

## “No One Returned for Me”

**H**aving provided close air support to ground troops for about six months, Pao Yang's aircraft had been hit many times. He had grown accustomed to seeing holes all over the aircraft after he landed. Each time he was relieved to have escaped death. The bomber T-28D model Chao Pha Khao pilots flew was a modified T-28A training aircraft. It enabled Hmong and Lao pilots to fly near treetops, which increased bombing accuracy. The close air support capability of Chao Pha Khao pilots overwhelmed enemy forces at the same time that it put the pilots in great danger.

The enemy usually reserved the Soviet 37 mm antiaircraft artillery guns for American jets flying high. Its length and weight made it difficult to quickly move the gun and point it at the target. Since the T-28D pilots flew very low, the enemy used the 12.8 mm and 12.7 mm instead. “When I was hit,” Pao recounted, “it was from a 12.8 mm. It was because I was not lucky that day. Something was said to be wrong with my plane and the mechanics couldn't figure it out. Just as I was about to go home, they said they had fixed it.” He climbed into the air-

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craft to join his fellow pilots, Koua Xiong and John Bounchanh Sayavong, on an urgent mission.<sup>1</sup> The three would be led by an ethnic Lao pilot named Kongthong, whose last name Pao does not remember. After the four 250-pound bombs were securely loaded, he followed the other pilots in hot pursuit of the enemy as he had done in nearly one thousand other missions. He dropped the first, second, and third bombs and told himself, “One more, then I would be on my way home!”<sup>2</sup>

That would not be the case. “But just at that last moment before dropping the bomb, my plane was hit. I heard a huge noise under my feet. [The plane] quickly caught on fire and dropped headfirst. My hair curled up, and I could feel fire surrounding my face. I couldn’t open my eyes.” If the fire had started on the wings or another part of the plane, he believes he would have been able to guide it to friendly territory.

Because the plane was on fire, his immediate response was to press the parachute button. “At that moment, it was horrible! I was in a daze because of the fire, plus, when the parachute ejected, it jerked me. Since I had just been hovering over enemy troops, it took a very short time for me to reach the ground.” Pao’s aircraft fell right next to the enemy’s camp in an area known to the Hmong as Thai Dia Choua (Thaib Dhia Tsua). In northeastern Laos, where the mountains are grandiose, he considered himself fortunate to have not smashed onto the mountainside. A number of pilots were killed when thick fog blocked their view of mountains that seemed to have emerged from nowhere. The problems were not only due to the mountainous terrain. The T-28D were poor-quality aircraft that were no longer used in Vietnam. Instead of discontinuing them, U.S. civilian and military officials decided to transfer them to be used in Laos without regard for the safety of local pilots and the American volunteers who flew with them.

Pao explained with much frustration, “This is on the side called Na Mai (Naj Maib). There were communist Vietnamese only. No communist Lao. Vietnamese only. They brought their

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large guns to that mountain range to shoot at our soldiers, very heavy artillery. We had some soldiers at Phou Long Math (Phu Loos Maj) and some at Phou Pha Xai (Phuj Phaj Xai). The leaders told the pilots that we had to go bomb those guns. We had enough communist forces to deal with around Long Cheng, and we couldn't even get to them all! But still, they told us to go bomb this heavily armed area. That's how I was shot down!”

Long Cheng was the location where the CIA established its operation with General Vang Pao. From the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, the CIA worked with Hmong to transform the densely forested valley to a lively town of nearly forty thousand inhabitants. Its population grew dramatically due to the relocation of people who could not remain in their villages. Long Cheng was not like Saigon or other cities and towns with U.S. troop presence. At any point, there would be only a few CIA operatives and other American intelligence officers orchestrating military and humanitarian activities. With readily available aircraft to fly them back to the capital city, Vientiane, Americans who served in Laos typically did not stay overnight. As the CIA's headquarters, it was the frequent target of enemy fire and communist troops had attempted to overrun it many times.

