

Tom Marks/ [REDACTED]

### GUERRILLAS IN THE MIST/Hmong Resistance Continues in Laos

It is an upbeat Hmong resistance patrol that moves into our position in "Xaignabouri" Province, Laos.

The operation has gone well. Decimated first by the blast from a homemade claymore, then hit with small arms, the communists suffered four dead. The patrol lost no one. More importantly, it captured two rifles, together with more than 160 rounds of ammunition.

Of such small successes are guerrillas wars won -- especially in Xaignabouri.

Xaignabouri. In the old days we called it "Sayaboury," but the Lao communists, in a drive for authenticity, have gone ethnic and changed everything to x's and gn's. The irony, of course, is that it was the hated imperialists, the French, who came up with the transliteration system "Viangchan" (Vientiane) is now using!

More ironic still is that, while asserting their own cultural prerogatives, the Lao have set their energies to the elimination of another way of life -- that of the tribesmen who cluster about on my ridgeline.

These are the Hmong. Small, tough people who stick to the hills, they fight a lonely battle for survival.

"The Lao government tells their people to kill us, and they do," says a diminutive soldier, not even 5-feet tall. "They come to kill us because we are Hmong. We do not want to fight, but we must to save our culture, our writing, our beliefs, our language. These are important to be human, to be a person of the world."

He speaks with passion, as "Group 2," led by Pang Chang Her, 30, begins to relax. It has been a hard two weeks.

As they go through their debriefing, combatant after combatant mentions the key role played by Xiong Por, 34. He was everywhere, the men recount, even after he was wounded (it turns out to be minor).

The more they describe him, the more I know this is a man I've got to meet.

In any case, word is out to the patrol that there's a foreign photographer looking for some good shots. Thus it's no surprise when an Asian Charlie Brown, Beach Boy haircut straight out of my junior high school days, sidles up, grins and says, "You want action, you come with me."

The patrol's respectful gaze makes clear the man's identity: Xiong Por.

"This can't be Xiong Por!" I'm thinking. "Xiong Por the Brave? Xiong Por the Fierce? Xiong Por the Terrible-in-a-Fight and Xiong Por the Thank-Goodness-He's-On-Our-Side?"

Yet it is. And a more mild-mannered fellow you could not hope to meet. Soft spoken, kind, considerate...in the village, the model citizen.

But can he fight! I saw him, weeks later, go down as a Lao RPG-7 round blew up, it seemed, right in his face. I went over backwards myself from the blast.

He was up before I could get the camera focused again. Blood streaming down his face, he threw back everything but the kitchen sink. The other troops literally fed him weapons as he pumped rounds into the communist positions -- RPG, grenade launcher, rifle. He probably would have thrown my camera, had I handed it to him!

All the while his expression barely changed. He just did it.

Later, as we raced through the bush, mortar shells and RPG rounds going off all-round, machinegun fire to the rear, Pang Chang Her asked him if he was alright.

"I think they hurt me," was all he said.

Pang Chang Her kissed Xiong Por's forehead. I gave him my First Aid wrap, which he gratefully accepted -- and put in his pocket! Off we went.

It was many hours before Xiong Por was treated: they put some iodine on the shrapnel. There was no way to extract it.

He never said a word. And afterwards, safe in camp, he had only one request: would I tell his wife in the States that I had seen him and that he was fine? I said I would be honored.

What motivates such a man? One evening, by a flickering fire in a smoke-filled bamboo hut, he tells me:

"I joined Chao Fa [the resistance movement] in 1976, because the Lao, after the Vietnam War, said the Hmong and the Lao could live in peace. But then they started to round up all our leaders who had fought with Vang Pao [the Hmong leader]. Plus, because we have different customs, they kept trying to kill us. That's why we fight."

### Struggle for Survival

What more noble cause can there be?

Still, humanity has a fickle conscience. We care about the rights of the unborn...and about the rain forests...and about the habitat of owls. And even about some native peoples -- we gasp in astonishment at the vanished world of the American Plains Indians and shower awards on "Dances With Wolves." But where the real "Indians" are fighting and dying every day, we are conspicuous only in our absence.

