

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Pao Xiong
Lao Army, Vietnam War
2014

Pao Xiong – English Transcript

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, November 21, 2014

Transcribed and translated by Seethong Yang, March, 2015

Ca. 1 hour 50 minutes

Abstract:

Pao Xiong began his story by telling of his birth and childhood in the province of Savannakhet. He joined the military right after graduating from level six in school. After joining he decided to become a medic, which gave him training in how to care for the sick and injured. After completing his medic training, he served with his unit at the front where he witnessed many battles. Pao Xiong got injured during the war, after which he took two months off to rest and recuperate. After his time off, he went back to be with his unit. He recounted several of the assignments which his unit was assigned. After the war ended, Pao took his wife and some refugees and crossed over to Thailand, where he lived in refugee camps for more than five years before coming to the United States. In the United States, he attended school to learn English and machine tool. After completing his training in machine tool, Pao was able to find employment to support his family. For Pao Xiong, the transition from the war to life in the United States has not been easy.

[Start of Interview]

Ellen Brooks: Today is Friday November 21st, 2014, this is an interview with Pao Xiong, who is a Hmong veteran who served with the SGU during the Secret War in Laos. The interview is being conducted at the narrator's home in Sheboygan, WI. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks and the translator and co-interviewer is Seethong Yang.

So we're going to start at the beginning if he can tell us where and when you were born?

Translator: To start out, please talk a little about where and when you were born.

Pao Xiong: I was born in Laos, in the province of Savannakhet.

Translator: I was born in Laos in the Province of Savannakhet.

What about your date of birth?

Pao Xiong: I was born on May 5th, 1955.

Translator: My date of birth is May 5th, 1955.

Ellen Brooks: Can you tell us about your childhood?

Translator: Would you tell us a little about the time when you were still young, your life, and your parents' life at that time?

Pao Xiong: Sure. After I was born I help with my parents' farming. I mostly farmed until the age of eight, then I went to school. I studied in the same village. I studied in the same village until I finished level six. Back in our country, once you finish level six they called it *Pathom*¹, right? Then I continued, I wanted to continue so I joined the military.

Translator: There was no more opportunity for education, correct?

Pao Xiong: There was, but my ability didn't allow me to.

Translator : Oh, ok, ok.

Pao Xiong: I couldn't get admission.

Translator: When I was younger, my family mostly did farming, mostly wet rice farming. When I was eight, I went to school in the village school, in the village and studied until the sixth grade and in Laos that's considered *Pathom* and from there I entered military service. Um, there were higher grades than sixth grade also, but I could not get admitted, admission to go on (to) school so that's when I entered military service.

Ellen Brooks: Did you enter the military service because that was your only choice or why did you enter the service?

Translator: Did you join the military because that was the only opportunity you had at the time, or why did you join the military?

Pao Xiong: It's like this, once I graduated the sixth grade, I could either go and farm, but I didn't want to farm so I joined the military, to increase my ability. That's how they'd allow me to choose a field of study such as a nurse or radio operator in the military. That's how they'd let you go and train. That's why I decided to join the military.

Translator: Because after the sixth grade, the other option was either to be a farmer and farm or enter the military service and receive further education to become a nurse, or to become an operator, or some sort of, radio operator of some sort. And that was the decision to go and continue learning and growing in education.

Ellen Brooks: So can you tell us about your training, your military training?

¹ A level of education, may be equivalent to high school;

Translator: Would you talk a little about your training? When you were training, how did you train?

Pao Xiong: When I joined military, the training was all military, but I volunteered to test, to go on to train as a nurse. I took a test to go on to train as a medic, a military medic.

Translator: What year was that?

Pao Xiong: It was '69.

Translator: '69?

Pao Xiong: Yes.

Translator: 1969, I volunteered to enter military service particularly to study medics, or nursing.

Ellen Brooks: And so what's that training entail?

Translator: When you were training to be a medic, how did they train you and what did you learn?

Pao Xiong: When we received our training, it wasn't in the village. They sent us to train in the southern part of the country. So they trained us in "first aid". In terms of "first aid", it's the same as in this country, the same as "emergency" that sort of thing, right? For example, when the soldiers get injured, get sick, we'd have to take care of them. Once we're done, we'd report to *nai kong lu-ai*² or *nai kong phan*³, and they'd order an aircraft to come and lift those that were injured.

Translator: Ok. They sent us to train, towards the south of the country. We were trained in first aid and emergency, someone got sick, some got injured, what do we do to take care of them. Once we take care of them, *the nai kong lu-ai* and the leaders, the commanders who send choppers or planes to come and pick them up.

Ellen Brooks: And did you have training, combat training or was it strictly medical training?

Translator: Was your training mainly to take care of those that were sick and injured or were you also trained in combat?

² "nai" is a Laotian word which means "leader", "kong lu-ai" refers to a unit of soldiers about one hundred strong, maybe the equivalent of a company;

³ "kong phan" refers to a unit of soldiers about one thousand strong, or the equivalent of a battalion;

Pao Xiong: It's a must, must also train in combat. The medic training was different. Because you have to join the military in order to receive that training, have the right to receive that training. In order for you to get admitted, the thing about being in the military, the combat training...

Translator: It was a must?

Pao Xiong: It was a must because I was a soldier.

Translator: That's true.

Translator: It's a must because it's a military so the medic training is separate, but the military training is a must. It's part of the military service.

Ellen Brooks: Can you tell us more about that, what that combat training was?

Translator: Please talk a little about the combat training, the training in the military, what sort of things did you learn and what did they teach you?

Pao Xiong: When they trained soldiers, they trained our body to be strong. The same thing that soldiers elsewhere would do. They also taught us how to shoot, and how to hide, right? For example, when you enter the battle field in the jungle, how would you hide, how would you escape, in what manner would you do that, to give you experience so when in the thick of battle how would you fall, how would you turn, right? Ok, too many things [laughter].

Translator: The military training involves a lot of physical training to be physically strong and we were also trained to shoot and how to hide from the enemy, how to escape in battles, how to fall when being shot at, or how to turn, what to do to be safe.

Ellen Brooks: And who trained you?

Translator: Who came to train you?

Pao Xiong: There were those that came and taught. Not sure who they were, but they were Thai and Laotian officers, they were the ones who trained, who taught (us).

Translator: There was some Thai officers and some Lao officers, I don't know specifically who they were, but they were Thai and Lao officers who came and trained.

Ellen Brooks: And why did you want to be a medic?

Translator: Why did you want to train as a medic?

Pao Xiong: It was like this, the thing that I like about it...in our country you have to have something like a nurse or a teacher, right? Something so that you'd be able to build a reputation, back in our country. Let's say if you're a teacher or a nurse then you're one that people respect.

Translator: Ok. In our country at the time, being a medic, being a nurse or a doctor, or a teacher, it's considered, it's highly respected.

Ellen Brooks: Um, can you tell us a little bit about the first, your first assignments, the first duties that you had after training?

Translator: Would you talk a little about the time after your training? What was the first assignment that the commanders asked you to do and what did you do on that assignment?

Pao Xiong: After my training, I returned to the base. I was living with other soldiers, right? At that time, I was living on the base, so I had to go work. There was a civilian hospital for those who had fever, and other illnesses that were not related to combat. On the base, there had to be that kind of hospital, so as a medic I had to go and help them there. I only assisted them, I wasn't the nurse, but I was given authority to help. Whatever they need they'd ask me to help them, help the nurses in that hospital.

Translator: After my training I came back to a military base to be with other soldiers, but in the military base, there was a hospital, there was a general hospital. We cared for people with fever, other illnesses not from combat. But (I was) not a physician or a nurse full nurse, but just to help the nurses (with) what they need in that hospital.

Ellen Brooks: And you were still pretty young? You were a teenager I think still?

Translator: Were you still very young at the time?

Pao Xiong: Yes, still very young, because graduating from level six in school put me at fourteen only, after which I joined the military, so fifteen years old.

Translator: Yes, I was still very young, when I finished with sixth grade, I was only fourteen and finished training maybe fifteen.

Ellen Brooks: So, where did you live at that time when you were done with training?

Translator: When you finished your training, you said that you came to live on the base, or where did you say that you live? You came to live in the base but who did you live with? Did you live with other soldiers?

Pao Xiong: Yes only with soldiers. After completing the training, because I joined the military first then I went to the training, right? So now that I completed the training, they wanted me to come back to be with my old *kong phan*, to serve that *kong phan*. It was at *Nong Sa Phaang*, they called it *Nong Sa Phaang*, the SGU military base at *Nong Sa Phaang*.

