

A Hmong Story Cloth Featuring Mak Phout (Lima Site 137) In Northern Laos: Rare in Content and Artistic Detail by Linda A. Gerdner, Lee Gossett and Frederic C. Benson, Hmong Studies Journal, 20(2019): 1-44.

A Hmong Story Cloth Featuring Mak Phout (Lima Site 137) In Northern Laos: Rare in Content and Artistic Detail

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Abstract

The Hmong, who allied with the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the United States during the “Secret War” in Laos, were forced to flee their homeland when the RLG fell to Communist control. They escaped to refugee camps in Thailand. During confinement the women drew upon their exceptional needlework skills and lived experiences to create a new art form using a culturally relevant medium to embroider colorful images on cloth to tell their stories. This article features a rare story cloth depicting military operations and life at Lima Site 137 during the “Secret War.” Because little information is available about this specific site, the article begins with background information on the overall purpose of Lima Sites with emphasis on those that are more well known. The article advances with a photo of Hmong refugees establishing a temporary shelter in the jungle after fleeing from the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese soldiers. A portion of these refugees eventually found safety at Lima Site 137, providing a segue to the featured story cloth. This ethnographic textile art is supplemented with rare photos and the first-hand experiences of Retired Captain Lee Gossett and Frederic Benson. Both provided humanitarian effort to the Royal Lao Government and the Hmong people affected by the war. Extended efforts were made to talk to Hmong individuals who had experienced life at LS-137, but those we learned of were no longer available to share their stories. Select photos of daily life at other Lima Sites add breadth and depth to our understanding of life during the war as experienced by both the refugees and the United States humanitarians who served them.

Keywords: Hmong, Secret War, Storycloths

Introduction

In 1954 Laos gained full independence as a constitutional monarchy. The Hmong had a relatively peaceful and self-sufficient life in the highlands of Laos, until 1961, when the Vietnam War covertly extended into Laos. Despite the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962, the North Vietnamese aided the Pathet Lao in their communist political movement. In response, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided financial and military support to the Royal Kingdom of Laos to resist these communist efforts. Hmong men and boys were recruited by each of the opposing sides.

During the covert or “Secret War” in Laos, approximately 450 Lima Sites (Hammond, 2017) served as clandestine U.S. military installations for conducting covert paramilitary and combat operations, as well as humanitarian efforts for Lao and Hmong allies (Leeker, 2006, updated 2016). Lima sites, many of which were rudimentary airstrips carved from the mountaintop of each command post, allowed accessibility by fixed-wing aircraft. The Helio Courier and PC-6 Pilatus Porter aircraft accommodated flights over rugged terrain of jagged mountain peaks as well as short runways for take offs and landings (Ptaff, 1995). Smaller landing zones were cleared for helicopters. In addition, drop zones were cleared to receive airdrops of supplies carried by Air America and Continental Air Services.



Figure 1. Captain Lee Gossett arriving at a Lima Site, west of Long Tieng, in his Continental Air Service Pilatus Porter. The purpose of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) flights were often related to public health issues. Striped and Green (Blue) Hmong Villagers are dressed in traditional Hmong attire. Courtesy of Retired Captain Lee Gossett ©.



Figure 2. Pilatus Porter taking flight from airstrip at Lima Site located four miles west of Long Tieng. Photo courtesy of Retired Captain Lee Gossett ©.

We advance by providing examples of well-known Lima Sites with accompanying photos to convey their diversity and importance and to place the featured Lima Site within context of the greater whole.

Long Tieng (LS-20A)

Long Tieng (a.k.a. Long Cheng) also referred to as Lima Site 20A (LS-20A) was located in the highlands of Xiangkhouang (a.k.a. Xieng Khouang) Province and served as the military air base for the anti-communist Hmong forces led by General Vang Pao (refer to Figure 3). Long Tieng was the busiest Lima Site and included living quarters for soldiers and their families, a market district for supplies, and a school for children. To view a story cloth that includes Long Tieng with accompanying vintage photos of life at LS-20A during the war, refer to Gerdner

(2015, pp. 16-19). Responsibilities of the Hmong soldiers who served the United States included rescuing allied pilots whose aircraft had been shot down and collecting intelligence for the CIA.



Figure 3. Aerial view of Long Tieng or LS-20A. Photo taken by Captain Lee Gossett © while flying east.

Bon Xon or Ban Houei Pamone (LS-272)

The base for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) of Northeastern Laos was originally located at Lima Site 20 (LS-20) or Sam Thong. However, this site was overrun by the North Vietnamese on March 19, 1970. USAID, requiring the subsequent relocation to Lima Site 272 (LS-272) also known as Bon Xon or Ban Houei Pamone (refer to Figure 4). LS-272 became the second busiest Lima Site at an elevation of 1000 feet and an airstrip of 3040 feet.



