



**Larry Cashman, the
Unscrupulous Bounder**

Chapter 9

The Wild Men of Oudomxay

When we moved to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, in 1995, it felt like we were living in a wonderland frozen in time. The wide tree-lined streets were crowded with children riding bicycles with nary a motorized vehicle in sight. The entire city had two traffic lights, and these were disregarded by most inhabitants. With neither factories nor vehicles, the air was crisp and clean, continuously refreshed by the gentle breezes radiating from the nearby Mekong River. The tallest buildings were only four stories high, a far cry from the skyscrapers that dominated other Asian cities at that time. Vientiane was more like a quaint village than a capital city.

Nevertheless this quaint village was blessed with a bevy of fine restaurants, a vestige of its French colonial heritage, where a gourmet meal could be had for a pittance. There were French, Italian, German, Swiss, and Russian restaurants in abundance — not to mention the Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese and Korean eateries that had sprung up throughout the city as Laos opened its economy.

Katerina was enrolled at the Vientiane International School, which she could safely reach by bike. My office was located at the Ministry of Health, a five-minute drive from our home situated along the banks of the Mekong River. In the Mediterranean style, there was a two hour midday break, allowing me to return home for a leisurely lunch followed by a relaxing 45 minute snooze every day. The Cashman family loved the laid back ambience and casual living arrangements in Vientiane. The traffic jams, the crowds, the clutter, and the pollution that were our constant companion in cities like Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila seemed like a distant memory.

But it was Sabrina who liked Vientiane the best. She worked from home with periodic trips to Manila and Jakarta. “I love it here, Cashman. I can’t imagine living in a big city like Manila ever again. When do you think you’ll get your clearance from the Lao Government?”

And that is when the letter arrived from the Ministry of State Security, threatening to disrupt our idyllic existence. It was written in a brusque and imperious tone. “Dear Dr. Cashman, Our background investigation has uncovered disturbing findings from your past. Please report to the Lao Communist Party’s Directorate for Internal Investigations at the Ministry of State Security for questioning.” There were no pleasantries, no cheerful salutations. It was clear that the Lao Communist Party was not happy with whatever their investigation had unearthed .

This outcome was inevitable. Having worked in several US embassies for 15 years, the Lao Government probably thought I was a spy; or an agent provocateur who would spread unwelcome propaganda about civil liberties, human rights, and democracy. Nine years of continuous US bombing during the 1960s and 1970s were still fresh in the collective Lao memory.

Nothing could be further from the truth, of course. If the Lao government wanted to espouse authoritarianism, totalitarianism, Communism, Marxism, Leninism, plagiarism, narcissism or whatever “ism” was on their “top 10 list,” there would be no complaints from me. Live and let live, I always say — as long as they let me stay in this blissful Shangri-La where Larry Cashman and family now found themselves.

Nonetheless I was scared shitless at the prospect of a hostile interrogation by hard-nosed, doctrinaire communists about past policies about which I knew little and cared even less. I wasn’t one of those chauvinistic, self-righteous, uptight stooges working at US embassies who championed human rights and democracy. I just wanted to have a good time and stay in Laos.

Sabrina blamed me for this fiasco. “Why did you have to tell the Lao government that you worked for the US embassies in Indonesia and the Philippines? You lie all the time. But NO! This one time you had to tell the truth! Why didn’t you just tell them that you were a used car salesman, or that you worked for some apparel store in New York. You better spew some of your mellifluous bullshit to get out of this pickle, Cashman. You’re still on my shit list, you know. I don’t want to leave Laos.”

As the day for my interrogation approached, I was frightened half to death by the prospect of facing hard-nosed Communist Party interrogators. Perhaps some Cashman deception was in order. I considered my options. I couldn’t cut and run, the true coward’s first option. Sabrina made that abundantly clear. I could try a bribe, but that was risky. These were diehard Marxist-Leninist communists who might not be amused by capitalist chicanery. I even considered having a mannequin attend the interrogation in my stead, but these guys couldn’t be as dumb as those idiots at the US Embassy in Jakarta.¹ This time I would have to face the music, bullshit extemporaneously, and let the chips fall where they may. Why did I always seem to find myself in these dilemmas?



Ministry of State Security Vientiane

The Ministry of State Security in Vientiane was an imposing four story concrete mausoleum of Stalinesque grandeur built by the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Its crypt-like appearance intimidated both Lao and foreigners alike. You can imagine my apprehension as I approached this gruesome-looking structure for the anticipated grilling. I was worried I might never leave.

