

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Yong Neng Vue
Lao Army, Vietnam War
2014

Yong Neng Vue – English Transcript

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, November 14, 2014

Translated, transcribed, and abstract written by Seethong Yang, February, 2014

Abstract

Yong Neng Vue is a war veteran who fought in the secret war in Laos. He began his service in the army when he was twelve years old. Before he joined the army, he was living with his family. They farmed and lived off the the land. He attended school for three years before joining. During the early part of the war, because he was so young, he wasn't sent to fight at the front but was kept in the back. His main responsibility was to package food, ammunition and weapons to be sent to soldiers at the front. Yong Neng, his father and brother all fought in the war. After the war ended in 1975, he continued to fight as guerilla fighters. A few years later he and his family crossed over to Thailand. They lived in two different refugee camps, Nong Khai and Ban Vinai before coming to the U.S. Yong Neng is grateful for his life in the U.S. because his children had an opportunity to be more than he and wife could. At first, he didn't want to stay in the U.S. but later he was able to find peace here.

[Start of Interview]

Ellen Brooks: Today is Friday November 14, 2014, this is an interview with Yong Neng Vue who is a Hmong veteran, who served in the Secret War in Laos. Ah, the interview is being conducted in La Crosse. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks and the translator and co-interviewer is Seethong Yang.

So we'll just start at the very beginning if he can tell us when and where he was born.

Translator: We will begin by asking you about when you were born, where were you born, what year, in what region? Would you speak a little bit about that?

Yong Neng Vue: I was born in Laos, and the city in Laotian is called Tha Nee, in Xieng Khuang. I'm not sure what the Americans call it.

Translator: I was born in Tha Nee in the Province of Xieng Khoung in Laos.

What is the date?

Yong Neng Vue: Ah, what date?

Translator: Such as the year and the date, like what you told me earlier is fine?

Yong Neng Vue: Ah, June 8th, '59.

Translator: June 8th of '59.

Ellen Brooks: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood and what your life was like when you were growing up?

Translator: Would you talk a little bit about when you began to remember, what was your life like in Laos?

Yong Neng Vue: Ah, ever since I remember I was a soldier. Before that I farmed with my parents from place to place. After that I went to Laotian school for a little bit, only for three years, not long. I attended first grade to third grade then I became a soldier. [1:45-2:16]

Translator: Before I joined the war, I remember my family, were farming, we were doing anything just to make a living. And I went to school for three years to learn, through the Lao, the Laotian school system, went from grade three, first grade to third grade and that was it. And I had entered the war effort after that.

Yong Neng Vue: Yeah.

Ellen Brooks: So you entered when you were a child, so how old were you do you think?

Translator: When you began as soldier, you--

Yong Neng Vue: I would say that I was just a very young boy. May be about twelve years old.

Translator: I was probably just a child, must've been only about twelve.

Ellen Brooks: What did you do as part of the war effort?

Translator: Because you were still a child when you started, what did you do?

Yong Neng Vue: During the war, the parents...my father is that one [pointing to a photo; asked his wife to give him the photo from the wall]. This one, my father is that one. The three of us were soldiers. My brother is this one, all were involved in the war in Laos. This is Laotian, it's Laotian...

Translator: Is it a soldier's identification card?

Yong Neng Vue: It certainly is a soldier's identification card, but that one is my brother's. I lost mine.

Mrs. Vue¹: He's back in Laos.

Translator: Oh, really?

Mrs. Vue: They sent him from Vi Nai back to Laos.

Translator: So both me and my father and my brother, my older brother were, all served in the war effort, this is my older brother who got sent back to Laos. And this is his ID card, as a soldier during that time.

Yong Neng Vue: [Laughter]

Ellen Brooks: So when you were a young soldier what were your jobs and what were your responsibilities?

Translator: When you were a young man and a soldier what was your responsibility? What did they have you do?

Yong Neng Vue: My responsibility when I was young, they didn't let me go to the front. They told me to stay back. They brought meat, so I packed those meat. I packed rice, cooked rice, packed rice and sent them to soldiers. [4:39-4:59]

Translator: Because I was so young, they did not send me to the front, um they asked me to package food, rice and meat, cooked food and cooked meat and prepared it and sent it to the front.

Mrs. Vue: Tell them that you stayed with him [pointing to an individual in another photo].

Yong Neng Vue: Mm. The leader, the *kos-loos*² who commanded the soldiers, is the one further up [pointing to a photo].

Translator: Is that the Commander that you worked for?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, my Commander.

Translator: That was the commander. We're pointing to a photo on the wall, a gentleman in uniform that was Yong Neng Vue's Commander.

Yong Neng Vue: He's name is Chong Koua Vue.

¹ Mrs. Yong Neng Vue was also present at this interview; she sometimes intercepted a question and offered answers in the interview; her answers were sometimes difficult to hear;

² This is Yong Neng's exact word in Hmong, which doesn't translate into anything; might be an abbreviation for "Colonel" in Laotian or may refer to the ethnicity of the Commander;

Translator: Chong Koua Vue?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes.

