



**Larry Cashman, the
Impenitent Prevaricator**

Chapter 8

Cashman on Sabrina's Shit List

As I entered my forties, my future playing basketball and tennis was unpromising. It was clear that no NBA scouts had me on their radar. Similarly, my chances of getting an unexpected invitation to play at Wimbledon were rapidly dwindling. Then, of course, four knee operations did not improve my agility. As I approached middle age, it dawned on me that perhaps Larry Cashman needed to find another sport; something less taxing on those aching bones. After considering the alternatives, I settled on golf because of its many advantages. First and foremost, it didn't require much exertion. It was also a great excuse to spend the entire day with my loser, crony buddies without objection from Sabrina. It also would allow me to surreptitiously nip on my flask of whiskey in between holes; and I could smoke an aromatic Cuban cigar on the front nine and another on the back nine. You can't do that on a basketball court.

I began playing golf in the Jakarta in 1990. Perhaps I should qualify that last statement. Larry Cashman began hacking away at golf in Jakarta in 1990. Although I could hit the ball pretty hard, for some unfathomable reason I couldn't make it go straight, which can be a hazard on a golf course, especially in the adjacent fairways when my errant shots endangered other peoples' lives.

When I arrived in Manila, I decided that it was time to get serious about my golf game. I took lessons, I practiced at the driving range, and I started playing regularly. Gradually my game improved. I learned to hit the ball a bit straighter and occasionally, the Gods of Golf would bless me with a beautiful shot, which encouraged me to return to the fairways for more punishment. I shot in the 90s and occasionally even got into the 80s. One of my wildest dreams was to break 80, but that fantasy, week after week, appeared to be a mere illusion.

As Sabrina, Katerina, and I prepared to leave Manila in 1995, we spent our final weeks at the New World Hotel in Makati. It was quite convenient — buffet breakfast every day, room service, valet service, and proximity to great restaurants at the adjacent Greenbelt Shopping Mall. When Rafi Gatmaitan, the Undersecretary for Management at the Department of Health, invited me to play a round of golf at The Alabang Country Club during these final weeks, I jumped at the opportunity. It was renowned to be one of the finest golf courses in Manila. Rafi was a member so this was my best and probably only chance to play there. Accordingly, I packed up my whiskey and cigars and prepared for a pleasant day of golf.

Sabrina and Katerina were snoozing soundly (Carmencita, our oldest daughter, was already away at college by this time,) when I left the New World Hotel at 7 AM on a Sunday morning for my tee time at Alabang. It was unusually quiet on the streets of Makati. I had experienced these eerily quiet scenes before while living in Southeast Asia, and it usually meant trouble. As I hailed a taxi for the ride to the golf course, I noticed an armored military vehicle rolling down a deserted Ayala Avenue where there usually was an endless stream of colorful vehicles stuck in an enormous traffic jam. I didn't think much about it though, as it was not uncommon to see military vehicles rumbling along the streets of large Asian cities in those days.



The first fairway at Alabang Country Club

The weather was uncharacteristically gorgeous when Rafi Gatmaitan and I teed off on the first hole at Alabang Country Club. Equally unusual was my tee shot which sailed straight down the fairway, carried along by a gentle trailing wind. My iron shot landed on the green and I two putted for par. And that's how it went the whole day. My drives were straight, I got lucky bounces, and my putts were inexplicably finding the cup. After 9 holes I was only four shots over par.

After nine holes, Rafi received a phone call. There had been a coup d'état attempt in Manila by a group of disgruntled military officers known as the Young Turks. They were disillusioned by the rampant corruption in the Philippine Armed Forces and the blatant nepotism of senior officers when handing out promotions. Only instead of occupying the Presidential Palace, the Parliament, or the radio and TV stations, the coup leaders decided to occupy the Greenbelt Shopping Mall in Makati. Perhaps in their esteemed military opinion they thought that if local denizens of Manila couldn't access their favorite restaurants and shops, the people would become incensed and support their attempt to overthrow the government. Unfortunately, the New World Hotel, where Sabrina and Katerina were currently domiciled, was located directly across the street from the Greenbelt Shopping Mall.



The coup plotters occupied the Greenbelt Shopping Mall in Makati

Coup d'état attempts were not uncommon in the Philippines. There had been nine coup attempts between 1986 and 1990, and all were unsuccessful. Given that the coup plotters had only occupied a shopping mall, this one also seemed amateurish and doomed to fail. The Department of Health (DOH)

advised Rafi to sit tight while they monitored the situation. This was fine by me. I was eager to continue our round of golf. My chances of breaking 80 were getting better by the hole.

