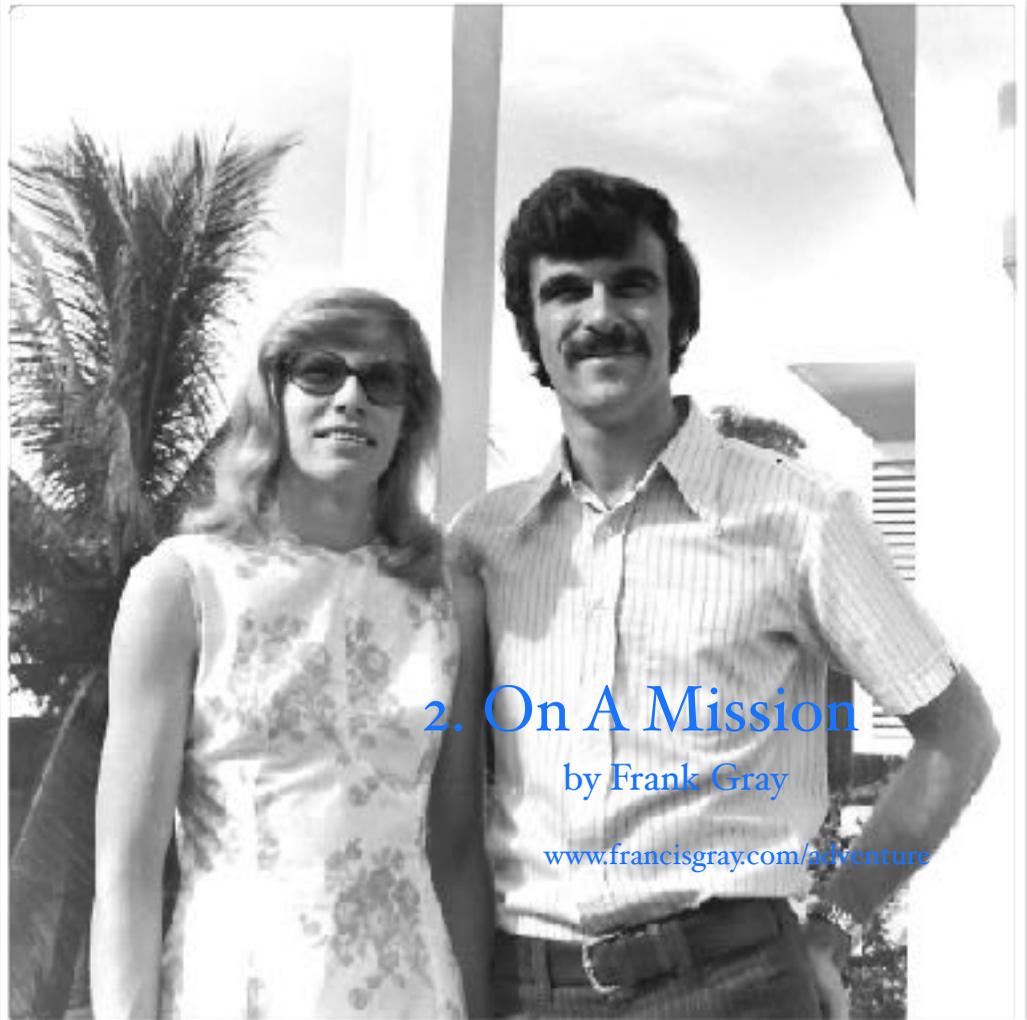


The Adventure

On a Mission

THE ADVENTURE



2. On A Mission

by Frank Gray

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And so it was that I boarded a Comet 4 of Dan Air at Gatwick airport on August 24th 1971. I had found a cheap way of getting back to Bangkok.

Responding to an advertisement in the Daily Telegraph by a group calling themselves 'Expo International' I finally obtained my ticket in the late afternoon of the day before I left. It required my catching a train to London at short notice and reaching the travel office just before it closed. It was tight!

At the airport I was given a membership card showing that I was a member of the 'Commonwealth and North Atlantic Teachers' Association'. It was during the dodgy days of group



Comet 4 at Gatwick

discounted travel but I was happy to play along with the system. When our flight was called nothing could have delighted me more than to discover that we would be flying in a de

Havilland Comet, the very first jet passenger airliner, operated by Dan Air. (Never mind

the horrific catastrophic disasters associated with earlier versions of this innovative plane!).

