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Letters by Frederic Benson. 1972

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9 January 72
Vientiane

Greetings —

I have been extremely busy since moving down to Vte. about a week after beginning work in Xieng Khouang, the North Vietnamese took the Plain of Jars and began pushing south towards the area of greatest refugee concentration. This resulted in large refugee displacement, and I have been concerned with tracking all of these people down and making sure they get rice, etc. It is expected that the Lao military base at Song Cheng will fall in the next day or two, precipitating the movement of thousands of other people, especially if the NVA continues its push south. It is not unlikely that the enemy will take advantage of the situation as they

5F memo of P
Still have several months of dry season
left and have begun this year's
offensive ahead of time (compared
to other years). Therefore, they have
a chance to regain all of the territory
they had at the time of the
1962 ceasefire.

All for now. Not much else to
report on as most of my time is
spent up north.

JFB

24 January 72
Vientiane

Greetings,

The war is continuing around here at a relatively high degree of intensity. While the situation around Song Cheng was stalemated to a degree, there is a possibility of being outflanked to the west and ~~to~~ to the east. The NVA has cut the Vientiane - Suang Prabang road and may move to the south in an attempt to take Muong Kasay and Nany Veng (20 miles west of Ban Xon), and/or move north along the road toward Suang Prabang. To the east several key positions have been lost and the enemy may move south toward Pakxane. If either of these moves is successful, the fate of Xeing Khouang will be in jeopardy.

Last weeks I was on a special trip to extreme southern Sayaboury Province for a couple of days.

Otherwise, I am still commuting back and forth every day. About 10 days ago an abortive sapper attack was carried out at Bantzen during the night. Chances are there will be another larger one in the near future.

I will probably appear in one form or another on an NBC special on Laos sometime next month (on the 25th or so).

all for now

A stylized handwritten signature, possibly initials, written in dark ink.

21 February 72
Vientiane

Greetings -

As the refugee situation has stabilized to a certain degree in Xieng Khouang area I will be transferred to Luang Prabang this week. The situation continues to be tenuous in many areas of the country, however.

Since the money in my checking account is almost depleted, please put the next 3 or 4 of my checks that you receive into my account.

Enclosed is my income tax withholding statement. This year I would like to average my last 5 years income.

all for now. ~~zz~~



20 March
Vientiane

Greetings -

My transfer to Suang Prabang has been delayed and I am presently working in the office in Vientiane. This week, however, I will be going to Suang Prabang for at least one month.

The past month has been quiet. I have spent virtually all of my time in Vientiane,

almost all of the film that I sent was taken in the Ban Houei Sai area.

The north viets have started recently another push in Xeng Khouang and in the Pakse area.

There's not much else to report at this time. - more after I get to Suang Prabang -



1 May 1972
Luang Prabang

Greetings —

I am now in Luang Prabang on a permanent basis beginning today although I have been here for several weeks. There is one other person up here working with refugees who has been here for one year. This person is quite incompetent, however, and the program here is a mess as a result. Consequently, he will be more of a hindrance than a help in getting things squared away. He has been on leave for the past three weeks.

altogether there are about 40,000 refugees in the Luang Prabang area. For the past several months there have been refugee movements almost every week. Consequently, I have been quite busy. Most of the refugees are in the immediate

Suway Prabang area although a sizeable number are located at sites to the south/southwest. Virtually all of the areas 10 miles north and east are enemy. Last year the N. Vietnamese got to the outskirts of the city, most of the refugees which we are currently supporting in the immediate area were generated last year. This year, there is no immediate threat to L.P. even though we have lost a number of positions in the vicinity of Pak Ou (just to the north of L.P. along the Mekong).

I will soon send you pictures. Included are pictures of a distribution of various commodities to new refugees ^{at Kiocham} south of Suway Prabang, and of an airlift of a group of Meo refugees to the Ben Xon area.

I am living in a house on the Mekong River (several sunset pictures which I took a couple of years ago were taken from my house). The house I have in Vientiane I will move out of in the near future.

All for now

[Signature]



U.S. AID MISSION
TO LAOS

EMBASSY
OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

VIENTIANE, LAOS

12 MAY 1972

Mr. Frederick C. Benson
USAID/ORR
Vientiane

Dear Fred:

While I am obviously most moved and most proud to have received the attached letter from President Nixon, in which he expresses his "admiration and appreciation" for the work of the AID mission in the narcotics control program, I am also keenly aware of the phrase "your colleagues", and of the fact that without your help, this accolade could not have been earned.

The best way I can think of to show my appreciation for your excellent support to the U. S. Mission effort in narcotics control is to forward to you with this letter a facsimile of the President's note, with my acknowledgement that it is addressed as much to you as it is to me, as each of us played our part in making the program a success.

It is therefore almost superfluous for me to add my personal and official thanks to you for your good work, but I shall nevertheless make bold to do so.

I have directed that a copy of this letter and its attachment be placed in your personnel file.

