

MEKONG EXPRESS MAIL



The newsletter of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood, Inc.

Volume 24, issue 1

Assistance in Thailand Returns

by Bill Tilton

Many members who have attended TLCB reunions have met Monty Dubs, a close friend since childhood of George and Ruth Ann Shenberger. While Monty does not have a military background, in 2009 George got him interested in travel to Thailand and Laos with members of the TLC Brotherhood. Since then he became a member and has taken more trips with TLCB groups led by Mac Thompson up into Laos to visit our various school projects and has become a strong supporter of our Assistance Fund programs.

Potjanee

In 2013, on one of his trips to Asia, Monty, a widower, met his sweet wife, Potjanee (pronounced “**poh**-tanee”). Potjanee was then a multi-lingual hotel manager in Bangkok, having a BA in hotel management and a two-year degree in political science. She grew up in a small village, Chiang Sean, in the far north part of Thailand, northeast of Chiang Mai. Today they have both a new house on Monty’s family farmland just outside Hanover, Pennsylvania, and also a house in Lamphum,

about 20 miles southwest of Chiang Mai, Thailand. They were married in 2015. In October, 2021, Potjanee also joined as a TLCB member.

Finding a Project

The Dubses were unable to visit Thailand for several years because of Covid restrictions, but when they finally did get back to their Asia home they went to work looking for a worthy project for TLCB Assistance. First they talked to a cousin of Potjanee’s who belongs to a Thai charity group that helps needy schoolchildren in nearby villages. Her cousin introduced them to a teacher, Miss Bangon Tiwan, whom she has known for over ten years. Miss Bangon has been doing charity work since graduating from college, over eighteen years ago, organizing

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The start of the first new Assistance project in Thailand in quite a few years. Potjanee and Monty Dubs next to Principal Suwit of Ban Nam Phiang Din School. This plot will be the site of a new bathroom. Photos provided by Principal Suwit to Monty Dubs.

Editor's Notebook

As many of you have probably heard, my wife Eileen has been disabled following complications from back surgery and has been restricted to a walker and a wheelchair for more than two and a half years. Her recovery was further slowed due to a fall that resulted in broken bones in both legs. Consequently, also due to some work conflicts when I was still working, it has been nearly seven years since I have attended a Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood Reunion. Eileen is making progress and while she will likely still be wheelchair bound, there is some chance we will make it to St. Paul this September.

For a good part of these last two years, my care-giver responsibilities have limited the time and attention I could give to the editor's job, and I seriously considered resigning; however, the Tiltons, Thelma and Bill, stepped it up and maintained the *MEM*'s schedule and editorial quality. In fact probably improved it.

Where I'm going with this editorial meander, is that I'm devoting a good amount of time once again to our quarterly newsletter and I want to remind all of you that your ideas and your stories are what make the *MEM* the valuable TLCB asset that it is. Send me your tales, whether from back in the day or your current activities. I am particularly interested in the profiles of new members, so newbies, don't be shy. And I am going to get aggressive myself about coming after you, and you know who you are!

John Harrington
Editor, *MEM*
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TLC Brotherhood, Inc. **Official Notice**

Nominations for 2023 Board of Directors Election

The nominations period for election of officers and board members-at-large, will be open from **April 1 through May 15, 2023.**

Positions up for election are:

Vice President
Secretary
Two Members-at-Large.

Submit nominations to anyone on the Nominating Committee:

Mike Vale; **mevale762@gmail.com**
Randy Jenness; **kay.jenness@gmail.com**
Bob Wheatley; **R_wheatley@Frontier.com**

Changed your address? ...eMail?

If so, please let us know so that we can update the official database and ensure that *MEM* issues and official mail get addressed properly. You can send an email to:

Treasurer@TLC-Brotherhood.com, or write to:
TLC Brotherhood
PO Box 60
Aspers, PA 17304. INCLUDE MEMBER #!

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Reunion 2023: St. Paul, Minnesota

Keeping the Lid on the Secret War—AC Journal —Well Almost

by Mike Burton

I expected something odd when I landed at Nakhon Phanom on that March Day in 1967, but I had no idea how unusual my assignment would be for the next 18 months.

The story about how I ended up assigned to the 56th Air Commando Wing goes back some time before my arrival at NKP. A few years before, an error was made on my O1 form, the record of one's USAF activities that each officer had completed when first entering the service. The mistake was that the airman who was filling out the form with me struck an "x" in the French box of "languages spoken." Having gone to school in California I do speak a little Spanish, but not French. This was in 1962 before the Air Force computerized the records, and I did not notice this error, so went off feeling happy that I was now official.

From there I went through a maze of training programs, including a term at Boston University for international relations, one at Hurlburt AFB for an intelligence course on SE Asia, and the Escape and Evasion course. The next thing I knew, I was on my way to Saigon with orders to a

"secret" base at some undisclosed location. At Tan Son Nhut I was sent off to a special guarded building where I finally found out my destination. "Oh yeah," remarked an NCO, "you're going to NKP in Thailand." When I asked what was there, his reply was that he didn't know, "It was all black-ops or something very secret."