Upon arrival in Bangkok things did not look too rosy. Several missionaries from Laos were there, at the C&MA Guest House, among them my good friend Don Scott. He told me that Vientiane was badly flooded and Wattay airport closed, and that he needed to get back quickly. Working now with World Vision, Don had his car in Bangkok and he hatched a plan for us to drive to Udorn and from there catch a ride on a US Army helicopter - a Jolly Green Giant. He had some good contacts at the airbase and was able to get us both on the manifest for a flight on September 1. There was a slight hitch: they had not realised that neither of us carried US passports... Oh well! And so it was that after a short flight we landed on high ground at the That Luang fairground. There were no immigration facilities so we had to report the next day to get our passports stamped.

For living space I was offered a small single room apartment on the small World Vision compound where Don and his family lived. They were a lot of fun, especially with their four children, two older girls and twin boys, Jeff and Mark. The arrangement worked just fine for me and I was glad to have the opportunity for joining in the life of the family and playing with their four children. For the first time in my life I became 'Uncle Frank'.



Jeff, Heidi and Mark Scott

The day began with breakfast which was always a challenge as I became accustomed to new foodstuffs while experiencing the drama of eating in the company of small children who provided constant lively entertainment – and education! As an early bird I normally have no trouble getting started at the beginning of the day. But it soon became apparent that I was struggling. In fact I often felt quite woozy in the mornings – as soon as I woke up. Strange! The children made fun of me when I came down to breakfast.

I also realised that there was a strange smell in my room. It was a distinctive sweet, sickly smell.

I also realised that there was a strange smell in my room. It was a distinctive sweet, sickly smell. Some mornings it was stronger than others... I became curious.

At the far end of my room opposite the door was a window with iron bars and mosquito screen. The window did not afford a view because it was backed up against another building. But as I looked down through the iron bars to the floor below I could make out just enough to see men sitting around a small flame with their pipes, smoking.

Opium addicts! It was their smoke that was wafting upwards into my bedroom, and I was getting their leftovers! My Canadian friends had a good laugh when I told them. I also told my Lao friend who was a policeman and he came round to check out my story. Opium dens were illegal so he soon got onto the case, and the opium smell went away.

Now back in Vientiane I lost no time in getting back to the studio I had helped build. I had a marvellous Yamaha trail bike that I was offered at a nominal price. I loved it. It was perfect for riding out to the Laos Bible Training Center (LBTC) along the rough trails and laterite-surfaced roads. Conveniently along the road to the LBTC was the house where missionaries



Laos Bible Training Centre

Mac and Helen Sawyer lived - and Helen was a great cook. She arranged to provide me with a cooked lunch during the working week - and that was greatly appreciated. She also headed up the literature work for the mission so we had lots to talk about.

But my first day in the studio it was as though the devil was waiting for me. He tapped me on the shoulder and sneered, "So, Mr Gray, "(we never were on a first name basis), "what do you know about program production and running a recording studio?" Now that was a good point - and not one that I had honestly thought about. Then I recognised where this was coming from. "Get lost!" I rebuked him. "God has called me back here and I am trusting him to show me all those things!" And he did...

It soon became clear to me that there was no limit to what could be done in a sound recording studio

It soon became clear to me that there was no limit to what could be done in a sound recording studio. There were so many languages spoken (about seventy among 3+ million people) and such high levels of illiteracy among a mostly rural population.

That studio soon became my life - for six days a week. Its original purpose was to record radio programs in the Hmong language to send to Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) in Manila, Philippines. I knew this station well. Since my arrival two years earlier, I used to enjoy their Overseas English Service, morning, lunchtime, and evening - Morning Coffee, Cowboy Joe, and Harold Sala's Guidelines for Living, all on shortwave.

Before the Vientiane studio was built the recording of FEBC programs involved taking a team of pastors to Thailand every month or two, to use the C&MA's studios in Khonkaen. A similar team would arrive from Savannakhet in southern Laos. It was very time-consuming back then, requiring two days of travel each way.



Nyaj at recording console

It was not long before I recruited Nyaj to work with me. He became responsible for all the recording and editing of tapes and became very good at it. He was quite creative with many good ideas that we bounced off each other. He also was like a younger brother.

