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Interview with Pang Her Vang

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Pang Her Vang

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Editor: Paul Hillmer

What is your name, where were you born, and how old are you?

My name is Pang Her.

My father was called Cher Kou Her, but when we came to the US they called him Ya Yua Her instead. My mother's name is Shoua and she is from the Kong clan [Shoua Kong]. When they had me, they lived in the village of Ton Thao in the province of Xieng Caong. This is all I know. I do not know if it was a city or something else but the village of Ton Thao.

Before I could remember anything, my father was already a soldier. I do not know what type of soldiers but they were all wearing red berets. When my father was still in the military the Vietnamese [communists] came into our village, so he had to move. My parents decided to take us somewhere else. They then took us to Pon Kong. When we crossed the Na Khang River to [the village of] Pho Vien. I remember we slept for one night in Pho Vien. My grandmother [on my mother's side] was already in Pon Kong. We then went to Pon Kong and I remember it was not long after we arrived that they set up a school there. They told us to go to school, but I don't remember exactly how old I was. They allowed us [children] all to go to school, but we only stayed in Pon Kong for two years. Then they sent [General Vang Pao's] soldiers from Long Cheng to set up a fortress on Pon Kong. We knew we couldn't live there anymore, and we were afraid of the Vietnamese, so we decided to move to Po Sue. From there airplanes from Long Cheng came and picked us up. We then came to Long Cheng and from there to San Tong. We said that we were farmers, so they moved us again to Po Khan Houa. We farmed there and that was where I grew up and was married. We came straight to Thailand from there. (4:21)

Were your parents both Christians when you were born?

My father and mother were both Christians before they even met. As far as I know, my mother was still a little child when missionaries came and taught them Christianity. When I was growing up I didn't know about our traditional religion anymore. Both my parents took us to church from a small age until now. (4:58)

Were you one of the first Hmong groups to become Christian?

I don't know. But as my grandmother said, they were the first group to become believers. My parents, who are old {my father is now over 60 years old}, both were Christians even before they were married. My father was in one of the first Hmong groups to go to Bible School to study to become pastors. At this time, my grandma was by herself and was lonely and cried a lot, [Bible school was very far away], so my father decided to stay back and help grandma with the gardening.

However, some of his relatives did go and were one of the first groups of Hmong in that area to study to become pastors. When we lived in Po Khan Houa, I don't remember what year I was married, but we still lived there. In 1975 I had two children, but by then General Vang Pao left the country. We went to [the] Hang Her [region] and we slept there

for one night at a village on a riverbank. I don't remember what it was called but it might have been River Na[n] Lee.

The first day it was we, the Green Hmong, who said that we are pushing on [to go to Thailand], but Vietnamese soldiers were blocking the way and didn't allow us to pass. They threatened to kill us if we went. We were frightened and came back [to the village] and slept a second night there. The White Hmong decided to be in the front this time, and the soldiers still wouldn't let us pass. [The White Hmong] were determined and they pushed the soldiers aside. The soldiers instantly killed those who were in the front and the people panicked. The Vietnamese killed and wounded a couple of people. Two died immediately on that bridge. Thousands of people panicked and rushed back. The older people were trampling over the young ones. We couldn't get to Vien Xieng because the Vietnamese were blocking the way. We stayed at Na Sue, but we didn't know what to do, because there was not a grain of rice to eat. When we got to Na Sue, we searched for everything edible and ate it. We decided to go back to our old farms so we could at least find some food.

When we came back to our old farms we discussed our situation. We agreed that if we did not 'become Vietnamese' we would all be killed. We decided to become 'Vietnamese' [meaning that we would act like we were communist] when the Vietnamese came to visit us. We hid all of our weapons and didn't shoot any of them.

