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Minnesota's Hmong veterans seek recognition for Vietnam War service

By **Cynthia Boyd** | 11/28/12



MinnPost photo by Cynthia Boyd

Zachor Lee and Neng Moua fought with American soldiers in Laos during the Vietnam War. They hold a photo of a friend who died in military action.

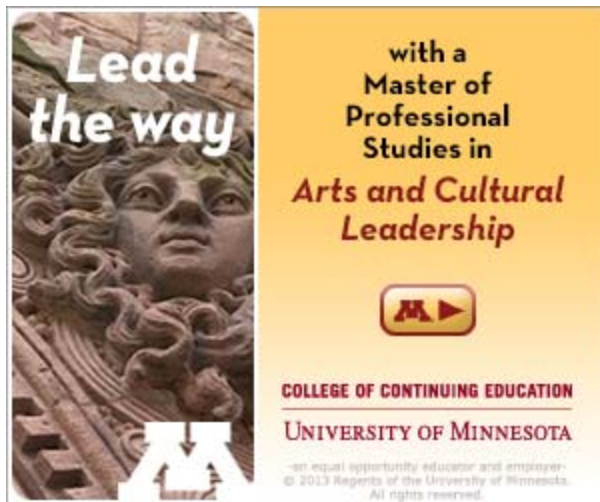
For most of us the Vietnam War has taken its place in U.S. history books.

Yet for about 400 older Hmong Minnesotans who fought with U.S. troops during the war in northern Laos, there is a wound still unhealed.

These fighters are not recognized as veterans of the U.S. military nor entitled to the benefits of having served, a fact they sorely remember this time each year as the nation observes Veteran's Day and Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day.

U.S. law prohibits them from being buried in national or state veteran's cemeteries. They receive no medical or pension benefits. Their names are absent from the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Among them are men in their 60s and 70s who gather regularly at a down-at-the-heels clapboard building on Arcade Street on St. Paul's East Side to retell war stories of the covert operation conducted by the CIA, stories about retrieving bodies of American pilots whose helicopters had crashed, of serving as medics, fighters, translators, radio operators, and, then, after the war, suffering devastating consequences.



They gather to share some of their history, a gallery of photographs of men in Vietnam-era uniform lining a wall.

Youa Thoa Vue, was recruited by the CIA at age 12, "too young to pull the pin on a grenade," he says.

Neng Moua, medical assistant, mission officer, translator, fought and was wounded when Communists shot up the helicopter he was riding in.

"In 1975 we lost the war and the Americans left us behind. I was captured by the Lao Communists and was POW," Moua tells translator Cassandra Lo, a young staffer with the group, called the SGU (that's Special Guerilla Units) Veterans and Families organization.

Fighting for the Americans, Yang Dang Chang stepped on a land mine and lost part of his left leg.

Once the Americans pulled out, Communists enslaved many in prison camps, setting up work gangs.

Za Chor Lee, 75 and vice president of the SGU St. Paul Chapter, who held the rank of captain with the Americans, was forced by his captors after the war to eat rice and leaves mixed with sand. They wanted them to die slowly, translates Lo.

But Lee's greatest sorrow was the death of his 18-year-old son, he tells me through Lo, tears pooling at the corners of his eyes. The boy was forced to clear away unexploded bombs and died in an explosion.

Though there have been numerous efforts to award these men military status, including a bill in the 2012 Minnesota House, the efforts have been unsuccessful.

Arguments against include fears that granting this group the rights of veterans would set a **precedent** and would have to be offered to other soldiers fighting on the American side, including Vietnamese, Iraqis, Afghans and Somalis.

Other opponents argue there would be difficulties in substantiating Hmong veterans' claims of military service, that extending benefits would be extremely costly and crowd cemeteries.

Still, the United States opened its borders to these Hmong veterans and their families, offering opportunity, a better life and sometimes Social Security disability payments. More than 60,000 Hmong live in the state.

For all that, they are thankful. What they lack, says Chang, is recognition of their military past, their service to this country.

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Cynthia Boyd, MinnPost's Community Sketchbook reporter, covers poverty, homelessness, mental health, and other topics related to the social and economic challenges facing communities. Community Sketchbook is sponsored by The Minneapolis Foundation. Email Cynthia at cboyd@minnpost.com.

COMMENTS (5)**An unpaid debt**

SUBMITTED BY **MARK WALLEK** ON NOVEMBER 28, 2012 - 10:57AM.

We can never repay the Hmong for what they did for us during the war. They deserve recognition and support on par with their enlisted counterparts. This should be a given. But then, when you observe how many vets have to effort to get their needs met, regardless of the endless promises out of the mouths of pols, you have to wonder if there will ever be more than lip service given to the Hmong sacrifice, which was a sacrifice of their entire culture. All I know is that I like my Hmong neighbors allot, and I am aware of why they are my neighbors, and that they would not be if we'd not gone off to an unnecessary war.

Recognition hardly its about money

SUBMITTED BY **ROB KEYS** ON NOVEMBER 28, 2012 - 6:05PM.

They fought beside US Armed forces in their country. Just like the thousands British, French and many others in Europe as well as at least a dozen countries in the South Pacific did in past wars. Did we have to give them the recognition and MONEY Yes we did we saved them as well as saving the Hmong and allowing them to move to the USA and become citizens immediately. But now they feel entitled and the US has to pay them for their support...This is why the country is in trouble.

The Hmong's deserve a thank you but that's all.

give it up

SUBMITTED BY **MARK WALLEK** ON NOVEMBER 29, 2012 - 12:10AM.

when you lose everything rob, because people came, illegally, into your area and you helped them accomplish their objectives, and when you go to another place very different from your padded american existence because you'll be obliterated if you stay behind,I'll throw you a couple bucks and I will heartily thank you as well.

they are nothing but a group of rebels

SUBMITTED BY **DAVID CHALEARNSOUK** ON NOVEMBER 29, 2012 - 3:46PM.

just like the taliban that the us cia supports. nothing more. we dnt recognized terrorists group

Hmong veterans

SUBMITTED BY **PAO THAO** ON NOVEMBER 29, 2012 - 10:55PM.

To David, we're not terrorist group... we haven't blown up anyone, killing our american soliders, or turn our back on any CIA, or any civilians, except rescued down pilot and helping the americans. You should check your facts before badmouth or labelled the Hmong as terrorist in this post.