We greatly enjoyed learning from scratch, though I was not a complete novice. I had spent some of my spare time back in England with Bible Comes Alive Recordings (BCAR) who had a studio in the basement of Reading YMCA.

One of my first discoveries was the need to provide material in a form that people loved to listen to. I made this discovery when I first tried to apply simple research methods, designing a basic survey questionnaire that asked questions about listening habits. Nyaj went off armed with a pile of questionnaires for people to complete. "Bo hu" was the most common response, accompanied by a shrug. "Don't know". In sheer vexation it became clear to us both that this approach wasn't working. I suggested to Nyaj that he walk the streets to see if he could overhear what people were listening to on their radios. They had no glass in their windows! The answer was unanimous: Lam Lao! To my ears it sounded like a monotonous, screechy singing accompanied by the bamboo khene. I thought it sounded horrible, but the Lao loved it and would listen to it for hours.

If that was the case, we would have to produce Lam Lao. But how? Having worked at Lao National Radio I had some



Mo Lam group showing their dancing skills

contacts, among them the Mo Lam group. Would they be interested in doing some work for us? To my surprise I found that we

already had a couple of Lao books of Christian poetry written in metric form. I gave them a copy to look at and they were very interested, so a deal was arranged. The recording sessions went without a hitch, first one book, then the next. These recordings on cassette tape were a big hit. 'More!' was the cry.

Very soon we had run out of new material. What would we do? We decided to give them a Bible and asked them if they could take Luke's Gospel and turn it into Lam Lao. Yes! And so it went on. The result? Quality material that proved to be excellent value for money and which could be used either on cassettes or edited for radio.

The Hmong also had their own style of Lam. With no musical instrument to accompany her, Doua Her would come and enthral us with her storytelling in song, all without any written script. One story on Creation lasted a full 45 minutes non-stop. Sounding distinctly different from Lam Lao it had both long glides and abrupt endings. It was through storytelling of this kind that the Hmong had a rich oral history, even one that included the Flood!

One day we had a visitor from Thailand come to our studio. He and his family had worked with the minority people of northwest Thailand and Myanmar over many years but LaVerne's specialty was pentatonic music. He was an ethnomusicologist. He pointed out that the predominant music of Southeast Asia was based on five tones, not seven like we are familiar with. Thus when missionaries translated western hymns the words may have been good but very often

So I played him some of the Lam recordings - and he was blown away.

the music, if not changed, would create endless headaches - because they could not hit the half-notes of our seven-tone music. Two notable exceptions were Auld Lang Syne and Amazing Grace.

He was trying to make the point that we needed to spend more time developing pentatonic music for hymns. So I played him some of the Lam

recordings - and he was blown away. He agreed that we had gone one step further and was duly impressed by this serendipitous discovery.

Another visitor I had one day was Lloyd, a young carpenter from Canada. He was about to start work with another mission agency in southern Laos. I had first met him on his arrival in Laos but he was now in town looking for a vehicle that he could buy. We had a lot of fun going round town on my motorcycle looking for vehicles. He soon found a white pickup and drove it away, down to Kengkok in the south. Later, he and his housemate Sam, invited me down to Kengkok to stay with them. However, tragedy struck a short time later.

In October of 1972 communist operatives entered their small town, captured two girls in their team and

Weeks later we learned they had been taken to Hanoi and were imprisoned along with captured US servicemen in the infamous 'Hanoi Hilton'.

they tied them up - then burned the house down with them inside. Aware of serious problems in town Lloyd and Sam were on their way to link up with their team but were hi-jacked in their pickup as they drove into town.



Fence where Lloyd and Sam tied up

They were tied to a fence for a whole day before being taken away - but no one knew where. Weeks later we learned they had been taken to Hanoi and were imprisoned along with captured US servicemen in the infamous 'Hanoi Hilton'. They were later released together with other POWs in March 1973. Hearing of my friends' disappearance hit me hard and brought me into a state of depression for several days.

As a single person I would sometimes go alone on trips to Thailand. In Laos it was not possible to go far by road before straying into enemy-held territory. Thus Thailand was a popular place and we had perpetual Thai visas in case we had to make a quick exit. On one such trip to Bangkok I had been buying up suitable Thai Christian literature that I could take back to Vientiane. There were books of poetry, but also John Bunyan's classic *Pilgrim's Progress*.

