

The Adventure

Year of Drama

THE ADVENTURE



3. Year of Drama

by Frank Gray

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Our time in Laos was soon to come to a dramatic end. By the Spring of 1975 the situation was beginning to get quite tense in Vientiane. Communist elements in the shaky coalition were making their presence felt.

By now the capital was infiltrated by hundreds of 'ai nong' cadres recognisable by their floppy khaki fatigues. Many of them were just young boys. They lived together in the large, French colonial-style houses in the downtown area of Vientiane and were known for holding seminars on the benefits of communism in an attempt to win hearts and minds.

The Pathet Lao were Lao people who lived in the mountains of Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang ... now they were in town, on our doorstep - literally.

During my years at Lao National Radio we had monitored the wire services of Khaosan Pathet Lao (KPL) which continually lambasted the 'US and their lackeys'. The Pathet Lao were Lao people who lived in the mountains of Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang close to the border with North Vietnam. But now they were in town, on our doorstep - literally. One place they took over was the Settha Palace Hotel (today a luxury 'boutique' hotel), right across the road from the C&MA offices

(and now with our studios on the top floor) and World Vision a few doors away. The Pathet Lao had moved into town! (The KPL is today the official news agency of the Lao government).



Studio staff Chanthalom, Nya
and Her Neng

Our half-hour English-language radio programs were not to last long, and after six months on air had to be discontinued - by order. I was possibly the only Englishman in history to ever have a regular radio program on the air there. It gave me a valuable glimpse of what it is like to have a

broadcast within one's own community.

One evening I went to one of my favourite noodle shops in Chinese cinema street - the Piu Ky. Seating was limited so I sat across from a young fellow who was also enjoying his 'fer! We got talking and he discovered I was English. He asked me if I knew of the English radio program every night on LNR. He enjoyed listening to it. I soaked it up, but really, this was getting a bit heady - especially when I told him it was my program, and he nearly fell off his stool. It was a valuable insight. But it also got me thinking about building bridges, relationships, breaking down barriers to belief, and all sorts of related issues that should concern the Christian communicator.

I also learned a very valuable lesson: as Christians in media ministry we learn to work within whatever parameters

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are given, including in situations that are not sympathetic or even hostile. If we are not allowed to do what we want we do not give up or walk away. Instead we experiment to find out – creatively - how much the local context can take and then make the most of that. Whatever we do as Spirit-filled believers is a Christian witness even though we may not recognise it. As one of my mentors once told me 'Nothing you do is secular. Be careful how you use that word!'

Among Lao Christians and missionaries discussions were underway on what the future held for the Christians there and how we might prepare them during the coming months. We even asked ourselves if we might be putting them at risk by their association with us. We had not anticipated the major exodus that was soon to follow.

Meanwhile for Hennie and me our thoughts were turning to becoming more of a family. Hennie was pregnant and the due date was in early May. Moreover, my Mum and Dad were planning on coming for Christmas and we wanted to show them around. Again, we would see later how that this was



Hennie with Mum and Dad

perfect timing in the light of the unfolding situation.

Christmas came and my Mum and Dad brought a few memorable gifts, like a teddy bear for the new baby, and an

electric drill for me. Hennie and I were also involved in the Christmas play at church where we played the parts of (guess who?) Mary and Joseph.

1975 was set to become a pivotal year in many respects. It not only signalled the beginning of the end - it also became the end. And a new beginning....

We took Mum and Dad to Luang Prabang and showed them the royal palace and the charm of that classical Lao city nestled among the mountains on the banks of the Mekong. After that we flew down to Saigon, as Ho Chi Minh City was called back then. In January 1975 those were desperate days. We arrived on January 6, the day Phuoc Long province fell to the Viet Cong, a loss that signalled the beginning of the end. South Vietnam was plunged into three days of national mourning and pagodas and churches were filled with people.

Together with my Mum and Dad we visited the large Tin Lanh church in the city and joined in the service to show our solidarity. We even found ourselves on national television as the TV camera moved down the aisles. We stayed at the C&MA Guest House meeting up with some old friends, and also our friend Don and his wife who now lived opposite the US Embassy. Within a few weeks this was to see some daring escapes (including FEBC Vietnamese staff I was to work with later) via helicopter as the end finally came at the end of April.

