

DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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DISCUSSION OF REPORTING FROM SOMDY PHOMMACHANH

**SUMMARY:** Beginning in 1985 and continuing to the present, Somdy Phommachanh, an ethnic Lao resident of the United States, has told Government interviewers and members of the electronic media various stories about seeing one or two American prisoners of war at a prison in Laos in the mid to late 1970s. Somdy has provided widely varying versions of events related to his sightings of the U.S. servicemen, to include circumstances of his observation, changes in the year of the sighting, the addition of names of the men, and the number of Americans he saw. On two separate occasions he also changed his story from a firsthand sighting to information he received as hearsay.

Based upon the significant changes he made in his report, evidence furnished by other sources, the results of a polygraph examination and admissions made by Somdy himself, we have concluded that his reports are fabrications.

Following is a chronologically arranged discussion of the details of Somdy's reporting, along with DIA's investigation, analysis and conclusion.

**SOURCE:** Somdy Phommachanh is a 42 year old Lao refugee who currently resides in Nebraska. He was a First Lieutenant in the U.S. sponsored Special Guerrilla Unit after deserting from the Royal Lao Army and served as a medic. His knowledge of the English language is limited; interviews were conducted in the Lao language by U.S. Government officials.

**INITIAL REPORT - 1985:** On 4 January 1985, Somdy told Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) interviewers at the Naphe refugee camp in Thailand a story about seeing a U.S. prisoner in Laos in 1977. According to Somdy, while imprisoned in Houay Leng Prison, Mouang Khoua District, Phongsaly Province, Laos, he saw a male Caucasian who guards said was an American pilot who had been captured in 1968 at Udom Sai, Laos. Somdy described the man as slightly over six feet tall, with a wiry build and blue eyes. He had long brown hair and a full, chest length beard, both streaked with grey. The PW had two wound scars, one in the upper left arm and one in the back of his upper left leg, which Somdy thought might have been caused by gunshots. Based on the man's behavior, Somdy speculated that he had mental problems.

Kept in an adjacent cell in the same building as Somdy, the Caucasian lived for 17 days before succumbing to an intestinal disorder. According to Somdy, the man was found dead in his cell one morning; his body was wrapped in a mat and taken by Somdy and five other inmates to the prison cemetery and buried. (During this interview Somdy gave the JCRC interviewer two photographs of himself, which he was later to claim were of the American who died at the prison.)

**DIA FOLLOW-UP - 1985-86:** Analysts from DIA's Special Office for Prisoners of War and Missing in Action conducted interviews with other inmates from detention facilities in the region of the prison, and from Houay Leng prison itself. One inmate who was there at the same time as Somdy remembered him as a medic for the camp. All of the sources stated that they never saw or heard of Americans in any of the camps in Phongsaly Province and were unanimous in their opinion that had U.S. PWs been held there, it would have been common knowledge.

**1986 REPORT:** In late 1986, we learned that Somdy had changed his story and was now telling producers of a BBC financed television program entitled "We Can Keep You Forever," that he had seen two Americans, one named "Smiley," the other named "Nelson." DIA analysts located Somdy in Nebraska, and arranged to interview and polygraph him there in January 1987. However, Somdy changed his mind and declared himself unavailable for interview. Nevertheless, DIA analysts did engage Somdy in several telephone conversations. In addition to providing the names "Smiley" and "Nelson," during the course of these telephone interviews Somdy made the following changes to his 1985 report to JCRC representatives:

- He claimed to have seen two Caucasians; one who died ("Nelson") and another darker skinned man who drew the name "Smiley" in the dirt outside the building in which he was held. Somdy claimed to have watched the Caucasian write in the dirt, and to have read it at the time it was written.
- "Nelson" died one week after arrival.
- The sighting took place in November 1978 (he told JCRC 1977).
- Somdy cut the Caucasians' hair and cared for "Nelson" prior to his death.
- In "Nelson's" belongings Somdy found two photographs; one of "Nelson" wearing a flight suit and one of "Nelson" in a T-shirt.
- Somdy claimed he learned "Nelson's" name from hearing "Smiley" call it out on the day that "Nelson" died.
- Contrary to his statements to the television producers that he gave photographs of "Nelson" to the JCRC interviewer, Somdy claimed to have given the photos to an American who interviewed him at the Thai Immigration Jail at Phongsaly. (Investigators contacted that American who, after referring to his notes, recalled Somdy but said he had not been given any photographs.) When confronted with the fact that he had given JCRC interviewers photos of himself, Somdy admitted this was the case. (In March 1988 he changed his story and claimed that he had given one photograph of "Nelson" to Thai officials who were accompanied by a man Somdy believed was an American.)

