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Refugee Contributions Shouldn't Be Kept a Secret: Hmong United States Relations

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Abstract

The Hmong people have endured and overcome great challenges throughout their history before resettling in the US and around the world. Hmong people have unique experiences as a stateless people and people of war and genocide. From 1961 to 1975, the United States (US) Central Intelligence Agency recruited Hmong men and boys to fight alongside the Americans and against the communists in Laos, during the Vietnam War. The participation of the Hmong in Laos is referred to as the Secret War, it was America's deadliest war. Included in this study are a review of the literature and a narrative inquiry study that highlights the lived experiences of 10 Hmong soldiers who served in the Secret War. This study attempts to educate the many Hmong Americans, and the American society as a whole, about the Hmong people's historical contributions in the United States military as soldiers in the Secret War. The sacrifices of the soldiers deem their recognition essential to honoring Hmong boys and men who fought fiercely alongside the US soldiers and those who lost their lives. This study exemplifies why these Hmong soldiers deserve a revered place in American history.

Keywords: CIA, Clan, Fiv Yeem (Hmong), Laos, Mekong, Paj Ntaub (Hmong)/Story Cloth (English), Refugee Camps, Secret War, Shaman/Shamanism, Vietnam War



Pa Nhia Xiong in the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand (1985)

“Following the Secret War, my parents escaped Laos to Thailand seeking asylum. I am the fourth of six children. I was born in a Thai refugee camp and lived there for six years before my family resettled in the U.S. in the mid 1980’s”. Pa N. Xiong (2020)

1. Introduction

The American Vietnam War occurred from 1954 to 1975 (Yang, 2003). During the Vietnam War, the United States (US) Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited and trained the Hmong people who lived in the jungles of Laos to fight alongside the US against the Communist regime in the Southeast Asian countries of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia (Vang & Flores, 1999). The involvement of Hmong people was one of the US's best kept secret, even kept from the American public (Vang, 2019). Due to US hidden foreign policy and limited archival records of participation of the Hmong in Laos during the Vietnam War, this conflict became known as the *Secret War*, and took place from 1961 to 1975 (Yang, 2003).

The Secret War ended in 1975 when the Communist Party of Laos took control of Laos (Yang, 2017). The Communist Party suspected that Hmong people were spies for the US; therefore, many Hmong people were captured, persecuted, tortured, and killed, because they were viewed as enemies of the regime who assisted the US (Vang & Flores, 1999). The Secret War was the deadliest in American history with more than 58,000 US military who died; it marked the Hmong genocide where between 30,000 to 40,000 Hmong boys and men died in combat and 50,000 Hmong civilians were killed or wounded (Minnesota Historical Society, 2019). More bombs were dropped during the Secret War than on all countries during World War II. Today in Laos, 80 million bombs still remain active with the potential of exploding (Budanovic, 2018).

During the Secret War children and civilians were deliberately recruited as soldiers by the CIA. The CIA promised the Hmong people that whether they won or lost the war, they would continue to protect and provide aid to all Hmong people (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). The agreement included US residency for the Hmong (Lor, 2007).

As early as 1959, the US had troops in Southeast Asia, and thousands of Hmong boys and men served as guerrilla soldiers for the CIA. They provided knowledge of the mountainous jungle terrain, fought alongside the US against the Pathet Lao Communists, rescued American pilots whose airplanes had been shot down, and saved American lives (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). The guerrilla units were trained to harass the communists and block shipments of supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, fly planes to deliver materials, and utilize advanced weapons (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). As a result of US war efforts, the Hmong people's crops were ruined and their livestock were killed, which was their only source of food. In compensation, the CIA paid Hmong soldiers and their families with money and food supplies. According to Faderman and Xiong (1998), rice, salt, medicine, blankets, canned foods and even live pigs were dropped from airplanes for the Hmong.

Lack of food and damage to villages resulted in Hmong families having no options but to assist the US and surrender their sons, as young as age 10, to participate in the Secret War. The Hmong families who refused to allow their sons to participate were excluded from receiving protection, food, and aid from the Hmong leader, General Vang Pao, and the CIA. Boys were recruited to fulfill different roles in the army such as airplane runway and cooks' helpers. The height of some boys was measured only as tall as a carbine, so they were referred to as "carbine soldiers" (Faderman & Xiong, 1998, p. 7).

When the US accepted defeat in the Vietnam War, they withdrew from Southeast Asia and abandoned the Hmong people (Vang & Flores, 1999). Faderman and Xiong (1998) indicated that by 1971, over one-third of the Hmong population died and one-half of all males over age of 15 were killed. The Hmong people escaped by foot at great risk and danger through the jungles of Laos to Thailand refugee camps (Faderman & Xiong, 1998).

