

**Hearing On Legislative Presentations of Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs)
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs (SVAC)**

**March 22, 2017
Hart Senate Office Building 216**

--

**Testimony of Philip Smith,
Washington, D.C. Director & National Liaison**

Lao Veterans of America, Inc.

Today, we sincerely wish to thank the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Johnny Isakson, and Vice Chairman Jon Tester, as well as each and every one of the Committee Members of the U.S. Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SCVA) for holding this important hearing today regarding the legislative presentations of Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs). We appreciate your concern about the plight of Lao- and Hmong-American veterans, and their refugee families, who served alongside U.S. clandestine and special military forces during the Vietnam War, in defense of U.S. national security interests and the Royal Kingdom of Laos.

We appreciate the opportunity to present our testimony for the record to both the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees at this important hearing.

My name is Philip Smith. I serve as the National Liaison and Washington, D.C. Director of the Lao Veterans of America and the Lao Veterans of America Institute, the Nation's largest Laotian and Hmong-American veterans organization.

Additionally, I am also pleased to serve as the Executive Director of the Center for Public Policy Analysis (CPPA), a non-governmental, public policy research organization (NGO), focused on U.S. national security, international relations, refugee, and veterans issues, including the plight of Lao and Hmong veterans and their refugee families in the United States and Southeast Asia.

In recent years, in previous hearings of this Committee, we have offered testimony detailing the plight of Laotian- and Hmong-American veterans in the United States and their hope that they would be further recognized and honored with burial rights and honors at U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' national cemeteries. We are grateful that the Committee is again holding hearings where we can contribute our voice and views.

Lao- and Hmong-American veterans are again requesting that the U.S. Congress and the President, work with the Department of Veterans Administration, and other Agencies, including the Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to expedite the granting of burial honors to the veterans by allowing them interment at national cemeteries administered by the Veterans Administration. We are hopeful that President Donald Trump and Congress, working in a bipartisan fashion, can help our veterans fully realize this honorable vision.

It is our anticipation that Congress and the Trump White House, working in bipartisan fashion, will jointly undertake Executive Branch and legislative action to grant burial honors and national recognition to Lao- and Hmong-American veterans and their families. Clearly, this is unfinished business as we have indicated in our previous hearing testimony to the SCVA.

In 2015-16, the Lao Veterans of America, Inc., the Lao Veterans of America Institute, and the CPPA, along with the U.S. Special Forces Association, and others, conducted special veterans' ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery, at the Lao Veterans of America monument ("Laos Memorial"), and the Vietnam War Memorial, to somberly mark the 40th anniversary of the fall of the Kingdom of Laos, and Long Tieng (Long Chieng), to invading forces of the North Vietnamese Army, and the People's Army of Vietnam, of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The bloody crossing of the Mekong River, and the refugee exodus, in the wake of the horrific Communist forces reprisals, was also remembered. These important veterans' memorial ceremonies were supported and undertaken with the official support of the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Army, U.S. Air Forces, U.S. Marine Corps, Arlington National Cemetery, Members of Congress, and others. Hundreds of Laotian- and Hmong-American veterans and their families participated, including those on buses and airplanes from Minnesota, Wisconsin, California, Arkansas, North Carolina, Georgia, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Alaska, Nevada, and elsewhere.

This year, 2017, will mark the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the dedication of the Lao Veterans of America monument at Arlington National Cemetery which we anticipate again commemorating, with the veterans and their families joined by Members of Congress and the Senate, as well as representatives of the U.S. Department of Defense and others. We hope to again meet with Senators serving on this SCVA as well as its senior staff, to continue our ongoing dialogue, as we have done over the years.

It is also important to recall that in 2013-14, and in previous years, the LVAI's President Emeritus, and Founder, Colonel Wangyee Vang Ph.D., and I, along with other Lao- and Hmong-American veterans' leaders, personally met at length with the Senate Committee

on Veterans' Affairs, and its good staff members, about pending veterans' benefits legislation, and other matters, to seek to assist the Lao- and Hmong-American veterans and their families, especially with regard to burial honors and interment matters.