Figure 4. Aerial view of Bon Xon or Ban Houei Pamone (LS-272). Office and warehouse buildings are situated north, along the center segment of the runway. The hospital is located center left posterior to the airport. A refugee village located in the lower right corner of the image. Photo taken March 1971 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).



Figure 5. Aircraft on ramp at LS-272 are from right to left: Air America H-34 helicopters, Air America Caribou, Continental Twin Otters, Air America C-123. (Photo courtesy of Captain Lee Gossett ©).

Unidentified Smaller Lima Site

An example of a smaller Lima Site, is shown in Figure 6. The air strip is short and elevated above the village. There are a number of worn foot paths in the area.



Figure 6. Hmong village and airstrip north of Phu Cum (LS-50). Courtesy of Retired Captain Lee Gossett ©.

Fleeing Danger in Pursuit of Safety

Throughout the war Hmong villagers were often forced to flee from their current area of sanctuary due to the threat of Communist troops. For example, Mok Plai (LS-193) was located a short distance northeast of Mak Phout (LS-137) and fell to the Communists in March 1966 (a date that corresponds to the photo in Figure 7). Survivors fled to the jungle while carrying needed supplies, such as cooking pots. It was here, at this undisclosed location (Figure 7), where White Hmong refugees and members of the Royal Lao military stayed until finding a safer area to settle. They quickly erected temporary lean-tos covered with foliage for camouflaged shelter. Propped against the lean-to at far left, is a water vessel with slanted end, made from a section of hollow bamboo. Nearby lies a pile of wood that has recently been gathered. Two blackened pots

have been unpacked and are ready for use at the campsite. One pot has a stick resting against the inner rim, that will be used as a utensil to stir food during the cooking process. A variety of ages are represented in this refugee group, with the youngest being a nursing baby. Importantly many of the refugees who fled Mok Plai (LS-193) after it fell, eventually found safety at Mak Phout (LS- 137) ten miles to the south (Udol, August 2, 1960; Anthony & Sexton, 1993).



Figure 7. White Hmong refugees hiding in the jungle following escape from Mok Plai (LS-193) during Communist takeover. Their temporary camp site was erected with lean-tos. Photo taken in March 1966 by Ernest Kuhn ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Ernest and Phaythoune Kuhn Image Collection.

Figure 8 displays a portion of a military map identifying the locations of Mok Plai (LS-193) in relation to Mak Phout (LS-137) along with other nearby landmarks. Mak Phout (LS-137) appears to have overlooked Route 4 (now known as Route 13) connecting Nam Bac (LS-203)

and Muong Sai (L-27), both trade centers. Note the solitary L in L-27, continues to represent the word Lima, but generally identified a longer runway, including some that were paved.