Translator: The gentleman in uniform in the photo on the wall's name is Chong Koua Vue.

Ellen Brooks: Did you have any training?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes I did. Because I was among those in the back so the training was done in the base.

Translator: Yes, I had training but because we were in the base we were just trained in the base with work responsibilities in the base.

Ellen Brooks: And what were those?

Translator: Since you were trained in the back, how did they train you?

Yong Neng Vue: Trained to fight of course.

Translator: We were trained to fight also.

Yong Neng Vue: Trained to fight, trained to use grenade, trained to use rocket propelled grenades, forties, bazooka, cannon, sixties, etc.

Translator: We were trained to fight, we (were) trained to use grenade, trained to use bazooka, cannon, sixties, rocket propelled grenades.

Ellen Brooks: And who was training you?

Translator: Who came and trained you?

Yong Neng Vue: At that time the Thai instructors had already trained some Hmong soldiers, so the Hmong instructors trained us.

Translator: At the time there were Thai officers who had trained some Hmong soldiers already, so the Hmong soldiers were the ones who trained us.

Ellen Brooks: And were there a lot of younger soldiers like yourself or is it pretty rare to be so young?

Translator: At that time those who were very young, twelve and thirteen like yourself, were you the only one or was there a lot?

Yong Neng Vue: There was a lot. Hmong and Laotian also.

- Translator: Also very young?
- Yong Neng Vue: All the same. The older ones were fighting (at the front), and the younger ones stayed in the back with the elderly. When I turned fourteen, fifteen, the war was already slowing down.
- Translator: There were others who were as young as I was, both Laotian and Hmong, very young like I was also. Because we were younger, we were held back. Some of the kids that are older, fourteen or fifteen were sent to the front. But when I became fourteen and fifteen, when I got that old the war was slowing down already.
- Ellen Brooks: So your job was mostly with helping with the food and preparing food?
- Translator: Were you mostly responsible for packaging food and sending them to the soldiers at the front?
- Yong Neng Vue: That's how it was. Those of us in the back we were called *koos-npas-xas-kas*³, right? We packed ammunition, packed grenades into parachutes, loaded them into airplanes and then the airplanes dropped them off for them. [8:42-9:01]
- Translator: Us, who are at the base, we were called *koos-npas-xas-kas*, and we packaged rifles, we packaged grenades into different packages and load them up into airplanes and these airplanes drop them off for troops at the front.
- Ellen Brooks: So then did you move with the soldiers? Did your base change or were you always in the same place?
- Translator: The base that you lived in, the fort that you stayed at, the place where you packaged those items, was it the same place, or did you have to move with the soldiers? Wherever they went, did you have to follow them, to be close to them?
- Yong Neng Vue: We went also, but the elderly were placed in the back. And the grown-ups were placed at the front.
- Translator: We moved also with the troops, but the younger ones were held back further from the front. The older ones were put right at the front.
- Ellen Brooks: And what were the soldiers, the older ones, what were they like?

³ A Laotian word, unable to find an English equivalent, but the word means “the unit that neutralizes crisis”;

Translator: The soldiers who were older than you, how were they like?

Yong Neng Vue: Those who were with me now live in this country, there's only a few left. Some have died because whether it was at the front or in the back there was fighting also. So I don't know if they're still alive.

Translator: The ones that had served with me, a lot of them had died already, because at the time the front, there was fighting at the front and also in the back too. There was fighting in the back also. So I don't know how many, or who had survived the war.

Translator: What about those who (were) sent to the front, were there anyone that you knew, that was related to you, those who were a little older than you that they sent to the front, how were those like? Do you know about those?

Yong Neng Vue: Mostly, they have all died.

Translator: They have all died?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes. I still have a photo over there, I will show you.

Translator: Oh, ok. Those that were older, that were sent to the front, mostly died. And I have a picture that I want to show you with some of the family members that had died at the front.

Yong Neng Vue: This photo, please tell them that this photo has the older ones, which have all died. In this photo, there are only two that I know are still alive.

Translator: Those that are still alive?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes.

Translator: Ok.

Mrs. Vue: There are more than two still alive...

Yong Neng Vue: But I don't know the Laotians.

Mrs. Vue: This one died [pointing to the photo], this one died, this one died, this one...let's see, died, and this one lives in St. Paul, right? And this one also lives in St. Paul. This one lives in Pennsylvania. This one in California, these two live in California. But don't know where this one is. But this one probably died. This one, this one and this one, these three died, ok?

Translator: We're looking at a picture with nine soldiers from 1971, they are indicating which one died , which ones are still living in the United States and their states.

Do you mind if, Greg is a Curator, do you mind if he takes a photo of this picture?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, he can do that.

Mrs. Vue: Permission granted.

