

OPERATION Black Pack: 2003



An investigation for General Vang Pao into the Last Elements of the CIA's Secret Hmong Army inside Laos



PART 4.

INVESTIGATIONS AND INTERVIEWS: LOCATION OF "LIVE" AMERICAN POW'S IN 2003

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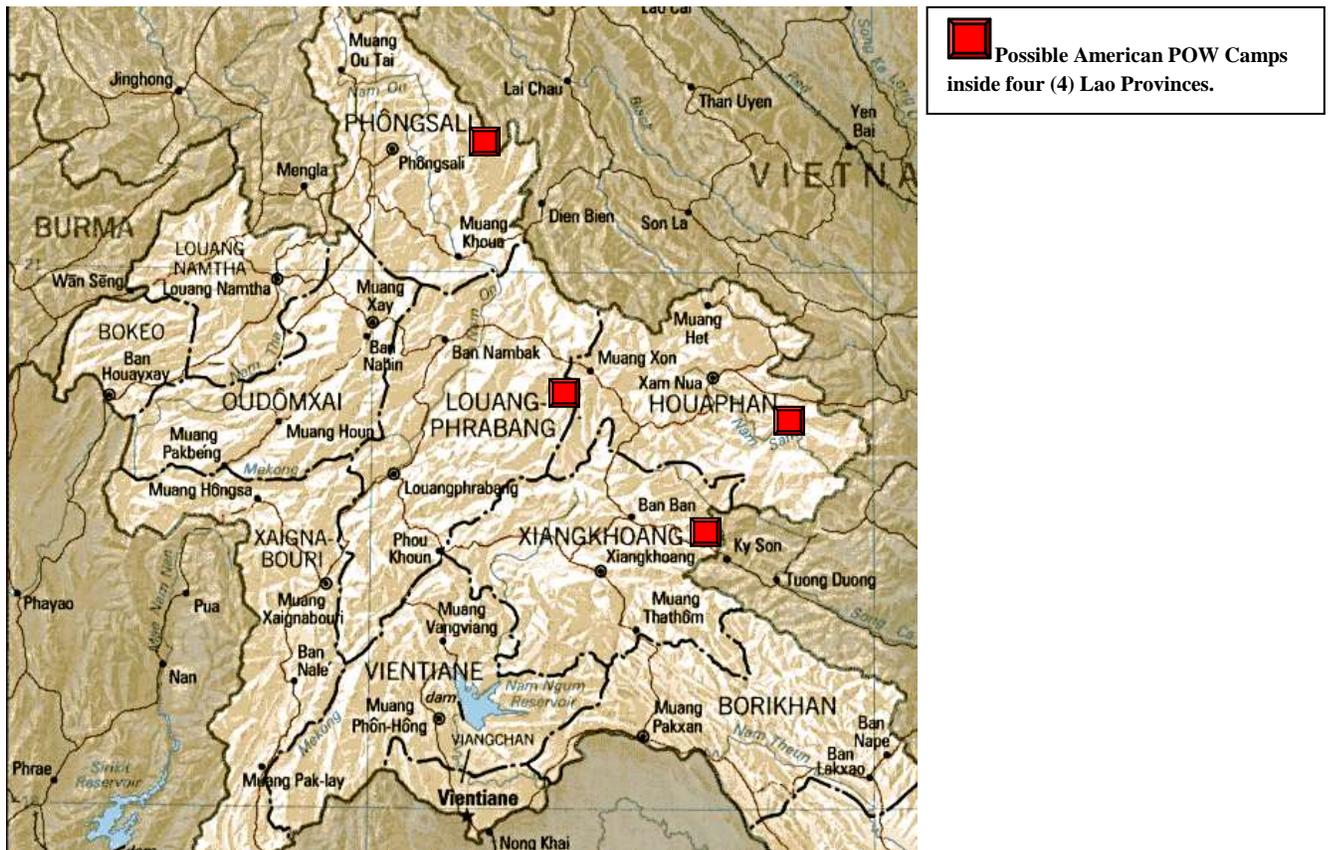
Destination Xan Nua, – Houaphan Province and Phounsavan, - Xieng Khuang Province:

In September 2003, I conducted an investigation for General Vang Pao and the Hmong living in California. It was a multileveled operation with the first part involving meeting with Colonel TC and his men in their mountain jungle stronghold. I learned many things during my brief stay with this small, but mighty force; not the least of which was the Colonel and his men were exhausted and in desperate need of help from the outside world. I also learned that they would continue to fight as hard as they could until each took his very last breath. In the end this was their life and their mission. I hated to leave them. It haunts me to this day that I could not spend more time with them.