Translator: For me I entered the military first, then I went to my medic training. After my training, I came back and joined the platoon at a place called *Nong Sa Phaang*, at an SGU military base.

Ellen Brooks: And how many people were in your platoon?

Translator: How many was in your *kong phan* or your unit of soldiers?

Pao Xiong: There was a lot, it was the entire *kong phan*.

Translator: And one *kong phan* is roughly more than a thousand?

Pao Xiong: It might be close to that. There were four *kong phan*, right? In each *kong phan*, there were four *kong lu-ai*. So *kong phan*, yes, there was a lot, it was the entire *kong phan*.

Translator: At the time, how many was there in one *kong phan*? About a thousand?

Pao Xiong: No, maybe...

Translator: That's not it?

Pao Xiong: One *kong lu-ai*, there were four *kong lu-ai*, five hundred...

Translator: So five hundred in one *kong phan*?

Pao Xiong: Five hundred, six hundred, yes.

Translator: There's a lot of us, there was four platoons or four units, each unit, each major unit is separated into four smaller units. And the smaller units, the four smaller units makes up probably five hundred to six hundred soldiers.

Ellen Brooks: And how many medics per unit, do you remember?

Pao Xiong: Oh!

Translator: How many medics, or those that take care of the sick, in each *kong phan*?

Pao Xiong: There were five medics in each *kong phan*.

Translator: A unit has about five medics.

Pao Xiong: Because there is one medic per each *kong lu-ai*. There was also a medic for the entire *kong phan*, who supervised us, right? So there was a total of five.

Translator: So, there's smaller units called *kong lu-ai*, and those, there are four of those *kong lu-ai*, and a *kong phan*. And each *kong lu-ai* has a medic so there's four medics there and there's one who supervises the whole *kong phan* so there's about five medics.

Ellen Brooks: And what was life like on the base?

Translator: When you were living on the base, doing what you did as a medic, taking care of people who were sick and injured every day, what was your life like? What did you do?

Pao Xiong: On the base, there wasn't much going on, but at the most you'd stay on the base for two to three months. Then they'd send you to the front.

Translator: At the base there's not much going on, but you're mostly staying there for two months at most, then you're sent to the front.

Ellen Brooks: So you were sent to the front with your group?

Translator: So your *kong phan* was sent to the front also?

Pao Xiong: Yes, wherever the *kong phan* goes I also went with them because I was a soldier within their unit, a medic with them. I was first a soldier then I received my medic training. After my training, I had to work in the unit until they discharge me. And yeah, ok.

Translator: Yes, we were sent to the front because before we received our training, we were already part of the unit and we have to receive our training and came back to the unit to serve, and go wherever they go until they discharge me.

Ellen Brooks: So just to bring it back to the base, um, can you describe the base a little bit to us on how it was set up and where people slept and what people ate? That kind of thing.

Translator: Let's go back to the base and talk a little about life there. Where did people sleep? What did they eat? Where did they eat? What was life like on the base?

Pao Xiong: On the base, each unit, each group live on a separate block. Each group stay together, and each *kong phan* stayed as a group. Each *kong lu-ai* live in a separate building. They built long buildings, right? Long like this [gestured with his hands] and they put up walls on the outside but no walls to divide the inside. They built beds all the way from one end to the other, there were no dividers, we slept together in rows.

Translator: There was only one very large bed all the way through?

Pao Xiong: Individual beds, it was almost like one wooden board per bed.

Translator: Ok.

Pao Xiong: However many you can fit on the beds, that's how many sleep there, in rows after rows.

Translator: But each have his own space to put his belongings?

Pao Xiong: There was individual space, but no dividers, it was open but there were personal belongings such as mosquito nets.

Translator: So your things are just there?

Pao Xiong: Yes, each individual space like that, on and on.

Translator: Each *kong lu-ai* is designated in a building and each *kong phan* is divided into different blocks and so in the buildings we sleep on beds that were mostly, just one big bed, just from one end from the building to the other end and you get a little space on that to put your things, to put your mosquito nets or things that belonged to you. And that's how we lived, it was just an outside wall, it was not divided inside, so we just slept all together across the building along the building.

Ellen Brooks: And most of the people in your unit, what, how old were they?

Translator: Most of the people in your unit, your *kong lu-ai*, or your *kong phan*, how old were they?

Pao Xiong: That depends, some were still young, fourteen, fifteen, same as me, sixteen, seventeen. There was no majority.

Translator: Were there any who were older?

Pao Xiong: There were older ones also.

Translator: How old were they?

Pao Xiong: Fifty, forty. There were fifty year-olds, and there were also those who were fourteen and fifteen. Most were in between such as seventeen, eighteen, nineteen.

Translator: It's all over the place, the age ranges from fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, to someone in the forties and fifties. But the majorities are between seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen.

Ellen Brooks: And did you know anyone, did you train with anybody that you know or end up in the same unit? Is there anyone you knew when you were younger?

Translator: In your *kong phan*, were there people that you knew from your childhood before you became a soldier? Those that went to train together.

Pao Xiong: Yes I did know. And there were, when I joined I had a friend, his sister's husband, his brother-in-law, no that's not...

Translator: Yes. His brother-in-law? Brother-in-law.

Pao Xiong: Yes, his brother-in-law. His brother-in-law was *nai kong phan*, in the beginning. His brother-in-law was *nai kong phan* and he wanted to join the military also. At that time we were just graduating, so he said "let's go join", and that was how I joined with them.

Translator: Oh. Yes, yes there were people I knew from my childhood that also served together with me. One of my friend's brother-in-law, his sister's husband was the *nai kong phan*, or the leader, commander of that platoon, that unit and when I was finishing school, my friend wanted to serve in the military and so he asked me to go with him and we went together.

Ellen Brooks: And were you able to stay together for most of the war?

Translator: When you were engaged in combat during the war, were you and your friend in the same *kong phan*? Did they separate you or didn't they?

Pao Xiong: No, we weren't together at all.

Translator: Really?

Pao Xiong: No, please say that he didn't go and train as a medic like me. He was where he supposed to be and I was where I supposed to be.

Translator: Was he also a soldier?

Pao Xiong: Yes, he was also in that *kong phan* also, but we each had our own responsibilities so we weren't together.

Translator: We're in the unit, but he did not go for the medic training. I went for the medic training, we're in the same unit, but he has his responsibilities and I have my different responsibilities.

Ellen Brooks: And can you tell me about what you did with your spare time, if you have any spare time when you were at the base?

Translator: When you were still on the base, when you had time or when you weren't helping someone and you're available, what did you do?

Pao Xiong: Nothing, because there's no time that you didn't have anything to do.

Translator: Really? You always had something to do, right?

Pao Xiong: If you have time, that day you wouldn't, you must have something that they asked you to train with, something like the laws of combat, or train as they instruct (you) to, right? There was a rule, every day they...if you're on the base (you) must train, so every day you had to train. When there was no training you'd always at the hospital helping out. When it was Saturday and Sunday you could rest, but the places that you'd like to go visit were also far away, because the military base wasn't in town, not close to a town. You couldn't go. On Saturdays and Sundays, there were merchants outside of the base that sold different things, right? While on the base you could only step out to walk around for a little bit.

Translator: There's not much spare time on the base, you're expected to go train every day and when you're not in training you're expected to go and help out at the hospital and do, there's something to do every day. Because certain places you want to go visit are also far away; entertainment, things like that are far away, but outside of the base, there are merchants who come and sell items and during my spare time I would just go sightseeing and go tour those areas, just briefly.

Ellen Brooks: What kind of people, what were the elements of the people that you were treating on the base?

Translator: Those on the base that you take care of and treat, what kind of illnesses did they have and how were they injured?

Pao Xiong: There were none with other kinds of injuries, but fever, mostly had fever. Those on the base mostly had fever. There were typical emergencies, nothing major.

Translator: That was at the front, right? When they fought in combat, did they get injured and sent them to you to take care of?

Pao Xiong: Not on the base, when they sent the injured, that got injured from outside the base from fighting, they didn't send them to the base.

Translator: Did they send them somewhere else?

Pao Xiong: They sent them somewhere else, to a different hospital. The base was only for the soldiers on that base, only for the soldiers in the back, who came there to train. The hospital on the base wasn't for those who got injured from combat, these they sent to the permanent hospital.

Translator: So it (the hospital) was only for that base?

Pao Xiong: It was only for that base.

Translator: Mostly, the people that we cared for had fevers because the hospital that was set up there mainly were for the troops and the soldiers that are on that base. The people at the front were injured, were not sent to that base to be treated. They were sent to the hospital somewhere else; the hospital on base which is to help those who are on base for training.

Ellen Brooks: Can you tell us what it was like on the front lines?