Likewise, in recent years, including 2016, the LVAI's current President, Mr. Richard Xiong, and Executive Director, Peter Vang, participated in a number of special follow-on meetings. These high-level meetings with the senior staff of the SCVA were helpful and constructive discussions. Mr. Pang Mang Thao, President of the Minnesota Lao Veterans organization has also provided important leadership as well as Mr. Toua Kue of the Rhode Island Lao Veterans of America, and Tong Vue, of Arkansas, in Capitol Hill meetings and events.

By way of background on our other past efforts in Washington, D.C., and Capitol Hill, the Lao Veterans of America and I helped to research, develop and spearhead efforts regarding extraordinary bipartisan legislation from 1991-2000, in the U.S. Congress, to grant honorary citizenship to the "U.S. Secret Army" veterans. This legislation known as the "Hmong Veterans Naturalization Act" eventually prevailed, after a great deal of work and effort, and was signed into law in the year 2000 by President Bill Clinton. Moreover, follow-on companion legislation granting honorary citizenship to the spouses and widows of Lao Hmong veterans was passed shortly thereafter by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush. The Lao Veterans of America worked to educate the public and policymakers about these and other important legislation and issues. As a result, tens of thousands of Lao and Hmong veterans and their families are now naturalized citizens of the United States. They are proud and productive new Americans.

The LVAI, LVA, and Lao and Hmong community, maintain active groups in nearly every single state represented by the Senators on this Committee.

Chairmen Isakson, and Vice Chairmen Tester, as well as distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the Lao and Hmong "U.S. Secret Army" veterans should be granted the honor of being buried at U.S. national veterans' cemeteries because of their extraordinary clandestine role during the Vietnam War in defense of U.S. national security interests as well as the unique manner in which they were covertly recruited and paid directly by the U.S. Treasury through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), via its covert airline, Air America, and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). Laotian and Hmong soldiers served with distinction as part of U.S. Special Forces and other special DOD and CIA ground and air force units in Laos.

Clearly, this is America's unfinished business regarding Laos, and the Lao and Hmong veterans who so heroically and uniquely fought to support the United States during the Vietnam War.

Mr. Chairman, Vice Chairman, and Veterans' Affairs Committee Members, many Lao- and Hmong-American veterans, who served in America's covert theater of operations during the Vietnam War, are dying across the United States without the benefit of being recognized, or honored, for their extraordinary military service. Having saved the lives of many U.S. soldiers and air crews, these forgotten veterans deserve to be buried with dignity at U.S. national veterans' cemeteries, with military honors, for their unique service as part of the "U.S. Secret Army" defending U.S. national security interests and the Royal Kingdoms of Laos and Thailand, pivotal in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam conflict and geostrategically critical during the height of the Cold War.

Laotian and Hmong soldiers, who served in the "U.S. Secret Army" in Laos, were clandestinely organized and supported by the CIA and the Pentagon, to combat the bloody, relentless, and protracted invasion of the Kingdom of Laos by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), and an insurgency of communist Pathet Lao guerrillas.

In the early 1960s, at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Berlin Blockade, and Berlin Airlift Crisis, with the additional mounting concerns about the Soviet Union's expansionism during the Cold War, especially in Southeast Asia, President John F. Kennedy, with the advice and input of key national security experts, including the late Theodore "Ted" Shackley, envisioned and devised the "Third Option" strategy in Laos, as a key, and critical, part of a much larger global strategy. This national security strategy, and its implementation, in part, sought to prevent a nuclear war, and/or a conventional land war, in Europe with the Soviet Union.

Among other serious national security concerns, CIA and U.S. military intelligence had determined that the Soviet Union and North Vietnam were egregiously violating the Kingdom of Laos' neutrality, and signed international diplomatic accords, by supplying large numbers of Soviet weapons to communist Laotian guerrillas and North Vietnamese forces, and establishing a trail and supply network (including the Ho Chi Minh Trail) through Laos to seek to offensively attack South Vietnam and possibly U.S. military bases in the Kingdom of Thailand. Consequently, in a follow-on strategy to President Dwight Eisenhower's earlier efforts in Laos and Indochina, President Kennedy's Administration bolstered CIA and U.S. Special Forces Teams, and other DOD "sheep dipped" personnel (military personnel officially removed from DOD payroll, and other records, and given a new civilian identity) from the U.S. Air Force and Army, and deployed them to Laos in an enhanced and more aggressive posture. This secret U.S. force were deployed to recruit, train, pay and fight alongside the Lao Hmong "U.S. Secret Army." This U.S. covert policy, and the deployment of the Lao Hmong "U.S. Secret Army", was cautiously undertaken to avoid overt international treaty violations signed with the Soviet Union on Laos' "neutrality", and avert a nuclear and conventional war with the Soviet Union and China (PRC). Thus, the U.S. strategy, and doctrine, of "Plausible Deniability" was conceived, developed, implemented and