Out on the streets people were beginning to panic and there was a sense of desperation in the air. We had been warned to

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look after handbags and cameras - and thankfully we heeded the warning. A motorcycle came from behind as we walked downtown and a hand reached out to snatch my camera bag, but I was holding onto it and they only got away with the shoulder strap!

Back in Vientiane the time finally drew near when Hennie would deliver our baby. For her first birth it was recommended that she go to Thailand where there were good hospitals.

Our preference was for the OMF mission hospital at Manorom in Chainat province of Central Thailand, a few hours north of Bangkok. The hospital wanted her to come in good time as it was a lot of travelling. So it was that on April 18 I took her to the ferry at Thadeua to see her across the Mekong into Nongkhai and from there by train to Bangkok. (It was the same day that Phnom Penh fell to Pol Pot). Dutch missionary friends had arranged for her to take a taxi to the hospital, about a four-hour journey. The due date had been estimated to be May 10, so all I could do was wait in Vientiane and plan for our return as a family, as well as figuring out how I would get there by car. There were no telephones at the hospital at that time. Mobile phones were not yet invented. Hennie and I were now cut off!

In Vientiane the situation was deteriorating fast. For several months we had been given Citizens Band radios to stay in touch in the event of emergencies. The US Embassy was in charge of any evacuation procedures and we were all issued a handbook - Bend with the Wind! It told us what to do, if and

when. Meanwhile we had been briefed at the end of April by the C&MA regional director, Grady Mangham, who had just come from Vietnam, that nothing was going to happen quickly.

Nevertheless the missionaries held a meeting on Saturday May 3rd at which we decided what our plan of action would be, what things we might need to take out (our studio equipment was something I wanted to get out, but this was turned down), and how to behave toward the national Christians whom we assumed would not be leaving with us, in the event that would indeed become a reality. Missionaries had had to leave Laos a number of times on previous occasions but had always been able to return again. Somehow this time could be different.

Also meeting that Saturday were the young people from the church. I met with them one last time that afternoon as they met at Chanthone's house, where I used to have my Lao lessons. Chanthone was Big

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Youth group at prayer

Sister's older brother. The young people met to pray for their country at this time of need before they went out into the streets to be witnesses to the Gospel and the hope they have in Christ. I was happy to take some final photos of them.

Meanwhile I was planning to leave on Tuesday May 6th. The 5th was a Thai national holiday, Coronation Day, so the government offices in Nongkhai would not be open for processing papers for the car. I would be driving the old mission VW Beetle which we had been assigned. I particularly wanted to keep safe our many photos, slides and negatives so I would take those and some basic baby supplies.

Photography had become not only my hobby ever since having my first camera at eleven when I went to Germany. In 1974 I had been asked to go to Ban Houei Said in the extreme northwest of Laos to document some of the pioneering work being done there by Jerry and Rose Torgerson. I remember one day trolling through the jungle with my camera and utterly enjoying myself. It came as a revelation out of the blue that I was enjoying this so much - and it was work! Over my six years I had amassed a large collection of photos and those included in the writing of this book are a testimony to the hundreds that I had saved.

That Monday morning I met with our staff in the studio briefing them on the work to be done in my absence – perhaps three weeks, I projected. I noted that I was in an especially good mood (gonna be a dad!) in spite of the pending disaster that was about to strike. I even got the car greased and oil changed, and a rod for the jack so that I could change the

wheel if needed. Then I started packing to leave. Two other missionaries, George Wood and Ollie Kaetzel, would come with me as far as Saraburi on their way to Bangkok.

Little did we know then that neither she nor our baby would get to see them

Trying to work at the studio above the C&MA office had become hazardous as youths on motorcycles tried to run us down. "CMA, CIA – what's the difference?" they told us...