Translator: Please talk about when they sent you to the front, how was it like when you were at the front?

Pao Xiong: Oh, tell her that it's very difficult and very dangerous, very frightening also. When there was fighting...oh there were many things.

Translator: It was very difficult, it was dangerous, it was frightening. During combat, there many things.

Translator: Can you tell of a time when you were engaged in combat at the front? How was it like?

Pao Xiong: The first year after I joined, I just returned from my medic training so they sent me to the front, I got into combat and I got injured, they shot me. That year I got injured.

Translator: The first time I was sent to the front after my training, I was involved in combat, and that year, I got injured.

Ellen Brooks: How did you get injured?

Translator: How were you injured? Did you get injured from a rifle or artillery?

Pao Xiong: It was like this, they used sixties, artillery sixties. They shot them up into the sky and fell down on us. When the shells fell they exploded, and a small piece of shrapnel flew and...

Translator: Did a piece of shrapnel hit you?

Pao Xiong: As it exploded, a piece flew and hit me.

Translator: Oh. It was one of the artillery attacks with a sixty that the enemy shot at us, and it was shot into the air and fell on us. And when it fell, it exploded, one of the (pieces of) shrapnel hit me.

Ellen Brooks: Where did you get hit?

Translator: Where were you hit?

Pao Xiong: I was hit on my finger, this finger and pass through my finger here and came out here. Right here, very close to my finger here, it's bulky like this, got hit right here and came out.

Translator: Oh, really?

Pao Xiong: That's one, the other one is on the back, right on the back here. Right here [showed his back where he was hit by a piece of shrapnel].

Translator: I got injured in two places; one is my ring finger on my right hand here, and the other is on my back, right here [showing his back where he got hit by a piece of shrapnel].

Ellen Brooks: And then what happened?

Translator: After you got injured then what happened? Did you send you back to the hospital, or what did they do?

Pao Xiong: Yes, after I got injured, the day after...when I got injured it was night, right? The day after I took some bandages to bandage-up my wounds, and there was a medic in the *kong lu-ai* who help me with my back. Then they sent me to the hospital in the back.

Translator: When I got injured, it was at night time, and the day after I wrapped band aid around my finger and also I asked another medic to patch up my back and they sent me to a hospital at a base nearby.

Ellen Brooks: How did you get to that hospital?

Translator: How did they transport you to the hospital?

Pao Xiong: By helicopter.

Translator: Really?

Pao Xiong: The men, all those that got injured, they called a helicopter to come pick us up. Once the helicopter landed, they loaded us up and the helicopter took us away.

Translator: It was by helicopter, several of us who got injured and they called in a helicopter to pick us up and took us away and send us to the hospital.

Ellen Brooks: And how long were you at the hospital?

Translator: How long were you at the hospital?

Pao Xiong: I didn't stay long at the hospital, two weeks. After two weeks, I went home for two months. After two months at home they sent me back to be with the soldiers at the front.

Translator: I was at the hospital for not long, for only two weeks, and then I was off from the hospital, I had two months off and then they sent me back to the front, to join the soldiers at the front.

Ellen Brooks: What did you do during the two months off?

Translator: During the months that you were off, what did you do? What did they have you do?

Pao Xiong: They told me to rest, so I rested, back in the village.

Translator: So you went back to stay with your family?

Pao Xiong: Yes, it was like being discharged temporarily. It was like you're injured and so they told you to take two months off. Once the months passed then they asked you to go back.

Translator: During those two months, I had, I went back and stayed with my family. It was temporarily discharged and after that two months they want me to be, to go back.

Ellen Brooks: And how did you feel to be back with your family for those two months?

Translator: When you came back to be with your family for two months, how did you feel and what did you think?

Pao Xiong: I didn't think much either. It was normal because all of the people in our village, our heritage, since we remember, it was normal, it had already like that so I didn't think too much about it.

Translator: I didn't think a bit much because my community, my country was already...everybody was going through similar things so I didn't think twice, too much about it.

Ellen Brooks: And how did you feel having to go back to the front after you were injured?

Translator: How about after when you got better, after you took some time off, you went back to the front, what was going through your mind? What did you see or what were you thinking?

Pao Xiong: I didn't think much either. It was my duty and so I just went. Once I was there, I didn't think much about it. The only thing that I thought about was "Oh, what if it happens like it did before? What if I get injured, what would I do?" It was only a thought. It was my duty so I went and do what I had to do.

Translator: I didn't think too much about it, but what came to my mind was "how was it going to be? What if you get injured again and...", but it's my responsibility, it's my duty so I had to go.

Ellen Brooks: And did you join up with the same unit?

Translator: When you went back, did you go back to your old *kong phan*? The same *kong lu-ai* also?

Pao Xiong: Yes, it was the same *kong lu-ai* and the same *kong phan*. So I went back to doing what I did before because when I got injured there was no medic in that *kong lu-ai*. That's why they asked me to be there so I could take care of everybody, when they get sick at the front.

Translator: Yes, yes, I went back to my same unit and do the same things that I was doing before because since I got injured, no one, there was no medic to service my soldiers in my unit so I went back to do the same things.

Ellen Brooks: So, can you tell us more about what it was like on the front and where you ate and where you slept and things like that?

Translator: Please talk about how your life was like at the front. Where did you eat? What did you eat? Where did you sleep? How did you sleep?

Pao Xiong: As I said, that's a lot of things, because life at the front was never in the same place. You have to move each day, you'd go until dark and that's when you can sleep. And in the morning you must be on the move. There was no base that you were permanently stationed. We had to move constantly. At the most, we remained in one place for only two night, just long enough to know that that place is safe. Other than that you couldn't sleep at all, because the Vietnamese knew when we move, right? They see your tracks and could tell where you went because there was a *kong phan* of soldiers, right? They see our tracks and so they tracked us all the time. As far as food goes, you had to carry food. There were these food, American food, dried rice for the soldiers. They had all kinds of things in there. When it was time to eat, you just pour water into it and wait for the rice to rise up then you can eat. When we were short in time, we just ate them dry, the rice will then rise up in our stomach. Those rice were hard.

Translator: Let me translate that first.

Pao Xiong: Ok.

Translator: As far as sleeping, it was not like the base where you get to stay in one place at an extended period of time. At the front you constantly have to move, you. In the morning you get up, you get your things together, you'll go all day long until night time, then you set up your camp and then you spend the night. At the most, at one location, the same location, at the most probably two nights. Other than that you're constantly going and moving, because there was a lot of us in the unit, the enemy could track us easily. They could see our path in where we are going and when they do, they usually come after us and that we need to move constantly moving and go all the time. As far as food goes, we were given military food, soldiers' food and they were coming in pouches and when you're ready to eat, you pour water on top of it. It's something like rice and wait until it puffs up or become soften with the water, then you eat or sometimes you

don't have time, you just eat it dry. And they're kind of coarse and hard too.

Pao Xiong: And also every three days, the aircrafts were able to drop off warm food, freshly cooked rice and meat also. Every three days, the aircrafts would come and drop off freshly cooked food.

Translator: And also, every three days, there would be planes that dropped off hot foods like rice and meat for us.

Pao Xiong: When the aircrafts are not able to drop off food, then we eat rice alone, because that was the only (food) we had. If the aircrafts tried to go the Vietnamese would shoot at them so the aircrafts weren't able to go. So that was the problem.

Translator: And as we go from place to place, sometimes the planes were not able to come in to certain areas because if the planes come in the enemy would shoot it down and they could not come, and those times we just eat plain rice.

Ellen Brooks: Did you ever interact with any Americans?

Translator: Have you met American soldiers or officials during the time that you served?

Pao Xiong: Yes, I saw them in that region. There were a few Americans who joined us each time, right? There were two to three that went with us, but we were the guys in the back, just kids, we didn't have the authorization to go and speak to the Americans. It was only those who had a responsibility, radio operator for example, who stayed with the Americans instead of the soldiers in *kong lu-ai* and *kong phan*. So I saw them but didn't get to talk to them, or discuss anything with them.

Translator: Yes, there were, um, in each unit there (were) two or three American troops, American soldiers, but us fourteen fifteen year old soldiers, we weren't able to talk to them. Mostly, it would be the radio operators who work closely with the Americans.

Ellen Brooks: Was there anything else, any other way that you were treated differently because you were so young?

Translator: Because at that time you were still very young, did they give you different responsibilities or said something to you that they didn't to soldiers who were older? Or did they treat everybody the same way?

Pao Xiong: The view everybody the same, but I didn't mind because we each had our own responsibilities, we each had our own duty so they did their duty and I did mine. So they didn't discriminate but it was only my own weakness, because I had my own level and they had their own level. That was all.

