

# HCR

# 4

<TARGET><BILL>HCR 4</BILL><SUBJECT>HCR  
4</SUBJECT><COMM>HMLV28</COMM></TARGET>

# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

**Interim:**  
716 West 4th Avenue  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501  
Phone: (907) 269-0216  
Fax (907) 269-0218  
Rep.Gabrielle.LeDoux@akleg.gov



**Session:**  
Alaska State Capitol  
Juneau, Alaska 99801  
Phone: (907) 465-4998  
Fax: (907) 465-4419  
Toll Free: (800) 698-4998

**REPRESENTATIVE GABRIELLE LEDOUX**  
[WWW.GABRIELLELEDoux.COM](http://WWW.GABRIELLELEDoux.COM)

February 26, 2013

Honorable Representative Neal Foster, Co-Chair  
House Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee

Dear Representative Foster,

I respectfully request House Concurrent Resolution 4 "An Act Proclaiming May 15 to be Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day" be heard in the House Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee at your earliest convenience.

Attached you will find the following documents:

1. A Current Version of Resolution.
2. Sponsor Statement.
3. Back up Documents

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Dirk Moffatt at his direct line at 465-2906 or on his cell at 229-3918.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gabrielle LeDoux".

Gabrielle LeDoux  
Representative  
District 13  
Muldoon, Elmendorf AFB and Creekside Park

# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

**Interim:**  
716 West 4th Avenue  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501  
Phone: (907) 269-0216  
Fax (907) 269-0218  
Rep.Gabrielle.LeDoux@akleg.gov



**Session:**  
Alaska State Capitol  
Juneau, Alaska 99801  
Phone: (907) 465-4998  
Fax: (907) 465-4419  
Toll Free: (800) 698-4998

**REPRESENTATIVE GABRIELLE LEDOUX**  
WWW.GABRIELLELEDoux.COM

## HCR 4 Sponsor Statement

### *“Proclaiming May 15 to be Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day.”*

House Concurrent Resolution 4 would recognize and honor Hmong veterans who fought in support of United States (US) military operations in the Kingdom of Laos between February 28, 1961, and May 15, 1975, by proclaiming May 15 to be Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day.

Hmong were called "damned good fighters" by the CIA. They fought bravely in what was called the U.S. "Secret War" in Laos against some of the toughest North Vietnamese and Lao troops for 13 years and suffered casualty rates five times higher than the rate experienced by U.S. soldiers.

The most conservative estimated numbers during the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War are 35,000-40,000 brave young Hmong killed in combat; 50,000-58,000 wounded; and 3,000 missing in action. After the US withdrawal from Southeast Asia, thousands more Hmong were killed during genocide carried out by communist forces during the Hmong attempt to flee to neighboring Thailand.

“Every (Hmong) that died, that was an American back home that didn’t die, or one that was injured that wasn’t injured. Somebody in nearly every Hmong family was either fighting or died from fighting...They became refugees because we (United States Government)...encouraged them to fight for us. I promised them myself, ‘Have no fear, we will take care of you’.” - Edgar Buell, Senior US Aid/CIA official working with the Hmong army, “60 Minutes”, March 4, 1979

The most recent numbers set the US Hmong population between 200,000-300,000; with the Alaska population at almost 4,700 and rising. Many Hmong have immigrated here following the Vietnam conflict after persecution for supporting the US.

The “Secret War” is no longer a secret and the recognition of these brave fighting men is long overdue. That is why I urge the passage of HCR 4 and by doing so commemorating the service of these forgotten warriors.



# LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH SERVICES

Alaska State Legislature  
Division of Legal and Research Services  
State Capitol, Juneau, AK 99801

(907) 465-3991 phone  
(907) 465-3908 fax  
research@legis.state.ak.us

---

## Research Brief

TO: Representative Gabrielle LeDoux  
FROM: Susan Haymes, Legislative Analyst  
DATE: March 7, 2013  
RE: Background Information on the Hmong People  
*LRS Report 13.254*

---

***You asked for background information on the Hmong population. Specifically, you wished to know the estimated number of Hmong people killed in Laos during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Additionally you wished to know the population of the Hmong in the United States and Alaska. You also asked how many states have adopted a Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day and the significance of the date May 15<sup>th</sup>.***

---

The Hmong are an Asian ethnic group from the mountainous regions of China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. For thousands of years, the Hmong have maintained a distinctive culture, including dress, oral traditions, and religion. They are a strongly independent people and highly value their autonomy. In pre-war Laos the Hmong lived high in the mountains practicing subsistence agriculture and had little contact with other people. As an ethnic minority in most areas where they have lived, the Hmong have often held a relatively low social status.<sup>1</sup>

---

### The Hmong and the Vietnam War

---

The Hmong generally supported the French occupation of Indochina from 1945-1954 because under the French the Hmong were a protected minority, and were mostly left alone to live their lives.<sup>2</sup> When the French withdrew in 1954, the Hmong found themselves under attack from the lowland Lao and from both the North and South Vietnamese. The United States, fearing a communist victory in Vietnam, had supported the French during the First Indochina War, and when the French withdrew supported South Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> As the Vietnam conflict intensified in the early 1960s, the United States discovered that communist forces had entered Laos.<sup>4</sup> In response, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sent in agents to recruit the Hmong to help in the fight. The Hmong, who saw communism as a threat to their land and their autonomy, agreed to help. The CIA established an air base at Long Cheng in northern Laos and selected Vang Pao to command the Hmong forces. This CIA-covert operation in Laos became known as the Secret War.

The United States relied heavily on Hmong soldiers from 1960-1975 to engage in direct combat, direct air strikes, rescue downed American flyers, fight behind enemy lines, and gather intelligence on the movements of North Vietnamese troops. More than 35,000 Hmong soldiers, representing about 12 percent of the population, lost their lives and many more were

---

<sup>1</sup> Rashaan Meneses, "Hmong: An Endangered People," UCLA International Institute, July 7, 2004. The article can be accessed at [www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=12590](http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=12590).

<sup>2</sup> French Indochina included the current states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. After World War I a nationalist movement had formed in Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh. Ho formed a liberation movement known as the Viet Minh and battled first the Japanese during World War II and then the French until 1954. The war during the French occupation is known as the First Indochina War. Negotiations to end the conflict, known as the 1954 Geneva Accords, divided Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The territory north of the line was led by Ho Chi Minh with Hanoi as its capital and the southern part was led by Ngo Dinh Diem with Saigon as its capital. North Vietnam became a communist regime and Ho created a new band of guerilla fighters in the South known as the Viet Cong.

<sup>3</sup> The United States subscribed to the domino theory, which posited that a communist victory in Vietnam might lead to communist victories in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

<sup>4</sup> The Laos communists were known as the Pathet Lao. At the time, Laos had been declared neutral, but with a growing communist presence, the CIA saw it as the next front.

seriously injured and disabled.<sup>5</sup> Overall, Hmong soldiers died at a rate ten times that of American soldiers in Vietnam. Most of the dead, however, were Hmong civilians who perished by the tens of thousands. Some estimates put the total number of Hmong lost during the Secret War at nearly 100,000, but given the circumstances of the Secret War, it is nearly impossible to know the exact number of Hmong killed.

In a report from 1969, then director of the CIA Richard Helms wrote that the Hmong had “borne a major share of the active fighting” against the Communists in Laos. After eight years of constant warfare, General Vang Pao had “been forced to use 13 and 14-year old children to replace his casualties.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the Hmong continued to fight beside the U.S. for another six years. Mr. Helms and others note that the tenacity and effectiveness of the Hmong saved thousands of American lives.<sup>7</sup> The Hmong, however, suffered heavy losses during the 15-year war and faced even greater hardship when the war ended and the United States withdrew its forces.

### The Hmong in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War

The end came in May 1975.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. had no coherent evacuation plan after 15 years of secret missions and had only enough aircraft to take the Hmong officers and their family members. The Pathet Lao overran the CIA’s mountain air base at Long Tieng, killing thousands of the 50,000 Hmong who had been left behind in retribution for having assisted the Americans during the Secret War.<sup>9</sup> The CIA military records that had been left behind helped the new government track down Hmong soldiers who had fought with the Americans. Many of the Hmong with resources were able to escape to Thailand; however, most of the poor and uneducated stayed in Laos.

