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Letters by Frederic Benson. 1971

Benson, Frederic C.

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14 January 71

Vientiane

Greetings,

Everything continues as normal.

I spent January 3-6 in Thakhek,
and last Saturday up north in
Xeng Khouang. While in Thakhek
I went across the Mekong to
Nakorn Phanom to see Gary Bohl
who is stationed there in the Air
Force. I stayed at the base there
for one night.

18 January

Tomorrow I go to Paksane, Muong
Kassy and Vang Vieng, where I
will spend the night before returning
to Vientiane ~~tomorrow~~^{Wednesday} afternoon.

Aside from trips into the field, not
much has been happening. Christmas
and New Year's was uneventful, and
work in Vientiane has consisted mostly

of Paperwork.

Enclosed is my wage and tax statement for 7/1 through 12/12. ~~The~~ Earnings for the period 1/1 - 6/30 (\$1230) are tax free as IUS is ~~is~~ contracted by the US Govt.

As soon as I get around to it, I will go

to the embassy and get a form for averaging my income during the past 3 years as a way of saving on taxes

by paying tax on the average of the last 3 years income. Total income for last

3 years (\$10,790) ~~still~~ averages out to

\$3,597 per year, the taxable total. This is based on total income of \$1380 (July 1 - Dec 31, 1968),

\$2460 (1969), \$6950 (1970). Figuring

income tax on this basis should result in Substantial Savings (all pay with IUS was tax free, by the way.)

The guy who recently returned ~~to~~ ~~Marengo~~ is Ted Olbuck. He came over here with me. His wife's

(a former IUS secretary) former husband - a soldier - was killed at M. Souei. Address: 22402 Kishwaukee ed Marengo 60152

I checked out silver bowls yesterday and will buy one as soon as I get back to the shop again.



28 January 1971

Vientiane

Greetings —

I just got back from a day at Ban Xon. Today was the monthly rice meeting to determine how much rice has to be dropped to the 150,000 refugees in the area. This afternoon we went to visit a couple of the refugee sites (a few pictures of ~~the~~ Ban Xon and a refugee site are on the next roll of film which I will send).

Last Thursday I went to visit a Meo village on a mountain top overlooking the Mekong about 100 miles west of Ute (also on the next roll of film - the picture with the choppers). Last Tuesday went to Pakse, Muong Kassy and Vang Vieng, where I spent the night before returning to Ute via Ban Xon (about 20 or 30 miles due ~~to~~ east of Vang Vieng).

Sometime next week I intend to go to Pakse for a couple days.

Unable to get the info. you needed to you
in time for your PEO thing as I just got your letter
2 days ago.

I have, on occasion, met this Mr. Maynard
that you referred to, although I don't know
him well.

This "Douglas" ^{who} ~~is~~ you mentioned used to
work with us in B. Thalat. He is in the U.S. on
partial scholarship for 4 years study in Hawaii.

As to date of return, it is too early to say.
The contract that I am presently on is a 1-year
contract - July 1, 70 - July 1, 71. If I can get another contract
beyond my present ^(probable) one, I will consider taking
it. In the event that I do get another contract,
whether or not I would be able to make it back
to the U.S. for a few weeks sometime during the summer
or early fall is questionable, depending upon
several factors - the refugee situation at the time,
home-leave schedule of direct hire employees in the
office, leave without pay or with pay, government
paid transportation expenses or not. Without the
last two, a month in the U.S. would cost \$2000 +
in lost pay and travel costs.

Feb 1, 71

All for now - I may go to B. Hawaii for
this week-end for a couple days. I've put
the Patso trip off for the time being.

P.S. - I sent the address
of the guy in Marengo
about 2 weeks ago.

A roll of film follows - pictures of
BHS ^{with} (Ton Phoung) ~~from~~ 16 Feb 77
Cheng Sen, Thailand; Plus Nguyen (west
of VTC) - the picture with the clapper;
Palane - the refugees; ~~at~~ various areas in Sayaboury
(pictures with airplane), and Xieny Khouang refugees (the last
Greetings - set of pictures) - M. Phun and
Plus He.

I have been quite busy lately.
about a week and a half ago I went
to Ban Houei Sui for a few days.
~~When~~ The purpose of the trip was
to visit various sites in Sayaboury
Province, we went to extreme southern
Sayaboury Province and spent the
night at an outpost west of Khentao
on the Thai border. The next day
north to a couple of places in the
M. Phoung and Hong Sa areas.