Translator: No there was not differences in how I was treated with other older soldiers. We each have our responsibilities and our own ranks and it was just our own, my own inability to communicate with the Americans. So, but we all have different responsibilities and so you just keep to your responsibilities and your duties.

Ellen Brooks: What was the general attitude toward the Americans?

Translator: At that time, how did the Hmong and Laotian soldiers view the American soldiers? Did they view them as important, not important, or viewed them as leaders of the unit or how were they viewed?

Pao Xiong: For the most part, when it comes to how they were viewed, they were viewed as those who supervised us. They were the officials that oversaw everyone, we viewed them like that. But at the front, because the Americans were with us so we viewed them as the ones who oversaw the...they weren't the ones who ordered us to do this or to do that. He was the one who contacted the aircrafts and the officials in the back, that was all, and only worked with the radio operator. He wasn't the one who controlled the duties and responsibilities. I mean, it was different, he'd go, they'd go and listen on the telephone and other things. For example, when we intercepted the Vietnamese's line of communication, we'd pass it on to the Americans and they would...

Translator: Send a message to headquarter?

Pao Xiong: Send it back to headquarter. They didn't command us soldiers to do this or do that. It was their duty, we knew that that was their duty.

Translator: Mostly the Americans were guarded with respect because they were considered the leaders and the officials of the military, but they did not have the day to day command for what we do or how we do things. They were in charge with the radios, communication back to the base, calling air support. For example, when we intercept a radio communication that the enemy had put out, it would be given to the Americans and they would communicate back to the base and send in, or ask for air support in that way. So they don't command us to do certain things in the front, but they played a role, critical in that way.

Ellen Brooks: Can you explain for people who might not know about the war about what you were fighting for and why you were fighting?

Translator: Please talk about the fighting in Laos, the Vietnam War, based on what you knew at that time, what was your objective in fighting the war because some don't know? Your objective, why did you fight in the war because there were some who don't know, they don't understand? Please talk about that so they'd understand your objective in fighting the war, what for, and what was the important thing that you were trying to accomplish at that time?

Pao Xiong: At that time, since I was born that was what I heard, fighting in the war, so I got used to it. Whoever was helping you, you knew. Ever since birth that was what I knew so I don't know what I would have done. There were places that the older generation...the officials led so (we) just followed them. That was all.

Translator: As far as I know, as soon as was able to make sense of the war, I was already, the whole country was already involved in the war and it was what I got used to and I was, pretty much followed the leaders and just go with it. Didn't really know clearly what it was for.

Ellen Brooks: Do you have any more stories about in the front or combat that you tell us?

Pao Xiong: Sure.

Translator: Is there stories that you can tell about fighting in the front, how fighting in the war was like?

Pao Xiong: Okay. There are many, it would be impossible to talk about them all.

Translator: If you could choose just one that would be fine.

Pao Xiong: It is something that I still think about even today. That was when I was a soldier, when the people got injured for example. So when people got injured when I was a soldier, because I was the medic, they'd send them to me to take care of first aid, right? Some could talk to me, some left messages, about this and that for me, asking me to pass along to their parents, right? For some, I could go and tell their parents of what happened, but for some I couldn't reach their parents so I couldn't tell them anything. This is something that still gives me trouble today. I still think, this country have that kind of problem, in our country, there were also but communication seemed so far distant. It was unlike this country

where there is phone or things like that. There was none. That is something that makes me sorrowful, it still bothers me today. There was one (soldier) who was injured on his chest, but he did not bleed on the outside, right? He bled on the inside, right? When I saw him, I knew that he wasn't going to make it. He was growing more and more pale. He asked me to tell his parents. So I bandaged him up and asked for a helicopter. The helicopter came to take him away, but once he was loaded onto the helicopter he was already dead. Now, when we came back, I didn't know his parents because they were far away, far from me. I couldn't get to them so I couldn't deliver the message. Oh, it's very troublesome, first of all. Second of all...

Translator: Let me translate that first.

Pao Xiong: Sure.

Translator: I still think about the experiences, there are many combat or many scenarios that I found myself in because when the soldiers got injured they sent to us and we performed first aid on them and bandage up their wounds. Some of them don't talk much, but some of them talked to me and asked me to send message, take message to their families back at home. Sometimes, I could do that, sometimes I could not and I'm still traumatized by it now that I think back because back then families are far away and there's no phone, no ways of communication with them. And it's still troubles me today, I'm still traumatized by that experience. There was one soldier, he got injured on the chest and I knew that he was bleeding internally and I knew that he probably will not make it because he was turning more and more pale. I bandaged up his wounds from the outside but I knew he was bleeding inside and we called in for air support and they lifted him up and on the way back he died on the plane. I don't know where his parents were and I don't even know that they were far away, that kind of experience still traumatizes me until today.

Pao Xiong: And another thing, and some soldiers, while I was still serving, at that time it was very dangerous because they were still fighting right there, right? I was there when they got injured, so they called out to me to go get them out to do first aid. That was very dangerous because there was still intense fighting, when they get injured they called out for me, because I was the nurse, so I must go after the soldiers and get them out, to take care of them before they were shipped out. That was dangerous to me and also dangerous to the soldiers. There was a lot of things like that.

Translator: Was there a place that you could tell us of one time when you were fighting? What was happening and what did you do? And how were you able to get out safely? Would you tell us about it?

Pao Xiong: Sure.

Translator: You can choose only one.

Pao Xiong: Okay. There was one (time) when we went to the South. We were brought by aircrafts. It was *super lai*⁴, right? The soldiers were sent into Vietnam, but the aircrafts didn't even land. The aircraft hovered in the air and they told us to jump, right? So we jumped out, and jumped out, but they didn't know that we were surrounded by the Vietnamese. They were at our front and in our rear. They sent us to protect route 9 in Vietnam, right? We were the ones to protect that route, to cut off that route. So we were surrounded by the Vietnamese and were waiting to die. They shot us and (we) shot back at them, and there were all kinds of injuries.

Translator: Would you let me translate that first?

It was very dangerous being in the war zone, being on the combat zone because in the combat zone, people are still fighting and shooting left and right, but as a medic you're sometimes required to go perform first aid to soldiers who were injured on the battle (field) while performing battle or in the thick of the battle. It's very dangerous to me and to other soldiers too, but I was expected to perform first aid before they were evacuated. And one experience, we were sent to the south, more towards the southern side of the country, the very front of the war effort. And the plane, the chopper that dropped us off could not even land, it was in midair and we were expected to jump off the chopper, but they didn't know that we were surrounded by the enemy already. And that was the time when we were sent to block route 9 which goes from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through Laos and we got engaged in a battle, a very heavy battle in that time.

So when you were dropped off, you had to jump off and the aircraft left, they didn't shoot at the aircraft? They only shot at you afterward?

Pao Xiong: Yes, they only shot at us after. They didn't shoot the aircraft because if they did, the fighter jets in the sky would see them and would respond. It

⁴ Unsure what this word refers to, or how it relates to the rest of the story, Pao Xiong literally said "super lai";

was during the day. The fighter jets were patrolling. That's why they didn't shoot then, right? The aircraft...

Translator: They shot at you after the aircraft left?

Pao Xiong: After the aircraft left, that's when they started shooting.

Translator: At that time when we were dropped off at route 9, when the chopper was still hovering they did not shoot the choppers because at that time with the choppers in the air were jet planes that could, if they could spot that there are enemies in the area, they could engage in the fight also. But they waited until the planes and the choppers have left, then they started shooting at us and we engaged in that heavy battle.

So after the choppers left, what happened then?

Pao Xiong: What happened afterward was...we were surrounded by the Vietnamese so at that moment each went their own way.

Translator: Trying to outrun them so you would survive, right?

Pao Xiong: Yes. Each went their own way and not in order anymore because it was during a battle, right? We got separated into groups of two to three, five to six. At that time contacting the aircraft was impossible because some of us had a radio, some didn't. So oh, it was extremely difficult.

Translator: At that time we are surrounded and we were not in our organized units anymore, we were separated in smaller units; two to three, maybe four to five together and we could not call for air support either because some had a radio and some don't, and it was very difficult.

Ellen Brooks: Did you have a weapon?

Translator: Did you have a weapon? Did you have...?

Pao Xiong: Yeah, I did have a weapon. Everybody must have a weapon because that was the way it was, you must have a weapon.

Translator: Yes, everybody has a weapon to go to the front like that, everybody do have a weapon.

Ellen Brooks: So what happened with route 9?

Translator: So what happened at route 9?