When I went to catch my overnight sleeper back to Nongkhai on the Mekong border I took the opportunity to change travellers' cheques in the bank at the main railway station, Hua Lampong (the Big Loudspeaker!). I needed to produce my

ID so I gave my passport. But when given the cash I inadvertently forgot to collect my passport and went and boarded the train which left around 6.30pm. It was not till bedding down around 10pm that I suddenly realised my mistake. No passport! There was no point in getting off the train at the next stop so I had to sit it out till I arrived in Nongkhai around 5.30am just as it was getting light on that

Then I had an idea: I would go and chat with the monks in the nearby Buddhist temple

Thursday morning. Happily I knew where I had left it so when I phoned the British Embassy around 9am I was able to tell them. They said they could retrieve it but could not promise how soon I would get it, perhaps Friday afternoon.

So, what could I do to pass the time? My first idea was to use the time to catch up with writing postcards to family and friends - so I bought ten and set to work. "Dear Mum and Dad....", "Dear Grandma...", etc. It soon got boring - depressing, in fact - as I was stuck in a place that I did not want to be, and there was nothing I could do about it. (It was the same kind of feeling that I had in Seoul, Korea, many years later when flights to Europe were cancelled due to the Icelandic volcano erupting).

Then I had an idea: I would go and chat with the monks in the nearby Buddhist temple. It was a great way of practising my Thai/Isaan/Lao since the languages are very similar. It was also very easy to get a hearing as they enjoyed meeting foreigners, especially ones that wanted to speak their language. It worked! We had a great time, and I even went off

to eat together with them in a nearby noodle shop - at my expense. They provided the three-wheeled samlor (tricycle taxi) and I paid for the food. It was a deal! I started talking about my books, too, and Pilgrim's Progress. They were interested.

But where should I stay that night? My money was running out, and I had no passport to change travellers' cheques. Happily the abbot of the temple (it was a teaching temple with many novices) got to hear about me and invited me over for the evening to have some conversation. We agreed to discuss comparative religion, Buddhism and Christianity. But it ended up with him asking most of the questions and me doing my best to explain. After about three hours of dialogue it was time for bed, and he graciously gave me a room and a key to his private bathroom.

I took my turn with the novices to eat the leftovers of what the monks had been out collecting in their bowls that morning

I slept quite well until it was time for breakfast. And that was when the fun began as I took my turn with the novices to eat the leftovers of what the monks had been out collecting in their bowls that morning - along the streets. It was not particularly appetising - dried up rice and leftover bits of egg. But the deeper thought troubling me was whether this constituted 'meat offered to idols'? Or perhaps the Elijah analogy was better, except they were not ravens...! Anyhow, I was thankful. I was much relieved when the afternoon train arrived from Bangkok bringing with it my passport and enabling me to get home before the weekend set in.

As for the Pilgrim's Progress book, it was soon to come in very useful as we ventured into drama. John Bunyan's classic was in the Thai language but could be easily adapted into Lao. That would make an excellent drama. There was always something happening as Christian and his travelling companion Faithful moved from crisis to crisis as they travelled toward the Celestial City. It is one of those timeless stories that transcends time and culture and addresses many of the main themes of life and death, good and evil. Again we needed to go outside of the Christian community to find professional actors to record the sound track. The group only consisted of four players one of whom used to provide the voice track in Lao for movies at the local cinema, as the movie ran. He was reputed to have eleven voices so could even perform much of the drama on his own. We ended up with twenty four 15-minute episodes that have endured for many years.

It soon became clear to me that the studio held numerous opportunities for expanding our range. One of these was to produce amplifiers for up-country churches. Another missionary, the MAF pilot Dave Swanson, made the metal boxes out of sheet metal, while we assembled the electronics and designed them to take multiple power sources: 'D'-size batteries, car batteries, etc. They became quite popular in the churches, especially when the rain beat upon the tin roofs of the churches, and babies were crying.

We also imported a few reels of movies – especially those produced by the Southern Baptists in Thailand. *Maesarieng Ti Rak* (Beloved Maesariang) was one which they had

produced that proved very popular. Another was *Kheun Teem* (Come Back Home) the retelling of the Prodigal Son, but in a contemporary Thai context. Because movies were quite rare at the time in Laos they had novelty value. Sometimes we were invited to Buddhist temples to show movies when they



XW-TAL - The MAF plane

held a 'boon' (festival). We also had a generator set to provide portability, and a very large screen to string between the palm trees.