The second part of my mission for General Vang Pao was to search for information about American Prisoners of War in specific areas of Laos. From the end of the American involvement in Southeast Asia, there have been “whispers” and “guarded comments” about the “possibilities” that some of our countrymen “might still be alive ... somewhere ...”

For a full month, I traveled across northern Laos from Bokeo Province in the far north-west, down the Mekong River to Louang Phrabang Province and into the dense jungle in that province. From there I traveled south to Bolikham Province and north again into Saisombun Special Zone that included traveling twice to Vientiane Province. Finally I went up into north-west region of Xam Nua, Houaphan Province and finally headed south into Phounsavan, Xieng Khuang Province. All these areas and provinces of Northern Laos had many Hmong inhabitants living in amongst mixed tribes such as the Kamu and Minh ethnic groups.

Within short order I came upon very credible evidence that American servicemen were in fact still being held captive in these regions. I was told by a number of local Laotians who had first-hand knowledge and direct contact with LIVE American POWs. Further, these Americans were located in a number of different prison camps spread across Northern Laos in the following remote provinces: LOUANG PRABANG, XEING KHUANG, PHONGSALI and HOUAPHAN. See map insert:



My sources included young Lao, Hmong and Minh who had personal knowledge of and contact with our countrymen at different locations including one source who provided direct information via a parent (next of kin) who worked within the Laotian military/government. This was in addition to two other locals who had direct contact with others in their areas.

Clearly understand there are different levels of direct knowledge. One can be through observation from a distance of Caucasians and Blacks in a prison compound replete with barbwire, guard towers, guards with weapons, etc. At the other end of the spectrum of direct knowledge is having the ability to talk directly with one or more of those prisoners.

One of my sources was a young Laotian who worked inside the infamous Pathet Lao's Sam Nua cave complex as a tourist guide. Another source was a Buddhist Monk who traveled to a prison camp to provide a religious ceremony for the Vietnamese camp commander. While there, the Monk saw a number of prisoners who were identified as being Americans. And the third source was an actual Lao prisoner himself who was held in the main prison identified as "Camp #9" which is located just west of Phonsavan (Plain of Jars), now called Xeing-Khuang Township. I will call this third source Khuan for the purpose this article.

At the time Camp #9 was the primary political prison and reeducation center located in this region. I interviewed Khuan for two solid days. As an ethnic Khmu, he was a political prisoner who was incarcerated in the re-education section of the camp. During these days Khuan provided me with an incredible account of what he saw over the years he was imprisoned there. He also told me of his upbringing, his family and why he was interned into Camp #9. And yes, I got to know him quite well.

Khuan spoke to me in clear and concise English that he formally learned after his release. He knew he needed this language skill because he wanted to be involved in the tourism industry in some way. While Khuan knew some English, it was not nearly enough to fulfill his dream. After operating in the whole of SEA for so many years, I was quite accustomed to hearing broken English spoken in an Asian accent.

He told me that from 1998 through to 2001, he saw several men who were held in a separate area within the confines of camp #9 and they were identified to him as being Americans captured during the Vietnam War. He said that some were pilots and aircrews while others were soldiers. He also said that there were a number of Thai's being held in the camp as well.

Khuan added that everyone knows when the Americans arrive and depart the Phonsavan area because there is a total electricity and communications blackout for at least six hours. He explained to me that the American's came into the camp after dark and always departed before first light. Further, they either came into Camp #9 by road or via helicopter.

Khuan also said that after his release, he spoke to a number of people in his township that he both knew well and trusted. He asked his friends about the Americans. Khuan explained that everyone knew about the prisoners, especially his parents' generation, but because it was a somewhat taboo subject, they were always afraid to talk about them. The people called them "Buan Nhan" or "forgotten ones."