Dutch friends were in town and came to visit our apartment. They taught me a Dutch lullaby to sing to our newborn. "Slaap kindje slaap..." Cute! "Welcome home Hennie and ____"

I had put on a banner over boxes of Pampers and other gifts Hennie had been given at the baby shower before she left. Little did we know then that neither she nor our baby would get to see them.

Tuesday morning I had an early breakfast with our next-door neighbour, Doris, then picked up George and Ollie - and we set off for Thadeua at 7.30. By the time we had got the car across the Mekong and had papers checked in Nongkhai it was after midday and we had a long way to go. Around 6pm I dropped off my passengers and was heading north into the rapidly darkening gloom. The car was behaving well - but the 6-volt headlights left much to be desired on the pot-holed Thai roads. Especially challenging was avoiding the unlit ox-carts that suddenly appeared.

Finally I arrived around 9pm at the Manorom OMF Guest House. I parked the car, then ventured to knock on the door. It was answered by Gwen, the manager of the guest house.

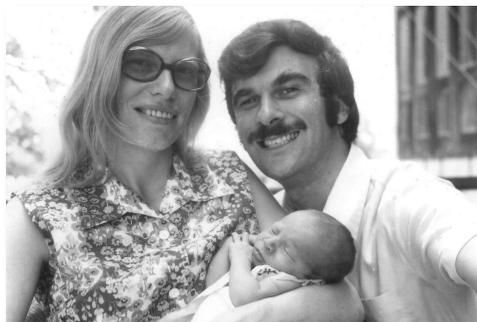
"Yes...? Can I help you?" she greeted me. "I am looking for my wife, Hennie Gray." "Oh, she is not here!" she replied. I was shocked. "Not here?" "No, she is over at the hospital." "Is she OK? Has she had the baby?" I asked anxiously. "Oh, yes! She had it yesterday." (Why did it have to be such hard work? I was thinking...). "Is it a boy or a girl?" "A boy!" She replied... "Can I go over and see her...?"



Malcolm in his cot at Manorom Hospital

When I got there I found Hennie sitting drinking coffee with some Dutch nurses. Apparently she had been out cycling on Sunday! She was pleased to see me and proud to show me our new baby. Malcolm had arrived early the day before and now here he was in a cage-like, mosquito-proof cot. He was delicately made with perfect hands, nose, mouth, feet - and the finest of finger-nails. It was a surreal moment! We both welled up with joy and thankfulness to God for a seemingly perfect baby.

Since the delivery Hennie had been sending telegrams to key people, and it seemed as though I



Selfie pic that says it all!

was among the last to know! Hennie felt sorry for me, so gave Malcolm the second name of 'Francis'. Well, he had arrived a few days early, and Monday had been a Thai holiday. I excused myself.

The hospital staff, many of them missionaries, were very kind to us and we stayed in touch as the week progressed. Having no telephone was not seen as too much of a problem but we were grateful for our transistor radio for keeping in touch with BBC World Service news. Of special interest were developments in Laos where things were turning even more ugly. Foreigners were leaving as demonstrations took place in Vientiane. It was a special matter for prayer in the chapel service the following Sunday, but it was later that afternoon when Dr Anne Townsend, the wife of Dr John Townsend the hospital director, came knocking on our door. Hennie and I had already been discussing the situation and what we ought to do under the circumstances. We decided that we needed to get down to Bangkok to get connected with C&MA again. Anne confirmed that.

By that time we had already started packing our things and by 7pm were ready to leave. It was a three-hour drive to the C&MA Guest House on the north side of Bangkok. We had both stayed there many times before – but this time it was different.

Instead of a warm welcome we found there was 'no room at the inn.' We pointed out that surely they must have somewhere for us with our six-day-old baby, even the floor

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would do. But no, we were told, that was not possible. They were full. We would need to find a hotel nearby.

These were days of great upheaval. The Guest House was loaded with missionary families escaping from Vietnam and Cambodia. And now missionaries were arriving from Laos while waiting to see how things would pan out. They soon discovered there would be no return this time. The communist takeover of Indochina was now moving toward completion. It was still May but by the end of the year nearly all foreigners had come out.