Since the enemy offensive started
up north ^(Xieny Khouang) (last week) I am spending
quite a bit of time working up
there keeping track of refugee moves,
numbers of people moving etc. I
will probably be spending 3-4 days
a week up there until things calm down.

I am still acting head of my office.
The place where I took the pictures is
Muong Ngeun. The ~~house~~ house with a hole
in the roof is a wat which was hit by
bags of rice dropped from a plane. The
American in the pict. is the refugee relief
guy in B. Houei Sai. The elephants ~~are~~ ^{belong}
to the people in the valley (Muong Ngeun and
Hong Sa (to the west - have more elephants than
any other place in Laos) are picking up rice
which was distributed. The amount of rice
dropped is based on the number of refugees, etc.
The people who live in the M. Ngeun valley
are Balom, not Sas. The soldiers in the
picture are positioned at the outpost where we
stayed. Mq. Ngeun fell to the enemy last
July for about 2 weeks. The security in the area
is still rather tenuous. The only reason we
stayed there overnight was ~~that~~ that we
were stranded - the chopper didn't come back to
pick us up due to bad weather.

The S. Viet-Namese attack in Sas was in an
area east of Savannakhet, not Pakse. The
attack may well have saved the day in Sas
in that as a result the PL/NVA may not be able
to take ^{back} the area which they controlled at the time of
the 1961 ceasefire, ^(as they had planned) thus putting them in a bad
position in terms of the impending peace talks in Laos.
It will also undoubtedly hurt them badly in Cambodia.

(F-7)

1 March 71
Vientiane

Greetings -

I received 2 letters, the one with income tax forms. I will sign and return this week.

I am presently working on a TDY basis in ^{the} Xieny Khouang area. As the ^{and military} refugee situation there is commanding priority attention in the mission (following NVA advances) I have been dispatched there to monitor and report daily on the status of refugee moves, etc. (there are now 50,000 - 60,000 people moving). I will be working there for at least a couple of months until such time as the situation stabilizes. At that time I will return to my old job. We commute back and forth to Ban Xon daily, a 40 minute flight each way, leaving at 0800 in the morning and ~~returning~~ ^{leaving} about 5:30 in the afternoon.

There are a couple of pictures of Ban Xon on my last roll of slides - it's the place with the big airstrip. About 75% of the 250,000 refugees which we are currently supporting are located in Xien Khouang.

Although I spend most of my time at Ban Xon, I spend time travelling about to the various sites, which are growing fewer since ^{almost} everything east of Muong Kassy & L.P. and north of Sam Theng has gone down the drain.

March 6

Ban Xon was attacked last night, for the first time. Nothing serious, however - the warehouses etc. were damaged ^{only slightly}, and a few people killed (including one N. Viet.). I didn't make it up today as I had work in the office. I'll probably go up tomorrow, however. Operations continue as normal.

John

28 March 71
Vientiane

Greetings,

I am still working up north in
Xueny Khouang every day. Things have
quieted down up there somewhat in the
last week or so. There have been no
further attacks on Ban Xon since the one
against our facilities near the airstrip a
couple of weeks ago, and one against a
nearby outpost. However, the situation
continues to be somewhat tenuous.

I spend most of my time travelling
around to the different sites which we still
control north, west, south and SE of the P.D.J.
I will be sending 3 rolls of pictures.

Working upcountry is much more
interesting than the office, and I'm not
particularly looking forward to returning to the
office, wherever that may be.

all for now —



13 April 1971

Vientiane

Greetings,

I am spending most of my time in Vientiane now, although I still go up to Ban Xon occasionally. Things have more or less calmed down up there for the time being.

Beginning next month I will take over the rice drop program. The person who is presently handling it is leaving, and I will fill in for about 5 months until his replacement shows up. ^{(This includes scheduling} rice drops - about 400 C-46 ^{drops/mo. - based on site - but} site requirements, and making sure ^{the drops} are made. As the person who is temporarily in my ^{job} is leaving in a month, I will have my hands quite full for the next few months. This, plus the fact that 3 other people will be going on home leave this summer, makes it almost impossible for me to make it back to the US this summer. Maybe next fall.

In terms of bargaining, the only bargaining power which I hold (as a contract employee) is the nature of the job I have - most of the other contract employees may be terminated at the end of June.