The third floor room to which I was ushered had a rectangular table with a mirror on the wall, not unlike interrogation rooms one sees in TV police dramas. The two gentlemen who awaited my arrival were right out of central casting for communist apparatchiks. They were short but stern-looking. Both sported ill-

¹ See Volume 2 Chapter 5 “The Special Arrangement” for Cashman’s devious use of a mannequin to avoid attending boring US Embassy meetings in Jakarta.

fitting black suits with a bright red “hammer and sickle” pin adorning the lapels. The two also had pitch black hair that looked like it was dyed with shoe polish. They introduced themselves as Keobounkham and Sengpraseuth. They opened our tete-a-tete by saying, “You may call us Keo and Seng for short.”

That seemed friendly enough. Some of my fear was allayed. Keo spoke first. “We are very concerned by the findings of your background investigation, Dr. Cashman. You need to provide some explanations.”

I checked him right away. “Just call me Cashman. Everyone does.” I didn’t want to get off on the wrong foot with these ruffians. Now I steeled myself for questions about the US bombing and my work at the US embassies in Jakarta and Manila.

“We have learned, through our investigation, that you received a payoff when you worked in Indonesia,”² Seng continued.

I almost fell off my chair when I heard this. How in the world did they find out about that incident? And it had nothing to do with the US bombing of Laos or America's foreign policy in Southeast Asia. What was going on? I explained how the white envelope stuffed with cash mysteriously appeared on my desk at the Training Division in Jakarta.

“We don’t care about that,” Seng responded indignantly. “We want you to explain why you returned this serendipitous windfall.”

This caught me by surprise. My interrogators apparently wanted to know why I was stupid enough to return a bribe. I explained by emphasizing Sabrina’s intervention and her insistence that I return the money. I assured them that I thought her advice unwise but had no choice except to follow it. They jotted notes in their daily diaries but looked at me askance, as if I was surely deranged. Now it was Keo's turn to ask the next question. “Is it true that you tried to smuggle whiskey into India and were apprehended by Indian Customs?”³

Once again I was taken aback. This incident occurred more than 20 years ago. How the heck did they learn about this escapade? The oddest part of the interrogation was that they had still not asked a single question regarding my work at US embassies. This situation was getting stranger by the minute. Once again I explained what happened.

Keo was clearly dissatisfied with my explanation adding, “Didn’t you know that you’re supposed to put money in the box with the whiskey to bribe the Customs officials? Your bio-data says you grew up on the streets of New York City. Didn’t you learn anything there?”

A pattern was rapidly developing here. These two apparatchiks couldn’t care less about my previous work with the US government. They wanted to know why I didn’t know the rules of the corruption game.

Seng now approached me, raising his voice to a menacing crescendo, as he posed the final question. “Thai Customs records indicate that marijuana was found in your household effects shipment from Bangkok to Indonesia.⁴ When your shipment was examined in Indonesia, the marijuana had disappeared. This left Indonesian Customs with no choice but to pilfer your shipment to make enough money to pay



Seng and Keo, Cashman's Interrogators

² See Volume 2 Chapter 3 “Cashman’s Dilemma” for Cashman’s handling of this ethical conundrum.

³ See Volume 1 Chapter 5 “The Reluctant World Traveler” for Cashman’s run-in with Indian Customs

⁴ See Volume 2 Chapter 2 “The Road to Indonesia” for Cashman’s exploits with Thai and Indonesian Customs

off Thai Customs. An informant has told us that you flew to Bangkok, broke into the Thai Customs warehouse, and removed the marijuana from your shipment. Don't you know that, if you had the decency to pay off Thai Customs in the first place, like you're supposed to, all that effort could have been avoided?"

I didn't even attempt to respond to this question. I just let Seng continue his vitriolic harangue.

"Cashman, these findings are extremely troubling. Although you claim to have been working in Southeast Asia for 17 years, you somehow seem oblivious to how things work here. In view of these alarming findings, I am afraid that we cannot approve your credentials to work in Laos."

Well I wasn't born yesterday. I knew where this interrogation was going. Without skipping a beat, I asked the magic question, "Isn't there another way to resolve this issue?" This was a classic shakedown, and while I was the one getting fleeced, I wanted to see how this played out.

Seng and Keo huddled to ponder my question. I felt like saying, "OK fellas, why don't you just tell me how much this is going to cost so that we can get the whole thing over with?" But that's not the way things work in Laos. That would cause these two officials to lose face. And that is the worst thing that can happen. You simply have to offer government officials a plausible reason to ask for money without their losing face.

As Seng and Keo discussed their next gambit, it reminded me of the time I was confronted by the Village Chief in Jakarta over Pedro Franklin's dalliance with my maid; and he conferred with the aggrieved husband on a price to get Pedro off the hook.⁵ Hearing what came next was worth the price of the bribe.