Khuan told me that while he was in Camp #9, he was able to talk quickly to one of the Americans through the fence near their washing area. They only had a minute or so, but during that time he asked the American his name and how he came to be a prisoner? I remained calm and composed while Khuan explained to me what was said between the two of them. Even though I knew the POW-MIA issue very well, this was different. I was listening to a LIVE sighting report from a first-hand witness, not hearsay information that had been passed down from one person to another. Another important point, this time there was a name to go with the rest of the information!

Khuan relayed the following information to me:

1. The American was shot down in a plane inside Laos in 1971.

2. He asked Khuan to get a message to the American Embassy or anyone that could help him and them get out as they all wanted to go home to America and to their families.
3. Per Khuan's spelling of his name, it was "Edwood Issenback."

As soon as possible I checked every website and database available to me that dealt with POW/MIAs. It wasn't long before I found information regarding the only POW/MIA that met Khuan's criteria. It states in part:

*On 27 December 1971, Captain George Ritter, pilot; Captain Roy F. Townley, co-pilot; **Edward Weissenback, kicker;** and Khamphanh Saysongkham, kicker; comprised the crew of an Air America C123K (tail #6293), Flight #293. Their cargo of rice and other supplies was bound for Royal Lao Army troops stationed at the village of Ban Xieng Lom, Luang Prabang Province, Laos. The last communication with flight #293 was when the crew radioed that they were approximately 11 minutes from the village.*

Within months intelligence reports began rolling into military intelligence regarding these men:

First: A radio transmission made by a Pathet Lao (PL) unit was intercepted by US intelligence in August 1972. The communist transmission stated that: *"in late December 1971 an American aircraft was shot down and all of the Americans captured."* This report was correlated to Air America flight #293 and copies of it were placed in George Ritter's, Roy Townley's and Edward Weissenback's casualty files.

Second: In October 1972, another intelligence report, IR 2 237 0095 72, stated, *"Source allegedly observed the crash of an aircraft with the tail #293 in the vicinity of Muong Sai airfield (RC123893) in December 1971. According to the source, three Americans and one Lao who had been aboard the aircraft were captured and later taken to a detention facility in the vicinity of UG425730."* The source elaborated on the condition of each of the men: *"The American kicker suffered an injury over the left eye. Otherwise he was in excellent condition. The Lao kicker, named K, lost one tooth. Otherwise he was in excellent condition."*

The source described the detention facility and the daily activities of the POWs as follows: *"The detention facility was reportedly located inside a cave which had a five to six meter-high waterfall running over the entrance of the cave. Two cells were inside the cave. One cell was for US POWs and the other was for the high ranking Thai and Lao personnel. Outside the cave were areas for growing vegetables including an area for growing pumpkins. Approximately 50 enemy personnel reportedly consisting of PL were within one kilometer of the camp. The Americans reportedly bathed in a nearby stream once a week, cut fire wood in the vicinity of UG423740, and were also utilized to grow vegetables."*

Third: In August 1973 a defector, who was a Pathet Lao General, provided information regarding American POWs for whom he had personal knowledge. The General was shown pictures of American POW/MIAs in an effort to identify those he saw in captivity. He positively identified photos of Roy Townley and Edward Weissenback as being two of the prisoners he had seen. He was not able to provide information about George Ritter and Khamphanh Saysongkham.

Never lose sight of the fact that in round numbers there are over 600 men and woman who were never accounted for in Laos. Know that there have been a number of remains found by the JTF/DPMO – now DPAA – excavation teams. However, also keep in mind that since the end of the Vietnam War there have been well over 22,000 reports of American prisoners, missing and otherwise unaccounted for that have been received by our government. Now here is the rub: The USG has a long standing track record of focusing only on skeletal remains recovery and identification rather than repatriating LIVE POWs regardless of their status

or condition. There is no doubt in my mind that the USG knows who every one of those living POWs are and where each is located. I also believe with everything in me that our government is absolutely and totally ignoring the reality that there are “breathing” Americans in SEA today.

I learned my lesson the hard way after providing evidence to DPMO of possible live Americans that I obtained while operating inside Vietnam in 1995. My information was used for a Stony Beach (SB) investigation in which one of their Teams was sent into the area in which I collected that intelligence. However, the SB Team was denied access to the military installation where our people were located. The team members were also denied access to talk with local citizens in the area including possible Caucasian children who were seen and photographed initially before my investigation took place. These children were no older than 10 years of age in 1995 therefore they were born long after 1975 when we as a nation totally departed that part of the world. You do the math! After this incident, I lost all faith in our government and it's so called “Highest National Priority.”

