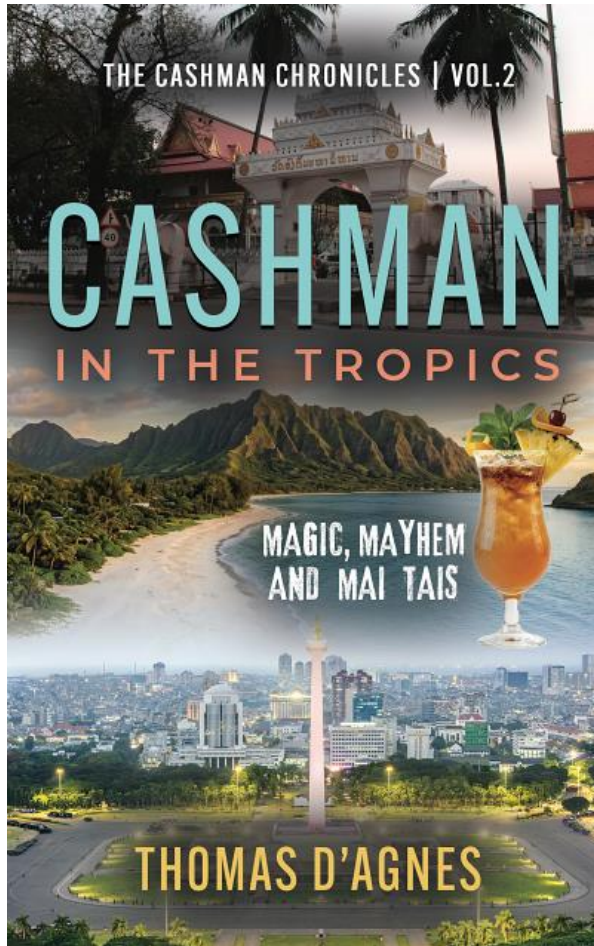




Despite his many foibles, Larry Cashman bumbles his way to Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Laos, and Hawaii in Cashman in the Tropics. Through it all, he remains a cunning schemer, coward, and most lovable scoundrel you'll ever meet.

Cashman in the Tropics

By Thomas D'Agnes

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THE CASHMAN CHRONICLES | VOL.2

CASHMAN

IN THE TROPICS

MAGIC, MAYHEM
AND MAI TAIS



THOMAS D'AGNES

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Chapter 7: The Philippines



Mt. Pinatubo Erupting in the Philippines

It didn't take long for the next terrorist attack on the US Embassy in Jakarta. The perpetrator, a graduate of the infamous Al Qaeda School for Bomb Making, tried to throw a bomb over the Embassy wall. Fortunately, the would-be bomber happened to be a chronic truant who frequently skipped class to watch lurid pornographic films. As a result, he missed the lecture on how a bomb requires a fuse long enough to give the thrower time to ignite it and then hurl it safely over a wall. In the aftermath, investigators reportedly discovered several singed photographs with his remains—among them images of Connie Lingus, Cherry Poppins,

and an especially youthful Stormy Daniels. As a future US President would attest, "...at least he had good taste...."

So there I was, in Jakarta, mulling over the fact that the immediate future did not bode well. There were bound to be more terrorist attacks. At the same time, I was unhappily engaged in a contentious battle with the self-righteous assholes at the Jakarta Embassy, not to mention my run-ins with Javanese evil spirits and black magic. The writing seemed to be on the proverbial wall; namely, it was high time for me to leave town. My family and I had been in Indonesia for 11 years. It was time for a change.

As I've always said, I'd rather be lucky than smart or competent, and once again, serendipity came to the rescue. Out of the blue, while pondering my fate, I received a call from Dr. P, who was now working at the US Embassy in the Philippines. He was calling from Manila.

"Cashman, I want you to come to the Philippines and work with me. I want to revisit our 'Special Arrangement' because I need your help developing new projects. The people that I work with here are fantastic. Our counterparts in the Philippine Government are some of the nicest and most competent people I've ever met. And, you will be happy to learn, the US Embassy in Manila has a 'No Assholes Allowed' policy, and I know how much you hate dealing with assholes. I have a strange feeling that you and Sabrina would like it here."

Dr. P departed from Indonesia one year before to become the Director of the Health and Population Program at the US Embassy in Manila, Philippines. In our correspondence since his departure, he had waxed fantastic about his counterparts in the Philippine government and how much help was needed after the mess left by the former dictator, Ferdinand Marcos. Dr. P had considerable

resources at his disposal, and he needed help to deploy them productively.

I didn't know much about the Philippines when Dr. P called me in 1991. What I soon learned was that the dictator and kleptomaniac, Ferdinand Marcos, spent the years from 1972 until his ouster in a People's Power revolution in 1986, turning a vibrant Philippine democracy into his own personal fiefdom and cash register. During that time, he silenced all dissent, imprisoned or exiled the political opposition, destroyed the Philippine institutions of democracy, and expropriated the country's wealth for himself, his family, and his cronies. Marcos was a first-class scumbag, but I had to give him some credit. When it came time to rape, pillage, and plunder his country, he was one of the best. Bashar Assad and Nicholas Maduro are amateurs compared to Marcos.

After Marcos' ouster, Corazon Aquino, the wife of the prominent opposition politician Benigno Aquino⁶⁷ who was assassinated in 1983, was elected president in 1986. Because of the devastation left by 14 years of Marcos' misrule, financial recklessness, and his kleptomania, the Aquino administration faced serious fiscal, economic, and governance challenges. There were nine coup-d'état attempts to overthrow the Aquino government between 1986 and 1990; all were unsuccessful.

Sometimes it's best not to know too much, so I welcomed Dr. P's invitation to join him in the Philippines. Sabrina, Carmencita,

⁶⁷ Benigno (Ninoy) Aquino was a senator and longtime political opponent of Ferdinand Marcos. He was shot on the tarmac of Manila airport upon returning to the Philippines after a three-year self-imposed exile in the US. Although it was never definitively proved, it was widely believed that Marcos ordered his assassination.

Katerina, and I moved our entire household to Manila,⁶⁸ the capital of the Philippines, in June 1991.

Manila was the quintessential Southeast Asian megalopolis, much like Jakarta. Both were old cities. Manila was founded in 1571, while Jakarta was established in 1619. Both cities had tropical climates and were densely populated with horrendous traffic jams. Both were a veritable mélange of culture and history. The Philippine archipelago contained more than 7,000 islands, while Indonesia encompassed 14,000 islands. Both countries had numerous ethnic and linguistic groups.

Our first order of business was to find a house to rent. Unlike the US Embassy in Jakarta, the US Embassy in Manila didn't provide housing for its employees. Instead, it provided a special "living allowance," and employees were expected to make their own housing arrangements. This was convenient, as it gave Sabrina the freedom to choose a neighborhood and a home she liked. She struck gold in Manila. We found a great Spanish colonial hacienda in Das Mariñas Village, Makati's central business district.

The house was owned by Alexia Faustino. Initially, this name meant nothing to me. When I mentioned it to my Filipino friends, however, every one of them knew who she was. Alexia Faustino was commonly known as the "Marilyn Monroe of the Philippines," the most beautiful woman in 1960s Philippine cinema. She

⁶⁸ The city of Manila is one of 16 cities in Metro-Manila, which comprises the Manila metropolitan area and is also referred to as the National Capital Region. Other cities in Metro-Manila are Makati, Mandaluyong, Quezon City, and Pasay City. In 2020, Metro-Manila's population was 12.8 million, and the City of Manila's was 1.8 million. References to "Manila" in this chapter refer to "Metro-Manila."

dominated movie dramas and romantic comedies in the sixties, and played opposite the most dashing Filipino leading men, many of whom later became politicians.

It had been 25 long years and about 50 lbs. since Alexia Faustino's heyday in Philippine cinema, and the years had not been kind to her. She no longer resembled a movie queen and national sex symbol. Now she looked more like an aging hippopotamus. During our negotiations for the house, she would occasionally take short breaks to graze on the lawn or munch on a large box of imported chocolates. But I must admit, she was an exceptionally nice hippopotamus, so we quickly concluded our negotiations. We lived in her Spanish hacienda in Makati for the next four years.

On June 15, 1991, exactly two weeks after our arrival, Mt. Pinatubo erupted. It was the second-largest volcanic eruption of the 20th century, sending a cloud of volcanic ash 22 miles into the atmosphere, which eventually landed hundreds of miles away from Pinatubo. Since Mt. Pinatubo was situated only 55 miles northwest of Manila, an enormous amount of volcanic ash rained down on the nation's capital for what seemed like an endless number of days.

At the same time, Typhoon Yunya struck the area around Pinatubo, mixing rain with ash. This gooey mess soon blanketed the entire countryside, creating pyroclastic flows called *lahars* that rumbled down Pinatubo's slopes, burying towns and villages and filling once-deep valleys with volcanic deposits 200 meters thick. More than 700 people were killed by the eruption and its aftermath. The economic cost was estimated to be \$750 million.

