THE DARK NIGHT OF THE HMONG

Nghia Kao Yang, age 32, slipped quietly into the muddy waters of the Mekong River. It was March 11, 1978, the night was dark at 3:00 a.m. and Yang could wait no longer. His family had not eaten for ten days and would soon be too weak to move. He listened for the sound of patrols but heard nothing. At a sign his young wife slid forward two crude floats made of bamboo saplings. No one in the family could swim, so Yang tied them all together. Then he put his four children on the floats and pushed off into the deep water toward Thailand and safety. Some forty-five minutes later they staggered up on the Thai shore. For Nghia Kao Yang, former paid soldier for the United States Government, the Indochina war was finally over. He still carried his American M-16 rifle. Now he would surrender it for the first and only time and join the ranks of the Meo refugees in Thailand.

Yang was only sixteen in 1962 when he first started fighting in the U.S.-sponsored Meo army of Major-General Vang Pao. For thirteen years he and his fellow tribesmen denied much of northern Laos to the North Vietnamese army, tying down in the process at least two NVA divisions which could otherwise have been thrown against the Americans in South Vietnam. At the war's ostensible end in April 1975, Yang, now a captain and deputy company commander, was with a thousand-man Meo contingent at the key road junction of Sala Phou Khoun, still blocking the North Vietnamese thrust toward the Laotian capital, Vientiane. And it was categorical orders from Vientiane, not the enemy, which finally forced the undefeated Meos to stand aside. Due to no fault of theirs, the communist victory in

Laos was complete, and the "Lao Peoples Democratic Republic" came into being.

The mountain tribesmen of Laos, who were known to the outside world as the Meo, call themselves the Hmong--the "free people." Originally from central China, they had migrated southward into Yunnan and Tonkin, finally reaching northern Laos in the last century. A sturdy, handsome race, the women striking in richly embroidered black dresses and silver ornaments, they lived in cool wooden houses as mountain farmers. They raised cattle, pigs and horses, grew corn and upland rice for food--and opium for cash. They became prosperous, proud and independent. By the time of World War II a tribal dispute had split the Hmong into two antagonistic factions. The larger, numbering perhaps 350,000, was led by Touby Lyfong and allied itself with the French. The smaller group of less than 100,000 under Faydang sided with the Japanese and later the Viet Minh. When the Americans came on the scene in the late 1950's and early 1960's, it was from Lyfong's willing recruits--by now fiercely anti-Vietnamese and anti-communist--that the so-called "CIA secret army" was eventually formed. At its zenith that force numbered about 40,000, made up of 10,000 elite Special Guerilla Units (SGUs) and about 30,000 village defense militia--all supported and paid by the U.S. Government through the CIA.

The Hmong were probably not aware, at the outset, that they were to be trapped between two contending political forces--North Vietnamese expansionism backed by China and the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and an American policy of containment, on the other. The Hmong were quite simply delighted to receive help from a powerful friend in their struggle

against the traditional Vietnamese enemy.

Still less were the Hmong concerned as to which particular agency of the United States Government gave them the guns with which to fight. In 1962 they could not foresee that the United States would one day reconsider its policy, nor that they would find themselves branded by the victorious communist forces as "tools of the CIA." The Hmong have never considered themselves to be the tools of anyone. They regarded the Americans as trusted allies, not masters. But the Hmong's CIA connection has given the new rulers of Laos the perfect propaganda pretext for the policy of near-genocide which they have waged against the Hmong since the war officially ended in 1975.

For thirteen long years the Hmong people bore the main burden of the war in northern Laos, paying a terrible price for our decision--and theirs--to block Hanoi's push into that key strategic area. Vang Pao estimates that his people suffered 30,000 casualties from a population base of 350,000, the equivalent of 20 million in U.S. terms. Thomas J. Barnes, who today heads the Refugee Section of the American Embassy in Bangkok, remembers visiting Hmong villages where all the males from ten to fifty-five were either away in the army or already dead. He saw children standing guard, carrying rifles taller than themselves. The Hmong were brave and resilient fighters. On several occasions, particularly in 1971 and again in 1972, they staged epic defenses of their never-conquered stronghold at Bouam Long, north of the Plain of Jars, throwing back one, and later two, divisions of North Vietnamese regulars--but always at a fearful cost.