We had been there for about a year when Hmong guerilla fighters [soldiers who stayed behind instead of fleeing to Thailand] from Phon Bia came and told us that General Vang Pao had come back and that it was time for us to fight against the Vietnamese. They were lying, but we didn't know anything, so we thought it was true. Everyone went back to find their weapons that they had hidden and started to ambush Vietnamese convoys on the roads. The Vietnamese couldn't come in to our village, and they became very angry. They sent a lot of soldiers to come and fight us. In 1977, they attacked our region. They came by night, and by morning when they started to fight us they had set up artillery in all the high ground. They didn't even bother to come in to our village, and they started to shell us from north of Na Mooe. From there they shelled us, and everybody panicked and ran. They fired on the whole region, including small slim mountain and the big slim mountain area. It took them one day to do it. People didn't know where to flee. Some who were in the garden fields ran all about and those in the villages ran into their garden fields. Mothers went one way and children went another way. It took us all night just to regroup and to find more people that we knew near Mount—I think it was called Mount Kou-yeh. We were there for 20 days. The Vietnamese still shelled us and we couldn't live there anymore, so we fled to Na Feng. There was no food in this region. There were so many Hmong here that we crossed over to Sa La and lived there. We didn't know what to. We could become 'Vietnamese' again and live in the city of Phon Sa Vaj or go somewhere else. We were very worried. We decided to make a garden there and some of our relatives came back from Thailand to fight the Vietnamese in this area. During this time there was much anti-Vietnamese activity in this area; the Vietnamese didn't dare to come near. Those who had come from Thailand told us we should go there, too. (13:56)

Were you married by then?

Yes, I was married and had three children (14:04)

Did you still live with your parents?

Yes, we were together, but when we came to the region of Na Phen we were separated. I went with the Xiong clan. I was married to a man from the Xiong clan back then. I went to Sa La and we lived there for about half a year. Then we were told to move

to Thailand. We then moved from there to various villages. During this time we were very scared because there were many Vietnamese around. It took us eight days to come to the Mekong River. There were many who came with us, but we were the second group to arrive. The first group was the Yang Clan. There were more than 300 in our group. The first group came down to the river and poisoned their children with opium. [Otherwise babies make too much noise and risk getting the whole group killed.] Even so, the Vietnamese found them, started shooting at them, and chased them.

When they came back to us they were very upset and angry. They started to shoot their guns and we thought the Vietnamese were trying to kill us. We fled and hid. Everyone went their own way. We hid for one or two days. Along the way I met some of my relatives. One of them was sick and died at Mount Pa Chou. We stayed there for a couple of days and decided to investigate the situation along the river to see if it was safe to cross over to Thailand. Instead of going down to the river before knowing the dangers, they just headed for the closest place to forge the river. They hid the women and children in the forest. When they tried to look for a place to cross [the Vietnamese] shot Cheng's father [my first husband]. Two others hid for two days and came back and told us there was no way to cross. They didn't know what to do. After this incident, we stayed there for ten more days with little edible food to eat. We ate leaves and vines and tried to pull out roots or the inner parts of edible plants to eat. We immediately ate things that weren't bitter, as long as we could swallow them. We tried to dig out potato-like roots and cook them to eat them so we wouldn't die. We thought we would certainly die if we stayed like this. We decided to go back down to the river.

This time we went down river and approached a place that looked like it might be safe to cross. We waited for nightfall to cross. The men told us that they would go look again to see if it was safe and then they would come back and get us if it was safe. When we got to the river bank there were many Vietnamese patrolling it. When the men came back they tried to spook us by speaking Lao [Vietnamese can't speak Hmong so they speak in Lao for the Hmong to understand.] We women and children got scared and we fled until they told us who they really were.

The second try we went upriver to the same place we were a few days before. If we didn't make it this time we were going to die. They hid us a little north of there and four men tried to look for a place to escape over the water. The Vietnamese spotted and killed one of them and the remaining who survived told us to go back to the forest and hide. This time we had nothing to eat and the only thing we had was the clothing on us, just our children and blankets.

