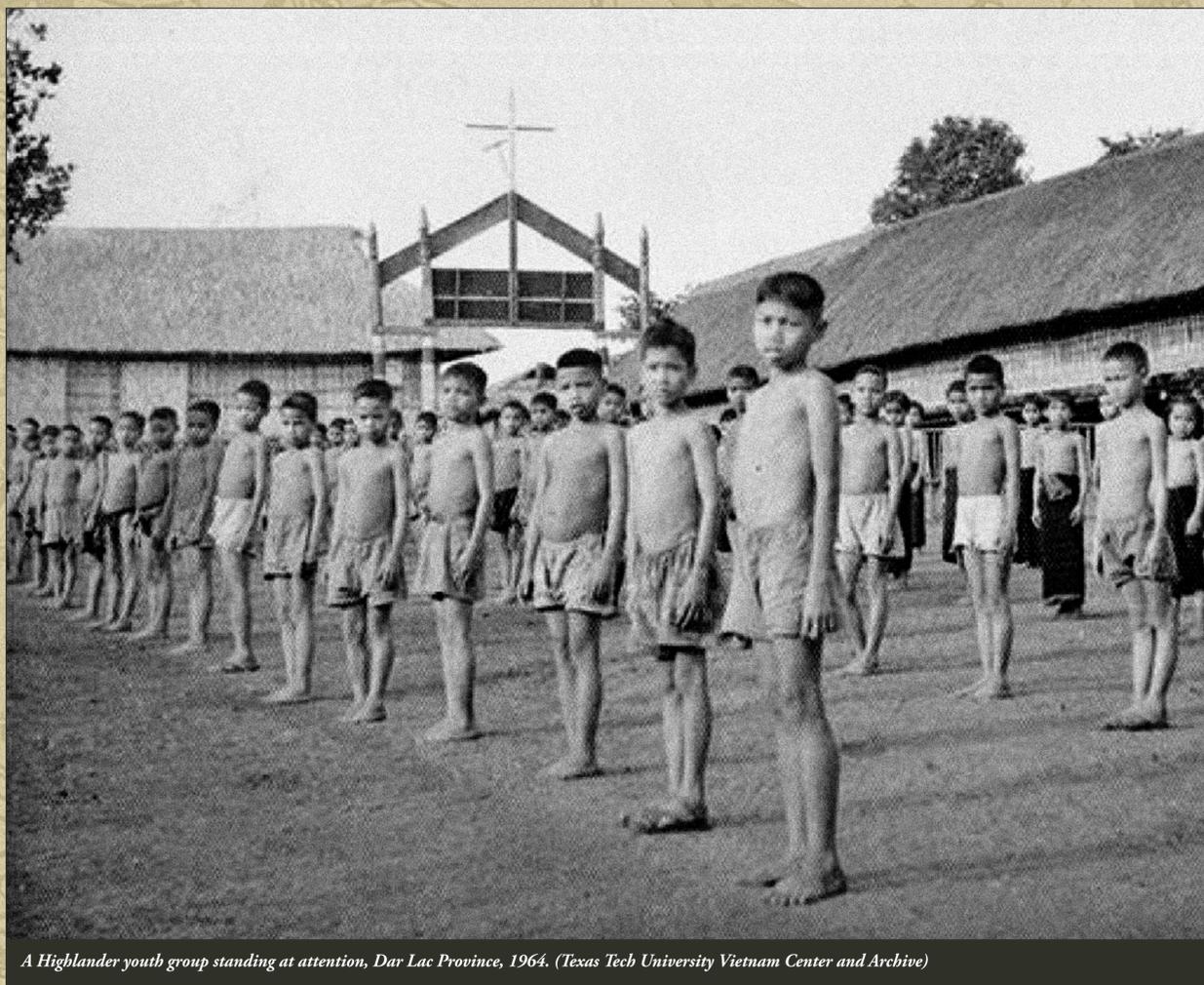




INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE VIETNAM WAR

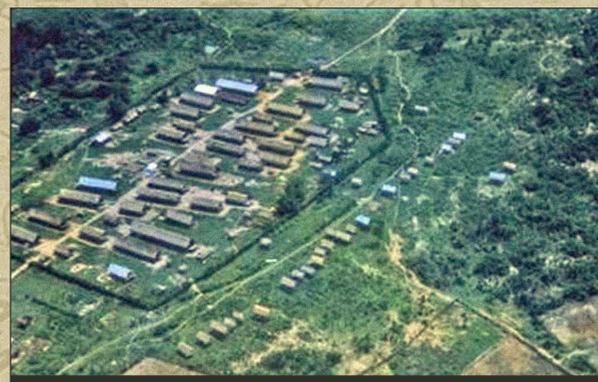
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A Highlander youth group standing at attention, Dar Lac Province, 1964. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)



