

DECEMBER NEWSLETTER

FROM THE EDITOR'S TURRET

Welcome to the last newsletter of the year, following a busy November. The featured Remembrance Day Branch Meeting, coordinated by Vice-President David Thomas, was once again a landmark event and David's article below honours it.

The Thai Dineout at Sue's Thai Kitchen, Woodlands on November 27th, again organised by John Dingle, was well attended and great value. What would we do without him?



Thai Diners

Your editor and Membership Secretary Marion have been away for a couple of weeks in Laos during November and we would like to share some of our experiences and impressions via the articles below. Basically, it is an interesting, colourful country to visit and quite good value but one has to take into account its turbulent history, especially in the "Second Indo-China War". Touring there is also a bit physically taxing for seniors with little in the way of disability aids apparent. It is, however, well worth while putting on the bucket list to visit, as much for the multi-ethnic cultural aspects. Note the more negative side of 2019 things from Marion's viewpoint – Laotian Lament, having previously visited Laos in 2013.

President Geoff Jones reports on a seminar he attended about an alternative type of seniors association – the Village Hub. There are contrasting Hubs at Victoria Park and Darling Range. He also reports on getting closer to a defibrillator for the Mt Claremont community centre.

NSA has recently circulated two important documents, essentially the work of Chief Advocate, Ian Henschke. We will send these out by email and provide hard copies of the "Seniors 20 – 20 Vision" at the Christmas lunch and at the February Branch Meeting.

NOVEMBER REMEMBRANCE DAY BRANCH MEETING – David Thomas

The Branch Meeting on Thursday 14th November 2019 was a Remembrance Day event. Although a few days past the designated 11th of November, the traditional 11th hour ceremony was observed by over 80 members and guests.

The Honourable Sean L' Estrange MLA, the Member for Churchlands, and formerly Colonel in the ADF, attended the event and provided an opening presentation on the effects of war, the tragedy of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and terrible evidence on how it is affecting our past and present defence force members. Mr L' Estrange also laid a wreath and recited the ode on behalf of all who attended. Sean took leave from Parliament to attend and the Branch is most grateful for his presence on the day.

The keynote speaker was Helen Stamp, Adviser - Red Cross People on International Humanitarian Law, presenting much of interest and raising many questions. The level of queries has left the door open for a return visit in 2020.

The Last Post was played with respect and pride by Nicholas Alexander, a student from Churchlands Senior High School, and the performance followed by Geoffrey Suttie leading the singing of war songs with accompaniment by Gloria on the keyboard. Our members and guests sang with gusto and reverence - a big thank you to Geoffrey and Gloria.

The RSL was well represented with Judy Welsh and the knitting ladies in attendance and our appreciation goes out to them once again. The Claremont RSL Sub-Branch Welfare Officer, Margaret Burridge, provided the poppies.

Thanks for the superb morning tea provided by our wonderful catering team, led by Sandra Spiro.



Sean L'Estrange & members



Nicholas Alexander, bugler

LOOKING AHEAD

Thursday 12th December 11.30 for 12 noon Christmas lunch at our Mt Claremont venue again, bigger than ever and at a branch subsidised \$35 cost. There is a super, virtual “degustation” menu, so fast for a couple of days beforehand! BYO. It's not too late to book with Terry on 0417 171 844. The cost for members' friends will be \$45.

THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN - Geoff Jones

I would like to tell you about the two meetings I attended on Tuesday 3 December. During the day I participated in a seminar that showcased the development of 'Village Hubs' in WA. In the evening I gave a short speech in support of a defibrillator for the Community Centre to the Nedlands Council Committee meeting.

The Village Hub meeting was held at 'The Homestead' in Victoria Park, the base of the 'Connect Village Hub' which has been running for 18 months. Peter Kenyon, who some of you may remember talking about developing community connections during a Branch meeting a couple of years ago, talked about the newly launched Darling Range Seniors Hub. Helen Morton, a former state government minister, outlined plans for a village hub in Pingelly in the Wheatbelt.

