

Boua Fue Yang – English Transcript

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, November 21, 2014

Translated and Transcribed by Seethong Yang, March, 2015

Ca. 1 hour 22 minutes

Abstract

Boua Fue Yang was a former SGU¹ veteran during the Secret War in Laos. He told of the time when he was younger and still living with his family in Bong Na, in the province of Xieng Khouang, where he attended school. When he was still in school, he was forced to take up arms to fight in the war. He was trained in Thailand. After his training, he was sent to fight in the front. He recounted of the poor living conditions in the battle field. Because of constant rain and fighting, many of his fellow soldiers had sores on their feet, which made it difficult for their unit to continue fighting. After retreating back to base, many of the soldiers refused to go back to the front. When officials from both sides signed a cease-fire agreement, Boua Fue and his fellow soldiers were told to disarm themselves. At this time the enemy came and persecuted them, and took away many former soldiers to be re-educated. Boua Fue said he was targeted also. Him, his wife and other relatives left their village to escape persecution. After multiple stops, Boua Fue and his family finally crossed over to Thailand. They lived in Nong Khai refugee camp in Thailand for some time before coming to the United States. In the United States, Boua Fue attended school and worked in the Chicago area before moving to Sheboygan, Wisconsin. At the time of the interview, he lives in Sheboygan with his wife and children.

¹ Special Guerilla Unit;

[Start of Interview]

Ellen Brooks: Today is Friday November 21st, 2014. This is an interview with Boua Fue Yang, a Hmong Veteran who served with the SGU during the Secret War in Laos. This interview is being conducted in the narrator's home in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks and the Translator and the Co-Interviewer is Seethong Yang.

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

Boua Fue Yang: Okay. I was born in a town called Bong Na in the Province of Xieng Khouang.

Translator: What about the time of your birth, what year and what date?

Boua Fue Yang: According to the records which was prepared for us to come to this country, it was September, 1951.

Translator: I was born in village called Bong Na in the Province of Xieng Khouang on September 10th,² 1951.

Ellen Brooks: And can you tell us a little about your childhood?

Translator: Can you tell us about your history and when you were young?

Boua Fue Yang: Okay. When we lived in Bong Na, Xieng Khouang, I attended school there. After Xieng Khouang fell, we moved to a small village near the foot of a mountain called Phu Kay for two years. Then we went to Long Cheng. My father led us. I was just a child then. I couldn't carry much except for a kettle. We moved to a village called Pha Phai to Muang Ong then to Pha Qau, then to Long Cheng, to live there. At that time, it must have been 1960 or 1961. Then I attended school there, until *hong thee neung*.³ After that, they didn't have any higher grades, so they sent us to school in Sam Tong. So between 1968 to 1969 I went to school in Sam Tong. Then in September 1969, my father passed away so I came home for his funeral and after the funeral...because there's no one to help support me anymore, right? So, I had to join the military. There was a relative who worked at Office 5⁴ in Long Cheng. He told me that they're in need of someone to work and wanted to know if I was interested. So I told him that I don't have anything to do, that I could work. So they hired me to work at Office 5, which was to administer to refugees from Xieng

² Although Boua Fue did not specify the date of his birth, he wrote it down on a document as part of the interview;

³ A level of education in Laos, may be the equivalent of middle school to high school in the U.S.;

⁴ Boua Fue's own words were "hoob kas tsib";

Khouang, those whom we were able to rescue. We gave them rice ration, other food products, and also take down their personal information. 1:11-

Translator: Let me translate that first? Let me translate that so we have the English before we continue on.

Boua Fue Yang: Ok.

Translator: When Xieng Khouang fell, our family moved to a place at the base of the mountain called Mount Phu Kay and from there we went to Long Cheng. I was just a child, I could not do much, I just carried a little kettle and that's what I could carry with my parents, my father. Then we went from there to Pha Phai into an area called Muang Ong and then another area called Pha Qau. That would've been 1961, 1960.

Did you go to school in Pha Qau or in Long Cheng?

Boua Fue Yang: I went to school in Long Cheng. Once we got to Long Cheng, that's when I attended school there.

Translator: You said *hong thee neung*, what does *hong thee neung* mean?

Boua Fue Yang: *Hong thee neung*, back in Laos, we had 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade, 4th grade, then 5th grade. 5th grade was *hong thee song nyai*⁵, and in Long Cheng *hong thee song nyai* was the highest grade. 6th grade on they called that *hong thee neung*, toward *see-tria ka-tria tria-zia*⁶ on and on.

Translator: Ok, so *hong thee neung* means 6th grade and up, right?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes, from that point onward that's what they're called. It is different from the United States because in Laos that level was pretty high in the education system. It may be beyond High School in America. So...

Translator: And at Long Cheng I attended school there, a grade school and I got up to probably equivalent to high school, which is called *hong thee neung*. And then I could not go on anymore in Long Cheng because that was the highest grade in Long Cheng. I went to Sam Tong to continue my education and that was about 1968, '69 and in September. '69 my father died and I came home for the funeral and since my father died I no long received support and help. And one of my brothers, one of my relatives, he was in the military and he told me about the military that they needed a person to fill a position...

Translator: What is the place that you worked at called? Is it Fifth Rank?

⁵ A designation of grade level in Lao school system;

⁶ This is a phonetically transcription of Boua Fue's own words, it may be French;

Boua Fue Yang: Yes, Office 5, it's like working in an office, but in Suite 5. It's similar to this country where they call general office, Suite 5. According to what I know that's what it was. But I worked at Office 5 until '72, the year [was] '72. It was March or April when the Vietnamese reached Long Cheng, so everybody migrated to Pong Ta in the region of Pha Daeng. Everybody migrated to that region and we lived there for one month. During that time, they wouldn't let the students who studied at Sam Tong to come back home. They forced them to take up arms. So air planes attacked the Vietnamese very close by and injured one of our relatives. They sent him to Vientiane, but they couldn't treat him so he died. So we lived for one month in the region of Pha Daeng, in the area of Pong Ta. Then they said it was ok, that we should return to our homes, so we went back to Long Cheng.

