

The Dog At The Camp

by Bryan Thao Worra

Npua ua rau dev noj
Pigs do and dogs eat.
—Hmong aphorism

Adapted from an interview with Corporal Kou Her, 62 years old, Saint Paul, Minnesota, September 2000 for the Hmong History Collection Project.

Captain Yee thought he was some kind of tough guy. During the war, he, like many of us, watched a certain royalist colonel stationed in Xieng Khouang province make his points by shooting a stray dog in front of the troops every day. It was some sort of an object lesson. I never saw much sense in it, but that may be why I never became an officer.

As for Captain Yee, he'd seen the good life officers lived, and that's why he pestered his father until he got his way. They made "donations" to enough of the right people in the army to get him a small command a few months earlier. My sister-in-law, who now lives in Merced, used to baby-sit him and his brothers before the war. She says they were always like that.

After the colonel arrived to motivate us, Captain Yee thought to himself, "That's the lifestyle I deserve to be living." So he began following the colonel about, emulating everything he did like some puppy in a uniform. Captain Yee even started shooting stray dogs too.

Now, I'm not a dog lover. The beasts aren't good for much more than eating poop and licking babies clean, as far as I'm concerned. But there was enough death going on in our country that I didn't see why we had to kill dogs so senselessly.

Whether the colonel knew and was flattered or insulted by this ridiculous behavior was anyone's guess. We for the most part just tried to keep our heads down and stay alive. That task alone was damn harder for us than most people would think.

It's no secret I didn't care for Captain Yee. The feeling was reciprocal. I doubt he really had our unit's best interests at heart as he sent us out on patrol after patrol and his "special missions." He thought it made him a better officer if he volunteered us for the suicide runs no one else wanted.

He became predictable that way. Some people mistake that for dependability.

He was always losing men and saying idiotic remarks like, "The greater the glory, the higher the costs," while he stayed back with the other officers planning our next day.

I suppose many of the Americans were impressed with him and his ability to motivate his troops. There was talk of promoting him to major in a few months, and giving him more men to manage.

It was my lousy luck to be assigned to him. And it was my lousy luck he got us assigned one of the most hazardous sectors to patrol, one that most of the locals considered haunted, just west of Sam Neua. This kind of luck of mine is why I don't play cards today.

Back then, anyone who saw those old gnarled trees and the blasted landscape charred by our constant shell- ing would know why it was rightfully thought accursed. Sensible men wouldn't set foot near that hellhole.

But this was the Army, and we don't have the luxury to steer clear of such places, because the Americans, from their relative safety at Long Cheng, were determined to cut the enemy off at any cost.