**DIA FOLLOW-UP - 1987:** A DIA analyst spoke to Somdy by telephone on 18 and 19 January 1987, and confronted him with the conflicting reporting received from other inmates in the Phongsaly region. Faced with these facts he admitted the story he gave the television producers was false and said he had done it to assist the Lao resistance in obtaining support from the American public. He said he had been contacted by a Lao refugee and a U.S. citizen who claimed to be working for the BBC. According to Somdy, these people urged him to tell his story for use in the television program as this could help the resistance. In return, he was flown to Los Angeles and paid \$100 for telling his story. He offered no explanation as to how the names "Nelson" and "Smiley" entered his story. DIA analysts concluded that in view of his confession to providing false information, and based on contrary reports from other inmates, Somdy's story had no credence.

**1988 REPORT:** In January 1988, we learned that an NBC reporter had contacted JCRC, seeking information on Somdy. Somdy was telling NBC the same basic story of having encountered "Nelson" and "Smiley" in Houay Leng prison in 1978, as he told BBC in 1986. In February and March the reporter contacted a staff member of the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, House Foreign Affairs Committee, and a staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. She was also in contact with the next-of-kin of the Americans named by Somdy, a U.S. Congressman, a former Congressman and Somdy's employer, all in relation to this source's story. (NOTE: The aforementioned committees, which have oversight responsibilities for this Agency and the PW/MIA issue, have been kept apprised of events related to this case.) In a February conversation with one of the congressional staff members, the NBC reporter said Somdy was claiming that in January 1987, he had been intimidated by the DIA interviewer into falsely stating that his sighting was bogus.

**DIA INTERVIEW OF SOMDY MARCH 1988:** During the period 10-14 March 1988, DIA analysts reinterviewed and conducted a polygraph examination of Somdy in Omaha, Nebraska. He again claimed his story was firsthand, but changed aspects of it and expanded on his post 1975 activities in Laos. Now Somdy said that the man who died had a crippled right arm, rather than left, and that his face was scarred on the right side caused, Somdy believed, by burns. He also denied that "Smiley" spoke "Nelson's" name, but said he learned it from reading it on the top of a piece of paper taken from "Nelson's" pack and shown to him by a Pathet Lao guard. Also, Somdy now said that only on the morning after "Smiley" wrote his name in the dust did he see it. Among clothing items found in the pack taken from "Nelson's" cell, Somdy said he found and kept one, vice two, black and white photographs of a man in a T-shirt and uniform trousers. The print was cracked and peeled to such an extent that the face was obliterated. Somdy claimed he did not assist in "Nelson's" burial, but was in the vicinity when the burial was conducted. He saw "Smiley" only once, on the day "Nelson"

died. It was then that "Smiley" wrote in the dust and he disappeared the following day. Somdy also changed his story as to whom he gave the "Nelson" photograph. After he was informed that we had contacted his American interviewer at the Thai Immigration Jail, Somdy said that he really gave the photograph to two Thai intelligence officers on the day following the interview. He also claimed that the Thais were accompanied by a swarthy, portly Caucasian who he assumed was an American.

REPORTING FROM OTHER SOURCES - 1988: Prior to departing Washington, DIA debriefers reinterviewed two former Lao prison inmates who had been incarcerated with Somdy during or at about the same time the sighting was supposed to have occurred. Each interview was done independently and sources were not aware of reports from others. Descriptions of the prison were elicited as well as the names of fellow prisoners and staff. It was established that these persons were indeed familiar with those elements of information. They provided information about Somdy's activities at the prison, indicating a close working relationship between him and the prison staff. When those activities were mentioned to Somdy during the interview in Omaha, he readily admitted to them, thus further lending credibility to other inmates' statements. They uniformly characterized Somdy as a talkative individual who curried favor of the prison staff. They again insisted that no Americans were kept at Houay Leng prison or its environs.

