

## Grateful to be in America

[By Nancy Pasternack/Appeal-Democrat](#)

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The fading map of a U.S. military installation serves now as a reminder of his last home in Laos.

East Linda resident Tong Vue, 58, spent his young adult years in the mountains near Long Cheng, the primary base of U.S. military operations in Laos from 1961 to 1975.

He says that as one of the 39,000 Hmong guerrillas who fought in the Secret War — a CIA-led campaign against North Vietnamese-backed Communists — he helped supply food and weapons to his countrymen and U.S. troops in the jungles near the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Now, the wall-mounted map and framed photos of three of his sons in U.S. military uniforms remind him of his allegiance to his new country.

Two of those sons are deployed by the U.S. Army in Iraq. A third is serving an Air Force tour in South Korea after two tours in Iraq.

"We are citizens of this country now, and we have to help the government," says Vue, who works as a cabinet maker in Yuba City.

His wife, Chee Vue, 57, nods in agreement.

The American flag that flies in front of their house helps announce this sentiment to others in the neighborhood.

Not all Hmong refugees in the area are as unequivocal in their patriotism, explains Bright Vue, 27, the couple's third son and their first child born in the U.S.

When U.S. troops and leadership pulled out of Laos in 1975, they left behind thousands of the mountain tribespeople who had supported them.

The widespread killing that followed still weighs on the minds of elders in the area's Hmong communities, Bright Vue says.

"A lot of them do feel betrayed. At the same time, they are grateful now to be in the U.S.," he says.

A flat-screen TV stands in the corner of the Vues' living room and a computer screen features an ongoing slide show of family photographs.

These attest to a cultural overhaul the Vue family has undergone in the 20 years since their tribal hunter-gatherer roots in East Asia were severed, permanently.

They escaped Laos in 1978 — three years after being left behind by U.S. forces. Dozens of family members and friends had been lost in those years.

"My mom is heartbroken about what happened to their homeland," says Bright Vue, when he sees his mother's eyes become glossy.

They spent a year at Ban Vinai, a sprawling refugee camp in Thailand where most Mid-Valley Hmong families have some history.

Tong and Chee Vue, and their four then-small children, were finally expatriated to the U.S., by way of a host family in Indiana.

"It was a big shock," says Chee Vue, by way of her son Bright's interpreting skills.

"They didn't know how to use the utilities around the (sponsor's) house," says Bright Vue.

"Over here is the first time we see a faucet," says Tong Vue, laughing.

"They had to learn how to use a stove and to use the restroom," said Bright Vue. "Their sponsor had to show them."

But the biggest change, said his mother, was that the family no longer struggled to find food.

The Vues' 10 children have assimilated to Western culture to varying degrees. Their two eldest daughters married Hmong men in Georgia, where they now live. The rest attended Alicia Intermediate School and Lindhurst High School. The youngest is now a high school freshman.

Bright Vue recently graduated from California State University at Northridge.

Hmong kids in his generation, he says, are caught between two worlds and two different sets of expectations — those from their parents' culture, "and the way that modern society here wants me to behave."

But, he says, all his family members share the same strong feelings for their adoptive country.

"They know that America is a good country," he says.

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