

Exchange Student

by Henry Pelifian

There was an American university exchange student who came with a small group of exuberant classmates to Thailand. The exchange student's death was a sudden and almost methodical event and his life seemed in slow-motion until the end. But his life was neither in fast motion nor slow motion, it was just the meandering motion that made it so dangerous.

An American instructor for the exchange students was an expatriate's expatriate. He had not only done everything right, but also done with style and a bit of distinction. Peter Mayton had stayed in the foreign country he had been stationed. Well, not exactly. He had to finish his tour of duty in Germany first, but he returned to Thailand almost immediately after visiting his family in Colorado. He had been an officer in the Air Force during the Vietnam War. There were many U.S. air bases in Thailand that flew bombing missions into Indochina. He was an administrative officer and among his duties was assigning new arrivals to their units.

Peter Mayton was adept at learning Thai, becoming so proficient some Thai friends encouraged him to stay on and attend graduate school in Thailand. It appealed to him and he enjoyed the country called the Land of Smiles. The Thais were a fun loving and gracious people. Infected with their culture he tried to learn as much as he could. He learned to read and write Thai well, not an easy task for most Westerners. The Thai language is tonal, meaning of words depends on the tone used, low, high, rising, falling and normal tone. The challenge of a new culture and language spurred Peter on to study even while he was in the Air Force. He often assisted his colleagues when they needed to communicate with non-English speaking Thais on or off the base because he learned Thai very rapidly, his mind soaking up the language of such an alien culture, which he found very pleasing, especially the way Thais loved to banter and always trying to find humor in all that was around them.

Eventually Peter Mayton became a liaison officer for the base with local Thai government officials.

As soon as he completed his military service, he returned to Thailand urged by several Thai professionals and enrolled at a university in Bangkok. He was among the first foreigners obtaining advanced degrees from a university in Thailand. After he had graduated he soon started working in development in non-formal education and assisting subsistence farmers in expanding their production and water supply. As his reputation grew he worked for international organizations dedicated to improving the health and education of people in lesser developing countries throughout Southeast Asia. Soon he developed a reputation as an effective and efficient professional assisting the less educated and less fortunate in humanitarian programs. He consistently championed consulting first with the local people before and during the lifetime of the project to determine their needs and views. Soon international organizations and agencies sought him out to develop or implement their programs in Thailand and surrounding countries.

After more than twenty-five years after the war Peter Mayton was living in Thailand as a well-established expert in development. There was always that scuttlebutt or that invisible whispering campaign which stated that people like Peter Mayton had gone “native” according to some career U.S. government officials stationed overseas who were always reluctant to have him hired on U.S. government funded projects because they doubted his loyalty. U.S. government officials who doubted his loyalty had blocked him several times from securing jobs. Invariably these U.S. government officials seldom spoke the language or understood the culture they were living in and some of them even distrusted Peter Mayton and resented his fluency in Thai.

Peter Mayton worked under those beautiful blue skies and usually gentle weather of Thailand, ate the appetizing food, and was lucky to find an educated and compatible Thai wife who was not the stereotype, a submissive spouse. After having been married for more than ten years, he came to believe the stereotype largely inaccurate

about Asian wives being docile and subservient to their husbands. Maybe uneducated Westerners without a grasp of Thai culture created a label based on an incorrect model in another Asian country believing Asia was culturally homogeneous. Creating labels seems to be a shorthand way of understanding things, except it may be wrong.