I came to understand the concept of a village hub is very flexible. The first ever village hub of this type is attributed to a group of a dozen or so friends in the US who committed to working together so that they could live out their lives in their current homes. That is, they would continue to live exactly where they were in the same community with mutual support – and other supports as needed.

The first Australian hub – in Waverton, NSW, also aims to enable members to age well in their own homes for as long, as meaningfully and as inexpensively as possible (<http://wavertonhub.com.au/home>). These are goals that many of us can agree with. It is a non-profit community organisation run by members for members. It now has government funds to support other hubs to get started.

In contrast the Vic Park hub has changed a very ordinary seniors day centre into a busy place where approaching 300 members can take part in, or run, exercise classes, information sessions, sundowners, meals (and run the kitchen), make art, make music, borrow books or simply drop in for a chat. Two staff have worked hard to develop the hub and enable members to run their activities as they wish.

One of the things that interests me about the Darling Range Hub is that Peter is part of a small group of friends who, within the larger group, have committed to support each other to live in their same homes for the rest of their lives in a similar way to that first village hub in the US.

That same evening the Nedlands Council Committee Meeting agreed to add a defibrillator for Mount Claremont Community Centre into the City's mid-year budget. I spoke briefly in support of the motion, which was carried unanimously. Mark Goodlet, the CEO, indicated that they will review all Nedlands community facilities with a view to installing more defibrillators as needed. So far so good.

I look forward to wishing everyone a Happy Christmas at the Xmas lunch.

TRAVELS IN LAOS – Terry Middleton

In November, Marion and I spent 2 weeks in the Republic of Laos as members of a small Wendy Wu's Tour group, comprising about equal numbers of Aussies and Brits. Laos is dominated by the Mekong River artery but there's much more to it than that. We arrived at the ancient northern capital of Luang Prabang, on a Mekong River junction, by air from Bangkok and settled into laid-back Lao time for 4 days in and around this UNESCO World Heritage small city. We were based at a splendid, boutique hotel within walking distance of the city centre and Luang Prabang is a comfortably walkable, tropical city including the main Temples, Palace Museum, Phousi hilltop lookout, night markets and riverbank cafes for the obligatory Lao Beer sundowner. Our Mekong river excursion here was a 2hr upstream cruise on a long boat to the Pak Ou caves which are filled with rescued Buddha statues of all shapes and sizes.

The pretty Kuang Si travertine waterfalls provided a refreshing forest walk and dip in the turquoise pools with a visit to the adjacent "Free the Bears" sanctuary, founded by Perth's Mary Hutton, a reminder of our moral responsibilities to vulnerable species.

On the 5th day we headed south by bus on HWY 13 over spectacular forested, mountainous terrain, fortunately with a careful driver, thence turning east to Phonsavan at the approaches to the Vietnam border. This was an all-day trip for about 200km. The country here is more gently undulating and cleared with rice paddy terraces and lots of very graceful cattle wandering all over. The purpose of this trip was to examine the UNESCO World Heritage "Plain of Jars", an area shrouded in mystery with groups of up to hundreds of jars up to about 3m in height and 1m diameter and all apparently carved from sandstone, implying iron-age construction by an unknown civilization, and thought to be up to 2500 years old. The jars were thought by the early French visitors to be burial urns but there was no direct evidence.

The cleared hillocks are pock-marked with bomb craters, resultant from American Vietnam War bombing of the “Ho Chi Minh” trail, deemed to be covering much of eastern Laos. It has been estimated that over 4 million tonnes, of ordnance was dropped on Laos during “The Secret War”, said to be more than dropped on Europe in WWII. The legacy is huge amounts of “UXO” (Unexploded Ordnance) still remaining over much of the country including deadly, grapefruit sized “bombies” (cluster bombs) which will take decades to clear.