"Cashman, we are happy to inform you that the Lao Communist Party understands that individuals sometimes commit unintentional faux pas. Accordingly, it routinely conducts a three week orientation course for people who are unfamiliar with how business is conducted in Southeast Asia. If you can successfully complete the orientation course, you will receive official authorization to work in Laos. The admission fee is \$400."

Well that was easy, and relatively cheap, but I decided to take this to the next level. "That seems reasonable. But three weeks is a long time to be away from my work. Does the Communist Party ever conduct an abridged version of the course?"

"I'm glad you asked, Cashman," Seng replied without skipping a beat. "You could purchase a VCR⁶ of the entire training course and watch it at your leisure. The price for the VCR is \$200. Then all you need to do is pass the final exam and you will receive your official authorization."

This was getting better all the time. In my long, but not-so-distinguished career, I had been down this road before. I decided to follow this scam to its logical conclusion.

"I really dislike taking exams. It reminds me of being in high school. Is there a way to avoid the final exam?"

Then Seng leaned over toward me, and with an acknowledging grin, he delivered the clincher. "In fact there is. You can purchase the answers for \$100. I can even offer you a special deal. If you take the whole package and pay in cash, it can be yours for \$500; and you can walk out of here today with your official authorization to work in Laos."

⁵ See Volume 2 Chapter 4 "The Paradox of Pedro Franklin."

⁶ A VCR is a video cassette recording. The Lao Communist Party had not yet been exposed to DVDs.

And that is how things worked in Laos. After I accepted the deal, Seng and Keo ordered up some Lao coffee with sweetened condensed milk. We hung out and became good buddies. Then I went over to the Bank Commerce Exterieur du Lao and withdrew \$500. When I handed it over to Seng and Keo, they handed me my official authorization to work as an Asian Development Bank official in Laos. It was my ticket to work in Laos for the next 20 years.... a bargain at twice the price.

When I returned home from this encounter and showed Sabrina my official clearance to work in Laos, she was ecstatic. "Cashman, how did you manage that? Did they grill you about working for US embassies?"

"You know that mellifluous bullshit you're always disparaging? Well, combined with some Cashman mendacity, it saved the day." And with that I officially departed Sabrina's shit list.

Compared to the self-righteous, religious fundamentalist assholes who worked at US embassies, my colleagues in Laos were a rogues' gallery of misfits and charlatans. I felt right at home. Palomede Jupien, a French physician who had been in Laos for five years, was the training advisor on our project. Palomede, who spoke fluent Lao, had been all over Laos in the past five years. Without failure, as he and I traveled to the most remote regions of the country, one of his paramours would show up looking to curry his favor or claim restitution for an unwanted offspring. Palomede could drink Lao whiskey till the cows came home and danced the Lam Vong⁷, the traditional Lao folk dance, like a native.

Toby Suykerbuck was our Belgian malariologist. He had worked in Africa for 15 years before coming to Laos. Toby drove an old Toyota Crown sedan and broke every traffic rule in Laos with impunity, just as he did in Africa. He drove through red lights and stop signs, or drove on the wrong side of the road if he was so disposed. The police would chase him to our office where Toby would negotiate his "fine" with the police then drink Lao whiskey with his new buddies.

On one occasion he put his 10 year old daughter on his lap and let her drive his car. When she crashed into a parked tuk-tuk, the ubiquitous three-wheeled scooters found in all Southeast Asian cities, and the Lao police asked to see her license, he gave them his Belgian license wrapped in a 10,000 Kip⁸ note (about \$10) and the police didn't bat an eyelash.

Pete Hayman was one of those guys who just showed up in Lao periodically. He was a brawny South African who grew up in Namibia and had been everywhere. When in Laos, he worked for the Luxembourg Development Corporation as a health administrator. But Pete was a multi-skilled Soldier of Fortune who could just as easily manage a blood diamond mine in Sierra Leona or smuggle gems from Burma to Thailand. He came to Laos the first time in the late 1980s to design a hospital, when the creature comforts were at their most basic. The shack where he stayed had no running water but was blessed with a small

⁷ The Lam Wong is a stylized folk dance common to Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia where the male and female partners perform stylized motions with their hands and arms while moving in a circular fashion. It is performed at traditional festivities, popular celebrations and modern parties. Every Lao child is taught to dance the Lam Vong from the time they can walk.

⁸ The Kip is the Lao currency. One US dollar was worth 1,000 Kip.

ditch that served as a toilet. Pete found a plastic chair, cut a hole in the seat, and placed it over the ditch, proudly calling it his throne.