Two women from the American Red Cross and an American serviceman sample Highlander rice wine, part of a welcoming ceremony for guests, unknown date. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)



Aerial photo of a Highlander village, unknown date. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)

Introduction

The 1954 Geneva Accords that ended the Indochina War divided the former colony of French Indochina into the countries of Laos, Cambodia, and North and South Vietnam. But the region was home to many dozens of ethnic groups. Although ethnic Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese peoples were the majority populations in their respective countries, Indochina incorporated a host of peoples, many of whom lived largely isolated lives in rural locales. The Hmong of Laos and the indigenous peoples of the Vietnamese Central Highlands had distinct cultures, and, despite the new national borders, they did not have much in common with their majority countrymen.

Both Communist and non-Communist governments recruited ethnic minority peoples during the Vietnam War, each side with at least some success. At least 50,000 Highlanders and 23,000 Hmong served in combat as U.S. allies in Southeast Asia. When the wars ended and the United States withdrew in 1975, the new regimes arrested, imprisoned, or killed many Highlanders and Hmong. Many also became refugees, some of whom immigrated to the United States.



Highlander troops pose with their U.S. Special Forces adviser, unknown date. (Montagnard Assistance Project)

Who are the Highlanders?

The people native to the Vietnamese Central Highlands played an instrumental role in the counterinsurgency fight against Communist troops on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and elsewhere. The French referred to them as the “Montagnards,” meaning “mountain people,” a label that Americans used as well. The Highlanders referred to themselves using words from their own distinct languages.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Highlanders were not one people but several. The three most populous groups were the Jarai, the Rhade, and the Ba Na, but there were about two dozen others. These groups were themselves divided into clans, which were matrilineal, tracing descent through the female line.

In the 1960s, the Highlander population in South Vietnam was approximately 1 million. They lived in the sparsely populated forested mountains in and around Kontum and Ban Me Thuot, practicing swidden agriculture (sometimes known as “slash-and-burn”) supplemented by hunting and gathering. Their religious beliefs were animistic—beliefs in the supernatural power of animals, plants, and other natural phenomena. Outsiders mostly left the Highlanders to themselves until the late nineteenth century, when the French opened the Central Highlands to missionaries, explorers, and administrators, nominally incorporating them into their colonial system.

Why the Highlanders Fought

The Highlanders resented outside rule and were prepared to fight for their independence. During the French Indochina War (1945–1954), French leaders used this to their advantage, promising to grant the Highlanders semi-autonomy. In return, the Highlanders agreed to fight against Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh. After the 1954 ceasefire agreement divided North and South Vietnam, South Vietnamese head of state Bao Dai did grant the Highlanders a degree of autonomy. But when Ngo Dinh Diem assumed the presidency in 1955, his government forcibly relocated Highlander villages and confiscated their land as part of his land reform programs.

In response to Diem’s policies, some Highlanders formed the Highlander Liberation Front in 1955, also known as the Bajaraka movement. Over the next several years, the Bajaraka incorporated additional oppressed ethnic minorities and renamed themselves the United Struggle Front for Oppressed Races (known by the acronym FULRO)

My people suffered terribly under the Vietnamese Communist regime. They came and took our land, and made it theirs. They try to erase our language and force us to speak Vietnamese. They have taken our fertile land and forced us to the bad land. They say they have come to build progress for my people, but they have come to kill, arrest, and oppress my people.

— Leader of FULCRO, speaking in 1992.



