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Interview with Colonel Gao Moua

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Colonel Gao Moua

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Please let us know your name, your parents' names, and what village you were born in.

My name is Colonel Gao Moua, I was born in the village of *Khoun Sam. I was born on January of the year 1947 in Laos.

Before the war reached your land, when you were still a boy, what kind of jobs did you do, and what kind of work did your parents do?

My great grandfather was a general/leader of his generation of Hmong till year 1956. My father is Col. Txia Pao Moua; he was a leader from 1956-1960.

When you were still a boy what kind of work did you do in your village? Did you help your parents with anything?

At that time when I was young I was the second in my father's family. I was eight years old before I could go to school. But during school the war became more threatening so I couldn't finish one of my years. Not only that, in Laos there was a General, he was a captain holding a group of soldiers who parachuted. He took his army and betrayed the Laotian government by joining with the Red Laos to help take over Laos. This was what started the big problems.

When the war started, and as you were a young man, what influenced you to join the war? And where did you train to be a soldier?

There was so much going on in the war at that time. During that time though, my father and the rest of us lived in the village of *Nam Bien, which was in the middle of Route 7, which led to many important places. They came and we couldn't stay so Dad led the villagers to *Blongmong. In 1961 I came from *Blongmong to continue schooling in Vientiane for two more years. I was of age then, so when I reached Vientiane I went to ***. I saw that we Hmong had not been highly educated like other cultures. There were a lot of Hmong in Vientiane. Because of this, before I came to work and help the Hmong I went to train as a soldier for four months. I was small and at that time the Laotians treated us roughly. We crawled through holes and barbed wires carrying a backpack and a gun. After four months I couldn't do any more because they were all so very mean and I was tired.

Were you trained under Lao or Thai soldiers?

They were Lao soldiers.

Were these Laotian soldiers commanded by the Americans to train the Hmong?

We had training centers led by Lao soldiers.

After those four months, what did you do?

After those four months, General Vang Pao said, 'Uncle Moua Gao, since you want to be a soldier so much, you should come help me work at Vientiane and be an officer ***.' So then I became a soldier in June of 1963, after school.

When you came to work for General Vang Pao with the CIA and USAID, had you already learned English?

I was taught for a year at Laos-American association school. At that time, a friend and his wife were also taught with me. The pronunciation was very hard. That school had huge mirrors and when you speak you have to look at your mouth. We studied together for three months then I didn't see my friend and his wife come anymore. They were educated in French but when 'pronouncing' English, they could do it well, so then they stopped. I studied for about a year.

After one year, did you think you spoke English well?

I wasn't very exact, but at that time there were less than 20 Hmong leaders who could speak understandable English.

And you were one of those 20, then?

Yes, that's all.

Please let us know, when you worked for General Vang Pao, what kind of jobs did you do?

In June of 1963 I worked in Vientiane as an officer for the CIA and USA, which means US Act. At that time Hmong came from far places to Vientiane, so when they got there I helped in finding places for them to stay and when they went back home I found rented planes to send them back. In one day I would run once or twice to the CIA to ask for a plane. At this time there was Air Continental and Air America, but if the CIA used them then they had to pay the airlines. (48 min)

When you first met and saw the Americans, what did you think?

First of all, I want to say something. The first American who came to meet General Vang Pao was named Captain Jack F. Matthews. He was from Los Angeles, CA. They met in 1958 in Laos. After contacting General Vang Pao he reported back to his boss at the CIA and then they arranged a way to come talk to General Vang Pao. Then the first time I met and talked to an American was when they came to work for our land. Most of them were educated so even though we couldn't speak well, they understood us.

When you met the Americans did you trust them? Or did you think that they wanted to only use you to fight for them? What were your thoughts during that time?

When the Americans came they were well educated. They were mainly CIA agents. Before they came they had already talked about the law.

Please let us know what the CIA said were the reasons you should help them fight against the Vietnamese.

The reason why the CIA contacted the Hmong and General Vang Pao is because the war in Laos became harder in 1960. The North Vietnamese used the Ho Chi Minh Trail located on the border line of Northern Laos to come to Southern Laos. They used it to attack Southern Laotians and Americans there. The border line is filled with mountains and caves which made the Navy and Air Force think, 'If we don't find some people to watch this area when our planes pass they will be shot down and we would have no way to rescue our people.' Because of this they contacted General Vang Pao to ask the Hmong to help the Americans watch over this trail and this land area. They also needed people to spy and report about where the Vietnamese were located so they would know where to bomb.

