

Auguste Maurice Cavalerie, 1923-2010.

Maurice Cavalerie was born in Kunming, China, on 27 May, 1923. He was named Auguste by his father, but always known as Maurice – apparently because his mother found Auguste hard to pronounce. His father was a botanist from the Massif Central region of France, who was sent by the Museum of Natural History in Paris to study the plants of southern China, many of which he named. His mother was a teacher, the educated daughter of an aristocratic Chinese family, from the last generation of such ladies to have bound feet.

When Maurice was five his father was murdered by Chinese bandits. He was brought up by his mother, with the benevolent assistance of the principal of the French School in Kunming. Maurice attended the Lycee Albert Sarraut in Hanoi to complete his baccalaureate after which he enrolled in the medical faculty of the University of Hanoi. On the side Maurice began trading in commodities like sugar, which were in short supply and high demand in Indochina. At the same time he tutored at the Lycee, where in 1942 he met another young instructor, his bride to be, Rosalie Erembert.

In March 1945, Japanese forces staged a lightning coup, interning all French military and civilian personnel in Indochina. Maurice went underground and escaped internment. After the Japanese surrendered six months later, Maurice was invited to become an interpreter for the Chinese army of occupation in their negotiations with the returning French. So valuable did the Chinese commanding general consider his services to be that he was assigned the honorary rank of major, a vehicle, a driver and two body guards.

Towards the end of 1945 Maurice received his call-up papers for national service, which had arrived via Kunming. So by the time he received them, the date of his call-up had passed. When he reported for duty, the sergeant was less than polite. Annoyed, Maurice warned that he might have to call upon his body guards, who were waiting outside. A quick check revealed that this was not an idle threat. Negotiations followed, and Maurice's language skills were transferred from the Chinese authorities to the French – at a time when negotiations were underway for the withdrawal of the Chinese army of occupation from Indochina. As you can probably imagine, Maurice's telling of this story (and many others) was hilarious!

In 1946 Maurice took advantage of the offer of evacuation to France for French citizens to further his education. He and Rose settled in Paris, where Maurice enrolled in the prestigious Ecole Supérieure de Commerce. Their first two children, Elisabeth and Monique, were both born in Paris. In 1949, Maurice decided to return to Hanoi, leaving Rose to follow with the children. The Vietminh insurgency was by then well and truly established, fuelled by the communist victory in China in 1949. Maurice's mother and sister fled Kunming for Hanoi, leaving behind not only the family compound and other properties, but also all the family gold.

The war years provided opportunities for a young man with entrepreneurial flair, a love of adventure, and considerable courage. Maurice expanded his business interests to include wholesale distribution, driving trucks laden with tyres and other items in short supply through rural areas infested with bandits and communist insurgents. From Hanoi he ran the gauntlet of Vietminh checkpoints to transport goods to French communities in towns across northern

Vietnam. It was a risky, but profitable venture that soon enabled him to expand his business interests to include the importation and distribution of products from France, notably French Champagne and wines, food, and luxury goods including perfumes and underwear – all in high demand by the French Community and the French army.

By 1954 Maurice was a wealthy and respected member of the French business community in Hanoi. But when the Geneva Agreements of that year handed North Vietnam to the Viet Minh, Maurice and his growing family (Mireille and Danielle were born in Hanoi) were forced to evacuate – leaving behind a fortune in fixed assets. Maurice settled his family in Dalat, where Rose taught in the Lycee and the girls attended the Couvent des Oiseaux as boarders under the strict care of French nuns. Maurice meanwhile canvassed business opportunities, first in Saigon, then in Laos, which then seemed less threatened by a communist takeover.

In Vientiane Maurice started a new business in hospitality and catering by establishing the soon-to-become famous Hotel Constellation, with its associated restaurant serving French food and wine. Being the entrepreneur he was, he soon expanded his business interests to include importation of a wide range of products, real estate and several airline agencies. A little anecdote illustrates his creative approach to business. Maurice contracted to import Heineken beer. As the brand was then largely unknown in Laos, Maurice hired a couple of well-dressed Lao and sent them to every alcohol outlet in the city. In each they asked to place an order for beer for a large function, demanding Heineken and refusing any alternative. In no time Maurice was inundated with orders, and Heineken was established as *the* only beer to serve on all important occasions.

In 1958 Maurice moved the family to Laos. Eric and Jean had been born in Dalat, and Brigitte in Saigon. The trip was by road, from Saigon through Cambodia and north along the Mekong River to Vientiane. In those days of rough dirt roads this was a major expedition that took days, but the family arrived safely (minus Elisabeth and Monique, who stayed on as boarders for two more years in Dalat). Once established in Laos the last child, Luc, was born.

As Laos lurched from one political crisis to another, journalists flocked in from around the world. Many stayed at the Hotel Constellation, which in those days, as some of us remember, was the hub of contact, not just for visiting journalists, but also for Air America pilots, embassy personnel and spies from every agency in town – including the Russians and Chinese. During the battle for Vientiane between opposing factions in 1960, Maurice protected both his family and his guests. The only casualty was the water tank on the roof, which was holed by machine gun fire and flooded several rooms.



Maurice changing money in Vientiane in the Mid-Sixties

Maurice was well informed on political developments in Laos – but was always discreet about what he said about it, and to whom. On this discretion he built a reputation as someone who could be trusted. Nothing told him in confidence was ever passed on. I never heard him gossip about any journalist, or speak ill of anyone, for that matter – even those to whom he had lent money that was never repaid. Judging by the comments of Old Hacks in response to Carl’s RIP notice, among the press corps Maurice was always treated with respect and affection.

In 1975 when the Pathet Lao seized power in Laos, and once again Maurice lost all his fixed assets. As a French citizen he could have gone to France, but he and Rose preferred the climate in Australia. Maurice decided to move to Brisbane, but not before he had quizzed me on Marxist influence in the Australian Labour Party. Having been dispossessed by communist revolutions in China, Vietnam and Laos, he wasn’t going to risk the same thing happening in Australia. On this I was able to reassure him.

The family settled on acreage in the outer suburb of Brookfield. Maurice decided not to go into business, but rather to spend his time managing his investments and gardening, which he loved. He remained proudly French, but developed a considerable affection for Australia. He became an active member of the Union des Français à l’Etranger (UFE) and joined the French-Australian

Chamber of Commerce. He also donated generously to support the French language service of a local radio station and to the Société de Bienfaisance.

Maurice remained a genial and generous host. He loved nothing better than presiding over family gatherings at home or in good restaurants – with the more members present the merrier. My own memories of Maurice will always be of his warmth, kindness and generosity, and of the many family dinners we shared together.

His courage and fortitude were tested in his final days after being diagnosed with terminal cancer of the duodenum, but he died as he had lived, with dignity.

Adieu Maurice. Merci pour tout.