So it is that a brave race, the Hmong, struggles on amidst the near-total silence of the world.

"We want to know why no one helps us," says Yang Ching Cheng, 28, son of a farmer from Xiengkhouang Province. "Why do some countries have programs to save natural resources, trees, and plants, even animals, but not for Hmong lives? Are we not as important as the trees or the animals?"

It is a question that lingers, like the mists that shroud the hills at this time of year, the rainy season.

The largest of the roughly one hundred ethnic minorities who inhabit Laos, the Hmong once tallied more than 300,000 in a national population of only three and a half million. They have seen their numbers within Laos itself dwindle to less than a third of the previous figure.

In the process, they have been scattered to the corners of the earth as refugees. Fresno, California, it is said with a touch of irony, is the largest "Hmong city" in the world. Ban Vinai, a major refugee camp in Thailand, was at one point not far behind (it has since declined in numbers).

And now, the Hmong fear for the survival of their way of life. Thus, though their conflict is often portrayed as a remnant of the Second Indochina War -- the communist Lao settling old scores with their most tenacious foe, the so-called CIA "Secret Army" of Vang Pao -- it is not ideology but the specter of genocide that drives the resistance movement of the "Chao Fa" (literally "God's disciples," but translated by the Hmong themselves as "Sky Soldiers") against the Lao government.

Says Yang Teng, 39, Secretary General of the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELOL), the umbrella body created by Chao Fa to encourage other minorities to fight with it, "We have forgotten all about Vietnam. We have forgotten about communists or capitalists. We do not fight for these things but for the Hmong. We have our own culture, our own social structure, everything different from other people. We want to live our own lives. We do not want to destroy Laos or the Lao government. That's someone else's problem...What we want is to be Hmong. We have our own culture and letters [language]. That is the goal for which we fight."

Such sentiment has resulted in a movement that echoes the "Ghost Dance" revolt of the late Nineteenth Century -- the last gasp of Plains Indian culture in America. As patrols armed with a bewildering array of modern weapons leave for "the front," communicating by ICOM radio, aged holy men labor to produce thick hand-lettered and illustrated volumes of Hmong folklore and customs. The script is not romanized characters, adopted by missionaries to the Hmong tonal language, but the Sanskrit-like writing of the Hmong themselves, a unique script invented by an illiterate farmer, Yang Shang Li. The drive to record what is known before the memories vanish is all-encompassing.

Indeed, it is the figure of Yang Sheng Liu, "the father of Hmong letters" -- a revered Hmong teacher persecuted by both the communists and the Royal Lao government for his messianic blend of mysticism with a Hmong literacy campaign (and ultimately killed by one side or the other about 1971) -- who is at the root of the Chao Fa phenomenon. Both Chao Fa's president, Pa Kao Her, 59, who works in the Thai-Lao border areas, and its military leader, Zong Xia Her (aka. Zhang Zhua Her), who commands the Hmong redoubt at Phu Bia in Xiengkhouang Province of Laos, knew Mr. Yang personally (in a confusing practice, some Hmong offer their names Chinese style, others in the Western fashion). Today, many younger Chao Fa members wear amulets containing Yang's picture or simply carry cards with the same likeness.

Interestingly, soldiers asked about these scoffed at the notion that they might contain special powers. Rather, they were just one more appeal for protection in a world of myriad spirits.

"We know only [about] Yang Sheng Lue," explains President Pa Kao Her, "so we believe in him. We pray for him, but we don't know what God is above him. We ask him to protect the Hmong and the other groups that have problems like the Hmong. He's in the same position as Jesus, but we don't know who his father was. Maybe the same father."

It is this fusion of two worlds, the matter of fact acceptance of the known and the unknown, that informs all the Hmong resistance does. Cleaning of weapons, carried out amidst a discussion on the situation of the Kurds in Iraq, goes on even as ceremonies are conducted nearby to appease an evil spirit deemed to be dogging a soldier wounded in successive skirmishes. Likewise, Yang Sheng Lue may or may not be a heavenly messenger: the Hmong are frank concerning their uncertainty on the point. What matters to them is that the sage sought to spread literacy.