As we played the 14th hole, I suddenly received a call from Sabrina. She was getting anxious about the coup and her safety.



The New World Hotel was next to the Greenbelt Shopping Mall

“I just received a call on the Embassy hot line,” she exclaimed excitedly. “The coup plotters are threatening to occupy the hotels adjacent to Greenbelt Shopping Mall. The New World Hotel is closest to the shopping mall and may be the first target. The Embassy recommended that we prepare to evacuate. I want you come and get us before it’s too late to leave the hotel.”

This was bad news for me. Here I was having my best round of golf ever, and Sabrina wanted me to leave the golf course and pick her up. I needed to stall for time.

“I think the Embassy is being alarmist, Sabrina. Rafi just got a call from the DOH and they think the situation is under control. They recommend a wait and see approach. I think we should do the same.”

Sabrina was reluctant but she agreed. “OK, let’s see what happens. However, if the situation gets worse, I want your lazy ass over here immediately to get us.” Whew! I had bought myself some more time.

As I prepared to tee off on the 16th hole, Sabrina called again. “Cashman, the Embassy just issued an evacuation order. Come to the hotel and fetch us immediately.”

This was catastrophic news for me. I had just gone par-birdie-par on the previous three holes. If I finished the last three holes at one over par, I would break 80 for the first time in my life. I couldn’t stop playing now!!! I needed to stall for more time.

“Sabrina, don’t panic. You know how embassy officials are. They’re just being overly cautious. This looks like a sloppy coup attempt by young soldiers looking to get some publicity. Rafi says the military has the situation firmly under control. When I finish my round of golf in about 45 minutes, I’ll come and get you.”

“Did I hear you correctly Cashman? You want your wife and daughter to wait in a hotel that is being threatened by rebellious military coup plotters while you finish your round of golf? Are you out of your mind?”

And then the neural connection between my brain and my mouth misfired once again, as I blurted out, “Sabrina, you’re not going to believe this but I am six over par with three holes left. If I shoot one over par on the final three holes, I will score a 79 and break 80 for the first and only time in my life. Just let me finish the final three holes and I’ll be right there?”

I wish there was some way to surgically repair the neural disconnect between my brain and my mouth because it would prevent me from continuously putting my foot in my mouth, which has caused me untold grief over the years. Since there isn’t, I apparently have to live with the consequences, which in this case was Sabrina’s uninterrupted string of profanities, obscenities, and expletives aimed at my

character, my intelligence, and my judgment. I deserved every bit of it, of course, but I was nevertheless determined to stall for a bit more time.

Sabrina, however, was insistent. “Break 80!! If you don’t get your sorry ass over here to pick us up right now, I’ll break your neck. Oh, I should have listened to my mother. She always said you were useless and unreliable, and a goddam coward to boot!” Another ringing endorsement of my stellar character and moral fortitude from my beloved mother-in-law.

As the reader may recall, I have done many things in my life that I am not proud of... like the time I was being taken away by Indian Customs officials in the New Delhi airport and told them to take Sabrina instead.¹ Or the time I suggested that Sabrina should break into the Thai Customs Warehouse in Bangkok to find the marijuana hidden in our household effects shipment instead of me.² But this next prank was one of my worst.

As Sabrina continued her relentless harangue, I pressed down on the plunger³ in my phone. “Sabrina, your voice is breaking up. Please speak a bit louder.” As I sporadically depressed the plunger, the reception was interrupted and all I could hear was Sabrina’s voice in fits and starts referring to me as “asshole....scumbag....loser....”

“Sabrina, you’ll have to speak up. I’m losing the connection.” And then CLANK!!! as I held the plunger down and ended the call. I turned the phone off and headed to the 16th tee to finish my round of golf.

When I got there, Rafi Gatmaitan was flabbergasted. “Did you just hang up on Sabrina so you could finish this round of golf? When she pleaded with you to rescue her from a hotel being threatened by military rebels? Cashman, you really have no shame.”

“Rafi, you’ve seen my game today. I’m having the best round of golf in my life. You know how these coup attempts go. They’re just a bunch of disgruntled soldiers who want attention. It won’t amount to anything. I’ll finish this round within the hour, hopefully break 80 in the process, and then I’ll fetch Sabrina.”