Translator: He's ok.

What about that one? Would you mind if we take a photo?

Yong Neng Vue: Yeah, yeah, ok.

Mrs. Vue: Go ahead and take a photo, if he prefers we can make a copy for him.

Translator: Oh, you'd be ok with that too?

Mrs. Vue: Yes, of course.

Translator: They're ok too if we borrow it and make a photocopy of it and send it back just like the other one.

Yong Neng Vue: Yeah, that way it's good like the original.

Translator: What about this one? What is it?

Yong Neng Vue: Ah, this one...

Translator: Is it you?

Yong Neng Vue: It's a military photo also.

Translator: Is it you?

Yong Neng Vue: I took it in 1978.

Translator: Can I see this one?

Yong Neng Vue: Sure.

Translator: We're looking at a picture here of Yong Neng Vue.

You said that this was 1978?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes.

Translator: Taken in 1978.

Yong Neng Vue: It was longer with the whole body but when the Vietnamese came I cut it short so I can hide it.

Translator: Oh.

Yong Neng Vue: Hid it for a long time and this is what's left.

Translator: It was a picture that was enlarged from a smaller picture, the smaller picture has its whole body but they had, because they encountered, they had cut off the rest of the body and just kept the kind of a portrait for that from the picture.

Ellen Brooks: So you were a soldier, were you able to continue your education at all or were you a full time soldier?

Translator: When you became a soldier, you weren't able to continue going to school anymore right? You were a soldier and that was all that you did, right?

Yong Neng Vue: I couldn't. I couldn't because the soldiers at the front were numerous and they (the enemy) kept attacking so those in the back worked hard to cook, pack, and send food to them. We packed ammunition also. We sent weapons.

Translator: No, could not go to school anymore because at the front there were many soldiers that were fighting that need assistance, need food, need weapons and so we prepared the food, prepared the weapons, packaged them up and sent them out to the front.

Ellen Brooks: And were you able to communicate with your family? People who weren't fighting at all.

Translator: When you were (a) soldier, were you able to stay in contact with your relatives? Those relatives in the back. Were you able to stay in contact or not?

Yong Neng Vue: None. At that time they allowed you to go for fifteen days, if you had a lot of people then you rotate. You can go and stay there for fifteen days, and then you go stay back here for fifteen days, that was fine. But if there was not enough people then you'd just continue to stay there indefinitely.

Translator: If there's a lot of us, or if there's enough people would rotate. We would rotate, some of us go a little closer to the front for fifteen days, then we'll

rotate back for fifteen days, but sometimes there's not enough people to rotate, so we're just, we're kept at the front, close to the front all the time.

Ellen Brooks: Where did you sleep?

Translator: According to what you remember, when you were a soldier, when the war was going on and you were packing food for them, where did you sleep?

Yong Neng Vue: During the war, in the battle field, we don't sleep as we sleep here. We dig holes and sleep in them. We take large tree trunks, enough for four to five people to carry, and used them to build the holes, make rooms and sleep in them.

Translator: Did you use the tree trunks to make walls or roofs?

Yong Neng Vue: The tree trunks as walls then we put earth on top, and sleep inside. A hill like this, we dig up the holes and sleep inside.

Translator: We built trenches, we used logs, big heavy logs to divide up, we dug, dig out the trenches and used the logs to stable the trenches and covered them up with ground and we sleep in there.

Ellen Brooks: And I know that you weren't at the front, but were you ever in danger? Did the enemy ever bomb your camp or anything like that?

Translator: I understand that when you were a soldier you were very young and you didn't get to go fight at the front, but were there times when the Vietnamese or the enemy fired artillery or attacked the base that you stayed in?

Yong Neng Vue: There were.

Mrs. Vue: When they were guerilla fighters, for two years before they became guerrilla fighters, they were at the front fighting the Vietnamese.

Translator: And here we have a voice Mrs. Yong Neng Vue, she was mentioning that two years before the war ended, Yong Neng was actually at the front and after the war ended in '75 after that, he was very much at the front of the combat. Yong Neng was just saying that there was sometimes they were attacked by the enemy.

Yong Neng Vue: [Addressing the Translator] Please tell them a little bit that when the country was lost, the Vietnamese came to stay with us, but took away all of our guns. At that time, only the Vietnamese had guns. [17:43-17:59]

Translator: When the war ended in '75, the enemy came and lived with us, among us, but they took away all of our weapons and no one, we didn't have any weapons except for the enemy.

Yong Neng Vue: So we concluded that if this was the case then we might not be able to stay anymore. That was why we only stayed and farmed for one year then we went into the jungle. [18:11-18:29]

Translator: So after the war, this was going on and we lived like this trying to farm, trying to resume our normal life for about a year and we knew we had to leave, we had to run into the jungle, into hiding.

Yong Neng Vue: Yeah.

Ellen Brooks: So when you went into hiding, how many people did you go with?

