

50 years later *Vietnam War memories*

By Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt



Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt in Vietnam as a war correspondent and photographer.



Hmong Pa'ndau: Hmong stitched escape stories with their needles. This “story cloth” depicts crossing the Mekong River using bamboo - note the person in yellow is drowning.

Could it be 50 years ago that on April 30, 1975, Saigon, South Vietnam fell to the communist forces of North Vietnam, ending in defeat for the U.S. and changing the political dynamics of Southeast Asia and ethnic populations in the U.S.?

It seems like yesterday that Saigon fell; then, neighboring Cambodia fell to Pol Pot and his murderous Khmer Rouge, which in less than five years exterminated at least one – maybe three – million people, particularly anyone with an education, through starvation, hard labor, torture, and execution.

The last of the neighboring countries involved in this conflict to fall to communist rule was Laos: The Kingdom of a Million Elephants and a White Parasol. In this case, tanks didn’t roll in to seize control, but a well-planned take-over of Laos was initiated by disarming soldiers and tricking government officials into concentration camps, called “seminar camps.” On December 2, 1975, the Lao King was forced to abdicate his throne and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic was established. The Royal Family died in one of these “seminar camps.”

I went to the Vietnam War with my generation – not wielding a weapon, but with a typewriter (yes, an Olivetti portable typewriter) and a Nikon camera. I covered the troops and the fighting in South Vietnam, winning awards for my front-line combat coverage and photography. But my destiny would

lie with the fate and tragedy of a remote mountain minority in Laos – the Hmong.

While covering the fighting in South Vietnam, I discovered that Laos was a critical but “secret” theater of the Vietnam War. The communist North Vietnamese Army needed control of northern Laos, Hmong homelands, so it could move men and materiel through Laos to South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply route to fight U.S. and South Vietnamese forces.

To me, reporting on the “secret war” in Laos was important – and a challenge. Covering northern Laos was forbidden (or “embargoed”) for journalists. I pieced together what was going on by learning to “read between the lines,” listening to Americans working in Laos, and even watching as American fighter jets returned to Thai airbases without attached ordinance much too quickly to have made it to North Vietnamese airspace. I did manage to publish some articles on the fighting in northern Laos and got in serious trouble with U.S. Defense authorities.

The Hmong alliance with the U.S. began in 1962 when President Kennedy reached a Geneva-negotiated “deal” to keep Laos “neutral” and out of the regional fight for control that was taking place between the Soviet Union and China and the U.S. and its allies. The Geneva Accord of July 23, 1962 declared the neutrality of Laos by stating that the 14 signatories, in-

cluding the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam, and the U.S., would refrain from direct or indirect interference in internal affairs, and that no foreign troops could be housed or operate there. The U.S. made an attempt to keep its end of the neutrality deal while other countries continued operations there. When the Kennedy administration realized that its adversaries had not withdrawn their forces, Kennedy’s CIA covertly recruited, trained, and armed Hmong to be the American “boots on the ground” in Northern Laos.

The Hmong, under Hmong General Vang Pao, would become a guerrilla blocking force against the North Vietnamese Army invaders. And significantly, Hmong would serve as defenders of a hi-tech aviation guidance system atop a mountain called Phu Pha Thi – code-named LS 85 – that strategically and precisely directed U.S. bombers and fighter pilots to their North Vietnamese targets regardless of weather or time of day. Hmong also became spotter pilots for U.S. strike aircraft in Laos, Ho Chi Minh Trail watchers, pilots of T-28 bomber aircraft, and were tasked to rescue American pilots downed in Hmong territory.

All of this was done at great sacrifice by the Hmong. While Americans didn’t know about this U.S. “secret war” and its alliance with the Hmong, those whom the Hmong were fighting knew and vowed revenge.

After the Communist take-over in Laos, revenge came quickly and deadly to those allied with the U.S., supporters and officials of the Royal Lao Government, and the Lao Royal Family. The new Communist Lao government even announced on national radio that when they found any former U.S. or Royal Lao Government allies, they would “wipe them out.”

As word trickled out about the atrocities taking place in Cambodia and Laos, I decided to return to the area to investigate – focusing on the refugees from Laos, particularly the Hmong – who had sought sanctuary in northern Thailand refugee camps.

As fate would have it, the English language *Bangkok Post Newspaper* agreed to run my articles based on my interviews with Hmong survivors who had escaped. They described in great detail their treacherous and deadly treks to escape Laos.

Then this happened: I witnessed a massacre of Hmong refugees trapped on a sand bar in the middle of the Mekong River. Helpless to do anything except record the details of what I was witnessing, I made the commitment to record my interviews, to document everything with photos, and to preserve what I was witnessing and what I was learning from the survivors.

Thus was born my book *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, The Americans and the Secret Wars for Laos 1942-1992* which includes interviews with over 1,000 people, including some 500 Hmong involved in this “secret war.” Hmong shared stories of their fighting days and their consequent fleeing and surviving at horrific costs to themselves, their comrades, and their families.

As the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War is remembered, I opened *Tragic Mountains* to re-read the heroic stories of children, women, and men who somehow managed to find a way to survive to tell their stories.

Now decades later, Hmong who resettled in the U.S. officially as political refugees have been hugely successful after some years of struggling to adjust to ways totally different from their remote mountain villages.

In those early days of Hmong

resettlement in the U.S., I was keenly aware that for resettlement to be successful, Americans needed to know who the Hmong were and why they were suddenly living in their communities. In the early 1980s, I created a traveling exhibit featuring their intricate and exquisite textiles accompanied by my photos of traditional Hmong life, refugee camp life, and their alliance with the U.S. during the Vietnam War. It was a small gesture, but it was effective, and today there are museums devoted to featuring Hmong textile arts, particularly the story-cloths which depict scenes from Hmong life and history.

While researching *Tragic Mountains*, I was befriended by General Vang Pao, the Hmong leader in the Hmong diaspora communities. I often joined him in travels to various Hmong communities in the U.S. He was a charismatic speaker who always used tribal traditional homilies to make a point, much to the delight of his fellow Hmong. He had several themes he always talked about. Two I remember clearly: get off welfare and get a job; and, you must keep your children in school, because education is the future for the Hmong in America.

Much has happened in the American Hmong community since Hmong refugees first came here in the late 1970s. On May 15, 1997, a memorial at Arlington National Cemetery was dedicated to honor the Hmong soldiers of the “U.S. Secret War in the Kingdom of Laos.” May 15 has become a special Hmong day, as Hmong gather each year at Arlington to remember those fallen in defending freedom and to reflect on the fall of the Hmong base at Long Chieng and the horrors that followed. During this time, General Vang Pao, outfoxing enemy forces and capture, made it out of Laos. He was never able to return to his mountain homeland. He, too, became a refugee – and the leader of the Hmong in exile.

In addition, after years of lobbying by Hmong veterans and their friends, in 2018 Congress approved legislation that allows Hmong and Lao veterans who served in support

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of the U.S. during the Vietnam War Era to be buried in U.S. national cemeteries. This was considered by Hmong veterans as, at last, recognition of their years of service as the American “boots on the ground” in the “secret war” in Laos.

Hmong General Vang Pao is no longer with us, but his vision for Hmong success in America is recognized by the descendants of those who managed to escape at-

tempts to “wipe them out.” Hmong are now lawyers, judges, school superintendents, educators, military officers, farmers, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, historians, poets, mayors, members of Congress, an Olympic gymnast, and a winning female golfer.

During 2025, Hmong American communities will host commemorative events to recognize Hmong unique history, resilience

to tragedy, and their eventual blooming in American society. ■

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