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Special Report: Reality gets in the way of loyalty to general

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Every month for many years a man came knocking at Blia Yang Vang's door on St. Paul's East Side. And every month Blia Yang Vang handed the man at least \$50 in cash. No matter how tight things got around the house, Blia Vang doesn't think he ever missed a payment.

Blia Vang never knew exactly where the money went, other than that it was earmarked for Neo Hom, the vast Hmong network in the United States headed in part by Gen. Vang Pao. Beyond that, all he knew was that Vang Pao needed the money, and so he gave it, no questions asked.

His loyalty to the general still runs deep. "If they want it, you have to give it to them," he said last month, speaking through a translator.

The payments, he says he was told, guaranteed him the rank of general in Laos once Neo Hom overthrows the Communist government and the Hmong return to their homeland.

Even though he thinks he is to be a top commander, Blia Vang can neither read nor write. He is now in his 60s and physically frail. He didn't know how many men he would command or where he would be assigned. But the man who collected the money gave him two official-looking certificates written in Lao. Blia Vang says the collector told him the certificates guarantee that he'll be a general someday. His photograph is glued to the bottom of each one, near an official stamp and the signature of Gen. Vang Pao himself.

"They issued you the certificate, so you have to be proud," he said.

Over the years, he said, one of his sons confronted him about the payments. "He asked me, 'Why not spend the money to buy food?' and I say nothing," Blia Vang said. He added that the collectors have stopped coming around and he no longer makes payments.

As a warrior in exile, Vang Pao has spent decades in the United States as a political evangelist asking for cash from thousands of refugees like Blia Yang Vang. According to authorities who have investigated the Neo Hom network, Vang Pao has allegedly threatened refugees financially and threatened to prevent them from ever returning home -- refugees such as Blia Vang, who are growing old in the United States far from their homes in Laos.

Vang Pao wouldn't be interviewed for this series. But his son Cha Vang denied that Hmong are pressured to contribute to Neo Hom.

"Nobody gives unless they have some personal interest," Cha Vang said. "Nobody is coerced. My father's not going around demanding money."

Blia Vang and Vang Pao shared the same dream of getting back to Laos.

As refugees, Blia Vang and others looked to their leader to get them back home. But when Vang Pao was flown out of Long Cheng in May 1975, his command structure was in shambles. Trusted aides were spread out across the world -- in Thailand, France, Australia and the United States.

His private life had changed dramatically, too. He arrived in the U.S. on July 5, 1975, and ended up living on a ranch outside Missoula, Mont., near where his CIA contact Jerry Daniels grew up.

U.S. law forced Vang Pao to divorce all but one of his many wives. In his early years in Montana, he sought solace in the Bitterroot and Sapphire mountains, hunting elk and deer alone. Other times, he took his family on camping trips into the rugged terrain, sometimes riding out to a hunt on the back seat of a Yamaha motorcycle driven by a family member. It was everyone's time to regroup and tell the old stories to the children.

But Vang Pao remained focused on the fate of his homeland. His next step was figuring out how to get back there.

The rise of Neo Hom

By the end of the 1970s, Vang Pao was ready to reassert his influence on Hmong politics. He lost the 400-acre Montana ranch because he didn't know how to farm in such a harsh climate. He and his family resettled in California, which already had a large Hmong population. Montana court records show that in 1986 he was more than \$170,000 in debt.

Still, he held onto his dream that some day he would lead his people back to a free Laos and the lush mountains of their ancestors.

In the early 1980s, he and a group of allies formed a closely-guarded network that he hoped would fulfill that goal. Neo Hom's purpose was to aid insurgents who had remained in Laos to continue the fight and overthrow the Communists.

The group's organizers came up with a plan -- they would sell military and civil service ranks to refugees, former Neo Hom members said in interviews.

If a refugee such as Bliang Vang could make a down payment and keep current on lower monthly payments, he was promised that he could become a leader some day back home in a free Laos. It didn't matter if he had never held a command position before. All that mattered was coming up with the cash.

They worked out a system: City by city and district by district, Neo Hom representatives were assigned geographical areas from which to collect money by going house to house.

Over time, the organization raised millions of dollars, made in small individual cash payments, say authorities who have interviewed Neo Hom members.

Phil Smith, executive director of Lao Veterans of America, estimated that at one time Neo Hom was raising at least \$50,000 a month this way. And without a paper trail, he said, there was no way to prove how the money was spent.

Smith said he knew firsthand that some of the money early on helped get some Hmong out of remote provinces in Laos. The money was used for bribes to get people across the Mekong River and into Thai refugee camps.