My next source was a tourist guide in the Pathet Lao cave complex just outside Sam Nua. As he was taking our small group of “European tourists” that included me on tour, he said in passing that “American prisons were still being held in the following Lao provinces of Louang Prabang, Xeing Khuang, Phongsali and Houaphan.” This young enthusiastic and western educated Laotian was the son of a very high ranking Military/Ministerial official. I firmly believe that he really did not understand the full scope of what he was saying to the tourists he was leading because it was simply common knowledge to him and those around him.

Our tour guide also stated in his matter of fact way that during the “War against the American Imperialist's,” as many as 200 American prisoners were held in the caves in and around Sam Nua as well as in those other previously mentioned provinces.

While continuing on our tour, one of the female Swiss tourists asked if there were any Americans still being held in prisons inside Laos today? I was “taken aback” when the question was posed to our tour guide. I was even more startled when the young Lao went into an immediate personal rant emphatically saying: ***“YES, of course there are many who are still in prisons for their crimes against the Lao people and the people's party. They are being kept in prisons in Louang Prabang, Xeing Khuang, Phongsali and Houaphan Provinces, there are many still in prison for their crimes!”***

I waited a little before asking another question about American prisoners, as I did not want to seem too anxious in doing so. I then posed my question to him as to why were Americans still being held in prison after such a long time? His reply was: ***“... the American government did not negotiate or compensate with the Lao Peoples Party and they were legally obligated to pay compensation to the Lao people after all the damage that had done in bombing Laos,”*** then he added: ***“As you may know, America dropped more bombs on Laos than in the whole of World War II.”***

I then said, ***“But they are Prisoners of War and should have been released at the end of the war.”*** He said, ***“No, they are common criminals, pirates, terrorists who murdered our people. You must remember war was never declared on Laos or on Vietnam, so how can they be graded as POWs?”*** This answer actually brought home to me the other side of the coin in which our old enemy perceived history and I actually saw it from their perspective. I found it quite interesting to hear it directly from the other side. Maybe he actually had a point in that our government did not want to consider the communist's position at the time negotiations were taking place in Paris. To my way of thinking, every member of Richard Nixon's administration who is still alive has a lot to answer for!

But I digress. My last source was a young Buddhist Monk who I met in a pagoda temple in Sam Nua. The year was 2000, and his sighting came about simply because the Abbot of the pagoda was summoned by the Lao military to a camp to provide the Vietnamese Camp Commander with a ceremony for both Lao and Vietnamese military officials during the Lunar New Year festivities. The Abbot tasked the young Monk to travel with him to perform the ceremony.

When asked, he told me in very broken English that yes, he saw Americans in a Military Camp just Northeast of Sam Nua. The Monk said that he saw a number of white men and seeing them surprised and puzzled him. After leaving the camp, the Monk asked the Abbot about them, and the Abbot told him that they were American criminals who had been detained for a long time.

I asked the Monk how many did he see? He answered there were around 20 to 30 white men. I asked him if he spoke to any of the American criminals? He said no, that he was too afraid to. But more importantly, he could not leave the Abbot's side as it was his duty to provide support during the ceremony in the form of translation for Vietnamese officials. It was also his job to present flowers and chant Buddhist blessings to the military personnel at the camp.

These three sources therefore had direct access and observed first-hand Americans who were ALIVE and well in Laos from 1998 to 2003. My question is this: Why is it that in the 30 days that I traveled around this region of Southeast Asia, I was able to collect 3 direct sources who told me about their first-hand sightings while the USG claims it can't locate, and then repatriate any LIVE American POW/MIAs? This is not an idol question as it goes directly to the heart of the matter.

For many years I grieved over the fate of prisoners and missing from the Vietnam War. I know that the governments of the United States, Vietnam, Laos, Russia and other allied countries do not want to disclose the true fate of our POWs for their own political self-serving reasons. As a young naïve Military Reservist, I tried for many years to tell our government that there were many US, Thai, Australian, even French POWs/MIAs still alive in Vietnam and Laos. They were being kept by both of those Communist governments again for their own political purposes. Our government did not want to believe my debriefing relating to living POW/MIAs. Likewise, the people who received my information were only interested in data about skeletal remains. You should know, too, this is exactly why I resigned from the military.