Yong Neng Vue: Those that went into hiding with us, correct?

Translator: Those that went into hiding with you, how many were there?

Yong Neng Vue: All of us in that region, there were more six thousand.

Translator: But each went separately in small groups?

Yong Neng Vue: All together.

Translator: All together, six thousand went into the jungle?

Yong Neng Vue: All together, six thousand people.

Translator: About six-thousand. And I [meaning translator] have clarified to see if the six-thousand was in small badges, but it was verified that six-thousand all together as one.

Yong Neng Vue: Then we divided up everybody. We divided, who's staying where, who's guarding where. This was how we regained the territories that the Americans once controlled. We stayed until when they (the enemy) came back and regained all the territories, we ran out of ammunition that's why (we) crossed over to Thailand. [19:25-19:47]

Translator: So with the six-thousand, although it was a big unit, we divide it up into different groups who stayed in different areas, that way we could occupy a larger area and defend those areas. But for a while, we, a while after we did that we ran out of ammunition and that's when we crossed over to Thailand.

Ellen Brooks: So what was your everyday life like when you were in the jungle?

Translator: Would you talk about when you were in the jungle, what did you do in the morning, in the afternoon? What did you do when you were in the jungle as guerrilla fighters⁴? The life in the jungle.

Yong Neng Vue: **When we were guerrilla fighters it was like this, everyday our main objective was to find enough food for our family who stayed in the back, to stay alive to fight. That was what everyone did. [20:28-20:55]**

Translator: The whole purpose was...we were still in the jungle, was to find enough food for the day, for yourself and for your family, your wife and children. Mostly the men were at the front and the wives and the children were a little bit back, into the jungle. So our priority for the day was just to find enough food for ourselves and for our family.

Ellen Brooks: What kind of food were you looking for?

Translator: You were looking for...

Mrs. Vue: Son, please tell them this. During the three years that we lived in the jungle, we had no rice, we ate bamboo, ate the roots of bamboo, we also ate *la*⁵, things like that.

Yong Neng Vue: As far as food goes, we didn't have rice, but we were able to eat bamboo, bamboo shoots. There were also wild potatoes in the jungle the size of your fist, these we could eat.

Translator: These were not the regular type of potato?

Yong Neng Vue: No they're different. They're wild potatoes.

Mrs. Vue: No they're different. They say that these were *sha-ya-ther*⁶ and *chong*⁷. Do you know what *chong* is?

Translator: I have heard people talk about it.

Mrs. Vue: After we ate those, the elderly and the young all died, please tell them that.

⁴ The actual word used by the translator is "*caub fab*", the closest English equivalent is "*guerrilla fighters*";

⁵ This is a transliteration from Mrs. Vue's exact word in Hmong "*laj*" or more commonly referred to as "*toov laj*", which is unclear as to an English equivalent, but in the context of the description it may be a plant grown in the jungle.

⁶ This is a transliteration from Mrs. Vue's exact word in Hmong "*sab yaj thawj*", which is unclear as to an English equivalent, but in the context of the description it may be a plant grown in the jungle.

⁷ This is a transliteration from Mrs. Vue's exact word in Hmong "*txoob*", which is unclear as to an English equivalent, but in the context of the description it may be a plant grown in the jungle.

Translator: Oh, really? Because they couldn't eat them or what?

Mrs. Vue: They couldn't eat them.

Yong Neng Vue: The young ones couldn't eat them, but the older ones tried to eat.

Mrs. Vue: The little ones and the elderly, those who were one to two years old, and those who were fifty to sixty years old, they all died when we were in the jungle.

Translator: Died from hunger?

Mrs. Vue: The died from hunger and also when we were in hiding they found some kind of fruit, because they were hungry, they ate those fruits and oh my! They all died.

Translator: So they (the fruits) were poisonous?

Mrs. Vue: Yes, so we were very much afflicted.

Yong Neng Vue: They came, please tell them so that they'll know that they (the enemy) took the airplanes, our airplanes back in the days, they captured these, right? They used these to drop some kind of poison, don't know what type of poison, but a mixture of red and white smoke. Our people died from that too. Had dysentery⁸ and died. [side conversation] Died from dysentery, or just died without any signs. This is true. I saw it with my own eyes.

Mrs. Vue: They got too hungry and...

Translator: They died from poison and also from hunger?

Yong Neng Vue: After they used the aircraft to drop off those things, there was smoke like that. And this is true.

Translator: Ok. Let me talk about the food first, ok?

The food that we ate, there was no rice, um mostly were just shoots, bamboo shoots, shoots of any kind in the jungle, um things that are called, Hmong called *tong la, chong*, potatoes, those things. We ate everything and anything that we could find. Um, so the very young and the very old, a lot of them died because they could not eat.

⁸ Yong Neng Vue's Hmong word for this was "*zawv plab liab*";

Mrs. Vue: Would you like to see some of the potatoes downstairs? Should I get some from downstairs to show them?