Pao Xiong: What happened? So we went to protect that route, for about two to three weeks, that was when we were able to gather together, right? In addition, they also commanded us to cut off route 9, to block route 9. The Vietnamese was also present at route 9 because their trucks that transported weapons to South Vietnam came every day, right? They commanded us to cut off that route, so we arrived there at night time. We couldn't go during the day. So at night, we crawled and crawled until we got to the route. We looked for whatever tree was biggest, we attached explosives to all the four sides of the tree. We light the explosives to topple the trees so they would block the road, to block the trucks from getting to the South. That was what we did.

Translator: For two to three weeks after we were dropped at route 9, we could gather our troops together and we were commanded to block the enemy from sending supplies from the north to the south. On route 9, the enemies also used that route quite a bit and they guard that route very heavily also. So we couldn't go during the day, so at night time we would crawl to route 9 and we would spot big trees, any tree that are on the side of the road that are big enough and we would tie a mine at the base of the tree and would try to topple that tree so the tree would fall and block the road.

Ellen Brooks: And then what happened?

Translator: And after that, what happened?

Pao Xiong: After that we ran away because we were lighting explosives, right? So when the explosives go out, the trees fell and blocked the road, but now the Vietnamese knew, right? The Vietnamese knew so they came after us, then we all went our own separate ways again. After we got separated, some got lost. The reason that we got lost was because we went together as a group of ten or more but when there was trouble everybody went in different directions. It was at night so we couldn't see. Those who had a map went in a different direction. Those who didn't have a map went in a different direction and couldn't find the others, so that created more problems. Some had a map and radio, but everybody was separated, and got lost.

Translator: After we toppled some trees to block the route, the enemy knew that we did that so they chased us and they came for us and it was at night time so we all got separated. Some have a map, some don't, and some have radios and some don't so that was chaos where people, a lot of people got lost.

We would go in units of ten, but we got separated, you're on your own and it was, a lot of people got lost because it was night time.

Ellen Brooks: And what happened to you specifically during that time?

Translator: What about yourself? How did you escape? Who were you with and what happened to you?

Pao Xiong: At that time I was in a group, there were five of us. There were five but we didn't have a radio, we had a map but not a radio. We knew where to go but we couldn't call in air support, that was the problem. So we continued to follow the map until we made it back.

Translator: Where did you come back to?

Pao Xiong: We made it back to the rest of our unit in the back, because the mission to block the road was not for the entire *kong phan*. They only commanded about ten soldiers to go on that mission. We went to do the mission and come back. It wasn't close, it was far. The medics were supposed to be with the soldiers at all times. Wherever they went, in whatever direction, you're supposed to go with them.

Translator: How many days did it take you to get back? How long did it take you to get back to your unit in the back?

Pao Xiong: Three days.

Translator: Three days?

Pao Xiong: We got back in three days, but the ones with the radio...

Translator: They were able to call air support?

Pao Xiong: They couldn't call either. At the time they were even further away than we were because they didn't have a map. They continue to go until...

Translator: They got lost...

Pao Xiong: They got lost and they called air support. They tried and tried and finally almost evening the following day (they) were able to contact air support. Air support went to look for them and told them that they had gone in a wrong direction. They had gone into Vietnam. So air support told them to follow in the direction which the airplane was going. It took them six days to get back.

Translator: The group that I was with, there was five of us. We had no radio, we had a map and a compass. We know, we knew where to go but we couldn't call for air support for airplanes to come lift us, pick us up. It took us three days to get back to our unit, which were, which stayed back, only ten of, about ten of us went to on that mission. And every time we have a mission like that a medic always go with them, and so the five of us we took three days to get back to our unit. The rest, there was one particular group they went on a different direction, they had a radio, but they didn't have a map so they didn't know where they were going, they went off course and they went further into Vietnam and eventually they were able to call and gave their position to air support and they were told that they were off course and very far away into Vietnam. And the airplane would guide them by flying very high in the direction that they should go and they followed the airplane and that's how they got back. It took them six days to get back with our unit.

Ellen Brooks: And who are the pilots of the helicopters and of the airplanes?

Translator: The pilots who came to pick you up or to help you, who were they?

Pao Xiong: Those, I don't know either.

Translator: Don't know?

Pao Xiong: Because I wasn't the one who communicate directly with them, but mostly those were Thai and Laotian, the pilots of the smaller aircrafts. The pilots of the fighter jets were all Americans. It was said that the smaller aircrafts were Thai and Laotian, but I'm not sure if they were actually Thai or Laotian.

Translator: I don't know for sure either, because I don't have direct contact with them, but the smaller planes are usually Thai or Lao officers. But the jet planes, the fighter jets are Americans.

Ellen Brooks: And in your unit, the people that you are fighting with, are they all Hmong people or are they from different places?

Translator: In your *kong phan* or *kong lu-ai*, was it mostly Hmong or were there other ethnicities also?

Pao Xiong: There were other ethnicities as well. There were Hmong, but Hmong was the minority, mostly Laotian, and also *Poo-Ter*⁵.

Translator: Yes, in my unit there were some Hmong, but Hmong was the minority. They were mostly Lao and there were others that are called *Poo-Ter*.

Ellen Brooks: And that's another, like another type of people, like another ethnic group?

Translator: *Poo-Ter* is another ethnic group in Laos, right?

Pao Xiong: Yes, that's right. There were other ethnic groups as well but those were all counted as Laotian. They weren't counted as a separate group like Hmong or *Poo-Ter* or Laotian. For example, Thai *Leu*⁶ and Thai *Dom*⁷ were counted as Laotian. They did not count these as a different ethnicity. These were the three that they counted. The rest were numerous, such as Thai *Leu*, Thai *Daeng*⁸, Thai *Puanya*⁹. Their dialects are different, but understandable.

Translator: They were all counted as Laotian correct?

Pao Xiong: Yes, they were all counted as Laotian.

Translator: Yes, *Poo-Ter* is another ethnic, another major ethnic group, but within the Lao ethnicity there's other minorities too that was classified into the category of Lao or *Nplog*¹⁰. Um, Hmong and *Nplog* and *Poo-Ter* are the three categories, but within them are smaller ethnicities that are grouped together among those three big categories.

Ellen Brooks: And how did everybody get along?

Translator: When the people join the military, some were Hmong, some were Laotian, some were *Leu*, some were *Poo-Ter*, did they get along or did they have trouble being together?

Pao Xiong: Oh, they must get along. There was no room for not getting along.

Translator: Because everybody had a common enemy, so they must help each other and get along, is this correct?

⁵ An ethnic minority who mainly lives in the highlands of Laos, transliterated from the Hmong word "pub thawj";

⁶ An ethnic minority group in Laos;

⁷ An ethnic minority group in Laos;

⁸ An ethnic minority group in Laos;

⁹ An ethnic minority group in Laos;

¹⁰ The Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) word for "Laotian" or "Lao";

Pao Xiong: It was like this, we had the same rules and the same leaders. No matter what ethnicity you are it made no difference, we must love each other, we must help each other from that point on. There was no separation, only by name and ethnicity, but as far as rationing food and dividing up responsibilities all were alike. There was no segregation that you're this ethnicity, I'm this ethnicity.

Translator: There's no segregation, no separation, even though people are of different ethnicities, we will follow the same law, the same leader, the same commander, the same purpose and so pretty, we get along well and served together really well.

Ellen Brooks: Is there anything else about combat and being in the front lines that you want to talk about before we talk about the end of the war?

Translator: Is there something about fighting at the front that you'd like to talk about before we talk about the end of the war?

Pao Xiong: There is something, such as the time when we were fighting at the front and air support couldn't drop off food for us. Sometimes we even ran out of plain rice, water was gone. There was one time when I went on for a week without food to eat or water to drink. The aircrafts couldn't drop them off. We could contact the aircrafts but they couldn't drop off supplies because we were by the border of Vietnam. Everybody could hear the aircraft overhead, but the Vietnamese shoot at them. So the aircraft couldn't drop off supplies for us. We went on without food and water for seven days. In the morning, there was dew on leaves, on taro leaves, right? So we collect the dew and drank them.

Translator: These were taro leaves, correct?

Pao Xiong: Yes, there was water dew during the night, right? In the morning I'd go and collect the dew from the leaves so I'd get a little bit of water to drink. But the real big problem was when air support couldn't drop off food, even the plain rice that we carried with us were gone. The plain rice, you could only carry thirty bags, a person can only carry thirty bags.

Translator: Yes, there was one time when we were in deep trouble where we have no food, and no water because the planes could not drop for us. One time, we went without food and water for seven days or a full week. We were very deep into the border between Laos and Vietnam and we, planes could come, but they could not come low enough to drop off food and water for us because they would be shot at every chance that they come close. So in

the morning, we just gathered leaves that has some dew on them and collect the dew on the leaves and drink them that way, just to survive. And the food that we were able to carry, the rice bags that we were able to carry, each person, a soldier could only carry thirty bags maximum.