I was put on a C-130 shuttle and arrived at NKP in the late afternoon. Stepping off the plane, I thought I had entered a time-warp into WWII. The runway was composed of pierced steel planking (PSP) and all the aircraft were prop jobs. There



Monty's Ice Cream Parlor, overhanging the Mekong River in the town of Nakhon Phanom had the worst ice cream in Thailand, but the coldest beer.

were some A-26s, A-1s, C-123s, and T-28s, and there was a Jeep with a 30-cal. machine gun mounted on the back.

I was greeted on the flightline by Captain William Turk whose first words to me were, "Thank God you are here, I can go home." Turned out he was on extension since my arrival had been delayed, which was something I did not know. He said that we should drop off my bags at a "hootch" and then go get a drink at the O Club. We did just that and I was thankful

for the idea of a drink after the 8-hour milk run on the C-130.

The O Club turned out to be a teak wood structure with a canvas top. Over semi-warm beer, Turk told me that he wasn't sure why I was selected for the slot, but that I would report directly to the wing commander and "do anything he tells you." He added that I would act as a liaison with some of the "local" forces. I was about to ask him who they were when a radio

he was carrying beeped. He answered the call, said "Shit,"

and then turned to me and said, "We gotta go." He ran out to his Jeep with me in tow and we headed toward the flightline. He informed me, as we drove, that a C-47 had crashed on take-off.

Once there, an Air Security cop told us that apparently a crew chief on the C-47 got drunk, went crazy, and told everyone that he was going to fly home. The crew chief probably knew more about a C-47 than most, so he could start up the plane, but he forgot to remove the gustlocks for the control surfaces, and after a few feet in the air, rolled and crashed. I asked the Air Security NCO nearby what happened to the crew chief, and he just pointed his flashlight a few feet in front of me lighting up a body-bag saying that he was in there. Welcome to NKP.

Early the next morning I found my way to Wing HQ and timidly went in looking for anyone who could tell me what I was up to. The only person in the building turned out to be my new boss, Colonel Harry Aderholt, who stood leaning on his desk examining some papers. I saluted and stated my name, and he looked up and said, "Oh yeah you're the guy that speaks French." I muttered something about not speaking French and he replied, "Doesn't matter, the people you will be working with don't speak French, or for that matter, Laotian." This remark puzzled me, but I would soon find out what it meant.

Aderholt told me to find a desk and that I should attend a staff meeting at 1000 hrs. In that meeting, Aderholt introduced me as the wing's new "Junior Woodchuck." I was certainly junior; I was 26, a new captain, and the men around the table had Korean War and even WWII experience. Sitting around that table were the men who flew T-28s, A-26s, C-124s, A-1s, and O-1/02s. During that meeting I found out that the mission was to support General Vang Pao and stop the materials, men,



56th Air Commando Wing shield
--later 56th Special Operations Wing

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and munitions coming down a trail along the Mekong.

After the meeting Aderholt told me to come into his office. He told me that the mission of the 56th was highly classified, and in fact, we all had to sign a 25-year oath that we would not let anyone know where or what we were doing! My job he said, was to make sure that nothing about the base, or particularly where the missions were flown, got out to the public. He then hopped up and sat on his desk, saying to me, "These pilots risk their lives every day and the crews work their asses off for little more than the sweat they get out there in the sun. Here's what you are going to do," he went on, "you are going to get them as much recognition for their work in spite of the assholes at 7th Air Force."

I am pretty sure I responded with "Yes Sir!" but had to ask why was the 56th, what I called, "Blacked out?" By this time everyone knew we were in a general war in Vietnam, so why the secrecy? Aderholt smiled, shook his head a bit and said, "That isn't Vietnam; that's Laos just across the river. You better get a map and figure out where you are!"

I slunk back to my office and did just that; I found a map and saw that Laos was a slice of land between Thailand and Vietnam, and that NKP was at the northern edge of the Mekong, just across the river from Laos. I had seen Laos marked on the regional maps during my intel classes at Hurlburt, but it didn't sink in where that was, and why did that make the 56th and its mission so secret?

In 1962, the United States signed the Geneva Accords which guaranteed the neutrality of Laos. The Accords were also signed by South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Thailand, China, the Soviet Union, France, India, Burma, Cambodia, Canada, Poland, and the UK. Before the ink was dry, the North Vietnamese were violating the treaty by moving men and munitions through Laos along what would become known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The interdiction bombing of Laos had begun two years before; by the time I reached my post in early 1967, the US was pouring the equivalent of a B-52 planeload of bombs every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, and did so for the next eight years. This was a total of over two million tons of ordnance during 580,000 sorties in that period.

Colonel Aderholt felt that I should experience what the pilots



North American AT-28, fighter version of the Korean War vintage Air Force trainer aircraft, used extensively by the Air Commandos and the Royal Lao Air Force, and also for counter-insurgency in South Vietnam and other countries. (The bright spot is reflected from the camera flash.) The first fighter in the North Vietnamese Air Force was an AT-28 flown there by a Thai defector in 1963, who was promptly imprisoned for his effort, according to Wikipedia. All Graphics furnished by the author.

and crews were going through and arranged for me to sit back seat on several T-28 missions and on A-1E Sky Raider cover flights. These were hairy, especially when I realized that the guys on the ground were trying to kill us.