States Pa Kao Her emphatically, "It is knowing the Hmong letters that will allow the Hmong to change as the world changes and, therefore, survive."

### Birth of Resistance

Though facts are vague, best evidence indicates that it was the communist threat to this vision of cultural identity and

survival that prompted the original Hmong resistance in the immediate post-World War II years. Then, Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh made the Vietnamese northwest and Lao northeast, rugged hill country all, their base areas. In the process, they gained some Hmong converts but even more Hmong enemies.

"The Hmong custom is democratic," relates Nou Tou Kue, 31, a former primary school student now working to procure supplies -- and whose father, 53, still shoulders a rifle. "You can do whatever you want...The communists tell us we must stop everything. If an important person comes to your house, you cannot be their host, you cannot kill food for them. So the Hmong join with the Americans in [the] Vietnam [War]."

Vang Pao, a Hmong officer in the Royal Lao Army, served as the vehicle to rally virtually the entire Hmong populace in support of the Allied war effort. But even before Vang Pao's American-assisted rise to prominence, the Hmong resistance movement already existed, as did the core of the Chao Fa movement, though it is unclear that it was called such at the time. When the Americans offered the hill revolt modern arms to resist "the Vietnam," as the Hmong invariably term the foe, the tribesmen accepted with alacrity. For it was the Vietnamese communists, rarely the inept Pathet Lao, who did the fighting in Laos.

In the fierce struggle that followed, centered in Xiengkhoang, where Yang Sheng Lue taught, the Hmong gave as good as they took. The conflict bore little resemblance to the burlesque portrayed in the recent film "Air America," and casualties were heavy. Nonetheless, the Hmong were never vanquished.

When, however, communist victories in the other two Indochina states, Vietnam and Cambodia, insured that Laos, too, would fall, Vang Pao and the senior "Secret Army" leaders agreed to leave the country. In return, the Hmong were to be given amnesty.

They, in fact, demobilized and returned to their clearings in the hills; but the Lao, controlled by their Vietnamese "advisors," were unwilling to let bygones be bygones. They set spark to kindling by launching a campaign of murder and arrest against former "Secret Army" personnel. Clan loyalties being what they were, they soon faced a conflagration: Chao Fa.

Hence, the present struggle stems principally from post-rather than pre-1975 events. Vang Pao eventually sought to get back onto the playing field, and forces loyal to him do appear active in some areas under the banner of a Chao Fa rival, the United Lao National Liberation Front (ULNLF) -- it claims to be a coalition of all anti-communist peoples in Laos. But it is Chao Fa that remains the locus of the Hmong struggle.

Explains Pa Kao Her, "I followed Vang Pao before, because he was a Hmong leader. I thought he was fighting for the Hmong and

their language and customs. But he had different goals. He was not able to protect the Hmong, so we started Chao Fa."

Adds Yang Tang, "What Vang Pao is talking about is no longer possible. What we are talking about here is the survival of the Hmong people."

And while Pa Kao Her and a few others were field grade equivalents under Vang Pao -- the president commanded Groupe Mobile 21 -- virtually all other figures, whether officers or regular soldiers, are "second generation" guerrillas. Too young to have fought with Vang Pao, they have been mobilized by communist abuse.

Recounts Chao Her, 26, a soldier who now works with the cadre organizing the populace, "My father was a soldier in General Vang Pao's army. He was a soldier, only a soldier...But in 1982 the Lao Army came to kill my father. They killed him in the fields with my older brother, in the small house where we stay while we work. So I joined Chao Fa. I have three younger brothers. We all joined."

It is a story that has been repeated in myriad versions. For, faced with resistance, the communists unleashed an all-out assault on the Hmong people. It was then that the "yellow rain" attacks began.

#### Communist Chemical Warfare

Enough has been written about "yellow rain" to fill several books. Some critics continue to claim that the whole business was a State Department/CIA fabrication. Others hypothesize that the Hmong, traumatized by the beating their society took during decades of conflict, interpreted outbreaks of disease -- or even bee droppings -- as indications of chemical attack.