In 1977, the Lao government organized a massive troop movement against the Hmong, driving them from their homes. Hmong villages were burned, crops destroyed, and livestock killed. Tens of thousands of Hmong fled into the jungles and wound up as refugees in Thailand. It is believed that as many as a third of the Hmong population fled to Thailand at that time. During the exodus, countless people drowned in the Mekong River and hundreds of others died from starvation and disease. For example, by one account, one group of some 8,000 people began the journey to Thailand, but only 2,500 arrived. The Lao military used conventional and chemical weapons against the Hmong, as well as terror bombing and mass rape. Of the Hmong that were captured, tens of thousands were sent to reeducation camps, which were more like prisons and torture facilities. Many thousands died in these camps, as a result of torture, starvation, and illness. All told, between 1975 and 1978, about 50,000 Hmong were killed.<sup>10</sup>

Several thousand of the Hmong, primarily soldiers and their families, who escaped into the jungle took up arms against the Laos government. Although some of their raids were initially successful, the Lao military retaliated with heavy bombing and chemical weapons. Today perhaps 1,000 are still on the run in the jungles of Laos according to journalists and human rights

---

<sup>5</sup> The Hmong population in Laos numbered between 300,000 and 400,000 before the war, with most estimates putting the total closer to 400,000.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Weiner, “Gen. Vang Po’s Last War,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2008. The article can be accessed at [www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/magazine/11pao-t.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/magazine/11pao-t.html?pagewanted=all).

<sup>7</sup> Lionel Rosenblatt, president emeritus of Refugees International, who has followed the plight of the Hmong for 30 years, notes that “The U.S. put the Hmong into this meat grinder, mostly to save U.S. soldiers from fighting and dying there. The U.S had no compunction about putting Hmong into this role, which saved thousands of American lives.”

<sup>8</sup> In 1973, the U.S. and North Vietnam signed an agreement in Paris to withdraw their military forces from Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam. To gain citizen’s support, the Pathet Lao in 1974 prepared an 18-point policy called the Program for Achieving Peace, Independence, Neutrality, Democracy, Unification, and Prosperity of the Kingdom of Lao. In 1975, the Pathet Lao took over Laos.

<sup>9</sup> As a result of this systemic eradication of the Hmong people, the government of Laos has been accused of committing genocide.

<sup>10</sup> Mai Xiong, Ed. D., “Hmong Journey for Freedom,” Hmong Studies, Delta College, Stockton, CA. The article can be accessed at [www.hmongstudies.org/HmongJourneyforFreedom.html](http://www.hmongstudies.org/HmongJourneyforFreedom.html).

activists who have recently traveled to the area. The jungle Hmong are believed to have staged occasional hit-and-run attacks, but according to Amnesty International their military capacity is all but depleted. The Hmong, however, are still being hunted and killed by Lao military units.<sup>11</sup> Several hundred thousand Hmong live in Laos today in cities and small villages, but essentially the Hmong have lost their land and their way of life.

Since 1975, many Hmong have been resettled in the United States, Australia, and other countries. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Hmong population in the U.S. numbers 260,076. The Hmong mostly live in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Alaska also has a sizeable Hmong population. According to the 2010 Census, 3,534 Hmong live in Alaska, primarily in Anchorage.<sup>12</sup>

---

### Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day

---

The U.S. government kept the Secret War in Laos confidential until 1997. On May 15, 1997, the U.S. government publically acknowledged that it had supported a prolonged air and ground campaign against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong from Laos, and in honor of the Hmong and other combat veterans from the Secret War, dedicated the Laos Memorial on the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery. As a result, May 15<sup>th</sup> has become an historic date for Hmong veterans, since it represents the first time that the United States government officially and publicly recognized the contributions of these soldiers who fought alongside the Americans during the Vietnam War.<sup>13</sup>

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), California is the only state to have adopted a Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day (ACR 182, 2003).<sup>14</sup> In 2001 Congress passed a resolution urging the President to proclaim a National Lao-Hmong Recognition Day (HCR 88). The resolution finds that a number of states and cities have adopted July 22<sup>nd</sup> as Lao-Hmong Recognition Day, a day to remember and honor the Lao Hmong people for their service and sacrifices in the Secret War.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) recently introduced legislation that would allow 6,900 former Hmong soldiers living in the United States the right to be buried in national cemeteries (S. 200). In 2012, Senator Murkowski unsuccessfully attempted to similarly amend a defense bill that would have authorized the burial in a national cemetery of any U.S. citizen or legal resident who served in support of U.S. forces (S.3254). Similar legislation was introduced in the House in 2011 by Representative Jim Costa (D-CA), but never made it to the floor.

We hope this is helpful. If you have questions or need additional information, please let us know.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tim Weiner, "Gen. Vang Po's Last War," *New York Times*, May 11, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> *Hmong Studies Journal*, Census Special Issue, Volume 13, Issue 2, 2010. The Journal can be accessed at [www.hmongstudiesjournal.org/hsj-volume-1322012-2010-census-special-issue.html](http://www.hmongstudiesjournal.org/hsj-volume-1322012-2010-census-special-issue.html).

<sup>13</sup> We include the proclamation from the ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery as Attachment A. More information can be accessed at [www.arlingtoncemetery.net/laosmem.htm](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/laosmem.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Angela Andrews, NCSL, can be reached at [angela.andrews@ncsl.org](mailto:angela.andrews@ncsl.org).

<sup>15</sup> The states of Minnesota and Pennsylvania, and the cities of St. Paul, MN, and Golden, CO, have adopted a Lao-Hmong Recognition Day on July 22nd.

**DEDICATED TO  
THE U.S. SECRET ARMY  
IN THE KINGDOM OF LAOS  
1961 – 1973**

The story of this Memorial is a story of sacrifice and patriotic valor by American Advisors and Hmong and Lao combat soldiers in the jungles of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

Hmong General Vang Pao's army, once considered among the best of U.S. allies, helped the Administrations of U.S. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon in the "secret" Lao Theater. The United States in its effort to combat communist insurgency in Laos, recruited, armed, and trained ethnic minorities. Advised by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), General Vang Pao's army of Hmong, Kmhamu, and Lao, gathered military intelligence, rescued downed U.S. air crews, protected U.S. Air Force navigational sites in Laos, and fought North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap's ever increasing forces to a standstill in Laos for a decade.

When, after the fall of Laos, the communists took control, they launched a genocidal campaign to punish or eliminate those who allied with the United States, particularly those who had served in the U.S. Secret Army. Tens of thousands of Hmong escaped across the Mekong River to Thailand and refugee camps. From there, former soldiers and their families eventually were resettled in the United States. Once here, the Hmong adjustment proved difficult, but few Americans knew of their historical alliance with the U.S. adding to their resettlement problems.

Because the campaigns waged by General Vang Pao and General Giap were secret, most Americans knew little, if anything, of the secret war in Laos. Not until almost 20 years after falling to the communists did U.S. Government officials publicly admit the existence and role of the "U.S. Secret Army" in the "secret" Lao Theater of Operation of the Vietnam War. Appearing before Congress, in 1994, the Honorable William E. Colby, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, talked of the "heroism and effectiveness of the Hmong struggle" and the critical role and sacrifice of the Secret Army.

In part, Colby said:

*"For 10 years, Vang Pao's soldiers held the growing North Vietnamese forces to approximately the same battlelines they held in 1962. And significantly for Americans, the 70,000 North Vietnamese engaged in Laos were not available to add to the forces fighting Americans and South Vietnamese in South Vietnam."*

After Ambassador Colby's acknowledgment, a handful of Americans who knew well the Hmong alliance with the U.S. felt it timely to seek official U.S. recognition for the soldiers of the Secret Army and their American Advisors who died in Laos. Mr. Grant McClure, a former U.S. Army Advisor to the Montagnards, became the moving force behind the idea of a permanent Memorial at Arlington to nationally and publicly honor the uncommon sacrifices of the Secret Army. Mr. McClure's efforts brought together in common cause former CIA Station Chiefs, Vietnam Veterans, Members of Congress, and others who served in civilian and military roles, as well as Lieutenant Colonel Wangyee Vang, founder of Lao Veterans of America, Inc.

Finally, after discussions with officials of the U.S. Government and the Lao Veterans of America, whose members number some 55,000 former soldiers and their families of the Secret Army, agreement on a Living Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery was reached.

On May 15, 1997, some 3,000 veterans of General Vang Pao's army – Hmong and Lao – dressed in jungle camouflage fatigues, flight suits, nurses uniforms stood at attention on the Mall in Washington, D.C. near the Vietnam Wall. Facing them were current Members of Congress, former U.S. Ambassadors, and the CIA Station Chiefs under whom they had served during the time of the "secret war" in Laos. A Congressional citation was read. CIA Station Chiefs paid tribute to the extraordinary contributions of General Vang Pao and his brave forces in the fight for freedom in Southeast Asia and assisted in handing out the Vietnam Veterans National Medal.

The next day, General Vang Pao and the remnants of his army, again wearing camouflage fatigues, assembled at Arlington National Cemetery. Six deep, they stood at attention for the dedication of the Memorial Monument – a small stone topped with a copper plaque, acknowledging the "secret war" in Laos – and the Hmong, Lao, and American Advisors who valiantly served freedom's cause in the jungles of Southeast Asia and, in so doing, died in the Lao Theater in the Vietnam War. They will now be forever known and remembered.

Contributed in Loving Respect, September 1999 by Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt,  
Nobel Peace Prize Nominee, Author of Traagic Mountains: The Hmong,  
The Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos 1942 – 1992.

