

Trip Report

Monty Dubs

NE Laos

March 16-22, 2014

Our last TLCB visit to Xieng Khouang was in early December when Assistance funds were provided for three projects. We thought it was about time to go check out the progress that has been made, and it turned out that fellow TLCB member Monty Dubs had just arrived in Bangkok, so we made arrangements for him to accompany us on the trip. No Assistance funds were taken along this trip, the purpose was checking on the three recently funded projects, scout any new projects needing our assistance, and to kick start the stalled roofing project for the Sam Thong Primary School.



Sunrise over Long Tieng

I met up with Monty at 0545 hours at Klong 7 (I live out at Klong 10) on Hwy 305 east of Rangsit, which is just north of Don Muang Airport, and headed on up to Udorn, with me driving Sunee's Toyota van. A few pit stops later we arrived at the new, and very nice, Bouquet Boutique Hotel in Udorn. For just baht 490 a night we had A/C and Wi-Fi and even a small swimming pool! I had dinner

that evening with TLCB member

Mike Cosenza who lives in Udorn and an Ozzie friend who also has a house in Xieng Khouang.

The next morning, Monday March 17, we're out the door at 0700 hours and on to Nong Khai, where I leave the van in storage while in Laos. We head across the bridge to Lao Immigration to meet up with our rental pickup and driver, Somphou, who has been with me for about 20 trips now. He is another good guy and very helpful with our program.



Beer Lao Brewery

We didn't need to go downtown to Vientiane but we did make a quick run to the Beer Lao Administration Office to see what goodies might be on sale; I was particularly looking for hats and umbrellas, but not much luck only three hats. So we head on over to Xaysomboun where I expected to have a meeting with the local head of the school district and to RON as we've done in the past.

We stopped for lunch near the Nam Ngum crossing to phone Mr. Bouakeo, the Xaysomboun education chief that I've been working with for the last several years. I got in touch with him and lo and behold, he's been transferred to Long Tieng. He said, "Come on up, no need to go to Xaysomboun." I wasn't really sure about this as Auke Koopmans and I had been sort of turned around in December at Long Tieng since we did not have police permission to be there. After a couple hours we arrived at the Australian owned Phu Bia Mine (PBM) area and phoned again from the market to check. Bouakeo again said, "Yes, no problem, come on up." I wanted to be sure about this as it was getting on towards mid-afternoon



Bailey Bridge with missing Safety Pin

and it's another two hours to Long Tieng. I really didn't want to be turned around there and have to drive back south at night. We then went on up the road to Long Tieng passing a number of Bailey Bridges on the way, most of which have had many the safety pins pulled from the locking pins of the bridge panels; I suppose they may make good fishing hooks.



"Bowling Game"

We arrived at Long Tieng at 1730 hours and had no problem getting past the gate. We pulled up to the office

area and interrupted their after-work Lao “bowling” game, pétanque. I met up with Bouakeo and drove back down to the guest house that had been built about three years ago. Most of the rooms have three out of the four preferred add-ons; sitter, crapper, hot water, and satellite television. However, we got the rooms with no TV or hot water, but the bed was good enough. The valley has had electricity since early 2009 which is quite a change since Sunee and I RONed there at the pho shop in August 2008. We slept on the floor with a thin mattress back then, this was an improvement indeed.



Guest House in Long Tieng

A couple items of note; the good rooms at the guest house were taken by the Chinese guys supervising some work on the Nam Ngum 3 dam which is located about 10 km SW of Long Tieng. I believe the dam construction is on hold now because of lack of financing. There’s also a very large camp area for the dam workers over on the SE side of the runway. I don’t think many of the workers, if any, are there right now.

We walked down to a small restaurant for a very poor dinner, won’t go there again, although the Beer Lao was cold. As we left to head back to the guest house, we were offered a couple of young hookers which was kind of disappointing; I must say I didn’t expect that in the small town of Long Tieng.