The Base Brochure and The Reporter

One of the first things we had to do was publish a base brochure. The contents were mundane with things about Thailand and the hours of the clubs and shops on base, nothing about the mission. I decided, however, that we should put photos of all the 56th aircraft on the cover; we didn't say anything about their missions, just a photo of the aircraft. When a copy got to 7/13th, I got a call, saying to stop publication and to destroy any existing copies. When the word got out about that, the brochures became collector's items.

My efforts to keep the mission secret were tested one day when I got a call from 7/13th AF HQ, Udorn, telling me that the Thai



Cover of the "collectible" brochure for NKP in 1967.

government had approved the visit of an American reporter to visit the base. The reporter was a stringer, or freelance writer, whose articles had appeared in "Newsweek" and the "New York Times." Fortunately for me he was arriving by Jeep having been driven up from Udorn. I was forewarned about his arrival so managed to meet him at a perimeter gate, out of sight of the flightline. His name was Howard Sochurek and this was not the last time I would have dealings with Mr. Sochurek.

He told me that the Thai government mentioned a civic action group at NKP and that he was interested in seeing what they were doing. This was a relief to me since the activities of the civic action teams were all off base. I drove Sochurek down to the Mekong River landing where the 606th ACW's Civic Action section maintained two boats. These boats circulated up and down the Mekong providing medical care for villages on both sides of the river. Major Phil Choate, MD, oversaw the unit. Dr. Choate was in his office, a lean-to at the foot of the pier; the boats were out on mission. Sochurek was a photojournalist and wanted pictures of some action, and Choate accommodated him by driving out to a local Thai village where patients were being treated.

Satisfied with his photos, Sochurek said that he had to get back to his driver so he could make it back to Udorn before dark. Greatly relieved, I rushed him back and skirted

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Major (Dr.) Phil Choate, who was in charge of the wing's civic action operations, including three medical boats that worked both sides of the Mekong

around the perimeter of the base to his waiting Jeep. As he was about to get out of my Jeep, a helicopter rose from behind the perimeter, hesitated, and flew off. The photojournalist snapped a quick picture. "What is that?" he asked. It was, indeed, one of those "black ops" choppers that belonged to the CIA. Without thinking through the implications, I told him that it was one of our rescue choppers and that its sister ship had recently been shot down and was painted black in mourning. That seemed

to satisfy him, and he drove off in his Jeep.

This did not satisfy the head-shed folks at 7/13th AF. In fact, all hell broke loose when a quote by me showed up in an AP release written by Sochurek. I got a phone call from a colonel ordering me to report in person to explain myself. I told Colonel Aderholt about the call, and he immediately got someone on the line (to this day I do not know who) and laid out that "no weenie" colonel from HQ could order one of his men to report unless that order was through him. Aderholt, who was about to leave his command, added "What was the captain supposed to do under the circumstance for a 'F- up' by HQ in the first place!" I never heard again from 7/13th AF regarding this matter.

A Word About Harry Aderholt

I felt privileged to serve under Colonel Aderholt. I learned a great deal from him, and he always cared for his men. He got sideways with General William "Hank" Momyer, commander



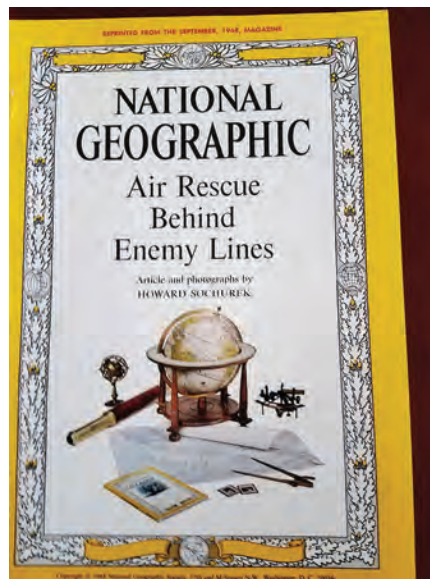
Retired Brigadier General Harry Aderholt, former TLCB member, left, with retired Air America pilot and illustrious TLCB member and MEM contributor Lester Strouse, of Bangkok, as depicted in the June, 2011 MEM article about Aderholt.

of 7th AF in Saigon. The two clashed on tactics and style. Aderholt asked me to review his end-of-tour report to 7th. I was merely asked to check for grammar and syntax, but it was clear to me that Aderholt was punching 7th in the nose for not paying enough attention to interdiction against trucks in certain areas.

I understand that when Aderholt reported to Momyer to present the report, the three-star general sat with his back to him and remained that way, said nothing, and so Aderholt filled the silence by leaving after a respectful time. Aderholt was eventually promoted to Brigadier General, but only after Momyer retired.

Col McCoskrie and The Reporter— Again

Colonel Aderholt was replaced by Colonel Roland McCoskrie, who had been the USAF Attaché in Bangkok and was very familiar with the operations of the 56th. He too was frustrated by the constraints placed on wing operations by both 7th AF and the embassy in the capitol of Laos, Vientiane.



Cover of the 1968 National Geographic magazine referred to in the article.