The Hmong culture including language, religion, and spirituality sustained them despite their hardships and sickness during the journey. The Shamans played significant roles in maintaining Hmong faith and hope during the secret war and in refugee camps (Xiong, 2020). Hmong culture describes Shamans as individuals who are chosen by ancestral spirits to naturally and spiritually heal others who are sick (Tapp, 1989). Shamans perform spiritual rituals such as blessing ceremonies to uplift people's spirits. Shamanism is the traditional Hmong religion and is passed on from one generation to the next. In Hmong culture, the world is embedded with natural, ancestral, and supernatural spirits who protect household members from sickness and hardships (Tapp, 1989). Shamans are

the gifted ones who can venture into the spiritual world and return safely (Tapp, 1989). Furthermore, Hmong Shamans and clan leaders preserved religion, culture, and language.

Many Hmong soldiers were left traumatized and crippled emotionally, physically, and mentally. Their heroic stories were never told and not included in history books. The purpose of this study is to document sacrifices of Hmong soldiers in the Secret War and Hmong contributions in US history. This study highlights the brave actions of Hmong soldiers and their people, and has implications for understanding challenges refugees face in the US.

2. Review of The Literature

2.1 Hmong People

Vang and Flores (1999) recorded the Hmong are a group of people with a unique culture and language. They call themselves Hmong because it means “free people” (p. 9). Faderman and Xiong (1998) acknowledged that Hmong people do not have a country to call their own. Over the centuries, Hmong people were known to migrate from place to place due to slavery, ethnic persecution, wars, and genocide. The exact location where Hmong people originated remains a mystery.

Hmong legends indicated Hmong people can be traced back to China more than 5000 years ago. Hmong legends declared the Chinese Dynasty murdered the last Hmong King in the 18th century and threatened to destroy the entire Hmong population. This caused the Hmong people to flee to Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma (Faderman & Xiong, 1998).

When Hmong people arrived in Laos, they settled in mountains as high as 5000 feet, and dispersed into small villages where they continued their way of life as farmers and hunters (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). Laos was made up of approximately 60 different Southeast Asian groups and the residents spoke 80 different languages and dialects. What separated Hmong people from the rest of the many ethnic groups were their strong ties to each other through shared religion, culture, language, artistically created stitched clothing, and their history of persecution (Faderman & Xiong, 1998).

The Hmong people were communal and relied on each other for support and cultural attributes. Hmong people originally consisted of 12 clans or last names: Chang, Hang, Her, Kong, Lee, Lor, Moua, Thao, Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang (Hmong And Native American, 2012). Recently, Hmong And Native American (2012) reported that the number of clan names has increased to 21 and scholars claim that the increase is due to spelling variations from the original 12. The clan name or last name is deemed to be the identity card in Hmong society and serves as a linkage into a person’s family history, ancestors, principles, language dialect, status, and superstitions.

2.2 America’s Broken Promise

In the late 1950s, Hmong people’s peaceful way of life in the high mountains of Laos was changed forever. The US CIA recruited a Hmong man named Vang Pao, currently known as General Vang Pao, to become the Hmong leader and to recruit Hmong boys and men into the US Secret War against Communism in Laos (Faderman & Xiong, 1998).

In 1975, after the US was defeated and withdrew from the Secret War, General Vang Pao along with his family and other top leaders were airlifted to Thailand for safety and then resettled in the US. However, most of the Hmong soldiers and their families were abandoned by General Vang Pao and the US. The US’s attempts to assist the Hmong people as promised were soon jettisoned due to US planes being shot down and the sheer number of people that needed to be rescued. Hmong soldiers who surrendered or were captured by the Lao Communists were tortured and killed for fighting alongside the US Military, the females who were captured, were tortured, raped, and killed (Lor, 2007). Of the 40,000 Hmong people that waited in airfields to be transported, only 15,000 were able to board the planes to Thailand. The remaining Hmong people had to flee by foot through the jungles of Laos

in their attempt to reach the Mekong River, the main river that divided Laos and Thailand, and cross the Thailand border for refuge (Faderman & Xiong, 1998; Vang & Flores, 1999).

The journey was treacherous because the Mekong River was guarded by the Lao Communist's military throughout the day until midnight. Hmong people had to wait until after midnight to swim across to Thailand for refuge (Vang & Flores, 1999).

During the horrific journey, families were separated, and many lost their loved ones, especially young children and elders. Some Hmong parents gave opium to their young children to keep them quiet or sleepy throughout their escape, but unfortunately, some newborns and young children died due to opium overdose while elders and the infirm died due to starvation, illnesses, and drowning in the Mekong River.

