

U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Hearing On Pending Benefits Legislation
&
S. 200 "The Lao & Hmong Veterans Burial Honors Bill"
Wednesday, May 15, 2013, 10:00 A.M.
Russell Senate Office Building, SR-418

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Testimony of Philip Smith, Washington, D.C. Director & Liaison
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&
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We sincerely wish to thank Chairman Bernard "Bernie" Sanders, Vice Chairman Richard Burr, and each and every one of the Committee Members of the U.S. Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee for holding this important hearing today regarding pending veterans' benefits legislation, especially regarding S. 200, "The Lao & Hmong Veterans' Burial Honors Bill", (also known as the "Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act").

We also wish to express our deep gratitude to Senator Lisa Murkowski, and fellow Alaskan Senator Mark Begich, for their crucial leadership efforts, along with Congressman Jim Costa in the House of Representatives, for introducing S. 200 /H.R. 3369 and helping to bring it before the Veterans' Affairs Committee today for this important hearing.

My name is Philip Smith. I serve as the Washington, D.C., Director of the Lao Veterans of America Institute (LVAI) and the Lao Veterans of America, Inc.(LVA). These most honored fraternal groups are the nation's largest, non-profit Lao- and Hmong-American veterans' organizations representing many thousands of people who served in the U.S. covert war in Laos, and the "U.S. Secret Army" (L'Armee Clandestine), during the Vietnam War, as well as their refugee families in the United States.

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), and think tank, focused on U.S. national security, foreign policy and veterans issues, including the plight of Lao and Hmong veterans and their refugee families in the United States and Southeast Asia.

Last Friday, May 10, the LVAI's National President and Founder, Colonel Wangyee Vang, personally met, at length, with the Senate Veterans' Committee, and its good staff members, about today's hearing and pending veterans' benefits legislation, including S. 200. These were helpful and productive discussions, especially regarding Lao-Hmong veterans.

President Wangyee Vang, unfortunately, could not be at today's hearing to personally testify on behalf of his Lao-Hmong veterans and their families, as he had hoped, because of the emergency hospitalization of one of his close family members.

By way of background, the Lao Veterans of America helped spearhead extraordinary bipartisan legislation from 1991-2000 in the U.S. Congress to grant honorary citizenship to the "U.S. Secret Army" veterans, which eventually prevailed and was signed into law in the year 2000 by President Bill Clinton. The LVAI, LVA, and Lao and Hmong community, maintain active groups in almost every single state represented by the Senators on this Committee.

Chairman Sanders, Vice Chairman Burr and distinguished Members of this Committee,

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 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), via its covert airline, Air America, and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD).

It is important and symbolic to note today that U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island is also a cosponsor of this important legislation, S. 200, and is very familiar with many of the details of the testimony that I will provide today. His father, the late Ambassador Charles Whitehouse, served in Laos during the Vietnam War, and was crucial to formulating and implementing policy in America's clandestine war in Laos. U.S. Ambassador Charles Whitehouse, like President Kennedy, was a friend of the freedom-loving Laotian and Hmong people, and one of those who understood the unique nature of "U.S. Secret Army" during the later war-time period. I want to thank Senator Whitehouse for his support and leadership today. Over the years, I have had the good fortune of working closely with many of the Lao and Hmong veterans, refugees and Southeast Asian community leaders who were resettled in Rhode Island in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and resulting Indochinese refugee crisis. We are grateful to Senator Whitehouse for his support of this bill to honor the Lao-Hmong veterans.

Mr. 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 aircrews, 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 Kingdom of Laos, 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 strategy sought to prevent a nuclear war, or a conventional land war, in Europe with the Soviets.

Among other serious national security concerns, CIA and U.S. military intelligence had determined that the Soviet Union and North Vietnam were egregiously violating 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) to seek to offensively attack South Vietnam and possibly U.S. military bases in the Kingdom of Thailand. Consequently, President Kennedy directed CIA and U.S. Special Forces Teams, and other DOD "sheep dipped" personnel from the U.S. Air Force and Army, and deployed them to Laos, to recruit, train and pay the "U.S. Secret Army." This was done 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). The strategy and doctrine of "Plausible Deniability" was thus implemented in Laos.

Therefore, the "U.S. Secret Army" was envisioned and created by the White House, under President 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 China (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. "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. Chairman, 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, 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 troop and supply convoys in Laos, and on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, by the Lao-Hmong special forces.

