

There are people throughout history that have demonstrated unselfish sacrifice by committing themselves to a cause that the world is unable or unwilling to acknowledge or understand. Among these great people who have forever changed our lives and perspective on human value and equality are Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and for the Hmong, our father, leader, mentor and dearest friend, General Vang Pao. No words can describe the immense pain and sadness emanating from the core of Hmong people worldwide as we mourn the death of our beloved leader.

The Hmong are a peaceful people that lived in the mountains of Laos and prided themselves on family, loyalty, and freedom. In 1961, the United States (US) CIA knew they would find committed allies within Laos if they could recruit the Hmong to their cause. As a result, the US met with General Vang Pao, a decorated and revered general in the Royal Lao Military who had a history of leadership and compassion for all people that lived in Southeast Asia. This historic meeting forged a loyalty and commitment that would lead to the sacrifice of thousands of Hmong men, women and children to save thousands of US soldiers.

In 1975, as the last US military personnel was airlifted out of Laos to safety, thousands of Hmong began their trail of tears. On this perilous journey, many were tortured and killed and those who were spared death for the moment were put into concentration camps where they were raped, mutilated and psychologically annihilated. In the blink of an eye, the Hmong went from being the United States' closest ally to a forsaken and forgotten people and the best kept secret of the Vietnam War.

Even with the loss of the war and having to flee their homeland with nothing but the clothes on their back, there was one shining glimmer of hope for the Hmong – their fearless leader, General Vang Pao. He was a man who had committed his life to the freedom and success of his people. His loyalty, commitment and love for the Hmong were the driving force for his tenacity and perseverance in never allowing the US to forget their promise to the Hmong. Consequently, General Vang Pao single-handedly negotiated safe haven and a new life for thousands of Hmong refugees across the world. Through this entire ordeal, he was deemed a war criminal by the Communist Lao government for his allegiance to the United States and barred from ever returning to Laos where the Hmong today remain prisoners of war and are actively being persecuted and executed. Even on his death bed, his commitment never wavered as he continued negotiating diplomatic terms in which his people in Laos could live in peace again.

General Vang Pao's legacy will live on in the lives of the Hmong around the world. He has taught us to embrace every opportunity to build a new life and to never forget the sacrifices that have been made so we can have these opportunities. He has ingrained in us the importance of family, education and retaining our culture so we will never forget who we are. Unfortunately, one of our greatest challenges is to be able to share these values and the General's legacy and wisdom with our future generations. As with previous immigrant groups, we are constantly trying to balance new opportunities while maintaining the values and beliefs that define us as Hmong. Our children are

constantly struggling with the Hmong language and the cultural fabric that unites us. No matter what our future may hold, we will find a way to persevere and maintain our identity because General Vang Pao would not expect anything less of his people.