A week after McCoskrie arrived, I got another heads-up from 7th AF that my old friend Sochurek was coming back to NKP. This time he was with National Geographic and was coming to embed with the Air Rescue squadron to cover a story about rescue missions, saying he learned about such operations from "an officer on the base." I was tasked with "accommodating" the team from

National Geographic (NG) for assistance and to ensure that Laos was not identified in any of their materials. The NG writers and photographers were embedded with the HH-3 rescue helicopter "Jollys" and other rescue aircraft crews for about a week. On flights, they would ask where they were as we flew over forest and jungle. My response was always "Somewhere north of the DMZ." I said this so often that the film crew began to kid me about it, but when the article appeared in the September, 1968 edition, Laos was not mentioned anywhere in the story.

By March, I had managed to sort through enough background information to understand why Thailand, and especially the mission of the 56th, was so critical to the US war effort in Vietnam. In Washington DC, a ballet of diplomatic point-counterpoint dating back ten years, had been playing on the stage of the US, fear of the domino effect if any country in SE Asia should fall to communism.

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Mike Burton's photo of the centerfold illustration in a 1968 issue of the National Geographic Society magazine, showing an artist's impression of an air rescue mission in "Southeast Asia." Thanks to Mike's efforts and subterfuge, the article somehow never mentioned Laos! In this depiction, A-1H "Sandy" Skyraiders provide air cover while "Jolly Green" rescue helicopters risk heavy enemy fire to rescue airmen who had been shot down by Communist forces. A pair of Forward Air Controllers (FACs) observe the action from Cessna O-2s, at the top, with a Skyraider between them. The karst formations clearly depict the area of the Ho Chi Minh Trail...in Laos.

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Ambassador "Field Marshall" Sullivan
and Lima Site 85

I was in Vientiane on a couple of occasions, mostly to carry charts that my bosses were using to brief the US Ambassador, who at that time was William Sullivan. Sullivan was referred to as "Field Marshall" Sullivan as he called the final shots as to where we could or could not go in Laos to exercise the mission. He was in fact, a career foreign service officer with broad experience in South East Asia, but with little if any tactical military knowledge.

In one meeting, I was clutching a few charts in the back row when an argument broke out between Sullivan and Major Richard Secord who was the primary liaison to the Royal Laotian Air Force. Secord was making the argument to give weapons to the USAF personnel who were holding a particular Lima Site but were unarmed. Sullivan was opposed to arming "civilians," which was how the airmen were officially designated, once again to avoid any direct conflict with the 1962 Accords. Later, Secord muttered that the "Field Marshall" was about to sacrifice troops for the sake of show. He managed to

get a few small arms to the USAF personnel on site. Secord also tried to have the area evacuated as Communist troops approached, but the embassy thought the site should be held as long as possible. Secord was right, the Lima Site was later overrun and most of the techs were killed. [LS85 was a "Skyspot" and DME navigation site on top of a mountain deep inside occupied Laos. Ed.]

General Vang Pao

Colonel McCroskrie was particularly concerned about our relations with the Hmong forces under Major General Vang Pao. Vang Pao was the head of the Special Guerilla Unit (SGU) based at Long Tieng. Built by the CIA, Long Tieng served as a town and airbase operated to support the Royal Lao faction during the civil war in Laos. It was also referred to as Lima Site 98 or Lima Site 20A. This huge base would become the second largest city in Laos, with a population of almost 50,000 at one point. It was also referred to as the "most secret place in the war."

I accompanied Colonel McCoskrie on several trips to Long Tieng as I had with Colonel Aderholt. McCoskrie spoke Lao

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and Vang Pao treated him with a deference he did not have in his meetings with Aderholt; however, in both cases, we were always treated with a BBQ that consisted of one of Vang Pao's cattle roasted over a spit. I never saw the herd, but on each trip a veterinarian was brought along to tend to the health of the cattle. My job on these trips was to check with the SGU troops to see what they may need in the way of food (rice was flown in each day), medical equipment, and other goods we might be able to provide. The operational briefings included Major Secord, someone from the US Embassy in Vientiane, and the on-site CIA coordinator Jerry Daniels**. Daniels was one of those who had been "sheep-dipped," meaning that his identity was hidden, and he operated outside any normal or routine chain of command.

A Liaison With Thai Officials

Thailand had been a reluctant player in the ballet being played out in Southeast Asia. For years, Thailand resisted US intervention in what was becoming an increasing presence of Communist clandestine efforts in Northeast Thailand to destabilize the Thai regime in that area. The Northeast was also considered the "wild frontier" of Thailand, rife with gangs, gamblers, smugglers, and drug addicts. For this and other reasons, the region was a difficult place in which to instill a strong sense of nationalism.



When on base, 56th ACW personnel wore Air Commando uniforms. This is Mike in the middle with Captain (later Brigadier General) Paul Scheidel, top Air Cop at the 56th, and Captain Frank Brown, who was visiting from 7/13th Air Force

Vietnamese who were sending back information about the base to Hanoi. When I asked what they were doing about this, I was told that it was the job of the police to deal with spies.

Some of the most frequent "meetings" between base troops and local Thais were in bars or houses of ill-repute. When I

** For more information about Jerry Daniels see "Hog's Exit" Texas Tech University Press, 2013, ISBN 2013936485

Being the Venereal Disease Control Officer was a front to allow me to have an excuse to meet with the Thai police weekly.

reported this to Colonel Aderholt, he immediately appointed me as the Venereal Disease Control Officer (VDCO) with full authority to work with the Thai police to control suspicious activity with the local "businesses." Being the VDCO was a front to allow me to have an excuse to meet with the Thai police weekly.