Yong Neng Vue: Ah, stop, that's enough. That's enough already.

Mrs. Vue: Yeah, just get a little bit so they know what we ate.

Translator: Mostly they died from disease and died from starvation. And because after the war ended um the enemy have ceased a lot of the airplanes that we have had as our air support. They used those airplanes to drop poisonous gas on us, red and white poisonous gas on people. And when you come in contact with those you just have a bad diarrhea, that's just blood diarrhea and people died a lot from that too.

Yong Neng Vue: The aircraft that they used on us was our APC back in the days. The APC aircraft on the base that finds the location of the Vietnamese, by using smoke.

Mrs. Vue: Son, when the Vietnamese was chasing us, this was what we ate [showing off a type of potato].

Translator: This is an example of those that we ate back in the jungle. Mrs. Yong Neng Vue is pointing to a root of some sort that they used to eat back in the jungle.

Yong Neng Vue: Before the country was lost, we only used these to feed the pigs. We used them for the pigs and the chickens. But when we were in the jungle, these became our food.

Translator: Oh. These are the things that we used to feed our pigs and our chickens before the war, but during the war and after the war we had no food to eat so this is what we eat to survive.

Ellen Brooks: Could, was it, could you cook it or not? Did you have to eat it raw?

Mrs. Vue: Cook it, could eat it raw. Just boil it like this, then peel off the skin and just eat the inside.

Translator: Just boil it and peel off the skin and just eat it.

Yong Neng Vue was also saying too that the air support that used to be supporting their side, after the war ended and during the time they were in the jungle, those airplanes which have been ceased by the enemy were used to fight them, would use to bomb them. These were the airplanes that um, he had a term called APC were used to help them fight the

enemy, now was the other way around, the enemy were using these airplanes to fight them.

Yong Neng Vue: Honey [addressing Mrs. Vue], did you put back uncle's (photo)?

Mrs. Vue: Yes, I put it over there.

Yong Neng Vue: Ok.

Translator: You said APC, what is APC? Is it the aircraft?

Yong Neng Vue: APC is the APC aircraft.

Translator: Oh, so (it's) an aircraft with that name?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes. The APC, wherever the Vietnamese was, it would come and drop a smoke on that location, then the jets⁹ would see it and they would fire at it.

Translator: Oh ok. So just clarified what he referred to when he said APC plane by the name of APC. He said APC is a plane that shoots smoke into the air that they wanted bomb and so the jet, the jet plane would come and bomb that area. So in a way is probably a marker.

Yong Neng Vue: Yeah, yeah right.

Ellen Brooks: So the whole time when you were living in the jungle, were you thinking about getting to Thailand or trying to escape or were you just trying to survive there?

Translator: When you were in the jungle, did you ever think that you would cross over to Thailand? Or did you just want to stay in the jungle to endure the hardship, then go back to become civilian again?

Yong Neng Vue: As for us, we weren't educated in anyway, so when we went (into the jungle) and the Americans left we thought that the Americans would come back to wait for us. This was our thought that's why we went back to stay there. We stayed until all the people have died, the officials, the parents and relatives. Then we realized that the Americans were not coming back. That was when we decided to cross over to Thailand. [27:15-27:51]

Translator: Especially for us, we were not educated and we have no way of communicating with the rest of the world, so when the Americans left, we had hope that they would come back to help us. So we remained in the jungle until most of our people had died, and most of (the) leaders had

⁹ Yong Neng Vue's exact word for this was "*ai phuv*";

died, and that's when we realized that the Americans are not coming back. We had to leave and that's when we crossed over to Thailand.

Ellen Brooks: Can you tell us about that journey that you took to get to Thailand?

Translator: Would you talk a little about when you crossed over from Laos to Thailand, how was your journey and where did you go?

Yong Neng Vue: When we crossed over from Laos to Thailand, further downstream was guarded by the enemy, upstream was also guarded. There was only a very narrow section (of the river) in the middle (for crossing).

Translator: This is the Mekong River, right?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, it was the Mekong. So we came from the mountain, we stayed on the mountain until dark before we came to bank of the river. During the season when the river was narrow, you couldn't go there because they guarded it. However, in August when the river was wide they weren't there. That was when I crossed. I crossed during that time, and I swam across on my own. [28:26-29:15]

Translator: Really?

Yong Neng Vue: I carried all my weapons. Once I got to Thailand, I surrendered them to the Thai officials.

Translator: Ok. Let me translate this first, ok?

Yong Neng Vue: Sure.

Translator: We realized that the Mekong River was guarded, was heavily guarded, was heavily patrolled both the north part and the south part and there's only a narrow strip along the Mekong River that you can cross. And during the time, the dry season, the Mekong River is smaller which is easier to cross, those were the times when (it was least) patrolled. So we had to cross at the end of the monsoon season, the raining season which is in August, which is the time when the river was bigger and they didn't bother to guard it, to patrol it as much because they knew, the enemy knew it was hard to cross. So when I came in August, I swam across the Mekong River with all my weapons, everything that I was carrying. And when I got to Thailand, I surrendered my equipment and my weapons to the Thai officials.