Near the end of the interview on 12 January 1988, Somdy was offered the opportunity to speak on the telephone to any or all of these individuals in order to clarify the differences between his claims and what other former inmates had reported. Somdy declined, saying he did not wish to speak to anyone other than the DIA interviewers about his sighting. (After DIA debriefers returned to Washington, another former inmate of Houay Leng prison was contacted and interviewed. He substantiated the information provided by others about Somdy, the prison and the absence of Americans in the area. Additionally, this source stated that after Somdy's release from prison, officials there directed the source and other prisoners to build a home for Somdy, and a medical clinic outside the camp where Somdy worked and lived for some time.)

POLYGRAPH EXAMINATION: On 14 March 1988, after a weekend away from DIA debriefers, Somdy underwent a polygraph examination. The examination was conducted by two DIA polygraphers with an ethnic Lao DIA employee serving as translator. The polygraph results indicated Somdy practiced deception on questions related to his live sighting, how he obtained "Nelson's" name and whether he had been directed to furnish Americans with false PW/MIA information. Inconclusive results were indicated on questions relating to seeing the word "Smiley" drawn in the dirt, and whether Somdy is under the control of the Lao Communists or resistance.

POST-POLYGRAPH INTERVIEW: When the results of the exam were given to him and he was afforded the opportunity to comment, Somdy admitted that he had not seen the Americans. He said he merely wished to help the government, and that he had told the story in order to do so. Somdy apologized for giving the information as firsthand. His new version was that he had been told the story in 1984 by a friend, a former Pathet Lao soldier, who had also been incarcerated at Houay Leng prison. The former Pathet Lao soldier claimed to have seen the alleged PWs in 1974, while at Houay Leng, and identified them as "Nelson" and "Smiley." Somdy said his friend showed him a picture of "Nelson," which the friend kept. That photograph had the face obliterated and only a mustache and head outline remained. He admitted he never gave a photo of the missing American to anyone in Thailand.

Somdy was asked how he was able to pick out the "Nelson" photo from a group shown him by NBC during their February interview. He said that he only meant to point out someone who had a configuration of the face and the mustache similar to the photograph he was shown by the Pathet Lao soldier. He did not admit to any complicity in creating his embellishments. The DIA interviewer made it clear to Somdy that his latest story also lacked credibility and that further interviews were desirable to help clarify such anomalies as the photograph identification and how he obtained the names of the unaccounted for Americans.

REFUSAL OF FURTHER INTERVIEWS: The following day, 15 March 1988, when the DIA interviewer arrived at Somdy's place of employment to take him to the interview site, his employer said Somdy was not available. He added that Somdy claimed DIA interviewers had threatened him and used electric shock on him to skew the polygraph exam and to get him to change his story. According to his employer, Somdy was claiming that he had really seen "Nelson" and "Smiley" and that on 14 March 1988, he lied to DIA, saying it was hearsay, in order to get back to his employer's protection.

ANALYSIS: Analysis as to the truth or falsehood of Somdy's story considered these elements: The consistencies or inconsistencies of his reporting on this alleged sighting; evidence from other witnesses whose reliability can be demonstrated; the results of the polygraph examination; and finally, the admission made by Somdy regarding his story.

Somdy's reporting is replete with inconsistencies on major elements of his claims. In 1985 he told a JCRC interviewer he had seen a Caucasian who the guards said was an American. In 1986, 1987 and 1988, in interviews with BBC, NBC and DIA, he changed this story to one of having had personal contact with two Americans named "Smiley" and "Nelson." Finally, he claimed to have been told the entire story by a former Pathet Lao soldier.

- He made numerous inconsistent claims regarding photographs of "Nelson." He claimed to have given them to the JCRC interviewer, then to an American who interviewed him in a Thai immigration jail, and then to have given them

to an anonymous Inai police official. Finally, he claimed he was shown a photograph in a Vientiane restaurant by a former Pathet Lao soldier. In fact, he showed the JCRC interviewer two photographs of himself. He made each of the changes in his claim regarding photographs after being confronted with evidence disputing his current claim. Other sources who may have demonstrated their reliability have reported on their incarcerations at Houay Leng prison.

- Some of these sources personally knew Somdy in prison, a fact he acknowledged.
- These sources unanimously report that no Americans were incarcerated at Houay Leng prison during the period of Somdy's imprisonment.

Results of the polygraph examination indicated that on questions about having seen Americans at Houay Leng prison, Somdy was practicing deception.

Somdy admitted to DIA interviewers on two occasions that his firsthand account of having encountered two Americans named "Smiley" and "Nelson" at Houay Leng prison was not true.

**CONCLUSION:** Somdy did not observe any Americans at Houay Leng prison in Laos.