The Thai police said that they issued each prostitute a control number. Each was supposed to have a weekly health exam, and if they were infected with something they were sequestered until they were cured. I decided to broadcast the "bad" numbers over the AFRS station so that airmen could at least be warned if they might have encountered VD. After about a month of this, the VD rate came down; not sure the bad ticket announcements had anything to do with this, but Aderholt was pleased.

I later spoke with Captain, later brigadier general, Paul Scheidel, the top cop at NKP, who concluded that everyone in Thailand was corrupt and joked about having availability of funds that might grease the wheels of information. I knew that a safe in the wing commander's office was full of Thai baht, as Aderholt told me, for "emergencies."

With all the leaks and news stories showing up that hinted at the air strike force missions emanating out of Nakhon Phanom, I wondered if our "secret" status would last for long. But the Pentagon continued to deny that any strikes in Laos, even on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, were coming from USAF bases in Thailand.

Bob Hope and The USO

The facade was kept up. Around Christmas, 1968, Bob Hope and his USO troop came to NKP. Colonel McCoskrie appointed me to see that the visit "went smoothly." We were not allowed to make any announcement of Hope's visit until we were certain that he would, in fact, be coming. Security around his trip was tight and so release of information was restricted. This made it difficult on the command staff because while everyone wanted to make sure the maximum number of troops saw the show, setting up a schedule to do so took time. Fortunately, we got confirmation three days before the proposed visit and on that same day I got a call from one of Hope's staff members who wanted to know something about NKP or what we were doing so that he could write this into Hope's opening

Autographed photo of Bob Hope to Mike. Hope brought his USO tour to NKP even though it was "off limits."



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lines. I told the staffer that NKP was a highly classified base, and its mission was also classified. I danced around a few questions he asked and did say that perhaps our location might be worthy of a joke or two.

Hope opened his show by saying that it was “Really nice to be somewhere that doesn’t exist and to see all you fellas that aren’t here.” That brought a roar of laughter. Hope followed with “I understand this place is the worst one in Thailand but the best one in Vietnam,” that also bought down the house!

Visiting Lima Sites

My ground incursions to various Lima sites within Laos were not always successful. At one site, I asked the village elder what he needed, and he replied, “For you to leave.” He added, “This is not our war, it is yours, but you will get us all killed.” He was right; when I returned several weeks later, he had been killed in a most horrible fashion, made an example to the villagers by the Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese.

At another Lima site, the villagers had all moved out because the bombing was so intense. I counted 35 bomb craters within an area of an acre. In addition to the regular bombs, cluster bombs had been dropped. Some of these airborne land mines were not intended to immediately explode, but rather would bore in a few inches to await someone stepping on them to explode. In one village I found two children who had picked up a “bombie” only to have it go off, leaving the children without hands. These were fortunate in that we could provide immediate medical attention. Often the injuries

would occur, and medical attention was so far away that the children died.

Evacuating Laos

In 1975, I was ordered to Bangkok where Brigadier General Aderholt was the attaché, sent there to try to placate the Thai government who felt that the US was abandoning them to the Communists. The real object was to try to pull General Vang Pao and his staff out of Long Tieng by any means possible. Aderholt and others, including Jerry Daniels, the CIA operative stationed at Long Tieng, were trying to round up aircraft to fly the Laotians out. I did little more than add to the general chaos. I had not been in Laos for seven years and had no idea where any aircraft might be.

Eventually, about 3000 of Vang Pao’s top echelon were evacuated, leaving almost 30,000 behind. The last I saw of Jerry Daniels was as he took the last flight up to Long Tieng, screaming about how we had betrayed the rank and file. I understand that he was the last American to leave Long Tieng and was still shouting the same thing. The evacuation of Long Tieng was happening at about the same time

the US was evacuating Saigon. Ironically that effort was thoroughly covered in the world press, while the evacuation of Long Tieng was held under secret wraps.

By 1978, some of the Hmong refugees who had made it by foot across the Mekong to sanctuary in Thailand, were now being resettled in the US. I got a phone call from one of the Thai that I had worked with at NKP. Donald Youngchu was a Thai who spoke Lao and Hmong and had acted as an interpreter on several occasions. He was in the US on a USAID scholarship

when the communists took over in Laos. With him was Bruce Bliatout, a Lao from Vientiane. Bruce Bliatout was about 15 when I met him at Long Tieng. He was acting as an interpreter for Vang Pao. As a “low land” Lao, Bruce was fluent in French, Lao, and Hmong, and spoke several of the Lao dialects of the region.

Vang Pao wanted someone to be his interpreter and arranged to have Bruce flown over from Vientiane every Friday and then back to school on Mondays. Bruce obtained a USAID scholarship and was in the US when the communists took over. He got his medical degree in the US and later he oversaw a county medical service in Oregon.

I found out that hundreds of Hmong refugees would soon be brought to Portland, Oregon, and there was a movement to organize assistance for them. We managed to get some from the county and set up housing and training for the refugees. Imagine being dropped from a war-torn country without being able to speak the



Taken on Mike’s recent trip back to Laos. This man lost his arm while trying to dislodge an unexploded ordinance from his farm.