Translator: Ok, let me translate that first and we'll let Ellen ask us questions? Let me translate that first.

Boua Fue Yang: Ok.

Translator: So at Suite 5, I was referred to that position and which was a position to help refugees from the war. We administered to them, we registered them, we provided them with food. I worked there until 1972 when the enemy came to Long Cheng and combatted us in Long Cheng and that's when we moved to a place called Pong Ta and also another place name Pha Daeng and we stayed there until, about a month. As a student I wasn't allow to come back to my home anymore and we were asked to take up arms and defend the country. One of our fellow students got injured and he died from that injury through some of the fighting. And when things settled down a little bit, we were told to come back to Long Cheng.

Boua Fue Yang: And then after that, it seemed like July or August, they transferred me to GM 21, and...

Translator: What is GM 21?

Boua Fue Yang: GM 21 is *kong phan*⁷ 21. It was Battalion 21, they called it GM.

Translator: Ok.

Boua Fue Yang: But decided that I would not go. They were also recruiting. Zong Zoua was recruiting new soldiers to build a new *kong phan*, was that *kong phan* 23? 21, 22, 23, so they designated *kong phan* 23, and we were the new recruits for that year at Muang Ca in August, September, October of '72 until the end of that year. Beginning in January of '73 they sent us to train

⁷ A unit of soldiers, may be the equivalent of a battalion;

in Thailand for six months. So in June, the 26th of June, we completed our training, so they sent us back to Long Cheng. Once we got to Long Cheng, we stayed there for a little more than two months and on September 7th, or probably the 8th...

Translator: That was the year '73 right?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes. They sent us into the field in '73, to fight. So they dropped us off in the field and we fought day and night. It was raining.

Translator: Would you let me translate that first? So that once we have captured this point then we can continue.

Boua Fue Yang: Yes. Ok.

Translator: So in Long Cheng, I was transferred to GM 21 which was Battalion 21, but I decided not to go at the time. A commander by the name of Zong Zoua was also recruiting...

Let me ask you, at that time Zong Zoua did not join with General Vang?

Boua Fue Yang: He did.

Translator: So he did join, but he was a subordinate to the General?

Boua Fue Yang: At that time, he was a commander. He recruited soldiers to help the General.

Translator: Ok. Just to clarify, Zong Zoua was also a commander in the military under General Vang Pao. He was recruiting at the time, a Battalion 23. So I joined their Battalion in the region of Mouang Ca right about August to October of '72. And in January of '73 we were sent to Thailand to be trained. And on June 26th of '73 we were sent back to Long Cheng and we stayed there for two months, then on September 7th of '73 we were sent out to the field in the front to fight.

Ellen Brooks: Can you tell us about your training in Thailand?

Boua Fue Yang: Ok. Our training was all combat training. The training included crawling on the ground. They shot rifle above our heads, and we crawled under the wires. They put up wires about the height of this table [pointing to a coffee table nearby]. We crawled under, and they shot rifles overhead. As we crawled, they'd set off explosives all around to train us to protect ourselves, so we'd know what to do when there's explosions. Also, how to lay down when being shot at so we wouldn't get hit.

Translator: Mostly the training were combat type of training. We were trained to crawl very close to the ground, there would be firing squats probably as high as this table that we crawled underneath and there would be rifles firing above our heads and also grenades were exploding right around us to train us, to teach us how to, what to do in situations of combat.

Boua Fue Yang: Also, we were trained to be in the jungle, to stand guard, to stand guard around our base. We were trained in those things also.

Translator: And also we're trained to go into the jungle. We set up a base and guard our base, and how do we have guard duties and protect our base.

Boua Fue Yang: We learned how to shoot, disassemble a rifle, clean a rifle, all of those things.

Translator: We also learned how to shoot, learned to assemble and disassembled and clean our rifles.

Ellen Brooks: Why did you decide to go with the unit 23 instead of the 21?

Boua Fue Yang: *Ah, at that time when the GM 21 was in the front line so I was scary you know, kind of nervous, I don't want to go and at that time⁸...*
That's why I decided that "Oh because they were recruiting a new battalion, so I will go join that new unit". Also, Zong Zoua was a successful, prophet⁹, right?
Have you ever heard of Hmong people saying about prophets? So he new the proper time, the appropriate time that "You should go from here to here to be safe", right? He was an individual that knew those things so we thought that he was a, he knew those things so if we became his recruits and join the new unit we'd be safe when in combat, right? That was why we were able to recruit many soldiers, we got many soldiers.

Translator: Besides the fact that I was nervous to join Battalion 21 because I was the infantry to go to the front, Zong Zoua was also known for his ability to plan and also avoid catastrophe. He was known for knowing which route [to take] to be safe for his troops. And I decided to join and he recruited many of us.

Boua Fue Yang: So after the training, they sent us in September, as I said earlier, the 8th of September, they sent us to the front continuously from that time forward. It was raining a lot, it wouldn't stop. So they drop us off, as soon as we were out artillery shells were exploding everywhere, we couldn't even stick our heads out. So we ran trying to find a small hill of some sort to fortify ourselves. So when we got from one place to another, we dig holes

⁸ This sentence was spoken by Boua Fue in English;

⁹ The Hmong word Boua Fue used here was "saub";

as fortification for us to hide so when the Vietnamese fired their artillery we would be hidden, right? So we wouldn't get hit, but (the holes) were filled with water. We soaked in rain, day and night, and as we moved from place to place we were engaged in combat constantly. Everybody had sore feet. Because we soaked in rain so much, the skin of our feet started to peel off and it was painful. The leaders decided that we should retreat, so that was why we took everybody and retreated. At that time, they sent choppers to pick up the sick, those who got injured from fighting, as well as those who had sore feet, and those who were killed and had been retrieved. Those who had sore feet were so numerous, and also those [who] were injured, everybody tried to get on the choppers. They got some of the injured out, but nobody picked up the dead. At that time, [we] just left them there.

Translator: Let me translate that first ok?