2.3 US Attempts to Aid the Hmong

The Hmong who successfully crossed the Mekong River were greeted by Thai officials who escorted them to refugee camps prepared by the US (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). The refugee camps were similar to prisons, the Hmong were not free to leave, and the camps were enclosed by barb wire fences. The camps were overcrowded and unsanitary where diseases killed many children and family members, Faderman and Xiong (1998) indicated that large numbers of Hmong refugees were entering Thailand's refugee camps but not leaving to other countries fast enough as promised by the US. The situation resulted in frustrated Thai officials who began to resent the Hmong people which increased inhumane conditions. The Hmong people once again experienced injustice and harsh treatment including physical abuse, starvation, and torture in the refugee camps that were supposed to be a safe haven (Vang & Flores, 1999).

2.4 Hmong Refugee Resettlement in the US

In 1980, five years after the US abandoned the Hmong people in Laos, President Carter signed the Refugee Act of 1980. The resettlement of the Hmong in the US was not an easy transition. The Hmong encountered cultural and language barriers. Hmong people had a difficult time adapting to American mainstream culture and way of life. The Hmong people were mountain farmers and lived in refugee camps prior to arriving in their new host countries, and they were inexperienced with modern living that included electricity, plumbing, and driving. The Hmong were rural clan people and the majority of them had no formal education, making it difficult for them to find employment and survive in a modern way of life that was unknown to them (Wong, 2012).

2.5 Hmong Spirituality and Religion

Hmong people who practice Shamanism believe that when a person dies in his/her sleep, that the person's soul has left his/her body. As a result, a Shaman can perform a spiritual soul calling ritual that will guide the soul back to the person's body (Lor, 2007). Western culture and medicine do not recognize the spiritual aspects and beliefs of other cultures; therefore, they "focused on the disease and organ systems, not a person's spiritual reality" (p. 27). In Lor's (2007) study, a participant believed that he would have been dead if it was not for the Shaman who performed a spiritual soul calling ceremony for him. The continued practice of the Hmong religion in the US and other host countries is a testament to the importance of Hmong cultural attributes including culture, language, religion and spirituality.

3. Methods

The specific narrative approach that was used in this study is oral history, and is based on the qualitative method of conducting and coding individual participant interviews. Oral history allows participants to share their own "personal reflections of events and their causes and effects" (Creswell, 2013, p. 73). The approach was deemed to be the most effective method in capturing participants' lived experiences, culture, and history. Interviews were conducted primarily in Hmong at the participants homes with family members present to insure their comfort.

The study provided an opportunity for the former Hmong soldiers to share their lived experiences, regarding hardships, and attributes that provided sustainability and comfort during their challenging journeys. Hmong cultural, spirituality and faith practices were detailed during the interviews as they described their participation and recovery from the Secret War. In order to protect the participants' identities, their true names were not used in this study, different common Hmong male names have been assigned for each of the participants.

3.1 Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to chronicle the untold horrors of war and refugee experiences as told by Hmong soldiers. It also provides a context for understanding the true American history and the perseverance of Hmong families and their culture.

The purpose of the research study was to provide an historical perspective of US war efforts and the contributions of non-Americans in those efforts. The historical context of the study regarding the US/CIA "Secret War" was also an attempt to honor US refugees and to create a deeper understanding of the Hmong people's history and the sacrifices they have endured for all Americans.

It is important to recognize atrocities of the government and that US history includes negative actions and behaviors that have caused undue pain and suffering to many refugee families. With recognizing that many people made sacrifices to the ideals of freedom and democracy for the US, it is believed that the Hmong people need to be appreciated and included in the nation's history and educational curriculums

3.2 Participants

The 10 participants were Hmong soldiers during the Secret War in Laos between 1961 to 1975. The participants identified themselves as former members of the CIA's Special Guerilla Unit (SGU) in Laos. All participants were born and raised in Laos, when the US forces left Laos they fled to Thailand and then migrated to the US. The participants' ages ranged from mid-50's to early-80's: one was in his mid-50's; three were in their late-60's four were in their 70's, and two were in their early 80's.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Life Experiences of Hmong Soldiers During the Secret War

The older participants recalled their childhood life, living in the high mountains of Laos as peaceful times where they were able to help their family with farming, raising animals, caring for younger siblings, doing chores, and volunteering during cultural events. The younger participants did not remember having a normal childhood life because as early as they could remember, Laos was at war. They each recalled the nonstop sound of guns and bombs throughout their childhood years.

