

Robert Walsh

From: Chuck Palazzo [chuck_pal@yahoo.com]
Sent: Sunday, January 09, 2011 8:47 PM
To: Chuck Palazzo
Subject: Vang Pao

Dear Friends,

After I sent out the obituary from BBC last week, I was reminded by several of you that the Vang Pao that many new first-hand was quite different than the exiled hero some have portrayed him as. What follows are several first-hand accounts by a long time activist who spent many years in Laos and was very close to quite a bit of the activity involving Vang Pao and what the man stood for.

Thanks for reading and semper peace!

Chuck

SCANNED

12-07-11 RPR

I hadn't planned to write anything about Vang Pao, but since you asked, here are my views. Please feel free to send them to anyone who might be particularly interested - I don't particularly feel like sending this out as a mass mailing because I don't claim to be an expert on the whole Hmong business and, frankly, I've been sickened by Vang Pao and the whole Hmong story since I first started learning about it in 1967.

As I lived in Vientiane and dealt almost entirely with Lao, and the CIA/USAID operation with Vang Pao were in areas from which everyone was excluded, including Americans who didn't work there, I didn't have too much personal one-on-one contact with the whole Hmong (in those days we called them "Meo") business.

I did learn a lot about the whole operation, however, from dozens of sources over the years including CIA pilots, etc., and particularly from one American friend, a very decent USAID guy named Ron Rickenbach, who'd been in the center of the whole operation for several years, who really like the Hmong, and turned against the whole situation when he realized the Americans were forcing teenagers to fight and killing them off by sending them up against NVA/PL troops to essentially use them as live bait to draw enemy fire so the airplanes could bomb.

I always remember Ron, with tears in his eyes, describing how the traditional courting rituals of the Hmong - which featured boys in a crowd and girls in a crowd rolling balls back and forth between them - could not be conducted anymore because there were only girls and most of the young boys of fighting age had been killed off.

I also was in two meetings with Vang Pao personally at Sam Thong, and picked up a lot over the years from a variety of other people, including a friend who flew for the CIA.

-- My first meeting was particularly instructive. I wound up flying up to Sam Thong in the summer of 1967 with my Congressman, Lester Wolff and his colleague Cong. McCarthy from Buffalo. We were in a C130 and as we were flying to ST the head of USAID, Dr. Mendenhall, said there'd been some rain in ST and the runway was too muddy for our C130, so we'd land at an "auxiliary landing strip" and thence fly by helicopter to ST. We did so and, after landing at ST, the two Congressmen were greeted by Hmong putting Hawaiian leis around their necks. I walked behind a U.S. Embassy official who walked over to the legendary Pop Buell who was standing off to the side, arms folded around his chest, watching the show. Buell said to the Embassy Official out of the corner of his mouth: "do they know anything?" The official responded, "oh, no, Pop. Mendenhall showed them our big map and they were very, very impressed."

-- What the Congressmen didn't know was that we had landed our C-130 at a Long Cheng landing strip - or indeed that Long Cheng even existed. I was then at the meeting where "plucky freedom fighter" Vang Pao came in, briefed the Congressman on his fight against communism and for freedom, and asked for arms, which the Congressmen - two liberal Democrats - eagerly said they would support. That night I roomed with Cong, Woolf in a USAID trailer in Vang Vieng and tried to tell him about the rumors I'd already picked up - I'd been in Laos only about 5 months by then but had heard things - like how Vang Pao was a brutal, vicious sadist who would put "enemies" into holes and let them slowly starve to death like animals, etc. Woolf interrupted me quite passionately and explained that he had been elected on LBJ's coattails in 1964 and, with real fear in his voice, explained that no one in his class dared oppose LBJ.

-- So the U.S. Congress was not even told about Long Cheng, let alone the American bombing, let alone that the CIA was using northern Laos as a base to attack North Vietnam, including using the mountain Phou Pha Thi in northern Laos to guide U.S. bombers into North Vietnam, etc.

-- I had in fact, I realized later, witnessed the Potemkin Village set up by the Americans that was used to fool and mislead a generation of journalists and Members of Congress. The Potemkin village story line at Sam Thong: "The North Vietnamese had unilaterally attacked the Hmong in northern Laos, who had fled this vicious communist attack, and Pop Buell, Dr. Weldon and other courageous, well-meaning were feeding the poor Hmong families who had "fled communism barbarians", in a humanitarian effort aimed at keeping simple villagers alive at

Sam Thong, where they could not only get U.S. rice to feed their families, but have access to a hospital, schools, etc."