Tragically, the formal end of the war in 1975 did not halt the continuing decimation of the Hmong people. Communist mopping up operations, which are still going on, are estimated by Vang Pao to have cost his people an additional 14,000 casualties from among the 90,000 Hmong who still resist subjugation. The question is often asked why the Hmong do not simply surrender, given the hopelessness of their situation. Hmong refugees now in Thailand consistently reply that surrender is not a real option for those Hmong who were associated with the Vang Pao forces and with the Americans. They insist that such people, branded as "tools of the CIA" or "lackeys of American imperialism," are often shot out of hand, women and children included. In any case, confirmed information is available as to what happens to those surrenderning Hmong who are not shot: they are taken away to "seminar"--the curious term used in Laos to describe the "re-education" process--and then are sent to labor battalions from which, since 1975, only a few escapees have ever returned. In this situation the Hmong resisters feel that surrender amounts to a death sentence one way or the other, so only two real choices remain--to go on fighting with an ever dwindling supply of arms and ammunition, or escape to Thailand.

The most recent communist push--the one that made a new refugee out of Nghia Kao Yang, began on February 10, 1978 in the region of Phu Bia, Laos' highest mountain which rises 9246 feet above the western edge of the Plain of Jars, about one hundred miles north of Vientiane. This time the Vietnamese army, which has remained in the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic despite the officially independent status of that country, bulldozed roads to bring in Soviet PT-76 tanks into action. Overhead, Vietnamese MIG-21s and Laotian T-28s hit the Hmong villages with bombs, napalm

and tear gas while artillery, both U.S. 105s and Soviet 130s, pounded Hmong positions manned by about 3000 lightly armed tribesmen who were trying to protect 55,000 unarmed villagers. Authorities in Thailand are unsure whether this attack--which in June was still going on--was just a standard dry-season punitive operation against the Hmong, or whether it truly represents a Vietnamese "final solution" for the unconquered tribesmen, as the refugees themselves seem to believe. New measures such as the poisoning of waterholes, systematic burning of villages, foodstocks and crops, and the dropping of a poison gas which most observers assume must be tear gas but which does appear to have caused some deaths among refugees reaching Thai hospitals, all lend some credence to the latter view. Survivors of the fighting say that the Hmong suffered more than 5000 casualties in the Phu Bia fighting up to the end of May, and that 3000 more have tried to flee to Thailand. Some 2200 checked into Thai refugee camps between March 1 and May 1, and Thai police officials think that about 1000 more have died during the long trek from Phu Bia to the Mekong River. Additional thousands who have retreated further into the mountains around Phu Bia face starvation.

Nghia Kao Yang fought for five days--until February 15--before deciding that the battle was hopeless. Then he and his family joined a group of forty-six in a break for the Mekong, where they arrived after eleven days of forced marches. For fifteen more days the party waited for a chance to cross, evading the three companies of LPDR troops which patrol a 20-mile stretch of the Mekong opposite Thailand's Phon Phisai District. Their orders, according to defectors now in Thailand, are to capture any escaping Hmong who surrender, and kill any who resist or enter the water. (In this

connection, it is known that during the period of March 20-22 LPDR patrols did catch several hundred Hmong. They were first taken to nearby Paksane and thence to Vientiane where, on April 6, they were seen passing through town in four large trucks, on their way to "seminar" and to the labor battalions. They told onlookers they were from Vang Pao's army and they looked "thin and sad.") Yang's group itself had one brief clash with a patrol during which two women and three children were killed, as well as three LPDR troopers.

