

## Vientiane, 1972 © Chuck Hines 2013

Socially, culturally, and economically, Vientiane was quite unlike any other place in the world. Colonized and supervised by the French while Laos had previously served as a geographic component of French Indochina, most French colonial administrative effort was expended in wresting every franc possible from the Lao economy, then sending the money back home to France. Zero effort was expended in improving the quality of life for the Lao people who grew rice, used slash-and-burn techniques to produce a small plot of ground useful for a single-season crop, and ate fish caught in the river. No industrial production base existed within the nation. With the exception of a U.S.-built secondary school with a separate high school building, dedicated to educating resident children of the U.S. diplomatic community, no other schools or colleges existed anywhere in Laos. Roads and streets were mostly dirt, covered in about a three-inch layer of dust during the dry season. Built on the east shore of the Mekong River, the city was equipped with a buried pipe water distribution system – but the water pressure within their pipes was so low that it required about twelve hours of water flow into residential cisterns to produce sufficient water for a bath or shower. For drinking, water was filtered through large, porous ceramic kitchen containers overnight to exclude contaminants. In 1971 Laos was a net exporter of hydraulic fluid. Laos had no petroleum or chemical industry capable of producing hydraulic fluid. So you know this export originated from U.S. provisions which were already in-country. Early. Still dark. Back behind the aircraft ramp's blast fences Lao maintenance troops carefully dismantled live fifty caliber rounds and created separate component piles of brass, powder and lead which they sold as a means of augmenting their meager incomes.

On initial arrival the first thing one noticed was that almost every affluent citizen in the city was driving a brand-new Mercedes automobile. Our war had flooded a lot of disposable money into Vientiane. Small shops, clustered along sidewalks on tree-lined streets, displayed shelves exclusively stocked with imported luxury goods from Europe. Expensive perfumes, single malt scotch, carefully selected vintage wines, Swiss wristwatches. Kip was the name of the Lao Kingdom's paper currency in circulation. The exchange rate hovered near 800 kip per U.S. dollar. From historic and regretted personal experience, most Lao people retained an enduring distrust of any kind of paper money. Receiving their wages at the end of the week, clerks and shop girls would set aside a small amount of kip they would need to get through the coming week. Then to save the rest they walked over to the Buouterie Vilayphone on Rue Samsethai and converted their remaining kip into thin, 24-karat bangle bracelets. Ladies visibly wore their personal small investments, to preclude future loss in kip depreciation, on both wrists. Their objective was to survive, not to accrue wealth. In 1972 gold sold for \$86 an ounce in Vientiane.

Vilayphone was an unusually competent jeweler, a gold and silver smith who worked out of a small corner shop in the city. He turned out original one-of-a-kind items which were custom designed by each of his customers. Solid, pendant strawberries made of gold. Gold dog tags. And those heavy, solid gold I.D. bracelets worn by many of the Ravens. Took a while to explain what an oak tree seed was, but he made a splendid silver acorn hanging pendant from a silver chain. Have worn it around my neck for forty years and it has kept bad Phi, evil spirits, away.

Laos was inhabited with several varieties of both benevolent and malicious Phi (pronounced “fee”). Water Phi were abundant. Bad Phi which rendered combat aircraft totally unflyable until expurgated by a brief theological ceremony conducted by a Buddhist monk. At night local ladies would never walk beneath a tree. Malicious tree Phi abided above in those arboreal branches and came out after dark. There were nasty Phi who would deliberately steal babies left resting in a blanketed nest on the ground while their mothers gathered firewood close by at the edge of a forest. Ask any Lao about his or her experience with bad Phi and you’d receive in-depth, precise details of their individual encounters with sprites. Phi were an integral consideration of both day and night life throughout Laos. After continuing analysis of their detailed verbal reports of bad Phi activity it became clear that Laotians were actively involved in dealing with several kinds of animate spirits and sprite behavior of the sort we would regard as being much closer to actions of those naughty Katzenjammer Kids than to ferocious demons. Phi existence remained totally real to the people of Laos.