Pete's Lao colleagues were so pleased with his hospital designs that they promised him better accommodations on his next trip to Laos. When he returned for his second visit, his colleagues at the Ministry of Health put him in the same shack with the same ditch for a toilet, only this time they proudly placed a teakwood chair with armrests and a hole in the seat over the ditch, a token of their appreciation and recognition for Pete's fine work.

When I received the notice from United Nations Development Program (UNDP)⁹ announcing the arrival of their new Deputy Country Representative, the rogues' gallery of misfits was complete. It was Seamus Campbell, the final member of the University of Hawaii's League of Distinguished Knives, and the only one I had not met.¹⁰ From the stories I had heard, Seamus was a bounder and rascal of the highest order. I was anxious to meet him.

I drove to his office unannounced and told Seamus' secretary that I wanted to see him.



Seamus Campbell's office at UNDP in Vientiane

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked. "He is very busy meeting Lao Government officials."

"No worries. Just tell him it's Larry Cashman from the University of Hawaii. He'll know my name."

I could see Seamus behind the glass enclosure of his office. He was wearing a jacket and tie, the first person I had seen dressed in formal attire in Laos. He had an officious self-important aloofness about him, something you'd expect from the Deputy Country Representative of a large organization like UNDP, but not what I expected from a schemer and blackguard like Seamus Campbell. When his secretary told me he was too busy to see me and I should make an appointment, I knew something was wrong. So I barged into his office uninvited.

Seamus was reading a newspaper, having his morning coffee, and eating a pastry from a French bakery when I arrived. "Seamus Campbell, I'm Larry Cashman. Dr. P told me to look you up. He said that you along with Pete Lockery and Tim O'Riordan were the three most distinguished knives who ever graduated from the UH School of Public Health."

Seamus looked surprised, as much from the interruption to his morning snack as from my arrival, when I continued, "I loved the story of how you threw that hooker out the window in Chile to evade the

⁹ UNDP is the international development program of the United Nations. Through its Resident Coordinator, UNDP coordinates the efforts of all UN agencies in a country, and is the lead liaison agency between all donor agencies and the host country. The UNDP Administrator is the third highest ranking member of the UN, behind the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General.

¹⁰ See Volume 1, Chapter 10 of the Cashman Chronicles, "The League of Distinguished Knives." Dr. P had advised Cashman to seek out these three scoundrels while Cashman was a student at the University of Hawaii. Cashman met Pete Lockery and Tim O'Riordan in Thailand. Meeting Seamus Campbell in Laos completed the "Hat Trick."

police when she tried to overcharge you for an evening's entertainment.¹¹ That incident is legend at the University of Hawaii."

A light bulb went off in Seamus' head. He knew that I knew the real Seamus Campbell. "Cashman!! Do you work for ADB? Pete Lockery told me about you. Come in and have a seat. Would you like a croissant and some coffee?"

"Do you have time? Your secretary said you were busy meeting important people."

"No worries, Cashman. That's what I have her tell all the government officials and losers from international development agencies who want to see me about some cockamamie development project. I wouldn't have time to hang around all day reading my newspaper, drinking coffee, and playing video games if I spent time with such riff-raff. Most days I don't do anything but dress like this and look important to avoid all the idiots roaming around the UN compound."

Seamus Campbell had risen to a position of prominence where he did the least amount of work possible and still made good money by appearing self-important and avoiding people. We were obviously birds of a feather. It should come as no surprise to the reader that Larry Cashman and Seamus Campbell immediately hit it off famously.

It was late in the afternoon when we finished trading war stories. "Seamus, do you like to drink single malt scotch whiskey and smoke cigars? If you do, I have a bottle of whiskey and some Cubans at the ADB office. Would you like to go to the Lo Stivale Restaurant for some whiskey and a smoke?"

Seamus didn't need any convincing. "Does the Tin Man have a sheet-metal dick? You bet your ass I do. Let's vacate these premises."

After I fetched the whiskey and cigars, Seamus and I relocated to the Lo Stivale Restaurant, which was the best Italian restaurant in Vientiane. When Palomede Jupien, Toby Suykerbuck, and Pete Hayman heard of our plan, they dropped everything, fetched some single malt scotch whiskey, and we all convened at Lo Stivale for an evening of drinking, smoking, and bullshitting. The owner of Lo Stivale, a swarthy Italian rogue named Domenico, joined us for the festivities. When some of his customers complained about the smoke and ribald language, he unceremoniously threw them out of the restaurant for interfering with our revelries.



That evening was the inaugural convocation of the Vientiane Single Malt Club. Our rogues' gallery of misfits and charlatans would henceforth meet every Wednesday evening at the Lo Stivale Restaurant for a night of drinking, smoking, and revelry. Sabrina and Seamus' wife, Etsuko, joined us so they could nag us about drinking and smoking too much. When visitors came to town, they were welcome to join the evening's festivities and a superb meal at Lo Stivale.

