

Timeline:

How the Hmong People Became Allies of the United States

Early 1960's to 1973

Laos, the homeland of the Hmong people, borders Vietnam on the west. When the Vietnam War began, Laos was a neutral country by decree of the Geneva Peace Conference which took place in 1954. The Royal Lao Army was trained and supported by the United States. The Pathet Lao were backed by the Soviet Union. As the Vietnam War escalated, the main American battleground was established in South Vietnam. Thus, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had to move arms and food along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This trail was directly through the Laotian Mountains that was home to some 300,000 Hmong. Because of the Geneva Accord, the United States could not deploy ground troops in Laos. The CIA secretly initiated "Operation Momentum".¹ The Hmong people did not wish to lose their independence so they agreed to fight under the leadership of Major General Vang Pao. Over 60% of the Hmong people became involved in what is now referred to as the "secret army".² Their mission was three fold: to cut off North Vietnamese supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail; to guide U.S. bombing missions; and to rescue downed U.S. pilots. The Hmong saved thousands of American lives. In addition, they saved hundreds of U.S. pilots whose planes were shot down, and sacrificed thousands of their own people. It is estimated that 60,000 American soldiers and over 35,000 Hmong died as a result of the Vietnam War.

From 1973 to 1995

By 1973, Americans became tired of the war. A series of terms were agreed on that would drive the Hmong people from their homeland. One of the terms was the withdrawal of all troops from Southeast Asia which included the "secret army". By May 1975, the last American troops were evacuated from Vietnam. This left the Hmong soldiers to not only fight the Vietnamese but the army of Laos' new communist government, called the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). Among the many Hmong who fled to Thailand countless died of starvation, many drowned while attempting to cross the Mekong River into Thailand, and still more were killed by the communist soldiers of Laos.³ Approximately 100,000 Hmong were able to escape to Thailand. The United States and other countries opened their doors to the Hmong refugees from 1975 to the early 1990's. After this resettlement took place, there were about 80,000 still trapped in the jungles of Laos and unable to escape. Approximately 65,000 died because the Lao

¹ Wisconsin Public Television aired a program called *Being Hmong Means Being Free* in 2000. It highlights the history, culture, and identity of the Hmong immigrants who have settled in the United States between 1975 and the early 1990's. This documentary looks at Hmong life in this country as seen through the eyes of the program host, seventeen year-old Lia Vang. She recalls the historical events that brought her family to the United States.

² In 1961, General Vang Pao became the leader of a secret army of 9,000 Hmong men. When the Vietnam War broke out Laos was a neutral country. The United States signed an international agreement called the Geneva Accord which kept Laos neutral. The presence of active North Vietnamese troops in Laos forced the U. S. to secretly recruit freedom-loving Hmong to fight the Communists. The United States told the Hmong people that they would protect them against the Communists. The Hmong people placed their trust in us. By 1963, the secret Hmong army in Laos numbered close to 20,000. It was not until 1969 that Congress first learned about this secret war in Laos. By then, approximately, 18,000 Hmong soldiers had been killed in battle. Many women and children also died as well. *United States of America Veterans Magazine April 2008*

³ Wang Chue Khang, who was a soldier from 1961 to 1973 in the secret army, tells his personal story in the April 2008 edition of the *United States of America Veterans Magazine*.

People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) military continuously used chemical weapons, air and ground attacks, and starvation tactics to exterminate those in hiding including women and children. After 33 years, remnants of less than 15,000 are still hiding in the jungles of Laos today, including mostly women and children of the second and third generations.

From 2004 to 2005

In 2004, the United States again opened its doors to resettle a new group of Hmong people. Approximately 15,000 Hmong came here to resettle.

From 2005 to 2008

“Since 2005, Hmong advocates estimate that 2,200 Hmong have gone missing in Laos. No United Nations’ monitors are allowed in Laos so their status is unknown. In the past two years, Thailand has repatriated about 400 Hmong. Only 53 can be accounted for leaving the other 350 unaccounted for. No one knows whether they are alive or dead. Approximately, another 1, 800 have come out of the jungles and surrendered in Laos. No one knows what has happened to them. If the Hmong people stay in the jungle, they are hunted and killed. If they come out of the jungle and surrender, they often go missing and are forgotten.” *The following statement was made by Roger Arnold who is a photojournalist who regularly contributes features to World Picture News. His stories have appeared in publications worldwide.*

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in January of 2008 called for the release of 150 Lao Hmong refugees being held in Thailand’s Nong Khai Immigration Detention Center since December 2006. The groups - half are children - have now spent over 400 nights in detention, yet they have not committed any crime. UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Erika Feller says there is no basis for the detention of the 150 people who have been recognized as in need of international protection. They should be allowed to resettle in a third country. So far, the Thai government has stalled on this initiative and put a hold on any third country resettlement. The UNHCR has described the conditions at the center as “deplorable” and “inhuman”. Any improvements done so far have not gone far enough and the overall conditions still fall well short of international standards. www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/478c967e2.html

An additional 8,000 Hmong remain in the Huay Nam Khao camp in the Phetchabun Province of Thailand today. The Thai government has classified them as “illegal immigrants”. The Thai government threatens to send them back to Laos where they risk being tortured, jailed and even killed if sent back.