Boua Fue Yang: At that time, I also had a sore feet and one of my uncle. Both of us had sore feet so we couldn't catch up with the rest, right? The choppers couldn't pick up all of us. The choppers left and there were no more choppers on that last day. At that time, I couldn't remember the date but I remember that we had been gone for twelve days from place to place engaging in combat with the Vietnamese constantly.

Translator: Would you let me translate that first? I fear that if we talk too much then I might forget to translate.

Boua Fue Yang: Ok. Yeah.

Translator: And so at the front it was raining every day. We were there for about twelve days as soon as we got out, we were shot at right away. We had to go hide on hills and dug our holes to hide our, fortified ourselves. And during those times the holes that we dug were filled with water so we hid in those holes. And eventually we developed conditions on our feet that was causing a lot of pain and sores and had blisters and were infected and there was some dead from, from the fighting and some were injured and there's those of us who had problems and sores on our feet. When they sent choppers to pick us up, we, everybody was trying to get on the choppers to get back at the base, at the military base. Me and my, one of my uncle cannot catch up with the rest of the group. Some of the dead were left in the field because we could not retrieve them and no one could carry them onto choppers.

Boua Fue Yang: At that time, the majority and those who were strong, all got out. We had sores on our feet so we slowly crept after them, following their tracks. We followed the tracks that they left as they went. We'd hide during the day, and we'd get out at night to walk. When we got to a field, we met one of

the Hmong soldiers who was injured on his feet. So we took him and the three of us slowly walked into this field. It was an open field. We walked over many dead bodies. When we looked we didn't know anybody, but we found an M16 and Rocket Propel Grenade 40. We were hungry so when we were at that field we found some fried rice that the aircrafts had dropped earlier, right? (The bags of rice) were scattered all over, so we sat down and started eating. There was a small airplane, one of ours, one of those that came to patrol. When he sees our people he then signals to another airplane to come and pick them up. That airplane hovered very close to us so we thought "Is he going to shoot at us? What should we do?" So I waved a white handkerchief to tell him that we're on their side. But for whatever reason that airplane fired a shot close to us, so I thought "How come he shot at us, he's one of ours?" So I stood up again to wave furiously and that airplane circled once and then he was gone. Not long after, there was a chopper that came and landed. Said he had come to pick us up. The (first) airplane was only signaling so the chopper would know to come pick us up. After the chopper landed, the person that came out was Colonel Vang Ger. He came and loaded us up quickly into the chopper and took us to Tha Her.

Translator: Let me translate that first.

Boua Fue Yang: Yes.

Translator: That's it first, because if you say too much then I might leave something out.

Boua Fue Yang: Yes, that's right.

Translator: The majority of the troop at the time had gone ahead of us, so me and this uncle of mine, we had conditions on our foot and we couldn't catch up with them. But we did our best to follow their tracks, during the day we would stay in hiding and at night we would come out to walk and to do what, to try to catch up with them. We got to a field, an open field and we found a fellow soldier who got injured on the foot. He had been shot on the foot so we took him with us and we crossed over this field and we skipped over some dead people in the field. We picked up an M16, a rifle and RPG 40. We were very hungry and fortunately [we] found some food, packaged food, some fried rice apparently that, we were eating, we could eat. At that time we saw a plane, a marker came very close to us overhead. And so I took a white flag and signaled to that plane that we are here, but somehow he shot at us, right next to us. I couldn't understand why, but later as he disappeared, the plane disappeared, a chopper came within five minutes and it was Colonel Vang Ger who landed the chopper and put us on the chopper and took us to the base.

Ellen Brooks: So did you have anything with you, did you have weapons or a map or a radio or anything?

Boua Fue Yang: *No radio, but I carried M16 with me and when we get to...feel that the chopper going to pick up, we got there and¹⁰ RPG 40, right? I just know that it was RPG 40 and an M16, that we found and took with us. Then we met the soldier who got injured on his foot. The three of us slowly walked until Vang Ger came to pick us up.*

Translator: The M16, was it the one that you found or was it your rifle that you carried with you?

Boua Fue Yang: There's one that I carried also.

Translator: Yours is also an M16?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes. There's the one that I carried and we found another, also an RPG that we took with us.

Translator: Okay. I myself had an M16, myself too and we picked up an M16 on the way and we also picked up a RPG 40 and also we found the soldier so the three of us with the weapons, the rifles that we have got into the chopper.

Boua Fue Yang: So they took us to the mountain called Tha Her. We stayed there for five hours, when it got dark, they took us to Long Cheng. At Long Cheng at that time they took us...we, the soldiers all *sa lai*¹¹ and so...

Translator: What is *sa lai*?

Boua Fue Yang: It's just that, even if they were called back to duty, they wouldn't go, most were injured.

Translator: Oh, so they wouldn't go back?

Boua Fue Yang: So nobody went back. At the same time, Colonel Vang Ger said if any of the soldiers who would like to can be trained, they'd be sent to be trained to teach civilians to garden. Teach them to garden and build fisheries. So we went to that training in '73 ending in the middle of '74. Then they said that the country was again peaceful, and that they were going to draft documents to allow everybody to stay, right? So at that time we received the documents to allow us to stay, and we disarmed, we sent back our weapons, right? However, when the Vietnamese came, they came fully armed, and they came into our villages. They began to call on the commanders with higher ranks first. They sent them to learn at...they said

¹⁰ Here, Boua Fue spoke English;

¹¹ Unsure of what Boua Fue meant when saying "*sa lai*";

that they sent them to learn in the field. The commanders, colonels, they were sent to Luang Prabang, together with Tou Bee Ly Fong and with other high officials like the King. They were all sent to Luang Prabang.

Translator: Let me translate that first.

Boua Fue Yang: Yes.

Translator: Let me translate that because it's a lot already. I did have weapons, I had my M16 and picked up the, another M16 and the chopper took us to a place called Tha Her. Was it Tha Her or Tha Hau?

Boua Fue Yang: Tha Her, they called it Tha Her, it was what the Hmong called it. Don't know what it was called in Lao?

