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The covert wars of Vang Pao

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Vang Pao rode shotgun, his CIA man in the rear seat.

Their single-engine plane, buffeted by strong crosswinds, aimed at a short dirt airstrip scratched into the face of a rocky northern Laotian mountain.

To Vang Pao, the Hmong warrior, there was little to worry about -- divine spirits controlled his fate.

The plane landed near a village of about 300 people, defended by 60 men with old flintlock rifles, recalled Vinton Lawrence, the CIA operative.

Pathet Lao Communists let loose almost immediately with gunfire and mortar. "Instead of cowering, Vang Pao was up, directing these poor people who hadn't even been trained," Lawrence said of that day in the early 1960s. "His reaction was extraordinary. He assumed he was not going to get shot. He just exuded bravery."

It seemed he'd always lived this way.

As a teenager, Vang Pao had fought the Japanese in World War II, and in the 1950s he fought under the French in their disastrous war against the North Vietnamese.

In the late 1950s, when the CIA's Bill Lair was looking for someone to lead a covert war in Laos, Vang Pao's name kept coming up. Here was a soldier's soldier, Lair thought. The first one into battle and the last one out. In 1961, he asked Vang Pao the question: Would he fight the Communists for the United States?

The man from the hills didn't hesitate: Give him weapons and he would fight. Lair had his man.

Today, 30 years after the war, Vang Pao's reputation as a warrior has been cast aside and his legacy is in doubt. There are those who claim that the Hmong people he defended in Laos he later exploited in the United States.

Vang Pao had first attracted the CIA's attention because of his courage and the way he understood the

political structures of the tribal clans. He mixed pride, fear, patronage and inspirational talk to motivate villages to follow him. He married for politics as well as for love, taking wives from different clans to unify his forces.

He rose to the rank of general and became a revered and honored figure in the Hmong world and a person of influence in the United States, associating with civic leaders, military officials and members of Congress.

Because of Vang Pao, tens of thousands of Hmong were able to immigrate to the United States after the war. Today, more than 350,000 Hmong live in America, nearly 60,000 of them in Minnesota. This weekend, more than 20,000 Hmong from across the country are expected to attend the 25th annual Hmong soccer festival in St. Paul's Como Park. It's not known whether Vang Pao will attend.

In late 2003 and into 2004, a tumultuous political split occurred between the general and many of his former soldiers. The split was followed by violence -- a rowdy demonstration and unsolved shootings and fire-bombings in the St. Paul Hmong community, including the arson destruction of the home Vang Pao often stayed in.

Meanwhile, bitterness grows in the Hmong community over decades of aggressive fundraising by Neo Hom, the general's vast and secretive operation. Even one of Vang Pao's admirers in the CIA questions Neo Hom, saying it raises funds based on the dubious premise that Vang Pao will someday lead the Hmong back to Laos to overthrow the Communists.

Aging Hmong immigrants, many say, have given untold millions of dollars to that cause. But now their American-born children question what happened to the money their parents and grandparents gave.

Vang Pao declined to be interviewed for this series. His son Cha Vang denied that Hmong have been pressured to contribute to Neo Hom. He said that his father has made tremendous sacrifices to help his people. "It's hurt him, his blood, to have someone attack us," Cha Vang said. "He'd give himself up in the ultimate sacrifice."

Some of Vang Pao's operations have attracted the attention of state and federal investigators. The FBI is investigating possible bribery attempts surrounding a new Hmong funeral home in St. Paul -- once slated to be operated by the Vang Pao Foundation.

And more recently, the state attorney general's office has raised questions about the foundation's spending. A lawsuit alleges that it violated state charities laws and can't account for more than \$500,000.

With the scandals and questions, Neo Hom is drying up. And with it, Vang Pao's currency as a leader has been devalued.

"The general needs to preserve and protect his legacy," said Lee Pao Xiong, director of Concordia

University's Center for Hmong Studies in St. Paul. "When you open up a history book, you want to read about his heroics, not the scandals or the perceived scandals.

"But when things like this happen, you can't ignore it."

One tough guerrilla

To look at him now, there's no clue about his past ferocity. Well-manicured and sharply dressed in a suit and tie, Vang Pao -- now in his 70s and living in California -- was featured last year in a poster campaign by the Hennepin County Library encouraging Hmong children to read. Paunchy, balding and beaming in the photo, he held a Hmong version of "Cinderella."