When we were hiding there for a day or so, many other Hmong also came there. There were many of them, because they could not go on. They all decided to surrender to the Vietnamese. Some agreed, while others did not. The Vietnamese knew where we were. When they shot the men who were looking for a good place to cross the river, they got letters and maps of where everyone was and how many of us there were. This information was given to the boat-owners so they would know how many boats we needed. There were three groups. We were the first group and the most tired. We could not even walk anymore and had nothing to eat. Our group decided to surrender. Another group decided to go back and fight a guerilla war against the Vietnamese. Others hid and hoped that they could eventually find a safe place to cross the river. The next day we decided to surrender. We sent four or five men, about three young ones and two older who could speak to the Vietnamese, to the Vietnamese's area to surrender and ask for an escort and food. They spoke to the Vietnamese and they told them that it was a good thing that they came today.

The next day was a scheduled assault on the area where the Hmong were hiding. They gave the men two pieces of white cloth because the next day they'd have many soldiers and these soldiers could not distinguish our group from the others. They said they were planning to kill everyone, including women and children, but they told us to hold and wave out these two white cloths so they would know who we were and would not shoot us. The men came back and told us that the next day at 6am we all had to be ready and gather at a large slab of rock to surrender to the Vietnamese.

The next day, just when it was about to dawn, we moved out and we didn't know how many soldiers there were. The men told us women to go out first with the flags to the large slab of rock. Those of us women who were starving came to a roadway before the slab of rock. There were a lot of Vietnamese soldiers there already. They had probably come during the night. On both sides of the road were Vietnamese soldiers pointing guns at us. We carried the two white pieces of cloth so we weren't hurt. The males in our group who were 14 years old or older were all tied up together. The Vietnamese took all our guns and knives. The women and children were not tied. Along the way, when they met someone who wasn't firing at them, they let them join our group. Those who resisted were killed. After they rounded us up, many more Vietnamese soldiers appeared—all with white, pale faces and speaking a language we had never heard of. We didn't even know what kind of people they were. In Laos, most of us have yellowish skin and we thought the same about them. Most were pale white with high nostrils and spoke a language that none of us understood. They didn't understand any Lao, but there were two Hmong men with them who translated for them. Other than that, we couldn't communicate.

They took us to Pa Ly and we slept there for one night. There we were given food and the Vietnamese told us not to eat too much because we were starving for over 20 days now. They gave us a little bit of rice. We were caged up for 15 days in a school. The men were still all tied up. If any of the men wanted to relieve themselves, the Vietnamese would release him and guard him and then re-tie him after he was finished.

They then sent us to Vien Cheng and we were sent back to Na Sue. Now the Vietnamese controlled us, and we lived like that for two years. We then moved to Mong Peng and Na Pong. This was the second time we tried to escape and we succeeded. Our relatives from Thailand got the news and picked us up at the river. We lived in the refugee camp of Vienine. This is all I have to say. (31:21)

Who was *Vang Kai Vue?

Vang Kai Vue was a military leader in *Moung Nong in the province of *Xieng Khoung.

He served under General Vang Pao?

He served under General Vang Pao in *Keng So. During this time, the Vietnamese made my father a leader in charge of *Pah Dou. We moved from *Pah Dou to *Pha Hom. My father was *Nie Kong Lia [military commander]. He received his second star in *Pha Hom. We moved from *Pha Hom to *Moung Chai. The Vietnamese chased us until *Moung Chai. My father received the military rank of *Capitent. In 1975 when General Vang Pao left the country, my father was a *Commenda [higher military rank]. Hence the name, *Commenda Gung Neng Xiong. In 1969, I was serving with the US force in Laos. I was a radio operator who eavesdrops on the enemy. For example, we would listen to all the conversations going from the field troops back to Hanoi regarding which logistical supplies were in demand. We would record the radio messages and translate them in *Chen Meng Udorn, Thailand. The [South] Vietnamese there would translate these messages into Laotian

and English. We would relay this vital information back to our forts in Laos that the Vietnamese planned to attack. In this way, our troops were well prepared for the Vietnamese's assaults. (5:20)

How long were you a soldier?