The lies that have been told by the powers that be in all of these governments, borders on absolute criminality and is just plain wrong. I hope that one day the truth comes out and that all those who have tried to hide that truth will lose their reputations, credibility, integrity and in fact their freedom for their willing participation in this massive coverup.

Photo A1: *Photo of the sources I interviewed*



Below: The Sam Nua Cave Complex:- It was confirmed by U.S. Intelligence that many U.S. POWs were held in these caves during the war.



To one degree or another, each one of these counties has committed crimes against humanity, human rights violations, the cleansing of ethnic minorities including the Hmong and others by using chemical weapons and starvation as weapons against them. Also keep in mind that these types of atrocities could easily be brought to the attention of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and arrest warrants issued and executed.

Many think that Communism died at the time the Berlin wall fell and the Soviet Union was dismantled. For Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, Cuba and China; nothing could be farther from the truth. Communism is alive and well, and our men are still paying the price for our freedom with theirs.

As we all know, in the dirty and secretive world of politics particularly where it relates to national security intelligence issues, nothing is what it seems, especially at top levels of all governments including our own. The lack of rectitude and moral fiber of past and present political bureaucrats, who have shown nothing but contempt at best for our men in and out of uniform, is a total disgrace. Yes, they chose to serve. Yes, they signed that blank check stating they would give everything including their lives for us.

Per returned Vietnam POW Navy Captain Eugene “Red” McDaniel: We were prepared to be wounded, killed or captured; but no one is prepared to be abandoned.

Think about it.

God bless our POW-MIAs!

Word Count: 3212

Photo B: *A Vietnamese communication military compound in Sam Nua, Laos.*



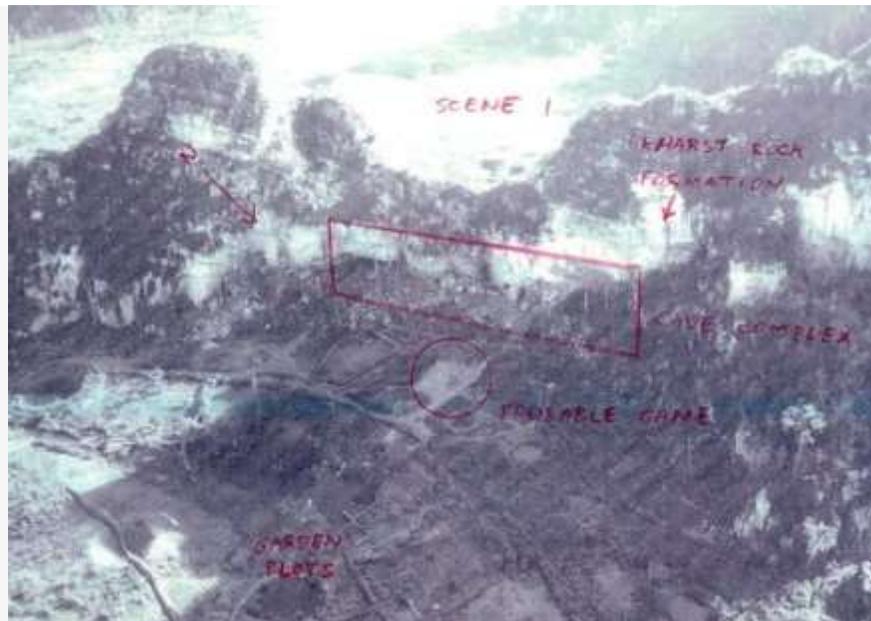
Photo C: *The Plain de Jars / Phonsavan close to where Camp# 9 is located.*



Photo E: Author and intelligence associate and in the center General Vang Pao



Photo E: A photograph from files of a 1992 CIA memo saying that “photographs taken by a reconnaissance aircraft in October 1969 show what may be as many as 20 non-Asians accompanied by Pathet Lao guards near caves” at Ban Nakay Neua.



The famous Ban Nakay Cave POW photograph. Taken in northern Laos by recon aircraft camera, it appears to show US POWs playing volleyball under armed guard. (See close-up below).



Photo F. Communist propaganda photo of captured American soldiers. 591 prisoners were repatriated in early 1973. What happened to the rest of our countrymen and women? Where are they today?