During my insulated life, I had never been this close to a volcanic eruption or a typhoon; never mind both calamities occurring at the same time. This double whammy occurred only two weeks after our arrival, so I excitedly asked Dr. P during one of our

early-morning tete-a-tetes whether such natural catastrophes occurred frequently.

“Well, there was the earthquake last year that destroyed Baguio City, causing many casualties.⁶⁹ It destroyed several buildings in Manila as well, causing panic and even stampedes. On the other hand, the earthquakes in Bohol and Panay⁷⁰ last year were not quite as bad. However, there have been reports of some scary tremors this year, but nothing major yet.”

I gagged when I heard this. “Wait a minute!! Earthquakes, casualties, stampedes, panic? What are you talking about?”

But Dr. P wasn’t finished. “I should add that last year was a rather bad year for typhoons. The Philippines lies in the path of many tropical storms, and you can be sure that at least one massive typhoon will strike somewhere each year and inflict severe damage and casualties.”

“Dr. P, are you shitting me? Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Oh, I guess I forgot.” Dr. P was almost apologetic. “By the way, Cashman, did I mention the communist insurrection and the Muslim insurgency plaguing the Philippines? Several staff from other embassies have already been kidnapped this year. We have to be careful when traveling.”

Dr. P took this opportunity to explain some things I didn’t know. The Philippines lies right in the middle of the world’s most active typhoon belt and is the most exposed country to tropical storms. On average, approximately 20 tropical cyclones slam into the

⁶⁹ Baguio City is located in the mountains, 124 miles north of Manila. A magnitude 7.5 earthquake rattled the city in 1990, causing massive damage and killing 2,412 people.

⁷⁰ Panay and Bohol are islands in the central, or Visayan, region of the Philippines.

Philippines every year. Ten of these will be classified as typhoons, and five will have enough strength to cause major destruction. To make matters worse, the Philippine Islands sit right along the Pacific Ring of Fire⁷¹, a geologic region where most of the world's earthquakes occur and where most volcanoes can be found. In fact, the Philippines was home to 20 active volcanoes!

What I also didn't know was that, in addition to the political instability plaguing the Philippines following the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos, there was also an ongoing communist rebellion and a Muslim insurgency in the southern island of Mindanao.⁷² In 1992, as the Philippines approached its first democratic presidential election since the end of the Marcos dictatorship, the country's internal stability was precarious.

I nearly vomited when I heard this litany of dangers that I could easily encounter over the next couple of years. Communist insurrections!! Muslim insurgencies!! Typhoons, earthquakes, and volcanoes!! Kidnappings!! These are not occasions for the faint of heart, much less for a coward who is afraid of clowns and ghosts.

Usually, it was Dr. P who was impatient with me. Now the tables were turned. I didn't need to hear any more. I know when it's time

⁷¹ The Pacific Ring of Fire is an arc around the Pacific Ocean containing many active volcanoes and is a region where earthquakes frequently occur. The Ring of Fire includes New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, Alaska, and nearly the entire west coast of North and South America. It is the site of around 90 percent of the world's earthquakes and is home to 75 percent of the world's active and dormant volcanoes.

⁷² The communist New People's Army (NPA) had been fighting to establish a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist state in the Philippines since 1969. The Muslim separatist movements represented by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and a breakaway faction, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), had been fighting for sovereignty in the southern island of Mindanao since 1973.

to cut and run, and this was the time. “This sounds extremely dangerous,” I exclaimed irritably. “If I had known about all of these hazards, I would never have agreed to come. I’m getting out of here.”

“Calm down, Cashman. I know what a candy-ass you are. If I mentioned even one of these ‘hazards,’ as you call them, you would never come here. Yes, I agree, there are occasional volcanoes, typhoons, and insurgencies. But the working environment here is phenomenal. I have never worked with such competent and friendly people, both in the government and in the Embassy. If we reprise our ‘Special Arrangement,’ I will make sure no one bothers you.”

Dr. P had a point there. The cultural clash between those white, Anglo-Saxon, religious fundamentalists at the Embassy and my crude New York City demeanor had caused me untold misery in Jakarta. In my two weeks in Manila, our colleagues at the Embassy had been nothing but helpful. I had met several of our counterparts at the Philippine Department of Health—Mariano Tanglaw, the Undersecretary of Health; Rafi Gatmaitan, the Undersecretary for Management; Miguel Dalidig, the Undersecretary for Infectious Diseases—and they were all brilliant and great guys to boot. The work situation in Manila was indeed excellent and something I would not easily find elsewhere.

Nevertheless, I was petrified that somehow, I would get kidnapped by Muslim insurgents. Dr. P could see that I wasn’t convinced, so he added, “And don’t forget the scuba diving. The Philippines has some of the best diving in the world. I know how you like to boast about your diving adventures. You can be diving every weekend here.”

The diving certainly made a difference. Suddenly, I began daydreaming about the great diving I had heard about in the Philippines. Interrupting my reverie, Dr. P was now the one who was losing his patience.

“By the way, Cashman, should I also remind you that you have already signed a contract for the next four years? You’re not going anywhere, and I’m finished humoring you. So kindly gather up your things. We have to go to work.”

Dr. P was right. Living and working in the Philippines was phenomenal. He and I got right down to business developing new projects—HIV/AIDS prevention and control, health financing, early childhood development, and primary health care. Our colleagues at the Department of Health were the best. No one from the Embassy ever bothered us. The Filipino people were wonderful. And the diving was out of this world.

Several months after we arrived in Manila, Andrew Jackson Poole,⁷³ my old buddy from the University of Hawaii, came to town. He worked for a shady global telecommunications company that sold the latest communications technology to any government or insurgent group willing to pay the price. He was a wheeler-dealer and scam artist extraordinaire, two characteristics I admired.

In recent years, he began selling light arms and explosives as a sideline—some M-16s and AK-47s here, some nitroglycerin and TNT there, and the occasional grenade launcher and landmine. Many of

⁷³ Cashman met Andrew Jackson Poole at the University of Hawaii in 1978, where they smoked weed, went to the beach, drank whiskey, and engaged in assorted nefarious activities while their wives worked full-time and supported them. See Volume 1, Chapter 10, for a description of Andrew Jackson Poole’s antics.

his communications technology customers needed both, so he did package deals. His clients read like a Who's Who of nefarious characters—Saudi Arabian princes, Afghan warlords, South African white supremacists, Angolan rebels, Cambodian psychopaths, Libyan dictators, and Russian oligarchs. If there was a deal in the air, Andrew Jackson could smell it. He visited us in Bangkok and Jakarta, so I was not surprised when, one day out of the blue, he showed up in Manila.

Since we lived in a villa with staff, a swimming pool, and lavish guest quarters, Andrew Jackson moved right in with us when he visited Manila. During daytime hours, he would slink around town, furtively meeting his clients (communist rebels and Islamic insurgents among them), then take us out to dinner at Manila's finest restaurants on his expense account. We had a great time whenever Andrew Jackson came to town.

It was the second week of Andrew Jackson's visit when Alexia Faustino invited us to a dinner party at her mansion in Forbes Park.⁷⁴ It would be a gala affair, with attendees from Manila's political and entertainment community. For a minor leaguer like me, this was a chance to see how Manila's high society lived. Sabrina had other engagements that night, so I asked Andrew Jackson to tag along. For him, it was a business opportunity.

Alexia's mansion was breathtaking. It was huge, built in the Spanish colonial style, and had a massive outdoor area encircling the pool, where 30-40 tables were adorned with lavish place settings. Alexia greeted us as we entered, and after exchanging pleasantries, escorted us to our table. By chance, I was assigned a

⁷⁴ Forbes Park is the most elite residential community in Metro-Manila, home to the rich and famous.

seat next to Senator Ricardo Santiago, one of the country's leading Senators.⁷⁵ He had also been Alexia's leading man in many movies that they starred in together during the 1960s. Alexia introduced us.

"This is Dr. Cashman. He is renting my home in Das Mariñas village."

"Just call me Cashman. Everyone does," I quickly added.

The Senator responded with monumental disinterest, obviously peeved that he had to sit next to an inconsequential lightweight. He nodded to me perfunctorily as he inhaled his cigarette. His aide, however, was more congenial and engaged us in conversation, while the Senator gazed off into the distance.

When the conversation turned to employment, and I told the aide I worked at the US Embassy, Senator Santiago stopped short. "You work at the US Embassy? Do you know anything about the Clark and Subic Bases Agreement negotiations?"

Clark Air Force Base and Subic Naval Base were prominent US military facilities in the Philippines. Both had played critical roles as forward support bases during the Vietnam War. Within the Philippines, however, they were widely viewed as a vestige of colonialism, an infringement on Philippine sovereignty, and a source of interference in the country's internal affairs.