In 1969, when I was in *Moung Cha, I trained for a month. In 1969 in September or October, we were sent to *Moung Soia. We stayed there for two weeks before the Laotian government forced all those who served with General Vang Pao to leave that area. [During the secret war in Laos, Gen. Vang Pao's weapons and pay came directly from the CIA, bypassing the corrupt Laotian government. This caused tensions in the Laotian anti-communist alliance.] It was agreed to give that area to the Vietnamese force [because of a truce]. We pulled back to Long Cheng. 1971, we tried to take back the area. We went back and tried to take it. That year, many of the troops who partook in the fight suffered from foot infections. (6:35)

How were you trained? What type of weapons were you trained on? What was the quality of the leadership?

I wasn't trained to fire the weapons; my specialty was in radio recording. There were four Thai and two American instructors who taught us. The Americans were "Mr. Moose," Mr. *Scroll and *Mr. Mathis. [CIA operatives were given code names. Peter and Mr. Phoumee are talking about the CIA operatives.] Mr. Mathis was in charge of the CIA supply from the Thailand air base at *San Chen Ou Doua. This was the big US airbase in Thailand where all the fighter/bomber planes were deployed to fight in South Vietnam and Laos. Mr. Moose was stationed in *Mua Na. He controlled the radio operators who were stationed with the frontline troops in the *San Khoua area. In December 1971, Communist Chinese troops together with the Vietnamese tried to take Long Cheng. I was stationed on Skyline 2 [key surrounding hills of Long Cheng]. The Vietnamese were just at the base of our hill sending radio messages to *Lang Seng to direct accurate artillery fire into Long Cheng. (The best Vietnamese artillery piece was the 122mm Russian-made artillery that has a longer range than any of the Hmong's artillery.) That night, my friend and I were stationed up there with a company of Thai volunteers [By this time, the Hmong were so depleted of troops that Thai soldiers were sent to replace the lost]. We intercepted the Vietnamese radio messages. One Vietnamese radio operator was far off while the other operator seemed to be close to our base. The closer radio operator would call for coordinated artillery barrage. If it was not accurate, he would call in to re-correct the coordinates. (The closer Vietnamese radio operator was a forward observation soldier who was giving coordinates for artillery.) Their two artillery pieces became very accurate after a while. They were targeting the residence of Colonel *Vang Seng and the Buddhist Temple. Some of the houses were burning. They fired all night until the morning. During the morning, one of our Thai instructors flew into Long Cheng to get the recording from us. We gave the tape to him and he flew off to *Na Sue. Na Sue was still a safe place while Long Cheng had primarily become a military base. (Long Cheng was at one time the second largest city in Laos due to the CIA secret air base there, along with General Vang Pao's main base of operation. During the height of the war, the Long Cheng single airstrip was busier than Chicago International Airport.)****Where did you get this statistic???** Before nightfall, the plane carrying our Thai instructor came back. He ordered us to depart because the Vietnamese were planning a massive attack that night. Our bombers were going to carpet bomb all our positions to deny the enemy everything of

value. Our options were to depart with him to Thailand or go back to our homes. We both quickly packed up our equipment and belongings and put them in the airplane and we flew to *Na Sue. (10:21)

What about the Thai troops?

The Thai troops were left on that hill. It was night already when we reached *Na Sue. We got on another plane to Thailand. Upon reaching Thailand we were given food and ordered back to work. We climbed aboard a C-47 transport plane and flew back to Laos again. [7 second pause] When we flew back to Long Cheng, it was being overrun already. Skyline 2 [a fortified ridge] was taken by the enemy while Skyline 1 was still heavily fought over. Our attack air crafts were bombing the ridge on Skyline 1. We don't know whether the Thais on the ridges were killed or had escaped. We fought all night and by morning the Vietnamese were in control of the majority of Long Cheng. The attack planes stationed in Long Cheng would take off only to bomb part of the Long Cheng area taken by the enemy. We circled around Long Cheng all night. We saw that the fort that we both were in earlier was totally destroyed by our own planes after it was overrun. All the troops there were killed and the Vietnamese were everywhere. (11:52)

What did you do once the Vietnamese were firmly in control of the majority of Long Cheng?