“I didn’t think you could be this heartless, Cashman. I should not have underestimated you. As a precaution I sent my driver to stand by at the New World Hotel after Sabrina called on the 14th hole. You



The 16th tee at Alabang Country Club

¹ See Volume 1 Chapter 5 of the Cashman Chronicles, “The Reluctant World Traveler” for details.

² See Volume 2 Chapter 2 of the Cashman Chronicles, “The Road to Indonesia” for details

³ Old style portable phones were fitted with switches called plungers located where the handset rests. When the plunger is pressed, the phone circuit is closed and reception is interrupted. When it is elevated, the circuit opens, allowing the user to make or receive a call, resulting in either a dial tone or the voice of the caller.

can tell Sabrina that he will be waiting outside the hotel in 15 minutes. He'll bring her to my house and we can meet up there."

Once again serendipity had come to my rescue. I called Sabrina with the good news. Only I decided to take the credit for this latest development myself.

"Sabrina, when you called the first time, I was so worried about you and Katerina that I couldn't concentrate on golf. So I asked Rafi Gatmaitan to send his driver to the New World Hotel to pick you up. He was reluctant at first but I finally convinced him. When we last spoke, I wasn't sure if the driver could actually reach the hotel, with so many soldiers and roadblocks on the street, so I didn't want to raise false hope." This was vintage Larry Cashman at his dissembling best. "I just received a call from Rafi's driver that he is near the hotel at this exact moment. He'll pick you up in 15 minutes. So get ready."

Sabrina was elated to hear this. "Cashman, I never should have doubted you. Can you ever forgive me for saying all those nasty things about you?"

"No worries dear. You were distraught after receiving those alarming telephone calls from the US Embassy. Just remember, I was only thinking about you and Katerina."

I was feeling pretty good about this turn of events. I finished my round of golf and my wife was pleased with me. When Sabrina arrived at Rafi's house, she gave me her longest and most affectionate hug. Then she turned to Rafi and said, "I was disappointed that you were reluctant to send your driver to fetch me, Rafi. I'm glad that Cashman was finally able to convince you to do so."

The quizzical look on Rafi's face alerted me to the trouble I was in. I tried to change the subject but I was too slow as Rafi responded indignantly, "What are you talking about, Sabrina? I was the one who sent my driver to the hotel when it became apparent that your husband was going to leave you there until he finished his round of golf."

Sabrina was livid when she heard this, and turning toward me she screamed, "Cashman! You had no intention of leaving the golf course, did you? You are an odious and repugnant creature. You are an unscrupulous wastrel. I should know better than to believe anything that comes out of your mouth." Sabrina knew me too well.

I caught hell for this little escapade for quite some time. In fact I'm lucky that Sabrina didn't divorce me. "I am so disappointed in you Cashman," she concluded. "How could you possibly justify your behavior?"

"Well, dearest, that 25 foot putt I made on the 18th hole to save par was miraculous. And I shot a 79."

When departing the Philippines, a *Despedida* is one of the country's more endearing traditions. A *Despedida* is a farewell party for someone leaving the Philippines for a long time. There is copious food, alcohol, dancing, and merriment. A special feature of a *Despedida* is the salutations and tributes made by friends, acquaintances, and coworkers sharing first impressions, memorable moments, and special accomplishments. The testimonials are usually pretty glowing at a *Despedida*. The only time they're better is at a funeral. Even a bounder like me might receive good reviews at a *Despedida*.

Sabrina and I attended our share of *Despedidas* over the years. As we prepared to leave the Philippines, I noticed that there were no *Despedidas* for me. In a more reflective mood I realized that most people who knew me either had nothing good to say about me or were only too happy to see the back of

my head. The prevailing sentiment as I left was “...Good riddance, Cashman, and don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.”

Sabrina was a different story. She had become a big shot while we lived in the Philippines. She was the director of a large project for HIV/AIDS prevention and education. She had a fancy office with many staff and she traveled to every corner of the Philippines — Puerto Galera, Cebu, Davao City, General Santos City, Olongapo — anywhere that had a commercial sex industry, injecting drug users, and a homosexual, bisexual, or transsexual community...the high risk groups threatened with HIV transmission. In these places Sabrina communed with pimps, pushers, junkies, prostitutes, transvestites, the gay community, and men who have sex with men. She got along famously with all of them. And they all came to her *Despedida*.