From 1988 to 1991, the US and Philippine governments tried to renegotiate an extension of the lease agreement for the military

⁷⁵ There are 24 Senators in the Philippines, each elected for a six year term. Unlike the US, where Senators represent a state and are elected by voters in that state only, Senators in the Philippines are elected at-large, which means that each senator must obtain a plurality of nationwide votes. Because of the limited number of senators and their national recognition, Senators in the Philippines wield substantial political power.

bases at Clark and Subic. It was a contentious negotiation. Any agreement had to be ratified by the Philippine Senate. A group of senators fiercely opposed any agreement to renew the leases because the bases violated Philippine sovereignty. Ricardo Santiago was chief among the antagonists.

The US, on the other hand, was less interested in Clark and Subic after both were heavily damaged by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. Both sites were situated within 15 km of the eruption. In fact, Clark Air Force Base was so severely damaged that it had to be abandoned.

I knew absolutely nothing about these negotiations. It was light-years above my pay grade, which is what I told the Senator. All of a sudden, Andrew Jackson, who had been silent up to this time, interjected, "Don't be so modest, Cashman. You knew a lot about it when you described the negotiations to me last week. You even met with Richard Armitage to discuss it." The Senator's eyes lit up when he heard that.

Richard Armitage was the senior US diplomat negotiating the Base Lease Renewal Agreement with the Philippine government. He was currently in Manila, engaged in tense negotiations. People like Richard Armitage didn't waste their time with flunkies like me. But it sure got the Senator's attention when he heard Armitage's name.

Andrew Jackson pushed me aside so he could confer directly with the Senator. "Why did you ask Senator?" After that, Andrew Jackson Poole, Senator Ricardo Santiago, and his aide huddled in an intense conversation and eventually stole away for some privacy.

When Andrew Jackson returned to the table, I grabbed him by his shirt collar and asked excitedly, "What have you been up to?" Knowing Andrew Jackson as I did, I was certain he was up to no good.

"Be quiet. I'll tell you everything when we get home."

When we arrived home, Andrew Jackson recounted the results of his discussion. He had made a deal with Senator Santiago. He would provide the Senator with secret details of the US negotiating position and strategy on the Base Lease Renewal Agreement. In return, the Senator would give him the inside track on a large telecommunications contract that would soon be tendered by the Philippine government.

Andrew Jackson was elated. "This is a fantastic opportunity. And I thought I would be going home empty-handed, except for that piddling arms deal I signed with those cheapskates in the Communist New People's Army. Now I may obtain this new and substantial telecommunications deal. That was great work, Cashman." Andrew Jackson was an equal opportunity scalawag.

"I know nothing about the U.S. military base negotiations. Where will you find out about the US negotiating position?"

"Do you mean that, if you knew something, you'd like to get a piece of this action? Cashman, you're still a degenerate at heart. I'm glad some things don't change."

"Hey, I have to get by on a government salary."

"Have no fears, Cashman. I would never rely on a slacker like you for information this important. My company has people at the highest levels who can provide me with what I need. However, because of you, I was able to get my foot in the door."

"That must be worth something," I retorted.

"It's worth dinner at the Manila Hotel tomorrow night. After that, let's see what happens."

"Dinner at the Manila Hotel!! Are you kidding me? I just gave you the opportunity for the deal of a lifetime, and that's the best you can do? When did you become such a tightwad?"

Andrew Jackson Poole was anything but a tightwad. Before I knew it, he provided me with three bottles of 21-year-old single malt scotch and several boxes of Cuban Cohiba cigars. "There will be more of everything when the deal is consummated," he assured me.

I was pretty pleased with this outcome. Andrew Jackson was generous, so I expected a handsome remuneration. Before I could even start imagining what I would buy with this windfall, a huge typhoon hit the area around Mt. Pinatubo, and *lahar* from the eruption slid down the mountain and buried Subic Bay naval base in 10 feet of mud. Since rehabilitating the base would cost billions, the US offered a paltry lease fee for the base, the Philippine Senate rejected it out of hand, and in a flash, Andrew Jackson's deal fell through, leaving me with some scotch and cigars but no cash. To add insult to injury, someone stole my wallet at Alexia Faustino's party and used my credit card to buy a new stereo system. What is that old saying about "What goes around comes around?"

Living and working in the Philippines was a most pleasant experience. The Filipino people were friendly, warm, engaged, and above all, capable. Everyone spoke English—from taxicab drivers and house staff to clerical staff and our professional counterparts in the government. Most of the professionals in the Philippine government spoke perfect English. I like speaking foreign languages, so I tried to learn the local language, Tagalog. When I used my basic Tagalog with my colleagues, their reaction betrayed their disbelief, as if to say, "Why are you speaking with me in Tagalog? My English is better than yours." Tagalog was the only

foreign language I never learned to speak in my years living and working overseas.

After more than 10 years working together, Dr. P and I had become an effortless team. He was the idea man, conceiving new projects and conceptualizing designs with our government counterparts. I then fleshed out these ideas and transformed them into workable initiatives for our Philippine counterparts to review, modify, and implement. One day, I received a call from Dr. P and I could immediately tell by the tone of his voice that something was up.

“Cashman, there has been a malaria outbreak on the island of Palawan. Miguel Dalidig, the Undersecretary for Infectious Diseases, is leading a team to Palawan to investigate. From what I have been told, the outbreak is severe. I want you to join him. Find out what is going on and what needs to be done. We will need to mobilize resources quickly to help out.”

Such requests from Dr. P were not unusual while we worked together in either Indonesia or the Philippines. Whenever there was a disease outbreak, a natural disaster, or an emergency, he would send me to investigate. Based upon my findings, Dr. P would obtain the resources needed to help the government. These trips frequently took me to many out-of-the-way places that were extremely remote and/or had been neglected; a perfect recipe for a severe epidemic or a natural and/or man-made disaster to wreak havoc among the local population.

Palawan Island was one of those places. It is a long, thin island situated in the Southwest region of the Philippine archipelago—280 miles long and 31 miles wide, with a mountain range running down its center. It was an extremely underdeveloped place when we went there in 1994. There were few paved roads, and those were

usually only found on the southern side of the island, branching out from Puerto Princesa, the capital city of Palawan province. One generally got around Palawan primarily by boat.

This, however, was slated to be an easy trip—a briefing with provincial health officials to assess the severity of the outbreak and determine what was needed to contain it. What excited me was the potential for some scuba diving. Palawan had some of the most pristine, undiscovered dive sites in the Philippines. Miguel Dalidig, the Undersecretary, was an avid diver. We had shared diving stories and talked about adding a dive trip to one of our field visits. This would be the perfect time.

There was one slight problem. Palawan was remote, and the Communist New People's Army (NPA) was active there. Not to worry, I thought, as Puerto Princesa was supposedly secure and we were unlikely to venture far from the town. I had never been to Palawan and was looking forward to this trip.

We left Manila early in the morning for the flight to Puerto Princesa. When we arrived there, provincial dignitaries were lined up to meet us at the airport—a not unusual occurrence when traveling with a high-level official like Miguel Dalidig—who whisked us off to the Governor's Office for a briefing by the Province's Chief Medical Officer. That was easy, I thought. There might even be time to get some diving in today. Suddenly, a military officer entered the office and whispered something into the Governor's ear.

"OK. The vehicles are here to take you to the helicopter," the Governor announced. "Please report your findings to me when you return." For good measure, he added, "And good luck."

"Helicopter! What the hell is he talking about?" I wondered. After leaving the Governor's office, I caught up with Miguel and asked him why we were being taken to a helicopter.

“Didn’t Dr. P tell you? The sites where the outbreak is worst are so remote that it takes health officials many days to get there overland. The affected communities are on the island’s north and south sides. Because of the mountains, the only way to reach them is by helicopter. The Air Force has provided a Huey helicopter to take us to the outbreak sites.”

“But isn’t the NPA still active in Palawan? Are the sites we plan to visit secure?”

“Don’t worry so much, Cashman. The Army will provide us with an armed escort.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. This was my worst nightmare. I hate flying in airplanes, never mind helicopters, which are infinitely more dangerous. But flying over steep mountains into areas controlled by communist guerrillas and with an armed guard? I didn’t sign up for any of this!!!

I’ve been in tight spots before. A crazed, drunken Moroccan with a knife accosted us when we arrived in Marrakech.⁷⁶ I had been captured and imprisoned by Cambodian guerrillas with Tim O’Riordan.⁷⁷ Only this time, I was staring into the abyss—a helicopter ride over rough terrain into areas controlled by communist guerrillas with an armed escort of soldiers. This was insanity.