Attendance at Vientiane Single Malt club meetings became so popular that Seamus and I decided that we needed some entry criteria to screen out the rabble trying to become honorary members. We decided that, in order to join the Vientiane Single Malt Club meetings, attendees should meet four criteria: they

¹¹ See Volume 1, Chapter 10 of the Cashman Chronicles, "The League of Distinguished Knives." When Seamus' Chilean lady friend demanded \$200 and Seamus balked, she called the police. Seamus tossed her out the window to distract the police and steal away.

should have a detectable pulse; they should be able to breathe without the aid of a ventilator or any other mechanical device; they should have some electrical activity in their brain that could be detected with an EEG; and they should bring a bottle of single malt whiskey to the table.

When we eventually discovered that these rather low-bar criteria were in fact too stringent and prevented many eager attendees from joining, we decided to waive the first three requirements if prospective members could bring a bottle of single malt whiskey to the table.

The Vientiane Single Malt Club still meets once per week in Vientiane till this day.

Receiving my official authorization from the Lao government to work in Laos had the unpleasant consequence of requiring me to actually do some work. The Asian Development Bank had agreed to loan the Lao government a large sum of money to rebuild its health care system, beginning in the northern provinces of Xiengkhouang and Oudomxay. The immediate task at hand was to negotiate the numbers of hospitals and health centers to be built in Oudomxay (pronounced OO-DOME-SIGH) province with its provincial health officials. These were destined to be tense negotiations. Building hospitals and health centers were construction projects that would inject millions of US dollars into the local economies of these provinces.

These provinces, however, were located in the northern mountains of Laos near the Vietnamese and Chinese borders respectively, where tribal people still lived in prelapsarian innocence uncorrupted by modern finance and large cash infusions. Even the local Lao currency, the Kip, had hardly penetrated the largely barter economies in these two provinces. Building hospitals and health centers required architects to be hired, construction contracts to be tendered, construction materials to be purchased, and workers to be employed. With so much money being spent, the sharks and vultures would be out in force, waiting to devour any scraps remaining from the rotting corpse.

The provincial health officials in Oudomxay province had made their position quite clear – the more hospitals and health centers to be built, the merrier. They quickly realized that most of the money would be going through their hands in some fashion, and some would undoubtedly get stuck there. They were like kids let loose in a candy shop, chafing at the bit to gorge themselves on its contents.

There was a problem with their position. There were not enough physicians, nurses, and technicians in Laos to staff the new facilities. Nor did the government have the finances to pay for the recurrent costs these new facilities would need to function – staff salaries, electricity, drugs, supplies, reagents, equipment maintenance and repair, to name a few. There seemed to be a disconnect between how many hospitals and health centers they wanted built, and how many could realistically be staffed and financed. There would have to compromise on both sides. As such, we expected the upcoming negotiations with the provincial health authorities to be contentious to say the least.

Before departing for Oudomxay I called Seamus Campbell to get some advice. He had been involved in similar negotiations in Papua New Guinea.

“Why don’t I join you for the trip to Oudomxay?” he offered. “I’ve never been to northern Laos and it will get me away from my office and the incessant stream of lower life forms that I must deal with on a daily basis. Perhaps I can help with the negotiations too. It sounds like you’ll need some help!”

That sounded like a good plan. Seamus and I would travel to Oudomxay together for the negotiations. Before we left Palomede Jupien pulled us aside. He had been to Oudomxay many times, and provided us with some useful but rather shocking advice as we approached these negotiations.

“The Lao are kind, gentle, serene, gracious, and dignified people. The tribal people who live in the northern provinces, on the other hand, can be crude, bombastic, boorish, and inclined to drink to excess. Our counterparts at the Provincial Health Office in Oudomxay are rugged Khmu tribal people¹² who lived in caves during the war to protect themselves from the unrelenting US bombing. They have little time and even less patience for the refined, pampered ways of honkies representing international aid agencies.”

Palomede warned us that we might find our counterparts at the Oudomxay Provincial Health Office a bit unusual. The words he actually used to describe them were “wild men” and that these wild men were “totally off the wall.”

“During a meeting or a negotiation, they will try to shock you with their behavior, to offend your sensibilities, to throw you off guard,” Palomede cautioned. “They’ll do anything to gain an advantage. If you show them you are shocked or offended, they will intensify their boorish behavior and then you’ve had it.”

I didn’t quite know how to interpret this warning, but as Seamus and I prepared to travel to Oudomxay to negotiate the construction of sizable numbers of hospitals and health centers, I was filled with a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach and a sense of deep foreboding of what would happen.