U.S. Special Forces soldier teaching a Highlander CIDG recruit to fire an M79 grenade launcher, March 30, 1967. (National Archives)

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U.S. Special Forces troops eating together with Highlander CIDG men during a pause while on patrol, circa 1966. (U.S. Army Center of Military History)

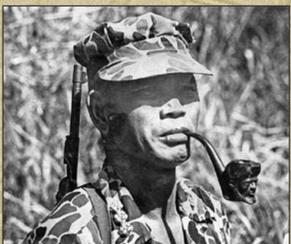


A U.S.-produced psychological warfare poster, distributed to Highlander villagers, promoting anti-Communism and support for the government in Saigon, late 1960s. (National Archives)

HIGHLANDERS IN THE VIETNAM WAR, 1964–1975

Both North and South Vietnamese governments attempted to recruit the Highlanders with promises of autonomy. Those who sided with the South Vietnamese and Americans tended to believe that a Communist regime was less likely to keep that promise. Highlanders did not fight for South Vietnam's freedom, per se, but rather to stake a claim to their own.

Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs)



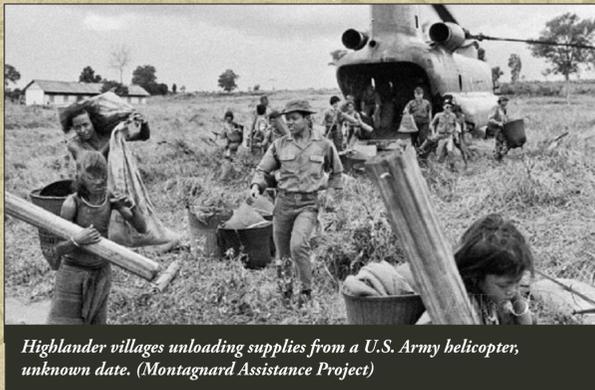
A Highlander (Rbade) leader and one of the founders of FULRO, Y Bham Enuol, unknown date. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)

As early as 1962, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began recruiting Highlanders into village-based guerrilla units known as Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs). CIDG forces were not usually full-time soldiers. They patrolled their own villages, searching for Viet Cong or North Vietnamese infiltrators. Some CIDGs also worked directly with U.S. Army Special Forces advisers. By 1964, there were 27 CIDGs consisting of 11,000 full-time and 40,000 part-time fighters.

Highlander military activities included counterinsurgency, border surveillance, ambushes, small-scale raids, and communication and logistics operations. Those fighters who became full time soldiers were usually stationed with a contingent of U.S. Special Forces advisers at remote, lightly fortified bases near the borders with Cambodia and Laos, where they were frequently attacked.



U.S. Army Special Forces troops visit a Highlander village, circa early 1960s. (U.S. Army Center of Military History)

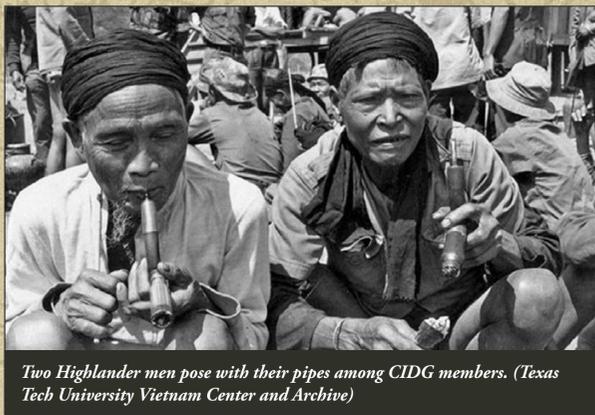


Highlander villages unloading supplies from a U.S. Army helicopter, unknown date. (Montagnard Assistance Project)

A Deadly War

Highlanders suffered high casualty rates throughout the war. The Central Highlands were a favored base of operations for Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units because of their sparse civilian population, dense forest cover, and proximity to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As a result, the Highlanders' homeland became one of the most war-torn parts of South Vietnam. Highlander villagers were often the victims of off-target bombs, shells, and bullets, and the solution employed by the allies—namely relocating villagers elsewhere—further disrupted their lives.

Of the approximately 1 million Highlanders in South Vietnam in 1960, over 330,000 of them had been casualties by 1975. As many as 225,000 of them were killed—a devastating 20 percent of their population. According to one estimate, 85 percent of Highlander villages had been destroyed or permanently resettled by 1975.



