

Brief History of the Hmong and the Secret War

The Hmong is one of forty-nine ethnic groups in Laos. Following the Cold War in 1960, the US feared that Laos might fall to communist rule. President Eisenhower named this theory the “domino theory.” *“You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is a certainty that it will go over very quickly.”*

Under the Neutrality Act of 1962 signed by fourteen nations, no foreign forces were allowed in Laos. To prevent the country from falling into the enemy’s hand, the US recruited the Hmong to fight on its behalf.

When John F. Kennedy was elected US president, he sent about three hundred CIA case officers to Laos to organize a covert military operation against the spread of communism. CIA operative Bill Lair was sent to meet with Hmong leader, Vang Pao, then a colonel in the Royal Lao Army, to discuss joint efforts supporting US policies in Laos. By 1962, about nine thousand Hmong men had joined this CIA-backed military, known as the Secret War.

The US assigned three primary roles to Vang Pao and the Hmong soldiers. They were i) to rescue downed American pilots in Northeastern Laos, ii) to protect a top-secret airbase at Lima Site 85, or at Phou Pha Thi, built by the CIA to guide bomber missions into Vietnam, and iii) to deflect North Vietnamese Armies (NVA) into Laos to reduce the heavy fighting along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and South Vietnam. By the early 1960s, more than nineteen thousand Hmong soldiers had joined the war. They were called the CIA’s Special Guerrilla Units (SGU).

As the Secret War waged on, Hmong casualties rose. By 1968, about eighteen thousand soldiers had been killed. In 1969, an estimated thirty-five thousand Hmong soldiers were fighting against 2 NVA divisions. This was also the year President Nixon increased US bombing in Vietnam and Laos, and Congress was informed of the Secret War.

In 1973, a peace treaty was signed in Paris for the US and its allies for mandatory withdrawal of all military operations from Laos. As the US began pulling out, the Hmong became increasingly worried about their safety. The Hmong soldiers, along with the remaining CIA case officers kept fighting. Meanwhile, the war had displaced more than one hundred and twenty thousand Hmong from their villages.

When the Secret War ended in 1975, the Hmong soldier casualties ranged between thirty to forty thousand, and about three thousand soldiers were missing in action. On May 14, 1975, General Vang Pao and about twenty-five hundreds of his high-ranking military officers and their families were airlifted to Nam Phong, Thailand.

As the Communist Pathet Lao took control of the country and started arresting and killing the Hmong who aided the Americans, thousands of Hmong fled to the safety of Thailand.

A few families were able to reach Vientiane, the capital city, and hired merchants to ferry them across the Mekong River while many walked on foot for weeks in the jungle to reach the river. Many died on the way. Some of those casualties were children whose parents gave them opium to keep them quiet. Thousands of Hmong couldn't flee the country, so went into hiding in the remote jungles and joined the Cha Fa, a resistance movement.

From 1975 to the early 1990s, more than one-hundred thousand Hmong refugees had immigrated to the US. Today, the US is home to more than three-hundred thousand Hmong, with the largest populations in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Sources:

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