“One more thing,” Palomede warned. “No matter what, don’t let your guard down. Even when things are going well, they will come back at you. They always want to have the last word.”

What made the prospect of this negotiation more daunting was that our counterparts from the central Ministry of Health in Vientiane decided, at the last minute, not to join us. “You negotiate with them first,” they proclaimed uneasily. “We’ll join later if there are unresolved issues.”

They were clearly throwing the lambs into the lions’ den first to satiate their ravenous appetites before confronting them themselves. Seamus, who was also a notorious poltroon, and I were scared shitless as we boarded the plane for Oudomxay.

The 15 seat Chinese made aircraft that transported us to Muang Xay (pronounced Moo-Ung Sigh), the capital city of Oudomxay Province, was being buffeted and tossed around as we flew between the mountains that surrounded Muang Xay. Several times it felt as if we would crash into the mountains or the rice fields below. It reminded me of flying in that helicopter over Palawan.¹³ The villagers were burning their rice fields on the sides of the mountains; slash and burn agriculture at its finest, creating convection currents that pummeled our little single engine aircraft around as if it were a toy. As our plane descended to land it was disconcerting to see that not only was the landing strip not paved, but there was a flock of

¹² The Khmu are the indigenous inhabitants of northern Laos, with a population of 500,000 living primarily in the five northern provinces of Laos. As Thai/Lao ethnic groups moved into Laos and inhabited the lowland area, the Khmu were forced to higher ground and live in the mountainous areas.

¹³ See Volume 2, Chapter 7 “The Philippines” for Cashman’s harrowing helicopter ride in Palawan

water buffaloes grazing on the ankle-high grass. The pilot had to buzz the runway three times to scatter the water buffaloes. I was relieved when we finally reached terra ferma.



The road from the airport to the city was so badly rutted with potholes and bomb craters that our vehicle slid into a ditch twice. Muang Xay was a dusty one horse town with no electricity, no running water, no hotels and no restaurants. Our hosts brought us to the Muang Xay market for a hearty lunch of congealed turkey blood, chunks of dog meat, beer and Lao whiskey. Between the harrowing flight, the obstacle course we navigated to get into town, and the tasty luncheon, Seamus and I were discombobulated and bewildered by the time we arrived at the Oudomxay Provincial Health Office for our

negotiations.

There were five wild men representing the Oudomxay Provincial Health Office sitting around the negotiation table, plus myself and Seamus. They were grunting and snorting in the local Khmu language, breaking into their highly accented Lao only when addressing us.¹⁴ After surveying the scene, it quickly became obvious that Seamus and I were the only ones in the room who were wearing shoes, using deodorant, had brushed their teeth today, had their clothes washed during the past week, and were still sober at 2 PM. A surlier, more ragged and unkempt bunch of tatterdemalion I had not met in my not-so-short and not-so-illustrious career.

The first hour passed uneventfully, as our counterparts recounted why they needed a hospital or health center in every rural hamlet, especially the ones where they or family members lived; while we explained the limitations imposed by staffing and recurrent funding to fulfill this desire. The discussion was surprisingly quite civil. Perhaps my apprehension was misplaced, I thought.

Then the negotiations bogged down on some thorny issues. The gentleman sitting directly across the table from me, who was leading his team in the negotiation, was being particularly obstinate and obnoxious. While lecturing at me, he looked me straight in the eyes, gestured menacingly, then he proceeded to insert his index finger into his nostril all the way up to the proximal phalanx, pulled out an enormous juicy goober, and stuck it into his mouth without missing a beat. He even slurped it on the way down and smacked his lips when it reached its intended destination. I almost fell out of my seat at this sight, but remembering Palomede's advice, I maintained my composure.

About five minutes later, while continuing his harangue unabated, the same guy blew his nose into his hand, producing a viscous wad of green snot, and threw it on the floor right in front of me. Splat!! Then he stomped on it with his bare foot to accentuate the effect. After this little display of local hospitality I began reeling. Larry Cashman doesn't do well with bodily fluids, especially when they're coming in my direction. But Seamus captured my gaze and warned me to keep cool.

¹⁴ I had been in Laos for five months when this negotiation took place and had made the transition from Thai to Lao, so comprehension was not a problem. Seamus had worked in Thailand for four years in the 1980s, was also fluent in Thai, and had become increasingly fluent in Lao. The Lao language was not a barrier for us. In Oudomxay, however, they spoke a crude form of Lao heavily accented by their native Khmu language.

At this juncture the Chief of the Oudomxay Provincial Health Office, an ornery character named Bounphone (pronounced BOON-PAWN), took the lead in the negotiations. His appearance was imposing, in no small measure due to his huge beer belly, small pointed head, and the oozing hemangioma under his mandible which distorted his face.