Ellen Brooks: And then what happened eventually? Did you move or was a plane able to get to you?

Translator: So when you had to continue without food and water for seven days, what happened? Were you able to get out afterward or was the aircraft able to drop off food for you? What happened?

Pao Xiong: Eventually they had to send in bombers to bomb. They continued to bomb the area, the aircraft continued to try to drop off food. The bombers and the supply aircrafts came together, each taking care of their duties. They continued like that for a while until eventually they were able to drop off food for us, and we were able to get food and have strength to get out and move on to another area. If it wasn't for that, because we didn't have food for six to seven days, we wouldn't have the strength to go anywhere.

Translator: That's right.

Pao Xiong: They continued to do that, to bomb until....

Translator: Maybe the Vietnamese retrieved, was that why they were able to drop off supplies?

Pao Xiong: Yes.

Translator: And how many were you at that time?

Pao Xiong: Oh, there was a lot.

Translator: Everyone in the *kong phan*?

Pao Xiong: The entire *kong phan*.

Translator: They sent in bombers during that time and they sent in bomber planes and also came (with) the bombers are the supply planes that dropped food that were trying to drop food. And they continued to bombard the enemy with bombs after bombs and after a long while, they could eventually dropped food for us. Because after seven days without food and water, we were too weak to move, too weak to go anywhere. So once we got the food and the water, we could eat and received our energy and moved and go elsewhere.

Pao Xiong: The bomber aircrafts, they called them B52. Because the B52 drop off bombs one time and the bombs exploded up to twenty to thirty minutes. They came in and dropped the bombs in waves so when the bombs went off the Vietnamese couldn't even stick out their heads. Because of the explosions the Vietnamese couldn't sent in their fighter jets. So when the supply aircraft dropped of rice for us, they couldn't shoot them down, because at that time there were bombs on the ground exploding everywhere.

Translator: So then they retrieved to hide?

Pao Xiong: They retrieved to hide, because if not the bombs would kill them.

Translator: That's right. So that was when the supply aircrafts could drop off food for you?

Pao Xiong: Yes, that was when the aircraft dropped off food. If it wasn't for that they could not have been able to drop off food.

Translator: What they did was the B52, the bombers would bomb, dropped bombs that would explode, explode for twenty to thirty minutes and during that time when the bombs were exploding among the enemies, they would hide and during that time, um, the supply planes would come and dropped food for us. That was the only way they could find the small window of opportunity to drop food for us, otherwise the planes would be shot at and they won't be able to drop food for us.

Ellen Brooks: Was there any food that you could eat in the jungle? Any food, like wild food that you could eat?

Translator: Was there food in the jungle that you could have looked for to sustain you temporarily?

Pao Xiong: Well, you couldn't really go anywhere either. There was, there were taro and other kinds of food but...

Translator: You still had to look for them and you were fearful of the Vietnamese?

Pao Xiong: We couldn't get out.

Translator: So you couldn't get out?

Pao Xiong: We couldn't even get out from our man hole. In order for us to look for food, we had to be extremely free.

Translator: There was, there was roots and others, but it was hard to get out of your, your fortified place that you were in to go and look.

Ellen Brooks: So anything else about that combat time that you want to talk about before we move on to the next part?

Translator: Is there something else when you were fighting at the front that you'd like to talk about before we move on to talk about something else?

Pao Xiong: Yes, there are many things. There was one time they came to attack us. We were on the base. The base belonged to them. They called it *nai lu-ai* base. In Laos, these were military bases for *nai lu-ai*...

Translator: Was the name of the base *nai lu-ai* or what was it?

Pao Xiong: No that's not it. It was Dong Hen base.

Translator: Dong Hen?

Pao Xiong: Dong Hen, it was a base for *nai lu-ai*, it was where they trained *nai lu-ai*.

Translator: Oh!

Pao Xiong: It was a base that trained *nai lu-ai*.

Translator: So they came and attacked you at that base?

Pao Xiong: Yes, they attacked us at that base. That was the time when Dong Hen was destroyed. They used artillery. They must have used up to twenty to thirty artilleries, firing at the same time. There were explosions everywhere, we couldn't do anything. That was the reason why we lost Dong Hen, the military base, *nai lu-ai* base (as it was called) in the old times. Oh, it was so dangerous. Besides, the outer perimeter was fenced with barbwire, right? Because it was a military base, it was fenced with barbwire so we couldn't get out. There was only one exit and the Vietnamese blocked it, they'd shoot anyone trying to escape. It seemed that they were trying to get rid of us all.

Translator: So they blocked the exit, that meant that they had come very close to the base, correct?

Pao Xiong: Yes, they were very close.

Translator: And they also fired artillery at you?

Pao Xiong: Yes, they were trying to block us in and use artillery to shell us in our man holes to make us extinct. But we were fortunate at that time.

Translator: How were you able to get out?

Pao Xiong: It was also because of air support.

Translator: Air support came and helped you fight?

Pao Xiong: Yes, the aircrafts came and bombed the exit, right? The aircrafts continued to bomb until the Vietnamese all died, until the area by the exit was obliterated, until the region was covered with dirt and the Vietnamese were all buried in there. I don't know how many there were either.

Translator: So that was when they stopped shooting at you so you could get out?

Pao Xiong: Yes, that was the reason why they stopped shooting, because they (the aircrafts) dropped very large bombs and the explosions took out the whole area, right? Must have been only three to four (bombs), and the region was all cleared, that's why we were able to get out.

Translator: Right. How long was it from the beginning when the Vietnamese came to attack to the time when you were able to get out? An afternoon or a day?

Pao Xiong: Oh, they had been fighting for several days before there was...

Translator: Before you were able to get out?

Pao Xiong: (We're) able to get out, because when you were going to do that they had to radio back to the officials in the back to see what they wanted to do, right? It's not something that you could just put in an order and get it done. It must be an official authority, an agreement to go ahead and bomb, because those who order the strikes they have the authority to order how many, right? That's how it was.

Translator: One time, we were at a base called Dong Hed? Or Dong Hen?

Pao Xiong: Dong Hen.

Translator: Dong Hen, at a base called Dong Hen, it was a base that trains commanders, to train *nai lu-ai* and the enemy came and attacked that base and it was the time of that base that finally was taken, or we lost that base. And they would use artillery shells, twenty, probably twenty to thirty big guns to bombard that base at the same time and explosions were happening everywhere and we didn't know how to get out of the base

because they guarded all the exits and also surrounded the base where barbwire that we ourselves had put up. So, everywhere we tried to exit the enemy would shoot at us and we couldn't get out of that base for two to three days. And we called in air support and they took that long, two to three days for us to remain at the fortified base because we request air support and the leaders that were to command or to order that air support had to deliberate what they were going to do. And finally, bombers come in and dropped so many bombs in the places that enemy had come and fortified themselves and eventually all those places that the enemy had taken over were bombed into shreds and that's how we able to get out.

Ellen Brooks: So then did you have to completely abandon that camp, that base?

Translator: So during that time you were able to get out and left Dong Hen just like that?

Pao Xiong: Yes, once we got out the Vietnamese seized the entire region. After we got out the aircrafts bombed until the place was completely destroyed, there was no building left standing.

Translator: Did the Vietnamese come to stay there or didn't they?

Pao Xiong: No they didn't. The Vietnamese did not stay for long.

Translator: No they didn't. So once they drove you out they just left?

Pao Xiong: Yes. Once we were out, they also left.

Translator: At the time, we lost Dong Hen but it was bombarded with so many bombs that it was already destroyed, there was no buildings still remain standing. The enemy did not take over that base either, they just drove us out and they left.

Ellen Brooks: And then so in 1975, when the official fighting stopped, what happened to you then?

Translator: What about in '75 when the war ended? What did you do? What happened to you and your family?

Pao Xiong: During that time, in '75, the Vietnamese came in, so those of us who were soldiers were sent to be re-educated¹¹.

¹¹ The actual word Pao Xiong used is "sa-ma-na";

Translator: This was the new government? The new government that sent you to be re-educated?

Pao Xiong: Yes, that year the old and new (government) were all together at that time. That year they were still together because when the new officials came in the old ones were still in place, right? So then they sent those of us who were soldiers to be re-educated.

Translator: When the war was over, the new government sent us to re, to be re-educated.

Pao Xiong: So that was how I got to Xieng Khouang. They sent me to Xieng Khouang, Phonsavan.

Translator: When you were sent to be re-educated, what did they have you do?