Translator: Tha Her, we stayed there for five hours and then we were taken to Long Cheng. When we gathered at Long Cheng, none of the soldiers wanted to go back to the front. At the time Colonel Vang Ger was recruiting soldiers like us to participate in an effort to teach the refugees and some of the residents in the area to garden, to raise fish and to plant and grow food and so that was '73 until mid '74. And we were informed at that time too that the war has ended and we were discharged, we were disarmed. The enemy came to our villages fully armed and at first when they came, they called out to higher ranks, former veterans of the war and took them to be reeducated in different parts of the country. And they called mostly the colonels and commanders and sent them to Luang Prabang which already housed some of the well known leaders and commanders of that time which [included] Tou Bee Ly Fong to a few of the members of the Royal Family.

Ellen Brooks: And the refugees that you worked with, who were they?

Translator: When you taught the people to garden and build fisheries, you said that they were refugees, who were they?

Boua Fue Yang: They were our people living at...

Translator: Were these Hmong?

Boua Fue Yang: ...fellow villagers who lived in the surrounding small villages.

Translator: Did they migrate there or were they living there already when you went to teach them?

Boua Fue Yang: They were living there already, we just went and...

Translator: Teach them?

Boua Fue Yang: ...Teach them to build fisheries, how to feed the fish so they would grow. Also how to till a plot of garden, how to organize into patches, how to lay down the soil, how to water the garden to get the best yield.

Translator: There [were] already the existing residents (who) were living in the area that we went and taught them how to dig a fish pond, how to raise fish, how to plant, how to fertilize the soil and such.

Ellen Brooks: And what, why were they refugees? Where do they come from?

Boua Fue Yang: *In the local, ah, Long Cheng base, small village, yeah the area*¹².

Ellen Brooks: So then what happened to you when they came? When the new government came to take people to re-educate them? What happened to you?

Boua Fue Yang: She said something about what happened afterward?

Translator: She's asking about the time when the Vietnamese came...

Boua Fue Yang: Oh, after the Vietnamese came.

Translator: ...when they told you to disarm, and they returned to take away some of the commanders and took them to be re-educated.

Boua Fue Yang: *They keep calling the higher rank to train but they just blame to train but they to kill*¹³.

Translator: What about yourself? What happened to you? Did they take you also or what happened?

Boua Fue Yang: Ok. I will talk about that. They get to the lower and lower ranks. My brother-in-law, he was a commander. He was sent to be re-educated at Xieng, which they called Xieng Khouang, right? Near the region of the Plain of Jars. At that time we decided that if there was nothing then we would stay, but one morning, right? One morning, my cousin, she went shopping at the morning market, right? When she got to the market, there were five Vietnamese soldiers who stood very close to her, right? The five soldiers were saying "Oh, we heard that there is man named Fue Yang who lives south of the airport, he has two rifles. What should we do? We probably should go investigate." So my cousin turned around and came

¹² Boua Fue spoke this sentence in English;

¹³ Boua Fue spoke this sentence in English;

back to tell me. That's why I took my wife and three year-old child to stay at the rice field, to clear out some weeds. We stayed there for...until we finished clearing the weeds. Prior to this I had gone to take care of the rice field, but not overnight. However, once we heard that, we went to stay there for two nights. Then I decided to go to Pha Kay village. But we have only gotten half way when we ran into a *Poo-Ter*¹⁴ man, right? He had come to check on his fish traps, so we said to him...

Translator: Was it only you or your family as well?

Boua Fue Yang: We had more than three families that came together.

Translator: Would you let me translate that first?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes. We had more than three families, so we said to him that we had migrated from Long Cheng, that we don't want to stay, and that he shouldn't tell the authority, and that we were going to Pha Kay. So he said "Ok. We're like brothers so I won't tell." So we were relieved. We went up the bank of the river, where he had come to check on his fish traps, to the other side and stopped to rest in a hut on a rice. So we dropped the loads we were carrying and tried to cook breakfast. It must have been about 9:00 or 10:00 am. There were some *Poo-Ter* harvesting their rice on the other side where we had passed through and came up from the river bank. The *Poo-Ter* man went over the bank, back to where he came from. We had come to rest at a Hmong rice field. There were *Poo-Ter* harvesting rice on the other side, the side where we had passed through. It was very warm, so I took off my shirt and went outside to get some air. As I looked, I saw two Vietnamese soldiers stepped out of a hut and there was an old man who also came out of the hut. The old man seemed to be saying something and pointing in our direction, right?

Translator: Would you let me translate that first? I'm afraid that if you say too much then I might not be able to translate everything that you said.

Boua Fue Yang: Yes.

Translator: My brother-in-law was commander and was taken to Xieng Khouang which is near the Plain of Jars. We would've stayed where we were, but one of my relatives, one of my cousins, she sell some of her items at the market nearby. And one morning she went to her store to set up for the day, and when she was there, they were five soldiers who stood nearby her and she overheard a conversation that they were having and mentioned my name which was at the time, Hue Yang. The soldiers were saying there's someone in that village name Hue Yang, we heard that he has two rifles we should go and investigate. So right away my cousin came back home

¹⁴ An ethnic minority in Laos;

and told me right away and so that got me. I went into hiding in a farm which was a little bit distance away. For two nights and after two nights I, me and other three families decided to get out of this area to an area called Pha Kay, but half way there we met a, a gentleman with the ethnicity of *Poo-Ter* and we told him that we are refugees of the war and that he should not report us to the authority and trusted him because he said that he wouldn't. He said "Okay I won't, I won't tell". We trusted him so we climbed that hill to the other side, he was there to fish at a river. We trusted him so we went to the other bank of the river and started a fire to cook breakfast because we have been traveling all night long. And as we're cooking breakfast, I got very hot so I went and took off my shirt and was just getting some fresh air. When I looked at the other side of the river I saw there was an older gentleman with couple of soldiers and he was talking with the soldiers and was pointing in our direction.

