Embracing the American Life

Lt. Lance R. Lindley

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PROMOTION

NAVAL AIR FACILITY ATSUGI, Japan – September 1, 2012 was not the first time Bobby Savanh raised his right hand and swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America.

The first time was in 1988, as a junior at Madison High School, in Portland, Oregon. That oath, more than 24 years ago, had earned him a spot in the U.S. Navy's Delayed Entry Program, and eventually entitled him to attend Navy Basic Training in June, 1989, wearing the rank and assuming the authority of an Airman Recruit.

By comparison, the oath he swore earlier this month at Naval Air Facility Atsugi, Japan, entitled him to wear the rank and assume the authority of a Commander.

But for Savanh, the situations were not so different. Each was a promise to serve, and each was a step along a personal path; and while the journey from Airman Recruit to Commander had been long and eventful, so had the journey that had brought him to take that first oath as a high school student almost two and a half decades before.

Savanh wasn’t originally from Portland, Oregon, or even the United States. At the time he enlisted in the Delayed Entry Program, he had only been studying English for about seven years, and only speaking it comfortably for about three.

Savanh was born in 1971 in a small village in Laos, called Ban Nong Kome. Even in this age of instant information, little to nothing can be found about his hometown on the Internet. But Savanh remembers well his childhood there.

“My family, like most people from the village was farmers,” Savanh said. “It’s subsistence farming. You were really only trying to grow enough to feed your own family, and if you were lucky to have some extra, you would take it to the market.”

For the people of Ban Nong Kome, the nearest market was in Savannakhet, a 10-mile walk in humid temperatures ranging from 88-95 degrees.

Meanwhile, the uncultivated area around the village was lush with vegetation, requiring even children to carry machetes to navigate through the dense growth.

“I have a scar on my head from a machete,” Savanh said, smiling at the memory. A far-sighted childhood friend misjudged his distance from Savanh while the two were out for a walk.

But the Savanh family was not destined to stay in Nong Kome. The only landlocked country in South-East Asia, Laos is a nation with many neighbors. Both emigration and immigration have been common

for centuries, but the 1970s saw an unprecedented outpouring of refugees from Laos.

Continuous antagonism between opposing political groups following the Indochinese War, fear of violence and many other factors contributed to make hundreds of thousands of people seek sanctuary in Thailand and other countries during that decade.

The Savanh family joined that stream of refugees; but sanctuary was not a guarantee.

“It was a real risk,” Savanh said of his family’s decision to leave for Thailand in 1979. “If you were caught on the Laos side trying to cross the Mekong river into Thailand, or if you were sent back to Laos by Thailand after you got there, you would be in serious trouble. But we were lucky enough to make it to a refugee camp and be allowed to stay.”

Once at the camp, families waited to be offered a country to which they could emigrate.

“At the refugee camp, the majority of the refugees aspired to go to the United States,” Savanh remembered. “However, it doesn't always work out that way due to timing and other variables. For example, my uncle and his family immigrated to France about 30 years ago and my wife's sister-in-law and her family immigrated to Japan and have been living here for over 20 years now. A protracted stay in a refugee camp environment breaks a person down. So, they go to France or Japan or decide to stay and roll the dice and may have to return to Laos and may face persecution.”

But in that atmosphere of uncertainty, the Savanh family's luck held out. After about a year in the refugee camp, they were offered a sponsor in the United States.

"A family selected to immigrate to the United States has a sponsor," Savanh explained. "Our family's sponsor just happened to be from Portland. If our sponsor had been from somewhere else, we would've started our new home somewhere else."

But as chance dictated, young Savanh found himself in Portland in late 1980, in an environment drastically different than anything he had known to that point.

"When we arrived in Portland I was nine years old," he said. "I started fourth grade without knowing a single word of English."

Portland does have a significant Asian community, but Laotian immigrants make up only about 0.1 percent of the U.S. population.

Savanh and his family were not without a support network; but they knew the path to success required true integration into their new country, so Savanh set about immersing himself in his new culture.