So I did what I have done every time I have been in a tough spot. I immediately started making excuses why I couldn’t go, and when this stratagem failed, I decided to cut and run. Only this time, I

⁷⁶ See Volume 1, Chapter 4 of the Cashman Chronicles, “The Marrakech Express” for a description of Cashman’s encounter with the crazed, knife-wielding Moroccan.

⁷⁷ See Volume 2, Chapter 1 of the Cashman Chronicles, “Nong Samet” for the account of Cashman’s capture by Cambodian rebels.

literally started running. One of the soldiers at the airfield, who was 20 years younger than me, chased me down and dragged me back to the helicopter pad.

The chopper that would transport us was a Huey from the Vietnam War. The pilot and a co-pilot sat in the front, with two bench seats behind them, each holding three people. Most terrifying was that this flying machine had no doors. Instead, it contained a wide open space beside our seats, just like in Vietnam War movies. I was seated on the first bench, right behind the pilot, with nothing between me and a free fall but an old, tattered seat belt. To the rear of the Huey, on each side, was a compartment with a mounted machine gun and three soldiers ready, and probably eager, to fire on any uninvited guests. I was terrified as the helicopter lifted off the tarmac.

We flew along Palawan's southern coastline for 40 minutes to the first site. The scenery was stunning—crystal-clear, azure-blue water with coral reefs ideal for diving, juxtaposed with white-sand beaches fringed by palm-tree-studded foliage. The flight was uneventful. Once we landed, the soldiers in the rear compartments fanned out with their M-16s to establish a perimeter. This wasn't so bad, I thought. The ride was actually quite pleasant.

The malaria situation was bad. The health center was treating 150 new malaria cases every week. They needed diagnostic test kits, bed nets, and malaria medicines. That's all I needed to know to report to Dr. P. I told Miguel he could drop me off in Puerto Princesa before proceeding to the next site if it was no trouble.

"Sorry, Cashman, we can't do that. To reach the next site, we have to fly over the mountains to the island's north side. Reports indicate that the situation there is even worse than here. Then we

have three more sites to visit. You'll have to join us the whole way. So sit back and enjoy the ride."

I thought as much, but at least I could comfort myself, thinking that "....hey, I tried to abscond in a dignified manner, but no luck...." I braced myself for the next ride.

We headed inland toward the mountain range in the center of the island. The mountain slopes were rugged and steep, requiring the helicopter to climb in altitude. It was a windy day, making the helicopter vibrate like we were in a washing machine. As we approached the summit, a gust of wind lifted the helicopter vertically. Suddenly, the wind changed direction, pushing us downward towards the mountain, creating a sensation of free-fall. I began to sweat profusely and my bowels were rumbling. The pilot, however, regained control of the chopper, and we slowly regained altitude. On the second attempt, the same thing happened. It was only on the third attempt that we managed to clear the mountain top.

By the time we landed and the soldiers had established a secure perimeter, I was trembling so badly that I was unable to walk on my own. I asked one of the health center staff members to perform an EKG. I was certain I had suffered a heart attack at the worst or paroxysmal atrial tachycardia at the least. There was no EKG at the health center. In fact, the facility had no electricity.

This scene was repeated three more times that day. By the time we boarded our flight home, it just felt like a roller coaster. When we cleared the mountains for the last time and were heading back towards Puerto Princesa, I breathed an enormous sigh of relief. I was proud of myself for surviving that day.

All of a sudden, while I was finally relaxing, I heard what sounded like a *pop*! Then another *pop-pop*! Before I realized what

was happening, the soldiers in the back of the chopper started firing their machine guns into the forest canopy below. We were under attack by communist guerrillas.

When I heard the shots, I freaked out. I jumped out of my seat and flailed my arms in horror. As my fellow passengers tried to restrain me, I knocked a spare oxygen canister off the ceiling of the Huey. When it fell, it hit the pilot on the head and knocked him unconscious. The chopper jerked and heaved, and then went into a tailspin. The co-pilot struggled to gain control of the chopper as it hurtled toward the ground. The co-pilot stabilized the helicopter a bit, then frantically searched for a clearing to set it down. The chopper was still falling too fast when it hit the ground with a loud thud.

Like everyone else on that chopper, I passed out from the impact when it hit the ground. When I regained consciousness, all I could see was rubble and unconscious bodies slouched in their seats. I staggered out of the wide open space next to my seat and assessed the situation. The chopper had gone down in NPA territory. The communists were probably closing in on the crash site right now, I thought. When the co-pilot landed the chopper, there was no explosion. I didn't see much blood, so maybe the passengers had only been stunned like me.

In my view, I had two choices. I could help my fellow passengers, in which case the NPA might reach the crash site and take me captive. Or I could cut and run and save my ass. As the reader knows, Larry Cashman is no hero. And I never had much of a conscience. So I started running away from the crash site as fast as my legs would carry me.

As I was about to take off, I noticed a substantial amount of cash strewn on the ground amongst bags of marijuana near the soldiers

in the rear compartment. Those rascals! The soldiers were making marijuana deliveries while we checked out the malaria situation. No sense leaving all that cash for the NPA, I thought. And no one would report it missing, that's for sure. So I gathered up the cash and stuffed it into my pockets. I dispersed the bags of weed so there would be no suspicion on the soldiers. This little windfall would make up for my loss when Andrew Jackson's deal fell through.

When the chopper went down, we had passed the mountains in the center of the island and were headed southeast towards Puerto Princesa. Palawan is a narrow island, so it couldn't be far away. If I kept walking away from the setting sun, I would hopefully reach the coast soon and be safe.

As the reader knows by now, Larry Cashman was born with few skills and even fewer redeeming qualities. I have a line of bullshit that stretches to infinity. I can speak foreign languages pretty well. And I am extremely skilled at resting and relaxing. In that jungle in Palawan, I discovered another skill. When I was being chased by communist guerrillas, and my neck was on the line, I could move through the jungle as stealthily as a Navy SEAL. Or more accurately, when I'm scared shitless, I can do what needs to be done to save my ass.

I slithered through the jungle for an hour, looking over my shoulder constantly for the NPA. After a while, I saw movement in the jungle ahead. This was it. My luck had run out. I crouched down in a crevice to conceal myself from the NPA. But it wasn't the NPA. It was soldiers in Philippine army fatigues. It was a search-and-rescue mission to locate the crash site. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was saved.

But what would I tell them? That I had abandoned all of my colleagues to save my ass? When the soldiers reached me, I did the next best thing.

"I'm so glad I found you. I left the crash site to look for help. I was the only one who could walk. Some of the passengers are injured. I'll take you back there."

"Are you Mr. Cashman?" the squadron leader asked.

"Just call me Cashman. Everyone does."

"That was a courageous thing to do, Cashman. This area is crawling with NPA."

"I wasn't thinking of myself. I was only thinking of the others," I lied.

The co-pilot had radioed the base about the impending crash, so the search party had a vague idea where the chopper had gone down. Every soldier congratulated me on my bravery. This was working out nicely. Then reality hit me. Now I had to go back to the crash site. There might be NPA there. There might be a firefight. I needed to think fast. I approached the squadron leader.

"Maybe I should go back to Puerto Princesa with some of the soldiers so I can report this incident directly to the Governor? If you head northwest for an hour, you'll find the crash site."

"You've done more than enough already, Cashman. Can I ask you to do one more thing? If you lead us to the crash site, it will save time."

Just my luck to meet a sanctimonious soldier with a conscience. There was no way that I could weasel out of this horror show anymore. There were at least 30 soldiers in the squadron. They would have to do the shooting if we met up with the NPA. Against my better judgment, I led them back to the crash site.

The newspaper articles reporting this story were effusive in their praise for my courage in the face of danger. The governor of Palawan gave me a medal for bravery and a key to Puerto Princesa City. As it turned out, when we returned to the crash site, the NPA had not yet arrived, and none of the passengers or soldiers were seriously injured, except for a few broken bones here, a few contusions there.

The pilot had a skull fracture from the oxygen canister I dislodged onto his head, but he healed up just fine. The soldiers looked pissed about their drug deal gone awry, but that was no concern of mine. The real hero was the co-pilot who regained enough control of the chopper to set it down without serious injury.

And by the way, the helicopter had not come under attack. The *pop-pop* sound that I heard was a piston misfiring. Our armed guards returned fire reflexively. If I hadn't panicked, nothing would have happened. But no one remembered that. The trauma from the crash caused a contagion of amnesia that erased my earlier actions from everyone's memory.

This entire incident was caused by my cravenness, but I came out of it smelling like roses, not to mention the nice chunk of cash I had expropriated from the soldiers. The Ambassador even held a special ceremony at the Embassy to recognize my valor. The Secretary of Health conducted a similar ceremony at the Department of Health to thank me. I, of course, did nothing to disabuse anyone of their misguided notions. I liked being a hero, and, like the whale shark stories, I exaggerated the entire incident in the retelling.