The U.S. provided Laos an extraordinary quantity of bulk bags of concrete sufficient to construct two 10,000-foot standard runways of the sort any pilot would recognize as being a real runway. (Concave and convex, most landing sites out in the Laotian bush initially looked nothing at all like a runway to U.S. pilots.) A significant transportation effort was required to deliver all that concrete because Laos enjoys no access to any ocean or sea. One concrete runway was actually completely constructed and it served the Vientiane airport, Wattay. Instead of building a second runway, the Lao government decided to use the remaining half of their runway concrete to construct a somewhat over-adorned and top-heavy oriental version of an Arc de Triomphe, which it named the Patuxay. We called that monument “the vertical runway.”

This somewhat small city was infested with national and international embassies, legations, consulates, envoys, and representatives from foreign nations’ ministries. The U.S. maintained a resident ambassador including a complete diplomatic staff which was augmented by assigned U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) people. Three flavors of the Lao governmental structure – right, neutralist, and the Pathet Lao communists – maintained diplomatic consulates downtown. An International Control Commission dedicated to establishing a cease fire, which never quite worked out, consisted of shifting representatives from Poland, Canada, Bulgaria, India, Hungary, Indonesia, and Iran. The North Vietnamese manned a resident embassy within the city, as did both the Soviet Union and Communist China. Ravens and foreign nationals from all these countries, some mutually quite unfriendly, mixed on the streets in daily commercial and social life within Vientiane.

Occasionally the resident Soviet air attaché would drop by for a social visit, tea, and conversation with our U.S. air attaché, Colonel Curry. Curiously, no mention of details of the war in progress ever occurred during these Soviet visits. Diplomats are carefully trained specialists in conducting peripheral small talk consisting of trivia which will not offend. This collective, international diplomatic community did manage to establish, and enforce in unified fashion, one common agreement: All parties remained free to engage in continuous, lethal combat on the Plain of Jars and throughout the rest of Laos, but no combat or fighting of any kind would be tolerated within the boundaries of the city of Vientiane. Occasionally somewhat minor, constrained violations did occur. E.g., one morning a civilian Lao lady working in the Morning Market (an extensive agrarian farmer’s market surrounding a single wood building which housed a few small shops selling fabric

and clothing) took personal offense at a uniformed Pathet Lao soldier who was buying a kilo of sticky rice from her. She stabbed a five-inch steel knife into his left kidney area and did the chap in. Although several people within that crowded market had to have personally witnessed the essential physical details of this assault, the offended Lao lady never became identified to the police.

The city's social environment extended well beyond an abundance of all those various international members of the several diplomatic staffs. Air America maintenance people, fixed-wing and helicopter pilots, their wives and families, lived in Vientiane. Within this dominantly Buddhist turf there was a single resident evangelical, fundamentalist missionary from southern Illinois who extended the right hand of fellowship to any passerby who would peaceably stand still for forty seconds. The missionary's manse was a white clapboard building a few meters down below on sloping ground behind the Lucky-Charlie complex, which consisted of two competing taverns. This missionary had a seventeen-year-old red-headed daughter who was employed by the U.S. embassy as a GS-4 clerk. No one serving in Laos used their real name. CIA case officers working with Hmong troops in the field answered to names like Mr. Clean and Mule. The missionary's daughter received no exemption from this no-real-name rule. Her nom-de-guerre was Fred. Fred didn't remain in Laos for very long. She departed and became a student at McKendry College. Funded with a full four-year scholarship by the Board of Foreign Missions.

There was another vigorously enforced social rule throughout Laos, which at first required considerable effort to keep in mind: Never ask anyone "What is it that you do here?" After a few weeks in-country one could tell precisely what they did just by observing the way they dressed. Resident CIA folks consistently wore neckties which looked as though they had been purchased at a garage sale in Iowa.

