

A Gold Mine That Won't Make Its Owner Rich: Review of Deep Tears: Post-War Hmong Resistance in Laos (1975-1990) by Gayle L. Morrison

By

Roger Warner

Hmong Studies Journal

Volume 25: 1-9

Abstract

This article provides a review of Gayle Morrison's Deep Tears: Post-War Hmong Resistance in Laos.

Keywords: Hmong, Laos, Secret War, Resistance

If we lived in a perfect world – spoiler alert, we don't – there would be a museum to the Laos war, a magnificent building dedicated to transmitting knowledge about the key role of the Hmong in Laos' northeast, and about the war's long and bumpy aftermath.

The exhibits would be interactive and immersive, like wearing virtual reality goggles – but tactile and experiential, too: Museum visitors could learn first-hand how to plant hill rice and how to harvest it, how to shoot with a muzzle-loading musket and then with the M-1 carbine and other American weapons of the 1960s; how to set up an ambush and then vanish into the hills before the enemy could counterattack; how to fly a T-28 plane in combat like Lee Lue; how to call in airstrikes on enemy positions as a forward air guide; how to travel through the jungle surviving on wild foods; how to build rafts and cross the Mekong River; how to adapt to the loss of freedom and loss of relatives in Ban Vinai refugee camp; and how to adapt to the weirdness of mainstream American culture.

In this glorious museum-that-does-not-yet-exist, there would of course be a library as a resource for future scholars, students, and filmmakers. And on the library's shelves, in a place of honor, would be a set of three books, equally sized, handsomely bound in leather, and in their own slipcase, by Gayle Morrison. Taken together, her three books, *Sky Is Falling*, *Hog's Exit*, and *Deep Tears*, will be among the most important source books on the Laos war and its aftermath for generations to come.

In her first book, *Sky Is Falling: An Oral History of the CIA's Evacuation of the Hmong from Laos*, Morrison established the approach she would use in all her books. Oral historians do a gazillion interviews, transcribe them laboriously, and then splice together interview quotes to construct a narrative. In *Sky Is Falling*, Morrison's technique was not as polished as it would become in her later books. But her subject matter – the May, 1975 fall of Long Cheng, the Hmong headquarters base in Laos, is important. (The “Sky” in her book title has several meanings: the C.I.A., the American buildings in Long Cheng, and in a loose sense Long Cheng itself.) *Sky Is Falling* will be the go-to source for the fiftieth anniversary commemorations, in 2025, of the history-changing event that both ended the Laos war proper for the Hmong and that began their long outward journey to the U.S. and other countries as members of a far-flung diaspora.

Morrison's second book, *Hog's Exit: Jerry Daniels, the Hmong, and the CIA*, is her masterpiece. In my opinion it is among the top half-dozen books produced so far on the Hmong part of the Laos war and its aftermath.

Her main subject, “Hog,” was Jerry Daniels, a smokejumper (an elite, parachute-trained forest fire fighter) from Montana who became Gen. Vang Pao's last CIA advisor in Laos, and

who stayed on in Thailand next door to do much of the initial screening of Hmong refugees to America.

Daniels, who died in a mysterious accident in Bangkok, Thailand about five years after Long Cheng's fall, was a rarity – tough enough to stay in the field for months on end, one of the few Americans to truly understand Laotian minds inside and out, and a humorous, loyal, and stalwart friend to the Hmong. Only Edgar “Pop” Buell, the Indiana farmer who ran the U.S. government's refugee relief program in Xieng Khouang province, had such a direct impact on Hmong, and approached Jerry Daniels in popularity. It might be said, though, that Morrison's real subject in this book is the culture gap between Hmong and the *Mee-ka*, the white Americans. Daniels' early death, his funeral in Montana, and the intense legends that sprung up about him, make him an ideal subject for Morrison's subtle, astute explorations of cross-cultural differences.

Morrison's third and last book in the trilogy, *Deep Tears: Post-War Hmong Resistance in Laos (1975-1990)*, is more difficult to like but should not be underestimated. The long-running postwar Hmong resistance against the communist Pathet Lao regime was a bummer. It had no chance of succeeding without the support of the Americans and the Thais, who had already withdrawn their military forces. And yet the resistance went on for decades, until about 2007 – propelled by the famous stubbornness of the Hmong, by individual leaders in Laos and Thailand and their delusions (and their lack of reliable information about the outside world), by a cast of shady American supporters, and by cynical Hmong-American fundraisers, who conveniently kept much of the money they raised in the States in their own pockets.