In your own opinion, why did the Hmong decide to join with the Americans and fight this fight? As we see it, it seems like the Laotians were not as determined in fighting as the Hmong.

The important reason why the Americans decided to ask the Hmong was because as they looked into Hmong history they saw that Hmong were upright and just people in their work. For example, the children listened to their elders right? So because of this they needed people who were righteous to help them. At that time there were no contracts with the Americans about what would happen after the war was over and how the Americans would help the Hmong.

Please let us know, during the war, as you served under General Vang Pao, what work did you do and when did they raise your position [rank]?

When I came to work for the Hmong I was in Vientiane as an officer from 1963 to 1968. I received the rank of First Lieutenant. Then they told me to go train in order to raise my position. So then I went to train in Management School [MR2] in Long Cheng. The professors who taught there were Thai Generals. I trained in the Army of the Thai's Management School for five months; then I became General Vang Pao's secretary from 1968 to 1970.

During the war, and as you were working for General Vang Pao, do you remember having many worries? And what did you do to survive?

At that time as I was working for General Vang Pao I noticed that the Hmong generals and the Hmong people were all of one heart and spirit. In everything they did, they were honestly and truly helpful. Because of this the Americans trusted us, cared about us, and wanted to help us.

As I've read and studied, I've seen estimates that 50% of the Hmong who fought in the war died, leaving many widows behind. How did the Hmong help each other to survive through this time?

At that time, the Hmong soldiers didn't have enough training—even the ones who became leaders and commanders. But we did have wisdom and knowledge we learned through life. So no matter how many Vietnamese attacked us, we still had heart to come together and say, 'this is our land.' We've never taken over someone else's land; they came to take ours so we had to help each other. This is why we Hmong worked so hard.

Were there any other people who lived in Laos and helped you fight against the Vietnamese?

In 1971, the North Vietnamese sent close to 100,000 soldiers to attack us and take over Long Cheng. General Vang Pao then asked the King of Thai and the Americans to help support. The Americans helped paid so the Thai's special forces could come help us protected Long Cheng, up to 30,000 soldiers. If it wasn't for that, having only us Hmong and Laos we wouldn't have ever been able to protect Long Cheng that time. (105 min)

From your observations, which people fought the hardest in 1971: The Hmong, the Laotians, or the Thai?

It was the Hmong [who fought] the most, the other people only came to help defend a certain place. They wouldn't travel and fight with us.

In MR2, did General Vang Pao watch over all the Thai, Laotians and Hmong?

Yes, all of them.

As a soldier, how were you paid? Did the CIA give money to the Laotian government and have them pay you or did the CIA give the money directly to you?

In that war I should say that we Hmong were very lucky, because we were able to trust each other—even from the leaders all the way to the small. The law is that the CIA cannot come to Laos unless through the Lao government. But then the CIA rode in planes right from Washington DC to General Vang Pao, then had planes contact the Hmong in all different places without the approval of the Laotian government. As you look at these facts, it's as if we Hmong were our own government and after being encouraged by the Americans we became more powerful. They sent money right to us Hmong soldiers and they sent money to General Vang Pao to help him make hospitals and schools to educate the Hmong.

During that time how much was paid to a soldier and how much to a family when a soldier died? And how did you disperse the money given to you by the government?

If an officer dies, at first they only gave 50,000 kip. Then ever since 1972 they gave 75,000 kip. At that time 1 dollar equaled 500 kip. So that means [the family of] a person who died was only given 100 dollars. For the soldiers who are still alive, they were given 15 dollars a month.

Please tell us, when you first started fighting, what kind of weapons were given to you by the US government? And later, during 1971-72, were the weapons given to you different?

Truthfully, we were all disappointed in the US. If they truly wanted to us to win, to protect the land from the North Vietnamese, whatever came, we would have won. Each time we were about to win, no supplies [bullets] were sent so we had no way to win.

So according to their policy you were only meant to defend, and not attack?

Yes.

If it was your choice, what supplies did you think were more effective against the Vietnamese?

At that time we asked the CIA and they gave us the best weapons.

From what you know of other Hmong soldiers, did they like the *black gun* or what gun did they like more?

The *black guns* were light for everyone and had great range and was easy to shoot. Everyone liked those.