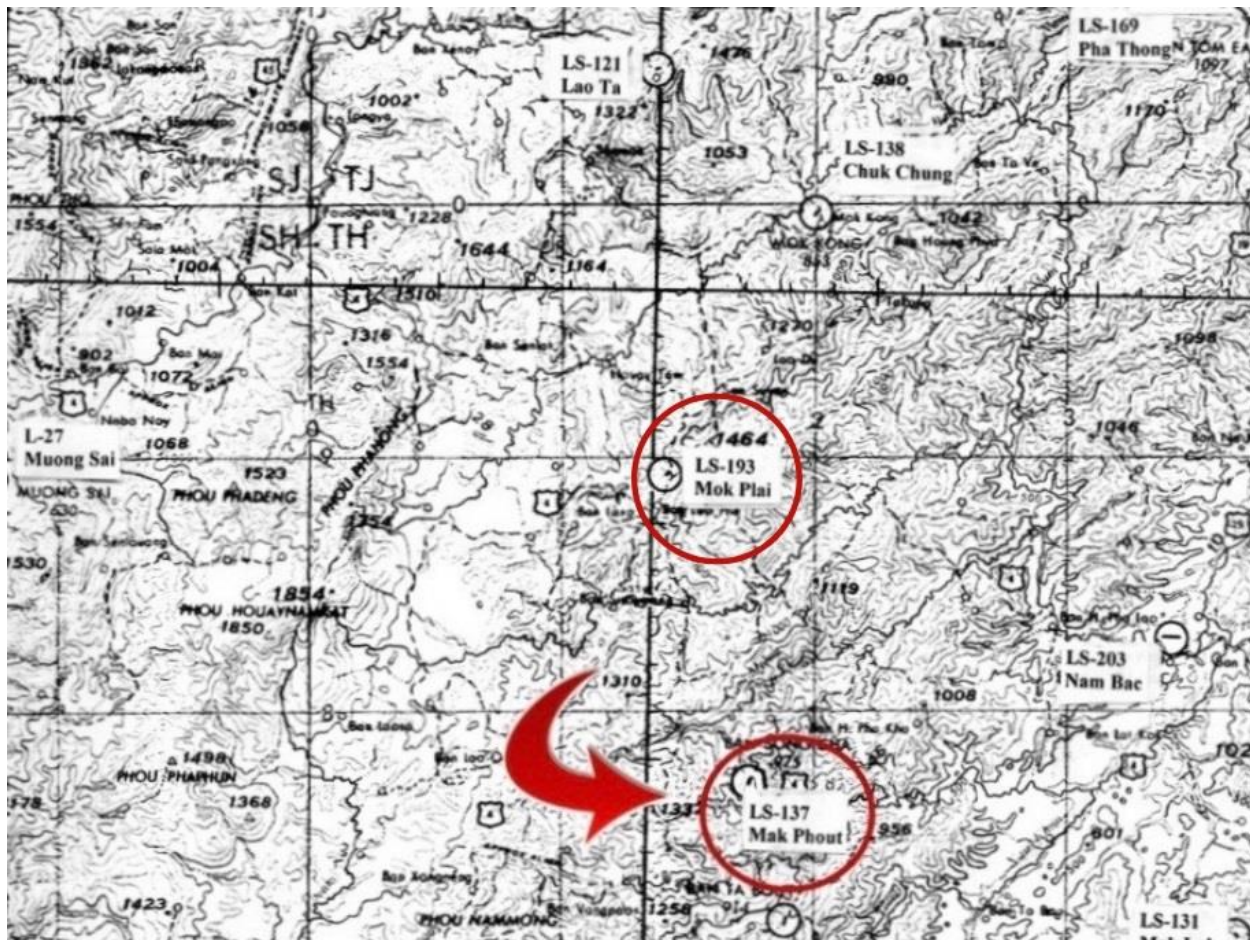


Figure 8. Military Map showing circled in red with Mak Plai (LS-193) and Mak Phout (LS-137) circled in red with an arrow pointing at it. These sites are shown in relation to each other and other Lima Sites in the area. Courtesy of Frederic C. Benson.

During the war, Hmong refugees from other nearby areas sought safety at Mok-Phout (LS-137). For example, earlier in 1965 refugees from the greater Muong Sai area traveled east/southeast to Lao Ta (LS 121), continued on to Mok Plai (LS-193) until eventually reaching Mak Phout (LS-137) (Author Unknown, March 17, 1969). We advance by discussing LS-137 (Mak Phout), the feature of this article.

Mak Phout or Lima Site 137 (LS-137)



Figure 9. Rare story cloth depicting Lima Site 137. Dimensions: width 62 inches, height 59 inches. Artist unknown. Personal collection of Linda A. Gerdner.

The artist, of this masterful story cloth (Figure 9), is unknown. Rarely did the artist provide an embroidered name or signature on textile art such as this (Gerdner, 2015). It is plausible the artist had first-hand experience at LS-137. It seems doubtful this textile art was made solely as a commercial product. An extraordinary amount of time was required for the masterful attention to

detail that focuses on a specific Lima Site not generally well known. Importantly, Pao Ly Moua, commanded the area of Luang Prabang Province to the north and northwest of Mak Phout (Douanovixay, October 21, 1970). He and his family immigrated to Canada following the war, where he lived in Ontario until his death in 2006 (Unknown author, 2018). In 2005, Lemoine reported a population of approximately 600 Hmong living in Canada. These numbers have remained relatively stable with the majority of citizens with Hmong heritage living in the province of Ontario. Reportedly, the owner of this vintage story cloth (prior to its purchase by Linda Gerdner in 2018) was an affluent couple who lived in Canada and traveled extensively. We do not know their ethnic background or if they were the original owners.

Methods

Discussion of the story cloth is divided into two sections - Military Operations and Life of Refugees. While the artist had a clear understanding of the story represented by the embroidered images, we conducted a careful and exhaustive search of available resources to expand our understanding.

A minimal amount of information is available in the literature and accessible military documents about Mak Phout (Lima Site 137). We were unable to find any photographs of LS-137 in the archives that we had access to. However, the featured story cloth represents the first-hand account of both military operations and life of refugees living at LS-137. This is a rare find, in both content and artistic detail. LS-137 was located in Luang Prabang Province in Northern Laos at an elevation of 3700 feet with a surface area of 975 feet x 60 feet (Flight Information Center Vientiane, March – April 1967).

The skill and mastery of the artist is apparent in the minute details of each embroidered image within the numerous scenes of the story cloth. These details allowed Lee Gossett and

Frederic C. Benson to identify specific weapons and military aircraft represented. In addition, their humanitarian experience in working with refugees at a variety of Lima Sites in Laos provided them with the knowledge of military scenes.