Two Highlander men pose with their pipes among CIDG members. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)

HIGHLANDERS AFTER THE WAR

When Communist Vietnamese troops toppled the Saigon government in the spring of 1975 the war ended, and with it ended the chances for the Highlanders to obtain autonomy as a people. For many, the war continued, and some persisted in armed resistance into the 1990s.

An Altered People and Landscape

The war and its aftermath dramatically altered the Highlanders' homeland. The Communist government confiscated much of their land and redistributed it to ethnic Vietnamese. In 1960, the population of the Highlands was about 1 million. By 2014, it had increased to 5.5 million people—the overwhelming majority of whom were non-indigenous. In 1960, 85 percent of the Central Highlands had been covered by forest. But between 1976 and 1990, one scholar estimates that the land was deforested at a rate of 74,000 acres per year to make way for agriculture and plantation development.



Highlander (Jarai) women in Plei Lao village, Gia Lai Province, Vietnam, where government police have broken up a prayer meeting, March 2001. According to Human Rights Watch, the police in this incident fired on the villagers, killing one of them, and burned the village church. (Human Rights Watch)

In the late 1970s, the Hanoi government initiated a large-scale migration program that resettled Highlanders and Vietnamese into what it termed the "New Economic Zones" of the centrally controlled Vietnamese economy. Many locals lost their ancestral lands. Those suspected of having worked with the United States were sent to reeducation camps. Today, Vietnam's 1.5 million ethnic Highlanders remain mostly impoverished and marginalized in Vietnamese society, even while they continue to demand the return of their lands and rights.

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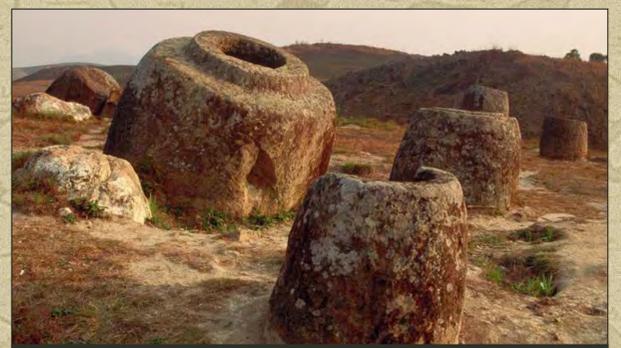
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Hmong Villagers plowing a rice field, 1960s. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)



Hmong women posing for a photo outside their village, 1960s. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)



One of the Hmong's Laos homelands, in and around the Plain of Jars, gets its name from the Iron Age stone cylinders found throughout the region, likely associated with an ancient civilization's burial practices. It received extensive damage during the wars of the 1960s and 1970s. (Smithsonian Institution)

THE HMONG PEOPLE

The Hmong (roughly translated as "free people") are an ethno-religious group with a history stretching back thousands of years. They historically resided in mountainous enclaves within China, Laos, and Vietnam, and they have long lived separate from ethnic Chinese, Lao, and Vietnamese communities. Before the Vietnam War, among the more notable centers of Hmong life in Southeast Asia were mostly in the northern upland region of Laos, known as the Plain of Jars, and in the far north of Vietnam in the borderlands near China. The total population of people who claim Hmong identity today is approximately 3 million. Roughly 800,000 reside in Vietnam, 500,000 in Laos, and about 300,000 live in the United States.



Defensive outpost on the perimeter of the Hmong village of Ban Na, near the Plain of Jars, Laos, circa 1962. (CIA)

Before the war, Hmong social organization consisted of patrilineal clans practicing swidden agriculture, growing mostly rice and vegetables. They were also well-regarded for their ability to raise livestock. In the agricultural off-season, many Hmong farmers grew opium as a medicine and means of local exchange. But later, as the war increased financial strains, outsiders encouraged it as a cash crop that was often funneled into the international narcotics trade. Hmong spiritual practices revolved around reverence for their ancestors, normally worshiped in the home rather than at any central temple or church.