One Christmas the MAF plane flew us up to a Christian Hmong village where we set up our screen strategically in a large natural amphitheatre on the hillside. Under the stars it was quite cold, but the hillside was packed with hundreds of Hmong people, many of whom had walked a day or two just to see the spectacle. Overhead we could see giant B52s heading across the night sky, going to or from their bombing missions. It was quite surreal.

Cassette tapes were also the popular, affordable medium at that time. We were able to import quite cheaply boxes of basic Hitachi cassette players. We recorded and produced cassette recordings in around six or seven languages. The most

popular were the tapes of Lam but also drama from Pilgrim's Progress.



Friends come to say goodbye to Pilgrim

At Christmas we played an active part in supporting special events. We produced a special version of Pilgrim's Progress for stage. Bible School students, most of them Hmong or Khmu, would act out the scenes, lip-synching with the audio

sound track that played via loudspeakers. It worked brilliantly. Villagers who watched were quite mystified, however, as they saw non-Lao actors speaking such perfect and entertaining Lao! How could it be...?

I also had some contact with the missionary folk in Savannakhet, mostly from OMF and the Swiss Mission Evangelique. They also had a recording studio there which was run by Jean-Jacques Dunant. I would go there from time to time to check it out and to keep up the contact. On one occasion I arrived there to discover some consternation over their shortage of water, because the electric pump would no longer pump water from the well. In questioning them I found that the electricity company had recently installed new generators at the power station and since then the pump had stopped working. It made the sound of working but would not pump! We found the 2-phase pump was rotating in the wrong

direction, because the phases had been crossed at source! Just by crossing over the connections we got the water flowing again.

As a single I used to spend a lot of time with the Christian young people at the church. Not only did I teach a group of them English three nights a week, but a fourth night was Bible teaching and a fifth night (Saturday) their Youth



My English class with Big Sister (2nd from left)

Club. They were great fun and there have been many lasting friendships that continue to this day. Most of that group are now in the USA and we keep in touch via Facebook.

The biggest youth event every year was the Youth Conference, for which I was the photographer. Young people would come from around the country. A group came from Savannakhet one year, happy to link up with young people from the north for the first time. The 4th annual youth conference in 1973, around Easter time, was one of the most memorable. The main speaker was pastor Amnuay from Thailand. God spoke to the young people powerfully and there was much repentance. Young people were on their knees around the auditorium after Amnuay had

spoken.. It had been a very meaningful encounter, with many friendships developing, and saying goodbyes at the end of the week was extremely hard.

By January of 1973 the Vietnam War was moving into its final phase. The Peace Accords were drawn up in Paris calling for a complete cessation of fighting and the withdrawal of troops. In Laos these accords were signed in February and a new coalition government was put in place. I had been having a holiday on my own at the time, travelling down the Malay peninsula to Singapore.

On my way out I had first gone to the east coast of West Malaysia, the same coast where South Pacific was filmed. I had taken the train from Bangkok to Sungai Kolok where the eastern spur terminated and I needed to literally walk across the sleepers of the railway track to enter Malaysia from Thailand.

I had been able to book a few days in a government Rest House on the beach in Terengganu. It was the same beach where the turtles come up on a specific tide each year to lay their eggs in the sand. I soon got bored, with no one to talk to, and the only company I could muster were the small crabs on the beach. After a few days I was ready to move on so headed for Penang. It was there in Batu Ferringhi that Chris and I had spent a few days of our first holiday just three years earlier, enchanted by the mynah birds and the gentle lapping of the wavelets on the sandy shore.

This time I stayed at the Christian Conference Centre. I remember going down the beach one day and watched the older men jogging along the beach. "Anyone could do that!" I said to myself. I needed something more challenging. Back at the CCC I enquired if they had a bicycle. They did, a fold-up one, but that was better than nothing. So the next day I committed to cycling around Penang Island, forty six miles in total!

Suddenly I was overcome with emotion with strong feelings of being part of God's creation.