4.2 Child Soldiers of the Secret War

Nine of the participants became soldiers when they were between the ages of 10 and 18. One became a soldier at the age of 20. Meng was 10 years old when he became a soldier. He was the youngest among the study's 10 participants. Meng described as being awakened day and night by the sounds of weapons and bomb explosions. Meng stated, "As early as I can remember, this was the way of life." Meng recounted how he was enlisted as a child soldier. When he turned 10, General Vang Pao and his high-ranked soldiers came to his village and provided everyone with guns and food. He explained that this was a way to recruit Hmong men and boys. He described his experience from the beginning when he was too short, too young, and too weak to go into the war zones, so his role was to guard his village at night and report to the army station during the daytime. At the army station, he monitored, restocked, and physically transported weapons and ammunition to soldiers and villagers as instructed by his supervisor.

Yeng was recruited to become a soldier at the age of 12. He felt he did not have a choice, at that time, as Hmong males who were 10 years old or older were expected to join the military. Due to the shortage of Hmong soldiers, every family was required to give up at least one son to the military. Yeng was willing to become a soldier because his family was poor and they did not have adequate rice, meat, and clothing. By serving in the military, he knew that his family would not starve because the military would provide food to his family. Since Yeng was too young and not strong enough to carry big guns, he stayed at the military base to cook and clean for other soldiers.

Thai was 13 years old when he was recruited. Before that he enjoyed attending school and learning to read and write in the Lao language. He remembered coming home from school one day and seeing soldiers dressed in uniforms at his home. The elderly villagers informed Thai that he was being sent away for an opportunity to pursue an education to become a doctor so he could return home to help his village. Since Thai loved school, he did not hesitate; instead, he was excited for the opportunity to go to school to become a doctor. Thai soon found out that he had been lied to, as he was really needed to become a soldier, and he was extremely upset that the Hmong military leaders and elders lied to him.

Pheng was 14 years old when he became a soldier. Pheng recollected that General Vang Pao along with his army came to Pheng's village in multiple airplanes, large carts of weapons and food for the villagers. After distributing the weapons and food, General Vang Pao demanded Pheng's grandfather, who was the village leader at that time, to provide him with a list of names and ages of all the village members. Pheng's grandfather informed General Vang Pao that he and his village members were illiterate; therefore, it was impossible for him to provide a list to General Vang Pao. General Vang Pao ordered Pheng's grandfather to choose one person to go with General Vang Pao to Long Cheng, Laos immediately. General Vang Pao explained that the chosen person would have the opportunity to attend school and live on the military base. Of all the village members, Pheng's grandfather chose Pheng. Pheng did not dare to challenge or question his grandfather's decision so he followed General Vang Pao into the airplane without saying goodbye to his parents. General Vang Pao assured Pheng's grandfather that Pheng would return home once he learned to read and write in the Lao language; however, Pheng was only able to return home a few months later to gather a list of villagers' names and then he was ordered to return to the military base. When there was a shortage of boys and men on the battlefield, General Vang Pao demanded all of the boys and men from Pheng's village, ages 10 to 65, to carry weapons and become soldiers.

Koua joined the military when he was 15 years old. Even though Koua said he was not forced to join the military, he felt that he did not have any other options; it was an unspoken expectation for young men to join the war effort. No one wanted to disobey the orders of the Hmong military leaders because it was a choice between life and death or food and starvation. Koua and his older brother became soldiers because their family was poor and they knew that soldiers received a monthly salary. The family decided that if he and his older brother joined the military then their younger brothers could remain at home to care for their parents and sisters.

Kong became a soldier at age 16. Kong joined because he needed the Hmong soldiers to help save and protect his father and brother. Kong recalled the communist soldiers coming to his village and mistreating the Hmong people. As his family attempted to flee to a nearby village, his brother and father were captured and sent back to their village. Kong was able to escape to a nearby village where he found a military base camp. He negotiated with the Hmong military leaders so that he would serve as a soldier and put his life on the line as long as the military helped rescue and protect his father and brother. The military agreed and rescued his family. His father and brother were flown to another village where it was safer to live while Kong stayed behind as a soldier. Kong recalled his commander handing him his soldier uniform and advised him to remind himself that all soldiers are considered dead people until they outlast the war. Kong was scared but remained calm because he felt he must keep his promise to protect his father and brother.

Phia became a soldier when he was 16 years old. He was not forced to join; however, he had no other option. Phia described that he was desperate to attend school, but his family was too poor to pay for his education, so he felt hopeless. That was when he decided to join the army and earn a monthly salary. Phia was hoping to save enough money to pay for his education. However, his dream of attending school never came true.

Blong stated that he joined the army at age 17. General Vang Pao came to his village and demanded that the village leader gather all Hmong men and boys for the war effort. He and his relatives were forced to become soldiers. Blong indicated there were no other options because General Vang Pao demanded more soldiers, and the Hmong people could not refuse.

