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Interview with Noj Her

Peter Chou Vang
Concordia University, Saint Paul, hillmer@csp.edu

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Noj Her

Interviewer: Peter Chou Vang
Translator/Transcriber: Peter Chou Vang
Editor: Paul Hillmer

Can you tell us your name and the names of your parents?

My name is Noj Her. My father was Tswv Tou Vaj and my mother was called Mai Lee. (00:21)

When and where were you born?

I was born in 1936 in the province of Xieng Khong near Long Cheng [the Secret CIA/Hmong base]. (00:31)

What was the name of the village where you were born?

It was called *Pha Khou. (00:37)

When you were growing up, what were your chores?

In Laos, when we were growing up we went to watch the cattle and water buffalos out in the fields. We also helped our parents with the farm. (00:55)

What did you do with your harvest once it was collected?

During those days we didn't sell what we harvested. We gathered everything and stored it away, waiting for the new harvest to come in. We stored enough for us and the animals to eat. (1:27)

How many people were in your family (in Laos)? Can you tell me all your siblings' names?

There were 11 of us altogether. There were six of us sons and we had five sisters. The eldest was called *Tsjaj Sher, *Chong Yaj, *Tsuag Koua, *Vaj Moua, *then myself and then *Naj Lee. Among my sisters, the oldest was *Suwv, *T sua, *Mee, *Mau and then *Toue. (2:05)

Did your family lose any to sickness or disease?

No, in our family there was no death due to those things. (2:17)

When did you start to fight in the war against the Vietnamese? Can you tell me your reasons for fighting?

The war against the Vietnamese started when we were little, when the province of *Xieng Khoung was taken [by the Vietnamese] in 1962. *Pho Dong and Pho Qua [two important towns in northern Laos] were taken, and that's why we joined in the fight against the Vietnamese. If we didn't protect them, the Vietnamese troops were going to take all our property and lands. That was the reason we joined our government in fighting the Vietnamese. (2:54)

How old were you then? Were you still at your old village or had you moved to another place?

I was about 17 or 18 years old. We were still in our old village. (3:09)

Can you tell me who supplied you with the weapons and equipment used to fight the Vietnamese? Was it the Americans or the Laotian government who supplied the equipment?

During that time, General Vang Pao withdrew from *Xieng Khoung to *Pha Dong after being defeated by the Vietnamese. The Americans [CIA] and Gen Vang Pao made an agreement and the Americans started to parachute in weapons for the General. He then distributed the weapons to us. (3:31)

Can you tell me how you were trained as a soldier and where you were trained?

There were many areas where we trained, but I'll just tell you about one particular training area. We usually ran, practiced shooting targets, threw grenades, assembled and disassembled weapons, and other military exercises. (4:09)

When you went out to fight, did they put you with soldiers you knew, or were you with soldiers you hadn't met before?

We trained in *companies [does Conpai really mean company & how many is that?] and we went as a company to battle. (4:25)

How big is a *Conpai?

One Conpai is 500 soldiers. (4:32)

In what year did you go into battle to fight the Vietnamese?

I don't quite remember the exact date, but shortly after we were trained we went out into battle. It's been so long, I don't remember. We trained in Long Cheng and *Sam Tum. We went to fight at *Pha Dong. After that, we went and were stationed at *Lai Khia and *Sum Mia. (5:12)

Did you also fight the Red Laotians [Pathet Lao] along with the Vietnamese troops?

We don't really know if they were Pathet Laos or Vietnamese. They were firing at us and we were firing at them. If they saw us, they would fire at us and if we saw them, we'd fire at them. (5:35)

In your opinion, during your first battle, were you scared?

I don't remember being scared. All of a sudden, guns were blazing everywhere, so I didn't have time to be scared. (5:49)

Did it occur to you that the enemies might possess better weapons and far more troops than your side? Were you too young to think about these factors?

At the beginning, their weapons were not all that good. The largest weapons in their arsenal were the RPG (rocket-propelled grenade), 60mm mortars and 81 mm mortars. However, as the war prolonged, they started to use 130mm howitzers and rockets against us. Their weapons were first last [??] toward the later half of the war. They even had air support to attack us. (6:31)

What type of planes?

They were *bi-planes. (6:35)

How did the Americans help you? Did they pay you, hand out weapons and supply close air support?

They gave us enough money to buy everyday items. They gave us enough weapons and ammunition for us to fight. (6:59)

One month's pay—how many sacks of rice or chicken could you buy with that?