For some 15 years, from 1961-1975, the CIA's clandestine airline, 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. From there, 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.

An ultra-secret group of Lao-Hmong soldiers of the "US Secret Army" guarded LIMA Site 85, Phou Pha Thi Mountain, the towering mountain citadel, and clandestine navigational and reconnaissance site, needed by the White House and its National Security Council to conduct the U.S. Air Force's, and U.S. Navy's, all-weather and night-time bombing of Hanoi and targets on the Red River Valley and Ho Chi Minh Trail. Special "sheep dipped" and "sanitized" clandestine U.S. Air Force units, including RAVENS personnel, and Air America units, based at the Royal Thai Air Force Base of Udorn Thani help support this most critical DOD, CIA, asset prior to the secret Soviet, PAVN, strategic attack on this electronics installation where Americans were killed by special PAVN commandos.

According to Colonel Wangyee Vang: "In the 1960s, the Communists launched many heavy campaigns to conquer Laos and its neighbors, such as the Republic of South Vietnam and Cambodia. On December 31, 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower declared: 'We cannot let Laos fall to the Communists even if we have to fight.' Therefore, when President John F. Kennedy was elected, he preserved that doctrine and sent U.S. CIA and Special Forces 'White Star' officers to Laos to recruit Hmong tribal, and other Lao ethnic peoples, to form the Special Guerrilla Units, GM Units, ADC units, RAVENS and others special units of the 'U.S. Secret Army' to fight against communist expansion. This is where, and when, the 'U.S. Secret Army' was created, under President Kennedy in 1961 in Laos."

Colonel Vang states further: "The Lao-Hmong 'U.S. Secret Army' mission included: 1.) to defend their own country; 2.) to protect American clandestine and military personnel and rescue downed U.S. Air Force (USAF), and U.S. Navy, aircraft, as well as Air America pilots and aircrews, shot down by the Communists over Laos, and along the Laos-Vietnamese border; 3.) to disrupt, destroy, and/or interdict the Communist shipments of combat troops, and war supplies, from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through the Kingdom of Laos, especially on the Ho Chi Minh Trail; 4.) to guard the top secret, high-tech U.S. radar station on the mountaintop of Phou Pha Thi, or Lima Site 85; This site facilitated the USAF to do its bombing over North Vietnam in all weather conditions, including at night; 5.) and, to engage invading main-force NVA divisions in Laos to destroy or engage them in battle."

Colonel Wangyee Vang lamented, in recent remarks at veterans' memorial ceremonies held at Arlington National Cemetery on May 10, 2013: "From 1961 to 1975, the Hmong and other Lao ethnic soldiers of the United States' 'Secret Army' lost about 40,000 strong men and women for the accomplishment of these missions. These included some very impossible and hopelessly dangerous missions, where the Lao-Hmong soldiers had to pay in blood with many, many, countless Lao-Hmong lives lost to often save one or two American aircrew members or clandestine CIA/DOD case officers at a time. Now it is 38 years after the war ended in 1975. Unfortunately, our veterans still have not received any burial honors, or other veterans benefits, from the United States government especially for our Hmong, Khmu, Lao, Mien and other ethnic veterans of the 'U.S. Secret Army.' We are, therefore, strongly urging the United States Congress, as soon as possible, to pass S. 200 for those Lao-Hmong veterans still surviving from the Vietnam war."

Indeed, a growing number in the U.S. Congress are concerned about the plight of Lao Hmong veterans. U.S. Congressmen Jim Costa (D-CA) and Frank Wolf (R-VA), along with a bipartisan coalition of some 32 Members of the House of Representatives, introduced legislation in the last Congress, which if passed, and signed into law by President Obama, would grant this final honor to the estimated 6,900-9,700 Laotian and Hmong-Americans in the United States who would qualify for this burial benefit at U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs cemeteries.

The LVAI, and LVA, are working to educate the public and policymakers in Washington, D.C., about the need to address this issue. More of their veterans, including many senior Lao-Hmong officers, are passing away and are being buried quietly, without honor or proper recognition, in isolated cemeteries, or in paupers' graves. Each year, hundreds more pass away in America.

Colonel Wangyee's brother, Chertzong Vang, a combat veteran of the U.S. Secret War in Laos, and the long-time President of the Minnesota chapter of the LVAI, died late last year in St. Paul, but could not be properly honored, or buried, in a U.S. national veterans' cemetery as he had hoped and wished. There are countless more examples.

