



## Hmong-American patriot recognized by Air Force chief of staff

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Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs

4/2/2010 - **WASHINGTON (AFNS)** -- Presumed dead for decades, a Royal Laotian Air Force fighter pilot received recognition from the Air Force's top uniformed officer here March 31 for his contributions during the Vietnam War.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz presented Yia Kha with a certificate of appreciation for his role aiding forward air control operations for seven years.

Much of his time served was during extensive combat operations, in which Mr. Kha's aircraft often sustained heavy anti-aircraft fire. In spite of this, then 1st Lt. Kha returned to the air over the battlefield to stave off the enemy and save the lives of fellow Laotian and American comrades.

General Schwartz described Mr. Kha's courageous rescue efforts while stationed at Long Tieng as "nothing less than heroic." He performed his duties faithfully despite bad weather, dangerous mountain terrain and constant ground fire.

"His intellect, loyalty to the mission and, most importantly, courage ... are certainly traits that we in our Air Force will always cherish," the general said.

The general shared the story of the Ravens, a group of American Cessna O-1 Bird Dog pilots in Laos. In slow, low-flying aircraft, the Ravens' job was to find the target, call up fighter-bombers, mark targets with smoke rockets, control the operation and make bomb damage assessments.

Supporting these Ravens was a handful of Hmong soldiers like Mr. Kha, who served as "backseater" aircrew. Known as Robins, the general said, these individuals learned English to translate radio messages. They also gained the rudimentary flying skills so they could land the planes in case the pilot became unconscious. The Hmong are a group of people indigenous to the mountains of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar.

General Schwartz compared the relationship between the Hmong counterparts and forward air controllers surveilling targets in unarmed aircraft to the modern-day mission of remotely piloted aircraft.

"Think about today's RPAs that use operators and sensors to find targets and communicate with ground control; they're not all that different," General Schwartz said.

Craig Duehring, the former Air Force assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and Reserve affairs, was Raven 27, a forward air controller who flew alongside Mr. Kha. Mr. Duehring shared an emotional account of his time with Robin 9, Mr. Kha, from September 1968 to December 1970.

In an excerpt from a letter to General Schwartz requesting a way to formally recognize his fellow Airman, he recounted, "I got to know all the Robins quite well ... but Yia Kha stood out from all the rest. He seemed to be with me every time we had a man on the ground or things got scary. The day I earned my Silver Star, I had another backseater with me. We got shot up a bit and were scared within an inch of our lives."

Mr. Duehring said he raced back to base to refuel and rearm after the skirmish.

"As soon as I hit the ground, the first backseater ran for his house, badly shaken," he said. "I knew I needed to return to the hotly contested area and needed a backseater. They all disappeared, except for one: Yia Kha, who appeared by the aircraft and said 'Raven 27, I will go with you.' And he did. Years ago, I was told by a Hmong



Yia Kha holds a certificate of appreciation he received from Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz during a ceremony March 31, 2010, in the Pentagon's Airmen's Hall. Mr. Kha received a certificate of appreciation from General Schwartz for his role in aiding forward air controllers during the Vietnam War. (U.S. Air Force photo/Scott Ash)

acquaintance that my friend, Yia Kha, had died in a helicopter crash during bad weather and for years I mourned his loss at the annual Raven reunions. I (recently) learned he was alive and living in southern Pennsylvania. I got his phone number and that call was unforgettable."

During the years that he was out of touch with Mr. Duehring and other Ravens, Mr. Kha actually went on to pilot training in Thailand and flew AT-28 aircraft in support of Laotians and Americans. Mr. Kha soon escaped Laos only to volunteer to continue helping his Hmong brethren in Thailand camps.

He and his wife, Bee, later gained citizenship in the U.S., where a church group sponsored them. The church group also helped Mr. Kha find employment in a metal shop where he still works today.

Mr. Kha expressed gratitude and humility as he addressed ceremony attendees.

"All that I've done for my family, friends and country comes from my desire to do my best," Mr. Kha said. "I thank God for saving my life and (am grateful that) through these years, my family and I found freedom, peace and jobs."