



Due Respect

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Pasert Lee, president of the Hmong Alaska Community, Inc. and a veteran of the Secret War in Laos, in his office in East Anchorage.

Pasert Lee was buried alive while running radio support for American jets from an underground bunker somewhere in Laos.

It was 1972, and he was 45 feet beneath the jungle floor when the bunker was bombed. Lee didn't have to wait long before his men dug him out of the rubble and put him on a helicopter to the nearest hospital, where he gained consciousness more than three days later. It wasn't the only time he dodged death during the Laotian Civil War: He bears scars from the AK-47 bullets that riddled his body.

Now, more than 40 years after the official end of the war, Lee is still fighting, struggling to secure military benefits for the remaining Hmong veterans living throughout the United States, including himself.

“It is very hard,” said Lee, 68, one of the last Hmong veterans in the Last Frontier. Lee, president of the Hmong Alaska Community, Inc., lives in Mountain View and is one of thousands of Hmong people recruited by the CIA to help fight communist forces during the Cold War. The special guerilla units battled the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in Laos in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and fought to keep communist troops from using the valuable Ho Chi Minh Trail. Lee said 35,000 Hmong were killed over the course of the so-called Secret War. Another 11,000 simply disappeared and are presumed dead, with “no cemetery, no nothing,” Lee said.

When Laos was overcome by the Pathet Lao in 1975, the surviving Hmong fighters and their families became refugees. Tens of thousands fled, trying to make it to camps in Thailand. Many died during the journey. Between June 1975 and April 1979, Lee said he and the other men in his unit struggled to survive, “mountain by mountain, year by year, jungle by jungle.”

Finally, he reached the banks of the Mekong River and swam two-and-a-half miles to Thai shores and the refugee camps on the other side.

Many years later, Lee came to America. In 1997, Hmong special guerilla unit veterans were honored with a memorial at Arlington National Cemetery, and in 2000 President Bill Clinton signed legislation granting naturalized U.S. citizenship to Hmong veterans of the Secret War in Laos.

For Lee and many others, it’s not enough.

Mai Xiong, one of Lee’s Mountain View neighbors and a member of Alaska’s Hmong community, still becomes emotional when speaking about the Secret War and its steep toll.

“We hope that the American people know what we did for them – that we died for them,” Xiong said. “Without the Hmong people, they would not be alive.”

They hope to see Hmong veterans receive U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care, and the honor of being laid to rest in America’s national cemeteries. It’s been a long, drawn-out battle.

In May, Lee traveled to Washington D.C. to meet with lawmakers and testify on behalf of Hmong veterans. He flew east again in late October, meeting with dozens of members of Congress to advocate for several bills currently caught up in committee. He hopes to return to Washington for a third time later this year.

At stake is H.R. 3369, cosponsored by Rep. Don Young, introduced and referred to committee in October 2013. A twin bill, S. 2337, was cosponsored by Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Sen. Mark Begich, introduced May 14 and referred to committee the

same day. Both pieces of legislation would give Hmong veterans the right to be buried in national cemeteries.

The bill-tracking website Govtrack.us predicts the measures have little chance of success. The House resolution has an estimated 15 percent chance of enactment, according to the website, while the Senate equivalent has only a six percent chance. Despite the odds, Lee continues to push.

He works closely with the nonprofit Center for Public Policy Analysis in Washington, which has spent decades advocating on behalf of Hmong veterans and refugees. Philip Smith, CPPA executive director, was instrumental in the dedication of the Hmong memorial at Arlington. Like Lee, he hopes for more.

"It is important to honor these extraordinary veterans with burial honors," Smith said in an Oct. 24 statement on behalf of the CPPA.

Two days prior, a group of Hmong veterans had marched on Capitol Hill in an effort to draw attention to their cause.

Besides the policy center, Lee said both Murkowski and Begich have been proven allies in the fight to honor the veterans of the Secret War; helping arrange audiences with other members of Congress and adding their names to various bills. In September, Murkowski announced her support for the creation of National Lao-Hmong Recognition Day. The Alaska Legislature passed a similar bill last year.

But time is running out.

There are only about 6,000 Hmong special guerilla unit veterans living in the United States these days, Lee said. There are 22 left in Alaska. There used to be 24, Lee said, but Yong Seng Moua passed away several years ago, and Neng Vue died last year. Both were lieutenants.

"People are passing, every year," Xiong said.

Lee said he does not understand why the veterans' legislation has yet to move forward, or why he must work so hard to secure burial honors for the Hmong people who gave years of their lives protecting American forces in southeast Asia.

While the war may be over, Lee's fight continues with no end in sight.

"It is very hard for me, because the people cannot wait for the bill to pass," he said. Before long, there will be no Hmong veterans left to honor.