The status of a contract employee, who is hired for a specified time only, is different from that of a direct hire employee, who is hired for an indefinite period of time. At the present time, in light of the current cutback in AID personnel no new employees (direct hire) are being accepted.

With regards to the silver bowl, etc., as soon as I get around to it I'll buy and send. I've been rather busy lately - I had my first full day off in two months two weeks ago.

Tao New Year celebrations begin tomorrow and last the rest of the week.

19 April

We have been quite busy preparing materials for the Kennedy Subcommittee hearing on Refugees (due to start this week) and for ~~the~~ Rep. McClosky, an idiot who ^{after bump} ~~is~~ here for 2 days ~~and~~ pretends to know everything about refugees and who is presently spouting off about his experiences in Indochina hoping to pick up a few votes. Everything he says is taken from context and turned into broad generalities.

I'm hoping to go to Bangkok in a couple of weeks for a week or so. Whether or not I make it depends on what comes up around here. All for now JFD

12 May 71

Vientiane

Greetings -

I just assumed my new job last week.

In addition to my new job - handling rice drops - I will be doing much of what I did before. Monthly, there are about 500 drops/mo.

On Saturday I am going to Hong Kong for a week - my first trip out of Laos in a year. I am going with another guy in the office. There is a direct flight from Vte. We made the decision to go today.

Tomorrow I'm scheduled to go to several places NW of Vientiane - Muong Met, Ban Done, and a couple of other places. Last week I went to Pakse and Savannakhet for a few days.

It has been confirmed that I will get a new contract when my present contract expires in June. It is possible that it will be a 1-2 year contract. In addition to a raise in salary, I will probably get round-trip transportation to the U.S. Chances are that I will be able to get back to the U.S. for a couple of weeks next fall, Oct or Nov or Dec.

As for another contract, I can't see the purpose of turning down a job worth \$17,000 - \$18,000 / year (furnished house provided, round trip transportation, overtime) in the face of: 1) 6% unemployment rate in US, 2) low savings potential ($\frac{1}{6}$ of what I can save over here in a year), ~~and~~ and 3) a job considerably less interesting than the one I have now. As for graduate school, I ~~can~~ see no reason to go to graduate school for the sake of going to graduate school. Once I finish here I will go to graduate school if I consider it to be in my interests.

to answer your questions: (Admin.)

1) I am no longer acting head of my branch because the new head arrived recently. This does not necessarily mean anything, because the new branch head is not concerned with my ^{work} job, which cannot be categorized as being in one of the 3 branches of ORA or the other. At the present time I am acting chief of the Refugee Relief Branch, and will be so for 6 months. This is rather "meaningless," also - as the activities of this branch beyond rice drop program are not my direct concern. Aside from 2 major jobs which span, theoretically, 2 offices, I am engaged in doing special research projects which is my own program.

2) I sealed my last letter with tape.

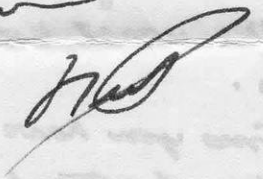
3) Bong Botl is in Intell. and will be in Thailand for another year. I have not seen him since January.

- 4) S. Prescott got married to the Thai girl and has been in the US for 1 1/2 yrs. in the Securities business.
- 5) I see the Taggarts every now and then.
- 6) I will send Mengai's books, but as far as I am concerned Mengai is a fraud and his book is the worst book I have read on Laos by far.
- 7) Most of the items you have requested - jade (imported from H.Kong & extremely expensive), carved plaques, lacquer boxes, silk, wall hangings and temple rubbings - are unavailable in Laos. All of these commodities are made and sold in Thailand, and I haven't been to Bangkok for 1 year. Various items which I have purchased I keep in my house. Other items I will send.
- 8) I have never heard of the person you mentioned as being in Laos. I cannot find his name listed in the personnel list.

As far as McCloskey is concerned, he was in Laos 2 days, not 11, and the generalizations he presents are completely false, being based on specific bits of information ^{from refugees in 1 village} which are hardly applicable to the vast majority of refugees ^{all over Laos}. That the US has brought more violence in Laos than in Nazi Germany is complete nonsense. To listen to these people talks you get the impression that Laos is nothing but a big bomb crater and that every one of the 10,000 +

5
villages in fact and all of the 3 million people
have been bombed out of houses and home. They
never consider all of the villages burned down
by the NVA and the atrocities they have
committed against civilians, many of which
make my list seem petty in comparison.

all for now



7 June 71
Vientiane

Greetings —

Everything is proceeding normally around here. On the military side, the Belovens Plateau, ~~east~~ of Pakse, (place where I took pictures of waterfalls) was lost a couple of weeks ago, but everything else is relatively quiet now that the rainy season has begun.

