on her own. She was very fond of Tom and it was her way of helping him get a good start in life. We left the red and white ‘baci thread’ around his arm for nearly a week, and we may still have it in a little box somewhere.

Some of the American advisors who the Lao really really appreciated would receive a departure ‘baci’ that might result in their wearing a collection of strings as thick as heavy rope on one or both wrists, after everybody who wished to had said their good words and added a string. It was another graceful, and moving gesture to us by people we can never forget.

I knew a T-28 instructor back in 1971-72 who laughed when he watched the Lao select certain newly delivered/rehabbed T-28s at Udorn to take north. They walked along the row of parked aircraft, looked over each one and selected five from the group of eight. The three remaining were to be used for instruction at Udorn. When asked why they didn’t simply take the first five, one of the Lao officers said the other aircraft had bad *pi*. Naturally, the Americans were amused.

A few weeks later, my friend took one of those aircraft out for a local familiarization ride west of Udorn at the old training range (name long forgotten). He experienced a ‘runaway’ engine which over-revved severely, failed to respond to any

controls. He said he was flying the airplane nose high, hanging it on the prop to try to minimize the RPM, but that didn’t work. His engine was taking itself apart in midair, but he was trying to control the situation, out of concern for his passenger, a young airman, who he was unaware had already bailed out.

His wing man said it was time for him to go too.

These T-28s were among a small number equipped with the Yankee Extraction System, an emergency egress system that was similar in concept to an ejection seat except that it was supposed to launch a rocket to

remove the canopy and pull the pilot out of the cockpit, rather than pushing from beneath. The Yankee fired, but failed to remove the canopy, so my buddy was pulled through the broken canopy glass. Clear of the aircraft, his chute pulled out of its container, but streamered. He described climbing up the risers in free fall and untangling the line that was wrapped around the canopy. At the last possible instant, the chute inflated, he got through about half a swing, and hit the ground.

He lived through it, and he never again laughed about the *pi* in the airplanes.



On Tuesday, 21 NOV 2000 Mekong Jim (Michener) sent this note to TLCB internet network: “Laos held a baci ceremony today for its second ATR-72.” (The ATR-72 is an airliner).

Mountain village in Vang Vieng District, Laos, in 1982.

Photos by Jim Michener





Poster featuring the original cover for Jimmie Butler's *A Certain Brotherhood*, with signatures of many who attended the 2001 reunion at Fort Walton Beach.

Photo of Ban Loboy water crossing in 1966 that appeared in MEM in the September issue. (Prints from the original negatives, at 11x14 inches, are available from the Brotherhood BX.)

Decor at Gilhooley's Saloon

Left: TLCB Brother Ron Brown has decorated his Morehead City, North Carolina, club with a large amount of fascinating memorabilia. Here are two items of special interest to our members.

2003 Dues and Tax Information

After January 1st, Remit \$25 to: TLCB, c/o Tilton; 7813 New London Drive, Springfield, VA 22153.

Your MEM mailing label shows the year you are current through. If it reads "2001" you owe dues for 2002. After March 31st unpaid dues are delinquent and membership become "inactive."

If you wish to include extra funds be sure to designate the purpose, whether for Assistance or forward dues.

TAX info: in addition to Assistance donations, \$20 (80%) of 2001 dues are tax-deductible as donations to a tax-exempt organization.

From the President

This is the first issue of Mekong Express Mail since the United States was attacked on September 11th. As many others have noted, our world has changed and will never again be as it was on the 10th of September. We who are old enough to remember World War II understand what this means. And if you think about it, when we first went to Southeast Asia to serve in that unique war, our personal worlds also changed forever.

The reunion at Fort Walton Beach has shown us that somehow they can just keep on getting better! Ed Miller started lobbying the board two years ago with a very persuasive color presentation. Ed and a long list of helpers made sure nobody was disappointed. At almost the last minute the terrorist attacks threatened to disrupt the whole thing. Air travel became very challenging, and the greatly increased security at the military installations made much of the planned program impossible. But the FWB crew was very resourceful and the program showed no evidence of disruption. Of course, even if we had been left with no program at all, this record crowd of Brothers and Sisters would have had a wonderful time visiting with each other!

I am pleased to welcome new board members, elected at the annual meeting. John Sweet is back on the board, as vice president (which makes him permanent reunion chairman as well). Ed Miller takes over as secretary, and his at-large seat was filled by Jimmie Butler, an addition that was long overdue! Lonnie McIntosh, who was appointed the non-voting position of "chaplain to the board," was elected chaplain, and Jim Bartholomew was reelected as a member at-large.

Members considering joining the many folks who will attend the bash at Bangkok next September: the governor of Nakhon Phanom is considering some sort of a reunion there for people who served at NKP, probably in cooperation with the guys in Bangkok. Watch for details.

~~~~~Bill Tilton

## Reunion 2003— Where?

With plans firming up for the TLCB's return to The WALL in Washington, D.C. in July 2002, we need to get a great site set for initial planning for 2003. The board's reunion policy is to rotate our annual gatherings in three-year cycles to include Washington, D.C., a Western US site, and an Eastern US site. Thus, we *should* be out West in 2003.

How about Las Vegas, Reno, San Antonio, or Phoenix? Those are some locations mentioned, and other great possibilities are out west. However, to set up a TLCB Reunion, we need

### The next reunion—

will be in Washington, D.C., on July 12, 13, and 14, at the Manassas Holiday Inn, in Virginia. The local committee is working up a terrific program, and we have locked in room rates that are truly affordable. If you want to call the hotel to reserve a room, be sure and identify yourself as a member of TLCB. Watch the March issue of MEM for full details!

some local brothers/sisters willing to take the lead. We need a couple of TLCB members on-scene to coordinate with the hotel, arrange for any activities away from the hotel, identify some

local presenters for the Saturday evening banquet and Sunday's Memorial Service, and have an address to accept reunion merchandise and items donated for the auction for the Assistance Fund.

Items to consider: Large hotel facilities, nearby installations that may have had some connection to the War in Southeast Asia, readily available airline service at economical rates, and restaurants within walking distance of the hotel. A good cadre of local TLCB troops is important. However, we now have lots of experience within the Brotherhood, and some items such as merchandise design and sales and the reunion logo are handled through the board.

So who's out there who would like to suggest a western location and agree to take the lead? Contact me at [jsweet@thepipeline.net](mailto:jsweet@thepipeline.net) with any questions you have, or to propose a site. Thanks for your participation!

Regards To All,  
John Sweet, TLC Brotherhood Vice President  
Reunion Committee Chairman