Who wants to read about such a colossal failure? Not a lot of people. In the short term, *Deep Tears* probably won't have many buyers. But the long term verdict of this book will, I believe, be appreciative and favorable. The resistance events Morrison chronicled *happened*, far

from the gaze of the rest of the world, but they *happened*. They consumed tens of thousands of lives. They were a postscript, a coda, to the Laos war itself. They took time and energy away from the difficult but ultimately successful effort for Hmong to resettle in the U.S. And until Morrison researched them and wrote them up with exquisite care, and with flawless scholarship, they had been little known or largely forgotten.

Today's young Hmong-Americans who have grown up in comfort with their cars and their cell phones, who don't know Laos themselves, but who want to understand what their parents and grandparents went through, would be wise to get a copy and dip into the pages. Though the physical book hasn't been bound in leather and given the respect it deserves, it's a beautifully designed, well-printed trade paperback, easily available through Amazon. It is a must-have for any serious Hmong-centric library.

Beyond its discouraging subject, what makes *Deep Tears* a bit of a tough read is its length (about 500 pages), its extraordinary level of detail (for example, about which foods could be foraged from the jungle), and its structure. It doesn't have a single, unified story arc the way most books and movies do. Instead it is a mosaic of many micro-stories that cumulatively tell a vast, sprawling saga.

Believe it or not, I think Morrison made all the right choices, given her material and her chosen career as an oral historian. She is a completionist, not a summarizer. Since she had the information on edible jungle foods, for example, obtained through her first-hand interviews, laboriously transcribed, she wanted to share it with her readers (whether they might be future eighth graders doing a book report or university PhD candidates writing their dissertations). And in doing so, in putting such a comprehensive book together, she also created a gold mine of

material for future playwrights, screenplay writers, movie producers, and other writers and artists.

Her use of different voices in the oral history format – first one person contributing a couple of sentences, then the next contributing several paragraphs, and so on – lends itself to stage adaptations with a small cast of actors. If you are sceptical, just check out her first chapter. With economy and grace, it covers the transition from the fall of Long Cheng to the beginning of a general uprising and resistance. Her technique is flawless, and there are other parts of the book that lend themselves to the stage treatment, too. As well as to other media.

Take, for example, the idea of a “shao,” which to the best of my recollection had never before been written up well in mainstream English-language literature. A shao, as Morrison explains, is a self-appointed mystic leader, “a fortuneteller, a person to call to the gods, a person with magic.” The first shao to show up in her book is Shao Nhia Pao Thao, who in the power vacuum created by Gen. Vang Pao’s sudden departure in 1975 became “like a president for the Hmong” in a region northwest of Long Cheng. Says a former major in Gen. Vang Pao’s army, Chong Moua Vang, “Most of the civilian people there believe shao. We former military officers don’t really believe what shao says but we listen to him and say, ‘Yes, yes.’ In our minds we already know that there is no magic but we have no choice. We need to protect our families and now there is no other leader.”

Shao Nhia Pao Thao was a forerunner of the spiritually-influenced resistance category that came to be known as the Chao Fa, the Lords of the Sky. When the communist government fired their fearsome long-range 130 mm artillery near a cave entrance his resistance group was living in, this shao declared, “No, don’t worry about it! They can shoot anything they want but I have the sky horse. When the Pathet Lao come to attack us we can ride the horse to the sky. Fire

will burn the ground, water will come up, and every enemy will die. After that we can come back to stay on earth.”

The communists stepped up their artillery attacks on the cave entrance, bombed the resistance villagers by plane, and then sent in ground forces to finish the job. Said Cha Phia Chue, a former first lieutenant in Vang Pao's army, “‘Shao, this is the last minute! You must pray magic for the Pathet Lao to see! Make them scared!’ Before that, the shao had lots of power to call for help from the sky god, call the rain to come, call the wind to come. This time shao is scared and runs in and out of the cave, crying, while the Pathet Lao bomb us – *boom, boom, boom boom!* I say, ‘Don't run! Call the gods! Make us strong again!’

“Shao prays; he calls out, ‘Where is my father Vang Pao? Can you help the Hmong people? This time we really have trouble!’

“I say, ‘Really? You are calling to Vang Pao?’ He says ‘Yes.’”

“I say, ‘Oh, you have nothing. Zero.’”

And thus, under enemy fire, the shao's pretense and blustering were exposed as a fraud.

After nine days of bombing, two thousand resistance people were hiding in a cave in a mountain called Pha Ngu, which means Snake Mountain, on the western side of the Nam Ngum river. Corpses were piled high outside the cave entrance. There was a rumor, unconfirmed, that the cave had a back entrance, hard to find. Said Mai Vue, a woman then twenty years old, “When we first got to that cave the men searched inside the big snake hole but they did not tell the rest of us anything about it. Now they say that we can escape through that hole down to the Nam Ngum River. ... Before we leave, the families who have the old people get together and talk with the elders. The old people say they know they cannot make it out. They say they are willing to stay there and die in the cave. The life left for them is short and they have nothing for the future.