The diverse background and experience of the authors in culmination brought a multitude of knowledge and resources to provide a greater understanding of the story embroidered on this cloth. Additional resources used to enhance our understanding include military and university archives, a Hmong Leader of the “Secret War,” knowledgeable Hmong American community leaders, and American colleagues who had supported the Royal Lao Government in Laos,

The story cloth is supplemented with embroidered words to accompany select scenes. A family member or friend who was in the process of learning the English language often inserted the abridged text in pen or pencil on the cloth. Subsequently, the artist carefully embroidered each letter to finish the masterpiece. As we will see this process may involve a few spelling errors. Although these errors may be of concern to some, it reflects the deep desire to promote cultural understanding despite limitations associated with the English language.

Close-up photography is used to explain individual scenes of the story cloth. Photos taken at various Lima Sites during the war, that parallel embroidered scenes, are incorporated into the text to enhance understanding from within a real-life context. More specific methods of inquiry are incorporated into the text as the need arises.

Military Operations

The upper portion of the story cloth is labeled “Outpost of Lima Site 137” (refer to Figure 10). The aircraft flying overhead is a T-28, used to carry bombs and was armed with machine guns. Armed soldiers are stationed atop the site with a number of tents posted on the flat surface. One tent conceals all but the barrel of a Howitzer artillery field gun. Satin stitches were used to

fill the grayish blue surface of the rocky outpost. This type of embroidery is typically used to fill small areas and becomes time consuming, requiring great skill to fill a large area while maintaining a smooth surface, free of puckers. The use of satin stitches in this example reflects the artist's commitment and dedication to quality. Ladders (likely made of bamboo) were built along the steep sides to gain access by foot. Small trees grow in rocky crevices.

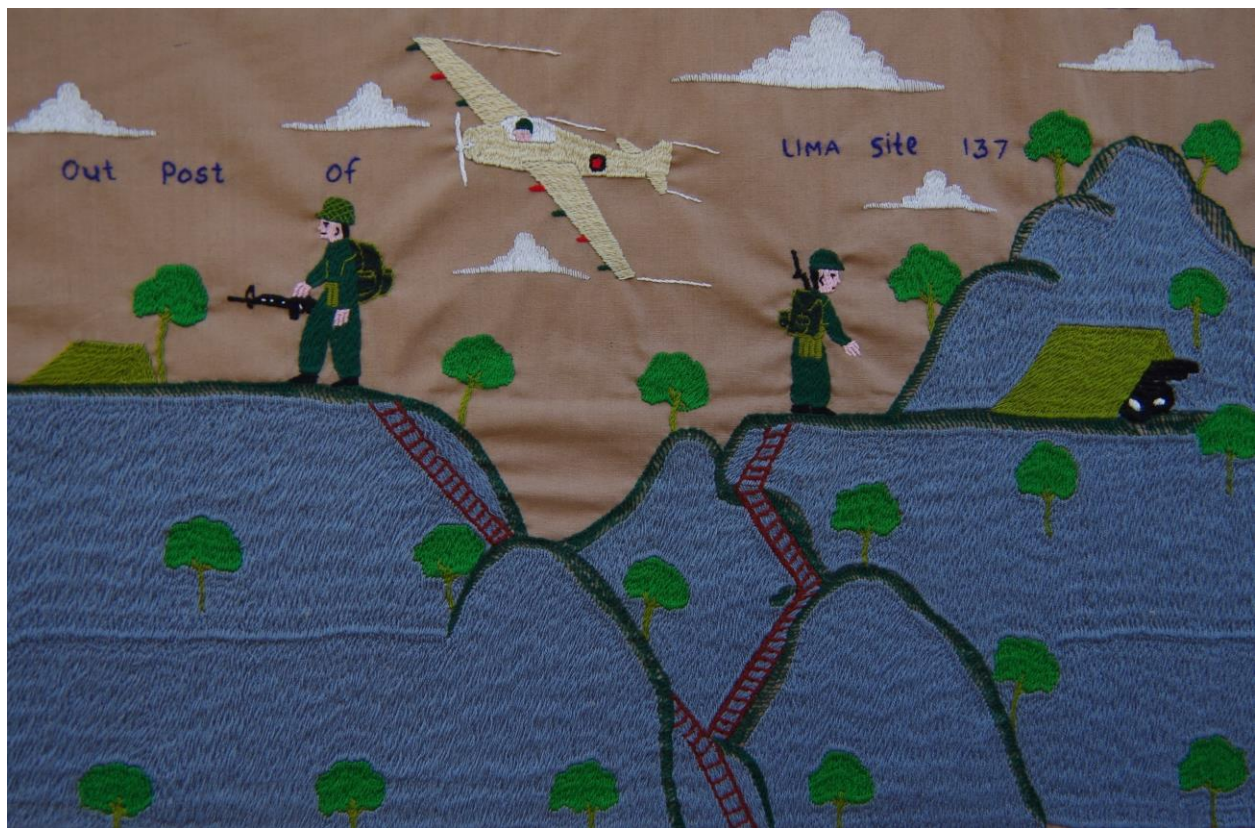


Figure 10. The aircraft shown above is a T-28 and was used to carry bombs and machine guns.