---

## **In Memory of Legions Lost and the Soldiers of the Secret War in Laos.**

---

**We stand in tribute of forgotten men...for their sacrifice, courage  
valor and honor. We honor them by this living memorial...starkly  
beautiful in its simplicity, for it stands defiantly alone, as did those  
soldiers in their seasons of death. It will serve as a poignant reminder  
of our battlefield allies, and is a tribute long overdue to proud Human  
endeavor...courage and valor in a long war lost in the unfulfilled hopes  
for Southeast Asia.**

*As the fallen leaves of Autumn  
in unregimented ranks,  
Countless unremembered soldiers  
rest...eternally.  
Let us now praise forgotten men...  
and some there be,  
Which have no memorial;*

*Who have perished, as though  
They had never been.  
But they served, they died;  
for cause and by happenstance...  
Expended in the hopes for Southeast Asia,  
and will forever be remembered,  
Mourned for their sacrifice.*

*If by weeping I could change  
the course of events,  
My tears would pour down ceaselessly  
for a thousand Autumns.*

**Thursday, May 15, 1997  
Salute to Lao/Hmong Patriots  
& their American Advisors  
Arlington National Cemetery**

# Facts and Details

[Home](#) > [Asian Topics](#) > [01Hill Tribes and La](#)

## **HMONG, THE VIETNAM WAR, LAOS AND THAILAND**

1. [HMONG AND THE VIETNAM WAR](#)
2. [Rescue of an American Pilot by the Hmong](#)
3. [Hmong After the Vietnam War](#)
4. [Hmong in Thailand After the Vietnam War](#)
5. [Hmong After the Vietnam War and the United States](#)
6. [HMONG IN LAOS](#)
7. [Hmong Insurgencies in Northern Laos](#)
8. [Revival of Hmong Insurgencies in Northern Laos](#)
9. [Attacks by Hmong Insurgencies in Northern Laos](#)
10. [Fighting the Insurgencies](#)
11. [Is the Hmong Insurgency in Laos Still Fighting](#)
12. [Hmong Tribes Surrender after Years on the Run](#)
13. [HMONG IN THAILAND](#)
14. [Efforts to Repatriate Laotian Hmong in Thailand Back to Laos](#)
15. [Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok  
in Thailand](#)
16. [Hmong Forced Out Of Homes In Thailand](#)
17. [Hmong Forced to Go Back to Laos](#)

### **HMONG AND THE VIETNAM WAR**

- From 1959 to 1973, the CIA trained Hmong tribesmen to fight against Communist insurgencies in Laos. Many of the first recruits were Hmong guerillas who fought under the charismatic leader Vang Pao and had worked earlier with the French. The Hmong have traditionally occupied the strategic highlands in Laos overlooking North Vietnam and have traditionally been enemies of the lowland Vietnamese. They entered the conflict against Vietnamese first as scouts for the French and later as guerrillas for the Americans.
  
- Under the guidance of the CIA and American special forces the Hmong rescued American pilots, identified targets for American bombs, fought Lao and Vietnamese communist forces, manned strategic mountain and jungle areas used by U.S. forces, disrupted and sabotaged supply lines, gathered critical intelligence and defended navigational sites in Laos that allowed precise, all-weather U.S. air strikes against enemy targets in northern Laos and North Vietnam." .

■ About 35,000 Hmong were recruited for the war effort. About 30,000 of them were They were key in thwarting attempts by the Vietnamese army to make major inroads into northern Laos and slowing the movement of supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Hmong had problems with helicopters though. American pilots usually kept the motor running when they landed and Hmong who had never seen them before walked right into them. More than twenty Hmong died this way in a twelve year period.

■ Hmong were called "damned good fighters" by the CIA. They fought bravely against some of the toughest North Vietnamese and Lao troops for 13 years and suffered from casualty rate five times higher than the rate experienced by U.S. soldiers. Over time so many Hmong were killed that by the end of the campaign many of the fighters were Thai troops recruited to take their place. But that time the war had been overtaken by a conventional war and the Hmong had outlived their usefulness.

■ As many as 20,000 Hmong soldiers died during the Vietnam War. Hmong civilians, who numbered about 300,000 before the war, perished by the tens of thousands.

### **Rescue of an American Pilot by the Hmong**

■ Marc Kaufman wrote in Smithsonian magazine: "In a mountaintop guardpost near the village of Ban Va in central Laos, Hmong soldiers watched the American pilot eject from his burning plane. It was December 1964, early in the Vietnam War, and the pilot was on a bombing run. The Hmong, part of a secret army backed by the CIA, hoped to reach him before North Vietnamese troops in the area did. [Source: Marc Kaufman, Smithsonian magazine, September 2004]

■ The leader of this cadre of ragtag Hmong soldiers, Nou Yee Yang, recalls that he and his men walked for hours before reaching a field where they spotted a parachute. They found the pilot hiding in some bushes. "He was sweating and very scared because he didn't know who we were," Yang says. Phoumi, the Hmong soldiers said to the pilot, referring to a Laotian leader supported by the United States. The Hmong, who spoke no English, hoped the pilot would recognize the name and understand they were on the American side.

■ Yang says the airman was still uncertain whether the Hmong soldiers were friend or foe as they led him to another hilltop village. Their American-donated radios weren't working, so they put the pilot's helmet on a long stick and waved it to signal U.S. search planes. A U.S. helicopter arrived the next morning. The pilot "was smiling so much and waving his arms goodbye when he left," Yang recalls, adding that the American presented his rescuers with his pistol as a token of gratitude.

■ Bill Lair, a CIA official based in Laos at the time, who directed the agency's operations there, says Hmong soldiers risked their own lives to lead many U.S. pilots to safety. The total number of American airmen rescued by the Hmong was, according to agency spokesman Mark Mansfield, never tallied by the CIA. Yang, now 65, fled Laos after the communist takeover in 1975 and has lived in Milwaukee since 1979. He still speaks no English and has found little work in the United States other than odd jobs. Nonetheless, he says, he feels connected to this country, in part because of that pilot he rescued four decades ago. Yang never did learn the man's name. "I wish that someday I could meet him again," he says through an interpreter.

■ Another Hmong veteran in Milwaukee, Xay Dang Xiong, 61, says he commanded Hmong forces protecting a secret American radar installation on a Laotian mountaintop. Like Yang, Xiong fled Laos in 1975. Today, he works with Lao Family Community, a Hmong social service agency in Milwaukee "When we fought alongside the Americans in Laos, it was called the secret war," he says. "Hmong

people did so many dangerous things to help, but people here still don't know that. It's still like a secret."

## **Hmong After the Vietnam War**

■ During the war the Hmong in Laos had been sharply divided, with some factions supporting the royalists, some supporting the opposition and some remaining neutral. About the only thing that unified them was their opposition to the Communists. In Thailand, ironically, many Hmong supported the Communist Party of Thailand in their struggle with the Thai government in the 1960s and 70s. In both Laos and Thailand the Hmong ended up on the losing side and suffered as a result.

■ After the Americans left Laos in 1975 and the Communist Pathet Lao gained control of the country, the Hmong were quickly overrun by Communist forces, who later launched a campaign to eliminate minorities—particularly the Hmong—who had assisted the Americans during the war. Hmong villages were burned and by some estimates thousands were massacred. The new pro-Vietnam Communist government in Laos used Soviet artillery, napalm and chemical weapons against the Hmong. An estimated 10 to 25 percent of all Hmong in Laos were killed during and after the Vietnam war. By one count there were 400,000 Hmong in Laos at the beginning of the Vietnam war and only 300,000 when it was over.

■ "In 1975, the current communist government came to power," says Jane Hamilton-Merritt, author of *Tragic Mountains*, a history of the Vietnam-era conflict in Laos. "It announced publicly that it intended to 'wipe out' the Hmong who had allied themselves with the Royal Lao Government and the United States and therefore opposed the communist Pathet Lao soldiers and the North Vietnamese military forces operating in Laos. . . . Wiping out the targeted Hmong began in earnest in early 1976 and continues in 2004." [Source: Marc Kaufman, *Smithsonian* magazine, September 2004]

■ The Hmong were reportedly the targets of chemical weapon attacks. According to witnesses yellow powder was dropped from airplanes on Hmong villages, causing villagers to go into convulsions and vomit blood. Thousands reportedly died from the "Yellow Rain," which was allegedly released by the Soviets or Vietnamese. No firm physical evidence was ever found to confirm the reports. A yellow toxic powder was discovered in area, but tests showed later that it could have been bee droppings.

■ Intense fighting continued until 1980. One Hmong man told the *Washington Post* that his parents and two sisters and were ambushed and killed by what they believe were government soldiers in 1978.

## **Hmong in Thailand After the Vietnam War**

■ At the end of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s as many as a third of the Hmong population left Laos and fled across the Mekong River to Thailand. In Thailand, the Hmong were housed in a series of refugee camps. About 130,000 made their way to United States. Another 50,000 to 100,000 stayed in Thailand. About 400,000 remained in Laos.