Pao remembers that fateful moment when he hit the ground. “I could hear them screaming and surrounding me, but because my pilot friends flew very low overhead to give me cover, they did not approach me right away.” Years later, when he saw Koua Xiong and John Bounchanh Sayavong in the United States, Pao learned from his fellow pilots that he was almost rescued. In their T-28D aircraft, they provided cover as a helicopter, which had just dropped off water at Padong, a nearby town, attempted the rescue. Koua and Bounchanh were soon forced to leave the scene because they were running out of fuel. Said Pao, “A rope was dropped, and it almost reached me. However, because of heavy fire, the helicopter was hit many times, [and] the pilot [also] left. They said that the helicopter was almost shot down near me. So, with that there was no more time to rescue

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me, and the enemy surrounded me.” The soldiers pulled him and the parachute into the cave in which they had been hiding. Shooting down a T-28D aircraft was considered a success for the communist troops since the pilots often inflicted great damage on them. Those whose aircraft were shot down during bombing missions typically died. Pao was one of only two from Military Region II who managed to survive. Bounchanh continued to fly following Pao’s capture. During one mission, enemy antiartillery guns shot down Bounchanh’s T-28D. He was able to turn his aircraft away from the enemy camp and parachuted to safety. Although he was severely injured, the rescue attempt to retrieve him succeeded.

For years, Pao had mulled over the issue of why he was not rescued. He told himself that it was a dangerous situation because the enemy had captured him shortly after he hit the ground. When he mentioned the enemy in our conversations, he was referring to both the Pathet Lao and their Vietnamese communist supporters. He often emphasized the enemy as *nyab laj* (Vietnamese). In his mind, the fact that it was Vietnamese soldiers who captured him further magnified the dominant role that they played in Pathet Lao affairs. Regarding why he was not rescued, Pao further justified that General Vang Pao and his CIA advisors likely calculated the risks and decided not to attempt further rescue missions. But deep down inside, the pain of being forgotten persists, primarily because he had been around long enough to see how those in power valued lives differently. “I was left in enemy hands because the leaders did not send rescue airplanes for me. What they did send was not even a pilot rescue helicopter! It was a very slow helicopter with no gunship. We’ve seen rescue efforts for American pilots. There were fighter jets and helicopters with gunship[s] to rescue downed American pilots. My rescue did not include any of that!” Why did General Vang Pao and his officers not treat Pao the same as American pilots? Why did they not utilize the same resources to rescue him? He had legitimate reasons to question the differences.

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Pao described the situation with a Hmong saying that he felt better explained Vang Pao's actions: “‘Pulling one hair is not going to make you bald.’ So, even if I died, it wouldn't matter to them. It doesn't hurt them. Our Hmong way of war was based on factionalism. If you did not have a close relative in a powerful position who could forcefully say that you had to be rescued at all costs, then it would not happen. I didn't have a powerful brother or uncle, and that was why there weren't those rescue planes for me. No fighter jets and helicopters to rescue me. My friends covered me for as long as they could before they retreated. That was it. No one returned for me!” Nepotism among Hmong leaders helps to explain how different members of the clandestine army were treated, but from a broader point of view, when a Hmong pilot was shot down, Hmong leaders did not have the power to expend the resources used when an American pilot was. Since the United States was operating under the pretense that it was not officially in Laos, U.S. military leaders were motivated to rescue downed American pilots at all costs to avoid enemy forces capturing them, which would provide evidence of American presence there. Local pilots, on the other hand, were likely regarded as dispensable.

By 1972, communist forces had moved so close to the Long Cheng area that aircraft had to take off from the Laotian capital of Vientiane, eighty miles southwest of Long Cheng. Due to Pao's pilot salary, his family was able to rent a house there. His mother lived with Pao, Ong, and their son, Pheng, whereas Pao's father came and went between this home and his home with his other wife. Polygamy was an accepted practice, and it increased significantly during the war, when so many men were killed. The wealth that some Hmong men gained from the U.S.-sponsored military also contributed to many marrying multiple wives. Reflecting on that fateful day, June 10, 1972, Pao's first wife, Ong Moua, explained, “I had cried and begged him to go fly one day and then stay home for a day before going back to fly. He'd always say that work is work. On that day, it

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was his day to rest. I don't know if he told you everything. It was his day to rest and not work. But, that day, we had planned to go find a cow to have a soul calling (hu plig) ceremony for our son, Pheng. Since it was his day to rest, I did ask him not to go to the office. He replied, '*Me pli* [my spirit], you worry too much. OK, today I will stay with you. After breakfast, we will go have some fun at Thadeua [Road] and then go look for a cow so that tomorrow we can have the soul calling ceremony for our child.' When I got out of bed, he followed and began to get dressed. I asked him why he was getting dressed [in his work clothes] when it was his day off. He was afraid of me asking him, but he responded that even though it was his day off, he had not talked to his superiors. He told me to get dressed and he would drop me off at the market to get something to eat while he quickly went to check in with them. He'd then come right back to pick me up, and after breakfast we would go have fun all day at Thadeua. We'd go find a cow before nightfall."<sup>3</sup> Hmong believe that a soul calling ceremony is important to ensure the child's good health physically and spiritually. Ong had wanted to have the ceremony for weeks, but Pao's schedule would not allow it. Thus, his suggestion pleased her greatly.