This scene continues to the right of the story cloth (close-up in Figure 11). A CH-46 Chinook helicopter is seen, externally transporting a second Howitzer by sling to the site. However, this specific model was not available in Laos until late 1972 or 1973, by that time LS-137 had fallen to the Communists, as will be explained later. In addition, an H-34 helicopter is transporting a box of needed military supplies to the soldiers. The red circular emblem displayed on military

aircraft represents the Royal Lao emblem referred to as Erawan, a three-headed white elephant standing against a red background. This emblem will be shown with greater detail in Figures 19 and 20.



Figure 11. Supplies being delivered to Lima Site 137

The Royal Lao flag with the Erawan or three-headed white elephant is flying from the pole in the scene labeled, “Stuation [Station] of GM” (refer to Figure 12). In this example, the initials GM are used as an acronym for *Groupeement Mobile*, a term describing the organization of regimental units. The term reflects the prior French Colonial rule over Laos. This area is partially enclosed by protective barbed wire. The artist meticulously included the sharp intermittent points along the strands of wire.



Figure 12. Soldiers are standing in a defensive position in a ‘z’ trench. The body of water labeled “Rive” [River] is likely a tributary of the Nam Ou River.

Figure 13 provides an actual photo of a ‘z’ trench at a different military outpost. Standing in a ‘z’ trench provides soldiers with a greater degree of protection. The zigzag configuration allows the soldiers to fire from a variety of angles. In addition, if a hand grenade is tossed into the trench, the Z configuration would help to block flying shrapnel.



Figure 13. Actual ‘Z’ trench at military outpost at Nong Luang (LS-322) within the Sayaboury Province. A mortar is in the round fox hole on the left. Photo taken February 1971 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).

Advancing to the left of the story cloth, a scene is labeled with the following embroidered words, “Outpost of GM in LS-137” (refer to Figure 14). The featured scene is protected by the meticulously stitched fence of barbed wire.



Figure 14. Outpost that serves as a defensive position or base camp. The brown peaked structures likely represent bunkers, while the light brown squares likely represent fox holes.



Figure 15. Royal Lao soldiers on guard at Nam Ngum basin outpost. Behind is the Nam Ngum Dam under construction, in Vientiane Province. The low woven bamboo structure with a wide angled roof is a bunker. Photo taken December 1968 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).



Figure 16. Strategic Hmong outpost at Bouam Long (LS-32) secured by barbed wire. LS-32 is located northeast of the Plain of Jars in Xiangkhouang (a.k.a. Xieng Khouang). Photo taken March 1971 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).

Note the masterful attention to minute embroidered details of each soldier in the Royal Lao Army (refer to Figure 17). Military helmets are covered with netting, allowing for the insertion of camouflage materials such as foliage. It should be noted that soldiers also wore red berets as shown in Figure 15. The soldiers' dark green backpacks include pockets outlined in light green thread. Some soldiers have a beige colored bag filled with rice, resting on top of their backpack. Soldiers are walking single file; each shoe is embroidered with a sharply defined heel. Individual soldiers carry an intricately embroidered weapon, likely an M16, complete with a tiny embroidered trigger. Belts with individual pockets, to hold ammo clips, are worn around the waste. While walking single file along the path soldiers alternate by either grasping an M16

outward (in the event of an enemy attack) or resting the M16 against their right shoulder. A subtitle explains that the soldiers are working in the field, referring to the military field.



Figure 17. Close-up shows embroidered detail of Royal Lao soldiers.

An area toward the forefront (Figure 18) is labeled, “field of aeroplanes.” Although the embroidered spelling of “aeroplanes” is not consistent with the U.S. spelling of airplane, but is consistent with the Canadian spelling. The plane taking flight is a Turbo Pilatus Porter. A helicopter has landed on the right side of the landing pad, with rotor blades in a slowing motion, while ground crew approach to assist the pilot. Lee Gossett explained, pilots seldom shut down an aircraft’s engine on either an airstrip or landing pad; this protocol facilitates a quick airborne response if the enemy is found to be nearby. This strategy also prevents the potential inability of restarting an engine that has been shut down. A helicopter positioned on the left side of the landing pad has its rotor blades spinning at an accelerated speed in preparation for lift off. The two soldiers, nearest this helicopter, are talking and appear relaxed.

The emblem on the fuselage of each aircraft is more visible than previously shown, but remains small. The ornate detail of the Erawan is difficult to reproduce in a hand-embroidered image, especially on such a small scale. For a larger image refer to the photo (Figure 19) of a Royal Lao Military H-30 used during the “Secret War.” A detailed graphic image of the Erawan is displayed in Figure 20.