Pao Xiong: Once we got there, and got off the plane, they took us to a very large building near the airport at Phonsavan and we stayed there. There must have been thousands of us, not few at all, because I don't know how many trips they had to make with the airplane. Then they interrogated us one at a time saying that they already know that we were former soldiers. They already know that we were former soldiers because we were brought there to be re-educated. They asked what kind of duties you had as a soldier, whether you were a radio operator, a medic, or a trainer that trained soldiers, or what you command, that sort of thing. Everybody was asked.

Translator: So, when we got to Xieng Khouang, Phonsavan, they took us and put us in a warehouse by the airport and we were asked, each of us were asked what duties we performed, what post we served during the war; whether we were a nurse, or a teacher, or what rank we achieved during the war.

Pao Xiong: In addition, I said to myself, "well I was a medic, I had four to five years of experience working as a medic, six years of experience" so I said that I was a medic. So they wrote down that I was a medic, right? So now they went on to ask someone else. Someone else said he was a radio operator, another said he was a trainer, right? And told them their ranks, but as a medic I didn't have a rank. There were some who had ranks, who were *nai lu-ai*, *nai muat*. Once everybody told them, then the following day they came back to ask "you said that you were a medic, do you still want to be a medic? If you still want to be a medic then you just say that you do, if not you can say what you want to become, and if you don't say at all then we'll put you someplace else." So I reasoned that because I was a

medic I should say that I still want to be a medic. Two days later, they let me go and instructed me to go on for more training.

Translator: Once they got everybody to tell what duties they served, what post they served and what their ranks were, whether you were a nurse, a teacher, or a commander, later they came back and asked if we wanted to continue serving in our position. They asked me if I wanted to continue to be a nurse and I thought and decided that, yeah I still wanted to serve as a nurse and they took that down also and they sent me for more training.

When you said “they” you mean the government after the General (Vang Pao) had left the country, right? These were those who came into power, to run the country?

Pao Xiong: Yes, they’re the one.

Translator: Just to clarify when we refer to “them” meaning the new Lao government after the war was lost.

Pao Xiong: So I received more training, for two and a half years. Really the training was supposed to be three years, but we only took two and a half years to finish.

Translator: My training took me two and a half years, usually takes three years, but I finished my training in two and half years.

Pao Xiong: In addition, once I completed the training, they sent me to work in Muang Caa, in Long Cheng, at Muang Au.

Translator: After my training I was sent to the region called Muang Caa to work in a place called Muang Au.

Ellen Brooks: And during that time, where was your family?

Translator: At that time where was your family? Have you gotten married?

Pao Xiong: At that time, I didn’t have a family yet, but my parents, brothers and sisters were still in our village. They were still farming as usual.

Translator : Oh, really?

Pao Xiong: Yes, they were still living as they did before.

Translator: At the time, I did was not married yet, did not have a wife or children, but my parents and my relatives were still back in our village still farming.

Ellen Brooks: And how long did you work as a nurse in your new position?

Translator: So after you came to work at Muang Au, how long did you stay there?

Pao Xiong: Not long, I think it was only, at the most probably not even a year. Not even a year and I became *caw faa*¹².

Translator: Not long, I was there, probably not even for a year which at that time, I went into the jungle and joined the effort called *caw faa*.

Ellen Brooks: What was that?

Translator: What is *caw faa*? Would you talk a little bit about it?

Pao Xiong: *Caw faa* is like a rebellion¹³.

Translator: To live in the jungle and fight against the government, correct?

Pao Xiong: Yes.

Translator: *Caw faa* is like a guerilla unit that fight in hiding.

Pao Xiong: And not long after that year, no that's not it, before that I got married. I got married then we became *caw faa*.

Translator: Went to join *caw faa*?

Pao Xiong: It was the year '78, '78 or '79? It was October, '79, October. It was October of '79, (we) went to join *caw faa*. After I got married then we went to join *caw faa* in the jungle.

Translator: October, '79, I, shortly before that I got married in October, '79 and I joined in the guerilla units in the jungle.

Pao Xiong: 'Cause we lived in the jungle until harvest time of '78, right? The crops were ready for harvest, so we harvested our crops. We threshed¹⁴ some rice (for food) and that was how we were able to cross over to Thailand.

Translator: Was it '78 or '79?

Pao Xiong: It was '79.

¹² A Hmong word referring to guerilla fighters in the jungle, in the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), it's spelled "cob fab";

¹³ The Lao word that Pao Xiong used is “ກູ້ຊາດ” [koo-saad] which literally means “to take back the nation”;

¹⁴ The threshing of rice is a process of putting the rice in a very large mortar and pounding with a pestle to separate the rice grains from the chaffs;

Translator: '79 right?

Pao Xiong: Yes.

Translator: So it was September or October that you became *caw faa*?

Pao Xiong: Yes.

Translator: It was also '79?

Pao Xiong: Yes.

Translator: But you were *caw faa* for only a few months, then after the harvest you crossed over to Thailand?

Pao Xiong: Yes.

Translator: So in October of '79, just a few months after I joined *caw faa*, after we harvested our rice we crossed over to Thailand.

Ellen Brooks: And why did you join the, that guerilla unit?

Translator: Why did you become *caw faa*?

Pao Xiong: Because if you don't do that then you had no way of getting out of the village. Because we were going to cross over to Thailand, so...

Translator: You couldn't get out of the village if you didn't become *caw faa*?

Pao Xiong: You couldn't get out of the village because the Vietnamese were watching. There were soldiers watching the villages. There were *kong luang*¹⁵ watching the villages, you couldn't go anywhere. They wouldn't let you go in and out carrying large quantity of rice like that. You must go and live in the jungle.

Translator: So you could prepare (to leave) from the jungle?

Pao Xiong: You go (to the jungle) first, yes, become *caw faa* and live in the jungle first then you can prepare. When you're ready then you can leave. That's how it was.

Translator: Because if I did not join that group or did not become *caw faa*, I won't be able to cross to Thailand because in the villages you are heavily guarded with military presence and you're not able to make any plans to leave the

¹⁵ These were villagers called by the government to watch for suspicious activities, they have some authority similar to the police.

country. So the only way to leave was to run to the jungle and become *caw faa* and, to prepare food and to prepare your way to cross over to Thailand.

So you were *caw faa* for just over a year? Or maybe not even a year?

Pao Xiong: Not even a year, it was from September, no that's not it, December '89...

Translator: Was it '78 or '89?

Pao Xiong: It was '79, right? [laughing]

Translator: It was December of '79, correct?

Pao Xiong: It was '79, sorry about that. Then we crossed over to Thailand. (We) came to Thailand in '79, but we got to Thailand in...

Translator: It was already '80?

Pao Xiong: '80, it seemed like February '80 or '79, or '81, January, right about there, between those times.

Translator: We got to Thailand probably late '79 or January of '80.

Ellen Brooks: And how did you get there? How did you cross over the border?

Translator: How did you cross the border from Lao to Thailand?

Pao Xiong: We just swam across the Mekong River.

Translator: Swam across the river.

Pao Xiong: Swim, once we got to the River, we only worked in the dark. We cut bamboo trees and make...

Translator: You made rafts?

Pao Xiong: Yes, made rafts. We made rafts, we get on them and propel them like this [demonstrating]

Translator: Together with your wife?

Pao Xiong: Yes, my wife, me...

Translator: Did you have children yet?

Pao Xiong: No we didn't. My wife and me. I had to pull along fifteen others. There were fifteen who didn't know how to swim.

Translator: So a raft for each person?

Pao Xiong: Yes, I was the only one who had a raft, the others had inner tubes. They had inner tubes. I bought an inner tube for my wife, one for my wife also, and I was the only one that had a raft.

Translator: Which floats better? The raft or the inner tube?

Pao Xiong: Inner tubes float better but inner tubes have no propulsion.

Translator: Oh.

Pao Xiong: Rafts have propulsion, when you propel, they...

Translator: They move better?

Pao Xiong: They move better. However, if the last person also had a raft then it wouldn't work as well either, because it is very heavy. You must be the heavy one and the rest are light in order for it to work.

Translator: We swam across the Mekong River, we came at night time. I went and cut some bamboos and created some floatation devices under my arms and I had my wife with me. We didn't have any children at the time and there were also fifteen others. They each have an (inner) tube with them and I bought my wife an (inner) tube too. The nice thing about having bamboos under my arms as floatation is that I can swim, and because the bamboos are heavier but they float I can propel and drag those fifteen people behind me. And the (inner) tubes are lighter so I could propel them and I could carry them across, because they couldn't swim.

Ellen Brooks: Did everybody make it?

Translator: So the group that you led, everybody made it across?