Xai stated that at age nine he started attending school in his village and he loved school. At age 16, Hmong military leaders arrived at his village to recruit him because the military needed someone who was literate in the Lao language; therefore, Hmong military leaders informed Xai's father that they had chosen him to join so he could attend an educational program to advance in both the Lao and French languages. His father could not refuse. For two years, the military kept their promise and Xai was enrolled in an educational program. When he turned 18 and was literate in both the Lao and French languages, he was instructed to discontinue his education and report to the battlefield.

Tou was the only participant who was not considered a child soldier. He was 20 years old when he was recruited. Tou stated that the CIA arrived at his village and provided the villagers with weapons and food. The Hmong military leaders informed the villagers that if the Hmong men did not become soldiers then the village would be overtaken by the communists. The Hmong people became frightened, and men and boys were forced to join.

4.3 Hmong Soldiers Secret War Roles

The Hmong soldiers performed a variety of duties and roles during the Secret War. All except two of the participants became frontline soldiers immediately after they joined. There were two participants who did not go straight into the battlefield because they were specifically chosen by Hmong military leaders to advance in their education. The Hmong men and boys who were uneducated or who were from poorer families did not have an option, and became frontline soldiers. The participants recalled that they had little or very limited training, which lasted approximately one to four months and consisted of how to use weapons, load the guns, activate grenades, and parachuting. A few of the participants stated that they did not receive proper training on how to use weapons; therefore, they self-taught themselves or were taught by fellow Hmong soldiers. It was understood that the primary role of all of the Hmong soldiers was to protect the American military. Hmong soldiers were instructed to rescue American pilots whose aircrafts had been shot down. When the American pilots ejected themselves from their planes, the Hmong soldiers were responsible for using a signaling device to detect the location of the American pilots and to bring them to safety before the communists located them. As portrayed by one participant, the lives of the Americans were more precious and more valued compared to all of the Hmong soldiers.

Koua was a soldier in a unit consisting of 1000 soldiers who traveled by foot from mountain to mountain to pursue communists in order to take over their land. During his first mission, more than half of the Hmong soldiers were either killed, wounded, or captured by the communists. Koua explained,

The communists came in the middle of the night to attack us. The communists shot and killed many Hmong soldiers. The communists captured 10 Hmong soldiers, in which two of them were very young boys around the age of 10. The communists tied the Hmong soldiers' hands behind their backs and dragged them off.

During Koua's second mission, many of his fellow soldiers died due to illnesses and foot infections because they did not have the proper boots during the heavy raining season. After surviving several missions, Koua's commander promoted him to a less dangerous role as a personal guard and assistant to Hmong military leaders and Americans who were stationed at the air force base in Laos. Koua eventually became a call operator and emergency dispatcher tracking airlines for the T-28 pilots, locating aircrafts that had been shot down, and identifying which communist locations should be bombed.

Xai reported that due to his educational background and knowledge of Lao and French languages, he had dual roles. During the day, he worked directly with the Americans at their headquarters and was in charge of completing enrollment packets for soldiers. Military leaders and soldiers relied heavily on Xai because he was responsible for

ensuring that all payroll information was accurate so everyone could be paid on time. In the evening, Xai supervised the guards and ensured that they were performing their shifts.

Thai described that at age 12, his first two years as a soldier were incredibly frightening because he feared death every second of every day in the battlefield. After two years of serving as a soldier, Thai convinced his commander to allow him to take the examination to become a Radio Telegram Operator. At 15 years old, Thai passed the examination and became the youngest Radio Telegram Operator for the CIA.

Pheng stated that he was literate in the Lao language which allowed him to avoid being a frontline soldier in the battlefield. Pheng worked directly with military leaders and CIA officials at the headquarters in Long Cheng. His job assignment was very dangerous; therefore, he did not feel safe revealing his specific duties. To this day, he is still traumatized and preferred to not discuss the details of his role.

Blong was a frontline soldier in the battlefield for 10 years before he was promoted to captain. As a captain, he supervised between 110-124 soldiers. He stated that his monthly salary increased when he received the promotion.

4.4 Dangers of Being a Hmong soldier

The participants each explained that due to the lack of training, proper uniforms and shoes, weapons, and protective gear, Hmong recruits suffered greatly when they became soldiers. The day after Phia became a soldier, he was ordered to go into the battlefield, although he had not received adequate training. During his first month, his unit was responsible for rescuing and carrying wounded soldiers back to the base camp for medical attention. One day when Phia and his partner were searching for a unit member, Phia stepped on a mine and it exploded causing injuries to both of his legs. He feared that he might die without anyone seeing him and his partner. Phia did not want to die alone in the woods or without his family knowing, so he limped and then crawled his way back to his base camp. His goal was to reach base camp so his unit members would witness his death and relay the message to his family. If he died, he wanted to die knowing that he fought until his last breath. Phia recalled,

Communist set up mines on the ground. I was walking in front of my partner. I stepped on the mine and it exploded, injuring both of us. My partner fell face forward and I tried waking him up but he did not...I did not know if he was dead or alive. I thought to myself that even though we were injured, we needed to keep moving to get to our team's location...I was not willing to die until I get to my team's location...if I would have died in front of my team, I knew they would have relayed the news to my parents and relatives. I was in so much pain and was airlifted. When my team located my partner's body, he was already dead.