I got back from Hong Kong, where I spent one week, two weeks ago, after a year in Laos. Hong Kong was a good change of pace. Spent two days in Macau, and would have stayed there longer if I didn't have several things to do in Hong Kong. ~~As~~ soon as I get around to packing them, I will send a set of 3 wall-hangings which I bought in Macau.

Once again I would like to request that my ~~bank~~ checking-account statements be sent to me here. It is presently impossible for me to ^{accurately} calculate the amount of money in my account, even if ~~you send the~~ ^{you send the} total figure ~~as~~ as that total is not current in light of the fact that it may not reflect recently written checks.

also, I need another drivers license
having lost my new one. What
~~steps~~ action is required in order to
get a new one?

Well, as there's not much to report on
around here, all for now -

Paul

12. July 1971

Vientiane

Greetings,

Not much has been happening lately around here. Enemy activity has slackened off, and the RLG forces have gone on the offensive. As is normal, everything slows down with the rains.

I have been spending most of my time in the office these days on the rice drops, which require constant overseeing in terms of requirements, aircraft availability, etc, especially during the rainy season when bad weather hinders operations. However, I will probably go to Suang Prabang this week or next week for a couple of days.

On Saturday I went to Udorn for the day and came back on Sunday.

All for now



8 August 1971
Vientiane

Greetings,

I just got back from Suang Prabang today - I went up yesterday.

The weather here has been quite bad the last couple of months, and the Mekong is higher than it should be. If heavy rains continue we might get a flood. This would result in the ice drop operation moving to Udorn.

Militarily, the situation has improved, RLG troops having taken back Saravane and the Plain of Jars (a portion of which is on next roll of film). An RLG offensive is an annual occurrence during the rainy season.

I just recently signed my new contract, which will run for 1 year.

This week another one of Kennedy's investigating teams will arrive for a 2-month review of the refugee program. I don't know what he's trying to prove.

Unless unforeseen developments occur
I will probably be coming to the U.S.
for a couple of weeks sometime around
mid-October. I will probably
come via Hong Kong, but I might decide
to come via Europe and spend a week
Semprella or other.

All for now—

J. R.

16 August —

Haven't gotten around to mailing this
yet. Today I just got back from
Pakse and Saravane (six on most roll
of film). Saravane was only recently
retaken by RLG after being under
enemy control for the past year. The
weather has not improved, and the
chances are that we are in for a flood in
a couple more days. Then it will be TDY in
Vudorn for the next week or so.

J. R.

7. September 71
Vientiane

Greetings —

On 20 August the water went over the dike and the airport, and subsequently portions of the city (including my house) were submerged. Therefore, the rice-drop operation moved to Udorn, as I had moved ~~everything~~ everything out of my house on the 19th, I went to Udorn on the last plane carrying items necessary to the rice drop operation out of Vientiane.

I have spent most of my time since in Udorn, getting the operation set up, etc. etc. During the peak period following evacuation, we moved 500,000 lbs. of rice/day on up to 12 aircraft/day, (as the weather had been bad all month, drops were way behind schedule).

However, the operation is presently moving quite smoothly and I will be spending more time in Vientiane. The Mekong is gradually receding, and hopefully

The operation will return to Vietnam
(and I to my house) by the end of the
month.

We are presently quite busy with
various groups from Washington, etc.,
investigating the refugee program,
~~and~~ including a couple of Congressmen.

No days off for the past five weeks.

Last week I was up on the P.D.J.,
and sometime this week I will
probably go to Muong Kasy.

If everything goes according to
schedule I will probably leave
here for the U.S. on or about the ^{week of} the 4th
of October. More than likely I will
come straight through across the
Pacific, and will return on
1 November.

all for now,



22 Sept 71
Venture

Greetings -

I will tentatively set my arrival date as October 9 or 10. I believe I will try to leave here on October 5, go to Bangkok for one night and proceed to Hong Kong for a couple of days before flying directly to the U.S. which way I travel - through Alaska or S.F. - depends on connections. I will be in the U.S. until November 1.