Without becoming embroiled in fruitless debate (bee droppings or no), suffice to say that a persuasive body of evidence, to include signals intelligence, supports the contention that the communists utilized chemical warfare, particularly in attacks on Hmong strongholds deep inside Laos. That the precise agent continues to elude specialists remains a source of considerable frustration for all concerned with the issue -- more so since the attacks apparently continue, having been witnessed on at least one occasion by Thai military personnel.

For the Hmong themselves, there is no question that chemical agents have been used against them. Asked to comment on the theory that "yellow rain" is, put bluntly, bee shit, Yang Ching Cheng grows quite animated.

"We've been in Laos more than a hundred years," he exclaims, "and we've never seen the bees dropping on us. Only since 1976 to now. In the world, we don't care who believes, but we know we have never died before from bee droppings. We've always eaten

bee products. Why does this stuff only drop where we are? Such attacks always precede by one or two months the communist ground assaults on us.

"These chemical weapons have caused much sickness for us. If the drops go on your skin, and you wash, you're OK. But if you don't, in a few hours you will feel weak, eyes running, nose running, dizziness, headache, pain in the eyes like they will come out of your head. You get nausea, hard to breath; watery diarreah comes very quickly.

"Whenever these things fall, we have these symptoms. We have no one trained in chemistry, but we have read some books. We send samples to the Thai Army, to foreign people, but they say they get no results in laboratory testing. They say the samples are not natural but not toxic. So we have no idea what it is.

"What we want is for somebody to test it themselves, eat a little bit, drink a little bit. If it causes sickness, then they will know it is a toxic chemical from the Lao government."

Frustration is likewise evident in the account of Nou Tou Kue, 31, a former student who, after a stint as a fighter, is working in the Foreign Affairs secretariat of the Chao Fa Central Committee:

"Last year [1990] in March, after the big Lao push started, I went to the fighting in our area. I made four or five boxes of samples, and I took them to Bangkok. I gave to the French Embassy, the U.S. Embassy, Thai Army. I take to them. They always saying things but not meeting me.

"Finally, one American official met me. He said, 'Why you bring this stuff here?' I say, 'You are America, the first country of freedom. Everyone looks up to you. You should help us get our human rights.'

"So he took it and put it in a big box and said he would check and get back to me. He talked to me a long time and had me talk to another man in MIA [Missing in Action -- a U.S. program based in Bangkok which attempts to check the veracity of reported live sightings]. But we have heard nothing.

"Some Thai commanders say they are sure they [the communists] are using it [chemical agents], but they can say nothing [publicly] due to the political situation.

"One time a Thai Captain with thirty soldiers came to the border to see our fate. They see the Hmong get sick and die. Even a Thai village had the same symptoms.

"Then, while they're there, at about 10:30, the Pathet Lao start 'yellow rain' again. They see with their own eyes. They know it is real. Is 'yellow rain' for sure.

"That Captain talked to the headquarters in Nan. He took samples for himself. Some in the Thai Army say it's 'yellow rain,' and they make in the newspaper. But the paper doesn't make clear who is dying -- we are!

"After that we have a meeting with the Thai Army. But then politics surfaced, and the whole business was dropped. But the Thai [now] have seen!"

Questioned in Bangkok on the condition he not be named, an official attached to the U.S. Embassy confirmed the time frame of the attack and the presence of apparent chemical weapons casualties in the Nan Hospital. The medical personnel there, in fact, were themselves convinced chemical agents were being used, and they initially talked freely with several Western reporters and observers. But when articles appeared, quoting the personnel, they were ordered not to give any further interviews.

As for the U.S. reaction, the official observed laconically, "No one cares in Washington. Word is it's not happening, so it isn't."

His demeanor, of course, hammers home the obvious: it is.

A Hmong "doctor," Lor Chong Blia, 23, puts the issue in rather sophisticated perspective for me, "The usual symptoms we associate with 'yellow rain' are dizziness and vomiting with diarrhea, especially problems with the urinary tract. It could be from bad water, but we have never seen anything like this before."