A team from the Mines Advisory Group. This is an all-female unit that seeks out and disarms ordinances in the field. “Legacies of War” funds this group.

Secret War *continues next page*



A blacksmith making jewelry from old bomb and aircraft parts.

language, and having to try to find a job, education, housing, and food.

Retirement and Setting The Record Straight

I retired from the USAF Reserves in 2001. I had been granted a 30% disability at that time but was told that I should apply for more due to the circumstances I had experienced. It was at this time that I found that three years of my records were “missing.” In fact, they had been sequestered by the CIA, and the VA had no access to them as they were considered classified. I did not work for the CIA, but anyone with the unit of assignment (the 56th) and being “in the field” (Laos) had their records sequestered. It took nearly five years to get those records released. I discovered that both Aderholt and McCoskrie had put me in for awards, but those were not forwarded beyond Pacific AF when the CIA swept up the records.



One of the few photos from the field. Taken in 1967. “We were required to wear civilian clothes to ‘blend in.’ I’m the tall guy. The other American is a CIA operative, whose name I cannot recall, with Lao and Thai interpreters.”

Recently, I was able to return to Laos and even though more than 50 years have passed, the bombs still haunt the small land-locked country, and me. I was able to go to Ban Na Phia, one of the villages I had been in years ago. Now, the local inhabitants make jewelry from old bomb parts. These are sold through a company called Article 22, based in New York.

Metal from bombs and aircraft are brought in by scavengers for melting down. A week before I was in Ban Na Phia, a pair of scavengers found a mortar shell, likely Chinese, that had a copper core. The scavengers, knowing the risk, tried to open the shell to extract the copper. When it went off, one man was blinded and the other suffered hand wounds. While removing the bombs is a priority, I do not think Laos will ever be bomb free, but areas can be made explode-proof enough for the country to make progress.

The sacrifices made by Americans involved in the Secret War were no less noble than those who fought elsewhere in that war. “Legacies of War,” an organization whose board I now chair is an advocacy group that raises awareness about the Secret War and seeks funding to remove the millions of ordinances that remain scattered all over Laos.

The Secret War, Still Somewhat Secret

Many people are unaware of the Secret War, the extensive bombing missions that the USAF flew in Laos. I eagerly watched the Ken Burns PBS film on the war in Vietnam. This ten-part series mentions Laos in an early episode, but then it is as if Laos did not exist. I was lucky enough to come across that chapter in a PBS program from Minnesota. It was financed by the Hmong community in that state but has not had wide play.

I feel the need to educate the American public about the Secret War. All war is terrible, but the sacrifices made by Americans involved in the Secret war were no less noble than those who fought elsewhere in that war. The Secret War was secret for political reasons, reasons that left us with limited options as they were often dictated by individuals far from the battlefield. There were occasions when those dictates were ignored to either allow a critical action to occur or to save an American life. Those actions did not need to be secret; they simply were not noted in anyone’s books. That part of the Secret War is still to be told. The Secret War remains hidden. Even many second-generation Lao are unaware of the war; their parents do not want to discuss the ordeals they suffered from that war, especially those who fought and flew with us.

Currently, there is a bill that has been introduced by Senators Tammy Baldwin (D) and Jerry Moran (R), *Legacies of War Recognition and Unexploded Ordnance Removal Act*, to recognize the contributions of the many communities from Southeast Asia who supported and defended the United States Armed Forces during the war in Vietnam. The legislation also authorizes funding for the removal of landmines and unexploded ordnances (UXO) and victim support programs for those injured by landmines and other legacies of war. If passed, this bill would finally recognize those who were recruited, trained, and fought with the US Forces. It will finally take the lid off the secrecy of that decade; it is the least that we can do.



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Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood

The two members listed below joined between the December 2022 issue of the *MEM* and this printing. You can find more information on our website database.

The *Mekong Express Mail* wishes you both a sincere “Welcome Home.”

No.	Branch	First Name	Last Name	City	State
02019	USAF	Bingham	Willodean	Anderson	SC
02020	USAF	Davis	Doug	Merced	CA

Help Wanted: RECRUITERS!

Dear members of the TLC Brotherhood

As you can readily see by the “list” above....showing just two new members joined in the past three months, our “join rate” has taken a dive. The pool of potential members who could enjoy the mutual benefits of belonging to this wonderful organization is huge! That only about 500 actually belong suggests that we haven’t reached many men and women who should be with us. We hope every member will try to contact

potential or former members. Who are they? Obviously, people who served in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, but also many Vietnam-only vets, dependents of veterans, and even people who are simply interested in the things we do and stand for. As you know, there is no service restriction to membership in the TLC Brotherhood—just confirm their support of our *Four Objectives* that are listed on the application and pay the dues.

Assistance continued from page 1

projects for charitable groups in addition to her teaching. She houses students in her home when she's working at a refugee camp that is situated near the border with Myanmar (Burma).

Miss Bangon's experience has given her knowledge about where the needs are greatest as well as where the best prices for raw materials are obtainable. Learning this, Monty and Potjane asked Miss Bangon where TLCB might be able to help. Her suggestion was for "**Ban Nam Phiang Din School**" located in Mae Hong Son Province. Mae Hong Son is located in the extreme Northwest corner of the country, up against Myanmar, with which it shares a long border. It is situated between a river and a mountain and must be approached by boat from the nearest village.