What about the big guns, the 81, 105...did the Hmong use them regularly?

The 81s were mobile and you could move them easily, but the 105s were very heavy and could only shoot a short distance. At that time we didn't use those much, but now they've advanced the 105s so they can shoot very far.

What planes did you think were most helpful?

At that time the ground soldiers were very obedient. The American planes, the skylighter* and the T28. These were flown by the Hmong and Laotians. Before that, the Thai helped us but after the Hmong learned how to pilot the planes it became only the Hmong and Laotians. The Hmong worked very hard for us to be able to still continue.

How many Hmong pilots were there? And how many of those were killed?

The first pilot was Major Lee Lue [also spelled Ly Lue and Le Lue]. One day you're supposed to only fly 3-4 missions but in one day you fly about 10 missions so consequently the plane wore out fast. These were also very old planes. The Hmong pilots grew to about 40 some, and about half of them died.

How many T28s were given to you by the Americans?

We were only given 12 planes.

Out of those 12, how many of them were shot down?

We were given 12 in the beginning but every time one of them was shot down, it was replaced so the number of planes remained around 12.

OK. From your knowledge being a secretary for General Vang Pao, what is your estimate of Hmong losses?

As I've said before, son, at that time we Hmong cared a lot for each other. Although we weren't educated, we were wise, and so compared to many larger groups, our losses were small. [Going back from] May 1975 [covering] the actual 15 years of fighting, there weren't many killed. After the war when the Hmong ran and the Red Laotians chased after and killed them, there were twice the number of losses than in the 15 years of fighting.

Now I'm going to talk about the Red Laotians who attacked your country. What were everyone's thoughts on the Red Laotians?

The Vietnamese don't have old soldiers, they only have young ones. The age only ranged from around 18-22. The officers were older but the ones who fought against us were all young. This was because they are more likely to not have a wife and family at home, and so they were there to only serve their country, making death not something to dread. The Vietnamese who fought against us had good training, unlike us. (149 min)

Of all the Vietnamese weapons, which ones were most feared?

Their weapons weren't enough for us Hmong to fear, it was just that their people were very determined. If we were lazy and didn't keep watch then when they attacked us, if they had 100 soldiers it would be OK if there were only 10 left, as long as they won.

As I've researched, I've read that they used the 122s in the attack at Long Cheng, right?

Yes.

At that time, were their 122's powerful?

Their 122s weren't so powerful, but during that time the Chinese gave them the 130s and these could shoot far—27-plus miles.

The American weapons, 155 and 105 that were given to you, were they effective?

The 105s could only reach 12 miles and the 155 only 17 miles. If it wasn't for planes we wouldn't have been able to do much.

Were there Red Chinese who attacked your country as well? I've talked to other soldiers and they said there were Red Chinese.

There were. The amount of Red Chinese who were killed in Long Cheng were a couple 10 thousands and the ones who died at *Blongmong were also around there.

How did you know they were Red Chinese?

They had different signs [insignia?] and their people were different, as well as their uniforms.

According to your estimates, how many Vietnamese attacked Laos?

Many 100 thousands for the Vietnamese, and the Red Chinese, around a couple 100 thousands. If we compare the ratio of deaths, it's as if there were hardly any Hmong killed.

When the country split, what else did you do? And how was your journey to Thailand?

At that time I worked with the citizens by helping them make food. The Red Laotians came and spoke out against the ***. Then General Vang Pao asked if we wanted to run or try to bear it. If we run, will we be able to take all our people? Then we decided that if we ran it would be better than if we stay. Our supplies would not last us. We then chose to ask the Americans to help us Hmong to Thailand. General Vang Pao flew to Thailand to meet with the king, asking for permission for the Hmong to temporarily stay in Thailand until we found a way to go wherever it was we'd want to go next. The Americans then said, 'It's not possible for us to take everyone to America. But the officers who have broken the law greatly, about 1-2 million [thousand], we'll take. In two days we'll take them all for you. The ones that are left, we'll discuss about afterwards.' The date was set at December of 1975, and then they took the officers as well as their families to Namphong.

When you reached Thailand, what jobs did you perform?

When I reached there we had close to 3 million [thousand] people, so we divided ourselves into five groups. I led one of those groups, finding and making food until we came to Vinai.

What did you do in Vinai?

I was only in there for eight months, and then we came to America.

