

Alaska Dispatch News

Anchorage honors Hmong veterans of Laos conflict

Devin Kelly, May 15, 2014



A celebration in Anchorage Thursday, May 15, honored the "largely untold" story of Hmong veterans who fought in support of the U.S. in Laos during the 1970s. Erik Hill photo

Steven Yang was 15 when he was recruited to fight on the front lines of the United States war effort in Laos in 1970.

He was among an estimated 100,000 Hmong trained by the CIA as Special Guerilla Combat Units to fight against North Vietnamese and communist troops. The war took a hefty toll: About 40,000 Hmong died in the fighting, and tens of thousands more were seriously injured or disabled.

On Thursday, Yang, now 58, sat in a cap and camouflage fatigues at an outdoor ceremony in Anchorage, one of a group of Hmong veterans being honored for their role in the conflict.

Last June, the Alaska Legislature officially proclaimed May 15 as Hmong-American Veteran Memorial Day. The date marks the end of U.S. military operations in Laos in 1975.

Because those operations were covert, the involvement of the Hmong in the Laos war effort remains a "largely untold" story, according to the text of the bill. After the war, facing retribution and torture, hundreds of thousands of Hmong refugees fled to Thailand and eventually re-settled across the United States.

About 5,000 Hmong now live in Anchorage, according to census data, a fast-growing population.

During Thursday's ceremony at Mountain View Lions Park, veterans listened to a series of speeches from Alaska legislators, community leaders and other dignitaries. Rep. Gabrielle LeDoux and Sen. Bill Wielechowski, the main sponsors of the bill to establish the commemorative date, and Rep. Geran Tarr, who co-sponsored the bill, were among those attending.

Each veteran received a copy of a special citation from the 28th Alaska Legislature to commemorate the occasion and an honor coin from the state's Office of Veteran Affairs. And the men were thanked, repeatedly, for their sacrifice.

Yang, now 58, lived in a refugee camp in Thailand before coming to the United States in 1979. He said the memorial day was important to reflect on what was lost in the conflict.

"You lost many things," Yang said. "You lost the home, friendships, family members."

Fellow veteran Breddy Yang, 60, a former captain in the Special Guerilla Units, remembered arriving at a U.S. Army airport in Laos when he was 9, after his mother died.

He later worked in the military's census office in Laos, keeping records of men who were killed. He remembers the details that had to be entered into the system, from the soldier's names and platoons to the names of people in their families.

He also remembered preparing weapons and uniforms that were loaded into airplanes and dropped to soldiers in the field.

Between 1975 and 1976, Breddy Yang was a prisoner of war in his home country. He immigrated to the United States in 1987.

He stood at attention and saluted as America's national anthem was sung at the start of the ceremony.

"Today is for them, for the people who passed away," Breddy Yang said.

Few Hmong serve in the U.S. military today, said Sgt. Kong Ly, an active duty member of the Alaska Guard Bravo 1-143 Airborne Regiment. Ly came to Thursday's ceremony after seeing a flier about it at a local restaurant.

Ly's father fought as Special Guerrilla Unit, and Ly grew up listening to stories of jungle warfare.

"For me, it's special because this is my heritage," said Ly, who came wearing his fatigues. He said his father is the reason he serves in the U.S. military today.

A second ceremony to commemorate Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day is scheduled to begin at noon Sunday at the Boys and Girls Club of Mountain View. The entire month of May is Hmong History Month.