I abhor traditions and despise sentimentality, so I avoided *Despedidas* and rarely attended one. I had no intention of attending Sabrina’s farewell *Despedida* either, until Sabrina informed me otherwise. “I want you to attend my *Despedida* on Friday. My staff wants you to give the final testimonial before you introduce me. Don’t make any excuses about not attending. And Cashman, a little word of advice — DON’T FUCK THINGS UP!”.

She made that pretty clear. I was perched squarely on Sabrina’s shit list from my antics at the golf course during the coup, so I had no choice but to attend the hokey party.



Sabrina’s farewell *Despedida*

There were at least 100 people in attendance for Sabrina’s farewell *Despedida* and they were dressed in their finest. There was lechon, pork adobo, pancit, and pinakbet⁴ in abundance, and enough whiskey and San Miguel beer to keep everyone lubricated. Sabrina was busy entertaining the guests so I was off to the side minding my own business and trying to stay out of trouble when several attractive ladies approached me.

“Are you Mr. Cashman? We’ve heard so much about you,” they marveled. If they heard it from Sabrina, it was probably what a jerk I was. I gave them my standard reply:

“Just call me Cashman. Everyone does.”

“Well Cashman, would you like to drink some Tequila with us?”

Accordingly, they produced a bottle of Don Julio Añejo Tequila and poured me a shot. I am unaccustomed to having beautiful ladies offer me a drink, what’s more a fine Añejo tequila, so I eagerly acquiesced. After licking the salt sprinkled on the back of my hand, I knocked the shot of Tequila down and finished it off with a lemon chaser.

Anyone who has ever had a Tequila shooter will appreciate the immediate buzz I felt after the first shot. “Let’s have another,” the ladies insisted. I was happy to oblige.

⁴ All local Filipino foods.

What followed were four more Tequila shooters, after which I was feeling no pain. Remembering that I had to introduce Sabrina later, I figured I better slow down.

And who should walk in at exactly that moment but my buddy Andrew Jackson Poole. He had just returned from Afghanistan, where he was negotiating an arms deal with the Taliban. Earlier that day I had told him to stop by Sabrina's *Despedida* if he had time. When he saw the bevy of lovelies at my table, he headed straight for it. Andrew Jackson liked the ladies.

"Well Cashman, you have certainly improved your lot in life. What do we have here?" he exclaimed, motioning toward the ladies. More tequila was poured and more shooters were imbibed.

This continued until it was time for the testimonials. There was a flurry of activity as the attendees, including our lady friends, scurried to the front of the room to acknowledge Sabrina. Before we knew it, Andrew Jackson and I were at the table alone with no tequila.

One by one, the attendees paid tribute to Sabrina. After five minutes Andrew Jackson turned to me and said, "This is boring. Let's get out of here."

"I can't go anywhere," I told him, and related the events of the coup d'état and my round of golf. "If I'm not here to introduce Sabrina, she will kill me."

"When did you become such a pussy?" He remarked snidely. "I have another idea. I picked up some Afghan Black hashish in Afghanistan. Let's smoke some." When I saw the black charcoal color of the Afghan Black, I knew this was the good stuff. We repaired to the parking lot for a few hits on Andrew Jackson's hashish pipe.

I hadn't smoked hashish in years, and Andrew Jackson's Afghan Black knocked my socks off. Between the tequila shooters and the hashish, I could hardly walk when I got back to the party.

If I sat down and didn't speak, I was OK. When I stood up, I got dizzy. I drank some water hoping it would sober me up, but to no avail. The line of well-wishers was dwindling and soon it would be my turn to speak. When I heard the Emcee introduce me, I froze.

"We are very fortunate to have Sabrina's husband, Larry Cashman, with us tonight. He would like to say a few words and introduce the guest of honor."

I panicked when I heard my name. When I stood up to take the microphone, the room started spinning. By the time I finished my customary introduction, "Just call me Cashman. Everyone does," I passed out straight away and fell to the floor.

The next thing that I remembered was waking up in a hospital bed engulfed in a hashish and alcohol-induced stupor, IVs sticking out of each arm, with Sabrina sitting next to my bed muttering, "If you're not dead, Cashman, you'll wish you were when I get through with you." Obviously things had not gone well.