Just let the young people get out. Then the families move all the old people to one section of the cave where they will have water ... A lot of words pass between the family members, crying and crying. It is very hard on them. We say we will try to return, then we leave ...

“We carry torches so we can see our way through that tunnel. The mouth of the tunnel inside the cave is a hole with a drop-off, like a cliff. At the bottom of the cliff it is level and there is a little stream. It is not a straight path for us. At some points there is just a tiny hole we have to crawl through one by one. Other places it is wide and everybody can walk easily. We go down, down, down. We follow the water all the way down through the tunnel. Sometimes the stream drops off and we lose it for awhile then it shows up again. There are so many people going through the tunnel that you don't have a lonely feeling.

“It takes us one whole night to get all the way to the bottom of the mountain, where the water flows out. We get there just as daylight comes up. We wait until night comes again then we sneak out of that area and we cross the Nam Ngrum River. I know we are going to Phou Bia” (the tallest mountain in Laos, covered in jungle, a resistance refuge). “There's nowhere else to go. If you don't go there, you might die. If you go, maybe you will live to see tomorrow.”

Today there might be Hmong-Americans living the prosperous high-tech life who find the idea of superstitious shao embarrassing, but outsiders find it fascinating. The shao's fall and the escape from Pha Ngu might well find its way to Hollywood. Not necessarily in a movie about the Hmong, by the way. It is easy to imagine a writer's room for, say, a second-rate spinoff from the Star Wars series. A table in the writer's room will be piled high with books, and the writers are deperately skimming through them for inspiration, to come up with the plot for an episode on a planet a long time ago and far, far away.

It's not hard to imagine a writer on such a series saying, "Look. I got it! Here's something we adapt. A popular resistance rises, headed by a shaman-like figure who says he is invulnerable to bullets. People desperate for a leader crowd around him, until the enemy bombardment exposes him as a fake, and then there is a mass escape through a hole in the back of a cave to at least temporary safety." But the Hollywood writers would change the names of the people and the planets – and Gayle Morrison would not get paid, and wouldn't even get mentioned in the credits.

That brings us to the context in which *Deep Tears* appears – the crowded and rapidly changing contemporary media landscape.

#####

A generation or two ago, books were treated with more respect than they are now. In today's electronic era, books are less likely to be mentioned around the dinner table or at parties than whatever is new and noteworthy on Amazon Prime or Netflix. Information, in general, gets ground up into scraps, re-used, recycled. Wages are low in the infotainment industry and people need to work fast. The old copyright laws, which were meant to reserve rights to creators, are nearly meaningless. And what used to be called plagiarism is now a normal business practice.

I am guessing that Morrison undertook this project with three goals in mind, the same three goals that all historians have. The first was to reveal facts that she felt were important and that had not been told before (or at least hadn't been told well in relation to their significance). This she has done, with integrity and first-rate scholarship. Now anyone wanting to look into the post-war Hmong resistance will have a reliable source.

The second goal is either to make money or make an impact – to be recognized. Here it is almost inevitable that she will be disappointed, because she hasn't written a potboiler. In the near-term, a likely outcome is that other writers and artists will borrow, steal, and adapt from her work, either in little pieces or wholesale, without giving her any credit. That's just the way the media world works these days. (I am speaking from experience: A history of the Laos war that I wrote in the 1990s, called *Back Fire* in hardcover, and relabelled as *Shooting At The Moon* in softcover, has been plagiarized at least twice.)

The third goal that all historians have is to make a breakthrough – to make an apathetic and media-saturated public aware that the events portrayed had a real importance, and that it might even change the way they look at the world. Unfortunately, it can be argued that nobody's made a real breakthrough in terms of mainstream America's awareness of the Hmong saga. There have been some critical successes and near-breakthroughs: Clint Eastwood's film *Gran Torino*, Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, and Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer*, for example. It might be argued that Gayle Morrison's three books taken together belong in this category of critical successes, and as I said earlier my personal opinion is that her *Hog's Exit* is a masterpiece. But none of these works about the Hmong has made the kind of deep and permanent impact on American culture as, say, the Civil War, or World War II. The Hmong story is an American story, but mainstream America doesn't see that, yet.

What, then, will be the impact of *Deep Tears*? It will be a source book, likely to enrich others more than it enriches its creator. But if a big, well-funded, well-curated museum to Hmong history ever arises, I hope Morrison receives a lifetime achievement award for her body of work. She deserves it.