■ Hmong recruited by the CIA to fight on behalf of a pro-American government during the Vietnam War were all but abandoned in Laos after their communist enemies won a long civil war and began single-party rule in Laos. Many managed to flee into Thailand and later resettled in the United States and elsewhere, but thousands stayed behind, some adjusting to the new regime and others staying in the jungle, where they faced continuing attacks by the government.

■ On the relation between Hmong who fled Laos for America and the Laotian government, Marc Kaufman wrote in Smithsonian magazine, “Although there are Hmong-Americans who do return regularly to Laos, relations between the Hmong-American community and Laos are strained. As it happens, Vang’s house in St. Paul was torched five months after his father had called for normal trade relations with the Laotian government and its president, Khamtai Siphandon, and negotiating an end to the 30-year-long jungle warfare. The U.S. State Department currently advocates normal trade relations with Laos. In September 2003, the two countries took an important step when they signed a trade agreement. It is awaiting Congressional approval. [Source: Marc Kaufman, Smithsonian magazine, September 2004]

■ Many of the Hmong in the United States are outspoken in their calls for the overthrow of the Laotian Communist government. The leader of the Hmong resistance movement against the Lao government was Gen. Vang Pao, once a close American ally. He lived in California for many years and died in January 2011. In the 2000s he was criticized by the American government for his support of the armed resistance movement against the Lao government and was charged in a U.S. court for his involvement in Lao coup plot.

## **Hmong After the Vietnam War and the United States**

■ The U.S. promised to “take care” of the Hmong. Some veterans and widows of the secret war were airlifted by CIA-operated Air America. But, when the war was over, and U.S. forces left Vietnam, the Hmong still in Laos were largely left to fend for themselves.

■ Many felt the United States betrayed the Hmong in the worst way. One State Department official who helped resettle some of them said, “They fought with us and they paid they highest price. They’re deserving as the last human element in terms of us taking care of our allies. If the Hmong were good enough to fight and die for us, they have to be good enough to resettle.”

■ U.S. Government agencies did not acknowledge the role played the Hmong until the 1990s. Veterans led by the former Hmong leader Vang Po want recognition and benefits from the United States government. Marc Kaufman wrote in Smithsonian magazine, “Their sacrifice was virtually unknown to most Americans until 1997, when efforts by Hmong veterans and their advocates resulted in the installation at Arlington National Cemetery of a commemorative plaque. “In memory of the Hmong and Lao combat veterans and their American advisors who served freedom’s cause in Southeast Asia,” reads the memorial, one of a handful honoring foreign soldiers in the cemetery. “Their patriotic valor and loyalty in the defense of liberty and democracy will never be forgotten.” [Source: Marc Kaufman, Smithsonian magazine, September 2004]

■ “The Hmong in Laos may be considered the last victims of the Vietnam War. Today, as many as 17,000 of them who fled into the jungle 30 years ago are said to remain in hiding, fearing for their lives and conducting sporadic guerrilla incursions against the still-communist Laotian government. Reports suggest that hundreds of Hmong have recently begun to emerge from the jungle, lured by the prospect of amnesty. Douglas Hartwick, U.S. ambassador to Laos, says that his goal has been to “reconcile Hmong insurgents and the Lao government.” However, many of those who have left their mountain redoubts have reportedly met with retaliation instead, perhaps facing imprisonment or execution. The Laotian government denies this. Hartwick says only: “We have been unable to substantiate these reports or repudiate them.” [Ibid]

## **HMONG IN LAOS**

- At the end of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s as many as a third of the Hmong population left Laos and fled across the Mekong River to Thailand. In Thailand, the Hmong were housed in a series of refugee camps. About 130,000 made their way to United States. Another 50,000 to 100,000 stayed in Thailand. About 400,000 remained in Laos.
- Hmong recruited by the CIA to fight on behalf of a pro-American government during the Vietnam War were all but abandoned in Laos after their communist enemies won a long civil war and began single-party rule in Laos. Many managed to flee into Thailand and later resettled in the United States and elsewhere, but thousands stayed behind, some adjusting to the new regime and others staying in the jungle, where they faced continuing attacks by the government.
- On the relation between Hmong who fled Laos for America and the Laotian government, Marc Kaufman wrote in Smithsonian magazine, "Although there are Hmong-Americans who do return regularly to Laos, relations between the Hmong-American community and Laos are strained. As it happens, Vang's house in St. Paul was torched five months after his father had called for normal trade relations with the Laotian government and its president, Khamtai Siphandon, and negotiating an end to the 30-year-long jungle warfare. The U.S. State Department currently advocates normal trade relations with Laos. In September 2003, the two countries took an important step when they signed a trade agreement. It is awaiting Congressional approval. [Source: Marc Kaufman, Smithsonian magazine, September 2004]"
- Many of the Hmong in the United States are outspoken in their calls for the overthrow of the Laotian Communist government. The leader of the Hmong resistance movement against the Lao government was Gen. Vang Pao, once a close American ally. He lived in California for many years and died in January 2011. In the 2000s he was criticized by the American government for his support of the armed resistance movement against the Lao government and was charged in a U.S. court for his involvement in Lao coup plot.

## **Hmong Insurgencies in Northern Laos**

- The last, almost forgotten conflict of the Indochina war may still be continuing in northern Laos. Most of the fighters are ethnic Hmong, who are descendants of Hmong fighters enlisted by the CIA in America's "secret war" in Laos at the time of the Vietnam War and were abandoned when that war came to an end and continued fighting. The Laos government has refused to admit that a Hmong insurgency exists.
- Several insurgencies operate or operated in northern jungles of northern Laos, some of them around the former Ho Chi Minh Trail. It is not often clear what they are fighting for. Some want more autonomy for the Hmong regions. Others just seem to be out to get revenge for the awful things the Communist regime did to them. The largest group, the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELOL) may have several thousand fighters but probably has few hundred.
- Most of the insurgent groups were small a little more than militias. Some remained loyal to the Lao National Liberation Front (LNFL) of Vang Pao, the leader of the CIA-funded Hmong army, even though he had been living in California and Minnesota since 1975. One diplomat told the Washington Post, "These groups don't seem to get along very well. They don't like each other, and they often seem to work at cross purposes."

■ In the 1970s and 80s, the Lao army with massive help from the Vietnamese military largely eliminated these groups but was unable to get rid of them completely. Some insurgents lived like wild men in the jungle with families because they were afraid if they emerged they would be imprisoned or killed by Laotian security forces. As of 2004, around 17,000 Hmong were still believed to be living in the jungles.

## **Revival of Hmong Insurgencies in Northern Laos**

■ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Hmong insurgents became active again in Xianghoang and Oudomxai northern Laos. A government spokesman said, "There is no security threat in Xiang Khuang province just a few isolated acts of banditry in which hardly anybody was killed."

■ The fact that there was evidence of an insurgency despite the best efforts by the Lao government to hide it was given a proof that insurgency was fairly large spread. One diplomat told AFP, "The intensification of the attacks is beginning to create a siege mentality among the population...Despite the secrecy maintained by authorities here, the casualties being suffered the army can no longer be hidden from a population in which relatives are being killed...As well as troop losses, a large number of government officials in northern villages have been killed by rebels."

■ The Hmong have little incentive to attack foreign, particularly Americans, because many Hmong now live in the United States and many of them were once fighters themselves and they continue to support insurgencies in Laos.

## **Attacks by Hmong Insurgencies in Northern Laos**

■ The Hmong insurgents ambushed army convoys, burned houses and tried to defend families that were involuntarily being resettled in the lowlands.

■ Caryle A. Thayer, an Australian expert on Southeast Asia, told the New York Times, "Hmong armed groups have been giving the Lao Army hell. They've raided and grabbed weapons. They've ambushed columns and shot down a helicopter. The groups have received an influx of weapons smuggled into Laos from Thailand by Hmong émigrés from the United States."

■ The fighting was heaviest in Xiangkhouang Province. Five people were killed, including two children, 14 were wounded and buildings were wrecked in a night time raid in Muang Khoun, a former royal capital in Xiang Khuong, residents there said. One resident told AFP, "Around 30 of them came into town firing their guns in the air and shouting...We all just ran out and hid while they ransacked and burned our homes."

## **Fighting the Insurgencies**

■ In an effort to win the hearts and minds of Hmong insurgents and their sympathizers, the Laotian government quietly allowed them to enter civilian life and provided them with some assistance to start new lives in return for laying down their weapons.

■ In the early 2000s, Vietnamese security forces became active again on Laos, at least in a supporting role, after the increase in insurgency activity. Analysts estimated that there were between 500 and 1,000 Vietnamese soldiers fighting with the Lao Army.

■ The government denied that any Vietnamese forces were involved but suspicions about this claim were raised in 1998 when a plane carrying top Vietnamese officials crashed in Xiangkhiang, killing everyone on board.

