

Belleville Man Recalls Laotian Experiences

By HARRY MULHALL
Staff Reporter

Robert Burr is home again. After several years with international development agencies in Laos he's now engaged in the more prosaic pursuit of painting the family home on Foster Ave.

It gives him time not only to ponder his experiences but the co-incidental timeliness of his own departure.

This week, Robert picked up a newspaper to discover the United Nations official assigned to replace him in Laos was under house arrest.

Robert doubts if the official is in "any immediate danger."

But the happening was one of the personal sequels to broader events as the south-east Asian nation adjusts — often forcefully — its political structure.

The situation has involved royalist forces with the leftist Pathet Lao.

The 31-year-old native Bellevillian takes a philosophical stance on the events. What's happening in a corner of the world daily watched by Westerners is that the Pathet Lao are militarily in the ascendancy. They're now adjusting the political situation to military reality.

These and other impressions are the result of fairly-lengthy first-hand experience for Robert.

He was studying post-graduate English when his interest in Buddhist culture — and in the wars and disputes wracking South Vietnam and its neighbors — led him to sign up for a year with a voluntary service group.

The first year he taught English; the second, with another voluntary agency, he was involved in a farmers' training centre. Last year, on a UN contract he went to his final assignment — a handicraft project, mainly involving refugees in the Laotian town of Souvanna Khet.

He departed Souvanna Khet in March, making it out of troubled Laos by Royal Air Force plane since the airport at Phnom Penh — the capital — was under rocket siege.

He is not surprised at the turn of events involving foreigners in Southeast Asia.

During his travels he always

felt "there was quite a feeling of under-the-surface resentment against a foreign presence. It took the "fall of South Vietnam to bring it out into the open."

The Laotians, much as they dislike Americans, also are strongly anti-Vietnamese.

Yet, present conditions may not be conducive to any foreigners working effectively in projects like those Robert was engaged in in Souvanna Khet, he believes.

However, the development work he and others helped direct will still produce benefits

"no matter who takes over."

And whatever power eventually takes over in that part of Asia, there is one aspect of life that should remain untouched — one which the Bellevillian came to respect.

The village culture on which the countryside's lifestyle hinges is still viable, and more complex than appreciated, he says. So much so, its benefits are being re-appraised by anthropologists.

But village life could be destroyed by Communist or Western-style philosophies geared to industrialization, he believes.

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