Upon returning to Laos I will be transferred from the office to Ban Houei Sai ~~the~~ direct-hire employees have/ will have replaced me in both of the positions which I have held. Ban Houei Sai is the most interesting field post in the country and I would not consider being transferred to any other ^{place in the} field. It will be a good change of pace from the office.

The flood waters have receded and the rice operation has been moved back to Vientiane and I am back in my house.

Nothing much going on around here at present.

all for now. When I arrive in U.S. I will give you a call from point of entry.

Jim

P.S.

3 rolls film sent a couple days ago. Also package containing Chinese wall plaques.

22 Nov 71

B#8

Greetings —

Since arriving back in Laos I have been quite busy, especially since the other guy working up here with me went on vacation several days after I arrived in Houei Sai. I generally get going about 0730, and as I have to close down the airport at night I usually don't get home until 0700 or 0730. During the last couple of weeks I have spent several days and nights in the field. Last week I stayed up at a place near Muong Fong for a couple of days, and tomorrow I will go to a place near Vienty Phu Kha for a day or two. I was also in Suang P. last week for a couple days.

My trip back here was relatively uneventful. I arrived in Vientiane on the 5th and spent the weekend packing my bags before coming up here on the 8th.

I have a house already - I moved in when I came on the 8th - although I don't spend much time there, "Winter" has come and it is beginning to get quite cold at night.

Shortly after returning, Laos developed
monetary problems and the kip was
devalued 20%, and a high tax
will be levied on all imports.

The recent coup in Thailand has not
had any outward effects in Laos, and does
not seem to have had any great effects
in Thailand.

I got Bud his lens and will send it
when I go to Vientiane in another week
or so.

all for now



December 3, 1971

Mr. John W. Greenough
Area Coordinator
Ban Houei Sai

Dear John:

This note has to replace a personal visit for the time being because I cannot get out of Vientiane for some time to come.

The purpose of this note is to let you know that your colleague, Blaine Jensen, has a serious staffing problem, i. e., Galen Beery is out of action due to illness, Pop Buell, his AC, has had to take annual leave and Tom Baranyi will be departing on R&R to the United States in a few more days. On top of all this the Xieng Khouang area still has a vacant position which we are not able to fill until AID/W recruits the man we have asked for from Vietnam and gives him the necessary 6 months of Lao language training.

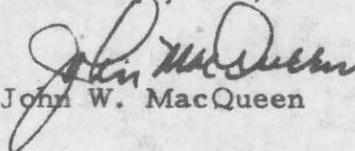
To make a long story short, it is necessary to loan Fritz Benson to the Xieng Khouang area for several weeks. Fritz needs to report to the Xieng Khouang area during the week of 12 December. Fritz is the only knowledgeable and experienced man that we have to plug the existing gap. I will need to discuss Fritz's future, that is to say his possible assignment beyond his TDY in the Xieng Khouang area whenever there is a chance for us to get together.

Upon returning to Laos from home leave one of the items of real good news was your appointment as AC at Ban Houei Sai. I am sure that you and Mary are enjoying that area of Laos.

I hope to be able to see you sometime within the next four weeks; although we do have R&R season again and I can make no firm promises.

With kindest regards to you and Mary,

Sincerely yours,


John W. MacQueen

11 December 71
Vientiane

Greetings —

I am now in Vientiane. Due to a shortage of personnel in Xieng Khouang I was asked to come and fill the gap for a month or two, ^{on Dec 8} after this period of temporary duty is over, I may be sent to Luang Prabang, where there are also personnel problems, to take over the ^{refugee} position. On the other hand, if the situation blows up in Xieng Khouang during the next few months I may end up working there for a while. At the present time we have an extreme shortage of experienced personnel in several key areas.

I have an apartment ^{in Vte} already located in the "center" of town. I will be commuting back and forth to Ban Xon daily, as I was doing ^{scattered} ~~this~~ year.

On Dec. 4 I took the ^{annual written} Foreign Service Officer examination. Only about 2% of the people ~~who~~ ^{who} take the examination pass, so I don't hold any great expectations.

(2)

While I was in Houei Sai I purchased
a bronze drum. One of these days when
I get time I will get a crate made
and send it.

Merry Christmas

Jms