But as the years went by and with large sums not accounted for, Smith asks: "Where are VP's base camps? Show me your weapons, your money."

"There is the sense that the money has been used privately. We know it's not getting to the field, civilians in the villages."

Still, until the last year, Hmong kept the faith.

Just as it is common to find a portrait of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in a black home, or a portrait of John F. Kennedy or the Pope in an Irish home, it became common for Vang Pao's followers to hang his photo on their living room wall. And next to the portrait, often, was a framed certificate, proof of the rank they had paid for and would hold when they all returned to Laos.

"A vast movement"

Many of the qualities that made Vang Pao so skillful in battle made him successful in Neo Hom. California agencies that investigated Neo Hom found that Vang Pao used strong-arm tactics, superb organization and personal charisma to get money from refugees.

The main Neo Hom fundraising organization was called the United Lao National Liberation Front. It was formed in 1981 to "resist foreign oppression on behalf of the Lao ... people who are pursuing the fight for peace ... and independence," according to its manifesto.

Ten years later, victory was still not in sight and more money was needed. In a 1991 document signed by Vang Pao on behalf of another group, the National Liberation Front of Laos, he urged followers to raise \$500,000 for work "in the front line ... to cover the plan we have promised."

According to the document, military ranks were priced according to levels of command. For instance, \$1,200 would buy the rank of general. A lieutenant general would cost \$1,000; a major general \$800; a colonel \$500, and at the bottom a captain would pay \$50.

Detractors, including Vang Pao's former son-in-law, Tou Long Lo, of Fresno, Calif., say the lack of financial accountability over the years has caught up with Vang Pao and his group.

"He did it only to make money," Lo said. "He knows it's impossible."

Lo said he was once involved in Neo Hom but dropped out. He became disgruntled in part, he said, after he saw how the organization pressured Hmong immigrant families to turn over money that should have been spent on their own families.

"Parents pay for rank out of welfare checks," he said. "Kids have nothing to eat."

Embezzlement

To help Hmong refugees navigate America's social service agencies, Vang Pao founded Lao Family and Community Inc., a California nonprofit. It eventually branched out to Minnesota, Wisconsin, and elsewhere.

Lao Family became a front for Neo Hom activities and its finances became entangled with Neo Hom's, investigators found. In California, Lao Family and Community was accused by the state attorney general's office of stealing money from refugees for Vang Pao's cause.

In 1990, the California authorities began investigating charges that refugees were shaken down for contributions to Neo Hom as a condition of receiving social services. Kao Thao -- Vang Pao's son-in-law and then-executive director of the California Lao Family -- was charged with misappropriating public monies, embezzlement and grand theft.

Kao Thao eventually pleaded guilty to embezzling more than \$70,000 from the agency. Thao, according to reports, had shared an office with Neo Hom members a few doors from the Lao Family headquarters in Garden Grove, Calif. Investigators from the attorney general's office found that one of Thao's file cabinets contained Lao Family case files and budgets in the same drawers as files marked with the Neo Hom logo.

Last fall, Cha Vang, one of the general's 28 children, defended Neo Hom and said that his family has not used contributions for their personal gain. "There's this perception that we're rich," Cha Vang said. But he said that's far from the truth.

Vang Pao received a modest monthly payment from the CIA after moving to the United States, said his translator, Xang Vang. The payments shrank each time one of Vang Pao's children turned 18. Xang Vang said he doesn't know if the general still draws a government check.

And as to whether Hmong immigrants were being misled that there was a chance of returning to a free Laos, Cha Vang said, "I don't know if it's false promises. Everybody wants to go home. Is it false promises to tell everybody we'll give them freedom in Iraq?"

Neo Hom informant

In 1997, a disillusioned Neo Hom insider went to the police. The man told Fresno police that Vang Pao and his associates raised money allegedly through fraud and intimidation.

No charges resulted, but a Fresno police detective told the Star Tribune that the source was extremely credible. In a confidential Fresno police report, the man told how "millions of dollars have been collected from the Hmong people nationwide." He told investigators that Vang Pao's loyalists threatened reluctant families by telling them they'd never be allowed to return to Laos if they didn't put up cash.

He also told authorities that "Neo Hom officials have told people that if anyone reports Neo Hom's activities to the Communists they will be killed."

The informant had fought under Vang Pao, then ended up in a Thai refugee camp before arriving in the U.S. in 1980. Once in Fresno, the report said, he resumed his relationship with Vang Pao by joining Neo Hom and working his way up to "team leader," responsible for monthly collections from 80 families. He said he collected between \$1,600 and \$4,000 a month.