## **Is the Hmong Insurgency in Laos Still Fighting**

■ Little reliable information about fate of the Hmong insurgents emerged until late 2002, when two Western journalists working for Time magazine made contact with one of the Hmong groups and came out with startling photographs and stories of their desperate existence.

■ Roger Warner wrote in the The Nation in 2007: “We looked into claims that Hmong are still fighting against their old enemies in Laos. We found those reports true on a small scale. Scattered bands of ragged fighters subsist off wild plants, trying to evade the Laotian army and almost every day, the leaders of these Hmong bands talk on satellite phones with their Hmong-American relatives. [Source: Roger Warner, The Nation (Thailand), June 28, 2007]

■ “There is no doubt that some Hmong-Americans have been up to their eyeballs in supporting and guiding the Hmong resistance in Laos, but there are different ways of interpreting this fact. Some might say it is heroic and steadfast for old allies to continue the fight for years after the US forces went home. (After all, which of our Iraqi and Afghan allies will do that?) Others might say that the old Hmong-American leaders are like exiled White Russians in Paris after World War I, plotting and scheming to return to power and not doing a good job of it. [Ibid]

■ Human-rights workers have another angle: go to the Amnesty International Website, they say, search under "Hmong" and start reading about all the violence done against tribespeople by the Lao regime, which adds up to borderline genocide. You can frame the arguments any way you want, but for me, the more I learn about the Hmong resistance in Laos, the more I find it ambiguous and troubling. There's a cycle of violence in the boondocks of Laos, and all sides are keeping it going. I put the blame first and foremost on the Lao People's Democratic Republic, which is doing the actual killing; the Hmong-Americans rank a distant second. [Ibid]

## **Hmong Tribes Surrender after Years on the Run**

■ In 2005, AP reported: Nearly 200 members of a Hmong hill tribe surrendered to authorities early today after decades on the run in Laotian jungles, a move that heralds a possible end to a tragic legacy of the Vietnam War. U.S. sympathizers traveling with the 170 women, children and old men said they were received warmly when they arrived around dawn in Laos. The group emerged at the village of Chong Thuang, said Ed Szendrey, a pro-Hmong activist from the United States who met up with them in hopes of helping ensure their safety. [Source: AP, June 04, 2005]

■ If all proceeds peacefully, those who surrendered today are expected to be followed by several thousand others, from various Hmong bands in hiding around Laos, said Szendrey, who 's with the U.S.-based Fact Finding Commission. Szendrey said the initial official reception for those surrendering was warm and relaxed and that the police chief said the military had been told to stand down. “It looks like the government is prepared to handle it on the local level and not get the military involved,” said Szendrey. “It looks like the Lao government is actually handling it pretty well.”

## **HMONG IN THAILAND**

- As of the early 1990s around 40,000 of the 200,000 Hmong that fled Laos after the Vietnam War, remained in refugee camps in Thailand, too frightened to return to Laos. Some stayed in Thailand despite having the opportunity to go to the United States because they heard about the problems suffered by Hmong living abroad. Others wanted to continue fighting the Laotian Communists and stay close to where the action was, Many Hmong wanted to become Thai citizens but the Thai government wouldn't allow it. They worried if they were sent back to Laos they would be persecuted or even killed.
- Thailand considers the Hmong refugees illegal immigrants and suspected some of them of illegal drug trafficking and helping Hmong exile groups stage attacks against neighboring Laos, harming bilateral relations. In the 1990s, the Thai government stepped up its effort to improve relations with the Laos government. The Hmong in Thailand, still regarded as enemies of the Laos government, were an obstacle to these efforts and the Thai government wanted to get rid of them.
- In November 2004, 150 Hmong, about half of them children, were detained for entering Thailand illegally from Laos. They had hoped to eventually make it to the United States. In July 2005, Thailand urged Laos to repatriate more than 6,000 ethnic Hmong migrants. Thai authorities said many were from Petchabun Province in Laos and had been duped into leaving Laos by human traffickers who promised they would be resettled in the United States. In August about 150 Hmong, including 90 children, went on a hunger strike, at a detention center in Thailand, saying they would rather die than be repatriated to Laos.

### **Efforts to Repatriate Laotian Hmong in Thailand Back to Laos**

- After an agreement was signed between Thailand, Laos and the United Commission for Refugees in 1991, the U.S. has insisted that it was safe for the Hmong to go back to Laos, and many were repatriated at the expense of U.S. taxpayers. Many Hmong felt it wasn't safe. More than 15,000 of them fled the refugee camps to avoid repatriation.
- In the mid 1990s, the United Nations closed its refugee office in Laos and the United States said it had no further plans to resettle any more Hmong. The Hmong that remained in Thailand remained stranded and were largely forgotten. The final group from the last official refugee camp for Hmong from Laos, at Ban Napho in northeastern Thailand, went home in 1999.
- The Lao Human Rights Council has asserted that refugees in Thai camps were denied food in an attempt to repatriate them to Laos. According to the U.S. State Department, Laos is a "most repressive state." Representative Patricia Schroeder from Colorado recently wrote a letter to the king of Thailand, stating that the Hmong should not be returned to Laos because of "the ongoing bloody civil war in Laos...well-documented cases of mandatory [forced] repatriation of Hmong to Laos...and gross violations of human rights by the Lao government, which closed Laos to all monitoring by independent human rights organizations."

### **Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok**

in Thailand

- More than 12,000 Hmong sought refuge in Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist temple 60 miles north of Bangkok. Eventually a refugee camp sprung around the temple. By the early 2000s, their numbers had

grown to 15,000, with three out of four born in Thailand. They made a meager living producing handicrafts, working as farm laborers, and performing dangerous rock quarry jobs that the Thais avoided. Some dealt and used drugs. The Laotian government regarded the refugees as a source of funding for Hmong insurgents in Laos.

- According to estimates by the Thai and U.S. governments, between 30,000 and 100,000 additional Laotian Hmong refugees live in Thailand outside Wat Tham Krabok.
- About 15,000 Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok were repatriated to the United States. The United States said was willing to take about half of the 15,000 refugees, provided they were registered as residents of the camp. By July 2005 about 10,000 Wat Tham Krabok refugees were settled in the United States. Another 5,300 were supposed to resettle there by September 2005.
- In August 2004, the Thai government detained 1,500 refugees at Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp because they had failed to meet the registration deadline to move to the United States. In May 2005, the camp at Wat Tham Krabok was closed.

## **Hmong Forced Out Of Homes In Thailand**

- Reporting from Huay Nam Khao, Thailand, Rungrawee C. Pinyorat of Associated Press wrote: "Soaked by rain, thousands of poor ethnic Hmong refugees from Laos were living without shelter in northern Thailand, forced from their homes under a Thai campaign to pressure them to return to their native land. Landlords in this village said the government set a deadline for them to evict the estimated 6,500 refugees from their bamboo shelters, threatening locals with prison or fines of up to \$1,200 for sheltering the Hmong, considered by Thailand to be illegal immigrants. [Source: Rungrawee C. Pinyorat, Associated Press, July 6, October 1, 2005]"
- The 6,500 refugees have been scattered along the roadside near Huay Nam Khao village. At first, they huddled under umbrellas and trees. Then they constructed bamboo huts and plastic lean-tos. Many have retreated to hillsides that provide more space and safety from possible flooding. A baby girl who died after she and her parents spent a shelterless day and night in the rain. The mother of the two-month-old girl said the baby had a high fever and had diarrhea after spending an afternoon in the rain. "She was shaking and crying for a long time. When she stopped crying, she was dead."
- Medical care was cut off to the Hmong. Thai officials also instructed vendors not to sell food to the refugees, including children, camped out since by the roadside in Huay Nam Khao, village leaders said. "They have no place to stay, no place to cook. How can they stand the heat and rain?" asked Sawai Leeprecha, a Thai-Hmong village leader. Some of the Hmong demonstrated outside a government office near the village, located in Phetchabun province about 185 miles north of the Thai capital, Bangkok. But most clustered in groups along the road carrying reed mats and plastic sheeting. "The Hmong would like to call for the United Nations to help us survive," said Jongli Saeloh, 43. "I would rather die here than be sent back to Laos." A sign on a fence read: "Please help, we're very hungry."
- The refugees had appealed to the United Nations to treat them as political asylum seekers and help find them a new home. Although pressure on the Hmong has eased, military operations against small bands of Hmong insurgents in Laos continue and tensions persist. Displaying a crease in his flesh from a bullet wound in his left leg, 64-year-old Jer Saechong told AP he had been an officer for the CIA-backed "Secret Army," but made his peace after 1975, settling down to farm north of the Laotian capital, Vientiane. Then, in 2004, "many former CIA soldiers were arrested and never returned,

including five from my village," he said. "I was very frightened and decided to travel across the border," said Jer, who slipped into Thailand with his wife and five children a little over a year ago. Chongmi Saelee, 37, said her husband — whose father also fought for the CIA — disappeared two years ago after coming back from a visit to the United States with money given him by his relatives. When she went to the police for help, she said, "they told me that they would also kill me if I continued to search for him."