Yong Neng Vue: Ah, I had to cross three times. I was able to cross the third time. The first time when I came, we were ambushed because they stood watch. The

second time, we were ambushed. Then the third time, I was able to cross at that time. [30:10-30:30]

Translator: Only you then, or your family also?

Yong Neng Vue: Oh, there was a lot of us.

Translator: So there were a lot of you that came?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, there were forty of us.

Translator: There was, took me three tries to cross the Mekong River. The first time we were ambushed, the second time we were also ambushed. And the third time, we made it through and there was about thirty to forty of us. Not just me.

Ellen Brooks: And everybody swimming?

Translator: Everybody had to swim?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes. I swam. I knew how to swim a little a bit so I swam. I tied a rope on me, then tied it on another, then on another. I swam ahead then I pulled. Then the one next to me pulled the one behind, and that one pulled the next one, to come together in a group. Then repeat the process again.

Translator: Yes, we swam together, let's say if I swim better, I could swim better, I will be the one to go first. I would tie a rope around my waist then I will tie (it) to you and tie it to somebody else. I'd swim for a little bit then I stop and I'd pull everybody along and you pull the person behind you so forth and so on, to gather everybody. Then we'll continue to swim that way so everybody can cross.

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, that's how it is. Life since birth until now has been full of hardship because of the state of the country. The only time when I saw peace in the country was '64 and '63. Besides that the country was in war. Furthermore, I also had to go to war.

Translator: Yes, since when I was born and when I started to notice or realize, I've been through some hardships. The only two years that I noticed peace in my life, peace was, during the time when I was growing up, was 1963 and 1964. After that, all I saw and witnessed was war, even myself had to be involved in the war.

Yong Neng Vue: Yes.

Ellen Brooks: When you were that young, and in the early '60s, was your father or anybody older than you, were they involved in the military?

Yong Neng Vue: In '63, '64 when you were still very young, as you mentioned earlier, was your father involved in the war? Or were your brothers involved also?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, of course. We were involved in the war. We didn't live with the villagers in the village. We lived on the base.

Translator: It was your father's family, right?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, my father and my family were living right on the base.

Translator: Yes, my father was also involved in the war and because of that our family did not stay in the village with other villagers, but we stayed in the military camp. My family stayed in the military camp.

Ellen Brooks: When you were growing up?

Translator: When you were growing up as a child, you were already living on the base, correct?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, about to grow up. I attended school for only three years then I became a soldier.

Translator: That's true, when I was growing up, I only had three years of schooling and then I, from there I went to join the military, joined the effort.

Yong Neng Vue: Yes.

Ellen Brooks: We saw the identity card for your brother, can you tell us what happened to him?

Translator: Your brother, the one that you showed his photo earlier, his soldier identification card, what about him? What happened to him? You mentioned earlier that he was sent back to Laos?

Yong Neng Vue: Ah, actually he was going to come to this country because he had helped the Americans. All of our family helped the Americans. When they came to Vi Nai refugee camp, somehow they didn't come here, but went back to Laos.

Mrs. Vue: They had gone, they came to live in Vi Nai, and when Vi Nai refugee camp was closed, they were sent to Napho refugee camp. Then they came to Bangkok. They already came to (Bangkok) but the Thai officials wouldn't let them come, so they were sent back, son.

Translator: Oh, really?

Mrs. Vue: Yeah, they were the large group that got sent back.

Translator: They, did they not want to come to this country, or did they want to?

Mrs. Vue: They wanted to come, but the Thai officials wouldn't let them. They just sent them back.

Yong Neng Vue: Before that they had completed the paperwork, ready to come to this country. But I don't know why they didn't want to come. They weren't able to come, just don't know why.

Mrs. Vue: In Thailand, they were sent back to Laos. My brother-in-law (and his family) were part of the group, don't know how many families altogether, that was brought back to the Lao government.

Translator: My brother, they came to live in Ban Vinai Refugee camp like a lot of refugees do, but they um somehow they had interviewed to come to the U.S. They were eligible to come, but they changed their mind, they didn't want to come until (the) refugee camp was closed. And so Ban Vinai Camp was closed and they were sent to a different refugee camp called Napho, stayed there for a little while and they were sent to a place close to Bangkok. Supposedly, they were going to be sent to the U.S., but somehow the Thai government sent them back to Laos.

Ellen Brooks: And that's where they are now?

Translator: And they are still living in Laos?

Yong Neng Vue: They are.

Translator: Yes, they are there now.

Ellen Brooks: Can you tell me what life was like in the refugee camp?

Translator: Would you speak about the life in the refugee camp, what was it like? How did you live? How did you communicate and make a living?

