

Lido Nights - LaDue  
01/03/2002 1:30 PM

By: Mike LaDue

Recently, I read a short and thoroughly debatable article by some unknown "journalist," the subject of which were his thoughts on "Vientiane, Laos in Modem Times" (the concept of a , 'modem Vientiane" being to my mind, an oxymoron, Vientiane isn't modem and it never was)... which got me to thinking about this place I lived in during the early 60's. Vientiane by day and Vientiane by night.

While initially assigned to another "RON" location when I first began to work for Air America, as an Air Freight Specialist, in April 1962 (yes, the halcyon days of the civilian clothed contract airline). It soon proved more efficient for a growing number of cargo aircraft crews to wind-up their work day at the grandiosely named, "Wattay International Airport." In those days on the company ramp, there was not much more than a small operations hut, a warehouse for the storage and the rigging of rice bag pallets and some space for aircraft parts & maintenance. The nearest "eatery" was a fried rice stand across the nearby Rue Luang Prabang (known locally as "the "airport road" if one were in town or "the road to town" if the reverse were true), but Station Manager Roy Stitt was even then developing plans for a new permanent structure at the end of the ramp to house most of the station administration, modern plumbing and an actual restaurant & a separate permanent Operations building. Such changes were also in the works as regards to overnight accommodations for the cargo crews (the Helio pilots already having found a house of their own near the airport, while the H-34 guys were based at Udorn). Most such, who had not previously made their own arrangements, had the use of a temporary company-run BOQ-like facility at the opposite side of Vientiane from the airport, on the road to Nong Kai, while a more conveniently located and modem facility to be known as the "Gray House" was being completed and outfitted. On the day the Gray House opened for business, those of us who wished to call it "home," dropped our belongings in the lobby and went sniffing around for a comfortable space. I wound-up in a nice room on the ground floor, along with George Poske, who could generally be found during the day, boring holes in the sky at the controls of a C-46.

In the months which followed, I came to learn that when the workday was over, George was generally happy to retire to his bed with a good book in one hand and a canteen cup of some obviously satisfactory - albeit unnamed - beverage in the other. For me however, it was often a fact that I would team-up with some like-minded employees and, if we wanted to eat-out, repair to such places as the SETHA Palace Hotel dining room or to the Sala Koetane on the Nong Kai road, where the owner, a former Japanese officer who had elected to stay in Laos after the war (or so he said), would cook a mean beefsteak & pommes frites to be consumed along with cold bottles of Kirin beer, on the outdoor verandah as the Mekong flowed past. Then, if the cranky old city electrical generator was cooperating that evening, it was off again on our motorcycles, to places with mysterious names like, "Dong Phalan, The Vieng Ratry, The White Rose, the out- of-the-way. "Rendezvous des Amis" (where a certain aura of French cosmopolitanism reigned supreme) or perhaps to the Constellation Hotel on Rue Sampsenthai, to obtain the best kip/dollar

It would seem that what set the Lido Night Club apart from the other watering holes of it's day was its size - the bar, the dance floor and the table area were bigger than most of the others. Also, the fact that (as did the Vieng Ratry - generally referred to as the "Green Latrine) the Lido offered floor shows on most evenings - the shows being most notable as regards the wildly varying degrees of talent which took the stage. For the residents of the Gray House in particular there was yet another attractive quality about the Lido. To get there from our address, it was only necessary to walk straight out the front gate and down a

narrow dirt road, hang a left up onto the Lido Hotel's concrete verandah and walk a few paces to the front stairs which led to the second floor night club itself. This convenient location worked in reverse more than a few times too, when some innocent off-duty Gray House resident or another, found himself suddenly attacked and overmatched by drink. In such circumstances, it was simplicity itself to walk (stagger blindly even if needs be) down the stairs, across the verandah back along the dirt road and through the gate to one's own room, bed, ceiling fan (alas, no air conditioning), mosquito netting, and a restful night of recuperative sleep.

I especially recall one night's Lido floor show, which featured an Indian snake charmer and his performing cobra. It was hot and stuffy as usual, the club was near capacity and everyone seemed fascinated with the movements of the charmer, the sound of his pipe and the sight of the serpent as he slowly arose from his wicker cage, hood flared. As though on cue, at that precise moment the above-mentioned city generator chose to fail, the nightclub lights flickered and died and the room was thrown into complete darkness. For a second or two, there was absolute silence, and then, as a central thought occurred to all of the patrons - "I'm in a dark room with a deadly snake, and he's probably slithering my way right now" - there arose the most awful din of chair legs scraping on the floor and of scuffing shoes but (oddly, it seemed at the time), not that of a mob heading for the exits. When the generator did kick-in once again - after an elapsed time of perhaps ten- fifteen seconds which seemed like forever - the returned lighting reflected a scene of each and every Lido customer and employee, standing stock still on chairs, tables and the bar and looking a few shades more pale than just previously ... while the Indian - probably used to this situation from many past experiences with uncertain lighting - smiled contentedly and pointed at the cage into which he had obviously returned his awe-inspiring sidekick when the lights began to flicker. It appeared as though everyone had opted to get some altitude off the floor, rather than to chance stepping on the snake while making for the nearest exit. (As might seem reasonable given the above, no such act was ever booked by the Lido again.)

In later years - while the hotel operation continued - the Lido nightclub closed; perhaps not able to keep up with the newer places which had sprung up such as Monty Bank's Purple Porpoise or The Riverside Tavern. Or maybe the owners just got tired of shelling- out all the pay-offs, which were part and parcel to the running of such a moneymaking establishment. Whatever, in it's day certainly, the Lido Night Club ruled!