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Interview with Nhia Lor Vang

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Nhia Lor Vang

27 February, 2002

Interviewer: Peter Chou Vang

Translator/Transcriber: Peter Chou Vang

Editor: Paul Hillmer

What is your name?

My name is Nhia Lor Vang. (0:10)

When and where were you born?

I was born on January 1st, 1954 in a place called Qua Chee [Goat Droppings. This place was populated by many goats, which is how they caem up with the name]. (0:29)

How old are you?

I'm 48 years old. (0:37)

What are your parents' names?

My father was called Chon Yong Vang and my mother was Ia Her Vang. (0:50)

What was your occupation before the war?

I was a farmer. (1:30)

When were you enlisted in the army? How old were you? What was your job in the army?

I worked for the CIA starting in May 1966. I started when I was 12 years old. During this time there was a civil war in Laos [between the communist, neutral, and pro-American forces]. The CIA sent some Thai army personnel to teach us basic combat skills for two or three months; just enough so we can learn how to use our weapons. Then we were sent to the war zone. (3:03)

Can you tell us which battles you were involved in—which ones you lost and which ones you won?

[Although Mr. Vang did not tell these details in this order, I chose to re-arrange his narrative in chronological order.] They first sent us to Pon Kou [a northern frontier in Laos] in 1966-67. It was a very intense battle up there. We would set up forward observation bases. These bases contained about 25-30 men. Bases with larger numbers of men usually drew mortar and howitzer fire, whereas the Vietnamese considered smaller groups less valuable. Before nightfall we usually took three crates of grenades (consisting of 32 in each) and made it into one big crate of 96 grenades. Each was issues a big crate and this is how we fought the Vietnamese. We weren't allowed to use our guns, because it would give our position away by the flash of the muzzle. We also put dried tree branches along with dried leaves all around the perimeter of our bases. Whenever enemies tried to sneak up on us they would make noise when they stepped on these dried branches and leaves. When we heard this we would toss a grenade in the direction of the noise. If we saw the enemy shooting at us (we could see where they were by the flashes of their gun muzzles), we would toss a grenade in

that area. These two methods were very effective. One example was a base where all the defenders would flee except for one person. By throwing grenades all night long and without firing his gun the enemies thought that there were more soldiers in the base than one man. In the morning he could see all the dead bodies of the enemies all around the perimeter. The Vietnamese would usually fire red and green flares before advancing on our bases. This was a sign for their troops, but it was also a good warning sign for us to prepare. Most battles usually lasted from 12am to five or six in the morning. If they withdrew, then it meant we won the battle. During the course of the battle, as I mentioned before, we couldn't use our guns to fire back. If we did, they'd know our position and know a B-40 [an anti-tank/anti-bunker bazooka-like weapon] to take us out. Those who did fire back at the Vietnamese with their guns were usually taken out within a matter of seconds [Later Mr. Vang gave me a good example of what happened when one soldier tried to fire back with his gun. This particular soldier was manning a machine gun between two boulders. He saw the flash of the Vietnamese's muzzles; he shot 20 rounds into that area. Before he could fire any more, he was suddenly hit by a B-40 round. It shattered the two boulders and his machine gun was shattered in half. Luckily, the two boulders took the brunt of the two rounds so he was just slightly injured.] Most experienced soldiers used grenades instead. This is one of the reasons it was hard for them to overrun us. (8:10)

When the Vietnamese tried to overrun your bases, did you call for air support?

The US usually sent in airplanes called "Spooky" [C-4 and C-130 gun ships] to parachute in flares so we could see where the enemies were. The Vietnamese usually hid themselves when the flares were dropped. The planes contained weapons such as M-60 machine guns. They asked us to use a 60mm mortar smoke round to shoot into the area where the enemies were; then they would know what they could take out with their guns. They would also send in some propeller airplanes called "Skyraiders" which were flown solely by US pilots. US pilots also flew the "Spookies." When they were running out of ammunition and flares, there were more airplanes to take their place. (10:04)

During which seasons did you usually win? During the monsoon [rainy] season or the dry season?

During the monsoon season, the rising water cut off all the Vietnamese routes, so they were immobile. During this time they were usually on the defensive and they could be easily defeated [with the help of US air power]. However, during the dry seasons they could move about and hide their trails. They usually tended to be on the offensive and usually win [they outnumbered the Hmong]. During the monsoon seasons, we usually took patrols out about five or six kilometers around our bases to make sure there were no signs of the enemy. If there were any signs left behind by the enemy, it was easily noticeable. In the dry season it was more complicated, because they could hide their tracks on the hard services. Because of this, they could usually surprise us more in the dry season than the rainy season. (11:33)

Were there any US planes that were shot down over your area? Did you try to rescue them?