The following day I was back on the beach, satisfied with my adventure. I relaxed, lay back, and gazed up at the palm trees waving their fronds in the gentle, warm breeze. Suddenly I was overcome with emotion with strong feelings of being part of God's creation. It brought tears of joy to my eyes, and a strong sense of God's love for me! I started writing poetry, several poems. This

was not something I had done before, except at school. I was feeling incredibly creative, and this stayed with me several days, even as I travelled back to Laos. And then it began to wear off as I got back to work again.

But while I had been away the scenery in Vientiane had shifted slightly with the arrival of a long-haired strawberry blonde from Holland! I had seen her photo in a mission publication and had been duly impressed. Now she was here - Hennie de Boer. Could it be true?

One day she was being given the grand tour and was brought to see the studio at the Bible School. I remember playing her

the LP record of Parchment and the featured song "Light Up the Fire". Hennie was impressed, especially as she had recently been in London and joined in singing that song at the Festival of Light in Trafalgar Square.

A few weeks later and it was time for me to go home to England for a break.

Romance was not easy to cultivate in the mission circle. The C&MA recognised that single males in their ranks could cause considerable disruption among the many single lady missionaries. There were numerous stories of romances that had back-fired, or single missionaries falling in love, either with complications or amazing simplicity. The story is told of one young missionary male on his way back to UK from Thailand who found himself seated on the plane next to an attractive European single lady missionary whom he had never met before. By the time they arrived in London he had proposed to her and they were engaged!

In my case my Lao friends were clearly getting worried about me. By the autumn of 1973 I had returned to UK twice, but twice had returned unattached. "Surely his parents must be having a hard time finding a wife for poor Frank! What could be wrong?" they would say.

the big challenge was to verbalise to God that I was willing to go back to Laos again, even if it meant not getting married.

It was something I had wrestled with back in England. Hebrews 12 was a chapter I agonised over: God disciplines us for our good. All my friends back home had been

getting married while I had been in Laos. I never attended a single wedding of any of them, especially my university friends. I also knew that I could find myself in a huge dilemma if I met a girl in UK who had no interest in going to Laos where I knew God wanted me to be.

For me the big challenge was to verbalise to God that I was willing to go back to Laos again, even if it meant not getting married. That was a big struggle, but a joyful relief once I had put it back in God's hands. It was all a matter of trust.

After days of listening and subsequent discussion they would bring out their demon things, fetishes and other symbols...

During my two years working in the recording studio I had been privileged to witness the impact that the shortwave radio broadcasts from FEBC in Manila were having on the Hmong people (we knew them as Meo in those days) living in the mountains of northern Laos. Quite often a delegation of a few Hmong men would arrive in Vientiane in search of the source of these radio programs, the only address given on air being Post Box 3.

They were sent by families in their village who had been listening to the broadcasts and now wanted to believe. Could pastors and missionaries come to help them? This would often result in five, ten or more families 'entering' the Christian faith. After days of listening and subsequent discussion they would bring out their demon things, fetishes and other symbols of the evil spirits that had dominated their lives, and burn them together as an outward demonstration of their new faith in Jesus. It was

also a clear and open rejection of the demons that had held so much control over them. Such demonstrations of faith also had knock-on effects as they got off opium, became healthier, planted new cash crops and began to prosper. This did not go un-noticed in their communities. It was a visible sign of transformation in action.



Two young Hmong record radio programs

Now it was my privilege again to become part of the supply chain recording the programs in our modest studio and sending them to Manila. Tapes were sent to FEBC via the chaplain's office at the US Clark Air Base north of Manila.

We also had a desire to put Christian radio programs on the air locally if that were possible. That had been my prayer during my VSO days as we worked on installing a second medium-wave transmitter on a new frequency. For months we had tried getting programs on some of the small local stations that were springing up across town, but, alas, when the start date came nothing happened. This happened more than once and resulted in huge disappointment. Finally we discovered that no one dared to air Christian radio programs without a precedent first being set by Lao National Radio, the government station.

This meant that we had no option but to bite the bullet and visit LNR. Having worked there I knew whom to contact. First

At his suggestion we prepared to meet with the final authority... the Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma.

in line was Thao Ouphet, the Program Director. He pointed us to the director, Madame Somphou. She was very polite but kindly pointed out that LNR belonged to the Lao Government so we should get the approval of the Minister of Information.