Peter's latest development project was in Laos. He arrived in Vientiane the capital. He had meetings with Lao government officials to determine the location of the rural development project. The next day he took a flight with a Laotian official to visit Savannakhet. After less than an hour's flight, they arrived. Then they drove by pick-up truck to a village. The rice fields surrounded the village and people were curious about the visitors, especially the children. Then, Peter saw them. Two children with lost limbs. A girl *Noy* had her right arm blown off. A boy *Somboon* had a left foot blown off. Peter saw the shiny smiling faces of Noy and Somboon. Each had done their best to adjust to their affliction. Each was waiting to receive their prosthetics. Buried cluster bombs lay throughout the Laotian countryside. Peter did not want to meet with any parents whose children had been killed by the cluster bombs, and if he had he would have been speechless. These children were part of the hidden history in Peter Mayton's own country, for they were seldom reported upon despite the fact that war raged in the region for decades, millions of Southeast Asians, Laotian and Vietnamese were killed, countless numbers maimed, more than fifty thousand Americans killed and countless numbers maimed and trillions of dollars expended. All the carnage was forgotten, just another episode of deadly folly in history where leaders and their appointees slither off into secure a financial life, sometimes supported with public funds.

He watched the children play with their disfigured limbs. They were still trying to be children despite their loss of limbs. They had a soccer ball that they hit with their remaining limbs and often using their heads to make contact with the ball. They could not run fast anymore, but their enthusiasm and exuberance to play was as strong

as any child. They did not know of supersonic bombers or fighter-bombers or anything to do with modern, technologically advanced warfare. They did not know how many billions of dollars it took to build them or maintain them. They knew the land around them was contaminated with cluster bombs they called *bombies*. Now they knew never to touch another one of these *bombies*. They knew American planes long ago dropped the *bombies*. They knew about the *bombies* as well as the fun of soccer that they played almost every day.

The American cluster bombs dropped during the Vietnam War were scattered over the Laotian countryside by the millions. Buried in the countryside and around rice fields were small toy-like bombs. Buried cluster bombs killed several thousand Laotians since the end of the Vietnam War. Peter Mayton stood there feeling trapped decades later. So long ago yet, so near, so close. He could hear the injured children playing and laughing.

He was there to help make the villages more prosperous and better farmers. As he talked with the farmers, he kept thinking of the three disabled children. He couldn't get them out of his mind. Innocent children afflicted with mutilated limbs. Was there no justice in the world?, Mayton thought.

Peter Mayton looked out at the rice paddies and asked the Lao government official where the bombs were.

"They are everywhere. In the rice fields and along roads. Children play and get injured. Some die. Every year we have many people killed. Since the Americans stopped bombing my country thousands Laotian killed by these *bombies*. The war still goes on here", the official said. He said these things in a straightforward way, without strong emotion. It was something he was familiar with and old news became matter-of-fact.

"People are poor. Sometimes parents send out their children to find scrap metal. We try to teach them not to touch. These *bombies* look like toys", the official continued.

Peter stood there and viewed the beautiful landscape. What could he say?

"Are you trying to find the bombs and take them out?"

"Yes, we have a program to find them and remove the danger. It is very slow to find them. There are millions of these little bombs. Three months ago, three boys were playing with bombies. They all killed", the official said.

Peter stood there, wanting to do something or say something. The official finally said, "We go to village elder's house."

The children picked up the *bombies* only to have their lives blown away. An old war became real decades later. For the subsistence farmers and their families the old war never really ended because they had to continually contend with the buried cluster bombs. The old forgotten war still had victims decades later. Meanwhile a political campaign in the U.S. presidential election focused on same sex marriage, abortion and stem cell research. The Vietnam War was old news for U.S. television news networks that rarely had news about the *bombies* killing children in Laos.

In his hotel room that night with the ceiling fan twirling overhead Peter Mayton started remembering the war. The bomber missions were flying out every night from the bases in Thailand. Now, American military prowess was still active in these undetonated bombs. He had trouble sleeping. Flashes of the injured sped past him. There was the boy out looking for frogs with a stick trying to make them jump in order to catch them for dinner. A cluster bomb exploded when the stick hit it killing him. He lived long enough to tell his story in a few words to his father. The boy's name was Lek and he had Buddhist funeral where his parents wept. He was helping the family get dinner when he died.