Recently, in despair, a decorated French veteran, retired Colonel Robert Jambon, who had been previously honored by French President Nicholas Sarkozy, and who served with Laotian, Hmong, and American special forces in combat against communist guerrillas, took his own life on the steps of a monument to Indochina war veterans in France. In a tragic and final letter, released by French police, Colonel Jambon decried the abandonment by America and France of the former Lao and Hmong veterans and allies. He also denounced the ongoing forced repatriation of Lao-Hmong refugees who continue to flee brutal human rights abuses, religious persecution and military attacks in Laos and Vietnam today. Many of these suffering refugees are the family members, and descendants, of Lao Hmong veterans of the "U.S. Secret Army" in Laos. The LVA, LVAI, CPPA, Amnesty International and others have raised similar concerns.

It was not until May 14-15, 1997, 22 years after the Vietnam War, that Lao- and Hmong-American veterans, and their refugee families, were first honored by officials in Washington, at national recognition ceremonies conducted at the Vietnam War Memorial, U.S. Congress and Arlington National Cemetery. At Arlington, a granite monument to the Lao-Hmong veterans, and their American advisors, was finally dedicated by the LVA. I assisted with these efforts.

Today, May 15, is the anniversary of the fall of the "U.S. Secret Army" base at Long Chieng, Laos, and the fall of the ancient and proud Kingdom of Laos, the Kingdom of a Million Elephants, Lan Xang, to invading North Vietnam Army forces. It is a somber day for those who remember the hundreds of thousands of Laotian and Hmong soldiers and civilians massacred, starved to death, imprisoned, or who fled as political refugees to neighboring Thailand. On that fateful day, May 14-15, 1975, as NVA and PAVN units began breaching Skyline Ridge and the perimeters of the base at Long Chieng, the U.S. government, including the U.S. DOD, CIA, and State Department, abandoned the Lao-Hmong people and the "U.S. Secret Army."

The stench of betrayal still hangs over the U.S. government for its brutal and thoughtless abandonment of their staunchest allies, the Lao-Hmong "Secret Army" veterans and their families. In the hour of greatest need, with absolutely no plan for the evacuation or safety of its loyal allies, the United States government simply walked away. Only rogue Air American pilots, and a handful of CIA case officers, in defiance of the U.S. government's betrayal of the Lao-Hmong soldiers of the "U.S. Secret Army" refused to allow General Vang Pao (GVP) and his senior officers, and their families, to be left behind. On May 14-15, 1975, a small group of Air America pilots, and CIA case officers, flew several plane loads of GVP's officers and their families to neighboring Thailand in defiance of Washington's, and State's, official communications to "stand down," and offer no help or assistance, in the face of the NVA/PAVN brutal attack and coming slaughter of the Lao Hmong soldiers and tens of thousands of innocent civilians. The vast majority, over 98% of the Lao-Hmong "U.S. Secret Army" soldiers, airmen and their families were left behind. They were abandoned by a politically divided and paralyzed U.S. government who refused to assist them as they were attacked and slaughtered--or imprisoned, tortured and killed by NVA/PAVN and Pathet Lao forces in those fateful days, months, and years that followed. Words cannot describe the suffering and death that haunts and silently pursues the Lao-Hmong veterans, and people, to this day. Washington had no plan to help them.

Today, May 15, is National Lao Hmong Veterans Recognition Day, a somber occasion marked each year since 1997 at veterans' memorial ceremonies held at the Lao Veterans of America monument in Arlington National Cemetery and the Vietnam War Memorial. It is very appropriate for this distinguished Committee to schedule a hearing on this long-overdue legislation to grant burial honors to Lao and Hmong veterans of the "U.S. Secret Army."

<http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20130512005048/en/Laos-Hmong-Veterans-Vietnam-War-Honored-National>

To follow-up on this long overdue national recognition, the U.S. Congress, the Department of Veterans of Affairs and Obama White House should work together to pass and implement S. 200. This is America's unfinished business and would more fully memorialize and honor the valiant Lao- and Hmong-American soldiers, their suffering refugee families, and their important legacy in unique partnership with the United States during the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

Again, thank you Chairman Sanders, Vice Chairman Burr and distinguished Members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee for allowing us the opportunity to provide testimony at today's hearing on burial honors, and benefits, for the Lao-Hmong "U.S. Secret Army" veterans.

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