-- The real story-line, as I discovered from Ron Rickenbach and a variety of other sources: the White House and CIA, wishing to use northern Laos as a base from which to attack North Vietnam, and to keep the Pathet Lao from power, armed a two-bit former Sergeant to first launch small-scale operations against the Pathet Lao and a handful of NVA in northern Laos and then, as the Hmong obviously were too weak to stand up to their communist foes - as was obvious from the start - built up a huge CIA presence in Laos, making it the largest CIA station in the world, built Long Cheng which at one point was the busiest airport in the world, imported tens of thousands of Thai, Nationalist Chinese and other mercenaries and, most importantly, began the most savage and protracted bombing of civilian targets in human history, using the Hmong as little more than live bait and mopping up operations after they had pulverized an area from above, in an attempt to prevail in northern Laos.

-- They based their "Secret Army" out of Long Cheng, and Sam Thong was a side show - a place to feed the dependents of the Hmong soldiers fighting for them and convince gullible journalists that the U.S. was fighting for freedom and democracy in Laos. The real dynamic driving the U.S. operation in northern Laos was "careerism", as the Shackleys, James Lilleys and many others used Laos as a steppingstone for rising within the CIA and military.

-- The notion that the U.S. was fighting for freedom and democracy in supporting Vang Pao was particularly ludicrous. As you may remember from the film, Vang Pao himself says repeatedly that he was fighting for the Free World, freedom, democracy, etc., in Laos against "communism". In fact, of course, Vang Pao was a brutal, vicious, small-minded warlord who rose to power solely because the Americans provided him with the money, arms and bombing, who presided over the murder of the Hmong - and sent heroin to U.S. troops in South Vietnam - out of his lust for power and wealth. He accumulated millions while many of his fellow Hmong, even on his side, lived in desperate poverty. There was NO DEMOCRACY WHATSOEVER in the CIA's Hmong and Secret War. It was in fact the exact opposite. Vang Pao was fighting to maintain "warlordism" not democracy in northern Laos.

-- If we go back to the late 1950s, the Hmong were divided. Some liked the Pathet Lao, some didn't. The greatest enmities had more to do with traditional rivalries between lowland Lao and the hilltribe Hmong. There was a sizable faction of Hmong fighting with the Pathet Lao. The Hmong leaders who were anti-communist - like Vang Pao - had fought with the French in the cause of keeping Laos a colony of the French, hoping to then cut their deals with the French. Had the U.S. not intervened, they would undoubtedly have reached a

deal with the communists, who probably would have won. Such a deal then would obviously have been much, much, much better for the Hmong people, than what eventually happened, after 20 years of bitter, U.S.-stoked enmity. And, most importantly, had the Americans not intervened all those Hmong who got killed fighting for the Americans - and their descendants - would have lived.

-- The enmity between the Vang Pao and the communists obviously has its origin in the first Indochina war. After 1954 the Pathet Lao obviously did not feel good about those who had sided with the French. The conflict between Vang Pao and them obviously had nothing to do with VP's commitment to "freedom" vs. "communism", but rather his siding with the colonialists and then accepting American money and arms so he could build up his own powerbase and increase his own power and wealth.

-- The last few times I've been to northern Laos I have been struck at how much of it consists of Hmong villages, living peacefully under PDR rule as far as I can tell. I have no idea how they feel about the present Lao government, of whether they might argue the Lao in northern Laos receive better treatment than they do, but there's no real armed resistance and life just seems to be going on. When I was on the Plain of Jars I met the head of the government police force on the PdJ – he was a Hmong. None of the westerners I talked to living on the PdJ were aware of huge problems with the Hmong. I assume the Lao government, which does make a show of having Hmong on the Politburo, talking about "nationality rights", etc., are treating them like anyone else if only to avoid antagonizing the huge numbers of Hmong in northern Laos who could become a huge problem if actively antagonized.

-- What I learned about Vang Pao was that he was a brutal, vicious psychopath who killed, one on one, face to face, without compunction. (In our Lao film you may remember the Air America guy talks about how the first time he saw Vang Pao, as VP came towards him, he was shown a prisoner, casually shot him in the head, and kept walking.)