Previously a combatant, now assigned the task of administering to sick and wounded, he speaks to me while changing the traditional herb pack on the mangled leg of a 16-year old youth. An AK-47 round has passed through the youth's right hand, then hit just above the right knee, leaving a gapping wound.

Lor Chong Blia has no formal medical training -- he has never even been out of the hills. Yet he proceeds with astonishing knowledge and skill, even while asking if I can get him a book on surgery.

"I need that very much," he states matter-of-factly, "because I do not know how to fix these [he points at the mass of torn tissue]. Most wounds I have seen like this heal in about two months. We put traditional medicine on, and the skin [tissue] grows back together.

Lor Chong Blia continues, "It all depends upon the herbs that are available. Some are very strong, others not so good. Some places we can get a lot, others not so much. The ones in this place are not very strong. But he [the youth] has no fever, and there is no puss. With no infection, he should recover."



He pauses for a moment, then pats the youth, but a few years younger than himself, on the shoulder and says, "That is good for us, because though he is young, he is a very good soldier."

The boy never changes expression. The wound now dressed with a new herbal pack -- it looks, for all the world, like a ball of mud from a swamp -- Lor Chong Blia steps back.

"We wanted to take him to a hospital in Thailand," he continues, "but he said no. He is afraid. We try not to use the Thai hospitals, because their way of dealing with everything is to cut it off. Even a wound in the hand or the foot, they cut off the limb."

Finally, he returns to the subject of "yellow rain," "I have seen the drops. They are yellow and wet. They splatter. When they land on the bushes, they die. That is unusual.

"At first I thought it was just [from] birds or something, because bee droppings were always solid. But how can it be coincidence that we're so often hit when we're on operations? For all these years in the mountains, we have never had such things happen [before]."

By now "the doctor" is checking the facial shrapnel wound of a young combatant.

"We have to leave the metal in. We do not know how to get it out. Sometimes it bothers them [the victims], but..."

He gives me a look which says, "That's life, eh?" Then he goes on, "The man you talked to several days ago, the one with one leg, was before the leader of the group you went with. But the Lao put many mines and booby traps in our area, and he stepped on one. It's what we fear most."

...To be a burden to society, he might have added. For in Hmong life, everyone has a place, a role. That of the man is provider and protector for his family.

And it is their families that the Hmong worry most about protecting. While "yellow rain" may be the most sensational killer in the communist arsenal, more common -- and no less deadly -- is good old fashioned slaughter. The Lao attempt to deal with the guerrilla fish in the popular sea by draining the whole ocean: Rather than going after the guerrillas, whom they cannot catch, they directly attack their host population.

Recounts a Hmong combatant, 37, "The communists always try to kill the villagers, to massacre them. We have no money for cameras to show what they do. We only have the eyes to see. Yet what I say always happens, always."

Adds another, Moua Pa Kao, 48, a farmer now in charge of a support base area just inside Laos, "I am from Phu Bia. In 1980

the Lao government attacked my village. I have now five children, four sons and one daughter. I had ten -- three more boys and two more girls -- but the Lao soldiers killed them.

"They attacked our village while I was away working. They came in my home and killed the children with knives. I buried them and knew I could not live there any longer, so I moved. It was not easy. The Lao Army killed many of us before we could move [scatter] to many places."

Neither chemicals nor the wholesale massacre of villages, however, has succeeded in snuffing out Hmong resistance. It continues in all of the traditional areas of Hmong settlement in Laos.

### Uncertain Future

Yet the future can only be viewed with disquiet. Having cut recent deals with Burma and Laos -- better relations in exchange for trade, the right to invest, and a free hand in plundering natural resources -- Thailand, in May 1991, forced the large Hmong concentration in its Nan Province to move back into Laos.

There, Hmong families are again exposed to attack and exist in often appalling conditions. Disease, particularly malaria, is rampant, the diet a bland mix of cucumbers and rice. Some camps have been reduced to catching rats to supplement their meager rations. And, like food, ammunition, too, is low.