Figure 18. A Turbo Pilatus Porter or Continental Air Service Porter and two H-34 helicopters (Sikorsy UH-34D Seahorse).



Figure 19. Royal Lao Military H-34 helicopter at Muang Nane (LS-254) in Luang Prabang Province. Note the roundel with Erawan, representing the Royal Lao Airforce, displayed on the fuselage of the helicopter. Photo taken October 1968 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).



Figure 20. Roundel of the Royal Lao Airforce displayed on military aircraft. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Life of Refugees

The next section of this article is dedicated to the embroidered scenes portraying life during the war for Hmong refugees and others. The methods for this section involved extended efforts to learn the stories of the Hmong people who had a lived experience at LS-137. However, those that we did learn of were no longer available to share their stories. In addition, the impaired cognitive status of another potential informant prevented his story from being told.

We were not able to find any photos specific to life at LS-127. However, we did incorporate select photos from the collections of Retired Captain Lee Gossett, Frederic C. Benson, as well as Ernest and Phaythoune Kuhn. Although these photos are from other Lima Sites, they add breadth and depth to understanding life during the war as experienced by both the refugees and the United States humanitarians. All photos are reprinted with permission.

We continue our discussion with a scene located to the right of the airfield labeled, “Village Hmong.” This scene is labeled incorrectly, an obvious error in English terminology, but the reason for this error may be more complex. The Hmong people lived in the highlands of Laos,

building their homes on ground level with an earthen floor. The Khmu people are also reported to have lived in the vicinity of Mak Phout (Dakan, November 28, 1966) during the war.

However, the Khmu people are a midland ethnic group (Schlemmer, 2017) who lived at a lower altitude than the Hmong. As a result, Khmu villagers built their homes on stilts to prevent flooding during the monsoon season. The altitude differences may have prevented or limited contact between these two groups. The mislabeled village is likely a Khmu village. In addition, the couple entering the village are dressed in the traditional attire of the Khmu people (refer to Figure 21). The worn and tattered pants of the man suggest the difficult living conditions imposed by the war. The couple are each carrying a heavy cloth bag on their back that is supported by a strap across their forehead, as is the custom of the Khmu people. The language difference between the two ethnic groups likely contributed to inaccurate use of terms. Without knowing the exact reason for the error, we are confident the Hmong people would know without a doubt that the images were not a Hmong village or of Hmong people.



Figure 21. The area labeled “Village Hmong,” appears to be a village of Khmu people who also lived at Mak Phout. Traditionally, the Khmu lived at a lower altitude than the Hmong people, requiring them to build their homes on stilts to prevent flooding during the monsoon season. The body of water marked “rive” [river] is possibly a tributary of Nam Ou.

Figure 22 provides a photo of an actual Khmu village with homes constructed on stilts. The photo in Figure 23 is of a woman, likely an ethnic Khmu, carrying a heavy bag supported by a strap near the top of her head. This is in contrast to the Hmong people who carry items in a woven basket supported by a leather strap across each shoulder (refer to Figures 24, 26, 28).



Figure 22. Khmu village in Houei Tong (LS-196) in eastern Luang Prabang Province. Photo taken November 1966 by Ernest Kuhn ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Ernest and Phaythoune Kuhn Image Collection.



Figure 23. Ethnic Lao woman (possibly Khmu) carrying a heavy cloth bag strapped across her head while walking along a worn path with two pigs. Note, she is also carrying a carbine rifle for protection in case of an encounter with the enemy. Photo courtesy of Retired Captain Lee Gossett ©.

The lower portion of the story cloth depicts Striped Hmong villagers tending to the daily chores necessary for survival. They are recognized by their traditional attire which includes blue stripes appliquéd on their sleeves. The scene in the lower left corner, shows the villagers harvesting rice (refer to Figure 24). These plants include panicles created with chain stitching to represent the attached grains of rice. Cut stalks are thrashed or beaten to free the grains of rice while retaining their protective husk. Bare stalks or straw, are arranged in a stack and later fed to livestock. A parallel photo in Figure 25 shows a Hmong man harvesting a dry rice field during the war.



Figure 24. Striped Hmong villagers harvesting and thrashing rice.



Figure 25. Hmong man harvesting rice near Nam Hia in Sayaboury Province. Photo taken October 1968 by Frederic C. Benson©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).

Next, the loose grains of rice are placed in the bowl of a rice pounder to crack the hulls, as shown in Figure 26. A man pounds rice while his wife tosses pounded rice on a winnowing tray, allowing gravity to release the hulls. Meanwhile, a woman replenishes the feeding trough that draws the attention of a hungry lactating sow whose piglets scamper behind. Directly below this scene, villagers are harvesting corn in the field.



Figure 26. The Hmong are an agrarian people. Here they are shown pounding rice, feeding a lactating sow with piglets, and harvesting corn.