-- VP was a Sergeant in the French army, a member of a small clan, a virtually nobody in traditional Hmong society. CIA case officer Bill Lair heard about him and the CIA, particularly under Ted Shackley, Lair's successor - supplied him with hundreds of millions of dollars of arms and aid, as well as U.S. aircraft, CIA personnel, tens of thousands of Thai, Long Cheng, etc., etc. - transformed him from a minor psychopath into a classic vicious and undemocratic Asian warlord.

-- Vang Pao ruled with an iron hand, as a vicious, savage dictator. Besides his own personal killing and torture, and that he authorized, Al McCoy talks

about how villages who refused to supply soldiers to his army were refused rice and/or bombed.

-- Vang Pao is said to be personally willing to fight and had shown some talent in the early years, not so much for real war-fighting, but launching raids into North Vietnam, assassination, spying, small-scale killing, etc. Once the war grew beyond small, murderous actions, however, it was way over Vang Pao's head and the U.S. ran the show. Vang Pao was largely a figurehead from an overall military point of view.

-- The CIA was clearly just cold-bloodedly using the Hmong, knowing they could not possibly win but, as I said, because they were useful as "live bait". Heine Aderholt, the USAF General in charge of the bombing and fighting in northern Laos out of Udorn, actually said on camera in a film made about returning Air America pilots, that the whole U.S. purpose Hmong operation was to tie down 2 divisions of North Vietnamese troops (their numbers were never more than a few thousand up until the time I was kicked out in February 1971, might have grown somewhat subsequently), so that Asian boys could die fighting them instead of American boys.

-- One of Vang Pao's main interests was moving opium and heroin, using the Air America planes at his disposal, to the huge market of U.S. soldiers in South Vietnam. He showed no compunction about doing this, nor did the CIA which turned a blind eye to it.

-- Ron told me that somewhere in the mid-1960s even Vang Pao had cold feet about presiding over the disappearance of the Hmong on his side, and wanted to give up, but the CIA and Pop Buell wouldn't let him quit. So he presided over the disappearance of the Hmong men on his side.

-- In late 1970, while interpreting for Sydney Schanberg, I went up with a group of journalists to Sam Thong, This was the famous incident where, after the typical VP briefing asking for more arms, Tim Allman stringing, Max Coiffait of AFP and John Saar of Time/Life, walked over the hill to Long Cheng and reported on it for the first time. What I remember most, however, was interviewing a 15 year old Hmong "soldier" with a big gun who had been forced to fight in the CIA's "Secret Army." That was late 1970. The war - and the death of Hmong children who the CIA mercilessly forced into battle knowing they would be massacred - vastly escalated over the next two plus years.

-- So I regard Vang Pao as a two-bit monster and psychopath whom the U.S. used for its own ends. Even if one wants to argue, as I don't, that there was a rationale for the CIA supporting him in the late 1950s or early 1960s, I don't see how anyone with a mind or conscience can justify the CIA's keeping them

fighting after it was long clear that they could not win anything and would only be slaughtered.

-- There are many reasons to despise Vang Pao: his siding with the colonialists rather than those fighting for independence from the French, his savagery and brutality, his total disregard for democratic and human rights, his enriching himself from the opium and heroin trade and indifference to the great mass of his people, etc. But, for me, the greatest reason for despising Vang Pao is that he didn't quit in the mid-1960s, when he wanted to, and - for his own personal psychological needs, including an addiction to power and wealth - presided over the slaughter of countless more young Hmong men despite knowing they were just being used by CIA and U.S. Air force careerists.

-- I guess you could argue he was a tragic figure in the same way little Heinzie Kissinger deserves sympathy for what he went through from ages 9-15 in Nazi Germany as a Jew watching the advent of Hitler to power, a particularly sensitive age when one is aware of the fear and horror but not fully comprehending what is going on. Unfortunately, both men as adults to my mind became monsters in human form, e.g. the recent revelation of Kissinger's comment that the Russians sending Jews to the gas chamber was not an American foreign policy concern. I can sympathize with them as individuals, but also feel strongly that they need to be judged for their actions.

-- The question for me about Kissinger is not Kissinger himself - obviously a deeply traumatized and disturbed individual whom I could have sympathy for in a one-on-one situation - but how such an obviously sick and sickening, cruel and malignant, beast who had no regard for human life, could rise to such power and become the toast of American society, and of course that he was not brought to justice for his crimes against humanity. When I think of Kissinger, I find myself wondering what his career tells us about the sickness of America and the human psyche.

-- I have the same basic attitude toward Vang Pao.

Thanks for asking, Stay well,

END OF EXHIBIT