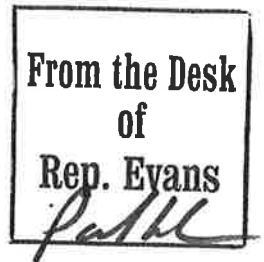


Hmong Vietnam War Vets Still Seeking Recognition

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Charlie Moua and 60 other Hmong soldiers plan to celebrate Veterans Day by marching around the Hmong Church in south Sacramento in their camouflage fatigues at 10 a.m., telling stories about the 15-year jungle war they fought against the North Vietnamese and communist Pathet Lao. They will celebrate the new life they gave their children in America. They will relive their victories over the better-equipped North Vietnamese Army -- victories U.S. combat veterans credit with saving the lives of tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers. They will toast their fallen comrades and their legendary leader, Gen. Vang Pao, who died in 2011.

Moua, 65, and other remaining members of the CIA's Special Guerrilla Unit won't be marching in an official Veterans Day parade with other Vietnam veterans. They have never been accorded U.S. veteran status and cannot be treated at veterans hospitals.

They are hoping, however, that someday soon they will win the right to be buried in U.S. national cemeteries alongside American soldiers.

"We want to preserve our legacy so our children know why we served and what we gained from this war," Moua said.

Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, last month reintroduced legislation that would accord military burial rights to Hmong veterans who have become U.S. citizens under the 2000 Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act. Costa has pushed the idea for several years, but says he is hopeful the measure will pass by next year. Costa put the number of Hmong soldiers who died in the war at 35,000.

"We've been building momentum and getting bipartisan support," said Costa, whose district includes roughly 40,000 Hmong, according to U.S. census data from 2010. Another 27,000 live in the Sacramento region. Costa has a companion bill in the Senate and the support of Rep. Paul Cook, R-Yucca Valley, a Vietnam veteran and retired Marine Corps colonel.

Costa said his legislation is urgent, given that many of the Hmong fighters have already died. "There are less than 6,000 Hmong Special Guerrilla Unit fighters left alive today, and granting them burial rights alongside other veterans is about honor, it's about dignity, it's about paying back with respect those who stood with us," Costa said. "We did the same for Filipino soldiers who fought with us during World War II."

The bill would also cover other Lao Vietnam-era veterans, including the Lu Mien, Costa said.

If Costa's bill becomes law, the Hmong and other Lao would become the first members of a foreign guerrilla army to qualify for U.S. military burial benefits. The case of the Philippines' WWII soldiers differs because the country was a U.S. commonwealth at the time of the war, transitioning to independence, and its fighters were eventually recognized as veterans.

While natives of other nations have a long history of fighting alongside U.S. troops, the Hmong mercenaries present a special case, said Lt. Col. Tony Palumbo, director of the California State Military Museum. "For centuries we have been paying people to help fight our wars and if they lost their lives they were always shipped back to their home countries," Palumbo said. "But the Hmong are unique because they became U.S. citizens, and the U.S. is their home turf and that's where their families are," Palumbo said. "That's the huge difference between the Hmong and the guerrillas that fought alongside us in the military events we had in Central America in the 1980s."

As U.S. citizens, "they have earned every right to be buried alongside U.S. born soldiers and airmen," said Palumbo, a veteran of the war in Iraq.

Thousands of Hmong soldiers have died in poverty and obscurity, never appreciated by their country or their Americanized children, said Moua, president of the Special Guerrilla Unit Vietnam Veterans (SGUVV), representing 1,200 former soldiers left in California, most of whom live in the Central Valley between Fresno and Chico.

"Our bloodshed and sacrifice brought the Hmong 100 years into the future by coming to this country -- that's what we gave our children," Moua said. "American children respect their parents, but Hmong children don't even bother to find out where their parents are coming from."

Moua said his 21-year-old son told him, "'I'm in a different world right now, we're not involved in that and we don't want to talk about it.' It's very sad."

When the Communists began to take over Laos in the early 1960s, the CIA recruited Vang Pao to organize a Hmong fighting force. On May 7, 1963, Moua said, he was trained to fire an M-14 rifle. "I was 11 1/2 years old, when I put it on my shoulder the other end was dragging on the ground. Any boy who was able to hold a gun was drafted," he said. "At night we were more afraid of ghosts than we were of the enemy."

Moua said men, women and children worked around the clock to build the first U.S. air strip in Laos. "We were willing to die for freedom, and committed every ounce of energy to gain that," he said.

After the Communists took over in 1975, more than 100,000 Hmong refugees fled to the United States, where they struggled mightily to fit in. Few could read, write or speak English. As political refugees, they could apply for citizenship and receive welfare benefits, but those who fought were not recognized as military veterans.

Major Khoua Xiong, 80, of Sacramento was a battalion commander at Long Chieng, the secret CIA airbase. "I had 300 soldiers -- 100 survived," he said.

His cousin, Major Katoua Xiong, 74, said he led a company of 100 soldiers, a third of them 12-14 year old boys. Half were killed. "When seven American pilots were shot down, I went out to secure the area for American choppers to come pick them up," Katoua Xiong said.

Once in the United States, both men landed jobs as janitors "for \$3.50 a hour, better than the CIA," Katoua Xiong said. "The CIA paid me 1,000 kip per month -- about \$2, enough to buy fabric to make clothes for my children."

Khoua Xiong said he made even less -- 800 kip a month. He came to Sacramento in 1980 where he and 12 other family members shared a four-bedroom apartment in a gang-ridden neighborhood in south Sacramento. "I could not make enough money to feed my family," he said. "I don't know how to write. I'm a farm boy."

Gayle Morrison, who chronicled the relationship between the CIA and the Hmong guerrillas in her new book, *Hog's Exit*, about CIA case agent Jerry Daniels, said "multiple U.S. government representatives promised Vang Pao and his troops if Laos was lost, the U.S would take care of the Hmong."

The Hmong Special Guerrilla Units tied up thousands of North Vietnamese troops that otherwise would have been fighting against American troops in Vietnam, Morrison said. "The SGU had road watch teams on the very dangerous Ho Chi Minh Trail that helped U.S. bombers take down Viet Cong convoys, and were involved in rescuing downed U.S. pilots -- they deserve to be buried in our national cemeteries."

Last Thursday, Moua and the Xiong cousins went to visit the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial in Capitol Park. The more than 5,000 names listed include no Hmong, but in the Rose Garden, two waist-high concrete blocks with names of Hmong and Lu Mien "freedom fighters" were dedicated in 2001.

Major Khoua Xiong is there, but Captain Charlie Moua and Major Katoua Xiong are not.

"We fought on the same field against the same enemy, many of us died for American troops," said Katoua Xiong, a lump forming in his throat. "When we pass away we get no help, no commendations. I want a military plot and a 21-gun salute. We all feel sorry for those who didn't live long enough to get anything."

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