If a family refused to pay, the man said he would bring in a higher-ranking Neo Hom official, and a "big talk" would take place.

"The talk was amiable and was not meant to frighten," the man told the detective. But he said that Vang Pao's reputation as a "cold-blooded murderer" during the war shadowed conversations.

"His exploits during the Vietnam War, where he was known to personally assassinate individuals, are well-documented," the report said. "Gen. Pao's reputation, especially when talking to family members who refused to donate money, was used to Neo Hom's advantage."

But since the late 1990s, the man said, there has been a backlash.

"The older Laotians ... are getting tired of his 'lies' as it's becoming increasingly clear that no one is returning to Laos," the report states. "The younger Laotians, most of whom were born here, consider themselves 'American' and don't support Neo Hom.

"Increasingly, General Pao is viewed more as a 'con man' who is using the monies given to him... for his own personal gain. He's often referred to in Laotian circles as a 'dealer in fraud.' "

The informant said he feared for his life. He was convinced that if Vang Pao knew he was talking to police "he would be eliminated."

Neo Hom defender

Ly Teng of St. Paul, a former colonel in Vang Pao's army who sits in the general's inner circle as a confidant and brother-in-law, said Neo Hom's original intent was to ensure that fighters left behind in Laos weren't forsaken. While he said he wasn't personally involved in sending the money to Laos, he defends Vang Pao's efforts.

"When we came here we saw freedom and democracy and our people were left behind," Teng said. "We needed to do something. It was 'United We Stand.' "

He realized that credibility issues exist when accounting for Neo Hom funds. But he believes the money ended up in Laos and not in the pockets of Neo Hom leaders such as Vang Pao.

"When you give the money, it depends on them [the insurgents in Laos] to decide" how to spend it, Teng said.

For example, the photos he's seen of insurgents show them carrying old rifles from the Vietnam war, an indication that the money was used for something else -- medical supplies, maybe, or food. Smuggling operations to buy those supplies may have sometimes been disrupted by ambushes, he said, and "lost before it gets to the target."

Xang Vang, Vang Pao's interpreter in St. Paul, said Hmong families need to understand that far more money was pledged than was actually raised. He said that large amounts -- he couldn't say how much -- have been spent on diplomatic efforts in Washington, the United Nations and in Europe to lobby for protecting Hmong human rights in Laos.

Former CIA operative Bill Lair said he was aware of the general's fundraising during Neo Hom's early years. Lair was the CIA field agent in Southeast Asia who recruited Vang Pao in 1961 as a covert military commander for the United States.

Lair, who had grown close to Vang Pao in Laos, had wondered why the general had not reached out to him after arriving in the United States. In retrospect, Lair said, he believes it was because Vang Pao was trying to raise money to go back to Laos and fight -- an initiative not supported in Washington.

"I knew it would never work," Lair said. "Hell, you know they ain't never going to go back there. It's stupid for anybody to believe that he could," especially without the support of the United States."

Lionel Rosenblatt, president emeritus of Washington, D.C.-based Refugees International, said the Hmong were left with Vang Pao as their leader almost by default. That's because U.S. government officials abandoned the group of valiant allies even before the secret war ended.

"What's fair to the Hmong has never really been at the top of policymakers' minds," said Rosenblatt, a former U.S. State Department official who dealt with Southeast Asia refugee issues. "You can't look at VP as good, bad or ugly... he was left to seek his own level."

Still dreaming

Dressed in shorts and a golf shirt, Bli Yang Vang sat in the basement, his memory fading and his body frail. He shook a bit.

He asked his wife to find the treasured certificates and she padded off to the bedroom, bringing them back. He looked at the documents and mumbled that he couldn't read what they said.

A translation of a certificate recognizes his pledge "to support the work fighting for the release of the Laotian country. This is your responsibility as a Lao citizen ... so we will be able to get back our independence, democracy, equality. ...Therefore, this award is to thank you for your pledge which you have kept for the

country..." Vang Pao is labeled as the head of the committee of the resistance group for the U.S. branch.

Nowhere on the certificate does it specifically promise Blia Vang the rank of general.

Yet he is still waiting to take command, just as when he was a warrant officer in Vang Pao's army. "Whenever the Communists came, we went out," he said.

Did he really believe Vang Pao could succeed at retaking the homeland? He didn't answer.

Still, the dream of returning hasn't left Blia Vang. "If the country is peaceful, sure, I'll go back today," he said.

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