The countryside was dotted with coconut trees and rice fields and the blue sky overhead captured an idyllic scene punctuated by a deadly past created by hidden American cluster bombs forcibly bringing freedom and democracy to the people of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

Peter Mayton recalled Al Lomack, the American exchange student who had died in Thailand the day before Mayton had departed for Laos. He tried to find out as much as he could prior to going to Laos.

He had seen Al almost every day for the previous month in the classroom at a university in Chiangmai. Al Lomack was in his third year at an Ivy League university, both prestigious and enormous in reputation, resources and square footage. There did not seem to be any air of superiority about him, not even disguised.

Photography consumed him. He was taking pictures since he was a freshman in high school, a private school for the son of a successful architect and a well-respected psychologist. His parents had bought him the finest cameras, so by the time he arrived in Thailand near the Golden Triangle, Al Lomack was a proficient and talented photographer.

Al was not the first to discover that the Golden Triangle has been the source of opium for generations. The climate and terrain are ideal for its production, from the beautiful poppy bulb standing vigil on the mountainsides after the flower petals have fallen off.

He was a well-built young man, for he had the broad-shouldered height and good looks indicating a future life of prosperity and fulfillment. There was even a touch of ruggedness about him unshaven when he visited the Hill Tribe village with a local guide and another American student. He took revealing photographs of the Tribal villagers, especially of the heroin addicts. There were striking close-ups photographs of a Hill Tribe man smoking the drug in bamboo pipes called bongs. Al had established rapport with the people for a couple of hours before he removed his camera from his backpack. One middle-aged man was lying on a straw mat holding his pipe, caressing it. His thin gaunt body seemed a frail vessel for anything, including opium. Al carefully photographed young and old in the village learning their stories as the local guide interpreted for him translating his questions and answers the villagers gave. Al listened intently to their hardships of making a living, having neither citizenship nor land ownership, despite the fact that the Hill Tribes have lived in that geographic area for centuries.

A few days after Al and the small contingent of college exchange students settled into their rooms on university property, I was a guest speaker, an expatriate, in one of their classes. I talked about

the history of the Hill Tribes in the Golden Triangle and of the international development efforts on behalf of Tribal peoples. The American students attended classes in Thai culture, history and language taught by Thai instructors and myself.

His work to assist the Hill Tribes- Lisu, Karen, Hmong, Lahu and Akha- had been only marginally successful. International experts arrive with high salaries and perks provided by governments from around the globe. They seemed eager to develop the Tribal peoples of the Golden Triangle. Bank accounts of the experts increased while the Tribal people have yet to have a bank account despite all the development schemes. Although his name was attached to several articles on the Hill Tribe peoples, he never felt he could expose the development community in his published writings for career reasons, though he did make clear the plight of indigenous people required more input from them for their own development.

One the day Al invited me to his accommodations at the college's bungalow compound to see his photographs of Hill Tribe villagers, a friend was accompanying me, Jack Dakasian. Maybe it was my apparent honesty about such development that prompted Al Lomack to show Jack Dakasian and me the photographs he had taken of the Tribal villagers, many of whom were opium addicts. I had seen many photographs of Hill Tribe peoples, but few had been so realistic, yet so troubling. But to this day those pictures preoccupy me. When I complimented Al on his photos, he promised to make copies of them for me. After we departed Dakasian said he wanted copies of those photographs. At that time we did not know we would never get them.

Looking back, there was quietness about Al, an aloofness that was not readily apparent at the time, but became apparent after he was gone. His interests never strayed far from photography. The day he showed me his starkly real and unglamorous pictures of Hill Tribes people he spoke slowly with some understanding and compassion for these people.

"Their way of life is being destroyed. There is no future for them Peter. They are exploited", Al said with almost undetectable anger as

he emphasized my name. Even though Al had been in the country more than a month and I had spent many years in the country, I couldn't disagree with him. I showed interest in the photographs. He said he would make copies of his photos for me and we planned to meet. I never got those copies.

