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## Interview with Phoumee Xiong

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# Mr. Phoumee Xiong

Interviewer: Peter Chou Vang  
Translator/Transcriber: Peter Chou Vang  
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## **What is your name?**

My name is Phoumee from the Xiong Clan. (00:11)

## **In Laos, when and where were you born? What were your parents' names?**

I was born in February 1952 in the village of \*Moug Ngang in the providence of \*Xieng Khouang of Laos. My father was \*Gung Neng Xiong who was \*Ta Bomb Txiah Pao's son. [P = What about your mother's name?] My mother's name was \*Txong Vue who was the daughter of Vang Pia Vue, who was from \*Nia Chia. (00:50)

## **When you were born, did they give you a Hmong name [Phoumee is a Laotian name]?**

Yes they did. I was given the name \*Ta Tong. (1:00)

## **Can you tell us what your chores were as a child growing up in your village?**

After I was born in the village of \*Na Vane in 1952, the French war was raging already. The French had arrested my grandfather and put him in the stockade in \*Moug Ngang. After the Vietnamese took the fort (at Moug Ngang) from the French, they freed my grandfather and put him in charge, giving him the title of \*Tam Boung. Once the French retook our area, my grandfather was put back in the stockade for another year. After the French released my grandfather, our whole family moved to \*Moung Khang Ker. We lived there for about four or five years. In 1963, Vang Kia Vue...that was when General Vang Pao received his fifth star [Was he giving the rank of Brigadier General?]. Vang Kia Vue followed us to \*Moung Khang Ker. This was when we joined with Vang Kia Vue to fight the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops. We fought like this until 1969. I was only a little kid then. I remember I could barely fire an M-1 \*Grande but I could shoot an M-1 Carbine [a smaller US supply military rifle].

## **Who was \*Vang Kai Vue?**

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

## **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

Un Dor, 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 Oua 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 Kheg 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 \*Mouang Own near \*Ma Na. We lived there until 1978. That year, the Vietnamese troops started to attack us there and everywhere else, including \*Khe, \*Mouang Cha and the \*Mouang 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 it's 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 \*Mouang Chat to their forts in \*Mouang Own. From \*Mouang Own, 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 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 machinegun along with crates full of ammunitions 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)