He picked up right where his friend left off. While ranting and raving about the need for a health center in his village, Bounphone coughed up a huge bolus of phlegm, turned to the open window directly behind him, and spit it out the window. As I watched the projectile waft lazily to the ground, I noticed for the first time the dead water buffalo that was lying right in the middle of the Provincial Health Office compound, no doubt placed there for our edification. It had obviously been dead for some time since its legs were already splayed in rigor mortis, and various scavengers were gathered round for a late lunch.



The wildmen of Oudomxay

I have always prided myself on my ability to adapt and remain composed in different socio-cultural situations. When that medicine man on the Navajo reservation tried to suck a tooth out of my shoulder, I stayed cool rather than punch him in the face.¹⁵ When I was captured by Khmer Seri guerillas because of Tim O’Riordan’s stubbornness, I concocted a plan to escape rather than strangle O’Riordan.¹⁶ The present circumstance, however, was testing the limits of my ability to remain calm. I didn’t know whether to laugh or vomit at their tactics. What I did know was that their antics were having the intended effect. The negotiations were going badly, I was being thrown off guard by their crude behavior, and my composure was rapidly waning. Unless some miraculous turnaround could be affected, the game was up for Seamus and me.

Just then, most propitiously, I felt some intestinal rumblings from all the congealed turkey blood, dog meat, and beer we had consumed for lunch. Two can play this game, I thought. Taking the initiative, I began explaining our position vociferously. Then, while looking them right in the eyes and without missing a beat, I delivered a thunderous fart of thermonuclear dimensions that almost blew the glass out of the windows. The wild men just loved that. It cracked them up. Immediately, the impasse was broken, both sides found ways to compromise, the negotiations were consummated, and we all went off to do what the wild men of Oudomxay do best — drink themselves into oblivion Lao style.

By the time we finished drinking with the wild men, Seamus and I had become one of the boys. We were also pretty loaded. Then Bounphone suggested that we meet later that evening at the local discotheque.

The discotheque, which the Lao affectionately called the “theque,” was an anomaly found throughout the rural areas of Laos. You could find a “theque” in every provincial capital city, regardless of its isolation.

¹⁵ See Volume 1, Chapter 7 “The Navajo Reservation,” for Cashman’s encounter with the Navajo medicine man.

¹⁶ See Volume 2, Chapter 1 “Nong Samet” for Cashman’s encounter with the Khmer Seri guerillas.

Although these provincial towns may not have running water or electricity, and at times not even a single hotel or restaurant, somehow they always had a “theque.”

By and large the “theque” was located in a decrepit building with seedy furniture, flashing dayglow lights, and a pasty Lao band playing traditional Lao music at deafening decibel levels so that lucky patrons could dance the Lam Wong. Seamus and I had never been to a “theque” before. This would be an interesting experience.



Pasty Lao Band at the “theque”

The “theque” in Muang Xay did not disappoint. It was musty and stunk of mildew. The concrete floor was stained with all manner of human secretions. The band played traditional Lao music on a stage framed by multi-colored, blinking dayglow lights. There were booths surrounding the dance floor with chintzy plastic sofas encircling a glass coffee table able to accommodate 10-15 people. There were five wild men from Oudomxay at the “theque” with their new farang buddies.

No sooner had we been seated than two bottles of Johnny Walker Red Label scotch whiskey, club soda, and some snacks appeared on our table. I nearly retched when I saw the Johnny Walker Red Label bottles before me. I stopped drinking cheap scotch 20 years ago, and Johnny Walker Red Label was rat gut. On closer inspection I noticed that the “Johnny Walker” label was spelled “Jhonny Walker,” making me doubt its authenticity. Talk about cheap whiskey.

The snacks were unrecognizable except for the boiled chicken feet and raw bamboo shoots. Some creature, probably reptilian, had been barbecued and skewered. Another plate contained a pile of fried insects of some unknown genus and species. None of the proffered victuals appeared appetizing or edible.

Then to our surprise seven Lao hostesses, dressed in elaborate traditional Lao attire, were escorted to our table, one for each member of our group. Their purpose, as we would later learn, was to mix our drinks, pour more whiskey if a glass was less than full, push the food on us, and serve as our dance partners. Not one of the hostesses was older than 20 years of age, and all were members of the different hill tribe groups living in the mountains of Oudomxay. And as a final treat none of them spoke much Lao.

It should be noted that our hostesses could provide other services as well, but only if their male partner could “sweet talk” them into it. This was a unique, and in some ways redeeming, feature of the Lao sex industry. The women were not obliged to have sex with their partner. They had to be “sweet talked” into it. There was even a Lao term for it. As soon as our hostesses were seated, our Lao friends began the mating ritual.

