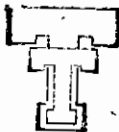




James R. Reckner
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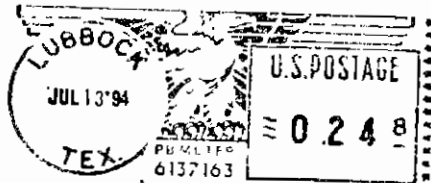
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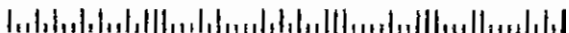
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"America's Dirty Little Secret"

by James R. Reckner

I never served with the mountain people, the *montagnards*, during my years in Southeast Asia. A sailor on river assault craft and river patrol craft, I was restricted to the lowlands, the Mekong River delta and the thousands of canals and waterways in the extreme south of South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the loyalty and honesty of the *montagnards* was legendary among those who actually served. Ask any Special Forces veteran.

Among the various groups of *montagnards* was one, the *Hmong* (sometimes called the *Meo*) whose home was the mist-filled mountains that formed the border between North Vietnam and northeast Laos. There, they practiced primitive slash-and-burn agriculture and also cultivated poppies for opium which was their principal medicine. But the *Hmong* had the misfortune to live in an area of strategic importance in the Cold War. In the early 1960s, these people were enlisted by the CIA to form a secret army to fight against the communist *Pathet Lao* and their North Vietnamese allies. The *Hmong* proved to be loyal allies; they stoutly defended secret American radar installations that guided American aircraft on their missions over North Vietnam. And many gave their lives in efforts, often successful, to save downed American airmen. In the process, they earned the enmity of the Laotian and North Vietnamese communists.

When the war in Southeast Asia ended with communist victory in 1975, the *Hmong* were subjected to severe reprisals by the new communist rulers. For several years, into the 1980s, their villages were subjected to airborne biological warfare attacks mounted but the Vietnamese in support of their Laotian communist brethren. As many as 100,000 *Hmong* are estimated to have been killed by the Lao government following the war. Many thousands more fled to refugee camps in Thailand and from there sought resettlement in the United States.

But times have changed. U.S. State Department officials now are anxious to improve relations with the Lao People's Democratic Republic, a government which, according to the U.S. State Department's current *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, restricts freedom of speech, press, and assembly, denies the rights of privacy and of citizens to change their government, and monitors international mail and phone calls, Lao society, and foreigners. Arrests are made on unspecified charges; accusers' names are withheld. Trials are secret. Human rights groups are not allowed. According to the U.S. State Department report, "Those accused of hostility to the regime are subject to arrest and confinement for long periods of time." Nevertheless, economic opportunities are seen in Laos and the troublesome *Hmong* still remain in refugee camps in Thailand have become bothersome to those who would deal with the LPDR.

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who have done nothing for the United States than we do for men and women who have put their lives on the line to protect American servicemen in mortal danger.

This despicable forced repatriation program is being carried out by U.S. State Department officials who have no first-hand knowledge of the Vietnam War. "History has changed," one of our Bangkok embassy officials told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1993, and *Hmong* refugees would no longer find it easy to enter the United States. History has not changed; some of us have already forgotten it -- or chosen to ignore it. The fate of the *Hmong*, our loyal allies in the long and bitter struggle in Southeast Asia, offers a stark reminder that neither foreign policy expedients nor public apathy can absolve this nation of a moral responsibility for the well-being of those we encouraged to fight the communists in Indochina.

Our government will continue to deny everything relating to the forced repatriation of the *Hmong*. They are "stonewalling": their policy is too filled with infamy, too reminiscent of another "final solution," for otherwise righteous men to accept it. It is America's "dirty little secret." But by our silence while this immoral process continues, we all share in the guilt.

James R. Reckner, Ph.D, a retired naval officer, served two tours of duty in Vietnam. He is Director of Texas Tech University's Center for the Study of the Vietnam Conflict.