CIA officer Richard L. Holm with a Hmong leader in the village of Phon Song, unknown date. (CIA)

Similar to the Central Highlanders of Vietnam, the Hmong have long sought autonomy. Their resistance to outside authority partly stemmed from their quasi-democratic social structure, in which decisions were made as a group. It was also a reaction to ages-

old prejudice. Ethnic Lao and Vietnamese people historically referred to the Hmong as "savages" and "primitives." Also like the Highlanders, the Hmong were courted by all sides in the region's twentieth-century conflicts. Many Hmong held anti-communist sympathies, and in 1961 the CIA recruited them as guerrillas to combat the growing Communist Pathet Lao movement in Laos.

LAOS'S CIVIL WAR AND THE CIA'S SECRET WAR, 1960-1975

During the 1960s, the political spectrum in Laos was roughly divided between three main factions: rightists, leftists, and neutralists. The rightists and neutralists were anti-communist and controlled the government. The leftists included the Lao Patriotic Front, or Pathet Lao, which was based in the remote northeastern regions of Laos, where the Hmong communities straddled the border with northern Vietnam.

In 1961, as Pathet Lao insurgent attacks on the government in Vientiane escalated, the United States made it a top priority to preserve a non-Communist Laos. President John F. Kennedy, however, stopped short of deploying the American armed forces and instead turned to the CIA, which began recruiting the Hmong to fight Communism.

Why a Secret War?

In 1962, the United States, China, and the Soviet Union signed a treaty stating they would not use their armed forces in Laos. Because none of the major Cold War powers wanted to risk turning the Laos civil war into a global conflict, the country became the site of a "proxy" war. The Communist nations clandestinely supported the Pathet Lao in waging a guerrilla war against the Royal Lao government, which was supported by the United States.



Hmong forces posing for a photo while on patrol in the Laos-North Vietnam border region, circa 1963. (CIA)

Operation MOMENTUM

In 1961, the United States began what became known as Operation MOMENTUM to train and arm the Hmong to fight Communist factions in Laos. By 1963, the CIA had recruited more than 20,000 Hmong, organizing them into Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs). The SGUs were officially part of the Royal Lao Army, but actually operated under CIA authority. The CIA objective in Laos was to interdict troops and supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to harass any Communist forces found there. The CIA hoped to force the North Vietnamese to expend significant resources fighting the Hmong in Laos, which in turn would reduce Hanoi's capacity to wage war in South Vietnam.

Why They Fought

The Hmong who sided with the Vientiane government and the United States did so because they believed them to be more trustworthy allies who would keep their promise to grant the Hmong autonomy after the war. Additionally, the civil war destroyed their fields and crops, and many became soldiers in order to escape the poverty and hunger in their villages, to provide for their families, and to stake claims to the death benefits the CIA paid to the families of those who were killed.



General Vang Pao (center) and his men with three CIA advisors, early 1960s. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)

Vang Pao, Hmong General

The Hmong were led by their own general, a veteran of World War II and the French Indochina War named Vang Pao. Vang was of humble origins, but became a charismatic Hmong chief and a hardened veteran of wars against the Japanese, French, Viet Minh, Pathet Lao, and North Vietnamese. Known as a respected leader and a sharp military mind, Vang Pao attracted recruits due to his famous exploits in combat and his reputation for caring about his men. After the triumph of Communist forces in Laos in 1975, he was forced into exile in the United States.

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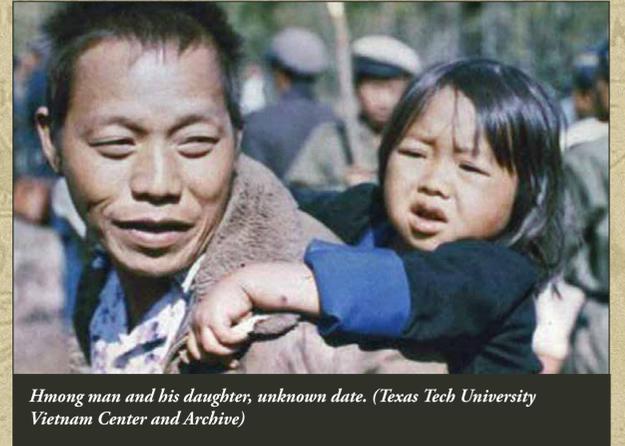


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Hmong troops on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laos panhandle selecting sites for observation posts along the road, circa 1963. (CIA)



Hmong man and his daughter, unknown date. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)



Hmong refugee children in the Ban Vinai refugee camp, in Thailand, circa 1975. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)

THE HMONG AT WAR

Special Guerrilla Units

Fighting in their homeland against enemies who were unfamiliar with the terrain, the Hmong excelled at setting up ambushes and other forms of insurgent warfare. As SGUs improved they also learned to effectively engage enemy forces directly, even when outnumbered and outgunned. Operation MOMENTUM grew so large that by the mid-1960s it became increasingly difficult to keep it a secret. Scholars estimate that there were over 23,000 Hmong fighters by 1964. Some of them were even sent to Thailand and trained to fly spotter planes and helicopters.