Rice pounders were impractical to transport while fleeing the Communists on foot through the jungle. Hmong people were resilient and adapted to the harsh living conditions imposed by the war. In Figure 27, a Striped Hmong woman demonstrates how she adapted the task of pounding rice, while hiding in the jungle from the Communists. To simulate a rice pounder, she scooped out a shallow area of ground. She then molded the excess soil around the sides of the

depressed area to simulate a bowl. Next, she covered the earthen “bowl” with woven hemp fabric and placed rice on the center of the fabric. She used a carved wooden pounder to crack the hulls. Apparently, she was so satisfied with this method that she continued to use it after relocating to a Lima Site. Note the winnowing tray positioned by her side.



Figure 27. A Striped Hmong woman, at Phou Saly (LS-178) located in the eastern portion of Luang Prabang Province, demonstrates an adapted method of pounding rice while hiding in the jungle from the Pathet Lao. Photo taken in 1968 by Ernest Kuhn©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Ernest and Phaythoune Kuhn Image Collection.

As shown in the lower right corner of the story cloth (Figure 28) the process of grinding corn requires two persons. In this example, the man drops the kernels in the open hole of the millstone

while his wife manually rotates the wooden apparatus to generate the grinding motion of the stone. The couple's baby is safely strapped to the mother's back with a baby carrier. This frees the mother's hands and arms, so she is able to complete her daily chores. A man feeds ground corn to the chickens. Nearby is the poultry house built on stilts. Under the slanted roof is a nest with three hen's eggs nestled in the center. Two goats, each with horns and a beard, saunter nearby. Embroidered lettering in the lower right corner explains, "The Hmong people are working, helping soldiers."



Figure 28. The Striped Hmong villagers are busy with chores that include grinding corn, feeding chickens, pounding rice, winnowing rice and gathering firewood.

As discussed previously, Mak Phout (LS-137) provided shelter to Hmong refugees seeking safety. Figure 29 portrays a group of Hmong refugees, with pack horses, arriving at Muong Phun (LS-37) in search of shelter. All are loaded with baskets and bundles of supplies. A small boy has a large basket strapped to his back with a steamer pot peeking out over the top. Further

ahead a woman has a woven bamboo winnowing tray secured to her back along with a large bundle. A man, has strapped his infant son to his back with a blanket, while carrying additional supplies in his arms. Villagers watch from a distance while soldiers walk out to meet the new arrivals.



Figure 29. Hmong Village at LS-37 (Muong Phun) in Xieng Khouang Province. The barren patch on the highland in the background is the result of slash-and-burn (swidden) farming. Photo taken during March, 1971 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).

Figure 30 provides a close-up photo of a village home with thatched roof at Nong Luang (LS-322). A White Hmong woman stands in her yard secured by a fence made of cut tree limbs. Another woman, with a baby strapped to her back, walks alongside the fence with her other children. All are shown wearing traditional White Hmong attire.



Figure 30. White Hmong woman and children in front of a village home with thatched roof located at Nong Luang (LS-322) in Sayaboury Province. Photo taken August 1971 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).

Throughout history, Hmong people have strived for a self-reliant and autonomous lifestyle, however that was not always possible during the war. For example, Captain Lee Gossett made landings and supply drops at various Lima Sites during the “Secret War.” Prior to making any of these drops he explained that a standard protocol was followed to insure a Lima Site remained “friendly.” Drop zones for small villages were generally deemed safe by displaying a white ground signal, located on the landing strip (if available). Variations in symbols include the following: I, II, L, or X (refer to Figures 31 and 32). Rather than relying on a symbol alone, the pilot attempted to validate safety of the site by assessing daily activities of women and children, this included observing for laundry hanging out to dry. After determining the site remained

“friendly,” the pilot would land the plane if an airstrip was available. If there was no airstrip, cargo was released through the belly drop door of the Porter aircraft. Ammo was placed on a pallet and dropped using a small parachute (refer to Figure 33 and 34). Ammo was limited to one drop. In contrast, a rice delivery, normally involved two drops by the airmen. Six to ten packages of rice were loosely packed, triple bagged and dropped “free fall” (refer to Figure 35).



Figure 31. Aerial view of an outpost in Sayaboury Province. Note: A soldier is placing a signal on the airstrip that appears to be a white “I,” indicating it is safe to land. Photo taken in November 1973 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1972).



Figure 32. Aerial view of a second ground signal formed with two white lines, also indicating that the village is safe. In this example because there is no airstrip an airdrop was made. Note shadow of the Pilatus Porter plane flown by Lee Gossett, who made two parachute drops of supplies. Photo courtesy of Retired Captain Lee Gossett ©.



Figure 33. Supplies being dropped by parachute for the military outpost at Nong Luang (LS-322) in Sayaboury Province. Photo taken during January 1972 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).