After the ceremony at the Embassy, people lined up to congratulate me.

"Good show, Cashman old boy. We need more Embassy staff like you."

"Cashman, you're the man."

"You really stepped up to the plate, Cashman."

"You've got brass cojones, Cashman."

Then someone surprised me from behind and whispered in my ear, "Meet me in my office in 15 minutes. We need to talk." It was Dr. P.

This was a problem. Dr. P knew me better than anyone. Above all, he knew what a coward I am. He'd seen it for himself many times, and he had little patience for my shenanigans. I didn't know quite how to play this.

"Well, if it isn't the conquering hero himself," Dr. P greeted me when I reached his office. "Come in and sit down."

That was a pleasant enough welcome. Maybe Dr. P believed the story. "Yeah, I did what had to be done," I retorted.

"And trekking through the NPA-infested jungle to bring help to your fellow passengers! That was not only brave, but it was also selfless."

And then the neural connection between my brain and my mouth misfired again. I should have downplayed the whole thing and ended the conversation. Not me. I couldn't help bragging a bit.

"You know me....only thinking of others. I was blind to the danger. That wild jungle crawling with communist guerrillas was just an impediment to be overcome in my effort to get help for my compadres."

"*ALL RIGHT, CUT THE CRAP, CASHMAN!!!*" he screamed. "I've heard enough of your bullshit. You don't have a selfless strand of

DNA in your genome. And courage? You're a gutless wimp and pussy. I saw you knock that old lady down in your haste to leave the Embassy compound in Jakarta after the first terrorist attack. You hide from the kids trick-or-treating at Halloween. You're afraid of clowns. Now come clean. Tell me what happened out there!"

Well, you can't shit the shitter, so I told him exactly what happened, except for the cash windfall, of course. No need to go into that.

"You panicked and dislodged an oxygen canister that fell on the pilot's head!! Dr. P gasped in disbelief. "Are you fucking kidding me? And you ran away from the crash site to save your ass!! Did anyone see this?"

"Everyone saw me panic, but no one seems to remember it after the shock of the crash. And everyone was unconscious when I ran," I assured him.

"Well, the die is cast, so that is the story we go with. You're the golden boy for now. If anyone ever learns the truth, you're a dead man walking."

Dr. P had a way of putting things in stark terms, and I couldn't argue with him. But I could see that something was still bothering him. Finally, he blurted it out.

"I can't believe you ran away from the crash site to save your ass without helping anyone. Then you had the audacity to tell the search party that you braved an NPA-infested jungle to try to get help? Cashman, you are an irredeemable coward."

Dr. P was right. I was feeling a bit guilty, so I said, "Dr. P, be honest with me....do you think I'm a bad person?"

"Cashman, that ship sailed a long time ago."

Somewhere I'd heard that sentiment before.

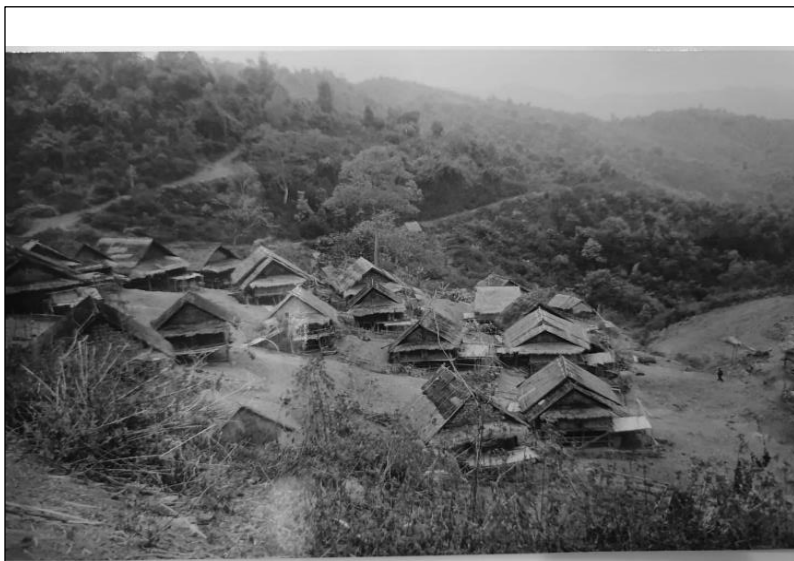
Dr. P was right about one thing. If anyone remembered how I panicked when the soldiers started shooting and caused the crash, I was in big trouble. While I basked in the adulation for my bravery, I knew it was only a matter of time until the truth emerged. Plus, during the many gatherings I hosted, regaling my admirers with my feats of bravery, I was liberally sharing the expensive whiskey and Cuban cigars I purchased with my cash bonanza, which might eventually bring unwanted scrutiny. I've been in enough tight spots to know when it's time to exit, stage left. And this was the ideal time.

Then serendipity came to the rescue again. The Asian Development Bank⁷⁸ (ADB) was looking for an advisor for its new health project in Laos, a small, isolated country bordering Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, China, and Cambodia. Most Lao government officials spoke Thai, and very few spoke English, so ADB sought an advisor who could speak Thai. And guess who is fluent in Thai? Once again, Dr. P's advice to me when I was a student in Hawaii—learn the local language—was coming in handy. Next stop...Laos.

⁷⁸ The **Asian Development Bank (ADB)** is a regional development bank headquartered in Manila with field offices in 31 countries. Unlike the World Bank, which provides development assistance to countries around the world, the Asian Development Bank assists countries in Asia and the Pacific only. Like the World Bank, it provides its assistance in the form of grants and concessionary loans.

Chapter 10:

The Back of the Beyond



A Hill Tribe Village in Northern Laos

When I worked at US Embassies in Jakarta and Manila, I spent endless hours going to useless meetings and conferences, where pedantic blowhards (especially me) spewed self-righteous bullshit about arcane matters of little consequence. My work in Laos, on the other hand, required me to travel to some of the most remote and lawless areas on the planet. Building hospitals and health centers in the untamed wilderness of northern Laos required visiting the sites where facilities were to be built and then monitoring construction to ensure contractors did not cut corners.

The construction sites were located in villages in the remote mountains and forests of Laos, which my colleagues and I referred to as the “Back of the Beyond.” These places could only be reached by flying in rickety, 15-seat, Chinese-made, propeller-driven airplanes to the provincial capitals of Oudomxay and Xieng Khouang Provinces.

From there, we drove 4-wheel-drive vehicles over impassable roads that disappeared into the forest. Then our “real journey” began as we had to get out and walk—climbing steep mountains, wading through streams, and crossing rivers until we reached our destination. This was usually some tribal village inhabited by Hmong, Yao, Khmu, Akha, or Luei hill tribes.

When we finally arrived, exhausted from our travails, the villagers had one thing on their minds—drinking as much of their homebrewed white lightning (called Lao-Lau in the local vernacular) as possible without their livers exploding. Seeing a honky like Larry Cashman get loaded, and semi-comatose on Lao-Lau provided them with much mirth and amusement.

There were no amenities of any kind in these villages—no electricity, no clean water, no latrines, no schools, no health care, no money. You name it, and it did not exist here. What they definitely had plenty of was malaria, measles, tuberculosis, diarrhea, pneumonia, and assorted bacteria, viruses, mycoses, protozoa, trematodes, nematodes, cestodes, spirochetes, and rickettsiae. Added to this was an abundance of unexploded ordnance (UXOs) littering the countryside, the detritus of nine years of US bombing. As the reader may surmise, these communities were not desirable tourist destinations, much less for a pansy like Larry Cashman.

I dreaded places like those, preferring the creature comforts and conveniences of civilized Vientiane. Unfortunately, installing a health care delivery system meant providing health services to people living in the “Back of the Beyond.” Sooner or later, I would have to drag my sorry ass out there to see what was actually happening with the funds the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had bequeathed to the Lao government.

My involvement with construction projects in northern Laos led to my unenviable association with a particularly unctuous and repugnant humanoid life form commonly referred to as “architects”. These individuals are devious, mentally challenged bean counters who control every phase of construction—from designing the buildings, preparing the bidding documents, overseeing the bidding process, and evaluating the bids, to receiving hefty kickbacks from each construction company bidding on a project. Architects chase construction projects the way lawyers chase ambulances, with an equally self-aggrandizing result.

During my career, I have dealt with assorted professional rabble and charlatans, including economists, lawyers, physicians, dentists, accountants, and politicians (the latter undoubtedly the most despicable and most venal life form found within the animal kingdom. Politicians make a snake in the grass seem like a paragon of virtue in comparison). Architects, however, rank right up there with this oleaginous lot and very close to the bottom of the proverbial barrel.