From there we crossed back over the mountains to the tourist playground of Vang Vieng, set in spectacular, precipitous karst limestone country with another cave visit made and the following day on to Vientiane, the current Lao capital. All the way along, we became aware of the construction of the massive Chinese high-speed railway as part of the “ASEAN Belt Railway” project, coming from Kunming in SW China to Vientiane and ultimately destined to reach Singapore. Vast capital expenditure is being incurred on this and the “hundreds” of hydro-electric dams being built by China and others – the latter to make Laos “the battery of SE Asia”.

Vientiane, on the Mekong, is a pleasant enough city with the chief places of interest visited being the Wat Si Saket – the principal Buddhist temple, and the gold covered That Luang Stupa. Also of interest is Patuxi Victory monument, roughly modelled on the Paris Arc de Triomphe, and ironically, built to honour the freedom fighters against the French. The 300 or so steps to the top make for a worthwhile days exercise.

Part 2 to follow

Terry Middleton

MARION’S CORNER

The plastic bottle top collection is now going to a local outfit – Greenbatch, with the same charitable aim. The range of items has increased to any plastic bottle tops up to 5cm diameter – but please make sure that they are clean and remove any attached foam inserts, rubber or paper. Any hard plastic items such as plastic bag closers, printer cartridge clips etc, may also be included. Please collect over the next two months and hand them in at the next branch meeting on Thursday, February 13th.

Laotian Lament

I have travelled to many places in this world. Some of them have been memorable for their beauty, their people or their culture. A few of these have made such a positive impression that I vowed never to return, afraid that my memories would be spoiled. This year I broke that vow.

I first travelled to Laos in 2013, and was enchanted by its people, its scenery, its various cultures and crafts. The Buddhist philosophy of living in the moment was evident in everyone I met. The need to accumulate “stuff” and to plan/hoard for the future seemed to have passed them by. I felt safe, encompassed by peace, grace, kindness, respect and compassion. There were very few tourists then, mostly French, (probably pretending that Laos was still a colony).

The city/town of Luang Prabang is a World Heritage site; it is charming, gracious and walkable! Every shop, guesthouse, and building displays local heritage with pride. The night market in 2013 was a place where the local craftsmen and the hill-tribes could display and sell their products of textiles, silverware etc.

The essence of Laos is the Mekong river, a life-giving cycle of flooding and deposition of fertile sediment for agriculture, a means of transport, a source of fish. It is timeless and regenerative.

The population of Laos is about 7 million, 75% of whom are subsistence farmers who support each other at harvest time and in times of need (Its neighbour, Vietnam, has 70 million).

So, what has changed in the 6 years since 2013? My first niggles of doubt began in Luang Prabang which was buzzing with tourists, mostly Chinese and S Korean. Then I went to the night market which was a huge disappointment. The local content was hard to find and swamped by many imports of cheap clothing and goods from China and Vietnam with very little evidence of craftsmanship.

There is also evidence of the tentacles of Chinese influence elsewhere. A very expensive high-speed train is being built through mountainous territory to Vientiane, the capital, which will bring tourists to the country and return freight and resources to China.

There are at least 50 Hydro Electric dams being built on the tributaries of the Mekong, and the river itself, and many more planned. These will generate electricity which will mostly be sent out of Laos to the surrounding countries. This infrastructure is being built with Chinese money, labour, equipment and expertise. Unfortunately, we don't know the environmental impact of this downstream in neighbouring Cambodia and Vietnam.

There are many new hotels being built with Chinese money to support the influx of tourists who bring their own tour guides and support staff. I saw little evidence of curiosity in these groups, they didn't seem to be looking for different cultural experiences.

I was overwhelmed by the image of Laos being absorbed and devoured by its northern neighbour. The development seems to be so one-sided.

Essential Laos can still be uncovered in the jungle, mountains, local markets and the countryside. Don't wait too long to experience its beauty!

Marion Laws



Terry with Lao dancer



Marion with tour group, Plain of Jars