Again the Minister politely listened then referred us to the Minister for Internal Affairs, Pheng Phongsavanh, who would shortly be signing the coalition agreement with Phoumi Vonvichit. The response was the same the higher we went up the ladder. At his suggestion we prepared to meet with the final authority in the Lao Government, the Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma.

Senior missionary Dr Ed Roffe set up the appointment and accompanied me on my mission. Our request: could we please put our Christian radio programs on Lao National Radio? The gentleman politely listened very attentively to our request - spoken in French, the official government language. Dr Roffe did most of the talking and then we awaited his response. Lao National Radio, the prime minister reasoned, belonged to the Lao Government. Laos was a Buddhist country, therefore it would not be possible to grant permission. He was very sorry.

I left that meeting determined to find some way to make it happen. There had to be a way. We just had to find it. The answer was an English language music program. I had been trolling around to see what might already be available.

The Southern Baptists produced two good programs - *Country Crossroads* and *Master Control*. I liked them. Back to the Bible might also be possible. I listened to the programs by Ord Morrow and thought we could use the speaking part - but the music was far too outdated for the audience we sought. I asked their permission to use the talk without the music - but was denied! They could not make any exceptions, I was told. How sad, I thought.

But that did not stop us using the Southern Baptists' *Country Crossroads* (a country music program) and *Master Control*, another trendy 'top-twenty' music program, as part of our bid. We also wanted to have a program with local flavour and came up with *Happy Day*, another music program that used LP records we had on hand in the studio. I took the package to LNR for them to review. They liked them. The funds were found to put them on the air on LNR's second medium wave channel at 7.30 every evening for half-an-hour.

By that time I had already struck up a friendship with Hennie, who had arrived on the field, coincidental with the signing of the 1973 Peace Accords. When she first arrived it was not so easy to get acquainted thanks to a rather controlling housemate. But now that person had gone home things began to blossom.

At the end of October each year the That Luang Fair was held, an international trade fair that also included plenty of amusements, including a (not-so) big wheel. One evening Hennie and I met up at the Lao Christian bookstall then slipped away to try our hand at the Big Wheel. It was a

hoot! As we sat in our chair together we soon found it was not made for people our size. As it swung forward we found our feet were within touching distance of the chair below! That was our first date.

"This is beautiful" he said. "Can you teach me more?"

Around that time the Good News Bible in simplified English was published, Today's English Version (TEV). In addition to regular hardback and paperback editions there were also two shortened 'popular' versions that were made, a tabloid newspaper version and an abbreviated collection with the title *The Man You Cannot Ignore*. Our

Southern Baptist friends were distributing these in Vientiane. Some of them fell into the hands of some Buddhist monks.

One day one of the monks came to the Baptists' office. He was pointing to the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on The Mount. "This is beautiful" he said. "Can you teach me more?" We learned there were a number of monks were interested in studying in the temple so I was one of those who went along to teach them one evening a week. What an opportunity! It gave them something to meditate on when Jesus said "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." It was also a huge lesson for me as I used to think "Why couldn't Jesus say more clearly what he meant with the Beatitudes?" I suddenly realised how Asian he was!

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The local radio programs on LNR were taking up more of my time, and Hennie was glad to help, especially when I got sick with a kind of malaria that cycled every 48 hours. It was ultimately killed off by a handful of chloroquine procured by Wayne Persons, one of the senior missionaries. Hennie had fun standing in for me in presenting the Happy Day music program. In fact I think she was more of a natural!

Sadly Hennie was to spend Christmas with a Dutch friend, Corrie, in Thailand. She had come to put up some Christmas decorations in my apartment just a few doors away from hers (I had moved twice since my opium experience), then took off before I could thank her. I was touched. Christmas suddenly seemed very empty without her and she was not due back till New Year. But amazingly she came back two days early. What a surprise! We found that our feelings were mutual and we couldn't wait to see each other again.

It was not long before we were discussing the possibility of marriage. But first we needed to get engaged. For that we came up with a rather novel plan, and that was to ride out to the middle of the Mekong river on my Yamaha trail bike, on the sandbank. Of course there was no shade to be had from the burning sun so I went on the hunt for some driftwood that we could use to set up as a bivouac using our towels. Bringing back a banana tree log on my shoulder I threw it down on the ground, and out slithered a krait, one of the deadliest snakes around!