So we drove along Pradipat Road to the Liberty Hotel (now known as The Elizabeth Hotel). Happily we only needed to stay there one night before they had room for us at C&MA.

Then we had to start making plans for Hennie to return to Holland with Malcolm. Her 30-day visa had already been renewed once and by June she would have to leave. We soon discovered that if I was not travelling with them Malcolm would need to have his own passport. So he had the photo for his first passport taken when he was just 10 days old. He would soon have his own British passport.

Meanwhile I had to travel back to Vientiane to take the Beetle back. It was not going to be an easy journey as I would need to sell up, pack up house – and get out. I had already been up to Nongkhai once to collect baby clothes that our Lao friend, Big Sister Keodouangsy, had collected for us and brought across the river. Now I was going to need to go in again myself. In fact three of us went in together. We found that our home help had evaporated so we were on our own when it came to

food. So that Monday night we went to eat at the ACA restaurant on the USAID compound. We left soon after 9pm. The next morning we heard that the USAID compound had been taken over by the communist Pathet Lao. Two Americans were detained there for a week before being released. Another close shave!

Word got around fast that we were leaving, so it was quite chaotic as Lao people showed up at our flat wanting to buy our things. How much we sold – and what – was tempered by the reality that I now had to be able to carry whatever we salvaged. Snap decisions had to be made on what to let go, some of them wedding presents. Some of them baby clothes.

I also needed to get exit papers from the Immigration Office. Finally, on Thursday, it was time to leave, with suitcases, boxes and bags. A taxi took me to the ferry at Thadeua, across the Mekong from Nongkhai. As we neared Thadeua we ran into a military checkpoint. It was manned by two soldiers, one from the old guard and one from the communist coalition. The latter did all the talking, asking to see my papers and the receipt. That was not enough... I



Kheum with Big Sister and suitcases they brought to Nongkhai

would need to go back for more, he told me. Desperation took over as I thought of Hennie and Malcolm waiting for me in Bangkok. I opened my travel documents again and he spotted some Thai money (baht). His eyes lit up and he pointed to the paper notes. His intentions were clear so I gave him 200 baht. He let us proceed. The taxi driver laughed: 'See, they are no better than the old guard!' he grinned.

It was with some relief that I got to Khonkaen that night, and then reached my sleeper berth for the overnight journey to Bangkok – and took a deep breath. Hennie was glad to see me. Malcolm was proving to be a bit difficult as he developed colic and could not easily be pacified. Using disposable diapers was a new experience (learning to use any kind of diaper for that matter!), and I accidentally blocked up the Guest House sewage system when I flushed one of the diapers down the toilet. (I thought that was what disposable meant). Veteran missionary, Elmer Sahlberg, in the room below ours was not very pleased!

The Guest House was also extremely restless with missionaries constantly coming and going. Moreover, Malcolm was having difficulty getting to sleep, not to mention the steep learning curve we were on as new parents! New arrivals, especially from Cambodia, were telling their chilling stories and shared with us some of the Cambodian banknotes that they found blowing down the streets of Phnom Penh. One family had done much to help orphans; their stories electrified us all and moved us to tears and prayer. Then there were the trips to Don Muang airport to say goodbye to departing colleagues. Would we ever get to see them again?

We had all that we needed - each other, baby Malcolm, and Jesus! That was a defining moment.

What belongings we had between the three of us did not amount to very much. We found two oil drums used for shipping belongings and packed them, one to go to UK and the other to USA (will explain later). What was left we fitted into three suitcases, one for Hennie, one for Malcolm, and one for me. As we sat in our room we gave thanks to God for what we had. It wasn't much. It was all we owned now. We had all that we needed – each other, baby Malcolm, and Jesus! That was a defining moment.

It was then that the big question hit us: what now? We have talked about this many times since and are amazed that we did not have a Plan B. We both knew we might have to leave Laos, but had not given any thought whatever to what we would do if that happened. Upon reflection it is possible that God was keeping us from having to worry about what we would do if... helping us to take one step at a time. We had gained a wonderful new baby, but had lost almost everything else – our work, our home and many of our possessions, including our wedding gifts. Also, my support from the International Church in Vientiane had evaporated. Whatever money we had in the Banque d'Indochine in Vientiane was now out of reach.