- Many of the migrants here in Phetchabun province, however, are not so clearly fleeing persecution, and Thai officials are trying to sort them out. "These people have entered the country illegally and will be sent back according to the law," Gov. Direk Thungfang said. Some of the Hmong acknowledge bribing Laotian and Thai officials to get them into Thailand...using small bars of silver worth about \$100 that are the traditional way of holding wealth

- In December 2006, Some of the Hmong were repatriated back to Laos while U.S. President George Bush was visiting Thailand.

## **Hmong Forced to Go Back to Laos**

- Seth Mydans wrote in the New York Times, "In a quick, one-day operation, Thai soldiers with riot shields and clubs evicted more than 4,000 Hmong asylum seekers from a holding center and forcibly repatriated them to Laos, where they say they face retribution from their government. Thailand acted despite protests from the United Nations and human rights groups. Even as the soldiers were trucking the Hmong over the Mekong River into Laos, the United States government was calling on the Thai government to stop. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said Thailand had received assurances that the returnees would be well treated and "that these Hmong will have a better life." [Source: Seth Mydans, New York Times, December 28 and 29, 2009]

- "Close to 5,000 troops and security officers entered the Hmong encampment in Phetchabun Province, about 200 miles north of Bangkok, at 5:30 a.m. and opened the operation by rounding up "potential troublemakers," said Sunai Pasuk, the Thailand representative of Human Rights Watch. The Hmong were processed at a military headquarters, then bused across the Mekong River into Laos. "This forced repatriation would place the refugees in serious danger of persecution at the hands of the Lao authorities, who to this day have not forgiven the Hmong for being dedicated allies of the United States during the Vietnam War," Joel R. Charny, acting president of Refugees International, an advocacy group in Washington, said in a statement. [Ibid]

- Col. Thana Charuwat told AP that no weapons were used and the Hmong offered no resistance "In advance of the eviction, the military removed residents' mobile telephones and halted medical services and food provided by aid groups, apparently "to physically and mentally break their resistance to their deportation," Mr. Sunai said. "Such coercive, intimidating and brutal measures are clearly the opposite of the concept of 'voluntary repatriation,'" he said. Refugee experts say the camp residents are a mix of refugees who fear persecution and economic migrants who have left Laos over the past few years. They have included dozens who display what appear to be battle scars, as well as some older refugees who fought on the American side during the war. [Ibid]

- "Mr. Panitan said Laos had said that the returnees would be treated well and that the United Nations could interview them within 30 days of arrival to determine if any were eligible for resettlement elsewhere. "There is no reason to believe that they will be harmed," he said. "We have been repatriating Laotian Hmong in the past few years," he said. "I think this is the 19th time, and they seem to be fine. Their living conditions seem to be better when they return."

Image Sources: Wikimedia Commons

Text Sources: *Encyclopedia of World Cultures: East and Southeast Asia*, edited by Paul Hockings (C.K. Hall & Company); New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Times of London, The Guardian, National Geographic, The New Yorker, Time, Newsweek, Reuters, AP, AFP, Wall Street Journal, The Atlantic Monthly, The Economist, Global Viewpoint (Christian Science Monitor), Foreign Policy, Wikipedia, BBC, CNN, NBC News, Fox News and various books and other publications.

[Page Top](#)

© 2008 Jeffrey Hays

Last updated November 2012

Questions or comments, e-mail [ajhays98@yahoo.com](mailto:ajhays98@yahoo.com) | [About This Project](#) | [Support and Donations](#)

# MINNPOST

*This content is made possible by the generous sponsorship support of The Minneapolis Foundation.*

## 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.

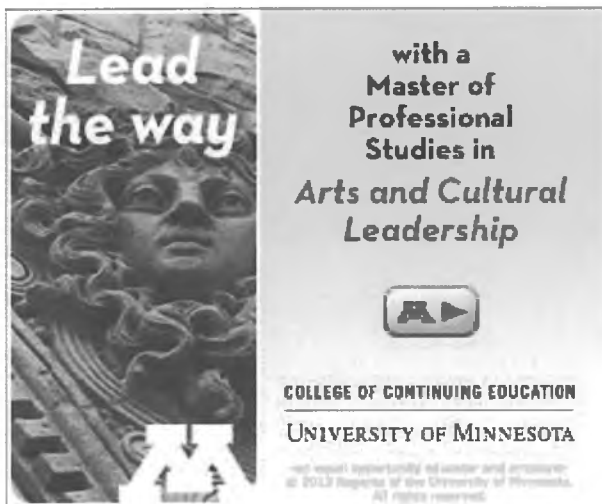
For most of us the Vietnam War has taken its place in U.S. history books.

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.

#### RELATED CONTENT:



COMMUNITY SKETCHBOOK

#### **Food Stamp Challenge: Try living on \$31.50 for food for a week**

BY CYNTHIA BOYD | 11/14/12

Twin Cities religious leaders organize a grocery shopping trip to highlight obstacles facing the poor.

#### Related Tags:

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



#### **Cynthia Boyd**

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](mailto: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 immediatly. 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 solidders, 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.

# Why Are the Hmong in America?

Essay by Jeff Lindsay, Appleton, Wisconsin  
(Published in *FutureHmong Magazine*, June 2002, pp. 14-15.)

Like their American counterparts, many Hmong people in the United States do not really understand why the Hmong are here. Most Hmong young people know that they are here because of fighting that occurred in Laos, but do they really understand the monumental sacrifice their people made to help the United States? And do non-Hmong Americans understand their debt of gratitude to the Hmong people? Given the misunderstandings I have seen on both sides, I think it would be helpful to review a little history.

In the late 1950s, southeast Asia, including Laos, was viewed as an important region to the West. With the fall of China to communism and the rise of Communist rebellion in Vietnam, the US sent elite soldiers, the Green Berets, to train Hmong guerrillas to oppose the Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao communists of Laos. Though the Hmong had no desire to play political roles for other nations, they loved freedom and know that there would be little freedom under Communism. They were threatened by the intrusion of North Vietnamese troops into Laos, so the U.S. then encouraged them to fight and provided training and weapons. With CIA assistance, General Vang Pao became the leader of a secret army of 9,000 Hmong men in 1961. Laos was officially neutral as the Vietnam War broke out, and the US had signed an international agreement, the Geneva Accords, intended to keep Laos neutral and prevent fighting there. In reality, this agreement gave the Communists the upper hand, for they flagrantly violated the agreement. Responding to the presence of active North Vietnamese troops in Laos, the US tried to oppose them without appearing to violate the Geneva Accords by secretly recruiting freedom-loving locals to fight the Communist -- and these freedom-loving locals were the Hmong.

Most Americans thought that Laos was not part of the Vietnam War, but Laos played a critical role, especially since supplies from North Vietnam to its warring troops primarily moved along the Ho Chi Minh trail that passed through Laos. Much fighting occurred along this trail and the surrounding regions in Laos. But our military efforts there were not publicized to avoid international criticism. So we pretended that nothing was happening in Laos, while North

Vietnamese troops were actively helping the Pathet Lao take over the country, and while thousands of poorly-equipped Hmong were fighting a war against terrible odds. Many Hmong lives would be lost in the unpublicized battles of Laos.

The Hmong apparently were told that they could bravely fight for the U.S. because the United States would always be there to protect them should local communists turn on the Hmong. It was a relationship of trust, but Hmong trust in the US would be sadly misplaced.

In 1963 the Kennedy Administration had the CIA increase the secret Hmong army in Laos to 20,000 soldiers. Significant battles occurred as the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao occupied major areas in northern Laos in 1964. Meanwhile, the US began a secret air war in Laos. By 1968, US pilots would be doing 300 dangerous sorties a day to battle many thousands of Communist troops. Hmong soldiers rescued many American pilots who were shot down. Sometimes dozens of Hmong would die in order to rescue one American pilot. Over 100 Hmong pilots were recruited and trained by the US, and they ran mission after mission until they were all killed. Hmong courage seemed to know no bounds in the fight for freedom. But sadly, much of the fighting seems to have been in vain.

Years after the war, when the infamous "Pentagon Papers" were published, shocked Americans and Hmong patriots would learn that much of the war was fought by the United States under secret rules that we agreed to that almost guaranteed the fall of South Vietnam to the Communists. Just as the Hmong were told to only fight defensively and not to take steps that could directly throw the North Vietnamese out of their country, so too were U.S. actions continually hampered by rules of engagement, apparently orchestrated by Robert S. McNamara, the US Secretary of Defense at the time. For example, US pilots were not allowed to attack Viet Cong anti-aircraft installations until they were fully functional. Though hotly debated, many are convinced that the war could have been won by cutting off supplies to the North Vietnamese and hitting them in the regions where they were most vulnerable -- something that was forbidden by our rules of engagement. Instead, American soldiers died unnecessarily in jungle skirmishes that gave an upper hand to those familiar with the territory.