Yong Neng Vue: In the refugee camp?

Translator: In the refugee camp.

Yong Neng Vue: In the refugee camp, people weren't able to make a living. We relied on whatever the United Nations provided, and that was what we lived on. We did not have employment, because in the refugee camp we weren't

allowed to get out. They didn't allow us to get out, so we must follow the law. But when we were in Nong Khai, we were able to get out, but it was only in secret. The law didn't allow us to get out. And in Vi Nai, it was more strict, not allowed to get out. Whoever tried to get out was beaten and was punished.

Translator: Let me translate that first, ok?

Yong Neng Vue: Okay.

Translator: Life in the refugee camp was very hard because there was no way to make a living. There was no work and you cannot get (out) of the camp to do anything. So we had to rely completely on UN or outside help for food and everything that we need. When we were in (the) refugee camp Nong Khai, we could get out a little bit, but still in secret. But in Ban Vinai camp, it was more strict. If anybody get out, they, and they're captured, they would be punished. They would be beaten or they would be punished heavily.

Yong Neng Vue: Son, it was a very difficult thing. I don't know if you had lived with us in that region.

Translator: I did also. Uncle, I did live over there until I was older before we came here.

Yong Neng Vue: Oh. Ban Vinai was the final stop, it was more strict, (you) couldn't get out. I came there in '79, and lived there for only one year then I came to this country.

Translator: Oh. Ban Vinai is a place that a lot of refugees came to, before they came to the U.S. or somewhere else, and Yong Neng lived there for only a year. '79 he came there and '79 lived there for only a year and came to the U.S.

Yong Neng Vue: That was that. Do they have other things to talk about?

Translator: Do you have any other questions you want to cover?

Ellen Brooks: Just, um, if you can let us know how you got to the United States and what you ended up doing when you got here?

Translator: Would you talk a little bit about the objective of your family in coming to America, and how your family got here? And after you arrived how did your life change? How you had to change to make a living?

Yong Neng Vue: Coming to this country has given me a lot of peace. When I first came, I didn't want to stay because I didn't know the language. But after living here for a few years, I was pleased that this is a good country, good for my family, everybody was healthy. My children could obtain an education. These are things that I'm satisfied with. [39:18-39:54]

Translator: When I came to the U.S., I had more peace and more joy. At first, because I did not know English, it was hard. Um, I did not want to stay, I did not want to live here, but after a few years, I know this is a good country. My family, my wife and kids are healthy, happy, and have school. I appreciate all of that.

Ellen Brooks: And how did you end up in Wisconsin?

Translator: How did you end up in Wisconsin?

Yong Neng Vue: Because I am not educated so by coming here (Wisconsin) I could attend school. Back then, I did come here. I came to Oklahoma, but I couldn't attend school. Both of us couldn't attend school so that's why we came here.

Mrs. Vue: All of our relatives are here (Wisconsin). Our relatives...

Yong Neng Vue: After we came here, we started learning ABCs.

Translator: Oh, really?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes.

Translator: When they first came to the U.S., they came to Oklahoma and there was no opportunity to study or to learn English so they moved to Wisconsin and they started to learn ABC in Wisconsin.

Ellen Brooks: And how do you like it here?

Translator: Do you like it here in Wisconsin?

Yong Neng Vue: I like it more than I thought. More than I thought I would.

Translator: I like (it) more than I thought.

Ellen Brooks: That's great!

Mrs. Vue: Please say that we gave birth to our children in La Crosse. And now they are all, our oldest son is a teacher in Wisconsin Rapids. We are very

happy that after we came to America, we were able to support our children to have a better life than we had.

Translator: Mrs. Yong Neng Vue was just saying all of the children they um, came to La Crosse and all of them were born in La Crosse. The oldest one is a teacher now in Wisconsin Rapids. So they're very grateful that in America they could, they have opportunities to be more than their parents could be.

Mrs. Vue: Six boys.

Ellen Brooks: Six boys?

Mrs. Vue: Yeah, three girls...[laughing]

Translator: Your children, there are nine altogether?

Mrs. Vue: Yes, nine.

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, nine altogether.

Translator: Greg? Nine kids.

Greg only has one child, the only child.

Yong Neng Vue: Yeah? One? [all laughing together] I have a lot!

Greg: Yeah.

Ellen Brooks: Is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you'd like to talk about today?

Translator: Is there anything else you, that we didn't cover, that you'd like to tell us? The history of your service, so the youth down to the children can learn about the history of the Hmong?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, let's say this, when it comes to war, nobody likes it, right? When I served, I didn't know it was serving the Americans, right? So I just did what I had to do, but now I know that it was to help the Americans, the American government, I am proud of that. Even if I didn't serve for very long, I am still proud that I had help the Americans. [43:04-43:44]

Translator: When it comes down to it, no one likes to fight in a war. And at the time, even though my service in the military, involvement in the war wasn't long, and I didn't know that we were fighting for the U.S, and fighting with the U.S along our side. Now I know that it was, the little efforts that

I have was to help the U.S., I'm grateful that I did. Although I didn't fight long, I didn't, with my service was not extensive, I am still grateful that I was able to help in some way.