Indeed they hadn't for after passing out and nearly fracturing my skull into tiny bits upon hitting the ground, some guests tried their best to revive me but apparently with no luck. Then one bystander sounded the alarm when she claimed she couldn't feel my carotid pulse. The fact that she was searching for it on my right leg left some doubt as to her medical acumen. However, once it became apparent that I couldn't be revived, Sabrina decided it was high time to call an ambulance and I was whisked away to the Makati Medical Center. Damn, that sure was good hashish.

Since Sabrina accompanied me to the hospital, it was also the end of the *Despedida*. No more testimonials, no more speeches, no farewell remarks from Sabrina to her colleagues. Everyone just went home.

“Cashman how could you do this to me?” Sabrina screamed irately as I regained consciousness. “I saw you drinking tequila shooters with those women. The one time I ask you to be responsible and do me a small favor, what do you do but get drunk and pass out. Oh why didn't I listen to my mother's advice about getting involved with you in the first place?”

Since Sabrina didn't mention Andrew Jackson or the hashish, perhaps she really didn't know all that happened. Now I saw my way out of this predicament.

“Sabrina, I didn't pass out from the tequila. It was Andrew Jackson's Afghan Black hashish. He just picked it up in Afghanistan. This mess was all Andrew Jackson's fault.” Any port in a storm, I always say.

Sabrina knew Andrew Jackson for the boulder and reprobate that he was. “I should have known there would be trouble when I saw that rascal arrive. Why did you have to smoke hashish with him?”

“I was nervous about introducing you in front of all those people and thought a hit of hashish would calm me down. He told me it would only give me a mellow buzz. Andrew Jackson insisted I smoke it. And the hashish blew me away. I should never have listened to him. He's nothing but a troublemaker.” And with that final remark, I threw Andrew Jackson under the bus. Better him than me, I thought.

From the look that came over Sabrina's face, I saw that she was falling for this excuse. It was partly true, you know. Had it not been for Andrew Jackson's hashish, I would have survived this episode unscathed. My wife was actually beginning to feel sorry for me, as if I was merely the victim of Andrew Jackson's shenanigans. As Sabrina left the hospital that night, I felt like I had dodged another bullet.

Well, that bullet soon pierced my heart when Sabrina returned to the hospital the next day, with Andrew Jackson in tow. “Cashman, you're such a liar. Andrew Jackson explained everything to me. You were flirting with those women while downing tequila shooters? How could you do that at my *Despedida*?” Andrew Jackson added that little tidbit to deepen the morass I was sinking in.

“You think you're such a stud with the ladies, don't you?” she continued. “Well for your information, Casanova, those women you were flirting with are all men. They're transvestites who work for our partner NGO in Cebu.” I almost choked on the water I was sipping when I heard this. I looked at Andrew Jackson as if to say, “I hope you didn't take one of those ladies back to your hotel last night.” On second thought, it would serve the scoundrel right .

Exasperated, Sabrina continued, “And the only way Andrew Jackson could get you to stop flirting was to offer you some hashish, which you kept smoking until he dragged you back to the party? My mother had your number from the moment she laid eyes on you. Cashman, you are a low-life of monumental proportions. You are in big trouble now.”

And then I realized what happened. One of Andrew Jackson's greatest talents is his sincerity when pleading his innocence, especially when he's guilty. It got him out of trouble countless times in the navy. He seemed to be particularly adept when pleading his innocence with women. Now he employed his verbal skill and charisma on Sabrina, much to my misfortune. As she berated me for my behavior, Andrew Jackson just sat back with a big shit-eating grin on his face enjoying the spectacle. There is no honor among thieves....or, for that matter, scoundrels.

After leaving the Philippines, the Cashman family returned to the US for a one month respite before departing for my next assignment with the Asian Development Bank in Laos. After the mischief I created at the golf course followed by the fiasco at the *Despedida*, Sabrina would hardly speak with me. I left for Laos on my own while Sabrina and Katerina waited in the US until I could scope out the situation and find living arrangements. "You better make sure everything is arranged when we arrive, Cashman. You're still at the top of my shit list."

I must admit feeling some apprehension as I departed for Laos,⁵ formerly known as The Land of the Million Elephants. The Lao People's Democratic Republic, its official name, was an enigma to most outsiders in 1995. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Laos closed its borders to the outside world and retreated into communist/socialist isolationism. The entire country was divided into small, self-sufficient communes, the currency was devalued, and the country reverted to a barter economy. When I arrived in 1995, the country was emerging from 20 years of Marxist/Leninist xenophobia.



The Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic

There were no Americans working in any official positions with international agencies when I arrived. Relations between Laos and the US were frosty at best. During the Secret War in Laos⁶ from 1964 to 1973, the US had supported the Royalist Lao Government against the Communist Pathet Lao, the name of the Lao Communist Party now governing the country. During the war the US dropped more bombs on Laos than the combined total it dropped on Japan and Germany during World War II. Approximately one-third of these bombs, however, did not explode upon impact, leaving much of Laos contaminated with

⁵ The correct pronunciation of Laos is "LOUSE." Most Americans incorrectly pronounce it "LAY-OSE." In 1961, after John F. Kennedy became president, the civil war in Laos threatened to involve the US in a land war in Southeast Asia. Soon after assuming the presidency, Kennedy made a nationally televised address to explain US actions in Laos. When asked the correct pronunciation and told that it was "LOUSE," Kennedy demurred. "I'm not going to tell the American people, in my first televised address, that we may have to go to war over a country called "LOUSE." Instead he pronounce it "LAY-OSE" and the pronunciation stuck.

⁶ In an attempt to disrupt the transport of North Vietnamese troops and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was situated in Laos, the CIA trained a guerrilla force of Lao hill tribesmen to combat the Vietnamese military and the Pathet Lao communist guerillas; then supported them with air support from the CIA airline Air America and covert air strikes from US bases in Thailand. Because details of this war were largely unavailable to the press and public due to official government denials that the war existed, it has become known as the CIA's "Secret War in Laos."

vast quantities of unexploded ordnance (UXO). Over 20,000 people had been killed or injured by UXO in Laos since the bombing ceased two decades before my arrival.

Staff working in official positions with international agencies, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), had to be scrutinized and approved by the Lao Government before assuming their positions. And now Larry Cashman, fresh from 15 years working for US Embassies in Indonesia and the Philippines, was set to arrive in Vientiane needing approval from the Lao Government to work for the Asian Development Bank in Laos.

I didn't know anything about these machinations and subterfuges as I departed for Laos in 1995. What I knew was that, after living in huge, densely populated Southeast Asian countries, we would be moving to a country with only 5 million people that was about the same size as Minnesota. The capital city, Vientiane, was a backwater with 250,000 people, a far cry from metropolises such as Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila that each had populations of 10 million or more. And for the first time in 15 years, I would not be working within the cozy confines of the US Embassy with its attendant perquisites. Hence my apprehension as I arrived at the tiny airport in Vientiane to commence my assignment with ADB.



Victory Monument in Vientiane

What I found in Vientiane was a quaint, charming, bucolic city nestled along a bend in the Mekong River, frozen in a relative time warp by communist isolationism. There were more bicycles on the road than cars. Rice paddies were plentiful even within the city limits and the French colonial architecture, although slightly dilapidated by 20 years of neglect, added a European flavor to the city. I found a pleasant home along the

banks of the Mekong River with a spectacular view of the river and the city. Sabrina would be pleased with it, I hoped, allowing me to eventually escape from her shit list. The whole place had a mystical, harmonious, Shangri-la-esque ambience. It seemed that one could become very comfortable living here.

That is until I made my first trip to the rural areas in the provinces. If Vientiane had a dilapidated feel, the provinces were downright ramshackle. The Asian Development Bank and the Lao Government had agreed on a loan to rebuild the entire health care delivery system, which had totally crumbled after 10 years of civil war and 20 years of socialist neglect; and Yours Truly would be ADB's principal advisor on this project. The project would commence in the two northern provinces of Xiengkhouang (pronounced SEE-UNG-KWONG) and Oudomxay (pronounced OO-DOME-SIGH). Both were centers of communist resistance during the war. Both were also heavily bombed, and both provincial governments were led by doctrinaire communists who had little affinity for the American "imperialists" who had tried to bomb them into oblivion over a 10 year period.

I've been to some backward, run-down places in my life, but nothing prepared me for what I encountered in Xiengkhouang and Oudomxay in 1995. There were no paved roads or any water or electricity in the capital cities. Water was transported from lakes and rivers; and decrepit, soviet-era generators provided electricity for three hours every night. The guest houses where we stayed had

crumbling rooves with bats nested in them. The rooms had plywood bed frames with no mattresses, covered by mosquito nets with large holes resembling Swiss cheese. The toilets were holes in the ground concealed in the woods with a stick to keep the pigs away. Hot water for bathing was delivered in a thermos once per day. When we ventured out to the remote areas, we bathed in the rivers. As the reader already knows, Larry Cashman is a candy-ass who likes his amenities, but there were no creature comforts to be found in Xiengkhouang and Oudomxay.