Phia was airlifted to Long Cheng for medical treatment. He stayed in the hospital for approximately nine months before returning to his military base camp. Blong was also wounded on the battlefield by stepping on a mine. The explosion severely injured Blong's right foot, his right heel was blown off. Blong was fortunate that he was related to a high-ranked commander who immediately arranged for Blong to be airlifted to Long Cheng for medical treatment. Blong stated that if his relative was not high-ranked and he did not receive medical attention immediately, he would have lost his entire leg or bled to death.

Koua along with other soldiers witnessed their unit members who developed trench foot, foot infections and other diseases. Unfortunately, due to not having proper fitting or extra pairs of boots, some soldiers died. During the rainy season, soldiers' feet and legs were soaked in mud for days, weeks, or months depending on the length of their mission. Koua believed that many soldiers would have survived if they were provided with proper and extra boots.

Kong stated that he and his unit of 300 soldiers were ordered on a mission. After arriving in a village, General Vang Pao radioed the unit leader to abort the mission because communists had taken over that village. Kong and his unit were instructed to gather the village people and escape to the nearest village by foot. His unit led a large group of 2000 Hmong people on a 22-day journey running through the jungles. He remembered that his shoes and the shoes of the others were shredded into pieces due to the rainy and muddy conditions. Some of his unit members

and village people were left behind because they did not have proper shoes to keep running. Their feet were blistered, bleeding, and rotting, and the pain became unbearable for them to continue on the journey. Many were left behind presumably to die.

Xai explained that although he was not a frontline soldier, he was trained for a short period of time to become familiar with small and powerful weapons. He explained he was not provided with proper gear to protect his ears, eyes, and face. For this reason, Xai developed chronic hearing difficulties. Xai explained, "I am hard of hearing now because I used to shoot big guns. It is very difficult for me to hear. I am lucky to have come to America and escape death."

4.5 Family, Religion, and Culture

As the participants recalled the horrific memories as soldiers in the battlefield, they also recalled how much they missed their families. They described how they were crying on the inside while trying to stay strong and alert while at war. The negative thoughts and fears of death never seemed to vanish during their time as soldiers. In their darkest moments, their only hope was to stay alive so they could see their families again. The soldiers were authorized to return home to visit family members between one to four times per year depending if their group's mission was successful or not. Many of the participants shared how they were not present during the birth of their children nor were they able to raise them. The participants shared that their families were their main motivation to stay alive. Every day was a day of uncertainty because fear of death lingered nonstop in their minds. They also feared they were going to die alone in the jungle without anyone by their side.

Yeng who was 12 when he was recruited, explained it was tremendously difficult for him to be separated from his parents. He shared how he missed them all the time and was only allowed to visit his family twice a year. He was willing to put his life on the line to ensure that his family continued to receive food from the military, but he had to force himself to be strong and not cry.

As a soldier, Koua missed his family indescribably. Koua was authorized to return home to visit his family every three to four months after his missions were completed. Every time he visited his family, he wished he did not have to report back. However, he had no choice because he did not want his family to starve or be tortured due to his being noncompliant.

Xai recalled that he was authorized to visit his family only once during his first year while he attended school. There was a shortage of Hmong soldiers; therefore, he had to leave school to become a frontline soldier. For Xai, being a soldier was the most fearful, stressful, and hopeless time of his life. He felt he had traded his own life to protect others such as his family, the Hmong people, and the Americans. He recollected when he was a lonely soldier standing on top of the mountains in Laos and desperately missing his family, home, and village. He described that those were the moments when he missed his parents more than anything in the world. His parents were his motivation to stay alive so he could see their faces again. Xai emotionally described,

I missed my mother and father more than anything. The life of a soldier was filled with so much suffering. The fear of being killed or shot by communists lingers in my head. I had to force myself to believe that I have to survive in order to see my father and mother again. The thought of seeing my parents again helped ease my anxiety.

Every time Xai saw an airplane, he recalled,

We [Xai and his unit members] were stationed on the mountain top. Every time I saw an airplane fly by, I wished I had the power to magically place myself on that airplane. I wished for the airplane to take me to another country...a country that provided freedom and opportunities so I could escape the torturing, suffering, and possibly death. No matter how badly I wanted to escape, I couldn't.