expanded in the Kingdom of Laos.

Therefore, the “U.S. Secret Army” was envisioned and created by the White House, under Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy to covertly defend U.S. national security interests, and at the same time prevent a nuclear war, or conventional war, with the Soviet Union and PRC, during those crisis years, when the world sat darkly at the brink of nuclear annihilation and the very potential outbreak of a Soviet-U.S., or China-U.S., Third World War, “World War III.” During those perilous Cold War years, when tensions were at their greatest between the nuclear Superpowers, and the largest and most powerful land armies in human history faced off against one another in Berlin and Europe (the Warsaw Pact and NATO), the “U.S. Secret Army” in Laos was indeed critical in this strategic regard, embodying America’s third national security option, “Third Option,” which is often a little-known, little-understood, but an important, reality shrouded in the deepest of black, classified secrecy, until recent years. President Kennedy, and two subsequent U.S. Presidents, from both political parties, understood this and secretly and aggressively implemented this policy option, the “Third Option,” with the help of the Lao-Hmong “U.S. Secret Army.”

Mr. Chairmen, and Vice Chairmen, and distinguished members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees jointly gathered here today, Laotian and Hmong-American veterans should be granted burial benefits, and military honors, at U.S. national veterans' cemeteries by the U.S. Congress and Obama Administration for yet another important and key reason: They were paid directly by the U.S. government, in cash from the U.S. Treasury, via Air America and Civil Air Transport, by the CIA and Pentagon, for their unique service in Laos. This military service included the rescue of downed U.S. Air Force and Navy pilots, as well as the interdiction of NVA /PAVN troop and supply convoys in Laos, and on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, by the Lao-Hmong special forces.

For over 15 years, from 1961-1975, the CIA’s clandestine airlines, Civil Air Transport (CAT) and Air America, flew cash payroll flights to support, pay and expand the elite Lao and Hmong clandestine army, which was based at the large covert base at Long Chieng (Long Tieng), Xieng Khouang Province (Xiangkhouang Province), Laos. From there, and other “LIMA Sites”, the Lao-Hmong clandestine army engaged in strategic battles against main-force NVA divisions of the Soviet-backed Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN) as well as communist insurgents. Lao and Hmong special forces units saved thousands of American soldiers from being attacked and killed in South Vietnam by engaging numerous NVA and PAVN units in combat and playing a key role with the U.S. bombing campaign of enemy supply routes and targets on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Plaine des Jarres (PDJ) and elsewhere.

The U.S. Congress, the Trump Administration, and America should not abandon and continue to leave our Lao and Hmong-America veterans behind as they grow older in

the United States. Recalling the tragic end of the U.S. involvement in Laos at the end of the Vietnam War, Mr. Pang Mang Thao states: "As a young soldier who served on the battlefields of the Vietnam War in the Kingdom of Laos, I felt it was my duty to stay and fight to the end. Unfortunately many of our fellow soldiers were left behind. I was one of those. We roamed the jungles and mountains until 1979 trying to survive on whatever we could get our hands on. We traveled on foot to Thailand and arrived in Ban Vinai camp on February 7, 1979."

America's Lao and Hmong "U.S. Secret Army" veterans should not be left behind and abandoned again by the United States, but instead be honored with full burial, and interment, honors and benefits at U.S. national cemeteries administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs.

In conclusion, I want to again thank you Chairman Isakson and Vice Chairman Tester and the distinguished Members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, for conducting this SCVA hearing today, and allowing us the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the legislative presentations of Veterans Service Organizations, including the Lao Veterans of America, Inc. and Lao Veterans of America Institute.

###