Boua Fue Yang: So after they were finished saying something to each other, the two soldiers ran toward us, perhaps trying to capture us. So I said to the people that was with me "The Vietnamese are after us, leave all of your belongings only take what's important." So each and every one tried to grab their children, then everybody left our lunches and our belongings. Each and every one grabbed what's most important to them. I grabbed the carrier basket, in Hmong we call it "*lub kawm*"¹⁵ or a back basket, or something like that. So I grabbed the basket and grabbed the kettle and threw it in there also, and other important things like silver and jewelry. Then I grabbed my child, and my wife carried the other child that was only one month old and we ran to the edge of the rice field. We followed a little creek, with flowing water. The other families didn't have small children so they could run faster. Both my wife and I each had a small child with us so we couldn't catch up with them. So we hid in a bamboo tree, one that was very thick. We went and laid down (in the bamboo tree). When the Vietnamese got to where we were they called out to the others "Where have they gone? Have you seen where they went?" Some had followed the creek. It appeared that they had seen us or something, they fired their rifles into the bamboo tree causing the bamboos to explode above our heads. Then we heard the sound of an RPG exploding, so we thought "Are they firing at us?" but we didn't get hurt. We continued to stay low. Then they yelled to each other and left for about fifteen minutes or so. Then we heard gun shots and explosions. It seemed like they had met them (the other families) and were shooting at them.

Translator: Let me talk about that first?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes.

¹⁵ A Hmong word which means "the basket";

Translator:

So afterward, when I saw that older gentle man pointing toward us, the two soldiers ran toward us. They were on the other side of the river and ran toward us and I noticed that they were after us, so I yelled to my group and my family to gather our belongings, the most important things only such as money or children or food, immediate food that we could grab. And I grabbed a basket and put a kettle in there, grabbed the necessary things plus a few jewelry, I picked up one of my child, we have two children at this time and my wife carried our youngest one and we ran, all of us ran to the edge of the forest. The edge of the rice field, we tried to enter to the forest and cross a small stream. Because my wife and I have two small children we could not run as fast as the rest of the group who went up stream. So we decided to hide at the base of a bamboo tree, a very big bamboo tree and as we were hiding there, we saw these soldiers approaching the area that we were hiding and they were talking, asking where everybody had gone and see if they seem to know that everybody, the rest of my group had gone up stream so they were running after them and shooting and bullets hit the bamboo tree that we were hiding underneath that bamboo tree and we thought that they were shooting at us. There were also an RPG that was shot right very close to us and they ran upstream but fortunately they did not see us. Only fifteen minutes after they left us at the bamboo tree we heard gun shots in the distance and seems like they have caught up with my group and were shooting at them.

Boua Fue Yang:

Then after that we hid there for the entire day. After the shooting, probably about one hour later, (they) brought back a mother and child. (We) heard them dragging pots and pans on the way back. We didn't know how many but later we found out that they brought back a mother and a child. We didn't know anymore than that. So we hid until dark before we came out. We came out and went into a Hmong village, which was called Hua Hong, yeah Hua Hong. We got to the village around seven O'clock in the evening and didn't know where we could find a place to rest. So we pleaded with a man, with the last name Moua. He said to us "Were you the ones the Vietnamese was chasing earlier?" We said that "We were", that we hid ourselves and didn't get back until now. He said "Oh, I'm afraid there may be trouble for us." Then I told him "We're all Hmong, if you don't tell then they wouldn't know, it's already dark. Please let us rest the night. Tomorrow we will go to Pha Kay." So he said "That's no problem, it's already dark so there's probably nothing. You may rest." So we got to rest with that Hmong family. At four the next morning, we went to Pha Kay. We got to Pha Kay probably at noon, or around there. So we went to stay with a relative, an uncle.

Q After lunch he said "Son and daughter-in-law, tomorrow they will come and look through our documents, and because you're new here they may give you trouble. Since you already prepared to leave, is there any way that you could leave and be gone?"

(We said to him) “Oh, if that is true then we must leave. Because we had planned to leave, we’d leave until the very end.”

Then we picked up the basket to carry on the back and carry the child in the front. My wife carried the little baby. Then we left Phu Kay village and went to a village they called Phu San *Noi*¹⁶, no, Phu San *Yai*¹⁷. That village, they called it Phu San *Yai*, in Laotian, they called it Phu San *Yai*. So when we got to Phu San *Yai*, we spent a night there. Then in the morning we went to a village called Na Kao. In Na Kao we had some relatives with the last name Vue, so we went and stayed with them. We stayed there for a week, and unfortunately, [I] contracted an illness. I got sick for five days, but I could still get up. So we decided to leave Na Kao after a week and went to another village called Na Xu. The Laotians called it Ban Xon.

Translator: Would you let me translate that first?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes. Na Xu, two villages together, one was called Na Xu and another called Ban Xon.

Translator: Let me translate that first before you continue to talk.

Boua Fue Yang: Yes. Ok.

Translator: We hid there at the bamboo tree all day until night time, when we were hiding there after an hour after the shooting we’d heard in the distance, we heard they brought back a few people we didn’t know who. But we heard pots and pans clanging as they brought back these people. They caught up with them, later we found out that they brought back a son and a mother. So we hid there until night time and we got out. We came to a place called...you said it’s called Hua Hong right?

Boua Fue Yang: The village called Hua Hong.

Translator: Hua Hong?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes, it’s called Hua Hong.

Translator: Hua Hong correct?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes, Hua Hong.

Translator: We decided to go to a village called Hua Hong, that was at night already. We asked one of the Moua clan members if we could spend the night with them, and he asked us if we were the people, the refugees that the soldiers

¹⁶ A Laotian word that means “small” or “little”;

¹⁷ A Laotian word that means “big” or “Large”;

were chasing and we said we were. And he wasn't quite comfortable with us staying with him, but we pleaded with him and he allowed us to spend the night with his family. (At) four AM in the morning we went to Pha Kay. We journeyed to Pha Kay, we, in Pha Kay we found a relative, uncle of ours the next day and the, from what the uncle said, he said they were reviewing refugees quite heavily in the area to see if we have [the] legal paperwork to migrate that he suggested that we move on if we didn't have the legal paperwork to do that. And so we left Pha Kay to go to Phu San, a place called Phu San. There's a little Phu San and there's a big Phu San. We went to the big Phu San. From Phu San, we stayed in Phu San for one night then we went to...you said it was Na Kao right?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes, a village called Na Kao.

