

Morrison, Gayle L. *Hog's Exit: Jerry Daniels, the Hmong, and the CIA*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2013. 431 pages.

Reviewed by Dr. Nengher N. Vang

Hmong Studies Journal, 15(1): 1-5.

***Hog's Exit: Jerry Daniels, the Hmong, and the CIA*, by Gayle L. Morrison. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2013. 431 pages. Review by Nengher N. Vang.**

It was late 1960 when CIA operative William James Lair first made contact with anticommunist Hmong leader General Vang Pao, then a lieutenant colonel of the Royal Lao Army (RLA), in the mountains near the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang Province, northern Laos. From 1961 to 1973, the United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Air America, provided training, money and logistical support to tens of thousands of Hmong and other ethnic minority groups in a covert operation against the communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army in what has become known as the Secret War in Laos. During that period, the Hmong served in both the regular RLA and the Special Guerilla Units (SGU) paramilitary units authorized by the RLA but directly supported by the CIA. At the height of the war in 1969, forty thousand Hmong were in the SGU. Some Hmong became pilots and flew on air strike missions. Others were spies and radio operators gathering critical intelligence on the movement of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops. As America's foot soldiers, many Hmong and other minority groups risked their lives to rescue American pilots shot down by Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese gunners, often paying a heavy cost in lives. Yet, after the United States signed the peace treaty with the communists to end its involvement in the war in 1973, it withdrew all funding to the Royal Lao Government and the RLA, of which the SGU had been a subset, and left the region, leaving its allies—both Hmong and those from other ethnic groups—entirely on their own to defend themselves. The United States made its final evacuation of American military personnel from Laos on 14 May 1975, one day before the communists took over the country.

Gayle L. Morrison documented the tumultuous evacuation of 2,500 Hmong from Long Cheng, the "secret city" where the military headquarters of the CIA and General Vang Pao was based during the war, and abandonment of tens of thousands of other Hmong who flooded Long Cheng airbase on 14 May hoping to be airlifted with American military personnel to safety in her first work, *Sky Is Falling: An Oral History of the CIA's Evacuation of the Hmong from Laos*, published by McFarland & Company in 1999. *Hog's Exit: Jerry Daniels, the Hmong, and the CIA* is Morrison's second work on the CIA and the Hmong. Like *Sky Is Falling*, *Hog's Exit* is an oral history told through the oral testimonies of individuals who knew or worked with Jerry Daniels, including his family members, Hmong and non-Hmong friends, former CIA agents, U.S. State Department officials, as well as newspaper reports, letters, and declassified government cables. Unlike *Sky Is Falling*, however, *Hog's*

Exit centers on just one character rather than a whole population. *Hog's Exit* is, in short, an oral history of Jerry Daniel's life and death, his connection to the CIA and the Hmong, and his role in the Secret War in Laos in the 1960s and early 1970s.

There are four parts to the book. There are three chapters each in the first two parts. The third part is the longest with twenty-one chapters while the fourth part is the shortest with only two chapters. In twenty-nine chapters, Morrison deals with a wide range of issues: Daniels' childhood, passion for outdoor adventure, and early career as a smokejumper in Montana; his arrival and employment as a "cargo kicker" with Air America and the CIA in Laos in 1961; his assignment as an air operations officer working directly with the Hmong at Lima Site 36, Na Khang, in Military Region 2 from 1965 to 1968; his transfer to Long Cheng to work directly with Vang Pao as his case officer/advisor and the CIA's chief of operations from 1970 to 1973; his vital role in the evacuation of the Hmong from Long Cheng to Thailand on 14 May 1975; his decision to stay in Thailand to work as a refugee coordinator for the U.S. State Department Refugee Program after the fall of Laos to communism; his role in the resettlement of Hmong refugees in his hometown of Missoula, Montana; his mother's influence on his life and work; his problem with binge drinking and passion for women; and his three-day funeral ceremony in Montana organized by his Hmong friends and former comrades-in-arms. She devotes multiple chapters to Daniels's role in the Secret War in Laos in the 1960s and early 1970s alone (e.g., chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, and 19).