Yes, there were. The US planes that came during the night hardly received fire because the Vietnamese lacked radar. The planes usually turned off all their lights so it was really hard

for the Vietnamese to spot them. The planes that got shot down were usually the day fighter/bombers. There were no planes that went down near us, but one time a Hmong pilot who flew a T-28 propeller fighter plane was hit and he was captured. However, because of the intense bombing by other planes, he escaped. The US pilots were taught that if they were going down, they should try to parachute near or over a Hmong base. In this way it was a lot easier for the Hmong to rescue them. [During one incident, a US F-4 Phantom II jet was shot down. Over 100 Hmong soldiers went on the search and rescue mission. They found the two US pilots but they also ran into the Vietnamese search team that was out looking for the pilots. The Hmong soldiers sacrificed more than 50 of their soldiers just to rescue two US pilots. (14:09)

How many years did you fight before the country was taken over by the communists?

I fought from 1966 to 1975. Then the communists took the country. Some decided to escape to Laos but some of us decided to stay and fight anyway. We used guerilla tactics to hit and run tactics on the communists until March of 1979. Then I decided to escape to Thailand. (15:09)

When you were still in the military, how much were you paid?

In 1966, as a common soldier I was paid 300-350 kiep per month. (15:41)

How much is 300 kiep worth in US dollars?

I don't know for sure at this time. But after 1972 we were paid 3,500 kiep. Shortly after that it was 6,500 kiep. I don't really know how much it is in US dollars during that time. (16:42)

How did you escape to Thailand?

We were at Phu Bia after the communists took over. The Vietnamese told us that since the war was over there would be peace throughout Laos. They wanted everybody to stay and everybody would get equal rights. Most of the civilian Hmong believed them, but then the Vietnamese started to arrest all Hmong males who were 15 years old and above. They seemed to be arresting men indiscriminately. They claimed that everyone they arrested was a soldier for the US. The Vietnamese planned to execute them all. During that time I was still part of the resistance. We came down from the mountains one day and talked with some of the Vietnamese. We claimed that we were civilian farmers but we hid all of our weapons in the mountains. During the talk in the village they asked us if we knew General Vang Pao, the CIA and the Americans. We lied to them by saying no to all their questions. We said that we were farmers from the surrounding region. The Vietnamese told us they had a saying that goes like this: 'There was a man who owned some water buffalo. When the man's master went away, he decided to take over. However, some of the bulls were very aggressive. They had to trap and kill them. Once the bulls were killed then he [the Vietnamese] could subjugate the 'cows' and the 'calves.' We knew what they were saying. They wanted to kill those who were involved with the Americans and then raise a new generation of Hmong who would be loyal to them. We then decided to fight, even with no governmental support or any financial backing. We fought from village to village protecting our families. In 1978, it took one month for us to move from one village to another until we escaped to Thailand (20:01)

How long did you stay in Thailand until you came to the United States?

I was in Thailand from June of 1978. However, I still went over the border to help with the resistance until May of 1987. I had decided to get a visa to come over here [the US]. In the process of getting a visa you had to prove that you were working for the US in Laos. It was very easy for us because they would show us weapons and such and tell us to name them. We were all expert with them, so we could easily tell which one was this and which one was that. (21:24)

When you came over to the US, did you feel like staying or going back? Was it hard to adjust?

If you have some relatives who know how to live in this country, then it's not that hard. There is lots of freedom, unlike under the communists. The communists had a saying: 'What we say we will not do, what we do we will not say.' It was because their policies were hard and unbearable that we moved to this country. The only reason that it is hard to live in the United States is the lack of education. Other than that, this is a good place to live. (22:20)

I forgot to ask you earlier—did you suffer any wounds during your many years of fighting?

From 1966 to 1975 I was wounded three times. On one occasion the enemies set a booby trap with a grenade. Someone tripped over the wire, but I was the one who got hit. The grenade shrapnel hit me in the leg. My second time we were ambushed on a trail. I was injured with shrapnel from a B-40 bazooka, which hit me in the back. On my third time, I was hit by another grenade booby trap. So I was injured by two booby traps and one time by ambush. Other than those incidents I was fine. (23:27)

Do you have anything else you wanted to say to Hmong students who will listen to this recording in the future?

To those who will be listening to my story about our struggle with the communists, we must love one another. We need to help one another through education and so on. We shouldn't strike one another down. Education is a valuable thing to help our people. If they persecute one fellow Hmong, you need to feel their pain as well. To the Hmong who will succeed in life, you must love and never forget about your brothers and sisters who are less fortunate than you. The less fortunate who have little or no education will use their physical strength to support those who are the intellectuals. Those who have the education will usually lead and those who do not will not be there to help you in time of trouble. When someone is an intellectual, s/he shouldn't use that for their benefit alone, but for the benefit all their people. If you do it only for yourself, then you are nothing; you need the support of your people. This is my advice for Hmong students. Those who are educated but humble, kind, and respectful to your people, these are people who will be good role models. However, if you abuse others just because your education level is higher than theirs, you will not be useful to yourself or to others. We aren't white; we don't have high nostrils. If we don't help ourselves, no one will. You who are educated will probably know more know more about this than I. That is all I have to say. Thank you. (27:13)

Thank you.