Pilots on duty between 1968 and 1970 were very busy. This was the case because of heightened activities in the larger Vietnam War. The year 1968 saw the highest number of U.S. troops in Vietnam (more than 530,000). It was also when the infamous Tet Offense and My Lai massacre took place. In the former, North Vietnamese and their allies in the south carried out surprise attacks throughout South Vietnam that changed Americans' views of how the war was going. Although the nature of the latter would not be exposed until 1969, it also had a dramatic impact on support for the war at home and abroad. These periods of heavy fighting in Vietnam affected the work of Hmong pilots. They would leave early in the morning and not return until evening. By early 1972, when Pao was on

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active duty, diplomacy was taking place publicly and privately between the United States and North Vietnam. On the Lao side, the different factions increased efforts to gain territorial dominance. Consequently, the Hmong pilots were extremely busy. Family members rarely spent quality time with them. That was why Ong had wanted to have the ceremony on that day. Thrilled with Pao’s revised plan for their day together, she hopped on the back of his motorbike, and they cruised toward the Morning Market (Talat Sao). He dropped her off and then went straight to the airport office. Ong recalled, “I walked around the market and bought vegetables. When he dropped me off, it was only 7:30 A.M. I waited until 9:00 A.M. He didn’t return. It was 9:15 A.M., and he still wasn’t back. By then, I was frantically worried. My heart was beating so fast. I was crying inside. I couldn’t wait any longer, so I decided to take a taxi home. I told myself that if he came to look for me and couldn’t find me, I’d apologize later.”

When she arrived at the house, the elders were waiting for her as they usually did. The rice was cooked, so she quickly prepared the vegetables. Ong continued, “I boiled some of the greens in one pot, and in another pot, I mixed some chicken with mustard green. When it was ready, I told my mother-in-law that they should go ahead and eat. As usual, she asked why I wasn’t eating, and I responded that I was waiting for my husband to return to eat. So, I asked her to slowly eat and feed Pheng. It was now almost 10:00 A.M., so I went to take a shower because it was really hot. I took a quick shower, put on my panties, and wrapped a sarong around me. At that moment, I heard a motorbike approach the house. I was so happy! I thought to myself, ‘My husband is back!’ I exited the bathroom. I didn’t understand why I had not yet heard him speak. Every day when he returned, he would immediately talk to the children outside. [He would usually ask] his younger sister, ‘Where’s your sister-in-law?’ I was always the first person he looked for.”

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Ong had expected to hear Pao's voice. When she did not hear him speak, she realized that the sound was not that of his motorbike. "My heart sank! [Pilot] Vang Seng was already parked outside of the house. I went outside with no shoes and shirt. Just my sarong. When he saw me, it seemed like he couldn't find any words to say. He didn't say anything. I asked him, 'Brother Seng, why are you here? What do you have to tell me?' Without realizing it, I was already hitting him with my fists. He was still sitting on the bike with his helmet on. He took off his helmet and said that whatever spirits we needed to call, we should because Coy—Pao was skinny so they called him Coy ["skinny" in Lao language]—was shot down about 8:20 or 8:30 A.M. He also said that they had not heard of any announcements, so we should call the spirits." For Hmong who practice ancestral worship, it is common to seek the help of their ancestors' spirits to guide whatever situation to a positive outcome. This often involves the promise to repay the spirits at a future date. Burning of incense and joss paper and sacrificing animals typically constitute the payments.

