## On the Fly

## Text: Melody Kemp Photographs: Tessa Bunney

Dateline Vientiane Laos.

**T**he old, perhaps pejorative adage ‘a slip of a girl’ occurred to me while talking to Phinanong Luesasinh, who at 19 years of age, is set to be Lao’s first locally trained women pilot. While slim, attractive and somewhat shy, there’s nothing underweight about her ambition and determination.

Of the 120 applicants for pilot training, she has risen to be one of the top six trainees and well on her way to get a full commercial licence. ‘I want to make my parents proud of me and to follow my dream.’

It’s amazing that well over 110 years have passed since Therese Peltier became the first woman to fly an aircraft. Two years later in 1910, American Blanche Stuart Scott was the first to fly solo. France underlined its feminist credentials when also in 1910 Raymonde de Laroche became the first licensed woman aviator. In the Muslim world, at 23, Sabiha Gökçen an adopted child of the great Atatürk, became the world's first female fighter pilot in the 1930’s. Of the 8,000 flying hours she notched up, thirty two were spent in active combat, including bombing missions. By the 1930’s women flyers were more common. When WWII spun the world into violence, the UK Women’s Air Transport Auxiliary flew Spitfires fighters, Lancaster bombers and other war planes. When someone queried if women could fly big planes like the four engine bomber she controlled , well experienced Rosemary Reece replied ‘the idea is not for me to carry it, but for it to carry me.’

But despite Laszlo Moholy Nagy saying that ‘All are equal before the machine,’ there are still parts of the world where flying remains a male domain. Until recently, landlocked Laos was one of them.

**T**he first Lao woman pilot had the benefit of connections and wealth. Trained in France, she now flies with the national carrier. Gossip in this secretive, authoritarian nation says she is the daughter of one of the Vice Presidents. In nominally socialist Lao, huge wealth and class divides influence ability and ambition.

Which make Luesasinh’s achievements even more remarkable. Her parents had a small food stall in the city’s biggest market, Thong Khan Kham, until burned down under very suspicious circumstances two years ago. Now a huge tower is rising where Vientiane’s people once bought temple offerings, had their hair washed, bought vegetables, dry goods, and freshly slaughtered meat.

‘ They lost everything ,’ she said her eyes looking down at the vestiges of a painful memory. ‘No, the government did not help. They had to start again.’

‘In my spare time I help them, buying meat, and preparing food. My brother is only seven, so it’s my responsibility to help my parents,’ and of course to learn to fly, with all the complexity and time consuming repetitive drills that excellence entails.

Lao people first knew of Luesasinh’s success when a story was published in the English speaking daily, the Vientiane Times. In a photo taken just afterwards, she has her head and arms thrown back, a look of sheer bliss on her face. She had just completed her first solo flight over Vientiane’s Wattay Airport in a four-seater single engine Cessna 172. The first solo is a major marker in any fliers career and her triumph and delight pulsated from the shot.

‘I was so excited then. My instructors, friends and family had been so helpful. My first solo flight was because of their help. Now my parents believe in me, my friends want to talk about flying. I am now on social media and everyone knows me.’

Is that onerous?

‘No, I like being well known. I like being able to show that Lao women can achieve success. I don’t care if I am the first, second or tenth Lao woman to fly. That is not the question. What is important is to do what you want and be good at it.‘

**I**f you spend any time in landlocked Laos, a swing-by for travellers to Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia, you may soon learn that Laos is a land of ‘threes’.

Its people are divided into three groups: the lowland Lao, mid and upland Lao. The lowland majority are driven by the three Buddhist tenets: *Buddha, Dharma* and *Sangha,* but women are told they can only achieve enlightenment if they are reborn as men. At school, Lao kids are taught the ‘three hates’: laziness, dirtiness and enemies of the nation, as well as ‘three loves’: nation, leaders and studying. The Lao Women’s Union, whose role it is to ensure conformity, while also fostering the illusion of progress, exhorts their sisters to the achieve the ‘three goods’: being a good citizen, that is polite and unquestioning, a good house keeper wife and mother, and a good partner in development.

