

# **Minnesota Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Task Force**

## **Meeting 3 Summary – October 27, 2025**

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| Date     | October 27, 2025                           |
| Time     | 10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.                      |
| Location | Veterans Service Building (Hybrid – Teams) |

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### **1. Call to Order**

Chair Pha called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. Roll call was conducted by Vice Chair Johnson. Quorum was confirmed.

### **2. Opening Remarks (Chair Pha)**

Chair Pha welcomed members and noted minor additions to the agenda. The day's focus was to provide historical and legislative context regarding the Secret War in Laos, review the origins and legislative intent behind the 2025 Session Law, and begin defining criteria for veteran eligibility. Chair Pha emphasized that this conversation represents the beginning of several sessions dedicated to refining eligibility criteria. Public comment would occur at the end of the meeting.

### **3. Legislative Intent Overview (Rep. Ethan Cha & Chair Pha)**

Rep. Cha provided an overview of the legislative history behind the bill (SF 1959/Chapter 30). He explained that the initiative emerged from community interest in recognizing refugees and immigrants who served with a special guerrilla unit or with irregular forces that operated from a base in Laos in support of the armed forces of the United States during the Vietnam War period. The law has bipartisan support and was designed to honor and extend certain state veteran benefits to these individuals.

Chair Pha reiterated that the law's scope was always intended to include all irregular forces operating in Laos under U.S. direction from 1961 to 1975, not solely Hmong veterans. The Task Force's charge is to recommend clear criteria and a verification process consistent with the legislative framework.

Mr. Walker expressed concern that the conversation may have broadened the scope beyond what was legislated. Chair Pha and Rep. Cha clarified that irregular forces were explicitly included within the statutory definition and that the legislative intent was to be inclusive of all ethnic groups meeting the operational criteria outlined in law. Professor Lee Pao Xiong confirmed this understanding, noting that multiple groups contributed to the drafting process and that the statute reflects inclusivity.

#### **4. Secret War Historical Overview**

a. **Professor Lee Pao Xiong, Concordia University**

Professor Xiong provided a comprehensive historical overview of the Secret War in Laos, referencing CIA Operation Momentum and the organization of Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs). He explained that the SGUs were covert units funded, trained, and directed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency ("CIA") to support U.S. strategic objectives during the Vietnam conflict. He clarified the distinction between regular and irregular forces, noting that the Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) were irregular formations organized outside the formal structure of the Royal Lao Armed Forces.

Professor Xiong emphasized that the statute's reference to operations "from a base in Laos" was consistent with historical missions conducted under the direction of U.S. personnel. He also emphasized the inclusion of diverse ethnic groups (49 in total) who fought under the SGU structure. He noted that the Special Guerrilla Units played a critical role in rescuing downed American pilots, gathering intelligence, and supporting broader U.S. operations in the region.

Task Force members discussed the need for greater clarity regarding who qualifies as a member of a Special Guerrilla Unit or other irregular forces. Mr. Walker emphasized the importance of ensuring that the final legislative report clearly delineates inclusion and exclusion criteria. Chair Pha reaffirmed that the statute limits eligibility to individuals who were recruited, trained, and paid by the Central Intelligence Agency to operate in Laos.

b. **Statement for the Record - (C.I.A. Guerrilla Operations in Laos (1961-1975) -**

**Presentation - U.S. Covert & Irregular Operations in Southeast Asia (1961-1975) - Legislative Overview) - Thomas Briggs**

Mr. Briggs, a former CIA case officer, provided an eyewitness account of the Secret War in Laos. He described his experience training village defense units and the subsequent transition of these groups into SGUs. He emphasized that CIA operations during the period did not maintain formal personnel documentation, which complicates present-day verification efforts. Mr. Briggs cautioned that falsified or unreliable records could surface and underscored the importance of relying on verified primary sources whenever possible.

Chair Pha invited suggestions regarding potential methods of verification. Mr. Briggs advised caution in relying on unverified affidavits or photographs, noting the absence of centralized personnel records from the period. The following factors were identified for consideration when determining eligibility:

- Sworn affidavits verified under penalty of perjury
- Photographic evidence, including authenticated training photographs
- Command identification through reference to known officers or unit leaders
- Age parameters consistent with the historical period of service

It was noted that federal precedent under the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000 provides a model for verification processes. MDVA could review that framework to help inform the Task Force's forthcoming recommendations. Members discussed defining 'irregular forces' as a key next step to reduce ambiguity.

MDVA staff summarized the eligibility criteria outlined under the Naturalization Act, referencing H. Rept. 106-563 (106th Congress) – Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000:

**SEC. 4. DOCUMENTATION OF QUALIFYING SERVICE.**

A person seeking an exemption under section 2 or special consideration under section 3 shall submit to the Attorney General documentation of their, or their spouse's, service with a special guerrilla unit, or irregular forces, described in section 2(1)(B), in the form of--

- (1) original documents;
- (2) an affidavit of the serving person's superior officer;
- (3) two affidavits from other individuals who also were serving with such a special guerrilla unit, or irregular forces, and who personally knew of the person's service; or
- (4) other appropriate proof.

The statute directs MDVA to await legislative approval of criteria before issuing eligibility certificates. The Task Force must finalize recommendations by February 15, 2026.

## **5. Public Comment**

No members of the public requested to speak.

## **6. Closing Discussion and Next Steps**

Mr. Kirk inquired about the estimated number of SGU and irregular forces veterans in Minnesota that would be affected. Chair Pha estimated that between 1,000 and 2,000 individuals may qualify, noting that the precise number remains uncertain.

Mr. Walker introduced a motion, which was tabled until Meeting 4 due to time constraints. Vice Chair Johnson requested additional time for members to review the motion independently prior to the next meeting.

Members were encouraged to email suggestions regarding eligibility criteria ahead of the next meeting.

Next meeting will be held on November 13 from 2:00 – 4:00 pm. It is intended to get into the eligibility criteria in greater detail at this meeting.

## **7. Meeting was adjourned** at 12:01 p.m.

## Action Items

| Action Item   | Responsible Party    | Due Date / Follow-Up   |
|---|----------------------|------------------------|
| Compile list of possible eligibility documentation types to begin a master table for Task Force                           | Bill Strusinski      | Prior to Meeting 4     |
| Share Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act verification process summary to serve as a reference model for Task Force review | MDVA                 | Prior to Meeting 4     |
| Distribute Mr. Walker's written motion to Task Force Members  | MDVA Staff           | Prior to Meeting 4     |
| Develop draft definition for 'Irregular Forces'   | Task Force Workgroup | Prior to Meeting 4     |
| Post meeting summary and materials on MDVA website  | MDVA Communications  | Within 3 business days |

Note Taker: Shambrie Lesniak

Next Meeting: November 13, 2025 (2:00–4:00 p.m.)

Location: Veterans Service Building / Microsoft Teams