4.6 Hmong Faith and Culture

Hmong families are close-knit, and their familial values, culture and religious practices play a major role in their everyday lives. All 10 participants shared that their family's religious belief during the Secret War was Shamanism. At that time, the participants depended heavily on their Shaman faith and spirituality to protect them throughout the war. The participants explained that their parents and their village people continued to perform and practice rituals as a way of providing healing, hope, and protection.

Seven of the 10 participants explained that their parents would perform a traditional cultural calling known as "fiv yeem" which means "a promise of offering to the spirits" and/or ancestors (Helmbach, 1980, p. 425). Every time those seven soldiers returned home, their families would "pauj yeem" meaning that they kept their promises and repaid the spirits by offering an animal or whatever they may have promised during the "fiv yeem" (p. 425). Three participants, who considered themselves orphans, did not have parents who performed "fiv yeem" for them. However, they revealed that when they were scared and hopeless, they would get on their knees and call out to their deceased parents, grandparents and ancestors and felt protected by them. All participants pinpointed that their greatest fear was dying. They truly believed that "fiv yeem" and calling spirits to protect them were powerful practices and contributed to their survival.

The participants pointed out that Hmong people continued to practice shamanism "ua neeb" and performed "fiv yeem" throughout the war and on their journey while escaping Laos. The soldiers believed that the spiritual rituals truly protected them and guided them back to their families. Traditional and spiritual healings were also used to cure wounded and depressed soldiers. In Blong's case, he was hospitalized for 14 months due to his heel being blown off. When his heel continued to be infected and the healing process took too long, he paid a shaman to perform a ritual to cure his foot. Soon after, Blong's foot healed and he was able to return home. Thai became depressed after the death of his daughter. He was unable to eat, became ill, and lost focus. His father-in-law knew that Thai did not have parents who would pay for a shaman; therefore, Thai's father-in-law took him back to his village and performed a spiritual ceremony to call Thai's soul to return and protect him. Soon after, Thai was in high spirits and returned to work at the base camp.

Xai truly believed that his faith helped him survive as a soldier. Xai's father was concerned about Xai's safety and performed "fiv yeem" to protect him. Xai indicated,

In the Hmong culture, it is believed that fiv yeem will protect me from the time I leave my home to the time I return home. My father performed fiv yeem for me to protect me.

Pheng also emphasized that when hope was lost, fiv yeem was the only thing that Hmong people leaned towards for protection:

During the war, everyone suffered, lost hope and had nothing to live for...we were not dead, so we had to continue living. So many people died...so much suffering. We did not know what else to do but to perform fiv yeem all the time.

4.7 Dangerous Migration from Laos to Thailand

When the US Military left Laos, and abandoned the Hmong people, the communists killed, tortured, raped and attempted to reeducate the Hmong people. The participants fled Laos and crossed the dangerous rivers to reach Thailand at various times following the US exit. They traveled by foot for days, weeks, months, and even years. The participants explained how they fled with wives, children and other family members. They explained that the Hmong people moved in large groups which made it challenging to remain quiet and hidden while fleeing the communists. An even greater challenge was their inability to swim or the lack of floatation devices that would allow them to cross the rivers. Participants recounted how they used bamboo to fashion rafts to help them cross the Mekong River. They shared how many families drowned before reaching Thailand. One of the participants described how he collected emptied bottled water containers and tied them around his chest, once he arrived in Thailand he sent help for his family. Another described his horrific journey with his wife and one-month old

daughter. He explained that he and his wife blew air into trash bags and tightly tied them together to use as floatation devices. With their daughter strapped to their back they tightly held onto the trash bags and their belongings for hours as they crossed the river into Thailand.

Others used all of their money, silver bars, and jewelry to pay Lao and Thai boat owners to help them cross the Mekong River. Others explained that when the war ended, they were fearful of the communists, so they fled their villages and hid in the jungle of Laos for three years before reaching the Mekong River. Unfortunately, many Hmong families died during their journey to freedom. One of the participants described how he witnessed families committing suicide together because they could not bear the thought of being separated, captured, or killed by the communists. One of the participants, Phia explained that he carried a grenade with him throughout his escape from Laos. Phia stated that his motive for carrying the grenade was not to kill the communists but to use it on a suicide mission for his entire family should they get trapped by the communists. Phia firmly believed that being dead was better than being captured, tortured, and killed by the communists.