At that time, the price for livestock was still cheap. I didn't do the buying because we [the soldiers] chipped in together to get livestock. They also give us cash for food so that we were able to save our monthly pay. (7:26)

What did you do with your monthly pay? Did you send it back to your parents or what did you do with them?

When I was in *Sum Miam and *Pha Thi, I saved about a year or two of all my pay, and gave it to my parents. (7:42)

How did you save it? Did you just put it in your rucksack?

During that time there were some landmines called M-18s. We would save the M-18's casings and would put our pay in them. We would also put them in our pockets until we came home. (8:01)

Was the aircraft used to support the Hmong soldiers Americans, Thai, or Laotian?

At the beginning, it seemed like the aircraft were mostly Thai. As the war progressed, the majority of the planes were American. The Americans brought in their fighter/bomber jets and massive B-52s to bomb the enemies. The Thais were mostly in T-28s [The T-28 was a modified American Air Force trainer that served with the Royal Thai, Laos and General Vang Pao's army.] When the country was on the verge of defeat, Laotian, Thai and American planes were in the fight. (8:37)

What were the main tasks that you performed as a soldier?

When we were on the march, every night, we always fortified our positions, such as by digging foxholes. We always had to be on guard just in case the Vietnamese decided to attack us at night. If we were not attacked then we had to probe and scout for the enemy and force them to fight. Once when we engaged them we called in for close air support to eliminate the enemy. [Search and Destroy tactic] We fought like this so we could regain our territories that were lost to the Vietnamese. (9:29)

When you were in the field, usually how big was your unit?

We sometime went out in a company [500 soldiers]. If we were just to probe and scout, then only about 100 soldiers were needed, but in battle we went in a company. In battle, usually the company was divided into 100-man units and each unit would occupy and fortify a hill for the night. (10:04)

When you went out to fight as a company, was it still scary? What if you went out to fight with fewer than 500? Were you scared? [The majority of the time the Hmong were heavily outnumbered by the North Vietnamese Army and Pathet Lao troops.]

We were not scared. We didn't have time to be scared because they were shooting at us and we had to shoot back. (10:14)

Have you ever been on a search and rescue mission to find downed US or Allied pilots?

We went once to rescue downed Thai and Hmong pilots. (10:30)

How did you rescue them?

Their attack plane, a T-28 [Trojan] was shot down. [The T-28 was originally an American military trainer airplane that proved to be a hardy ground attack plane in the Laos theater.] (10:35)

Did you have to fight to rescue the downed pilots?

During that time, there were other planes to keep the enemy at bay and the downed pilots were close to our area. There was no problem rescuing the pilots. (10:48)

Can you tell me how long you were a soldier and what was the largest battle you were involved in?

The largest battle that I was involved with was when we were on the offensive in *San Khouan to *Bam Bam. Once our offensive wound down, the enemy countered our offensive and we were on the defense. Another major battle was when I was stationed in *Na Khang. It was a major battle and we retreated from that area. Our fortified places were filled with so much black smoke...just as if someone was burning the whole forest [He was comparing the forts to the slash and burn technique that Hmong farmers would use to burn down the forest in preparation for farming.] We never re-took *Na Khang back after that. At *Pha Thi, it was very fierce fighting. We were fortified on the top of a hill and we lost many men. They used artillery and they also surrounded the whole hill. (11:39)

How long were you a soldier for General Vang Pao?

I served from 1965 until 1975. (11:47)

After the war against the Vietnamese, why were you arrested?

I wasn't captured. After we were defeated at *Na Khang, I somehow escaped and hid for five or six days. [I'm questioning some more about the defeat at *Na Khang.] *Na Khang was a large fortified place. It was one of the headquarters and it even had its own air strip. In *Na Khang there were about 500 soldiers stationed there. [He was a little confused about the total number of troops stationed there.] (12:42)

What happened after the defeat?

We all tried to look for ways out of there. The Vietnamese blocked all the roads. We fought a retreating battle from there and many were killed or missing, though there were some who survived. There were also some Thais [Thai mercenaries who were paid by the CIA to fight in Laos. These "Volunteers" were to replace the heavy losses sustained by the Hmong male population after 10 years of fighting.] with us, but I think they were all captured. I don't know what happened to them. (13:02)

What happened to you when you tried to escape?

They shot anyone who ran. At first, there was a group of us but soon I was by myself. After three days and three nights, I reached *Mun Noui, Pho Koog Phog Blu. (13:17)

What happened after that?