The actual crossing of the Mekong is the most dangerous time of all for people escaping from Laos, as official Thai records show. Thai police of Bung Kan District counted twenty-six Hmong bodies floating past their post on March 26 alone. On May 3 a refugee attempted to cross with thirteen members of his family. Only four made it. Again, reports show nine Hmong out of eleven lost in one group, six out of twenty in another. Drowning is at least as great a danger as gunfire for the exhausted and starving escapees, since few Hmong know how to swim. Those who do reach sanctuary in Thailand have been described as "walking cadavers."

People in Southeast Asia--Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians--have obviously been voting with their feet by the tens of thousands ever since the communist takeovers of their homelands in 1975, and Thailand happens to be the only place most of them can go. As a result there were, by May 1978, more than 100,000 refugees in the fifteen official Thai camps supported by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, even after some 59,000 others had already departed to third countries for resettlement. The attitude of the Royal Thai Government to this unsolicited visitation has

gone through three distinct phases. At first, in 1975, the Thais offered unrestricted entry, assuming that the refugees would be promptly absorbed by other countries and that the flow of new arrivals would diminish. To their alarm, however, both assumptions proved to be wrong. Thus the January 1976 camp population of 60,000 climbed to 89,000 by August of 1977 despite the resettlement of more than 20,000 in third countries, and 71,000 of the incoming total had come from Laos alone. Thailand accordingly announced a new exclusionary policy on November 15, 1977 under which refugees would be turned back. The results were often horrendous. Thai police, seeing refugees attempting to cross the Mekong, would fire rifles in the air to alert the Laotian patrols, who would then proceed to shoot the escapees in the water. By February 1978 more than 300 crossers had been delivered back to the Laotians, the most notorious case occurring in that month at Tha Uthen District when a mother and her two daughters, sent back to Laos in broad daylight, were promptly shot down on the bank by Laotian guards in full view of everyone. United Nations and U.S. officials protested to the Thai authorities, and it appears that the Thais themselves were as shocked as anyone else. (Recently, in May, LPDR troops shot a woman whose body floated up on a sandbank in the Mekong in full view of the diners at Nong Khai waterfront restaurant. Outraged Thai citizens went out in boats to conduct a formal cremation.) The exclusionary policy has accordingly been modified. New arrivals are now confined in district and province detention centers under harsh but not abusive conditions for one to three months, after which, if it is determined that they have relatives in the UNHCR-supported Nong Khai camp or are bona fide political refugees, they are permitted to join the earlier arrivals in the camp.

Americans should know what life is like for their former allies in these camps. Nong Khai is the largest and most active, and it is here that almost all of the recent escapees end up. As of May 30, 1978 it had a population of 17,078 Lao, 618 Tai Dam and 7378 Hmong. About 80% of the latter consist of families in which at least one member fought in Vang Pao's U.S.-sponsored army. There is a guard at the gate, and the whole area is enclosed by a low wire fence, but this is not a prison. Refugees can often get permission to go downtown, some children attend Thai schools, and there is a steady stream of visitors. Most of the Hmong live in long wooden barracks in which a raised sleeping platform runs continuously from one end to the other. There are usually no partitions dividing the "rooms," although blankets are sometimes hung to provide a little privacy and to separate one family's space from another's. Between the barracks there is typically a narrow alley about five feet wide where meals are cooked over little charcoal fires, clothes mended and babies nursed. Food, mosquito nets and other necessities are provided by the UNHCR, using funds contributed by eighteen countries of the free world. The U.S. donation averages about 65% of the total. In 1977, for example, the U.S. share was $9.9 million out of a total of $16.4 million covering all fifteen UNHCR camps in Thailand. Australia, Norway, Denmark and the United Kingdom have been other major contributors. Interestingly, Sweden gives nothing.