Ban Nam Phiang Din School, in an area that is rural and poor, has an elementary school enrollment of about 65 and growing. The local population are "Karen" hill tribe people (pronounced "kuh-REN.") Read "The Karen People," on page



Kids at work in their classroom at Ban Nam Phiang Din School.

15. Most of the students are girls in grades one through six, though there are a few students in grades seven, eight, and nine. They have a dormitory for about 30 students from remote areas, and one teacher must stay there every night. Dormitory residents are expected to increase by another 20 this year. Students and teachers share one bathroom and as the dormitory population grew, a need developed for a separate student bathroom. Miss Bangon advised that this school needs many things, but the first priority should be the bathroom.

Readers who remember Mac Thompson's first, experimental project in rural Laos will immediately think of



Monty and Potjane Dubs, front, at a Bangkok restaurant with Tim and wife Ladda Sawers. Tim joined The Brotherhood seven years ago and has been a big help to Mac Thompson in the past and the current Assistance team in Thailand and Laos.

the bathroom funded by the Brotherhood at LS-20A, the once-notorious secret base at Long Tieng. (See MEM article, "Long Tieng Visit, February 2008" in the June, 2008 issue on page 12.). John and Nancy Sweet and I accompanied Mac on the first inspection visit, being very apprehensive about where our funds actually went. Mac had even declared that he would reimburse the Assistance Fund if the money had simply disappeared. Happily, all was well. (Later John and Mac officially inducted me into "China Post 1, in Exile" of the American Legion in a

Assistance continues next page

The village where many of the students live. Note the volleyball court. Some students also live in a dormitory at the school. Other students must reach the school by a river "school bus" (see photo on page 14).





Bathroom construction was mostly self-help by parents and even some of the kids, as shown above and below. Materials were paid for by the TLCB Assistance Fund.



little lunch room opposite the old parking ramp of Long Tieng base. We toasted with a Beer Lao while the cook watched Thai soap operas on a battery-powered TV—power lines were not yet up that far into Laos).

Miss Bangon introduced the Dubs to the school principal, Mr. Suwit, who turned out to be a very dynamic, “hands on,” type of leader. He readily grasped the opportunity for Ban Nam Phiang Din School, and a bathroom design and bill of needed materials were drawn up for presentation to the Assistance Committee. After considering this application last year, the committee approved the project expenditure of approximately \$1215. Exchange rate changes and fund wiring expense increased this amount a little, but basically, we are funding an excellent, stand-alone, durable, sanitary bathroom in



Above, students learn vegetable gardening and provide some of the food for their meals. Below, eggs and perhaps an occasional roaster are provided by this chicken pen on campus.



At left, Principal Suwit and a student landscaping outside the finished bathroom.

Mr. Suwit has sent TLC Brotherhood the following message:
 On behalf of Ban Nam Phiang Din School I would like to express my gratitude to you and your team for supporting the budget for constructing a bathroom for Ban Nam Phiang Din School for the students to use and create happiness for the students. Thank you very much.

Assistance continues on page 12

Assistance continued from page 13

Thailand for less than \$1300! As in our Laos projects, all the work except plumbing is voluntary, but even at that it is hard to imagine a similar project here for under ten thousand!

As you can see in the photos, Mr. Suwit was closely involved in this self-help project, and worked as both a leader and tradesman. At the time we went to press, work was nearly completed. Monty considers the school to be well built and easy to maintain, but they do hope for additional improvements, such as a larger water tank and an extension to their dorm as enrollment increases. They would like to have a library, but this would require an extensive rebuild of the existing structure and may be too ambitious for our program.



Children who don't live in the village use the "water taxi" for transport to and from school. During the rainy season the water is high and the river is swifter and much wider. Below, scouting camp for the local children.

The schoolkids enjoy well-balanced meals.



COMPLETED! Below, Ban Nam Phiang Din School principal and some of the children pose in front of their new bathroom.



The Karen People of Thailand

By Bill Tilton

The Karen (kuh-REN) people are said to be the largest of the seven “hill tribe” groups in Thailand. Their population is estimated to be from four hundred thousand to a million in Thailand, though most Karen live in Myanmar (Burma). There are four major types of Karen; the most famous subgroup of the “Red” Karen is the “Long neck tribe,” well known for the long brass coils worn around their necks. Karen villages are spread throughout the countryside of Northern Thailand and can be found in almost every province. There are also Karen refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border.

The Karen began to inhabit what eventually became Burma (now Myanmar) about two thousand years ago. They traveled from Tibet and China and settled largely in the hills bordering the eastern mountainous region of Myanmar. The main differences between the Hmong and the Karen are seen in their agricultural systems. The Karen practice wet rice and swidden (slash and burn) cultivation, mainly producing rice. The Hmong do not grow wet rice or upland rice, but plant cash crops instead.

With the arrival of the British colonists to Burma, the Karen people hoped to escape oppressive rule under the Burmese. Tensions between the two groups reached a high point during World War II when the Karen sided with the British allies and the Burmese fought with the Japanese.