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After going through the hoops of mission protocol for marriages on the field (something we had been blissfully unaware of) we were finally able to plan for a June wedding, but again there were complications. Hennie's flatmate, Hazel, was very sick and had to go away to hospital in Bangkok. It was customary to take a friend because nursing care was

limited, so Hennie and Doris Whitelock, our Scottish neighbour, went with her.

This upset our wedding plans. For legal reasons, we would need to go to Thailand for a civil wedding and then have a church wedding back in Laos. That is how we ended up with two wedding days, one in May and one in June. My parents were unable to come but unbeknown to us, Hennie's mother arrived the day we left by train for Bangkok for the civil wedding. She had come with one of Hennie's friends.



Wedding party (l-r): Clem Dreger, Hennie's mother, Annamarie (flower girl), Hennie, Frank, Jack Kinnison (best man), Don Scott, Ed Roffe

In the end it all came together, even though we had to arrange everything ourselves including finding a bridesmaid (Corrie, the Dutch friend from Thailand). We also needed some flowers in season (not much to choose from except purple

chrysanthemums which were not a good colour according to our Lao friends), and a reception on a shoestring at the ACA restaurant.

Clem Dreger, our mission leader, gave Hennie away and Jack, a Southern Baptist missionary, served as best man. My good Canadian friend Don (with World Vision) officiated. He had reserved that role a few years before. "Look at it this way, Frank," he once told me, "You are two-thirds married: you're willing, I'm willing - we just have to find the girl!"). He kept his promise.

We had about 150 friends of all nationalities at the reception before heading off for our honeymoon in Thailand. This too had its complications because we were originally planning on going by motorbike, but sadly my beautiful Yamaha 125 trail bike was stolen from beneath our apartment the week before. We had to borrow the mission's Toyota Hilux pickup instead (which proved to be a lot more comfortable!) to visit some of our favourite places in northern Thailand.

Just a few weeks after our wedding I had to go to Hong Kong for a Christian communications workshop at Castle Peak. The timing was unfortunate, yet viewed in the long-term it proved to be not only timely, but pivotal.

Travelling to Bangkok by train I then took Air Siam for my very first flight on a Boeing 747. The size was awesome - and flying into the old Kai Tak airport took my breath away as we made a tight turn and flew in past apartment buildings where we could see people watching TV.



Dr Engel (with camera) near²⁸
China border

Gladys Jasper, a literature guru with C&MA, had arranged for me to go, and it met my itch. Dr James Engel from Wheaton College Grad School was the main presenter. It was my first exposure to what later became known as The Engel Scale, the relevance of which to the situation I faced back in Laos was immediately obvious. Light bulbs turned on! It was also a wonderful opportunity to meet other Christians in Asia involved in communications.

Two of these were Major Taing Chhirc and another brother from Cambodia, both eminent leaders in the Khmer church that was emerging amidst the burgeoning crisis there. Tragically both were to lose their lives the following April at the hands of Pol Pot.

Being out of Laos also provided me an opportunity to visit FEBC in Manila to whom we had been supplying Hmong language programming. Efren Pallorina met me at the airport and drove me back to Christian Radio City Manila (CRCM), as it was known. It housed not only the two local Filipino stations - DZAS and DZFE - but also the extensive overseas services and their Asian staff. It was magical! I visited the shortwave transmitter site in Bocaue, just north of Manila. When I saw the antennas on wooden poles out in the paddy fields I was amazed that these modest bits of equipment could have such a significant impact among the various people groups of the southeast Asia region and beyond, to China, India and the USSR. I also met many of the missionaries and had an on-air interview in the main studio.

But returning home to Hennie was also memorable! As was the custom, once I got off the overnight train from Bangkok in Nongkhai, I took one of the small ferry boats across the Mekong. To my surprise and great delight, there was Hennie standing alone, at the bottom of the steps down to the river, in her red and black silk dress, waiting for me. Stunning! I had come home, my very first experience of this since getting married. Coming home was always to be something very special for me in the years ahead following numerous overseas trips that were to become a feature of our married life.

NOTE:

This is the second chapter of a series that will be published monthly on issuu.com. To stay in contact you can visit the dedicated website www.francisgray.com/adventure or look for the Adventure group on Frank Gray's Facebook page. You can also see all chapters as they become available.