Ellen Brooks: Well, thank you, you have a very unique story too. Especially since he started so young, not something that we haven't talked to someone who was your age yet. So, thank you very much for sharing with us.

Yong Neng Vue: Yeah, you too.

Translator: Thank you. Thank you because we don't usually have war veterans who started as young as you did. When you served...

Yong Neng Vue: And this one [pointing to a photo], we took when the American government invited us to Washington D.C.

Translator: Oh, really?

Mrs. Vue: If she would like, she can take this one also...

Translator: This one was, umm...

This photo was taken in Washington D.C? At a place in Washington D.C.?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, we took it right there.

Translator: It was a picture taken, we're looking at a picture that was taken in Washington DC during an invitation, that the Lao Veteran were invited to go close to the White House.

Ellen Brooks: Okay. When was this?

Translator: What year was this?

Yong Neng Vue: Mm, I think it was '89.

Translator: Looks like '89.

Ellen Brooks: Okay, and how's that experience going close to the White House?

Translator: When you went close to the White House, how was it like?

Yong Neng Vue: Mm, I was very pleased with the officials there. We have arrived in their country...we have arrived in a country that...

Mrs. Vue: That was when you went to erect a monument that the General...that was when they went to erect the monument that...

Translator: At the White House?

Mrs. Vue: Yes, for the Hmong people, as the Hmong people's own. Yeah.

Yong Neng Vue: Yes.

Translator: Oh, ok, that was when they went and erected a...

Yong Neng Vue: Please tell them that the officials, the veterans in town usually invite to join them when they have events. The other day when they went to do a ceremony at a school, they invited us to go with them also.

Translator: Oh, that's great.

Yong Neng Vue: That was a very nice for me already. Yeah.

Translator: This was when they have erected a monument close to the White House recognizing the Hmong Lao Veterans as part of the effort in the Vietnam War. And locally here, Yong Neng also appreciate the local veterans in town here, in La Crosse, that this past Veterans Day they had invited the Hmong veterans to join in a parade to be recognize as veterans of our past wars. He appreciates that fact that they would invite them to be part of that.

Mrs. Vue: Honey, are you going to give them that one also?

Translator: Uncle, you don't have to lend that (one), because it was taken in this country. That won't be necessary.

Yong Neng Vue: Only interested in the ones taken back in Laos.

Translator: If you don't mind, Greg will take these to make copies and will send them back to you.

Yong Neng Vue: You mean this photo?

Translator: Yes.

Yong Neng Vue: Yes, that's no problem. Of course.

Ellen Brooks: Should we turn off the recorder for now?

Translator: I think so.

Ellen Brooks: Okay.

Translator: Do you have anything else that you'd to say?

Yong Neng Vue: Yes. Lastly, I'd like thank them and you. I am grateful for the three of you. Although the war was had been over for some time, our leader had changed and passed, it is an objective for those of us still alive. I'm grateful for them. In regard to the war back in our country, it may be that they'd like to hear one person after another to have a clear picture. In the Internet, there is also information. Perhaps they already know. If they wanted to talk to one person, and another, and another, that is a good thing. I am grateful. Please tell them thank you, to you also, son. If anything comes up in the future, let's talk again. But in talking to them now, I am grateful for them.

Translator: Last, I just wanted to say thank you for coming, taking the time to come listen to my story, all three of you. Even though, the war has long passed and our leader is also gone now, it is something that that we keep with history of our people. The war, you might have a lot of information about the war already, but it maybe that you want to get a more personal story from different individuals about the war efforts and I'm grateful for your effort and if later on if you want to follow up with any particular part of this story, we can still do that. So thank you.

Ellen Brooks/Greg: Thank you.

Yong Neng Vue: Where will they put these photos?

Translator: We will take these photos and put them in an exhibit in August. We will write down your story. For example, that photo of yours, we want to find out when it was taken, and where. So we will have something to put together to tell that we are Hmong who had helped American soldiers. So we'd have both the written word and the photos, to help us identify which veteran helped the Americans from here to here. So we'd come to see...

Yong Neng Vue: The spelling of my name may not be correct?

Translator: Isn't it Chong Neng Vue?

Yong Neng Vue: It's Y.

Translator: Where is the Y?

Yong Neng Vue: Y-O-N-G.

Translator: Oh, this is how you do it?
Mrs. Vue: Yes. Yong Neng. They call him Yong Neng.
Translator: Yong Neng Vue right?
Yong Neng Vue: Yes, that's how it is.
Translator: Ok, we'll do that.
Ellen Brooks: Okay. Thanks.

[End of interview]