Much to my chagrin and eventual misfortune, we had to hire an architect to design our hospitals and health centers, and then supervise their construction. Because of warnings from colleagues about the aborted cerebral and motor development most architects possess, the basic qualifications for our architect were

kept at an exceedingly low bar. The successful candidate had to be able to (1) walk and chew gum at the same time, (2) differentiate right from left with at least 50% accuracy, (3) maintain uninterrupted consciousness for at least one hour, and (4) be able to solve the mathematical problem "How much is 2 plus 2?" Our team considered tossing requirements "3" and "4" out the window, fearing they would limit the pool of qualified candidates. The Asian Development Bank refused, insisting that certain standards be maintained.

We finally hired an architect named Bounmee. My suspicions about his competence were first aroused when he asked to use a calculator to solve the mathematical problem, and were confirmed when he got it wrong. But since Bounmee was the only applicant who fulfilled the first three qualifications, we hired him anyway, hoping for the best but expecting the worst.

Well, Bounmee didn't disappoint us. I strongly recommend against embarking upon any construction project with an imbecile for an architect. His designs were horrendous, his methods antiquated, and all material specifications were subsequently found to be incorrect.

I knew we had a serious problem when one of our staff members went out to inspect a health center, leaned against a wall, and the wall caved in, causing the ceiling to collapse on his head. When asked why this problem occurred, Bounmee postulated that "Maybe the inspector had leaned on the wall too hard." What should one expect from an imbecile? We avoided leaning on walls, doorways, gates, or windowsills during future inspections.

Having already built 30 "Bounmee-inspired," structurally compromised health centers, we now had to visit the villages where each one was being built to assess the damage. My worst nightmare

became reality when I was tapped as one of the four-member team that would have to visit each construction site. The team included two officials from the Lao Ministry of Health, Palomede Jupien and me. Regrettably, I was now facing an eight-week trip into the "Back of the Beyond" in Oudomxay and Xieng Khouang provinces.

As a matter of principle, I avoided such field trips like the plague, since going to these villages would expose me to diseases that made the "Black Death" of the Middle Ages seem like a case of the sniffles. In addition, such peregrinations meant hauling my lily-white, candy-ass out to 30 sites in the remote, mountainous jungles of northern Laos, places on the fringes of civilization that harbored bandits and hostile rebels.

Adding insult to injury, these inspections were scheduled just as the rainy season was morphing into the cold season, climatic conditions that Larry Cashman finds most distasteful. To make matters worse, I would have to squeeze my bony ass into the back of a pick-up truck traveling over impassable roads for hours on end. Once the roads disappeared, I would have to hike for hours through mountainous terrain to reach a dirt-poor village where I would have to sleep on the floor, bathe in frigid mountain streams, and take a dump in the woods, behavioral practices which held little appeal for a wimp like me.

This trip would introduce Larry Cashman to the many miseries and irregularities found in the isolated areas of northern Laos.

In 2019, the Plain of Jars, situated in Xieng Khouang province, was officially designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Despite this distinction, the area is still one of the most dangerous archaeological sites in the world. Thousands of unexploded bombs

remain from the Secret War of the 1960s, when North Vietnamese troops supporting the Communist Pathet Lao fought a land war in the Plain of Jars with the Royalist Lao Government (supported by the US Air Force), trying to create a land corridor from North Vietnam to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Much of the actual fighting, however, was performed by Hmong villagers who loathed the North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao allies.

The Plain of Jars got its name from the megalithic stone urns that stand up to three meters high and weigh as much as 30 tons, which are ubiquitously scattered over the descriptively named Plain. Today, large numbers of tourists flock to observe more than 100 sites containing more than 2,000 large stone jars. Archaeologists have dated their origin to between 1,350 and 350 BC.

When I arrived in Xieng Khouang Province in 1996 for my excursion through the mountains to inspect health centers, there was only one stone jar site on the Plain of Jars that had been cleared of unexploded ordnance and was safe enough to visit. On the day I arrived, my hosts took me to see the jars. Since the site was located just two miles from Phonsavan, the provincial capital of Xieng Khouang province, the road was good, the site was guarded by soldiers, and the huge prehistoric jars dotting the vast plain were spectacular. The terrain was flat as far as the eye could see. Maybe this trip would not be as rough as I expected. But first impressions are often deceiving.

The next day, after being packed into the back of a pickup truck with Palomede Jupien, my Lao colleagues, and an assorted collection of squealing pigs and bleating goats, I was quickly disabused of this false sense of security.

We headed north from Phonsavan. After one hour, the flat terrain of the Plain of Jars gave way to rugged, steep mountains, whereupon the partially paved road turned into a muddy morass. As anticipated, we abandoned our vehicle and started walking. As we trudged over mountains and through the forest to reach a newly constructed health center, a torrential downpour engulfed our group. We had to hike through slime and tall wet grass the entire journey.

When we reached the village where the health center was being built, I was drenched and covered with mud. Then I noticed that my white socks had turned crimson red and were soaked with blood. I had been attacked by leeches!! My ankles were covered with them, about 10 on each foot, gorging themselves on a tasty blood meal at my expense.

Leeches are nasty little “suckers.” There are many different kinds, including terrestrial, arboreal, and aquatic varieties. The ones on my feet and toes were about one-half inch long, 2 mm in diameter, and could move by flipping their tail end over their front end like gymnasts doing backward somersaults. When they attack their prey, they inject an anticoagulant (similar to heparin) that allows the blood to thin and subsequently ooze from the victim's body into the leech's oral cavity.

Once I successfully removed the leeches, I couldn't get the damn bleeding to stop. I tried pressure, a tourniquet, bandages... nothing worked. The wounds just kept oozing blood, and quite prolifically, until my ankles were reduced to a bloody mess. Having been trained to deal with such emergencies, I responded to this crisis instinctively and reflexively—by fainting dead away at the sight of all that blood. When the going gets tough, it's time for Larry Cashman to check out.

I regained consciousness after the second glass of “Lao-Lau” was poured down my throat, surrounded by villagers bemused at the sight of the alleged health expert incapacitated by leeches. When enough blood had spilled to sate their amusement, the villagers demonstrated how to stanch the bleeding by placing a small piece of paper directly over the wound. The cellulose in the paper produced a matrix for coagulation. Sure enough, the bleeding stopped almost immediately.

Once we inspected the health center and determined that most of it had to be torn down and entirely rebuilt, we high-tailed it back to the nearest town, which was the district of Nonghet. I led the pack as fast as my blood-drenched ankles would carry me. My tolerance for Laos’ irregularities—the food, the drinking, the corrupt officials, the nightclubs—was pretty high, but leeches went beyond the pale.

When we returned to Nonghet District, we learned that the District Governor and his staff wanted to meet with us. By and large, these characters were a bunch of rough-and-tumble, booze-consuming ruffians. Their offices were broken-down, dilapidated, unmaintained concrete buildings with wide-open windows without screens, creating a bizarre mausoleum effect in the cold season. Since the cold season had already arrived in the mountains, everyone was wearing those picturesque Siberian fur hats that flip down over one’s ears à la Genghis Khan.

So, this was the scene as we sat down to discuss important issues affecting the socio-economic development of Laos, namely, where we would have dinner and whether there would be enough “Lao-Lau” to satisfy the consumption requirements of six hard-drinking Lao and two sissy-pants honkies, a volume normally measured in gallons.

The Governor was seated at the head of the table, with me directly to his left. While we were immersed in discussion, a gigantic flying grasshopper soared in through the open window and began circumnavigating the meeting table, looking for a convenient place to alight. As the reader may know, Larry Cashman has a congenital aversion to insects of any size or shape. I loathe the repulsive creatures, with their scraggly legs and creepy antennae, their nasty little stingers and oversized mandibles. Unfortunately, Laos is home to the most diverse insect species, large and small, found anywhere in the world.

I froze in horror at the sight of the beast fluttering above our heads. Then I started ducking, dodging, bobbing, and weaving to avoid the buggie as it flew past my head on several kamikaze-style swoops. The Lao, of course, didn't even bat an eyelash or move a muscle. Insects do not bother them at all.

Finally, the winged monster landed on the shoulder of my Lao colleague, Siphone (pronounced SEE-PAWN), who was sitting directly across the table, and I could get a good look at it. It was enormous; at least 6 inches in length, as if it had been exposed to gamma radiation and grown to disproportionate size.

As for Siphone, he didn't even notice the creature resting on his shoulder. He just sat there picking his nose, belching, and spitting on the floor like everyone else at the meeting. I froze and never took my eyes off the behemoth for a minute. As long as it wasn't bothering me, I was relatively untroubled.

This period of blissful contentment was short-lived, however, as the grasshopper once again took flight, buzzing us several times before landing on the table directly in front of the Governor and me. Again, none of the Lao even acknowledged the creature's presence, continuing our meeting as if nothing was awry. I was

frozen with fear by this time. I couldn't take another round of getting buzzed by this dive-bomber. In a flash, I decided it was time to smash the brute with my notebook, and to hell with any Buddhist proscriptions about killing sentient beings.