Pao Xiong: Yes, the fifteen that I led all made it across, but there were two hundred altogether that came during that time.

Translator: So you led fifteen?

Pao Xiong: Yes, I led fifteen, but among the two hundred four drowned because they didn't know how to swim. There were four that drowned.

Translator: We came as a group of two hundred, but the individuals that were tied to me, that crossed over with me were fifteen. Out of the two hundred four had drowned and died.

Ellen Brooks: What happened when you made it to the other side?

Translator: And when you made it across to Thailand, then what happened? What did you do?

Pao Xiong: Once we were in Thailand, we didn't do much. We rested by the river. Once we crossed over, we climbed up onto the bank and there was a small grove of trees right there so we went into it. We rested there, it was dark. We built a fire and Thai (villagers) discovered us. The next morning Thai (villagers) discovered us, right? Thai (villagers) discovered us and so they reported us to their officials. The officials came and took us to Ban Vinai refugee camp. No, it was Nong Khai refugee camp, it was Kaataw camp.

Translator: Once we crossed over the river, we went up a little hill and over the hill was a small grove of trees, a forest there and we spent the night there. And in the morning we made some fire and some of the villagers in the surrounding area came and discovered us. They reported us to the authority and the authority came and took us and put us, took (us) into a camp, Nong Khai camp.

Ellen Brooks: And then what happened?

Translator: Then after that how long did you stay in Nong Khai? What happened then and how did you come to this country?

Pao Xiong: We stayed at Kawtaw for about, maybe one month, to process paperwork. They said we were refugees, we were immigrants. Once that was completed they sent us to live in Ban Vinai.

Translator: We, in that camp, another name is Kawtaw camp. We stayed there for about a month to register, to declare that we're refugees of war and after that they sent us to another camp called Ban Vinai.

Ellen Brooks: What was life like in the camps?

Translator: What was life like living in the refugee camp?

Pao Xiong: Oh, life in the refugee camps was extremely difficult. The climate was horrible, it was very warm and very humid. (With) the dust cloud you couldn't even see, when the wind blew the dust flew all over. You couldn't even see the other side, it was extremely difficult. There was not enough food. Those who had relatives over here, they can send money to them, and they could buy food and have food to eat. I didn't have any

relatives over here so I relied on the food that the United Nations¹⁶ sent, and did what I could. It was not enough.

Translator: Life in the refugee camp (was) very difficult, was warm, was humid, dusty, not enough food. Some of the refugees that have relatives in America, who sent money, they are better off. They can buy food, they can use the money to buy other things that they need. But some of us (who) don't have relatives over here in America, we just relied on the food that was provided for us by, perhaps, United Nations and it was never enough. It was very difficult.

Ellen Brooks: How long were you in Ban Vinai?

Translator: How long were you in Ban Vinai?

Pao Xiong: Oh, for five years.

Translator: Five years.

Pao Xiong: Almost five-and-a-half. Because when I was there I didn't have relatives over here, no one to sponsor me. So I stayed there until there was a relative or someone I knew was able to contact a church. That was when they sponsored me. That was when I could do the paperwork to come.

Translator: I lived there for five-and-a-half years because I had no relatives in America to sponsor me. And eventually there were non-profit church organizations (that) sponsored us and we were able to come.

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

Translator: How did you end up in Wisconsin?

Pao Xiong: Because there was a sponsor, a church here in Sheboygan, they sponsored me. I had a friend back in Ban Vinai who came to this country first, but we were friends back in Ban Vinai. So he knew that I didn't have any relatives that's why he contacted the church. So the church agreed to sponsor me and that was how I came to Wisconsin.

Translator: There was a church organization in Wisconsin. A friend of mine, we used to live in Ban Vinai together, he came here first. He approached the church and he knew that I didn't have relatives in America so he approached the church and asked the church to help sponsor me and they took that and they sponsored us.

¹⁶ The actual word that Pao Xiong used here is “ສະຫະປະຊາຊາດ” [sa-ha-pa-sa-saad];

Ellen Brooks: And while you were in Thailand, did you have children then that lived in the camp with you?

Translator: So during the time when you lived in Thailand that was when you and your wife had children, she gave birth to several of your children in Thailand?

Pao Xiong: We lived in Thailand for one year before we had children. And after that, one or two years later we had another one. When we lived in Ban Vinai we had two children. When we came to this country, we had a four year old daughter and a two year old son.

Translator: Yeah, after a year and a half in Ban Vinai we have a child and then couple years later we had another one. So when we came to America we have two children, one was four and one was two.

Ellen Brooks: And what did you end up doing here for work?

Translator: So when you came here what kind of work did you end up doing?

Pao Xiong: Once we arrived, they said that everyone must go and find a job so I attended school for a little while. I studied machine tool. I didn't know English but I went anyway, because it was instructed by a Hmong person. Once I finished, I studied for two years, I studied English for two years. I didn't know the language, didn't know anything, but they instructed me to go find a job. I got a job at Lear, here in town, so that was where I worked. 1984 I began work, I began work in 1984 until 2000 when I retired.

Translator: You said you worked at Lear, is Lear your place of employment?

Pao Xiong: Yes, it's a company, they call it Lear Corporation.

Translator: Ok, Lea as in L-E-A or something else?

Pao Xiong: L-E-A-R.

Translator: Oh, Lear, ok. When I came to America I didn't have a lot of English. I went, attended classes, I learned machine tool. I studied for about two years and didn't know, still didn't have a lot of English so looked for a job and I got a job at Lear Corporation, from '84 to 2000, that's where I worked.

Ellen Brooks: How has it been trying to transition to the United States and learning about the culture?

Translator: Comparing your life back then to your life in America, it changed a lot, how difficult has it been for you, and what did you have to adjust to when you came to live in America?

Pao Xiong: Didn't have to change much. The difficult thing is that I didn't know the language. I didn't know how to communicate with them, that was the difficult part. The other things were not all that difficult.

Translator: The main thing is the language, had no language, no English. That was the main issue, main problem. Other than that (the) changes, the adjustment it was not all that difficult.

Pao Xiong: And also, when I went to work, I was able to earn an income to buy food for my family. I was able to provide for them until today.

Translator: With work in America, I was able to earn money to provide for my family my children and continue to live until today.

Ellen Brooks: Is there anything else that you want to add that we haven't talked about yet?

Translator: Is there something that we haven't asked about or talked about that you'd like to add?

Pao Xiong: I don't know what that would be. There's not much else, there's only that those of us who came here later in life, we attended school sporadically. We don't know the language, we don't know anything. They'd still tell us to go get a job, oh, it's very irritating. That's something that I don't really like. I wanted to finish school first, then after I have the language skills I can go find a job, but they wouldn't allow that. The government would rather spend their money on something else rather than paying for me to go to school, that wouldn't be good either. They wanted me to provide for my own family. I didn't have the language skills, I just did what I could, it was very difficult.

Translator: The most important thing, the most difficult thing was having no English, having no language skills, having been asked or forced to work. Because ideally I would have loved to be able to learn enough English and have the skills first, the language skills before I started working but the government wouldn't help, or wouldn't do more to help us have that education and just put us in the work place and that was the most difficult thing.

Ellen Brooks: Is there anything about your service that you want to mention before we wrap up?

Translator: Before we wrap up, is there something about your service as a war veteran which you haven't spoken about that you'd like to speak of before we end?

Pao Xiong: That's probably it. It's been a long time, I couldn't remember much anymore. The only thing that I'm thinking about is that since I remember there was a war in my country. I just knew who was our government, who watched over us, who ruled our land, who helped our country, and we relied heavily on the Americans. However, since we came to this country it seemed a little strange. Back then I thought that the Americans would help as much as we needed them to, but now we're getting older, we served for so many years, got injured and much more...but when we came to this country they still deny us that's a very difficult thing. That's why nowadays I question "why they wouldn't recognize us?" Why then did our leaders say that the Americans were the ones who helped us the most? Saying that "no matter how difficult things were going to be, they'd help us regardless". However, once we got here and they don't recognize us I started to lose hope a little bit. Yeah, lose hope.

Translator: Don't have much else to say except for the fact that back when I was growing up, I grew up with the war, I knew the war and it was part of my youth and I followed my leaders. I followed those that led us at the time. And at the time, we had high hopes that (if) we joined with the Americans they would help us, they would provide a way for our living but when I came to America I lost that hope a little bit, because we had that hope that if anything were to happen, Americans would us through hard times but coming here we didn't really see that and it was just a little, put a dash in our hope a little bit.

Ellen Brooks: Thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

Translator: Thank you for your time and for telling us your story.

Pao Xiong: You're welcome. No problem.

[End of interview]