Gender specialist Phitsamone Ratavong said ‘This is difficult for me, as I was identified as a boy when I was kid. I would talk back and question so they cut me out of the good Lao woman list. When I tried to be a ‘good Lao woman’ I was polite, with no voice to say, deny or ask (sic). I dressed politely in Lao traditional clothes, grew my hair long, tied it up, always listened and served others. Then I became acceptable in Lao society. I just hated myself.’

Luesasinh’s parents were happy to see her getting into aviation, but they believed an office job or cabin crew would be more fitting for a girl. When she told them she wanted to fly, they were aghast, claiming it was far too dangerous. Despite parental, cultural and social taboos which told her she should obey her elders, she stuck with it.

At the end of her two year training program she will fly with Lao Skyways, who sponsor the program with PACTEC, a humanitarian aviation after Sam Herrmann saw the need for adjunct skills and flight training in Lao. Lao Skyways flies passenger domestic routes, but lest you think that is a doddle, immediately to the capital’s north, the mountainous terrain can become quickly socked in with turbulent clouds, thunderstorms and fog.

‘Women’s work is supposed to be easy,’ she laughed. ‘We are suppose to quiet and pretty, not strong like me. I have to pull the plane around the tarmac, and of course do the checks and know the mechanics.’

‘I want to show Lao people that women can do anything - that they can do technical work. It’s been difficult at times to understand the technical language that goes with engines and flying but I am determined.’

Trainee pilots have to show aptitude for maths and spatial understanding, as well as being medically fit and tall enough to be able to reach controls and see out of the cockpit. While those in the west may scoff, in Lao, poor maternal nutrition often compromises the stature of children. Luesasinh is not much taller than the requisite 1.6 meters required for women.

When she first arrived April Lanigan, the senior flight instructor explained, also found it hard. ‘While there are many women in aviation in Lao, there are no women in senior positions. Officials could not accept that I was in charge of flying operations. They referred to the two men in PACTEC, Sam and Martin. I had to be polite but firm, as I am the one with the authority. But,’ she admitted ruefully, ‘there are times when if I want thing done quickly, it is easier to get Martin to act on my behalf.’ Sigh.

**L**uesasinh’s parents were not at the ‘drome to watch her fly solo.

‘Right now I am not allowed to take passengers but maybe later ...’ her face switches easily between reflective earnestness and smiling joy while revealing how social media provides on line coaching.

‘I watch women flying on You Tube. They are smart women and I love watching how they fly their planes. They followed their dream and I am now following mine. I have about twenty five of the fifty flying hours I need. Later I will do instrument flying but right now visual flying is enough.’

One of Lanigan’s challenges is the poor education in Lao. ‘Critical thinking is not taught in Lao,’ she said. ‘So we focus on this skill as flying requires a lot of critical path analysis.’

Luesasinh, watching her mentor closely, nodded . ‘The most important thing I have learned is decision making. I have to go though system checks and sometimes things are not right so I won’t fly. I tell the mechanics what I think the problem is and then check again. I now know my limitations and try to be safety conscious.’

Lanigan laughed saying ‘Yes she was struck with a broken alternator last week, and a broken machine belt, but she knew and called the mechanics. Phinanong is careful and will not fly unless everything is perfect.

**C**limate change is biting. Vientiane’s sky frequently roils charcoal grey, the winds cruelly lashing trees, while lightning momentarily throws garish light over the scene. Storms arrive, thrash, destroy and are gone in half an hour. Being in a small single engine plane in those conditions must be scary.

‘Yes it can be scary.’ She looks at Lanigan. ‘One day we landed in strong cross winds and one wing lifted and the other was close to the ground.’ Phinanong leans sideway imitating the angle of the plane. ‘We try to monitor the weather and we are taught how to land if the engine fails.’

Information sharing is not one of Lao’s strong points. There is no weather radar or complete weather charts. Lao is a meteorological empty space. PACTEC uses its own satellite data.

‘English is the international language of aviation and when we arrived their communication was not up to scratch. The control tower in Vientiane is good. It has to be. They are managing increased traffic and now a mix of heavy and light aircraft.’

Lanigan, looking at the clock. We were taking up valuable training time. ‘We encourage an atmosphere where asking questions is normal and does not mean a loss of face or status.’

At which point Luesasinh, a cheeky smile on her animated face, asks me if I speak Lao. I have to confess I don’t.

//ends

1,683 words