The same man was depicted in a series of photos in 1965 taken by John Willheim, an American working in Laos. Those pictures showed him launching grenades, drawing up bombing plans and interrogating a crouching prisoner who was tied to a leash.

His power came from his personality as much as from his battlefield prowess.

"VP, when I first met him, I think he was probably the greatest guerrilla leader in the world," Lair said recently from his home in Texas. "He was very smart, and he knew how to talk. ... He could almost make these little guys levitate with the strength of his speech."

Years later, CIA Director William Colby told Congress that Vang Pao's fight in Laos kept 70,000 North Vietnamese from deploying in South Vietnam to kill Americans. The war killed 35,000 of Vang Pao's countrymen, cost the United States more than \$1 billion and reshaped the geopolitical landscape south of China.

To overtake South Vietnam and the Americans, vast numbers of North Vietnamese troops and supplies would have had to come through Laos. Vang Pao's guerrilla troops -- fighting on the ground while overhead the United States conducted one of its largest bombing campaigns ever -- ambushed and slaughtered them.

The general's loyalty to Washington paved the way for all Hmong immigration to America. It was payback for all of his years of carving into North Vietnamese Army divisions.

"He's the godfather who brought us all here," said Xang Vang, a St. Paul entrepreneur and confidant of the general.

There was no wonder that the Hmong were so devoted to Vang Pao.

'A big-hearted man'

On an unremarkable day in a long war, the roar from two U.S. fighter jets grew louder. As the pilots neared what they thought was their enemy target in the green hills of Laos, Vang Pao watched as his soldiers braced for the bombs. The attack targeted North Vietnamese infantry heading south. But the pilots miscalculated.

The bombs rained down very close to where Vang Pao stood. Thunderous explosions shook the landscape to his left and his right, driving him to the ground.

Then, to his troops, a miracle: Vang Pao rose from the smoke and debris, unscathed.

The escape from death had a profound effect on him, his adviser, Steve Young, said years later. Vang Pao believed he survived for a reason.

Young said that Vang Pao told him, "I must have been saved by the spirits, by some reason to do good for my people."

That sense of duty drove him to be even more courageous.

From the earliest days of the war, Ly Teng was one who witnessed Vang Pao's fearlessness.

Ly Teng, now 63 and a businessman in the Twin Cities, was once the chief of operations in Vang Pao's army. He is married to one of Vang Pao's sisters.

He can recount the time the general walked away from a plane crash, the time he survived getting shot in the chest and arm, and the times in the 1960s when Vang Pao fought off two attempted coups by Hmong factions.

While the names of individual battles and the exploits of men have blurred over time, what remains clear to Ly Teng is the code that the general pounded into his troops.

"His words were, 'If we die, we die together. Nobody will be left behind,' " Teng said. "He never commanded from headquarters. Every day he was with his soldiers. He knew the soldiers were paid very little, so he would always share what food he had with them. They saw he was a regular guy, a very fair man. We called him 'Siab Loj.' A big-hearted man."

Dark moods

It was, in the early years, the kind of war that made Vinton Lawrence feel as though he'd never been more alive. He watched C-130s on midnight runs dropping M-1 rifles and mortars in the middle of the jungle and made sure Vang Pao's men got them.

Vang Pao and his men taught him how to live off the land. Their meals were sometimes supplemented by food rations airdropped by the United States -- once, leftovers from the Bay of Pigs Cuban operation: beans and Spanish rice. During hit-and-run operations, Vang Pao's men showed him how to eat on the fly -- wrap some rice in a banana leaf and go.

Lawrence was 21 when, as a CIA operative working under Bill Lair, he was sent into Laos in February 1962 to work with Vang Pao from his base in Long Cheng. About 10 years younger than Vang Pao, Lawrence became like a son to the Hmong leader.

"I saw him under all kinds of situations and I was deeply impressed by his altruism, and to the extent he saw beyond the borders of Laos," Lawrence said recently. "He was a very, very impressive leader."

While Vang Pao exuded charisma, Lawrence saw what few were allowed to see. "I saw his dark moods when things were not going well," he said. "The dark moods came when he rubbed up against the corruption of the Lao government because he realized that no matter how hard he tried and how heroic he was, there were going to be Lao who would never accept him."