The food ration calculated at fifty cents per person per day is apparently enough to maintain basic health, and there is a small hospital run by International Rescue Committee doctors Domenica Garcia and Levi Roque, both from the Phillipines. They are assisted by two Laotian refugee doctors who are recent arrivals. One of them is Dr. Soudaly Chomchanh who

used to work for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Vientiane. After the communist takeover he was sent to "seminar" and then ended up as a manual laborer at the Nam Ngum dam project until his escape in February, 1978. Malaria and intestinal disorders are the usual health problems at the hospital, but Dr. Roque also reports some deaths from convulsions that he feels are consistent with a diagnosis of poison gas as claimed by the refugees.

The Thai officials who control Nong Khai and the other refugee centers take a generally benign approach and leave most of the internal management to the refugees themselves. There have been isolated cases of abuse of refugees, and reports of kickbacks in awarding of food and construction contracts, but most Thai officials have a sympathetic attitude toward the people in their charge. Many voluntary agencies also try to help the refugees, including IRC, Catholic Relief Service, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Norwegian Refugee Council, Finnish Free Foreign Mission and others. Nevertheless, a visit to the Hmong camp at Nong Khai is a sobering and troubling experience. It is not that the refugees are mistreated, nor is it even the overcrowding, the stifling heat and the minimal living conditions. It is rather because these proud and independent people are condemned to live in a state of suspended animation. It is because of the waste of life and talent. They cannot return to the mountains of Laos. The Thai Government will not let them settle in Thailand--of which more later--and third countries such as the United States accept only a few of them after long delays, and most of them not at all. So everywhere one sees bright, hopeful young families of farmers who are not allowed to farm, fighters who have no means to fight, workers with no chance to work. Active men and women, including

many wounded in battles fought at U.S. instance and for U.S. causes, are being left to stew in enforced idleness. This is what accounts for the sadness, frustration and even desperation that one senses beneath the calm and stoic surface at Nong Khai.

In Building 19 sits Dua Xiong, age 34. He has lived there for two and one-half years already. Back in 1961 he was chosen by "Mr. Tony" for training as a radio operator at the Hua Hin base in Thailand, then flown back to Laos and enrolled in a Special Guerrilla Unit paid and advised by Americans. He fought the North Vietnamese in many battles, including the seige at Bouam Long where an incoming mortar round slashed open his back and killed the two men next to him. By the end of the war he was a major and company commander in Vang Pao's army. He returned to his village near Long Tieng, hoping to live in peace. Unfortunately, he says, his people were regarded by the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao as "lackeys of the U.S. imperialists," subject to being shot at random. Xiong recalls that in his village sixteen people were shot or grenaded, often while going out to tend the livestock or while sleeping at night, in just the last month before he left there in December 1975. He successfully brought out his parents, wife, brother and four children, but his uncle and four others were shot while trying to cross the Mekong. Now Xiong thinks his long wait is almost over. He says he has been accepted for immigration to the U.S. and will depart as soon as a sponsor can be found. He wants to join his parents and his brother in Providence, Rhode Island.

A four-hour drive to the west of Nong Khai is a much more liveable camp, Ban Vinai near Loei. This was built to handle the first wave of 1975

refugees from Laos, and its population today is about 12,000, almost all Hmong. Whereas Nong Khai is flat and low lying, the Loei camp looks more like a large Hmong village, being situated in wooded hill country not unlike their homeland. Deputy District Officer Weechien is in charge and is one of the most highly regarded Thai camp commanders. He runs Ban Vinai in a relaxed and friendly way and allows Hmong to take jobs outside the camp to a distance of three kilometers. He thinks the UNHCR should allow a more generous food ration, but Hmong leader ex-Lt. Col. Vang Yee does not complain on this score. There are papayas and tall corn growing in the vegetable gardens, and children swim in the small lake within the camp. Despite these amenities, however, the underlying problem remains: these refugees have been waiting three long years for something to happen which would permit them to get on with their lives. And still they wait, and wait.