Translator: Na Kao, we stayed there for one week, unfortunately I felt ill for five days and then we left Na Kao to go to Na Xu and Ban Xon.

Boua Fue Yang: Once we arrived at Ban Xon, Na Xu there...

Translator: Uncle, would you wait just a minute, let me ask to see if Ellen thinks you should finish your story first and then she'll ask you questions or if she'd like to ask questions and have you answer her questions. So that way we'd know what are the important points for you to cover. If you don't mind let us do that, ok?

Boua Fue Yang: Ok, no problem.

Translator: I just clarified that to see maybe we should follow a structured interview so we can hit the highlights of his story.

Ellen Brooks: Yeah, I think we're doing okay. Yeah, I just have a couple of questions, but I was just wondering how old your children were at this point.

Boua Fue Yang: *At the point that we escaped?*¹⁸

Ellen Brooks: Ahah.

Boua Fue Yang: Ah, some had escaped.

Translator: Your two children at the time, how old were they? Your two children.

Boua Fue Yang: My two children?

Translator: Yes.

¹⁸ Here, Boua Fue responded in English;

Boua Fue Yang: One was three years old and the other was one month old.

Translator: One was three and the other was one month old.

Boua Fue Yang: *One month and my wife carried the little baby one and I carried the older one. So Yeah. When we were lay flat on the ground by the bamboo tree, you know, they couldn't see us so we stayed there one day until dark.*¹⁹ So after we left Na Kao and went to Na Xu, or Ban Xon, we rested for only one day, when the other wives and my wife, they went shopping for food at the market, right? They went to the market to buy food. There was an aunt who came from Pha Kay, she didn't see my wife but she saw the other women that my wife was with. She said "Oh, did Boua Fue and his wife get here? They had been looking for them in Pha Kay. The Vietnamese were looking for them. If they got here, please let them know. If they intended to leave the country and have them make it out. They were after them. They claimed that he had some rifles and that he was a former soldier." So that aunt told them these things, and one of the wives came and told us. So we thought that "Oh, if this is true, then we couldn't stay, we must leave." Then after breakfast, I carried our older child and my wife carried the younger one, and we went by foot, circled around in the forest and cut around to the Airport in Na Xu, right? We took that whole day circling around to get to that side, at which point we hired a taxi to take us all the way to Lak 22. You see, the road to Vang Vieng had certain sections that they called Lak 22. So then, we spent a night at Lak 22. The people there knew the gate at Lak 18 well, right? The Vietnamese created a checkpoint at Lak 18 where they wouldn't let anybody pass except the Laotians. They wouldn't let any of the Hmong to pass, but there was one of the woman with the last name Thao, she went to Vang Vieng regularly to buy and sell rice, right? So we pleaded with her "Oh, if it is that difficult (to pass the checkpoint), would you say that we're your relatives? That we had gone to work on our rice field in Nam Phao, so that we could pass?" (So she) said "Oh, that's no problem. Don't worry, I will say that you're my family, that you're going to harvest your rice in Nam Phao." So she helped us like that until we got the the gate, where they took everybody out of the car. They wouldn't let anybody pass, they were making it difficult, that "These are all Hmong, must not let them pass." So the woman with the last name Thao went and said to the Vietnamese who guarded the gate that "Oh, these are my relatives. They just going to harvest their rice in Nam Phao." "Is that true?" "Yes, that is true. These are my relatives" "Ok, then they can go"

¹⁹ Here, Boua Fue spoke English;

So we passed and went our way to the village Nam Phao. When we got there, we hired the Laotians to draft some documents for us, [to say] that we live in Vientiane, that we were just visiting our relatives here. So we hired the Laotians to draft these documents for us, each costing 60,000 Kip. At the time, only those who were wealthy could pay to get those documents. Those who were not wealthy couldn't afford to pay for those. So we hired the Laotians to draft documents and so we got to Nam Phao and we stayed there for a week, where we hired the Laotians to draft the documents for us so we could ride taxi down to Vientiane.

Translator: Would you let me translate that first? That's a lot, so let me translate first before I forget.

Boua Fue Yang: Yes.

Translator: In Na Xu we stayed there for one night and in the morning my wife and some women went to the market to buy food and at the market one of our relatives back home met one of the ladies that was with wife, they didn't see my wife, but they saw one of our relatives and they said that they asked about us.

They said "Have you seen Hue and his wife? Because the authorities were looking for them, they accused them that Hue has rifles and he was hiding his rifles and also he was a former soldier with their enemies."

And this lady who told these things to my wife, one of the ladies that was with my wife, to tell us to go to keep running and keep escaping to make it, if we don't make it then they might catch us and take us back and put us in prison. So after breakfast, we picked up our things, picked up our children and we started walking through the jungle around the city, around the airport and took a taxi to a place called Lak 22 or 22 Kilometer and we spent one night there. But we learned that at 18 Kilometer or Lak 18 there's a checkpoint that was heavily guarded. Fortunately, we know someone who was a merchant at the time, she was a rice merchant and we pleaded with her to, this merchant who goes regularly to Vang Vieng, a place called Vang Vieng to trade and to sell rice. We pleaded with her to allow us to go with her to somehow related to her so we can pass the checkpoint.

And she said "Ok, don't worry, we'll say that you're going to Nam Phao to harvest your crops."

And so she helped us to go to checkpoint, but they took all of us out of the car and they [were] giving us a hard time, but this lady who admitted, who agreed to help us, she did tell the authorities that we were just going to harvest our crops at Nam Phao that they should just let us go. And so we went ahead and got to Nam Phao. At Nam Phao we paid some, we bribed, we paid a fee, 60,000 kip per (person) to get authorization to continue our journey to say that we actually live in Vientiane and we were just visiting relatives in the area.

Ellen Brooks: Did you have the guns that people kept thinking you had?

Translator: Did you have the guns that they accused that you had?