The loss of 60,000 American lives for a no-win war in Vietnam was a tragedy to the huge nation of America, but it was a relatively small percentage of the nation compared to the loss the Hmong people suffered. In 1969, at the time when Congress first learned of our secret war in Laos, about 18,000 Hmong soldiers had already been killed in battle, and many women and children had died as well. The Hmong were taking a great risk in boldly fighting for the United States, trusting that we would stand by them. But in 1973, the U.S. began to pull out of Laos, leaving the Hmong on their own to fight thousands of North Vietnamese troops in Laos. By 1975, Laos had fallen completely into Communist hands, and the lives of all Hmong people who helped fight the Communists were in jeopardy. More than 100,000 Hmong fled to Thai refugee camps. Many would be killed along the way, especially when crossing the Mekong River to get to Thailand. An estimated 30,000 Hmong would be killed by Communist forces while trying to reach Thailand. Over 100,000 Hmong people died as a result of the war, and today nearly every Hmong family in the US has terrible tales of loss and tragedy relating to the war.

After taking over Laos in 1975, the Pathet Lao Communists stated that they would wipe out the Hmong. A Vietnamese broadcast apparently called for genocide against them. From 1976 to 1979, there were credible reports of chemical warfare used against Hmong villages. The world tried to ignore these reports, and some influential voices in the United States tried to discredit the evidence, claiming that the "yellow rain" that had been used to kill Hmong people was just natural bee feces, not a chemical toxin. By the time overwhelming evidence had been gathered to shatter the "bee feces" theory, the media no longer seemed interested in exploring charges of genocide by Communist forces.

The United States, recognizing the sacrifice made by Hmong soldiers to fight for the U.S., began accepting Hmong refugees into the United States in December of 1975. By 1990, about 100,000 refugees had entered the United States. Today approximately 250,000 Hmong are in the U.S., and a similar number still live in Laos. Over 5 million Hmong people are in Southern China, also under Communist rule.

Writing to an American who was confused about the Hmong people, Jack Austin Smith, a Vietnam Veteran and a retired career soldier, wrote the following in 1996 (quoted from his e-mail to me, with permission):

The war in Vietnam was fought on several fronts and I served in two them. The main American battle ground was in the Southern end of South Vietnam. In order for the North Vietnamese forces to fight us there, it was necessary for their supplies and troops to go through Laos and Cambodia on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and Laos was controlled by a Pro-Communist Government at that time. Therefore America was not allowed to have any forces on the ground, although we were allowed to bomb and attack North Vietnamese troops with our aerial forces. About 99% of the combat forces on the ground were Hmong irregulars who were persuaded by Americans to forget about being neutral, and to fight the N. Vietnamese regulars (not relatively poorly trained Viet Cong guerrilla forces). We supplied air cover, but every combat trooper knows aircraft can't take and hold ground. We depended on the Hmongs to do this. Without modern arms, without medical help.

After the fall of Saigon we pulled out of Southeast Asia and left the Hmongs to continue the fight without air support. When we left, the Hmong had to fight both the Laotians and the N. Vietnamese. They could not fight tanks, heavy artillery and aircraft with rifles. A great many Hmongs were slaughtered in their villages. Many were slaughtered at airfields where they waited for evacuation planes that never came. A few were able to fight every foot of the way across Laos and cross the Mekong River into refugee camps in Thailand where they were further mistreated by rather corrupt UN and Thai officials. Out of a estimated 3,000,000 prewar Hmong population less than 200,000 made it to safety. One other ill informed or stupid writer said "they were all gone" meaning, I guess, that the combat Hmongs were all dead, they are wrong. Most of the survivors are in Australia, France and here among us.

Now I don't know about those heroes who have never heard a shot fired in anger, but I am embarrassed that my country so mislead these people. The Hmongs gave up literally everything for us: their country, their homes, their peaceful way of life, most of their families, everything that we would cherish. We promised them our continued support and then we bugged out.

You mentioned having relatives who fought in Vietnam and I hope they all survived. However their chances would have been much less if the Hmongs hadn't intercepted over 50% of the N. Vietnamese troops and supplies. If you truly loved your relatives, you should be grateful for the Hmongs' sacrifices.

The Vietnam War and subsequent genocidal actions shattered so many lives and families. Every Hmong family in the United States was violated in some way, often with the tragic loss of loved ones. I have heard so many stories of sorrow and loss, the stories of desperate parents trying to hide their children from murderous soldiers, sometimes overdosing their children with opium to keep them from crying and revealing their hiding place. I have heard stories of trying to cross the Mekong River and having loved ones drown or be shot. For those who escaped torture and death in Laos, there would yet be tales of gruesome life in neglected refugee camps, tales of families split up by careless bureaucrats, and tales of shock and confusion as penniless refugees are dropped off in the strange world of America, where the citizens have no idea who the Hmong people were and sometimes viewed them as enemies. I can understand the sorrow of the old people, who sometimes stare out the window and seem immobilized by the tragedy of their loss, yearning for the once peaceful and happy days in the hills of northern Laos. But I cannot understand the ignorance of many Americans, who have not bothered to learn who these people are and why they deserved to be brought to the United States. They bled and died for us. They saved hundreds of American lives at great loss to them and their families.

We used the Hmong people and their freedom-loving courage, and suddenly abandoned them to genocidal tyrants, keeping their sacrifices largely secret from the American people. Ours is a debt of gratitude that remains incompletely expressed. And for today's Hmong-Americans, yours is a legacy of courage and valor that I hope will inspire you to stand for the highest of human values and bring further honor to your people and your ancestors.

# Lao Veterans of America (LaoVeterans.com)

"We cannot let Laos fall to the Communists even if we have to fight."

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, December 31, 1960.

"About 9,000 Hmong tribesmen have been equipped for guerrilla operations, which they are now conducting with considerable effectiveness in Communist-dominated territory in Laos... As men leave food-raising duties to serve as guerrillas, a problem is growing over the care and feeding of non-combat Hmong. The CIA has given some rice and clothing to relieve this problem."

Memo from Brig. General Edward Landsdale, July 1961. Published in the Pentagon Papers.

"The problem of Laos is the refusal of the communist forces to honor the Geneva Accords."

President Lyndon B. Johnson, January 18, 1965.

"A measure of the heroism and effectiveness of the Hmong struggle can be seen in the fact that the North Vietnamese forces arrayed against them increased over the years from the original 7,000 to 70,000, including several of North Vietnam's best divisions. The battle became increasingly conventional."

Ambassador William Colby, former CIA Director, Congressional Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Asia and The Pacific, April 26, 1994.

"We have been providing logistical support and some training for the neutralist government in order to avoid Laos falling under communist domination. As far as American manpower in Laos is concerned, no American manpower is there at the present time on a combat basis... Laos relates very much to Vietnam because the Ho Chi Minh Trail runs through Laos. It is necessary, under those circumstances, that the United States takes cognizance of that, and we do have air reconnaissance. We do have, perhaps, some other activities. I won't discuss those other activities at this time."

President Richard Nixon, (Press conference comments) September 26, 1960.

The most conservative estimated number that during the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, 35,000 to 40,000 young brave Hmong were killed in combat; 50,000 to 58,000 were wounded; and 2,500 to 3,000 were missing in action. When the United States withdrew from Southeast Asia, genocide followed the Hmong--thousands of

Hmong were murdered by the communists when they tried to flee to neighboring Thailand.

"Everyone of them that died (Hmong), that was an American back home that didn't die, or one that was injured that wasn't injured. Somebody in nearly every Hmong family was either fighting or died from fighting... They became refugees because we (United States Government)... encouraged them to fight for us. I promised them myself: "Have no fear, we will take care of you".

Edgar Buell, senior U.S.AID/CIA official working with the Hmong "Secret Army" During the war years, quoted on 60 minutes, March 4, 1979.

Some source said: There was about 100,000 North Vietnamese soldiers fought in Laos: 70,000 of this number including several of North Vietnam's best divisions fought directly against the Hmong soldiers, and about 30,000 were fighting with the U.S. SOF and Hmong soldiers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

About April 1975, the United States withdrew its troops from Indochina. During May 12-14, 1975, the CIA/Air America evacuated about 2,500 Hmong officers and their families from the secret base at Long Cheng in Laos (Headquarters of General Vang Pao--the combined base for the Hmong, CIA, Air America, and U.S. Air Force "Ravens"). They were evacuated to the U.S. former air base in Namphong, Khonekene, Thailand. The rest of the Secret Army (Special Guerrilla Units {SGU} and other special units) who were left behind began to walk to the Mekong River and attempted to cross into Thailand. The Communists killed thousands of these soldiers and their families. During the evacuation, and in subsequent years, thousands of Hmong and Lao veterans and their families were killed by communists North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao security forces. Thousand died of starvation as they fled toward the security and freedom on the other shore of the Mekong River. Thousands drowned in the river before reaching the Thai border. Even today, despite official denials at senior levels of the Pathet Lao government, the communist regime in Laos continues to persecute and discriminate against Hmong because of their role in the U.S. Secret Army.