After those eight months, did you want to come to America? Or was it only something you had to do?

At that time I had many children and when they were sick there wasn't any medicine for them. So then we decided that it would be best to come to America, to bring my wife and kids so that they could go to school and us Hmong would be able to see a broader road, giving us more options for the future.

When you came to this country, where did you land and stay at first?

California

When you first landed and saw America, what did you think?

When we first landed it was like looking into the sky. We couldn't understand the language. The fortunate thing for us Hmong was that we had relatives who came before. It was harder for the ones who came first, but because of them it became easier for the ones who came afterwards.

What are your thoughts in the Hmong getting their country, Laos, back? Or do you not believe there is any more chance of that happening? (204 min)

When the Hmong were in China we had our own land. When it comes to helping out even when we're not related, we Hmong do that, but because of this willingness to trust, it is easy for others to manipulate us. I do see that Laos was a great place for us Hmong. You, the younger generation, had heard of how the Hmong were badly treated in China, Laos, Thailand, etc. But in America, it

hasn't been 30 years, only about one generation. I've seen the young people, a hundred thousand, receiving GEDs, Bachelor's, Masters, and PhDs. So wherever we are, it's up to us to come back and love and help each other. The people outside won't help us, only when they need our help do they come and talk sweetly to us. If we lecture among ourselves then that is possible, but if we ask for help for others to raise us up they will say, 'Oh, this person says he is educated but if you give him a high position to hold, he is less able.' In America, the rich and prosperous country, they challenge each other in finding food for the country and so it will be good for all. They don't pay attention to personal problems. But Laos is a great country for us Hmong if we want our own country, although we shouldn't brag about it until we finally have it as our own. It is very dangerous for us to say right now that it will be the Hmong's country. Laos is a great opportunity because it hasn't been 30 years and yet we've prospered so much. If we could control our own country think of how much we could do!

If in the future there was a way opened for the Hmong to go back to Laos, do you think the Laotians would still have a grudge against the Hmong?

Because the Laos [run the] government [in] that area they will never be happy for us, but the reason we were able to live together was because we all helped support and lead the country. If you are the 'top', I will be the 'assistant', and vice versa. We would have to pull together for our country to be prosperous.

Do you have any words or wisdom, any advice you want to say to the young Hmong who will be listening to your words in the next 10 years or so?

I do want to speak to the Hmong, especially the young men and women. Like the Americans say, you're very lucky. Your parents, along with other elders have worked hard so that we can reach the sky. It hasn't been 30 years and we Hmong have already advanced a lot. So because of this, I want to say to the young men and women, you are living in a country of many opportunities. Your eyes have seen the way people govern and lead their country. When discussing about the [future of the] USA, both the Republicans and Democrats work on making the country better. They debate when there are elections and argue about ideas to better the country. They only want to build up the country with ideas and not destroy their own people. So to the young ones, the day I see that you all are wealthy together, you all speak the same language and no one is jealous of the other, you're not afraid that I'll beat you or you'll beat me, then that day is when we Hmong will be successful. If we still have thoughts fearing that you'll beat me or I'll beat you, you'll have more than me or I'll have more than you, if I teach you then you'll be skilled and I'll fall, if we still have hearts like this then we will never go far. If we all learn together and have the same, then we'll go far. We have to remember all the way back to the Vietnam War. Your mothers, fathers, and we have not been educated but we were able to achieve that much. There weren't a lot of lives lost. This generation can look back and see this, so I want you to not discriminate among each other. Do not say things against your parents or elders by saying, 'This is not Laos, it is now America.' If this generation still has the heart to speak against your parents or elders then you haven't learned enough. I promise you that by doing this, the country of America will think that although you've received your degree you don't have a heart to love your own people. These are only a couple of words for you all, whatever is good then remember it and study it, but whatever I may have spoken 'over' you can throw away.

Thank you for the words you have spoken; is there anything else you want to say?

I am a person who has helped the Hmong for a long time. Back then I've seen that the Hmong have loved each other. Coming to this county I've seen that you children have worked hard in

earning your education. I want you all to come back and remember your parents and the elders who have led the Hmong to make you what you are today. Remember what we've learned, what we've accomplished and learn from it to motivate yourselves into being better. Do this so the Hmong will be able to take another level that's greater than the last generations. I ask you this because this is very important.

Thank you for your words of wisdom you've given to us. (265 min) = 4:41