What would we do now? Hennie and Malcolm had tickets to go to Holland provided through C&MA's Dutch office but we did not have enough funds available to buy a ticket for me. Where would we find that? Happily Hennie had some good contacts in

Holland and was able to find funds from Open Doors. But it would take a while to process – and there were still things I needed to be doing once Hennie and Malcolm had left.



Jim Engel in Hong Kong

This takes us back to the very positive encounter I had had with Dr Engel in Hong Kong the previous year. Although educated as an engineer (something that will never leave me) I was now profoundly interested in Christian communications, especially in the context of missions. I wrote to Dr Engel and said that I was

interested in studying in the post-grad Communications program he had started a few years earlier at the Wheaton College Graduate School in Wheaton, Illinois. He wrote back saying that he would love to have me and would be able to find a scholarship for me to study there.

And so it was that within a few weeks it seemed almost certain that we would be going to Wheaton for the new school year beginning in October 1975. The timing was perfect.

Saying goodbye to Hennie and Malcolm at Bangkok's Don Muang International airport was tough

Saying goodbye to Hennie and Malcolm at Bangkok's Don Muang International airport was tough. It seemed so wrong that they should be going without me, but what else could I do? At that point I did not know how soon I would be able to join them.

There were plenty of things for me to do so I kept myself occupied by visiting the refugee camps that were springing up along the Thai border. I went to Pua in Nan province in the far north. It was there that I met Chong Lee and his newly-wed wife, Pai. They had both been in Bible School together in Vientiane. After school finished they got married and spent



Pai and Chong Lee in Pua camp

their honeymoon escaping through the jungle to the refugee camp. It took 11 days. When I found them they had a makeshift shack on the hillside made

up of branches of trees and covered with blue plastic. Chong Lee had found himself a job teaching at the nearby Bible School and was given a special permit from the camp to do so.

Chong and Pai Lee were very pleased to see me – a face they recognised. Like many other Hmong people whom I met they

asked for my help in getting them to the USA. The whole idea seemed incongruous as I tried to imagine Hmong tribal people from the hills of Laos living in the affluent west. How could it be? I used to point out that I was not in fact American and had no contacts. It was a let-off for me, but it did pose the very pertinent question, too, about what their future might be.

I also made contact with Eric Parsons, the interim director of FEBC Thailand. He was interested in visiting the Cambodian refugee camps in the southeast corner of Thailand. Word had reached him that the family of Kheam Nuy, the FEBC Khmer broadcaster in Manila, were coming out to Pong Nam Ron camp near Chanthabouri. This was now June 1975 and heart-rending accounts of things happening in Cambodia were beginning to trickle through.

As we arrived at the border we encountered a tragic scene: refugees, the first of countless thousands who would arrive in Thailand over the next few years. There was a sombre but



Eric Parsons interviewing Pastor Kung

expectant mood as people arrived. I remember one family group arriving pushing their vehicle which had run out of fuel.

We found Pastor Kong and his family who had just arrived, walking all



Cambodian refugees in Phong Nam Ron

the way across Cambodia from Phnom Penh in the southeast to the Thai border in the west. They told of the hundreds of people on the road all struggling to carry what they could and coping with fatigue, sickness and lack of food along the way. Their hardship was also tempered by their joy at finding freedom and the start of a new life without fear. Pastor Kong and his wife were losing no time in providing pastoral care among the refugees and holding services. We were able to send encouraging news back to Kheam Nuy.

The days rushed by as I prepared for re-joining Hennie and Malcolm in Holland. Open Doors had kindly transferred money to me in Bangkok and I had my ticket for a flight to Paris and on to Brussels that departed July 10. I noted that it was in fact six years, six months and six days since I had first arrived in Bangkok. Now an era was coming to an end. It was a nostalgic moment as I reflected on all that had happened during that period of transformation on so many fronts – not least for me as a person and what God had been showing me and doing in me. I had arrived as a single 21-year-old and was now married with a baby son. Jokingly I would tell people I had grown up in Southeast Asia – but there was a degree of truth in that.