Amazingly, the Hmong continue to hold their own. Intimately familiar with the terrain, they travel at will, moving as far afield as Yunnan in China in their search for aid.

"I went to train in China in 1982 and spent two years there," explains Thao Bee Jou, 39, a member of the Chao Fa Central Committee. "In fact, I have now been there twice."

When I exclaim that the journey must have been quite a hike, he reflects for a moment, then responds, "Yes, a long walk. It takes almost one month, but sometimes it takes a month and several weeks. It all depends on the military situation."

Thao Bee Jou continues, "We went there [in 1982] to do military training. China would help the Hmong [then], because it was fighting the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese."

"I was in a staff officers course. We learned about everything: tactics, weapons, how to draw a map, how to fight, how to do staff work. Our instructors were Chinese, our interpreter, Thai; so we learned in Thai.

"Altogether, we were twenty chiefs, fifty officers, and 300 soldiers. They gave us weapons, and we got to keep them when we came back [to Laos].

"But now the politics have changed again, and the Chinese will not help us. Just like the others, it's only people to people assistance."

Those days, when Peking was at loggerheads with Viangchan and Hanoi, were good ones for Chao Fa -- hundreds of Hmong soldiers remain armed with the AK-47 assault rifles they received -- but they have passed. Now, the "Sky Soldiers" must husband their limited supply of bullets, using the enemy for resupply.

For a time, the Thai seemed willing to pick up where the Chinese left off. Locked in a cold war with its communist neighbors, a cold war that sometimes grew quite hot, Bangkok wanted to keep the Hmong forces viable as an insurance policy of sorts. Consequently, it gave them some arms and ammunition, together with limited quantities of other necessities.

A warming of Thai-Lao relations, though, ended the arrangement. Analyzes Yang Teng, "It is to be expected. Thai people and Lao people are much closer than Thai and Hmong. That's a problem. They are brothers. Now, Laos is communist, Thailand is capitalist. But they are the same culture and the same social system, so they help each other."

It is the Hmong who have been left out in the cold. Still, they are philosophical about their situation. Observes one, a Central Committee member, "The problem now boils down to money. If we have money, we can get anything from the Thai. Thai people are like that. And the Chinese in Yunan want to sell to us. We can even get from the Lao Army. They charge us 3,500 Baht for an AK-47 [about US \$140].

"The most important thing we need is ammunition; next is medicine. We would like other groups to help [financially]. We can get the weapons and supplies. And if we get, then we can control a larger area and protect our families."

"Our main goal, always, is to seize weapons and ammunition. We launch constant small ambushes, putting out security elements to protect the ambush group. We have much experience by now. We have learned many lessons in Laos. If we mass, for instance, we cannot find food. So we stay in groups of six to ten families. This allows us to move freely, to escape.

"We use many small troops and move everywhere. If we bring together a big force, the Lao Army can use heavy weapons and chemicals. This way they cannot strike us. They can shoot their mortars and artillery, but they don't know where we are."

It's an uneven fight, but one the Hmong wage with considerable skill and daring. Their quiet demeanor and soft spoken ways hide tend to obscure the determination of the warriors.

One day after a hot fight with the communists, Xiong Blia Yang, a 42-year old Central Committee member, tells me, "Because

the Lao soldiers have many, many big guns, and we do not, it is very hard to fight them. They have a government that gives them supplies. We have no government, but we are not alone.

"Before, Vang Pao was our leader, so we fought for him...Now we have President Pa Kao Her. He tries to protect the Hmong. I joined Chao Fa in 1975, when the communists came to take us away and kill us. [Since then] I've been wounded three times, twice with AK-47, once by a mine. That's why I only have four toes on this foot [points]. But it is necessary for our people."

Echoes Xiong Por, in our last conversation before I leave, "My wife and family are already gone, but I still fight, because the Hmong should have their own small country. Everyone pushes us out, the Lao and now the Thai. Yet as long as I am living, I will fight for the Hmong."

And with that, he picked up his rifle and walked into the mists.

I should have yelled, "But how will you live, Xiong Por?"

He probably really would have called back, "Day by Day..." -- but I know he would have added, "...for the Hmong."