"Starting the 4th grade not knowing any English was quite challenging," Savanh remembers. "However, the teachers were all very patient and all English as a Second Language (ESL) students spend some time in an ESL class to try and bolster up our skill. I think it's because I was still relatively young I was able to learn English fairly quickly, mostly through interaction with English-speaking friends. My English speaking comprehension wasn't very good until I was in the 8th

grade, and my reading comprehension didn't catch up for another couple years.”

Savanh was determined not to give up, and, while attending the Portland Rose Festival one year, found a new goal to work towards.

“During the festival, U.S. Navy ships are present,” Savanh explained. “To me, these ships were the highlights of Rose Festival. Because of being visually exposed to these cool ships over the years, I joined the Navy under the delayed entry program after my junior year of high school and went to boot camp June 15, 1989 - 10 days after graduating from Madison High School.”

Boot camp was a challenge, in spite of all Savanh had been through getting there. Previously, whether using a machete to hack his way through underbrush, waiting in a refugee camp for an uncertain future, or struggling to learn a new language in a foreign land, he had always been with his family.

In basic training, the Navy asked him to accomplish a challenge without them for the first time, relying only on himself and the support of his leaders and shipmates. But change was one thing Savanh had grown accustomed to, and he soon added U.S. Navy Basic Training to his list of obstacles overcome.

In spite of his early attraction to surface ships, Savanh became an Aviation Machinist’s Mate, after reading the job description of how they inspect, adjust, test, repair and overhaul aircraft engines and propellers.

“It sounded really cool to me,” Savanh said. “I was right!”

And the opportunities to do cool things kept coming for the hard-working Airman, thanks in a large part to leaders and mentors who kept an eye on him.

“(Aviation Machinist’s Mate) Chief Eddie Espinueva encouraged me to apply for a two year Navy program that used to exist to allow enlisted Sailors to attend college to earn a degree,” said Savanh. “I followed his advice, was selected, and earned a BA from University of Washington within the two years. To achieve that, I had to take up to 24 credits per quarter. After completing college, I reported to VA-196, and my Division Officer, Lieutenant Junior Grade Greg Smith, a former Chief who became an A-6 Intruder pilot under the Naval Aviation Cadet (NAVCAD) program, encouraged me to apply for commissioning. Those two military professionals were important role models for me, as they took time to guide a young AD2 Savanh in directions I didn't know existed.”

And Savanh appreciates that his adopted country has given him a chance to serve, and to participate in the nation itself in a way that civilian employment doesn’t offer.

“From a Laotian-American community perspective, service to one's country is highly revered and honored regardless of what service or rank,” Savanh explained. “The same reverence is generally not afforded to those in civilian jobs. In a sense, the Laotian community view Laotian-American servicemen and women as representatives of the whole community and will rally support behind them.”

That support was evident on September 1, 2012, when Savanh yet again raised his right hand at Naval Air Facility Atsugi and swore to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America.

Many Laotian-American and Laotian-Japanese friends and family attended his promotion ceremony, including Savanh's sister-in-law, who had immigrated to Japan two decades ago.

If our past makes us who we are, Savanh's taught him the value of perseverance, flexibility, and taking care of each other.

"Bobby is driven by a passion to improve himself as an Officer, a leader, and as a father," said Rear Adm. Matthew Carter, Commander, Fleet Air Forward, for whom Savanh works. "It's apparent that he thinks about the bigger picture -- his Sailors, mission, family -- before thinking of himself. He is a role model not only for other Sailors that come from Laos, but for all of us due to the obstacles he overcame in life on the way to being promoted to Commander in the U.S. Navy."

Though Savanh's journey has taken him thousands of miles away from the tiny farming village of his birth, he still feels a connection and a desire to serve as a role model for the children who live in Nong Kome today.

Inspired by a book by former Microsoft executive John Wood, who quit his job to devote his life to helping small villages around the world, Savanh decided he wanted to give back to his home town in a similar way.

"A friend of mine is going back to Laos to visit soon," Savanh explained. "I asked him to go to the elementary school I attended and

quietly look around, to see if he can find out what they need without drawing too much attention. A little bit of money goes a long way there, so maybe I can help them out. I can’t do as much as Mr. Wood, but if I can do a little, then I want to help.”