One did have to be quite careful to avoid giving unintended offense to others in a bar or nightclub. In this region of Asia the bottoms of one's feet are regarded as the filthiest portion of the human body. Pointing your feet at someone, while putting your feet comfortably up on a bench, would and did quickly result in a swift kick from an offended person sitting or standing nearby.

There were Thai troops from mobile brigades. Peace Corps volunteers. Hippies would wander into town searching for the very best-quality marijuana. They seriously disturbed the U.S. ambassador by lining up on the street behind the saffron-robed Buddhist Bonze novitiates for breakfast. Pious ladies stood near the edge of a street curb during early morning hours shortly after daylight erupted. These ladies would sequentially ladle rice, fruit, rolls, and cooked vegetables into the black begging bowls which each Bonze carried with him. This daily gift of prepared food was all that a novitiate would eat for an entire day. From noon time through sunrise the next morning each Bonze was required to fast. A group of itinerant hippies regarded this public donation of free food as a good deal and queued up at the rear behind the last Bonze for several days in a row. Outraged by their theological encroachment, Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley showed up on that curb early one very warm and humid Tuesday morning. Formally dressed, wearing coat and tie, he stood a few meters distant from the pious ladies and verbally delivered his version of the riot act, which terminated with his emphatic assurance that the hippies would all be bodily, physically expelled from Laos if they ever demonstrated such offensive cultural effrontery.

to the national Buddhist religion again on some future occasion. Worked. Hippies did not subsequently disturb the Vientiane Bonze morning curb formation.

All these diverse and competing nationalities, with quite different political perspectives, mixed together physically and socially while shopping in the same shops, buying gold and silver items from Vilayphone. All dined in the same rather good French restaurants, bought rice and watermelons in the same Morning Market, and they drank good-quality single malt scotch in the same bars. Senior U.S. military officers occasionally visited “upcountry” wearing tailored civilian clothing called “walking suits.” We’d take them along early evenings for a visit to one of the finer watering holes in the city named Le Spot, a two-story building with a hotel facility on the lower floor and a nightclub on the second floor. We’d stop for a moment at the entryway to the Spot and pat the Otis elevator – and by way of defining the current state of Lao industrial development tell them “This is the only elevator within the entire nation and it only goes up one floor.” Then we’d ride the elevator up and go into a rather well appointed, dimly illuminated nightclub capable of simultaneously serving about ninety customers. Seated, drink in hand, we’d mention that those chaps sitting at the adjacent table were Russians and those at a more distant table were all NVA. Ravens would occasionally attend an evening public concert consisting of a Shubert piano concerto and several well performed flute duets. Unfriendly nationals from several communist bloc nations were present in the audience on these occasions.

Although every bit of Project 404, the Raven program, was then classified at the Top Secret level, the Ravens remained totally transparent to the local Lao people. They knew each of us by sight and were totally aware of what we did and where we did it during the day. We were under constant surveillance while moving about within the city. One evening I decided to go to Suzie’s bar for a beer. Walked across the dusty road, Nong Bone, in front of the Raven hooch and waited for a taxi. Didn’t wait long. A taxi stopped, I got in the back seat and told him my destination. He had driven about a half block before looking at me in the rear view mirror and asking, “You riv that house?” “Chai. (Yes)” “Oh, you Crow!” For an uneducated Lao taxi driver who perhaps knew less than one hundred words of the English language, confusing a raven with a crow was a surprisingly sophisticated lingual error which revealed the intensity with which Ravens were all being observed. Regulations of that period required that any contact with foreign, enemy nationals be formally reported in written form within twenty-four hours. Our foreign contacts were so ubiquitous and frequent that compliance with the USAF directive would have left FACs with no time to do much of anything beyond writing up these formal reports.