The commander's reputation carried to the leaders of the most elite forces in the world. Retired U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Harry (Heinie) Aderholt, who ran a covert operation in Laos during the war, saw how the outnumbered Hmong were willing to fight for Vang Pao.

"He was the only person capable of leading the Hmong forces," Aderholt recalled recently. "Without his devotion, his talent, the Hmong would have gone under years ago."

To this day, Aderholt considers Vang Pao to have been the top general in Southeast Asia at the time. "Better than any American general over there," he said.

Aderholt said that whenever one of Vang Pao's units was struggling to take a position, the general would intervene, inspiring his soldiers to the point where "they'd go up that mountain at any cost."

Lawrence said that Vang Pao had made peace with the prospect of dying. "When we talked about it, he said, 'Look, God has a ticket for me; if it's going to be my time it's going to be my time.' "

The CIA's Lair still marvels at the finesse of Vang Pao's hit-and-run army. In the mountain terrain, the North Vietnamese were no match for Vang Pao's irregulars as long as they stuck to their guerrilla tactics, he said.

"You'd almost swear they must have helicopters to move that fast," Lair said.

His growing influence

Vang Pao also had a dark side that has been chronicled in scholarly books. He was rumored to traffic in

opium, using planes provided by the CIA to export the drugs out of the country. One such book, "Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat," alleges that Vang Pao turned to narcotics in order to pay his troops after CIA funding stopped in 1974. Vang Pao has denied accusations of drug dealing in the past.

Lair said he has seen things that Vang Pao has done that could, by some, be considered barbaric. "When I first got up there, when they captured prisoners -- both sides did it -- they automatically killed all the prisoners," he said.

But to Lair, context is everything. Troops on both sides killed their prisoners because it was nearly impossible to confine them securely in the jungle, he said.

"I talked to him [Vang Pao] about it. I said, 'Look, when you capture these guys, we ought not to shoot 'em 'cause they know a lot of stuff; we can get information out of 'em which would be very useful to us,' " Lair said. "He wasn't shooting them because he was a barbarian. He didn't know what else to do with them."

In time, Lair said, Vang Pao tried to persuade prisoners to join his army and sometimes carried out a rescue mission to retrieve a prisoner's family from behind enemy lines, thereby ensuring the prisoner would remain loyal to him.

In recruiting Hmong soldiers, Vang Pao was known to spread money and goods in villages where loyalty was strong. If a village rejected his recruiting efforts, it might be left unprotected against enemy attack.

Aderholt said Vang Pao was only being true to his role as a guerrilla chieftain.

"Vang Pao's a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch," Aderholt said.

"Everybody was afraid of him. They had reason to."

Toward the end of the war, Lair said, Vang Pao had many admirers back in Washington. "Big leaders, generals and big people from the State Department, all kinds of people came and visited him and promised him all sorts of things," Lair said.

With the attention came meddling from the Americans. Vang Pao's strength was in his army's mobility. He was outnumbered and didn't have enough men to hold positions on every mountain. But he could sweep his territory of the North Vietnamese before they became entrenched.

As criticism of the Vietnam War increased, however, the Americans pressured Vang Pao to abandon his guerrilla attacks and engage the North Vietnamese in more traditional warfare. The new initiative to increase body counts came from higher-ups who hoped to deceive the public into thinking that the United States was winning the war because more North Vietnamese were dying, Lair said.

But this kind of combat decimated the Hmong ranks.

"When they stood and fought toe to toe with the Vietnamese infantry, they would lose, and lose a lot of people," Lair said.

Vang Pao found himself leading an army of kids -- young teens who were filling in behind men who had died in the war.

According to Lair and Ly Teng, Vang Pao's biggest miscalculation was off the battlefield. He believed that he would never lose U.S. backing. He didn't understand that Americans were growing sick of Vietnam and that the political winds were shifting.

"I talked to him in 1973 after I saw the news talking about a U.S. pullout," Ly Teng recalled. "I said, 'We need to be careful.'

"He told me, 'Don't worry about that; we've worked too hard for that to happen.' He trusted America very much. He thought America would never leave him behind."

The bloody end

Roused from his sleep, the veteran fighter pilot reached in the darkness for the phone ringing in his room in Vientiane, the Laotian capital. Jack Knotts was used to plans made on the run, especially in these waning days of a war being lost. Within minutes, he understood how badly events up north were unraveling.