The next morning, Tuesday March 18th, we drove up to the pho shop for breakfast, a very tasty omelet with sticky rice. I will definitely be having dinner here next time I RON. I visited the two Chinese owned hardware shops to price roofing tin, turned out to be almost the same cost locally as in Xaysomboun town. I was able to lock in a price for the Sam Thong primary school roof to be delivered by the new 6-wheel truck bought by the pho shop gal, for a nominal rental.



Long Tieng Gas Station

After a brief meeting with Bouakeo and others from the Long Tieng administration, we were dieseling up our vehicles and heading off to just over the hill to the site of the two-year old, Vietnamese constructed primary and secondary schools.

The new school facilities are very good as to be expected. They could use another toilet, which will probably be requested in the future, as well as additional school furniture. Primarily though, will be providing some assistance to the dormitory for a group of secondary kids who live too far to commute on a daily basis. Prior to the upgrading of the school this was at a lower level, M 1-3, now it's a full secondary school, M 1-7 and has become quite popular. TLCB will probably be funding a cement floor and roofing tin for the self-constructed dorm. I had thought of a new facility but really don't have the supervisory capability there to handle it, unlike the dorm TLCB funded up north in lower Sam Neua.



Long Tieng School and Skyline

After the Long Tieng School visit we headed out in two vehicles on a one hour drive to Sam Thong. The plan was to discuss the roofing project at the primary school, funded July 2013, which seems to have hung fire since then. We all counted the number of roofing sheets on the school then finally agreed on a figure. Since funds were already in place, the job will be completed soon, and indeed it was.



Sam Thong Primary School Before



Sam Thong Primary School After

In Sam Thong absolutely nothing remains of the former USAID facilities there. The Quonset style large warehouse, 4-5 nice bungalows, the hospital, these were all wiped out in 1970 and '71 fighting. The fireplace is all that remains of the Air America crew hostel and restaurant.



Air America Hostel & Eatery

Finished with Sam Thong, Bouakeo and his crew headed back to Long Tieng, and we made our way on up the road towards Phonsavanh on the PDJ. It sure looks like a good upgrade on the road is going on and it will be interesting to see if it goes all the way from the PBM area through to the PDJ. I wonder if this indicates a loosening of the restrictions on passage through the area which was previously pretty much off limits without permission.



Road Construction near Sam Thong

We arrived at Phonsavanh to the nice Guest House that Hmong owned. The place we normally stay was full so we went across the street to the Dok Khoun Hotel which is OK. Dinner that evening at the Scot (yep, a farang!) owned Bamboozle Restaurant.

We had the morning of 19 March, Wednesday, pretty much free so took a wander just a few kilometers west to Phou Keng which is reported to have a cave and a tunnel on top, and said to be a bit rough getting up to them. I soon found out it was ALL TRUE, especially for these 72 year old legs....



Phou Keng

I do wonder who built the concrete lined tunnel with blast doors inside, a couple of protected rooms, blast barrier at the entrance. Was it the NVA when they had the top? Perhaps, I haven't found out yet. But those 1,000+- steps to the top were a strain, even more so coming down. It was then back to Phonsavanh for a late breakfast at the Craters Restaurant, and the hotel for a nap.

The afternoon consisted of a two-hour dirt road trip with Mr. Soundeuane of the Xieng Khouang Provincial Education Service. He is our "main man" up there for TLCB school assistance and is a really dynamic guy. We headed northwest up towards the Nam Khan river to the Ban Lan Chong Secondary School. On the way the road was being upgraded and new electric power poles and lines being set which will replace the water turbines

seen in the local small river. The school is a self-help project with good wood construction and decent tin roofing. They'll be requesting cement for a floor and some furniture and cabinets for the teachers, all reasonable enough requests.