Boua Fue Yang: At that time I had left all of them in Long Cheng.

Translator: At the time I have thrown them away in Long Cheng.

Boua Fue Yang: [I] threw away all the rifles in the swamp, and didn't carry them with me anymore.

Translator: We hid the rifles in the ground, we didn't carry with us anymore.

Boua Fue Yang: So we passed Nam Phao and on to Vientiane. When we got to the checkpoint at Phon Hong, which was the entry point to Vientiane, they took all of us out and wouldn't let us pass. They wouldn't let us pass so we gave them our documents but they still wouldn't let us pass even if we have documents, so it was difficult. They took us out and left us there for two hours. Then the driver went to say to them "These people have authentic documents, why wouldn't you let them pass? They have the documents, and this is it, why wouldn't you let them pass? They just visited their relatives and are on their way home." And so they considered it for a while and then said "If that is true, we will let you pass, but when you go to Vientiane, if we couldn't find you there, when we meet you again, we'll kill you." So we agreed and said "Sure, we agreed to let you kill us if you could find us." So we lied in this manner and was able to pass. We passed to Vientiane and we went to stay at one of our relatives' house, they had left the country. That house that we stayed in belonged to Her Chai. We stayed there for five days. At that time, those who could get down there [to Vientiane] could still use the currency to pay to get across to Thailand. So we made contact, at that time there was a Hmong individual named Chee²⁰ Lor in Vientiane. He knew the Hmong people well and he has contacts, he had a Laotian friend. They helped us get across the Mekong River into Thailand. We rode in some Lao canoes. [They] used canoes to get us across to Thailand, and once we were in Thailand we stayed in...

Translator: Would you stop for a moment? You said that the individual who helped you get across to Thailand, he's name was Chee Lor?

Boua Fue Yang: He was a Hmong brother named Chee Lor.

²⁰ The Hmong name mentioned here was "Txhim Lauj";

Translator: Okay, let me translate that first.
So in Nam Phao, we get the authorization to travel to Vientiane, we paid for them. On the way to Vientiane we were at a check point in a village called Phon Hong, and they took all of us out of the vehicle and asked us to present our authorization. Even after we did that they still were giving us a hard time and we were stuck at that check point and put on hold for two hours.
Eventually the driver approached the authority and asked them why aren't they letting us through we have the proper authorization already and with this point they could not hold us any longer. They made us promise that we are truly going back to Vientiane because we live there. If they come down there and they couldn't find us, they, if they ever find us escaping or running over [to] Thailand, we'll be shot. And we said "sure we can, we agreed to that."
So when we come to Vientiane, we stayed at someone's house who have left the country and it was Her Chai's house. We stayed for five days and we finally got the contacts to help us cross over to Thailand by a Hmong man named Chee Lor. They used canoes to help us cross over to Thailand.

Boua Fue Yang: So we crossed over to Thailand and stayed in Nong Khai refugee camp. We stayed in Nong Khai for two years and in '78 we obtained authorization to come to this country. It was May 22nd when we left, May 22nd of '78, we left Nong Khai to come to America. At that time it was May, when we left Nong Khai, right? We left in May, not sure what the date was, but it seemed like the 7th or the 8th when we got Bangkok Thailand. More than a week later we got to Chicago. It was May 23rd.

Translator: So in Thailand, we stayed in a refugee camp called Nong Khai for two years until May 8 or May 7 of 1978, we were taken to Bangkok, and stayed there for about a week. May 23rd, 1978 we landed in Chicago.

Ellen Brooks: So what was it like in the refugee camp?

Boua Fue Yang: In the refugee camp...

Translator: How was your life like in the refugee camp?

Boua Fue Yang: How was life? When we were living there, the United Nations helped with some food rations, such as rice, vegetables, and meat to help everybody, that was how we could survive. And they built houses, wells so [we] would have water to drink.

Translator: In the refugee camp, the United Nations provided food, vegetables, meat for us to live on. And it was tolerable, they came and built houses for us, they came and dig wells for water.

Boua Fue Yang: And they also had places for check-ups, like clinics and such, to prescribe medication for everybody. Whatever the illness may be, everybody had a place to get medication.

Translator: They also set up hospital and clinics, [if] people get sick or have an illness they can go and obtain medication.

Ellen Brooks: So just before we get to the United States, I just wanted to back up and ask you about your combat experience that one battle that you described for us when you and your uncle got left behind. Is that the only time you saw a combat?

Translator: Before we talk about America, could we go back to talk about the time when you were in combat? You and your uncle had conditions on your feet, was that the only time that you saw combat or was there other times as well?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes, that was the only time. That was the only [time] that I faced extreme hardship.

Translator: That was the only time, that was the hardest for me.

Ellen Brooks: Did you have a sense of why you were fighting?

Translator: At that time, did you understand the purpose why you were fighting?

Boua Fue Yang: At that time it was the Americans who came to talk to General Vang Pao about helping the Americans in that region, to not let the Vietnamese pass route number 2 into South Vietnam, to not let the North Vietnamese pass on to South Vietnam. For us, in that part to block the Vietnamese, to not let them get to route number 2 into South Vietnam, so that the fighting in South Vietnam wouldn't be so heavy, right?

Translator: At the time the U.S. approached General Vang Pao and asked him to have the Hmong block route number 2 and don't allow the North Vietnamese to cross over to South Vietnam to aggravate the war effort in South Vietnam.

Boua Fue Yang: Yeah, so at that time the Americans came to plead with us and made a promise that "If your country is intolerable we'd help you escape and wouldn't let you suffer."
That was why we agreed to help the Americans.

Translator: At the time, the Americans seemed to have promise that even "If your country is lost, we would not let you fall into difficult times or hardships" and that's why we were involved in the war.