There were no civilians in Long Cheng by then. There were only troops there. Some of our troops were still on isolated forts that surrounded Long Cheng. There was fierce house-to-house fighting in the general area of Long Cheng. The T-28 attack planes were all flown to *Na Sue. (12:25)

Was *Na Sue the second largest base for you guys?

*Na Sue was headquarters for USAID [United States Agency for International Development, which provided support for the local Hmong civilians]. The USAID was originally in *Sam Thom but when *Sam Thom was overrun, it was changed to *Na Sue. [Talking among ourselves over the matter.] The civilians who were business-minded moved to *Na Sue along with all their equipment. The majority of the civilians moved to *Pha Kheng and *Phon Tha, which is over the *NaNoung River. Everybody tried to disperse into the smaller villages and towns. We then moved our airbase over into Thailand after 1972. We flew into Laos but would not land there anymore. We were divided into two teams. One team flew during the day while the other flew during the night. I was on the team that flew during the night time.

What type of planes were used? Were they modified C-47 transport planes?

Yes, C-47s were used during the night missions but ...[pause and confusion regarding the planes he used to be on for those missions]. At first, we used these twin engine dark green military planes and some smaller ones before we switched over to the C-47s. Only the C-47 can fly all night without refueling. The previous planes could not. The C-47s were modified to carry more fuel storage. In this way, we would take off at 6:00 pm and land back in Thailand at 6:00 am in the morning. (15:07)

How long did you do those night missions?

I flew these missions from 1971 to 1973. After 1973, the war in Laos was de-escalating. The Americans no longer needed our program because they were pulling their troops out of the war [Vietnam], so we were disbanded and sent back to Laos. (15:41)

When you were on those night missions, did you and your crew mates encounter any enemy anti-aircraft fire?

Yes, we did. They tried to take us down, but we flew very high. We usually flew about 12,000 ft. [Most of the Vietnamese anti-aircraft weapons were heavy machine guns, effective only below 12,000 feet.] One time, one of the day-time planes was hit around 10:00 am by enemy fire close to the area of *Bam Na. It was hit twice on the tip of one of the wings. It made it back and was escorted by two T-28 fighter/bombers. We thought that these planes were heading for the airfield in *Vientiane [Capital of Laos] but it came back to Thailand instead. [We were discussing some of the Laotian words he was using in the previous sentence.] The planes didn't land in *Vientiane because of the political situations there. Many in the Laotian government were supportive of the Communist cause and others were divided. There were too many Communist spies at the capital and our missions were secret, and so we were not authorized [by the Americans] to land in Laos. (17:20)

After 1973, when you were disbanded and flew back into Laos, where did you go and what did you do after that?

When we were disbanded, some of us became guerillas, continuing the fight, while others tried to settle back into their old life prior to the war.

What about you? What did you do?

I married in 1972 already. The Americans stopped sending aid to the Hmong after 1973 and the Americans were pulling out of the war. There was no more work left for us. We were sent back to Laos and I became a farmer once again. (18:18)

How many children did you have during that time?

I didn't have any children yet. (18:25)

Can you tell us what year you escaped into Thailand and how you managed to do it?