Thursday, March 20th, was a bit of a whirlwind of school visits. We started with the Yodt Phair Primary



Yodt Phair Thank TLCB

School two hours up the road from Phonsavanh, where TLCB had funded a new tin roof and cement floor on one building;

they're also

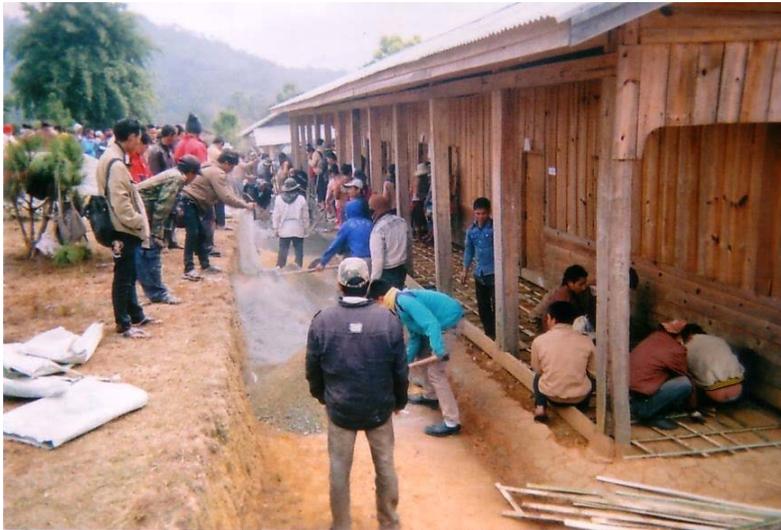
requesting more tin for another building. The funds had been recently transferred and the work was ongoing when we arrived.



Long Hang, Ban Lan Chong Secondary School

We had a meeting which consisted of speeches, a "Thank you TLCB" certificate, baci, and Beer Lao and lao Lao (ugh!).

We then backtracked a bit to the Ban Mixai Secondary School where we'd previously funded tin and cement for a large building. This time our visit was to look at a smaller self-help building where TLCB had funded some student furniture, cement for the floor and external preservative paint because as TLCB member and Vientiane resident Art Crisfield has said, "The Xieng Khoung pine is like dessert for the termites." Repeating the earlier visit we had a small meeting, speeches, a "Thank you TLCB" certificate, baci, along with Beer Lao and lao Lao (ugh!).



Pouring Concrete

We finished at this school, so we went on down the dirt road another 45 minutes to Ban Naxaythong where we've previously funded several projects. The purpose was to check a two-room toilet, which was nicely done. Then, repeating the earlier two visits up the road we had a small meeting with speeches, a "Thank you TLCB" certificate, baci, along with Beer Lao and lao Lao. This village does like to party, we had a difficult time extracting ourselves to head back to

Phonsavanh. For me, dinner that evening was just a couple of scoops of ice cream and soda water, my stomach was in a bit of turmoil from the school visits.

Friday 21 March, we had one school visit remaining, the Ban Vieng Thong Primary School, close to Phonsavanh town. We had funded replacement tin roofing for two of the school buildings; the work was completed a few days prior to our arrival. This is a large school, mostly Hmong kids, 23 teachers, run by a lady headmaster who's been there since 1980. They'll be requesting funding for new tin roofs for two more buildings and an additional toilet. After the walk-around, something becoming pretty familiar, a meeting, speeches, a "Thank you TLCB" certificate, baci, and again with Beer Lao and lao Lao.

This pretty much completed our school run for Xieng Khouang, and as it was still early, 1100 hours, Monty and I bailed out of the rest of the party and headed back towards Vientiane, some 230+ miles distance, with only one wreck seen all the way. We had the option to RON in Vientiane for one night but as it turned out we got to the border point at Thanaleng at 1815 hours, early enough to cross over to Nong Khai, and ROned at the Pantawee Hotel where I've stayed many times.

Last gasp on the trip was on Saturday 22 March, out of Nong Khai at 0645 hours and down the road to home, back to Klong 10 at 1430 hours where Monty grabbed a taxi for his trip back downtown to Sukumvit Soi 77.

All told, our road travel was 1,145 km = 710 miles in Laos and 1,197 km = 742 miles in Thailand, back and forth to Nong Khai, a fairly typical TLCB run to NE Laos.

Additional Photos from this trip may be found at the following web address:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/mactbkk/20141622MarchNELaosLTPhouKoutSchools>