When I got there, they [the CIA] sent a plane to pick us up to Long Cheng. (13:24)

I remember you told me that the Vietnamese took you and some others to prison.

I'll tell you the story. During the war, I wasn't taken by the Vietnamese. When we fought as a *battalion in *San Kong and *Pong Dong, I was captured after the war was over and General Vang Pao had left. [The interviewer was commenting along.] It was 1978-9. General Vang Pao had already left in 1975. We decided to stay instead of leaving and we continued to fight until 1977 or '78. Those who continued to fight were caught and taken to prison at *Paj Nok. (14:18)

Did the Vietnamese punish the people they captured?

The Vietnamese would use wooden stocks to lock our feet and our wrists together. At night, we were not allowed to relieve ourselves in the woods; they would give us hollow bamboo tubes that we could relieve ourselves in. (14:58)

Did they only arrest the men or also the women and children?

Only the men were sent here; the women and children were sent to *Nong Het. (15:09)

What other ways did they punish you and the men who were caught?

I was in that prison for three years. One time, during one of the Vietnamese celebrations, they started to fire their weapons into our prison cell. I was hit in the knee but it was not bad. (15:41)

How many Hmong were with you when you were captured?

I don't remember. There was three or four Laotians with us in the prison cell. The majority were Hmong. (16:02)

How many Hmong do you think were there?

It depends on what month. Some months, there would be 30-40 new Hmong prisoners and other months there would be 10 or so Hmong prisoners. Our prison camp was considered a maximum security prison and most prisoners were locked up all day. Some prisoners were eventually allowed to go to other camps where they could enjoy more activities. At our prison camp, we were locked up all the time and were given the bare minimum to eat to stay alive. (16:44)

For how long were you a prisoner in that camp?

It was from 1977 to 1980. (16:58)

Do you know how many Hmong were killed or died in that prison camp?

My older brother, one other Hmong and a Laotian died in the prison camp. My brother was Vang Moua. (17:14)

Did they allow you some freedom in that prison camp?

No, they did not. I was locked up all the time until my court hearing. I was ordered to work in a labor force for one month and a half before I was allowed to return home. (17:31)

In that prison camp, were there also Hmong civilians alongside the soldiers who were prisoners?

Most of the prisoners were then civilian because the war had been over for a while. [Many of the Hmong soldiers who fought in Laos were irregular militia members who only fought seasonally.] However, these civilians were at one time soldiers during the war. The Laotian prisoners were also ex-soldiers. We were all captured during a time of peace when the country was settling down. (17:59)

Can you tell me how they decided who was an ex-soldier and who was not?

[A bit of confusion because he did not understand the question.] There were some Hmong and some Laotians who were informers for the Vietnamese. They knew those who served as soldiers during the war. (18:29)

What was the worst part of being held prisoner in that prison?

The first one was the lack of food to eat. The second one was being locked up all the time. The only time you got to walk out of the prison cell was to dump your waste from the bamboo tubes into the river. When that was done, you were chained up again. Those were the worst parts of that prison camp. (19:08)

How did you endure the three years there?

I couldn't; I was too weak to think or run away so you just stayed where you were. (19:18)

Were you already married and had children when you were captured?

I was married with children already. My wife and children were sent to *Nong Het already. (19:29)

Were you worried about the condition your wife and children were in?

Yes, I was really worried but I couldn't do anything. You can't really do anything about their condition when you're about to die and you don't know when you are going to die. Yes, I was very worried, but I could not do anything about it. (19:52)

As of today, do you believe that the Vietnamese and Pathet Laos still imprison Hmong people in Laos?

I don't know if there are any Hmong ex-soldiers left for them to imprison. They still put in prison those who go against their rules and regulations. (20:18)

What about those Hmong *Chao Fas who are still fighting in Laos today? Do you consider them soldiers still fighting for General Vang Pao or just bandits?

The *Chao Fas are still fighting for freedom, but because they cannot contact people over here for help [referring to General Vang Pao and the Hmong in the US] they continue to fight [alone]. If the Vietnamese capture these *Chao Fas then they will be put to death. There's no question about it. (21:08)

Let's talk about what happened to you after coming back from prison. When you were allowed to leave and met up with your family, what did you do next?

They imprisoned me, but didn't take me to court. My brother, *Na Kong Vang Moua [a Colonel ?] was [questions between interviewer and interviewee regarding his brother] was killed. He was in charge of the civilian villages. He was in charge of getting the proper food and supplies from USAID to the villagers. (22:30)

What happened when you returned to your village?