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There are a number of potential options for the future of these former allies of the United States. One, purely theoretical at this time, would be to return to Laos. Indeed, the first question many new arrivals ask is whether some free world country will not help them with arms and equipment so that they can go home and continue the fight. They do not readily accept the answer they get--namely that no free world country has the slightest intention of lifting a finger for them in this regard.

The second theoretical option for the Hmong is to settle in Thailand. The Thais have said that they will some day give permanent status to a number of refugees from Laos and Cambodia, but only when other countries have first done their share, and only after the flow of new arrivals has largely dried

up. The Thais foresee difficulties such as a general shortage of arable land and resentment of local Thai citizens if preferential treatment is given to foreigners. Again, the Thai Government already has a problem with dissident hill tribes who resent the discrimination and exploitation traditionally practiced against them by the lowland Thais, and fears that the refugees might eventually join these dissidents. On the other hand, some Thai officials take a very different view, seeing in the fiercely anti-communist Hmong a partial solution for the insecurity that now prevails in many parts of Thailand. Bangkok newspapers report daily on ambushes and assassinations conducted by communist territorists in rural areas. One obvious antidote would be to move a few thousand armed Hmong into some of the worst zones, with permission to settle there in return for elimination of the terrorists. The Hmong are among the best guerrilla fighters in the world, and the terrorists would probably not long remain active. In 1977 Governor Chamnan Potchana of Nong Khai Province submitted a specific proposal to Bangkok to set aside a 2300-acre tract on which he would settle 6000 Hmong and 800 Lao refugees. Bangkok has dragged its feet in replying. Essentially the Thai Government is afraid to take any action which might relieve the pressure on third countries, or encourage them to walk away and leave the whole refugee burden in Thailand's unwilling lap. This explains why the Thais did not respond warmly when Vice President Mondale, on May 3, and the UNHCR more recently, offered financial help to Thailand looking toward resettlement of refugees. What the Thais want is firm commitments from third countries to take specific numbers of refugees, and only then will they move ahead on any resettlement plans of their own.

The Hmong, for their part, are divided on the issue of settling in Thailand. Perhaps fifty percent would favor that solution, partly because they would then be close to their homeland and in a position to go back if conditions changed. An increasing number, however, are nervous about staying in Thailand. They note the increasing tempo of communist terrorist attacks, the number of Thai village headsmen who have resigned their posts because Bangkok cannot protect them, and other indications that Thailand may someday go the way of Laos. Vang Yee says his people definitely do not want to settle in any country that could remotely go communist. Indeed, some Hmong actually turned down a chance to go to France because of predictions, before the last French elections, that the socialist-communist coalition might win and take over power. Once a refugee is enough, they say.

The third and most hopeful option at this time is resettlement in third countries, particularly the United States, France, Australia and Canada.

France has admitted more than 37,000 Indochina refugees since 1975, including 3000 Hmong, and will continue to take about 150 Hmong per month for as long as rural resettlement opportunities in France can be identified. Many experts view the French program as the most effective, least cumbersome and most flexible of any. To give only one example, polygamy is by no means unknown among the Hmong, and some have had to turn down emigration to the United States because it would have meant abandoning all but one wife. Hmong sometimes don't understand why having several wives should be a bar to living in the United States, when it obviously was not a bar to fighting for the United States. In any case, the French solve the problem by listing only one official wife, and showing the others simply as mothers

of their respective children, who all happen to have the same father. Honor is satisfied in this way. France has sponsored one particularly imaginative experiment in which 500 Hmong have been resettled along a jungle river in French Guiana. More will follow if the scheme proves successful.

Bolivia is considering a similar idea. At the original initiative of a California-based voluntary agency, Food for the Hungry, an initial 100 Hmong families may be resettled during 1978 in an area 200 kilometers north of La Paz. Each family would get immediate title to more than 100 acres of land, and Bolivian citizenship after one year. A possible weakness in this proposal is that it has yet to be examined on the ground by UNHCR or U.S. officials, despite the probability that they may be called on to assume future costs.