“The burning of 850 to 1013 homes in the Hmong refugee camp at Huay Nam Khao has been reported. The disaster has left the majority of the refugees without shelter. The fires occurred on Friday, May 23, 2008 starting at about 11:45 AM. Thai officials report the burning of the shelters was by the Hmong themselves that have been protesting their threatened repatriation back to Laos. Some protestors claim the Thai authorities are responsible for the fires.” Excerpts taken from news release by the Fact Finding Commission (FFC) dated May, 24, 2008 titled *Homes Burn in Huay Nam Khao Refugee Camp*, Currently, the Thai military is now using tear gas and pepper spray to force hundreds of Lao Hmong political refugees onto 11 buses at Huay Nam Khao refugee camp in Thailand to force them back to the brutal communist regime in Laos that they fled," stated Vaugh Vang, Director of the Lao Human Rights Council. "The Hmong refugees do not want to return to Laos; the Thai military's use of tear gas, a pepper spray and army troop to force the Hmong onto buses is deplorable, and constitutes serious human rights violations.” PRNewswire-USNewswire via COMTEX



The following are stories that have been told and documented on a video tape and can be verified at www.factfinding.org

“Hope Lost -The Aftermath” produced by the Fact Finding Commission in May of 2003 www.factfinding.org

The video talked about how General Bounchan, military leader from the Saysomboune Special Zone in northern Laos, vowed to exterminate the freedom fighters (Hmong Vietnam veterans) and their families from that region by the end of October, 2002. He nearly succeeded. In October, resistance forces led by Moua Tou Ter, who along with other Hmong, were hiding at Pacie Cliff along the Nam Ngum River. “Over two hundred people were killed, many more were injured. The group was cut off from the food supplies and fresh water sources. They were separated from the other refugees and situated in the terrain of the cliffs that was inaccessible. The group was now more vulnerable to attacks by the Lao People Democratic Republic (LPDR) regime and the Vietnamese army forces. In December, Hmong patrols were sent back to the Pacie area, to determine the fate of those who were missing after a mass exodus from the encampment that had been their home for several months. A man named Lai A Kmer was a member of the unit sent back to Pacie. Upon discovery of a body, he began to weep over its remains. He thought that his mother was alive and living with one of the scattered groups. Adding to his grief was the discovery of the skull of his teenage sister.” The fields where the freedom fighters found cassava to eat was heavily guarded by communist troops who placed landmines near all of the food supplies. Youa Pa Va was killed by a landmine on November 2, 2003. Twelve years ago, Va, who had been living in a Lao village, fled to the mountains to escape arrest by the LPDR authorities. They suspected that he supported other Hmong people in the mountains ... In earlier videos, Va spoke of the death of his son on December 1, 1999 in a communist attack and about the death of his grandson from a chemical bomb. A few months before Va’s death, he posed with family members in a Fact Finding video which was later smuggled out of Laos. On December 29, 2003, Kong Meng Vue, while on patrol for food, set off a landmine that tore off his leg. With no medical assistance, Kong bled to death from his wound. Landmines continue to pose a threat to those who live in the mountains of Laos.

In January 2003, Time magazine reporter Andrew Perrin and photographer Phillip Blenkinsop traveled to the remote area where Moua Tou Ter and his people lived. Upon arrival, they were greeted by nearly 800 people begging for help and relief to rescue them from the constant assaults of the communist military forces. Gia Tou Yang cries out for help and now the entire group begins begging the two men to rescue them. As the reporter and photographer leave, the people thought that they had come to rescue them and are preparing to leave with them. But to go with Perrin and Blenkinsop would mean certain capture by the communist military forces. Their leader, Moua Tou Ter, tells them they must stay behind. The people are left with little or no food and a small ration of good water. The daily pursuit by the communist military forces leaves these people with a bleak and uncertain future. Without immediate intervention, all of these people seen in this video will soon perish. *These videos were narrated by Ed Szendrey who is a Vietnam veteran and a member of the Fact Finding Commission*

“May 19, 2004 Bloody Wednesday” (www.factfinding.org)

“Under the leadership of Yang Toua Thao, this group lived in the area of Saysomboune Special Zone. In the morning of Wednesday, May 19, 2004, three small groups left the encampment to search for food. The first group included twelve young people with the eldest being 19 year old, Neng Chue Thao, carrying the only weapon, a relic from the Vietnam War era. In the second group, which was following some one hundred meters behind, was the Fact Finding Commission’s bibliographer Pa Cher Yang. Yang reported that gunfire erupted that morning just ahead of this second group. His group took refuge in the dense foliage. Gunfire continued for several minutes. Yang was able to see a group of soldiers surrounding the first group. After the initial volley of gunshots, Yang heard a girl screaming and yelling no, no as the soldiers laughed and shouted girls, girls. Yang identified the soldiers by their Lao uniforms and use of the Lao language. After about ten minutes, other shots could be heard. After the last volleys of shots were heard, Yang estimates that an hour went by. Once the soldiers left the area, Yang and the seven others with him returned to the encampment. Upon returning to Thao’s group, Yang got his camcorder and documented the following: the video showing a helicopter flying over the area and the return of those who escaped the ambush. Four people were seriously injured. Neng Chue Thao was shot in his arms and his left foot. Lue Vang was shot in his leg. Nhia Me Vang was shot in her back and her right foot. Nhia Fazeng was shot in her knee. All were shot while fleeing the scene.

Families grieved as they heard about the ambush. They feared for their children who did not return with the others. Yang joined the search party that returned to the scene of the attack. What they found were mutilated bodies of the four girls and one boy. Chee Her, age 15, had been raped, shot, stabbed, and disemboweled. Cha Lee, age 16, the oldest of the group had been raped, shot, and stabbed. Her face was also disfigured from a severe beating. Cha Lee’s younger sister Mao Lee, age 14, had also been raped and stabbed. Pa Lor, age 14, had been shot several times in her upper body, foot and had been raped. Tou Lor, the only boy had been shot twice in the back, stabbed in his chest and abdomen and beaten. For nearly 30 years, the Hmong who live in the remote jungles of Laos have been reporting these atrocities which have been committed at the hands of the communist government. This however, is the first time an incident such as this has been captured on video tape.