The crux of *Hog's Exit*, however, is found in the first two chapters of Part I and the last two chapters of the book (chapters 28-29 of Part IV). It is in these chapters that Morrison deals with the mystery and controversy surrounding Daniels' untimely death in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1982. The official account was that Daniels was discovered in his apartment three days after he had not shown up for work, and that he had died from carbon monoxide poisoning due to a faulty gas water heater. Daniels' family members and many of his Hmong and non-Hmong friends were, however, were unconvinced by the U.S. government's account of Daniels' death. The medical examiner in Missoula at the time of Daniels' death, Dr. Ron Rivers, also questioned the veracity and reliability of the government's account. As Ted O. "Little O" Lympus, a high school and college friend of Daniels and a prosecutor for Flathead County at the time of Daniels' death in 1982, recalled, "I told Dr. Rivers what the U.S. Embassy told us, and he said it was not consistent. He said if Jerry was on the bed passed out drunk, asleep, or whatever—if there had been either LP gas or CO leaking into the room, both are heavier than air and would have flowed to the floor. It would not have reached him up on the bed" (p. 366). Not only that, Daniels' family never received any proof that an autopsy was done on the body to determine the cause of his death. Moreover, although Daniels' body was sent home to Missoula, it was sent in a sealed casket with official order by the U.S. Department of State to keep the casket closed. His body, State Department officials explained, was so disfigured and decomposed that it would endanger the health of the people who came near or into contact with the body. Secret CIA operatives were also sent to Daniels' funeral to make sure that no one was violating the order. Adding to the mystery, the young Thai man who was found barely alive with Daniels in the apartment and believed to have also been a victim of carbon monoxide poisoning had mysteriously disappeared after he was hospitalized.

Growing up in the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand, which I called home from 1980 to 1987, I often heard my father and other Hmong elders mention the name "Jerry" in their conversations about Hmong life in Laos. They all spoke lovingly of the man they called Jerry. From the bits and pieces of the stories that I heard, it was apparent that Daniels had made a huge impact on the Hmong. I, however, knew little about Daniels or why he was so adored by the Hmong. Morrison shows why in *Hog's Exit*. Unlike other Americans, Daniels went "native" in Laos. He lived with the Hmong in their houses, and he learned and spoke their language. He raised geese, participated in rooster fights, watched bullfights, rode bulls, and went wild chicken hunting with the Hmong. He ate whatever they ate and always told them the truth. As Randolph "Toby" Scott, a former smokejumper and Continental Air Services (CASI) loadmaster in Laos recalled, "Jerry stayed there and lived with them. Whatever food they were eatin', he never turned it down. If he had to eat monkey or bat, he'd sit right beside them and join in. If they went two weeks without a bath, he did, too.... He was the only guy the CIA had that would go out and live with the Hmong and respect them and talk to them and not lie to them or feed them with a bunch of crap" (p. 52-53). In May 1975, days before the communists took power in Laos, Daniels orchestrated at great personal risk the air evacuation of Vang Pao and 2,500 of the CIA's beleaguered Hmong allies from Long Cheng airbase to Thailand, which Morrison chronicled extensively in *Sky Is Falling*. Most of all, after Laos fell to communism and other Americans who worked with the Hmong in Laos had returned home in America, Daniels stayed with the Hmong in Thailand and worked until his death in 1982 to resettle thousands of Hmong refugees in America, including Vang Pao and many of his Hmong comrades-in-arms to his hometown.

One other contribution that Morrison makes in this book that I especially appreciate is her careful documentation and extensive endnotes on the Hmong funeral rituals and proceedings as performed at Daniels' funeral, providing one of only a few accounts in English of the Hmong funeral process available to date. She describes the washing and dressing of the deceased and setting up of the *qeej* and the drum to prepare for the ceremony; the "showing the way" or *qhuab ke* ceremony, the funeral chant phases of the ceremony, and the playing of the *qeej* instrument on the first or opening day of the funeral (chapters 10, 13 and 16); the rituals on the "visiting day" or *hnuab qhua txws* and the symbolic importance of gifts and monetary donations (chapter 21) on the second day; and the playing of the "leaving song" or *qeej sawv kev* and the burial on the third day or *hnuab sam sab* in chapters 25 and 27.