The Vietnam War ended in 1975, genocide and persecution of the Hmong followed. This Stalinist regime arrested King, Queen, Crown Prince, members of the Royal Lao Family, and its high ranking officials in the Royal Lao government about 46,000 to put in the re-education camps, and also used chemical warfare "Yellow Rain" to eliminate members of the U.S. Secret Army and their families. From the period of 1975 to 1980, the Stalinist regime in Laos killed about 30,000 Hmong men, women, and children in the former 2nd Military Region of Laos where the major of the CIA operations took place, especially, around the foothills of Phou Bia Mountain. This is the Lao People's Democratic Republic's (LPDR) "ethnic cleansing" policy against the Hmong people. Today, LPDR government still continues systematically to persecute the Hmong people in that part of the world.

In addition to a devastating loss of life, the war resulted in a loss of our homeland, and we had to become countryless people and political refugees in a third country such as America, Argentina, Australia, Canada, China, France, Japan, and New Zealand.

Later in 1975, the Hmong and Lao soldiers and families began to take refuge in the United States. Their exodus continues to the present period. Many of those are still separated from their families and are finding reunification difficult. This, they have organized "Lao Veterans of America" as a Non-Profit organization. Its home office is in Fresno, California where it will be a central communication to all Lao veterans, which are scattered throughout the world.

The Lao Veterans of America, Inc. (LVA), like the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), represents veterans who served the United States honorably. It is among the largest veteran organizations of its kind in the United States and includes tens of thousands of Hmong and Lao veterans and their families who played a key role in the U.S. covert war in Laos during the Vietnam War. It is a non-profit corporation--with chapters organized throughout the United States in states such as Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. We also have members in Australia, Canada, and France. The LVA membership includes significant numbers of women who served in combat and combat support roles.

Members of Congress as well as current and former U.S. military and intelligence officials have honored the LVA and its work. Members of the LVA have been awarded the U.S. Vietnam Service, Vietnam Veterans National, Vietnam Campaign, and Purple Heart medals. The LVA has received bipartisan support on Capitol Hill for its efforts. It has been singled out with Congressional awards and citations as well as being honored in Congressional Records statements and in Congressional letters. The LVA also has received state and community recognition. California, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have recently passed a Joint Resolution and Proclamation in recognition of Hmong and Lao veterans and asked the Congress and President of the United States to grant those veterans and their families full U.S. citizenship. During recent years, former CIA Director William Colby and Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt have also cited the Hmong and Lao veterans--and their leadership--in Congressional Hearing testimony. LVA also have over twenty (20) U.S. veterans group writing letters of support to the Hmong Veterans Naturalization Act.

In recent years, with the declassification of secret information in U.S. intelligence and Defense Department files, military histories of the Hmong veteran's service have finally appeared in books. Examples of such books are: *Tragic Mountains, The Americans and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*, by Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt; *War in Laos 1954-1975*, by Kenneth Conboy; *The War in Laos 1960-75*, by Kenneth Conboy; *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*, by Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison; and *Across the Mekong*, by Charles O. Davis.

## WELCOME TO THE LOS VETERANS OF AMERICA INSTITUTE (LVAI)

The Lao Veterans of America, Inc. (LVA), like the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), represents veterans who served the United States honorably. It is the largest veteran organization of its kind in the United States and includes tens of thousands Hmong and Lao veterans and their families who played an historic role in the U.S. covert war in Laos during the Vietnam War era.

Members of Congress as well as current and former U.S. military and intelligence officials have honored the LVA and its work. Members of the LVA have been awarded the U.S. medal. Moreover, the LVA has received bipartisan support on Capitol Hill for its efforts. It has been singled out with Congressional awards citations as well as being honored in Congressional Record statements and in various important Congressional letters. The LVA has also received state-level and municipal recognitions across the United States.

## Laos

### “Secret Warriors”

In 1961, when the Vietnam War officially started, another war also waged. This war was known as the Secret War and took place in Laos. Like its name the Secret War was a total secret. The countries involved in the Secret War were the U.S., Thailand, Laos, and North Vietnam. The preludes to the Secret War were differing opinions by political parties on the governmental structure that would reign in Vietnam. This war caused havoc and grief to the people that occupied the territories that became the battlegrounds. In 1961 North Vietnam began advancing into South Vietnam, using military forces, with the intentions of establishing communist type government in Laos. The Pathet Lao, the communist Laos party, allied with North Vietnam while the Royal Laotian party, party in power in Laos, allied with Thailand and the U.S.

Thailand perceived the threat in having Laos, its neighbor, being overtaken by the a communist regime. They knew that if Laos lost, then the natural progression would be for them to be the next target for conquest. The United States of America (U.S.A.) was/is considered the champions of democracy and joined the alliance because they did not want communism to gain strength and spread. These three countries came together and took on the task of stopping the spread of communism into Laos. This war between communist Vietnam and the alliance was known as the Secret War.

Look for Cold War Policies and the Domino Theory

The Geneva Accords of 1954, was the first world country to send soldiers into third world countries thus the U.S.A. needed find a way to help the fight against communism. Thus, they recruited the Hmong and trained, paid, and provided military weapons to them; for the purpose of engagement in guerrilla warfare against the North Vietnamese.



(Image from book: War in Laos)

Here is a picture of one of the first U.S. training groups.



(Image from book: War in Laos)

Here is a picture of Hmong guerrillas getting briefing before.

Hmong soldiers rescued downed American pilots from enemy territories and defended American outposts in Laos. One such outpost was an airport by the name of Luang Prabang. Whole groups of Hmong soldiers risked and lost their lives to save one American pilot. They also attacked many North Vietnamese convoys that were using the Ho Chi Minh trail, which crosses Northern Laos from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. By attacking these supplies thousands of U.S. soldiers did not die in South Vietnam. The Hmong adult male population was decimated toward the end of the war and to make up the difference, children were recruited, trained in the same tactics and strategies of war and sent to combat. Thailand's also trained Hmongs, formed them into guerrilla groups, and provided air support for them when in combat. They valiantly fought for their cause throughout the entire Secret War.

When the U.S. withdrew its troops from South Vietnam in 1975, they also withdrew the training teams, military weapons, and financial support from Laos and the Hmong. This action weakened the Laotian government and Hmong guerrillas' army that depended on that support. The Pathet Lao communist party eventually took over Laos and the Hmong that were left behind were seen as a threat and persecuted. Deserted by their U.S. allies, the Hmong had to flee to Thailand for refuge. The Secret War ended in the same year as the Vietnam War—1975. The Hmong did not feel this finality, for to this day they still are persecuted.

### **"The Secret War"**



General Vang Pao led the CIA's "Secret War" in Laos.

In the early 1960s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Special Activities Division began to recruit, train and lead the indigenous Hmong people in Laos to fight against North Vietnamese Army intruders into Laos during the Vietnam War. It became a Special Guerrilla Unit led by General Vang Pao. About 60% of the Hmong men in Laos were assisted by the CIA to join fighting for the "Secret War" in Laos.<sup>[29][30]</sup> The CIA used the Special Guerrilla Unit as

the counter attack unit to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main military supply route from the north to the south. Hmong soldiers served against the NVA and the Pathet Lao, helping block the Hanoi's Ho Chi Minh trail inside Laos and rescuing downed American pilots. Between 1967 and 1971, a total of 3,772 Hmong soldiers were killed; another 5,426 were wounded.<sup>[31]</sup> Between 1962 and 1975, some 12,000 Hmong also died fighting against Communist Pathet Lao troops.<sup>[32]</sup>

General Vang Pao led the Region II (MR2) defense against NVA incursion from his headquarters in Long Cheng, also known as Lima Site 20 Alternate (LS 20A).<sup>[33]</sup> At the height of its activity, Long Cheng became the second largest city in Laos. Long Cheng was a micro-nation operational site with its own bank, airport, school system, officials, and many other facilities and services in addition to its military units. Before the end of the Secret War, Long Cheng would fall in and out of General Vang Pao's control.

The Secret War began about the time the United States became actively involved in the Vietnam War. Two years after the U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam, the Kingdom of Laos was overthrown by communist troops supported by the North Vietnamese Army. The Hmong people immediately became targets of retaliation and persecution. While some Hmong returned to their villages and attempted to resume life under the new regime, thousands more made the trek across the Mekong River into Thailand, often under attack. This marked the beginning of a mass exodus of Hmong from Laos. Those who reached Thailand were kept in squalid United Nations refugee camps until they could be resettled. Nearly 20 years later, in the 1990s, a major international debate ensued over whether Hmong refugees remaining in Thailand should be forcibly repatriated to Laos, where they were still subject to persecution, or should be allowed to emigrate to the United States and other Western nations.

(From "Memories of the Secret War")