In 1975, General Vang Pao left Laos and sought asylum in Thailand. In 1976, the Vietnamese came and took over the whole of Laos. Some of us became *Chao Fa [guerilla fighters named after a legendary figure and revolt during the French rule of Indo-China.] That same year, we moved out of our village of *Mouag Cha to *Mouan Own near *Ma Na. We lived there until 1978. That year, the Vietnamese troops started to attack us there and everywhere else, including *Khe, *Moung Cha and the *Mouan Own area including *Phom Bia. There were many Vietnamese troops who took part in the battle. We couldn't fight effectively because we were tied down with our wives and children. We were dispersed into the jungles and lived on wild roots and plants for two years. In 1979, we couldn't live like that any longer so we surrendered to the Vietnamese. We lived like that for a while. The Vietnamese forced us to work—in French its called *"coulee" [forced labor]. [We both agree on the meaning of the French word.] We were forced to carry ammunition and rice for them from *Moung Chat to their forts in *Muong Oun. From *Muong Oun, we carried ammunition to the surrounding forts. After coming out of the jungle, we were very weak and sick with a high fever. They forced me to carry two 82 millimeter mortar rounds. I was so weak that by the time I finished carrying ammunition from *Ba Hi to the forts at *Mom Nia and *Pho Con Ha, I was about to die. They forced us to carry rice from *Moung Cha for their troops in eat at *Pho Na Kha, which is near *San Khoung. After this experience, we realized that the Vietnamese way was very "strange." It's not like they didn't

have transportation aircraft and trucks to transport supplies to their troops. They refused to use their machines and forced us to do the labor. It was a policy that we all didn't like. They didn't pay us anything; we did the labor for free. (21:55)

Did the Vietnamese know that you were a former soldier for General Vang Pao?

They knew that every one of us men were soldiers, but since we weren't captured during the war, they couldn't prove it.

What happened if they had proof that you were a soldier?

If they had proof, then I would have to go to the "re-education" camps. Most who went to get "re-educated" were higher-ranking officials. Anyone who was a Captain or above was taken to the camps. Those who went there never came back.

Were they all killed?

The Vietnamese would make them work until they died. Those who were below the official rank of Captain were allowed to come back if they followed orders. (22:49)

How did you and your family escape from the Vietnamese?

When we were still performing forced labor for the Vietnamese, I owned a lot of farm land on that hill. I didn't know that the Vietnamese were going to build a fort there. Prior to burning that area to make it suitable for farming, we asked the Vietnamese commander of the fort for permission first. They had an 82mm mortar and 12.7mm heavy machine gun along with crates full of ammunition in that fort. I asked the commander if his men could set fire to the grass around their fort while I set fire on the grass at the bottom of the hill. I told him that it was time for me to plant my corn. [Hmong slash-and-burn farming techniques required the burning of a selected area first to fertilize the seedlings because of the lack of nutrients in the tropical soil.] The commander ordered his troops but the field wouldn't start on fire. The next day around 12 noon when it was blazing hot, my brother-in-law and I started to burn the grasses at the bottom of the hill after we received permission from the commander again. The soldiers wanted to see this event also. When the fire was started, a strong gust of wind moved the fire quickly into the Vietnamese fort. In the meantime, we were on the next hill across the ravine under the shade of some banana trees. We wanted to view the fire from there. When the wind and fire were picking up, some brush that was on fire blew straight into the Vietnamese eating quarters. The mess quickly caught on fire and then the bunkers that housed the 82mm mortar and the 12.7mm heavy machine gun also went up in flames. All the bunkers and buildings were connected, so the fire quickly spread everywhere. Suddenly the 82mm mortar and 12.7mm rounds started to explode! [He imitated the explosion by saying "Bee Boom!, Bee Boom!, Bee Boom!"] All the Vietnamese dashed out into the other side of the hill into the opium field. The Vietnamese started to fire their weapons into the air and towards our village. They probably expended all the ammunition they had with them. At that time we were very scared. Once we got home we met our grandfather who was visiting. He said, "Hey you two jokers, how did you guys manage to set fire to the Vietnamese's fort? You two better do what you two have in mind!" We asked him to go reconcile with the Vietnamese. I gave him a bottle of liquor to go talk to the Vietnamese commander. The commander told him that we did not need to worry. The commander told us not to leave the village and that he knew we didn't do it on purpose. Both of us were responsible for building the roofs of the building while

the Vietnamese troops would be making the sidings. I then quickly went over to our house and took off our roof thatch to contribute our share to the rebuilding of the fort. (26:42)