Just as I was getting ready to raise my notebook, the Governor nonchalantly reached out and grabbed the grasshopper between his thumb, index finger, and forefinger, and squeezed it to death without a nanosecond break in the proceedings. This was fine with me. It saved me the trouble of wiping grasshopper guts off my notebook. Then, just as nonchalantly as I watched in disbelief, the Governor took the dead grasshopper, raised it to his lips, and bit off its head and the top half of the insect's thorax, smacking his lips as he swallowed the tasty morsel. Then, always the gentleman and gracious host, the Governor turned toward me and asked if I wanted a bite.

During this entire incident, not a single person at that meeting acknowledged the grasshopper or the Governor's mid-morning snack. Come to think of it, they didn't take much notice of me either when I vomited in response to the Governor's generous offer. When I described this incident to my colleagues in Vientiane, their only surprise was that the Governor had taken the time to kill the grasshopper before devouring it. Flying grasshoppers are allegedly tastier when eaten alive.

And so it went for the next four weeks—long rides in the back of a pickup truck over terrible and/or impassable roads, long treks climbing over treacherous mountains on leech-infested paths, more drinking and eating unrecognizable food, and of course, more encounters with Bounmee-inspired, structurally suspect health centers. However, this living nightmare was just beginning as our team boarded the plane for Oudomxay.

When I disembarked from the plane at that sorry excuse for an airport in Oudomxay province, the Wild Men of Oudomxay were none too happy to see me. They were still smarting from the \$400 in counterfeit bills that Seamus Campbell and I stiffed them with on our last trip. They were doubly pissed for getting stuck taking the blame. The new Honda motorcycles they were riding and the neatly pressed clothes they were wearing suggested they had clearly benefited handsomely from the awarded construction contracts, no doubt assuaging their anger.

Between the shoddy architectural designs from our moron architect, Bounmee, and the corners that were cut on the construction materials to finance the kickbacks to the Wild Men of Oudomxay, I couldn't wait to see what our newly constructed health centers actually looked like.

After four weeks trudging through the cold, wet, disease-ridden mountains in Xieng Khouang, I was physically exhausted by the time I reached Oudomxay for another four weeks of hard travel. The first health center we visited had a bathroom with a latrine and sink, but the builders had neglected to install any plumbing.

At our next stop, the builder had contracted with local villagers to go into the forest to cut wooden boards rather than purchase them from a nearby sawmill. Lao villagers in the hinterlands are not experts at precise measurements, so a one-inch-by-six-inch board might actually be 1" x 4" at one end and 1" x 8" at the opposite end, leaving gaping spaces when stacked side by side on the floor and on roofs.

At another site, the contractor had mixed so little concrete with the sand and gravel that I could easily crumble the cement walls

with my hand. And so it went at each construction site, making me realize this would be an exceedingly long and not-so-enjoyable trip.

I survived the first three weeks of this ordeal intact. During the fourth week, as we were on our way to Na Mor District (pronounced NA-MAW) on the border between Laos and China, I began to feel feverish, with body aches and pains, one of those sudden tropical fevers that can disable you in a few hours.

Upon arrival in Na Mor District, we were met by the District Governor, who was a genuinely nice man—when he was sober. Unfortunately, he was only sober 20% of the time. The plan was to accompany the Governor to Ban Vieng village, another 24 km. away straight into the mountains situated more or less on the Chinese border, where a health center was being built. I was feeling pretty ill, but decided to make the trip.

It took three hours to reach Ban Vieng. At times, I thought we wouldn't make it. The inclines were so steep, the streams so deep, and the road so bad that I thought we would have to abandon the vehicle. On several occasions, we had to get out and push our vehicle to a place where it could gain traction.

After reaching Ban Vieng, we went through the usual ritual of drinking, negotiating, drinking, eating, drinking, and inspecting the health center's shoddy construction. By the time we left, I had a raging fever, generalized myalgia, and chills. Larry Cashman was deathly ill.

Upon returning to Na Mor, the Governor had arranged a dinner for us, accompanied by copious amounts of drinking. I was so sick that I declined the dinner offer, choosing instead to return to my hotel room and try to get some needed rest. The term "hotel" should be interpreted loosely in northern Laos. Rather, the structure was a dilapidated wooden shack with dormitory-style

rooms, each containing beds with straw mats. It seemed that Holiday Inns with Sealy Posturepedic mattresses had not penetrated Na Mor District in 1996.

Nevertheless, it was a bed with a reasonable facsimile of a mosquito net where I could recline and sleep through the night. Having been in endemic malarious areas for the past three weeks, I was concerned that I might have contracted malaria. If the fever broke then spiked again, I would treat myself with anti-malarial medication and not take any chances.

My host and colleagues were genuinely concerned about my condition. They figured that anyone who would turn down a sumptuous feast of turkey blood, raw snails right out of the rice paddies, and insipidly boiled mammalian organs, accompanied by all the Lao-Lau you can drink, must really be sick. They got me into bed, made sure I was comfortable, and even interrupted their drinking occasionally to make sure I was still alive. Since an earthquake could not interrupt the Lao from their drinking, they must have been concerned about my condition.

The next morning, I was abruptly awakened at 6 AM as the Governor burst into my room to see how I was feeling, while announcing, "I have just the thing to fix you up. Come with me."

Still groggy from the fever, I was escorted out to the balcony, where the Governor's wife was waiting, flanked by a bevy of the local gentry. She was a plump, energetic woman of about fifty-five, her hair pulled tightly back into a neat bun. Her teeth were stained orange-brown from years of chewing betel nut¹⁰². In my soporific

¹⁰² Betel nut is the seed of the Areca palm. Mixed in a packet, called a "quid," encapsulated by a betel leaf containing lime, the betel nut, and a flavoring of tobacco or cinnamon, it is chewed regularly by one tenth of the world's population.

state, the governor's wife resembled a big fat butterball turkey pulled out of the oven on Thanksgiving.

In her right hand, she gripped the dried heart of a sizable animal—a wild forest buffalo, as I would later discover. In her left hand, she held a live, three-foot snake, its movements slow and deliberate. On the table before her were five porcupine spines and a sharp knife. Most foreboding of all, a freshly opened bottle of Lao-Lau rested on the table.

The Governor's wife regarded me with curiosity. "I am going to mix you an elixir of traditional medicine to cure your fever," she cackled in her nearly incomprehensible Lao dialect. She could have prepared the concoction beforehand, but harbored doubts that a foreigner—and most likely a non-believer in the power of traditional remedies—would actually drink it if he did not witness its preparation. To ensure my compliance, she mixed all the raw materials right before my eyes. By performing this ritual in front of me, she was certain that I would have no reason to refuse her remedy.

This scene was just what I needed at 6 AM after a restless night of feverish sleep. Watching a fat lady with orange teeth mix a disturbing concoction made from various animal parts was not my idea of breakfast entertainment. Despite my reservations, I could not ignore their genuine concern and desire to help me. Declining to consume the offensive mixture felt impossible.

On the balcony, while I swayed weakly in a feverish stupor, the Governor's wife began the preparation. She cut several pieces from the buffalo heart, placing them into a pestle. Next, she added the follicular ends of the porcupine quills—alleged to contain potent

It provides a buzz equivalent to six cups of coffee. Over time, chewing betel nut stains teeth orange. It is also a precursor to oral cancer.

medicinal properties—and carefully ground everything into a fine powder. These ingredients were then mixed with half a glass of Lao Lau, a staple in Lao traditional medicine.

Then, as I watched in horror, she slit the snake's throat with a quick slashing motion that even O.J. Simpson would envy and poured the fresh blood into her magical potion. The result was a thick, reddish-brown, bitter alcoholic elixir that looked as alarming as it sounded. "Drink it down in one gulp, and you will feel better by tomorrow," I was instructed.

I was in big trouble now, with dwindling prospects of escaping this impending dilemma. My first inclination was to cut and run, the true coward's first recourse. But in my febrile state, I wouldn't get far. Perhaps I could talk my way out of it. After all, I've been an unparalleled bullshitter all of my life. But being too delirious and horrified to think straight, I couldn't devise a rational excuse to beg out. The only option was to bite the bullet and drink the poison. So it was bottoms up, down the hatch, and I chugged the whole "bloody thing" down.

Whether the concoction cured my fever is difficult to say, since I spent the next 24 hours with paroxysmal vomiting interspersed with explosive diarrhea. Drinking strychnine would have been like ambrosia in comparison. The good news was that, in this parlous state, a fever or malaria was the least of my troubles. A prolapsed rectum or a regurgitated esophagus was a greater concern. I almost died. As predicted, though, the fever was gone by the next day. No parasite could withstand such an assault.