Figure 34. Soldiers stationed at a military outpost at Nong Luang (LS-322) in Sayaboury Province, retrieving supplies encased in wooden pallets and dropped using two parachutes. Photo taken January 1972 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).



Figure 35. Soldiers collecting rice bags (each weighing 40 kilograms) dropped “free fall” from an Air America C-46 Commando for villagers and soldiers at Phou Chia (LS-25) in Luang Prabang Province. Photo taken August 1970 by Frederic C. Benson ©. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).

Fall of Mak Phout (LS-137)

Near the end of the war, 1971-1972, Captain Lee Gossett vividly remembers being notified that Communist troops were rapidly advancing toward Mak Phout (LS-137). As ordered, he immediately flew to the site and loaded as many villagers (6-10) as possible in his Pilatus Porter and flew them to safety at Luang Prabang (L-54) approximately 60 miles south (refer to Figures 36). Although he had planned to return for another rescue mission, his orders were changed. Due to the imminent danger imposed by the Communists, he would not be able to make a second

landing. Instead, he was ordered to drop bags of rice to the allied troops. Shortly thereafter, Mak Phout (LS-137) fell to the communist Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese.



Figure 36. Aerial view of Luang Prabang (L-54) with Nam Khan River on the right and the Mekong River on the left. Photo taken by Frederic C. Benson © on August 1968 from an Air America Curtiss C-46 Commando as approaching the royal capital's airport. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. Southeast Asian Images and Texts. Frederic C. Benson Laotian Slide Collection (1968-1974).

Discussion/ Conclusion

The rare story cloth featured in this article represents Mak Phout (LS-137) as it might appear on a routine day during the “Secret War” in Laos. Little information is available in the literature about this site. Extended efforts were made to talk to Hmong individuals who had experienced life at LS-137, but those we learned of were no longer available to share their stories. However, we did include select photos to relay how the lives of Hmong peoples who were affected by the war and experienced life at other Lima Sites in Northern Laos.

The story cloth depicts the Royal Lao military on guard at Mak Phout (LS-137) to secure the site from the Communist North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers. Embroidered lettering explains, “Soldiers working in the field,” referring to the military field. In the foreground Hmong villagers are busy with a variety of activities that include harvesting and processing rice and corn for poultry and livestock, as well as human consumption. Embroidered words are inserted that read, “Hmong people are working helping soldiers.” It is customary for the Hmong people to share their food with visitors and friends, this did not change with the war. A Hmong leader remembers the Hmong refugees sharing food with allied soldiers during the “Secret War.”

A quiet Khmu village is shown to the right of the ‘Z’ trench and “field of aeroplanes.” A couple, wearing tattered clothes are shown entering the quiet village. No other villagers are seen.

Although a rather uneventful scene, life at a Lima Site during the war could have great instability. When a Lima Site was being overrun by Communist soldiers, Hmong refugees attempted to flee to the jungle with only the essential items they were able carry. Hmong have always been a hard-working and resilient people. During war, their survival skills were challenged to the maximum. A temporary shelter could be quickly erected from supplies collected from the natural environment. This was exemplified by the Hmong refugees fleeing the Communist takeover of Mok Plai (LS-193) and establishing temporary shelter in the jungle, with a portion finding safety at nearby Mak Phout (LS-137). Survival during war required resilience and adaptation. After seeking shelter at one Lima Site, a Hmong woman demonstrated how she adapted a method of pounding rice while hiding in the jungle from the Pathet Lao (Figure 27).

An element of danger was ever-present and varied only by degree. A means of self-protection was required to complete daily tasks that extended outside a designated area of

“safety” (refer to Figure 23). This was exemplified by an ethnic Lao woman who carried a carbine rifle while traveling along a foot path with two pigs (refer to Figure 23).

The safety of Lima Sites were unstable as discussed by the takeover of Mok Plai (LS-193) and later Mak Phout (LS-137). Hopefully, there would be sufficient warning so as many women and children as possible could flee overland or be airlifted out.

Throughout the war there were times and locations when the Hmong people were able to plant and harvest crops. When not possible humanitarian aid would airdrop bags of rice and other supplies, providing there was no eminent danger. Ground symbols were developed and used to notify pilots of potential danger.

Story cloths are the first-hand ethnographic account of the Hmong life experience and cover a wide variety of topics (Gerdner, 2015). The time and meticulous efforts devoted to the creation of the featured story cloth indicates the significance that Mak Phout (LS-137) held for the artist. This became the impetus for an exhaustive search of resources to expand the authors’ knowledge of the life experience for our Hmong allies during the war. The shared knowledge and lived experience from the Americans who served the anti-Communist effort during the “Secret War” in Laos and the photos associated with other Lima Sites brought a deeper meaning and understanding of the embroidered images on this story cloth. The combined efforts of the Hmong and American experience has enriched our understanding of this difficult time in our shared history.

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