

Slideshow Talking Points - Secret War in Laos - Time of Remembrance Project

Elk Grove Unified School District

Slide 1

We are often asked: “What are all these Hmong and Mien immigrants doing here in Elk Grove?” But an “immigrant” is someone who chooses to leave his/her homeland. A refugee is someone forced to leave his/her homeland because of war, political persecution and/or religious or ethnic intolerance. The Hmong and Mien are refugees ... of a Secret War in Laos, a little known chapter of the Vietnam War years.

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The Geneva Accord of 1962 recognized the neutrality of Laos and forbade the presence of military personnel in the country. Fourteen nations signed the Accord, including the U.S. and North Vietnam.

Play clip.

Nixon - “There are no American combat forces in Laos. We have been providing logistical support and some training for the neutralist government in order to avoid Laos falling under Communist domination. As far as American manpower in Laos is concerned, there are none there at the present time on a combat basis.”

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But we were there. In fact, the largest paramilitary operations ever undertaken by the CIA took place in Laos. Much like the Mel Gibson/Robert Downey Jr. movie *Air America*, the CIA recruited pilots, who upon arriving at the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, were issued embassy IDs and told to switch out of military attire into civilian clothing. From Vientiane, they headed to remote mountain areas such as the tiny village of Long Cheng (Tieng) and its airstrip, which rapidly became one of the busiest airstrips in the world - but did not exist on any map. They were joined by Hmong and Mien soldiers.

Photos from Gene Hamner and Craig Morrison show “Ravens” (US pilot) with their “Robins” or “Backseaters,” Hmong skilled at recognizing enemy from non-enemy movement along the Plain of Jars and Ho Chi Minh Trail.

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On January 23, 1973, President Richard Nixon announced that the United States and North Vietnam had concluded an agreement to end the longest war in America’s history and bring “peace with honor” to Vietnam. The Paris Peace Accords called for a cease-fire that would allow the U.S. to begin its 60-day withdrawal from Vietnam. The Paris Peace Accords ended our

direct involvement in the Vietnam War, but it did nothing to end the war between North and South Vietnam. The fighting resumed. By April 30, 1975, Saigon fell to North Vietnam.

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Back to that question: How come there are so many Hmong and Mien here?

This video will be included in the Secret War Oral Histories Archive in the coming months.

After the Fall of Saigon, Communist took power of the mountain regions of Laos and US forces were forced to withdraw from Southeast Asia. Multitudes of Hmong and Mien fled the mountains of Laos to refugee camps in Thailand and Vietnam to escape communist rule and severe reprisals for their alliances with the U.S.

From 1976-1979, the first wave of Hmong and Mien families arrived in the United States. The second wave of resettlement began when the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program was instituted with the Refugee Act of 1980. The Hmong and Mien resettled throughout the U.S. and other countries throughout the world.

Tua Vang's family spent 13 years in a Thai refugee camp before coming to the United States. He still remembers arriving in San Francisco and seeing for the first time a major city - with hills. He entered 4th grade in a small public school in Oroville, California, where he started his transition into American life, but also dealt with enormous misconceptions by "Orovillians" about the origins of the Hmong people.

Timeline:

1975 - Secret war ends.

About 2,500 top military Hmong soldiers and their families are airlifted to Thailand for political safety; as many as 50,000 swarm into Long Cheng waiting for air transportation to Thailand.

Between 30,000 and 40,000 Hmong soldiers are killed in combat; many more are wounded.

About 10% of Laos' population sought political refuge elsewhere.

The United States, recognizing the sacrifice made by Hmong soldiers to fight for the U.S., began accepting Hmong refugees into the United States in December of 1975. By 1990, about 100,000 refugees had entered the United States.

For those who escaped torture and death in Laos, there would yet be tales of gruesome life in neglected refugee camps, tales of families split up by careless bureaucrats, and tales of shock and confusion as penniless refugees are dropped off in the strange world of America, where the citizens have no idea who the Hmong people were and sometimes viewed them as enemies.

Sources: <http://www.unitediumien.org/AboutUs.php> and <http://www.jefflindsay.com/hmong.shtml>

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During his high school U.S. History class, Tua waited to learn about the Secret War in Laos as part of the Vietnam War unit. It didn't happen. Somehow California Assembly Bill 78, signed in 2003, was not widely implemented.

Tua headed to CSU, Chico, looking forward to his Vietnam War class. No, the Secret War was not included, but the professor challenged Tua with task of researching, writing, and documenting the history of his people.

In addition to complementing AB 78 and 2064, the Time of Remembrance Oral History Project also serves as a valuable resource for helping students achieve the Common Core State Standards.

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A request from former EGUSD board member, Steve Ly, was to make sure we were including the teaching about the Hmong's critical role in the Secret War in Laos/Vietnam War (AB78), by making sure all EGUSD teachers and students had access to lessons and resources needed to do so.

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Connection between Japanese Internment and Secret War - Elk Grove area - strawberry fields

For our students to grasp the complexities and legacies of both wars, it is imperative that they have access to primary and secondary accounts of life before, during, and after the war years. Just as the oral histories of Japanese-Americans enrich the study of World War II, the Secret War oral histories, will go beyond facts and statistics and provide students with individual stories of survival, resistance, resilience, and reconciliation. It is through these lived experiences that students will understand how the past connects to the present and shapes the future.

This project is a resource for you to share - it's also a replicable model on documenting how history happens in our own communities.

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Tour the TOR website and show TOR Talks Blog

Slide 10

Background images: Book cover from author Gail Morrison (Hog's Exit: Jerry Daniels, the Hmong, and the CIA) = our connection to the Ravens via Steve Ly - To a Raven from the son of a Robin

Hmong Story 40 Connection - May Kou - father was a Robin
Photo of our Tech Services weekend interviewing setup

Standing with the Ravens is Tua Vang - who is writing two books and creating a documentary - and whose interview is part of our oral histories