Burma achieved independence from the British in 1948, but the Karen people were not granted rights to their own land, and the Burmese once again became the dominant ethnic group. During the 1960s, the Burmese army began a campaign against the Karen called “Four Cuts.” Entire Karen communities were forced to relocate and cut off from all resources; the Karen guerrilla movement was destroyed.

In Myanmar, the military regime established in 1962 continues to oppress the Karen and other ethnic groups. It has been reported that Burmese soldiers terrorize Karen villages



Girls operating the village mill in a Karen village in the mountains above Chiang Mai, Thailand. Photos taken by the author in November, 1966.

every dry season by burning their villages, killing or torturing civilians, and raping women and girls.

The Karen people inhabit an area named “The Golden Triangle” by our CIA. This region, centering where the borders of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand meet and including parts of Southern China, became famous as the second greatest producer of raw opium, after Afghanistan, from poppies grown by the hill tribes. Since the 1960s this production has been greatly reduced by aggressive action of the Thai government to replace poppy culture with other valuable crops.

According to the Karen Association of Minnesota, St. Paul is home to one of the largest Karen communities in America. More than 17,000 Karen have resettled in St. Paul since the early 2000s. (As announced in December, the TLC Brotherhood reunion this year will be held in St. Paul, with planned interaction with Hmong refugees there, most of whom came from Laos.)



A family in the village, taken in November 1966. Today this village is set up for tourists, with souvenir stalls and is much more modern.



Karen village, which was very typical. In 1966 water came via an overhead bamboo aquaduct, probably from a stream.

Reunion 2023: *St. Paul, Minnesota!*

September 14-16

Plans are in the works for our exciting St. Paul, Minnesota 2023 Reunion and Annual Meeting to be held on September 14th through 16th, a time when Minnesota temperatures are typically perfect!

St. Paul is the state capital of Minnesota, and our hotel is the only one that's located just off the capitol grounds, in the heart of the city. Nearby are many attractions, including several excellent museums, downtown shopping, and the renowned "Mall of America."

Minneapolis and St. Paul have the largest U.S. concentration of Hmong people, and their community leaders are eager to conduct some reunion activities with us. The Twin Cities have excellent transportation connections and offer many attractions for our members and spouses as well. Not least among these is the post-war settling of Hmong refugees from southeast Asia.

Who are the Hmong People?

In Southeast Asia, there are ancient populations of people who tend to live in the mountains and retain historic cultures of dress, agriculture, and religion that are very traditional and tribal. See the article, on page 15, about the Karen People, who are found in Northwest Thailand, near Chiang Mai. And in Vietnam, similar peoples were referred to by the French as "Montagnards," an umbrella term for the various indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The term means

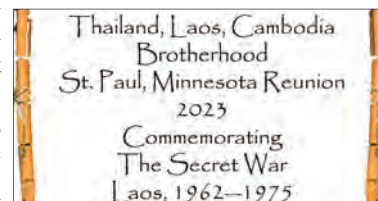


Above, detail from a Hmong tapestry showing air attacks in Laos and the Hmong people fleeing as refugees. Tapestries show people escaping across the Mekong and settlement in new homes, etc. These one-of-a-kind individual memorials are available in Hmong shops in St. Paul, MN, along with many other unusual items.

"mountain dwellers," and refers to any of at least fifteen different language groups in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, as well as from Southern China and Myanmar.

Why Visit the Hmong People?

Laos was officially neutral during the Vietnam war, but even as the neutrality treaty was being ratified, North Vietnam began the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos to South Vietnam, in direct violation. Also, North Vietnamese forces joined with Lao Communist forces (Pathet Lao) in an ongoing civil war in Laos. Mountain-living Hmong vigorously opposed invasion by the communists and formed the "Special Guerilla Unit" (SGU) to resist it. The CIA, Air America, and other U.S. entities joined with the SGU and supported the Royalist faction. The U.S. left Laos when South Vietnam fell in 1975, and we were able to evacuate only a fraction of the Hmong fighters who would be tracked down and persecuted or killed by the victorious Pathet Lao forces. To survive, tens of thousands of Lao people fled the country and temporarily lived in refugee camps in



Thailand, eventually re-settling in the U.S. and other countries in the 1970s. The Lao Hmong are mentioned in Mike Burton's article in this issue on pages 6, 8, and 9.

While many Hmong refugees now live in California and other states, the Twin Cities population of Hmong is the largest concentration, by far in the USA, estimated at 81,000 in 2019. The Hmong population of St. Paul is widely credited with reviving the city, with their industriousness and fresh flair for life. We are eager to meet these people and experience the colorful culture they have brought to Minnesota.

Watch our website, WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com, and the June issue of *Mekong Express Mail* for reunion program details as we plan for this unusual event.

We urge members to make your Radisson Hotel reservations early to ensure that you obtain our special group rate. The hotel has agreed to extend our group room rate up to three days before and three after the Reunion dates of September 14, 15, and 16. Simply call (651) 227-8711 and advise them that you are with the TLC Brotherhood group.



NKP Reunion 2023

The next Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB reunion will be held in **Charleston**, South Carolina on **April 12-16, 2023**

Details and registration at:

<https://www.events.afr-reg.com/eNKP2023>



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