This left Seamus and me in a bind. We had no idea what was going on. While our hostesses urged us to drink more cheap whiskey and eat the nauseating food, interrupted by the occasional trip to the dance floor for the Lam Wong, the wild men of Oudomxay urged us to chat up the ladies. This was difficult for several reasons. First, the music was so loud we could hardly hear anything. Second, the hostesses spoke only the most basic Lao, and Seamus and I were not very good at chatting up teenage hill tribe girls with a 4th grade education in another language. But the wild men urged us to give it a try.

After 3 hours (and several more bottles of cheap whiskey) of this excruciating routine, the lights flickered on. There was a 12 AM curfew imposed by the government and it was now time for the “theque” to close. Deliverance at last! When the waiter arrived with the bill, Bounphone directed one of his cronies to pass the bill to Seamus and me. “Let the honkies pay,” he beamed. Looking at the bottom of the smudged receipt, Seamus and I were dismayed to discover that we were saddled with a bill for \$325.

In addition to the whiskey and snacks, there was a per hour charge for the scintillating conversation and companionship of the hostesses. This was highway robbery, especially when one considers that even the cheap whiskey was counterfeit. Seamus and I were apparently the suckers. Palomede had been right. The wild men of Oudomxay would be relentless and keep coming back at us until they won.

Seamus was particularly appalled by this rip-off. Being of Scottish heritage, he was “thrifty” by nature. He hated getting conned by a bunch of wild men. But he had an idea. While we both perused the bill, he came up with a plan..

“Pay the bill with these four \$100 bills,” he whispered as he produced four crisp bills from his wallet. “And tell them to keep the change.” This was an uncharacteristically magnanimous response from Seamus.

As I looked at him quizzically, he continued, “They’re counterfeit bills. The North Koreans have been passing them around Vientiane lately. UNDP has a project to find and destroy counterfeit bills. The project director gave me several of them as a souvenir. They’re excellent reproductions. Give them to the sneaky bastards to pay the bill. They deserve it.”

“What if we get in trouble for passing counterfeit bills?” I cautioned.

“These bills will be circulating in the black market in China by tomorrow afternoon. By the time they figure out they’re counterfeit, no one will be able to trace them. If they do, it will come back to the fat guy with the pointy head. He’s a big shot around here. No one will bother him.”

Seamus was right. Bounphone was like a king in Oudomxay. Plus the rule of law had not quite penetrated Oudomxay. These were not the first counterfeit bills to be passed around in Oudomxay. I was, however, more worried about the present situation. “What if the owner checks these bills when we pay, and notices something strange? We could be in big trouble. We need a diversion after Bounphone pays so we can get out of here pronto.”

“I can take care of that,” Seamus replied confidently. “Give him the bills.”

When I handed the bills to Bounphone and told him to keep the change, he nearly came in his pants. As soon as the transaction had been consummated, Seamus stuck his index finger down his throat and disgorged the contents of his stomach on to the table and slithered to the floor. The chicken feet and insect antenna lacing the vomit looked familiar.

This created the expected diversion. The last thing they wanted was a dead honky on their hands. The wild men whisked Seamus out of the “theque” and back to our room, where he conveniently recovered upon arrival.

We later heard that, back at the “theque” after Bounphone paid the bill, he used the change, which was returned in a wad of Lao Kip, to curry favor with the hostesses. He was hoping that, on his next trip to the “theque,” he could keep the “sweet talking” to a minimum and get right down to business.

After this little scam, Seamus and I were anxious to get out of Dodge. When the flight from Vientiane arrived the next day, we heaved a sigh of relief. It was our ticket to Vientiane and safety. When we saw the pilots in the market knocking down beer after beer and partying with the locals, we started worrying again. Finally, the pilots wobbled onto the plane and we boarded the flight to Vientiane.

As Seamus predicted, the counterfeit bills shortly wound up in China. The only problem was that the Chinese don't like to get scammed, and several Chinese ruffians showed up in Muang Xay to investigate. Suspicion immediately fell on Seamus and me. "We would never do such a dastardly thing," we responded with righteous indignation. "The \$100 bills we gave Bounphone were real. What happened after that was out of our hands. Maybe it was the North Koreans."

Fortunately for Seamus and me, there was no way they could question the integrity of two fine, upstanding members of the international development assistance community whose agencies were providing the Lao government with oodles of money. Suspicion even fell upon Bounphone, but he deflected it with alacrity to one of his subordinates. If we ever return to Oudomxay for another negotiation, there will only be four wild men to abuse us.