Boua Fue Yang: Yeah, so when the cease fire came, the Americans say their *program*²¹ had ended. Their contract ended so they stopped helping us. That was the time when the Vietnamese took leisure to persecute our people in whatever way imaginable. In '71, the high ranking officials from both sides had come together to discuss, right? They had come together to discuss and signed an agreement, to stop the fighting, to live together in peace, and not have war anymore, but the Vietnamese broke the agreement afterward. So the American's *contract* had ended and they weren't helping anymore, that was why [we] no longer had the power. They left the fighting to us and we had given up all our weapons. The agreement was that there would be no more fighting, but when the Vietnamese came they were fully armed. When they came, they searched all the important people, the officials, the royalties. They took them to be re-educated but killed them all.

Translator: Let me translate that first.
During the cease fire, there was an agreement that both sides would cease fire and try to live in peace. And at the same time, the Americans said that their program was done, the finance that they have contributed to the war effort had stopped. And that made it very easy for the enemy to persecute our people. They disarmed all of us, told us to get rid of, give them our weapons and disarmed ourselves. But the enemy came with all of their arms and took away our leaders claiming to take them for re-education.

Boua Fue Yang: Now this time, John Tucker, is this one, and Colonel Idaho came to tell the General that "We won't let you face hardship. Wherever we are, we will take you with us. You don't have to worry."

Translator: What did you say the name of the Colonel was?

Boua Fue Yang: Colonel Idaho, [I] don't know what his first name was, and Colonel Billiard.

Translator: At the time, John Tucker, Colonel Idaho or Colonel Billiard have told the Hmong people that "we won't let your people suffered."

Ellen Brooks: I think it's Bill Milliard.

Translator: Bill Milliard? Bill, that's right.

Ellen Brooks: I think that's okay, yeah we can look it up later, unless you can give me.

Boua Fue Yang: So maybe my story ends in America. When I arrived, they let me attend classes for four months so I knew a little English. I knew a little English

²¹ Actual English used by Boua Fue Yang;

and they said “Oh, you know a little English now, so we'll send you to vocational job training” right?

In Chicago, I attended the training for nine months, it was training to repair type writers. It was about '79 or '80 they still used type writers. So [in] November of '79 [I] finished vocational training and I was sent to work in downtown Chicago, repairing type writers for company offices.

Translator:

In the U.S., my story would end in the U.S. When I came here I went to school [for] about four months. After that seemed like they thought that I know English enough to go to vocational training, so I did that in Chicago for about 9 months, learning to repair type writers. And in November of '79, I completed the training and I started working in downtown Chicago repairing type writers.

Boua Fue Yang:

[I] worked until September of '80, and my two brothers moved to Sheboygan. They said that this is a small town, and they still give assistance for people to attend school. I wanted to continue attending classes so I moved here in September of '80, and I have lived here ever since. When we arrived, we attended classes at LTC for six months, and they said “Oh, there is no one that could speak English. You know a little bit of English, so please help those that have doctors appointments, those that need help with wellness.”

So I worked, I attended school and also worked part-time translating for two years. At that time Audrey was the teacher at LTC. She said “Those of you who know English should go and attend Lakeshore Technical [College]. What do you want to study? No matter what [we'd] send to learn, but you'd just have to say what you'd like to learn. What do you want to study?”

So at that time, I thought that I like working with electronics. I thought they still like the old TVs, the old radios, they still repair them right? So I went into the program, only half way through, there were two Hmong students which were Lue Vue and Tou Yang. They finished the electronic servicing program, but they couldn't find employment. And I was in the same program as them. I was only half way through so I thought “Oh, I should switch”, so I switched to machine tools. So I switched to machine tool operation training and I finished that program.

Translator:

Let me translate that first.

In 1980, September 1980 in Chicago, two of my relatives moved to Sheboygan, and they told me that Sheboygan was a small town and there was good education here. And so that's, for those reasons I moved here until now. When I came here I went to LTC which is Lakeshore Technical College and studied there for six months and because I was one of the ones that know few more English words than others, I was asked to translate for other people's doctors appointments and I did that part time as a translator and then I did school. Audrey which is our teacher at

Lakeshore asked what vocational career we wanted to pursue, what your interests is, and if she finds out that she will help us attend Lakeshore Technical College to get a career. And I thought that because I like electronics, I would go and pursue electronic repairs or service. Two other classmates have done that program, but they couldn't find a job, Lue Vue and Tou Yang, so I decided to change my mind and pursue machine tools instead.

Boua Fue Yang: After I completed machine tool, I went to work for a company called Gilson Brothers Company in Plymouth.

Translator: Was it Gilson?

Boua Fue Yang: Yes, Gilson Brothers Company. I worked there for two years, then I went to work for a company. I left that company to go work for a Twin Dine, it's called Elanco Combine Tool Corporation, near Elkhart Lake Road America. [I] worked there for five years then I went to work for a company called ASAA Technology Corporation on the North side of Sheboygan, for about three years or so. Then in '91, they laid off a lot of people and I claimed unemployment for two years. Then in '93, I was employed by Tiffer Science Company, from '93 to '98, then I applied at Kohler Company and they hired me. I have been working there since. Still working at Kohler Company at present.

Translator: After my training in machine tools I got a job at Gilson Brothers Company. For two years, I worked there and then from there I went to Elanco Tool for five years and from there I went to a company called ASAA Technology Incorporated for three years. And it was big laid off in '91 and for two years I was in unemployment and from '93 to '98 I worked for Kiffer Science Company. From '98, I got a job with Kohler Company and I work there ever since.

Boua Fue Yang: In October of '98, I was hired by Kohler Company so at present I'm still working there.

Translator: And I still work at Kohler now.

Ellen Brooks: And how is it been adjusting to living in America?

Translator: When you made the transition from the life over there to live in this country, how are they different and how difficult has it been?

Boua Fue Yang: [My] life here in this country? How different has it been from the life over there?

Translator: That you had to change when coming from over there to over here.

Boua Fue Yang: Much better, if you know the language then it's good for you. As for over there it was a country in war so you had to go from place to place, and live temporarily, right? So over there it was constant hardship.

Translator: Laos and Thailand, because it was during the war time it was not stable, it was running from place to place.

Ellen Brooks: Do you have anything else you want to add that we haven't talked about?

Boua Fue Yang: I think that should be it.

Ellen Brooks: Great. Thank you.

Translator: Thank you.

[End of interview]