An Air Force special operations officer told him that he and Heinie Aderholt had just finished drawing up the secret plans for "an extraction."

Get up to Long Cheng -- Vang Pao's headquarters hundreds of miles to the north -- by dawn, Knotts was ordered. It was May 14, 1975.

Knotts had flown fighter jets in World War II, served in South Vietnam and then worked in Laos, flying for Air America, the CIA's covert air transport company. Now he was working out of the Laotian capital as a helicopter pilot. He was confident he could navigate any mountaintop or ravine from the China border to the Mekong River bordering South Vietnam.

For the past few weeks, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops had steadily advanced on the Hmong's last military base. Tens of thousands of Hmong had fled their mountain villages.

A few U.S. transport planes would airlift out as many of the refugees as possible. Knotts anticipated a

scene similar to the one a month earlier when Saigon had fallen: families with crying children being dragged into overloaded planes straining to take off.

That kind of chaos, Knotts had been told, would serve as the cover needed to pull off the last U.S. mission in Laos -- the rescue of Gen. Vang Pao.

Vang Pao was to be "extracted," while most of his loyal soldiers -- teenagers and middle-aged men -- would be left behind. The commander who had always been the last off a battlefield was, under CIA orders, being pressured to break one of his most fervently upheld rules.

"VP could not be seen getting into an aircraft on the runway with thousands and thousands of Hmong people around. It had to be done secretly," Knotts said recently, now 81 and recounting the tale by phone from his home in Florida.

When Knotts, in his helicopter, and fellow pilot Dave Kouba, flying his small Porter airplane, arrived in Long Cheng at 6:30 a.m., they saw more than 20,000 people strung along the airstrip. C-46 transport planes were soon flying in to start the evacuation. "It was crazy that day," Knotts said. "You know how word gets around. You could tell from the crowd ... they thought they were gonna get their heads chopped off. It was like panic. Like Saigon on the last day."

Knotts and Kouba walked into a stone building. Soon after, Vang Pao entered and was briefed. Behind a residence known as the King's House, a ridgeline ran parallel to the runway. Behind it was a large fish pond with an earthen dam.

The plan called for Knotts to circle out of sight of the runway at a spot called Checkpoint Peter. When Vang Pao signaled, Knotts would fly over to the dam and pick him up.

Knotts would drop Vang Pao off at another location and then go back to pick up Jerry Daniels, Vang Pao's CIA confidant. Kouba would then fly both men to Thailand.

"VP, being reluctant to leave, was dragging his heels a little bit," Knotts said. "And I have to say Jerry was doing not much better. It was wrenching for him, too. He'd been there for years."

By now, it was past 10 a.m. Knotts took off. After feinting one way for several miles, he turned south and headed back for Checkpoint Peter. From about 2,000 feet he looked down and saw a flash. Vang Pao's signal glinted in the sun.

Knotts landed on the dam. "And VP was there with his son. He's got a camouflage outfit, uniform-like, a baseball cap with some 'scrambled eggs' on the top; the son had a big weapon. There was no conversation. We said hello to one another and that's about it. Oh, God, he was sad."

Knotts dropped off the general and his son at an abandoned airstrip, then headed back to pick up

Daniels, the last American left in Laos.

Daniels stood "with his back to me and the helicopter, and he looked up at the sky and came to rigid attention and he gave a salute," Knotts said. "There were tears. This is the end, the bloody end."

As Knotts and Daniels flew in, Knotts looked down and saw Vang Pao surrounded by a crowd of refugees who, like him, were on the run. "He was handing out what money he had," Knotts said. "He was passing out all the money he had in his hand to the people."

By day's end, Vang Pao was in Thailand, and within months he would be living in America. But he wasn't about to give up his warrior past.

About this series

Staff writers **Tony Kennedy** and **Paul McEnroe** spent seven months reporting on Hmong issues in the Twin Cities. They interviewed dozens of Hmong in Minnesota and California, including two of Vang Pao's sons, his brother-in-law and an ex-son-in-law. They reviewed documents from Minnesota, California and Montana, including police reports, court files, property records, attorney general documents and philanthropic records. They interviewed ex-CIA and military officers who worked with Vang Pao in Laos; Hmong who fought with him, and Hmong who said they belonged to Neo Hom.

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