Hmong Losses

The war placed a tremendous burden on the Hmong. Along with the bombs that chewed up their fields and destroyed communities, the fighting took many men away from home during critical times in the agricultural season. Additionally, many young men spent years away during the time they would traditionally build families, leading to a long-term breakdown in traditional Hmong life. As the deaths mounted, the war became less about Hmong independence and more about survival, which led to desertions and defections.

By 1973, the United States had flown nearly 60,000 bombing sorties aimed at the Pathet Lao, rendering much of the Hmong homelands around the Plain of Jars uninhabitable. That situation persists to this day, in some places, due to unexploded ordnance and lasting damage to the region's ecology. Between 1960 and 1975, approximately 30,000 Hmong soldiers and civilians died—about 10 percent of their total population at the time.

THE HMONG AFTER THE WAR

Persecution

North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao won their respective wars in 1975, leaving Hmong partisans vulnerable to Communist regimes bent on suppressing and punishing them. The CIA evacuated approximately 25,000 Hmong in 1975, but many more wanted to go. About 11,000 of these refugees settled in the United States. Perhaps as many as 100,000 Hmong fled on foot to Thailand, most of whom ended up in refugee camps. Those Hmong who sided with the anti-communists and remained in Laos became targets of government persecution.



Hmong-Americans posing at the Lao Family Community Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, 1981. (Minnesota Historical Society)

Refugees and Immigrants

The Hmong's service on behalf of the United States was an official state secret during and after the war. Due to this secrecy, few Americans understood the Hmong's plight or the sacrifices they made for U.S. goals in Southeast Asia. Many Hmong refugees eventually settled in the United States, but it took dedicated volunteers and advocates in the United States years of work to make their settlement possible. About 105,000 Hmong were in the U.S. by the end of the 1970s, with thousands of others settling in France, French Guiana, Australia, and

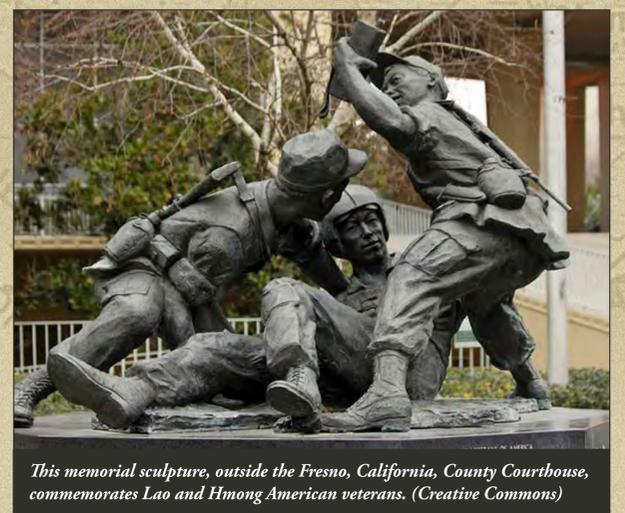


Hmong refugees have continued to seek asylum in recent years. This is a photo of Hmong residing in a refugee camp in Thailand, July 30, 2009. (Human Rights Watch)

Canada. More than 300,000 Hmong—including both foreign-born and those born in America—now reside in the United States. Much like other Southeast Asian refugee and immigrant populations, the Hmong community in the United States has tended to congregate in several major enclaves. The largest populations of Hmong-Americans today reside in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California.



Dr. James Rockner (right), Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive Director, greets a Hmong delegation on a visit. Former Hmong general Vaug Pao is at center. (Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive)



This memorial sculpture, outside the Fresno, California, County Courthouse, commemorates Lao and Hmong American veterans. (Creative Commons)

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