With best wishes for continued progress and success,

Sincerely yours,

Charles A. Mann
Director

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

April 25, 1972

Dear Mr. Mann:

This note is just to express my admiration and appreciation for all that you and your colleagues with our AID Mission in Laos have done to make the Administration's international narcotics control program a success. Without such skill and perseverance on your part, the very real progress made thus far in Laos would not have been possible. Every American who shares our deep concern about the menace of drug abuse has reason to be grateful for your splendid efforts.

With my best wishes,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richard Nixon".

Honorable Charles A. Mann
Director
AID Mission
Vientiane, Laos

11 June 72
Luang Prabang

Greetings —

Not much of significance has been happening around here recently. Most of my time has been spent reorganizing the refugee program, as a result of mismanagement on the part of the other guy working here, there is a certain amount of paving off to do on the program's one million plus dollar budget.

I am gradually making progress in doing so. This is being done in addition to covering the area between here and Muong Kassy, west to the Mekong. I also cover Sayaboury Province (the ~~western~~ eastern half east of Hong Sa and south to Paklay along the Mekong).

at the end of the month I will sign another contract which

includes about a \$2000 raise,
transportation ^(I did not get reimbursed for last trip) back to the US
and a round trip ticket to Hong
Kong (or to another point of equal
distance).

I think it's getting to be about
time diversify investments -
stop putting money into the
mutual fund ~~and~~ and move
into something else. any
suggestions?

All for now.



26 July 1972

Luang Prabang

Greetings -

Below are the answers to your questions:

4) Direct Hire = Still no prospect in sight.
However, no problem as I don't intend
to make career out of AID and
bargaining position for contractor better
than annual ^{salary} increase with AID, so
far have averaged \$2,000 per year raise -
if on direct hire, could manage \$1,000 at
best.

Not much has been happening lately
aside from the routine. The other individual
who I work with in Luang Prabang continues
to bungle everything he touches to the degree
that it's impossible to keep up with him.
He is scheduled to be fired at the end of
his tour (next spring).

I am now on about two weeks TDY in
Ban Houei Sai while the resident staff
member is on leave.

all for now -

John

21 Sept 72
Luang Prabang.

Greetings —

The rainy season has more or less come to an end and I have had ample time to begin to get things squared away here, although there is still a way to go, things are considerably more in order than when I came here six months ago.

Most of my day to day affairs have been organizational and strategic in matter and are of little more than local interest / significance.

One of my current projects involves investigating alternative sources of income for those in the area (mostly Meo) who plant opium. I am quite skeptical about the whole thing as it will be virtually impossible to knock out local opium production (profit wise,

There is nothing that can replace it in
this area). By the way, if you ever
see a copy of the book Politics of
(Hiroin) in So Acid by McCoy please
send me a copy. The author's main
source (a memo from what I understand)
is a person ^{with} whom I have had dealings
~~in~~ on occasion and is nothing but
a local ^(independent) warlord and opium trafficker,
of no small stature.

The refugee situation is relatively quiet
at the present moment although it
will probably pick up shortly as
the enemy becomes more active
with the coming of the dry season.

The person with whom I work will
probably be canned in six months.

My latest checking account statement
indicates that I have \$16 in my
account. Please transfer \$1,000 from
my savings account ASAP (or pump
in my next few checks).
all for now

Jim

31 Oct 72

GREETINGS —

I have been quite busy during the past week as the enemy overran the entire northern perimeter and bounced the Lao Government troops back to within 5 miles of Luang Prabang. In the process most of the areas 8000+ inhabitants were displaced. Although the situation has been by now contained it may be a while before the refugees will be able to go home.

I received both books you sent and have finished reading them. The one on the Plain of Jars is completely one-sided and therefore grossly inaccurate and the one on Heroin is interesting but the basic theme he presents in the case of Laos is misleading.

SF 10015
The P.L. and Lao Govt. are
now meeting in Vientiane and it
seems probable that a settlement
in Vietnam would soon be followed
by an agreement in Laos.

There is some speculation as to the
future of the AID program in the event
of a settlement. It is doubtful that
the refugee program, for one, would
soon be able to fold up.

Nothing else to report on now -
more later.



4 Dec 72

Luang Prabang

Greetings -

Things have begun to quiet down somewhat since the big enemy offensive started on 23 Oct. almost all of the positions to the north and east of Luang Prabang were lost, and on 13 November the airport was bombarded by 51 122mm rockets at 0340 in the morning. Although the situation appeared to be somewhat tenuous by the middle of November, a counter-offensive was launched and much of the lost ground is in the process of being resecured.

Since the offensive began we have gotten about 12,000 refugees and have consequently been quite busy.

4 Dec 75
As Luang Prabang was not
directly imperilled everyone
has remained throughout,
My only close call was to almost
have been shot down while on
a low-level recon on the day the
offensive began.

On the 21st I'm going to Bangkok
for ten days' vacation.

Thank you for the package you
sent. I have already consumed
most of it.

Not much else to report at this
time. More later.