Al spent his time not only visiting and photographing Hill Tribe villages, but also getting a view of the nightlife of Chiangmai, the second largest city in Thailand. Al had disguised it so well, but he was a drug addict even before he arrived in Thailand. When Al needed drugs he would meet the local guide who was able to make contact with someone in order to buy the heroin. The transition was made from recreational use to vocational use.

Al was taking in as much of life as he could. Maybe subconsciously he guessed that his time might be short on this earth. Just my wild speculation, Peter Mayton thought. But his photographs did not permit speculations- they were the coldest and direst kind of reality that did not allow self-confident wonder. Al was almost sailing through life- and the plight of the Hill Tribe peoples in northern Thailand became an anchor for his camera.

Later in his room, Al would lay on the bed wearing jeans and without a shirt. He had a feeling of well-being and elation after he had taken the heroin. Sometimes he could feel so small he believed he could fit through the eye of a needle. So much so he walked back and forth through the eye of the needle. Whether it was a kind of power or limitless ability, he reveled in what the heroin did for him. He confided in no one but his camera.

On the last day of his life, he attended his classes as usual in the late morning and afternoon. In the early evening while his fellow students went on shopping expeditions, Al met his local guide, the one who took him to the Hill Tribe villages. They ate together at a restaurant not frequented by tourists. Later in the evening, before guide departed he introduced Al to a transvestite who invited Al to a private room of a seedy bar tenderly administering the heroin. As the transvestite was beginning the injection, a foreign customer from the previous night burst into the room drunk interrupting him,

demanding that the transvestite join him at his table for a drink. The Thai male dressed as a woman spurned the advances of the tourist. Al stood up and the foreigner suddenly slapped him very hard on his back, making obviously insulting remarks to him in his language. Al took one step towards the foreigner interpreted it as a threat. He knocked Al down with a blow to his face. Then, the Thai cross-dresser, with one kick to the tourist's groin, ended the skirmish. The tourist doubled over on the floor, groaning. The transvestite called for the touts of the bar and who placed the tourist placed in a samlor to be taken to his hotel.

The transvestite cared for Al in the private room, wiping his face with a warm cloth and giving him a cup of hot tea. An hour later Al was feeling all right. Al asked for more heroin, but the transvestite was reluctant to it to him. But Al wanted it badly and so it was given to him. In a few minutes after receiving more heroin, Al fell on the floor in convulsions. The transvestite kept pulling him up into his chair. Al kept falling until the transvestite could no longer continue. Finally, leaving Al motionless on the floor, the transvestite departed, knowing the young man was dead. When the police arrived they questioned the proprietor, who reported that Al Lomack was with a transvestite who may have used heroin. The police loaded Al's limp body into a police station wagon and drove to the hospital where the doctors examined Al and simply noted he died of a drug overdose. The manner of Al Lomack's death was never reported in any newspaper. Making notification of the death of the Ivy League student with so much promise was no easy task for those at the Thai university.

A representative of the university went to Al's room and boxed all his belongings and shipped them to Al's home in New England.

Peter Mayton kept thinking if he had seen Al on the street the day before he died he might have changed fate, but didn't approach him because he seemed in a hurry and he didn't want to appear pushy. Perhaps, if he had made the effort on the street he could have invited him to one of his favorite restaurants for northern Thai food and introduced him to some of his Thai friends, it might have all

ended differently. But that's all very silly, for fate is like a freight train speeding towards its destination and the only thing that can stop it is a derailment. Maybe he could have been that derailment if he had stopped to talk to him and invited him to his favorite Thai restaurant the day before he died. He may have made some new friends who would have shown him more of Chiangmai. Sometimes speculating is like a whirlpool that one needs to pull out of as he thought of Al Lomack. He didn't know him well. He was a stranger in a foreign country meeting and staying among the poorest and vulnerable people in the world.

