

Larry & Dee Woodson recently returned from Sheboygan, WI where they attended the Memorial Day Celebration of the Lao, Hmong, and American Veterans Memorial event. The Memorial event commenced with a parade of the downtown area followed by the activities at the Memorial site. The Lao, Hmong and American Veterans Memorial is located on the shore of Lake Michigan in Deland Park. The Memorial was dedicated on July 15, 2006 to all those who served in the U.S. Secret War in Laos from 1961 to 1975.

Tens of thousands of Lao and Hmong and hundreds of Americans fought valiantly in a long and bloody effort. They delayed the eventual takeover of Laos by North Vietnam while protecting U.S. troops fighting in South Vietnam. The death toll, tragedy, and heroics extended far beyond the soldiers on the battlefield.

Violent clashes with communist troops drove most of the civilian Hmong population from the mountains they had long called home. The refugees suddenly found themselves dependent on the CIA and the U.S. Agency Development for airdrops, of food, shelter and medical supplies. That dependence was particularly trying for them, as they were a self-reliant, hard-working people. With their farmlands under enemy control and all able-bodied males fighting, they sacrificed and contributed much to the struggle to win back their way of life.

Despite U.S. assistance, Western diseases in refugee camps decimated the women and children. One measles outbreak killed hundreds of children. Malaria took a horrific toll. The infant mortality rate reached 70 percent. Many other women and children were killed by enemy rocket and ground attacks. They endured sorrow on a scale the vast majority of Americans have never had to face.

While the Hmong and Lao hill people fought hard to stay free from communist rule, their struggle to resist was defeated when the United States broke its promises and abandoned Laos in 1975. Then, the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies killed thousands of Hmong and Laotian hill people outright and placed thousands more in forced labor camps. They bombed gassed those trying to escape.

Finding sanctuary meant journeying through jungles on foot and evading communist troops to reach refugee camps in Thailand established by the United Nations. Many of the Hmong were accepted for immigration to the United States. Many different agencies helped bring the Hmong to the United States and to Sheboygan, including the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, the Catholic Immigration and Refugee Services, Episcopal Migration Ministries and Father Steven Mills of the grace Episcopal Church.

By 2000, subsequent migrations would establish Sheboygan as having the 14th largest Hmong population in the nation. The Memorial Perpetual Care Committee recognized Larry for his 11 years of service in Laos and for his assistance and support of their efforts in the areas of education and agriculture. Larry was previously given a commendation by the United States Agency for Development for helping with the construction of some 4,000 classrooms and numerous permanent schools. In recognition of his service, his name was inscribed in the black marble memorial. The memorial wall reflects the

contributions to the Hmong and Lao with the inscription of: "The following men and women served in Laos during the U.S. Secret War and have contributed to the memorial.

The Memorial Program included remarks from Xia Vue Yang, Chairman, Dr. Cha Va Lee, LHAC National Committee, Yang Houa Lee, LHAC-WI, Cher Lue Yang President of the Hmong Association, Bob Ryan, Mayor of the City of Sheboygan, and Thuy Smith, President of the Thuy Smith International. The program was concluded with a wreath presentation, acknowledge of the MIA-KIA soldiers, Taps, and a Gun Salute.

Larry and Dee enjoyed a lunch prepared by the Hmong women of Sheboygan. For Larry, it was an honor and a memory trip back to S.E. Asia.

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