The Raven FACs never had time to become involved in running a string of overt or covert intelligence agents. We were too busy fighting a war from sunrise to sunset. Several communist bloc countries obviously did provide agents. What was very different in Vientiane was the unusual magnitude of amateur covert agent activity conducted by common Lao street people. Citizens none of us had ever seen before would walk up to a Raven on the street and offer verbal or written information. Some of this material turned out to be accurate and occasionally useful. As a reward for their gracious behavior we’d usually pay them the kip equivalent of about one U.S. dollar. Took me a while to figure out what was going on. A female street vender walked up to me on the sidewalk outside a row of shops and offered to sell me a bar of good quality expensive European scented soap. “Merci beaucoup but I don’t need soap at the moment,” and then I walked away from her. Second time, different lady, I bought her soap as an act of charity and later noticed that

a concealed note, concerning NVA activity on the PDJ, had been attached to her bar of soap. I became a born-again soap buyer from street vendors. Good information resulted, and was later validated, concerning what the NVA was up to out on the PDJ.

Pinkeye is an unusually contagious eye infection. A form of conjunctivitis which rapidly infects and spreads across an entire population within a very few days. In one of these penciled notes, passed along with a bar of soap by a street vendor, pinkeye was reported as being epidemic among the NVA troops living on the PDJ. Most NVA troops in the field were already infected with scabies, spending their time itching and scratching. Ravens patiently awaited the first appearance of pinkeye in Vientiane – which would functionally define a linear sequence of physical contacts between the enemy on the PDJ and people residing within the city. Didn't take long. The city's first observable case of pinkeye infected a U.S. Intel officer working in our embassy.

John was a Raven FAC who worked out of Pakse down in the southern region of Laos. He was an unusually young-looking pilot and Air Force Academy graduate who one could easily mistake for being about eighteen years old. John would just show up to get a partial temporary duty (TDY) payment, an immunization, or to do paperwork prior to DEROS. I never had prior knowledge of when John was coming up for a visit in Vientiane. But a local Lao lady, mother to two semi-beautiful daughters which she was dutifully committed to marrying off, always knew when John would arrive in Vientiane. Mom had carefully selected John as her optimal matrimonial target. No other would do. Prior to each of John's visits, Mom always knew precisely what time John would arrive at the Raven hooch. Within minutes of his arrival we'd hear Mom's motorcycle stop down in front of the hooch, then sounds of offloading her two daughters who had ridden side-saddle style on the back end of Mom's machine. They'd come upstairs to the second floor bar area and sit down where we occasionally projected a movie early evenings. Daughters were always stylishly dressed, very polite and courteous, and rarely spoke a single word in any language. Young girls were on static display, passively being marketed by Mom for marriage to an American. What was obvious to the rest of the Ravens remained totally socially opaque to John. No one mentioned it to him. John never tumbled to what was going on, didn't have the slightest recognition that he had been targeted for matrimony. He took zero notice of, and indicated not the slightest personal interest in any of these motorcycle ladies. Mom's failing effort at producing an enduring romance with one of her daughters continued for months.

What fascinated me was how Mom acquired precise knowledge of John's arrival times. Turned out that no overt or covert agents of any nation were involved in her effort. Mom was well connected within the Lao culture's resident networking and gossip structures which existed with or without a war. It was their naturally existing networking capability which made our Top Secret Raven activities totally transparent to the Lao people living in Vientiane.

Buddhist marriage rules in Laos were a little different. An adult male could simultaneously be legally married to as many as four ladies. But having multiple wives invoked a rather expensive additional rule: each wife must be provided with her own house for herself and her children. Everyone in Vientiane knew how many wives Vang Pao had, and where each lived.

Early mornings, about seven A.M., a small herd of about eight adult water buffalo would travel up Nong Bone road, make a ninety-degree turn at the street corner just past the Raven hooch, then

continue to an unknown destination in the direction of the Mekong river where they spent their days. The honcho water buffalo, clearly in charge, led and maintained discipline. No human ever participated or directed their travel. Shortly before sunset the herd would reappear again following the reverse course of their early morning path. They stopped for a few minutes of glorious frolic and immersion in a large pond, drank, ate water lilies, then got back on the road together and continued back down Nong Bone to wherever it was they spent their nights. Subsequent generations of water buffalo likely continue their perpetual routine while you are reading this.