4.8 Life in Refugee Camps

The refugee camps in Thailand marked another sad transition for the Hmong people. Multiple families shared and slept in one shack, clean water did not exist, and food was very limited. Kong explained he is still traumatized from the first day that he and his family arrived in the Ban Vinai Camp in Thailand. The camp was overcrowded, so Thai officials needed to use the Hmong people's graveyard to build more housing for incoming refugees. Kong remembered seeing Thai officials digging up graves and dead bodies were scattered everywhere. The image of dead bodies in Hmong clothing consisting of red and green sashes and hand-stitched costumes reminded him of the foul smell of rotten bodies filled the entire camp and how Hmong people were treated like trash.

4.9 Challenges of Starting a New Life

Nine of the participants expressed their loyalty to the CIA and United States because they considered themselves American allies. Many stated they decided to migrate to the US for the sake of their children and families. The participants arrived in different states of the US. Seven of the 10 participants landed in California while three participants arrived in Texas, Washington, and New York before moving to California. Migrating to a new country was extremely difficult for the Hmong people. All of them faced numerous challenges such as language barriers, food insecurity, lack of support and resources, culture shock, and transportation issues. For many of the Hmong refugees in the US, the culture shock was overwhelming. Language and cultural barriers with those who were assigned to assist them with relocating to the US prevented smooth transitions. Interestingly the participants all agreed that life in the US was better than war-torn Laos and the refugee camps in Thailand. One of the participants, Xai, shared he was fortunate that he brought a dictionary from Thailand that was in the Lao language and contained English translations. He used the dictionary as a communication tool between him and those assigned to assist him. He explained the dictionary was given to him when he was a soldier. Xai said the dictionary was a valuable keepsake to him, and he kept it with him throughout his journey.

5. Conclusion

5.1 "It Was Worth the Sacrifice"

Grim realities of the Secret War included utilizing children who were coerced and threatened to become soldiers. They were not properly trained and often placed in dangerous and deadly situations. Hmong people were abandoned and as a result suffered torture and death at the hands of the communists. They fled for miles from Laos to refugee camps where they encountered hunger, abuse and death. The US did not honor their promise to relocate and care for them in the United States after the Secret War ended. The resiliency of the Hmong people made them a prosperous and educated population in the American fabric. The Hmong historical contributions are an example of refugee contributions and hope for a positive future.

Participants did not have many fond memories as soldiers, yet they proudly, kindly, and honestly shared their stories. They sadly expressed their lives ended in the war; however, they felt it was worth their sacrifice, for the benefit of Hmong people and especially their children. The Hmong soldiers who participated in this study exemplified extreme bravery and selflessness, and indicated they had no ill will towards the US.

The Hmong soldiers hope that current and future generations of Hmong children appreciate the sacrifices that their elders made, and in turn, use their elders' sacrifices to motivate them to achieve the highest educational opportunities in the US. All participants were proud to share that they have children and/or grandchildren who have earned college degrees in the US and are leaders in their communities. Pheng stated,

Hmong people had to shed blood to pave the way for a better life, especially, the Hmong fathers and sons who died as soldiers. Although the blood that we shed was not enough to conquer the country of Laos, we have paved the way for Hmong people to start a new life in America.

Pheng's message to Hmong children is:

You must remember that you are Hmong. You have Hmong blood. Although you are living in America, you must remember to love, respect, and forgive one another. Hmong people desire to live freely...Hmong people like to form communities and help each other. When a Hmong family faces darkness or loses a loved one, Hmong people come together to show respect. Hmong people have a beautiful culture.

Although many of the Hmong people have suffered, it is humbling to know they are forgiving and hopeful for their children and families and for the opportunities they have in the US.

5.2 Maintaining Hmong Culture

Hmong culture was maintained and passed from generation to generation through storytelling, wedding ceremonies, funerals, and spiritual practices and rituals. Additionally, embroidered story cloths (paj ntaub) communicated historical and familial events passed down to family members over generations, much like the pictographs on walls or animal skins that have been accepted as preserved histories of ancient peoples throughout the world (Xiong, 2020). These traditions help the Hmong to maintain and value their culture and customs even after many acculturated to living outside of Laos.

6. Recommendations

Refugees are a source of diversity, and they contribute greatly to the ideals of democracy and freedom. However, it is also important that communities respect and assist refugee populations who cherish cultural factors such as the family structure, religion, religious rituals and attempts at maintaining group sustainability. Understanding and recognition of refugees such as the Hmong can lead to improved race relations and acceptance of all people regardless of their language, culture, religion or color of their skin. Understanding Hmong contributions can also foster respect for all citizens whether they were born in host countries or not.

This study sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of Hmong people's history and their sacrifices for all Americans. The findings of the study can be used to educate and inform professionals to better understand and serve the Hmong community by establishing supportive and culturally sensitive curriculums and practices regarding the Hmong.

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