Despite these efforts of other nations, the United States is still the country to which most Hmong want to go. The reasons are, first, that many of them already have relatives here. Secondly, the Hmong had experience of Americans during the war and still retain a trust and liking for us. They still mention Mr. Tony, Digger, Kayak, Bamboo, Black Lion and the rest. Third, the Hmong are hardworking and want to get ahead, and they have heard from their relatives that America is the place to do it. Finally, they do not see us as ever going communist! Unfortunately for the Hmong, however, America does not yet have an immigration policy which will allow most of them ever to see our shores--even including many of those who fought for us at our urging and on our payroll.

Here is the simple arithmetic of this human problem: America has taken about 7000 Hmong from the original Vang Pao contingent which escaped

in 1975, but there remain about 40,000 Hmong still in Thailand. Of this number, about 18,000 consist of families in which the breadwinner fought for or worked for the U.S. Government. These people are obviously given preference, but no one, however qualified, can come to the United States unless immigration spaces are available. In 1977 the Attorney General authorized 8000 spaces for inland refugees from the Thai camps, and 4877 of this number were accorded specifically to our former Hmong allies. Then, in May 1978, Vice President Mondale announced a new program for 25,000 spaces, of which half will go for the Vietnamese "boat people" and the rest for inland refugees. The Hmong are expected to receive about 5500 spaces from this number. Thus even when all Hmong eligible under all current U.S. programs have departed for the United States--and this will in itself take about nine months under existing processing procedures--there will still be some 7500 of our former allies and their families left behind without any assurance of ever being allowed to come here. And this does not take into account those still fighting for their lives in Laos who may be able to escape in the months to come.

No one has yet told Vang Gao, who entered Thailand on March 27, 1978, that he has no present hope of ever going to America. He was an SGU captain, saw action in four major battles and was wounded twice. He worked very closely with Americans. Sia Pao Yang was employed by the Public Health Division of the U.S. Agency for International Development from 1963 to 1975. His job was to visit remote villages as a medical technician prescribing treatment or administering medicine as needed. He is not going to America either, even though he has a sister in Wisconsin.

The Hmong who have already come to the United States are generally considered by the voluntary agencies who work with refugees as having at

least as good a resettlement record as any other group from Indochina. They have modest initial expectations and work hard to improve themselves. They have established a reputation for honesty, dependability and self-reliance, and Americans who now work with refugee programs in Thailand hold them in special esteem. In any case, we armed and encouraged these people to fight a war in which they suffered enormous losses, and then we reconsidered our position and abandoned the policy for which we had urged them to fight, leaving most of them behind to suffer the consequences. We clearly owe them something better than hopeless stagnation in a Thai refugee camp. One logical, practical and honorable solution would be for the U.S. Congress simply to enact that any Hmong refugee who worked for the United States or fought under its programs on our payroll will be entitled to entry to the United States, if not accepted first by another country or otherwise excludable under U.S. immigration law. Such legislation, obviously, would not address itself to the entire Indochina refugee question. It would not take into account the plight of Cambodians who, although they did not work for us or with us, would nonetheless deserve our attention on humanitarian grounds alone. Nor would it deal with other Laotian refugees, but it would be one specific and feasible measure by which we would do justice to a brave and resilient people to whom we owe a special debt.

One of the many U.S. immigration questionnaires requires the applicant to list all his stocks, bonds, jewelry, gold and currency. Needless to say, it does not take long for the Hmong to fill this out. And the last question calls for a statement of total net worth. The Hmong usually answer, "none."

If we Americans forget these courageous former allies of ours who today are trapped in the sweltering camps of Thailand, then a legitimate question might be raised as to our "net worth."

Ogden Williams
Nong Khai, Thailand
May-June 1978