Like a good mystery writer, Morrison also keeps the readers on edge right from the start. She presents the mysterious circumstances surrounding Daniels' death at the start of the book and keeps them guessing on what really happened and anticipating an answer by the end of the book. Through the oral testimonies that she has collected, Morrison has successfully shown how it was impossible for Daniels to die from the gas leak the way that the U.S. government said Daniels did. Regrettably, however, Morrison does not draw any conclusion on what happened. As a consequence, the readers are left with an unsolved mystery and plenty of speculation and unanswered questions—the very questions for which Daniels' friends and family members had demanded answers from the U.S. Department of State more than three decades ago but never got them, questions such as

what caused Daniels' death? Did Daniels really die? How did his body become so disfigured and rotten after being dead for just three days? Was it really his body in the sealed casket because the casket was too small for his size? Was he sent on a secret mission to Afghanistan, Nicaragua, or another country somewhere in the world? Who was the "mystery" man who kept calling Daniels with threatening messages weeks before he died? Was he a victim of communist assassination through chemical or gas poisoning? Was he killed by his own government in order to stop him from disclosing classified information and going public about the U.S. secret operations in Southeast Asia and other locations around the world? Was there a cover up? Was this the reason for the sealed casket, as there was no apparent indication of any health risk? Why was the U.S. government so ready to take the report of the Thai government at face value without conducting its own investigation especially when Daniels was a U.S. federal government employee? Was Daniels alive in Russia hunting polar bears as seen in a picture years later at a local sports warehouse in Missoula?

Like a good oral historian, Morrison has also put together an impressive oral history documentary to tell the complicated story of Daniels' life and especially the mystery and lingering controversy of his death. She devoted ten years to the project, interviewed nearly one hundred individuals who knew or worked with Daniels, carefully transcribed and edited her interviews, and selected the most compelling quotes and stories from her interviews for the book. But a different format, such as a biography, would have been more effective. Not only is the oral history format that Morrison employs in this book repetitive, it makes it unnecessarily difficult for the readers to get a good grasp of Daniels' biography. To get a basic narrative of Daniels' life, readers would have to construct one on their own using the brief sketch of Daniel's life in the introduction and the chronology of events that Morrison provides. Most of all, the oral history format might also be responsible for the disorganization of the book, which again makes it difficult for the readers to follow the events in Daniels' life. The book jumps back and forth between life in Southeast Asia and life in America (e.g., chapters 1-3 on events in Laos and Thailand and then chapters 4-5 on life in Missoula, Montana, and then back to life in Laos in chapter 6). There is also no apparent effort to group chapters with similar themes together to show continuity and connection between the chapters and the narrative. The discussion of Daniels' involvement in the Secret War in Laos, for example, is spread out in chapter 3 of part I, chapter 6 of part II, chapters 7-9 and 19 of part III. Similarly, Hmong funeral rites are discussed separately in parts of chapters 10, 13, 16, 21, 25, 27. Writing *Hog's Exit* as a biography that moves chronologically from Daniels' birth to his death and subsequent funeral ceremony in Montana would still have allowed Morrison to incorporate the many voices that she does in its current format and make it easier for those who are less familiar with history of the Secret War in Laos and the Hmong to follow.

These flaws and shortcomings, however, should not obscure or trivialize the immense contribution of this work to our understanding of the importance of Jerry Daniels to the Hmong and the history of the Secret War in Laos, the CIA, and the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s. After all, Morrison produced a remarkable work of oral history to show why Jerry Daniels was so loved by the Hmong and why the official account of Daniels' death should not be taken at

face value but challenged and disputed. *Hog's Exit*, in the final analysis, remains an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the Secret War in Laos, the history of the CIA, U.S. interventions overseas, oral history methodology, the Hmong and their culture, particularly the Hmong funeral process, and anyone else who has ever wondered why and how the Hmong came to America or why Missoula became the site of one of the earliest Hmong communities in the U.S.

Author Contact Info:

Dr. Nengher Vang
Elizabeth City State University
Department of Social and Behavior Sciences
1704 Weeksville Road
Elizabeth City, NC 27909
Email: nnvang@mail.ecsu.edu
Phone: (651) 343-3768

Author's Bio:



Nengher N. Vang has a Ph.D in History and Master's degrees in Peace Studies and Theology. He is an Assistant Professor of History in the Department of Social and Behavior Sciences at Elizabeth City State University, where he teaches US global relations, immigration history, public history, world religions, and modern Asia. His research interests are US-Asia relations, social movements, refugee migration, and the transnational politics of diasporic communities in the US with an emphasis on the Hmong.