When they released me, I was so weak I could hardly walk. Somehow I made my way to *Pom Savah. There I was made to clean the governmental buildings there. I was even too weak to do this. The stronger prisoners were given hoes and rakes to clean the yards and I was given the task of gathering leaves and grasses to be thrown away. We performed these tasks for five days. It became unbearably hot and I could hardly take the heat. (23:02)

Were you with your family at this time?

No, I was not. This happened when I was taken out of the prison camp. During this time, I was still waiting for them to decide on my fate. There were no soldiers to guard us constantly, but we were all waiting for our orders. When we arrived at that place the Vietnamese told us that if we listened and obeyed them then we were free to go, but if we tried to escape they'd put us back into the same prison camp that we came out of. The first night there, they found a place for us to sleep. For five days, we searched and foraged for our own food there, trying to survive. They sent 10 of us from there to help with the rice harvest in *San Kuan. After harvesting rice there we were given documents and allowed to go find our wives and children. (23:53)

How did you find your way home? Did they give you any money for a taxi or any other means to help you come home?

They didn't give us anything. (24:05)

Given your weakened condition, how did you manage?

I made my way very slowly. (24:09)

When you came back home, what made you decide to come to Thailand?

I came back and stayed for one year. I was able to plant and harvest rice for that year. The following year, our relatives said that it was too hard to make a living in a time such as this, so we decided to make some documents from the government to move to *Vincheng and then to *Na Nyog and then to *Pho Nuer. Once we were close enough to the Thai border we escaped to Thailand. [During this time the Hmong were not allowed to travel without documents from the communist government. Noj Her and his relatives deceived the government by asking to be relocated closer and closer to the Thai border and then making a run for it.] (24:43)

What year did you reach Thailand?

We arrived in Thailand in 1985. (24:47)

When you reached Thailand, what happened to all your parents and siblings?

When I reached Thailand, some of my older brothers were already coming to the US, while a few were still in Thailand. (25:01)

Was Thailand hard for you and your family? Can you elaborate on it?

Yes, it was really hard for us. We came at a time when the Thais closed the border and didn't allow any more Hmong to come over. We came into the camp but couldn't register, so we could not get any food or medical attention. We had to buy or beg for some from our relatives. It was pretty hard; you had to find your own way of getting food on the table. After a year in the refugee camp, it was just too much for us, so we moved out to *San Khan and in five or six months were able to register to come over to the US. (25:37)

How many years did you and your family stay in Thailand?

One year at *Vinine, three to four months at *San Khan and three or four more months at *Pa Nai Ne Kong before we came over. (25:51)

When you first reached the US, where did you land?

We first landed in Seattle, then to San Francisco and finally to Fresno. (26:02)

How long did you stay in Fresno before moving to Minneapolis/St. Paul?

We landed in Fresno in March of 1983. We stayed there until 1985 [He said 1975 during the interview but it was supposed to be 1985]. (26:14)

Compare the US to Laos. What is your feeling about being here and not over there?

The younger generation is educated, so I don't know if it's hard for them. For us in the older generation, there are some good and bad things about living here. In the US, it's hard to go about and we need the younger generations to help us. There is no way for us to be self-sufficient like back in Laos. Those are some of the bad things about living here. (26:42)

If Laos became peaceful again, would you like to go back and live the way your parents and grandparents lived?

Yes, if Laos is peaceful and there is equality, then I would like to go back. I want to go back and have a farm. It's healthier that way. (27:07)

Do you have any words for the younger Hmong generation that will hear your words? What do you want to say to them about your generation?

I would like to tell all, whether they're my children or not, that since we came to live here [in the US] it's different from living in Laos. If you don't get an education, then job opportunities will be fewer for you. Pursue an education so you can get a job that will be able to support you. In Laos, it didn't matter if you were educated or not. If you had the strength and will, you could farm and be successful. You didn't have to worry about food or livestock because you were using your strength for getting everything that was necessary. Here in the US, there is no farmland for those who want to work on it. You must be educated to get a good job. (28:22)

So the core of your message is for the younger Hmong generations to continue to pursue an education so they will be secure in the future?

The important fact is that I want the younger Hmong generations to continue to get their education and to not worry so much about getting married. (28:46)

Do you have anything else to say?

No, this will be all. (28:49)

Thank you. (28:51)