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Finally the day came. The airport check-in for that Air France flight to Paris was going to have its challenges. My greatest concern was the large amount of stuff I had to take on my standard 20kg baggage allowance. I remember wearing as many clothes as I could, in spite of the heat. My jacket pockets bulged with photographs but my check-in weight was still around 50kg. So I had to turn on the charm. I related to the check-in clerk behind the counter my sob-sob story – how that we had to escape from Laos, we had a new-born baby, and this was what remained of what we had... She was quite moved and I was able to check in my suitcase and carry-on bags without penalty!

That flight home proved to be quite philosophical for me as I sat by the window looking at the ground below. It passed over

Bangladesh where half a million people had been wiped out in a tropical cyclone a few years earlier, and over India where Indira Gandhi had just declared a state of emergency. We landed in Beirut where things were just beginning to heat up in the troubled Middle East.

It gave me some insight into how God must feel as he looked down on our troubled world – broken by conflict and war.

From Paris it was just a short flight to Brussels. I discovered it was good to feel European again. It made a change from Southeast Asia which had become my second home, but which was also being massively re-shaped by revolutionary communism. And there at the arrival area was Hennie looking stunningly beautiful as she held up baby Malcolm. That was a very special reunion!

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It was also wonderful to meet Hennie's dear mother again and to stay in her Eindhoven home. Now it was time to meet Hennie's very curious, extended family who were anxious to see our new baby but also to see what kind of a man Hennie had found!

Hennie's aunts arrived by bicycle in several waves. I watched from the window and could see them coming down the street. We had just washed up the coffee cups and were putting them away when another wave of aunts arrived and we had to get



Hennie's mother with Malcolm

them out again and sit around the dining room table. (My mother-in-law was one of 15 children!). I discovered that in Holland people have small carpets on top of their tables! Douwe Egbert's coffee was the best and so were the cookies that went with it.

Surprisingly this was my first visit to Holland. I knew no Dutch and my mother-in-law knew no English so we had a most interesting experience

communicating. Happily smiles are universal and we both enjoyed each other's company very much, smiling at each other. I also picked up some interesting expressions. 'Hij heeft een bolletje' ('he has a fine head') she used to say about Malcolm of whom she was especially proud.

Finally after three weeks in Holland it was time to visit England. We went by ferry from Hook of Holland bound for Harwich, and on to Reading where I had grown up and where Mum and Dad lived. We took with us the wonderful yellow pram that Hennie's mother had given us, which also could be collapsed down - much to the Dutch taxi driver's surprise! We would later be taking it to the States.

It was a time of introductions – to family, friends and church folk. Amidst the curiosity of seeing whom I had married, and seeing our first baby (it looked as though Malcolm would be a redhead), there was also a degree of sympathy with our family situation and the fact that we were on the move. Living in Mum and Dad's home with a new baby did not come easy, especially for Hennie. My Mum was very house proud and her kitchen was her sole domain. I was no longer a teenager or university student but now a husband and father, new roles they were going to need to adapt to.

It was lovely to stroll by the Thames with our pram during those long summer evenings. The river evoked good memories from my childhood and school days – not least rowing with the Reading School



Grannie Harrild with Malcolm, Mum and Dad

boat club. After a few meetings and visits it was time to take the ferry back to Holland as we set our sights on Wheaton, Illinois. It was going to be a big step into the unknown, but through God's provision it looked as though we should be able to make it financially. Amazingly, everything seemed to have come together at just the right time.

We had our tickets on Loftleidir – the Icelandic Airways – and were set to fly from Luxembourg to Chicago via Rijkjevik. We were bound for the New World! Another chapter in our adventure was about to begin....

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Note:

This is a draft of the third chapter. You can read the other chapters and also view the extensive photo gallery for each chapter if you visit the dedicated Adventure web site at <http://francisgray.com/adventure>

Cover photo: Nya in studio at LBTC (1973)