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## The C.I.A. Man Returns

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**[Part 2 in a series: *The Strange New Life of an Old Secret War*]**

This is a series about a huge C.I.A. operation from long ago that's come to life again, in new forms - as a terrorism case in America, as a leftover insurgency abroad, and as a vexing personal challenge for the C.I.A. operation's retired founder. In the first part, an ambitious - but not very bright - federal undercover agent in Sacramento, California cooked up a spectacular plot to overthrow a foreign government, and then arrested immigrants he'd conned into the fringes of his plan.

Sleazy move! But it might not succeed! The immigrants - Hmong tribesmen from Laos, in Southeast Asia - came to the U.S. after fighting for the C.I.A. during the Vietnam war era. The C.I.A. operative who'd first recruited the Hmong, Bill Lair, looked into the Sacramento case and decided that the Justice Department's undercover man was out of his factually-impaired mind. **Oops!** The defense lawyer for the Hmong agreed with Lair, and recently filed a motion to dismiss the charges on grounds of "outrageous government conduct." And with that legal counterpunch, U.S.A. vs. Harrison Jack acquired an unenviable status as The Weirdest Terrorism Court Case in America.

As it happens, even before the Hmong arrests, Bill Lair and I had been traveling around the U.S., visiting Hmong-American communities. We did this because Lair - the architect of the second-largest paramilitary operation in C.I.A. history, and the man most responsible for Hmong coming to America - kept getting social invitations from the transplanted tribal people. I traveled with him, shooting video for a documentary and scribbling notes for a book, already having written a history of the Laos covert war (1961-1973) some years earlier.

It took a while for us to realize that the Hmong we were visiting in America were in a kind of quiet crisis - a tribal crisis that stretched from the U.S. to Laos and neighboring Thailand. It took even longer to understand the crisis' inner dynamics, because they were obscured by mythology, by rumors masquerading as facts, and by governmental misconduct of several kinds - the Sacramento terrorism court case being only the most visible example.

At every Hmong-American social gathering, Lair was asked if he could help the Hmong that still remained back in Southeast Asia. In Laos, where he and the Hmong had once worked together, a few Hmong were still fighting against their old enemies - the Laotian "reds," who took over Laos back in 1975. In neighboring Thailand, other Hmong were refugees - fleeing, we were told, from Lao government atrocities. It seemed bizarrely outdated, a conflict that should have ended long ago. Could Bill Lair do something about it, since he worked - used to work - for the almighty C.I.A.? Didn't he still have some connections, with the U.S. government, and with the Thais?

Lair and I got on a plane for Southeast Asia, to find out what was going on. An independent-minded octogenarian with an anti-bureaucratic streak, Lair told me bluntly that he was going to do things his way, and wasn't going to follow anybody's party line. We landed in Bangkok, Thailand, and decided to see Thailand's Hmong refugees as a first step in the investigation.

From Bangkok, we drove toward Lopburi, a medium-size city. South of Lopburi, we came to a Buddhist temple compound, called Wat Tam Krabok, a haven for Hmong hoping to resettle in the West. By then, most of this particular group had left for America, after what was supposed to be careful screening, so the temple grounds were nearly empty. But as we arrived, a few hundred were still standing around with their luggage. Then buses and vans pulled in behind us, to take the Hmong to the Bangkok airport, and then to America.

The retired spook sidled over to the tribespeople and began chatting with them. Decades before, he had mastered the knack of hunching his shoulders and appearing to be shy, to make himself seem smaller and less threatening when he was talking with shorter Asians. Lair also spoke Thai, which is almost identical to Lao, the national language of Laos, so he didn't need an interpreter. After a few minutes of what appeared to be small talk, Lair sidled back over to me, and grumbled, "They're fake. It's another U.S. government screwup."

I asked him what on earth he meant.

It turned out he was talking about this one group of a dozen or so people. "I talked with them!" said Lair. "They're Hmong tribespeople, all right, but they're not from Laos. These are Hmong from Thailand! They told me that themselves! They had no connection with the U.S. war in Laos whatsoever. They're just getting a free ride to America by passing themselves off as refugees. Looks like our brilliant U.S. government has mucked it up again!"

This wasn't what we had expected to find. But there are pockets of Hmong throughout the mountains of Southeast Asia. They live in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and southern China. And America's only obligation is to those Hmong from Laos who fought with Lair's C.I.A. operation long ago.

We spent the rest of the day in the temple compound. Beyond the walls rose peaks of limestone, or karst, as picturesque as any Asia. As twilight fell, Lair and I walked around the Buddhist sculpture pavilion on the site, an enormous sitting Buddha in the middle, surrounded by a circle of gigantic standing Buddhas. And we tried to make sense of discovery of the phony refugees.

Neither of us thought the *faux* refugees made the *real* refugees less deserving. Every large social phenomenon has an outer layer of hangers-on and pretenders around a central core. And Lair didn't blame the fake refugees much - everybody wants to come to America, as he put it, and the Hmong do better than many immigrant groups. Which was not to say he was pleased.

But the ease with which this small group of Thai Hmong had conned resettlement officials also suggested something more fundamentally alarming. To generalize, it was the curious inability of U.S. government employees to get an accurate read on people from other cultures, regardless of mythologies. The U.S. resettlement people who had blown the screening seem to have bought into in one mythology - the purity and noble suffering of refugees. The mythology and the reality didn't match. And the undercover agent in the California terrorism case bought into exactly the opposite mythology, the myth of Hmong terrorism. The reality and the mythology didn't match there, either, but that didn't stop anyone - Hmong or Americans - from making bogus claims. It was like that fine old saying of Oscar Wilde's: Even the truth can be proved.

At any rate, we learned that a majority of supposed Laotian Hmong refugees in Thailand were just ordinary peasants and farmers hoping for a better life. They formed the outer layer of the refugee phenomenon but we were more interested in the genuine core. We wanted to find out about the hardcore Hmong, those who deserved American help and who were actually suffering. Most of all, we want to find out about the so-called "jungle" Hmong, who'd kept on fighting in Laos for more than thirty years after Lair's C.I.A. operation folded up shop and went home. Some jungle Hmong were still in Laos, others had escaped to Thailand recently. We needed to have Lair talk with them, directly, without interpreters. So the old spook and I headed for the boundary between Laos and Thailand. To the Mekong, the river of busted dreams.

We looked at our trip this way: Once we'd talked with the jungle Hmong, maybe we could talk with U.S. embassy people in Bangkok, to try to figure out what was going on the State Department. And once we'd talked with State Department people, we'd talk with the Thais, the human rights guys, and the rest of the players. Could Bill Lair - who had *personally* started the C.I.A.'s covert war in Laos, all the way in 1961, who had *personally* recruited the Hmong - help bring the aftermath of this war to a close? We didn't know. The odds were certainly against it.

But it sure seemed worth a shot.

**Next week:** The C.I.A. man meets the "jungle" Hmong - the remnants of the original tribal force he raised. Related video: My overview of the California "terrorism" case, focusing on Vang Pao, the former Hmong military commander, whom Bill Lair recruited long ago, and on the U.S. Justice Department's mistakes.

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