Al's photos were sent to his home and whether they will ever surface for the world to see is unknown. Still, not one of them will tell about the young man behind the lens. The student exchange program continues unaffected by Al Lomack who is a dim memory, forgotten by almost everyone except his family. When Al walked it was with the light-footedness of someone who wasn't sure where he was going. But he did like to walk through the eye of the needle.

After Peter Mayton remembered Al Lomack, he slept and dreamt about the cluster bombs the Laotians called *bombies*. He dreamed about walking through those fields and any step might bring death or dismemberment. The fear of explosion with every step made him wake up and he looked at the coconut tree outside his hotel window swaying all night until dawn.

As he washed his face in the morning he knew he would never have the courage to walk into those Laotian rice fields. War had begun with lies, first with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that was provoked by the U.S. government claim that the North Vietnamese attacked a U.S. ship. Wars are sometimes based on lies, he thought.

Truth is often an unwanted orphan in a sea of falsehoods and lies. He saw the Laotian girl Noy without an arm, smiling. It was wonderful she could still smile and laugh. The craters of American bombs still existed like open sores on the earth. An ideal environment for mosquitoes to lay their eggs were the many of the bomb craters filled with water in the rainy season. These craters were holes in the earth, punctured by a desire to destroy an unseen

enemy from 30,000 feet. Instead, the earth itself had become the target and the enemy.

He would see that minefield again today knowing the minefields in his own country were of a different sort, where truth itself was sometimes a minefield for those who uttered it.

If Al Lomack had lived he would have wanted to take a picture of Noy, the smiling Laotian girl with one arm just as he had taken photos of the Hill Tribe people, including a middle-aged man smoking an opium pipe lying down on his small weaved bamboo mat that served as his bed.

The day before he died he was walking in a hurry down a street in Chiangmai. Looking back Mayton had wanted to call out to him. Instead, he did nothing but went on his way to some now forgotten destination. Maybe there was a shadow walking behind or beside Al following him and guiding him to his destiny. As Peter Mayton remembered him walking that day he was now sure that Al Lomack was not walking alone and he wondered why he had not called out to Al Lomack and alter his destiny. Why had he not called out to Al Lomack?, he asked himself. Would it have mattered if he had? Would it have altered his day and his death? Will Al Lomack's photographs of drug addicted Hill Tribes men surface one day?

Peter Mayton striding out of his hotel room in Laos would have invited Al Lomack to travel to Laos with him as a photographer. Al Lomack never saw the pockmarks on the earth in Laos made by American bombs and he never saw the maimed and dead children from the orange cluster bombs that looked like toys.

Maybe Al Lomack imitated and became one with the opium addicted who he had photographed and he had pushed himself to that place of total abandonment of society, family and home called eternity. It is that or just an overdose, but those Hill Tribe photographs float over me now showing faces, both serene and desperate at the same time, echoing over my thoughts in the hotel room in Laos with its clean bareness while I stood overlooking the coconut trees through the open shutters. If Al had accompanied me and seen the children maimed by the cluster bombs and heard the

stories of those who had died with mortal wounds he might have had a reason for living, instead of a reason for dying. Or he might have continued on his own journey to that outpost called destiny which is mostly forgotten each day, instead of cutting it short.

Peter Mayton looked out over the coconut trees from his hotel room in Laos and beyond into the fields. He was sure that had Al Lomack accompanied him there would be many pictures of children who had played with colorful toys that had exploded into their bodies.

Peter Mayton could only wonder what would become of the Al's pictures of opium addicts in the Hill Tribe village. Those pictures were part of Al's legacy, an earnest legacy gone awry in the early evening not all that far away from the addicts in that Hill Tribe village. Just as the maimed and dead children from American *bombies* were unknown to those in their country of origin, Al Lomack's death received little notice in his own country.

Peter Mayton had departed Laos flying over the countryside knowing the *bombies* had been planted from the air, burrowing inside the earth waiting and waiting sprouting its fragments by bursting.