Vang Seng's message was not the news Ong had wanted to hear. She wanted him to tell her that everything would be all right and that Pao would be home soon. "At that moment, I didn't know what to do. I became numb. I couldn't cry. I couldn't scream. I couldn't say anything. After the message, Vang Seng got ready to leave while my father-in-law grabbed some incense to burn. Without realizing what I was doing, I climbed on the back of Vang Seng's motorbike. He turned around and asked what I thought I was doing. I was like a mute. I couldn't speak. All I heard was my mother-in-law saying that I should let go because the bike might fall. Vang Seng didn't know what to say, so he rode back to the airport with me." Normally the trip would be less than half an hour, but this time, it seemed like an eternity to Ong. Halfway there, she closed her eyes and held on to Vang Seng tightly, for she feared that she would pass out and fall off the motorbike. She thought

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about Pao’s promise to return for her at the market. For a brief moment, she was angry that he did not keep his promise. Why did he have to fly today? It was his day off, so why did another pilot not go on this mission instead? As these thoughts went through her mind over and over again, she felt the motorbike slow down and eventually come to a complete halt.

They had arrived at the Wattay airport. She quickly opened her eyes and slid off the motorbike. As she glanced around, she saw Pao’s motorbike. She then quickly turned toward the aircraft parking lot and noticed that his T-28D was gone. It was at this moment that she cried loudly. Ong remembers the men trying to calm her down. When Vang Seng’s superiors, a Lao commander and an American officer, were told that Pao Yang’s wife had arrived, they came to talk to her. “The Lao commander who oversaw the operation held me and said that he was sorry that Pao was shot down but that Pao was able to radio to them so I shouldn’t worry. He was still alive. He told me that they were in communication with him and that they already [had] two rescue helicopters searching for Pao. The American spoke Thai and asked me if I understood Thai. I said that I only knew very little so he would have to speak slowly. He said that I should not be afraid and for me to stay calm. They had already sent two helicopters to look for Pao.”

In actuality, the officers were merely trying to ease her fears. Only one helicopter attempted to rescue Pao. Although he did try to use his radio after he had hit the ground, it did not work. As he explained, “I grabbed my radio and spoke into it, ‘Chao Pha Khao, do you hear me?’ Only complete silence!” No communication with Pao ever took place after he parachuted. Since Ong did not know about this at the time, their reassurance gave her hope. Although she could not stop her tears from falling constantly, she told herself in that brief moment that she would have to be patient.

As Ong waited, an uncle of hers who was also a pilot arrived at the airport. Other pilots followed suit. “When my

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uncle Moua Chue arrived, I was crying so he hugged me and had me sit down on a chair. Lee Teng came over. Vang Bee. All of the friends. Since Pao went down, they all came by. After a while, they all went into the office. It was only Moua Chue and I sitting there. Soon, he left as well. I had a watch on, so when I arrived at the airport, it was past 11:00 A.M. At that moment, I felt bad that I didn't bring anything for my husband to eat. It was close to noon and the others had gone to eat. I didn't bring anything, so what would he eat when he returned? It was then that I passed out. When I woke up, it was around 4:00 P.M. They had moved me to the medical exam room next to the office. Since I didn't have a shirt on, they had covered me with a blanket. When I woke up, the nurse next to me said, 'Sister, are you awake?' I looked at her and I didn't say anything. She asked me several more times before I could mutter, 'Yes, I'm awake.' Then suddenly I stood up and asked, 'Where's my husband?' She held me and guided me to sit back down. She told me to sit down and she'd go get someone to come and talk to me." The nurse disappeared for a few minutes. When she returned, Moua Chue followed behind.

Upon seeing Moua Chue, Ong sat up and asked, "Uncle Chue, where's Pao?" She recalled him responding, with tears in his eyes, "We've not heard anything from Pao. Just stay calm. As soon as we hear anything, we will let you know." When the Lao commander heard that Ong was awake, he also came over to speak to her. After trying to reassure her that they were doing everything they could to find him, he told her that he would take her home. She did not want to leave the airport. If there were any news about Pao, Ong thought, the leaders would hear about it first. But she felt powerless and complied. "When we arrived at the house, he came in and talked to my in-laws. He was crying as well. After that, he left. That night I cried all night. It rained so hard all night. I fixed his part of the bed, but he didn't return. I couldn't even take care of my child. He was with my mother-in-law even though I was still

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nursing him. I don't know what she fed him that night!" She knew other women whose husbands were shot down. They either were never found or, if located, returned in body bags. She had hoped that he would be alive. She wondered if he were cold. Did he have anything to eat? Was he afraid? Images of Pao flashed through her mind over and over again as she lay in bed. She does not remember how much time passed before she fell asleep.