Both provinces were littered with unexploded ordinance from the US bombing, some of which had already exploded when hit by farmers while plowing their fields. During my first trip to Xiengkhouang, we were walking to a remote village in the mountains. I wanted to divert from the trail to check something out, and queried our guide regarding its advisability. He suggested that I check my life insurance policy to see if it had a provision for accidental death by unexploded ordinance first, since the likelihood of stepping on one was exceedingly high if you strayed as much as a few feet from the trail. Regardless of the provisions in my current life insurance policy, I decided to stay on the trail.



**An unexploded anti-personnel bomb
uncovered in Xiengkhouang**

Another adventure was the food found in these two provinces. Toads, grilled birds, snakes and bamboo rats were the customary fare. In Xiengkhouang they served the local delicacy, giant bumble bees and their larvae disguised in scrambled eggs. These bees were about two inches long. I dissected bees in my high school Biology lab that were smaller than that. At one meal in Oudomxay they served roasted dog. I should have been suspicious when I saw the villagers bringing their dogs in cages to the restaurant. The roasted dog was accompanied by duck blood that congealed into a solid mass as it was consumed. I found neither of these delicacies very appetizing. When they brought what I imagined was some roasted turkey to our table, I was pleased to finally have something decent to eat. In the dimly lit restaurant (there was no electricity, of course, so we were eating by candlelight), I reached for what appeared to be an edible bit of turkey, took a bite, and felt a fluid filled sac burst in my mouth. I had mistakenly chosen the turkey's head, bit into its freshly cooked eye, and the ocular fluid squirted into my mouth.

After rushing outside this fine gastronomic establishment to vomit my guts out, I returned to the table to find another local culinary delicacy waiting to insult my alimentary system.. It was an innocent looking bowl of soup, liberally seasoned with marijuana, containing what appeared to be cylindrical wedges of a gelatinous fatty object. I thought it might be bone marrow or perhaps the spine of some unlucky animal. Not much problem here, I thought, so I tried it as my hosts waited anxiously. It was fibrous but very fatty. Much to my consternation, it turned out to be a bull's penis (fortunately cut in cross-section so it bore little anatomical similarity to the original member). As I began to chew, my hosts exclaimed, "It makes you virile," With a nauseated look on my face, I replied, "Oh really...it makes me sick." It must be a cultural thing.

But a Lao meal was not complete without imbibing copious amounts of alcoholic refreshment. Drinking is the national pastime in Laos. One time the Governor of Oudomxay invited us to breakfast and we started drinking beer. At breakfast! We were loaded by 10 AM. Now I'm not averse to tipping a few cool ones, but propriety demands that you at least wait until noon. Not in Laos. They also have a local white lightning, called Lao Lau, which was consumed in enormous quantities in the countryside. This stuff was lethal. It is highly flammable and has been known to spontaneously combust. At every village, in every district, we were greeted by the local gentry with their locally brewed Lao Lau.⁷ Regrettably for me Lao Lau is not sipped. It is chugged down in small, and occasionally rather large, shot glasses. The locals just love to see the honky get plastered on Lao Lau. One time we were drinking so much of it, I was approaching acute alcohol toxicity. So I stood by an open window and, rather than chugging down the Lao Lau, I just tossed it out the window behind me. My drinking buddies were too drunk to know the difference. When Sabrina arrived in Laos and saw how much alcohol I was consuming, she got on my case for drinking too much. I told her its cultural sensitivity. I was building rapport with my counterparts.

With these unusual distractions awaiting this uninitiated honky in the provinces, my assignment in Laos promised to provide no end of amusement and surprise for me. But I still awaited formal approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to officially begin my assignment. And that approval awaited the results of my background investigation by the inspectors in the Communist Party's Directorate of Internal Security. These were hard-nosed, meticulous sleuths who were uncompromising in their pursuit of unsavory characteristics in their target's background; and who had no love lost for citizens of the country that had bombed them into the Stone Age for ten years. In light of my employer for the last 15 years, and my checkered past, I was scared shitless of what they might find.

⁷ "Lau" is the Lao word for whiskey. Lao Lau is literally translated as "Lao whiskey."