But this tale isn't over yet. Our team still had to drive back to the provincial capital through dense jungle areas controlled by rebel groups opposed to the government. Concerned about my health and the dangerous road conditions, the Governor provided

us with an armed escort to guarantee our safety. With their flintlock rifles and flasks of Lao-Lau whiskey protruding from their pockets, the guards provided little comfort. The trip started uneventfully as we passed through primary forest overgrown with tall hardwood trees.

Then I heard a pop, like a cork popping out of a champagne bottle. It reminded me of the sound I heard when flying in that helicopter over rebel-controlled areas of Palawan in the Philippines, which turned out to be the helicopter motor misfiring¹⁰³. Maybe this was just a malfunction in the vehicle. When I saw my colleagues duck for cover and bullets whistling overhead, I realized that this was neither a champagne party nor a faulty vehicle. We had been ambushed and were under rebel attack.

A firefight ensued, with our security guard returning fire in between swigs from their Lao-Lau flasks. I immediately crouched down in the safest spot I could find. But we were pinned down with little hope of escape. While in this predicament, I asked my colleagues who these rebels were and what their grievances were. I was told that they were Hmong rebels opposed to their government's policies, which they felt favored the rich at the expense of the poor and oppressed minorities. How ironic, I thought. Here we were, under attack by rebels whose grievances I sympathized with. If only I could send them a graphic message that we shared similar political philosophies, they could save their ammunition for true reactionaries.

¹⁰³ See Volume 2, Chapter 7 of the *Cashman Chronicles* "The Philippines" for Cashman's exploits on the helicopter flying over the communist rebel-infested jungle in Palawan.

Then, I got a brilliant idea. I whipped out my trusty magic marker and, in the biggest letters possible, wrote a large sign which sent the following message:

“BOB DOLE¹⁰⁴ IS AN ANTIQUATED ANACHRONISM, NEWT GINGRICH¹⁰⁵ IS A MORON WITH UNDESCENDED TESTES, AND RUSH LIMBAUGH¹⁰⁶ IS A BIG FAT IDIOT.”

Immediately, the firing stopped, a white flag was raised, and the rebels emerged from the bushes to parley. Sure enough, they turned out to be registered Democrats, regular subscribers to the New York Times, and contributors to Bill Clinton’s re-election campaign. I even carried back their absentee ballots for the presidential election.

Eight weeks traipsing around the “Back of the Beyond” in Xieng Khouang and Oudomxay had left me psychologically traumatized. I had witnessed things that offended my sensibilities—biting leeches, radioactive giant flying grasshoppers, crumbling health centers, tropical fevers, toxic magic potion elixirs, and rebel ambushes by registered Democrats. The past eight weeks taught

¹⁰⁴ This was 1996, and Bob Dole was the Republican nominee for President running against Bill Clinton.

¹⁰⁵ Newt Gingrich was the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1996, a knee-jerk conservative, and a closet racist.

¹⁰⁶ Rush Limbaugh was a bombastic, right-wing, radio talk show celebrity who spent hours each day bloviating against liberals, immigrants, gays, women’s rights, and climate change.

me that nothing that I experienced in Laos should surprise me anymore.

All that stood between me and deliverance to the creature comforts in Vientiane was a one-hour flight from the Oudomxay provincial capital. I beat a hasty retreat to the airport to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible.

When I got to the airport, I saw a Chinese-made, chartreuse washing machine sitting in the baggage area of the terminal building, obviously waiting to be transported to Vientiane. All of these terms must be interpreted within the Lao context to truly appreciate this scene. The terminal building at the Oudomxay airport was a rickety, termite-laden, wooden shack with dirt floors and no windows. The baggage area was any level patch of ground in or around the terminal building, not covered with feces from the water buffaloes that customarily grazed on the grass runway.

What was most bizarre, however, was seeing a washing machine in Oudomxay. After all, there was no electricity or running water in Oudomxay. Plus, no one washed their clothes there anyway. But most of all, a washing machine could never fit into the cargo hold of the little Yak 13 airplanes that were the only flying machines able to negotiate the imposing mountains surrounding Oudomxay, before landing on a tiny grass airstrip through the thick, low cloud cover.

The Yak 13 is a small, Chinese-built, two-engine prop job whose engines are so unreliable that the FAA won't license it for insurance purposes. On the other hand, it was reputed to glide quite well when its engines failed, which was not an attribute of boundless reassurance to Larry Cashman. The interior of the craft had five rows, each with three seats—two on the right side of the aisle and one on the left. The door to the cargo hold was large enough for a

regular piece of luggage or a large pig, the more likely form of cargo on flights at Oudomxay Airport. There was no way that a washing machine could fit through that door.

With great anticipation and curiosity, I waited to see what they would do with the washing machine. Presently, I saw this officious-looking guy walk around it, waving two boarding passes. Since nothing in northern Laos surprised me anymore, I immediately knew what to expect next. When I boarded the plane, the chartreuse washing machine was occupying seats 2A and 2B, just like any other paying passenger.

If seeing a washing machine at the Oudomxay Airport seemed odd, you can imagine how bizarre it was to see one strapped into the passenger cabin of a little 15-seat airplane. From my vantage point at the rear of the cabin, I surveyed the other passengers to gauge their reactions to the washing machine. Except for me, there didn't seem to be anyone who acknowledged it, was surprised by it, or even noticed it. So there we were, 13 passengers and a washing machine, flying to Vientiane just as normal as can be.

Then, about 15 minutes into the flight, the Lao gentleman sitting directly across the aisle in Seat 2C struck up a conversation with the washing machine. Judging by his gesticulations and the pauses he gave the washing machine to respond, it seemed like quite an animated yet agreeable conversation.

My astonishment at this spectacle was only surpassed when the stewardess came by to serve the passengers a drink, offered the washing machine a Pepsi, which the washing machine ostensibly accepted, and she opened the lid to pour the drink in. I was having a difficult time believing this entire scene unfolding before my very eyes, but I held my tongue and controlled my bewilderment as best I could.

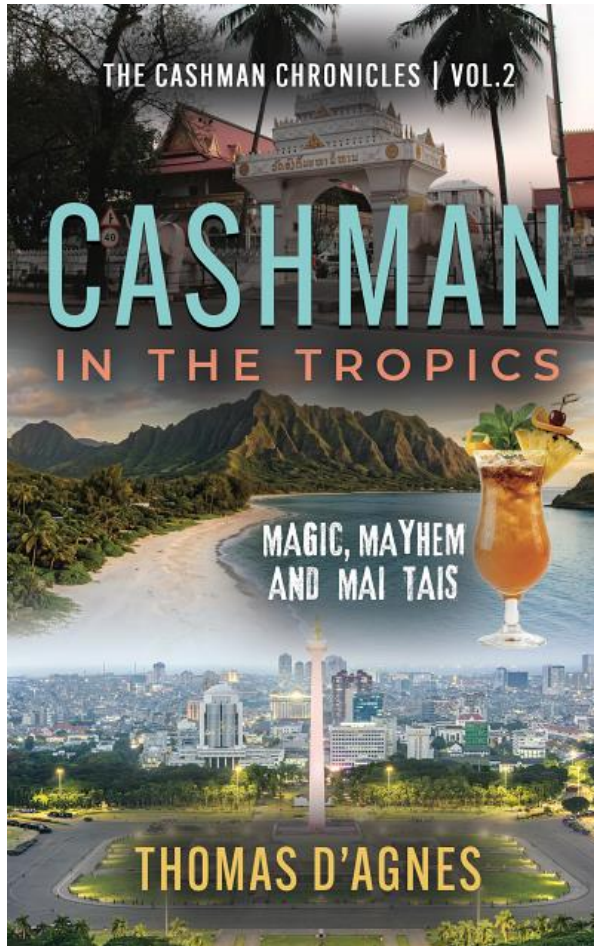
When we disembarked from the plane in Vientiane, I couldn't control my curiosity any longer. I went up to the Lao gentleman sitting next to the washing machine and asked, "How could you spend that whole flight talking to a washing machine?"

"Are you kidding me?" he responded ingenuously. "That conversation was a lot more entertaining than the senseless drivel I get when sitting next to most Asian Development Bank consultants." Appropriately disarmed, I could only shake my head and walk away—although I couldn't argue with his comparison of a washing machine's intellectual capacity to that of the average ADB consultant. In fact, it was an insult to the washing machine.

Nothing surprises me in Laos anymore.

About the Author

Like Larry Cashman, Thomas D'Agnes was born and raised in New York City. He worked on the Navajo Indian Reservation in New Mexico, then spent 35 years in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Laos, and later served as a Professor of International Public Policy at a West Coast university. He is retired and lives in Hawaii.



Despite his many foibles, Larry Cashman bumbles his way to Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Laos, and Hawaii in Cashman in the Tropics. Through it all, he remains a cunning schemer, coward, and most lovable scoundrel you'll ever meet.

Cashman in the Tropics

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