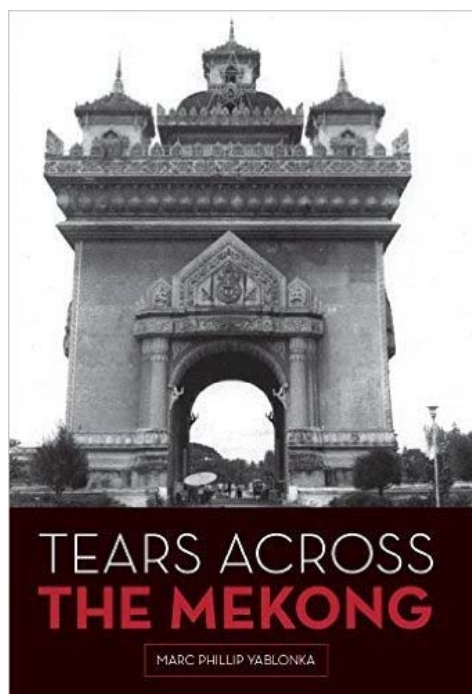




## Tears Across the Mekong by Marc Phillip Yablonka

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In 1983, former Green Beret Jim Morris (four Bronze Stars and four Purple Hearts) wrote a book called *War Story*. In it he wrote about fighting alongside Montagnards in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Morris convincingly made the point that the “Yards” were fighters unto themselves and never received the recognition they deserved.

In *Tears Across the Mekong* (Figueroa Press, 280 pp. \$25, paper), Marc Phillip Yablonka does an excellent job claiming that the same holds true for Hmong warriors from the highlands of Laos. Yablonka tells the Hmong story through interviews with those who escaped from Laos after the Pathet Lao communists took control of the nation in 1975.

A large majority of the interviewees were soldiers who fought for the CIA and the Royal Lao Government against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army during the so-called secret war in Laos. The men fought primarily in Northern Laos, but they also worked along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, conducted raids into North Vietnam, and in at least

one instance engaged Chinese infantrymen. Other interviewees had been schoolteachers and administrators—intellectuals the communists did not trust.

Hmong soldiers normally entered the army in their late teens and many fought for a decade or more. Hmong KIA numbered between 25,000 and 35,000. Misled by a false promise to build a free and democratic nation, 100,000 Hmong chose not to leave the country following the war’s end. They ended up in Pathet Lao re-education “seminars” that, for some, lasted more than ten years.

Life in the prison-like seminars consisted of hard labor and indoctrination lectures amid inadequate living conditions and occasional torture. Those who fell sick were allowed to die of “natural causes.” Little wonder that imprisoned Hmong fled at the first opportunity.

Escaping from the seminars and evading pirates when crossing the Mekong River into Thailand was merely half of the journey to freedom. Living conditions were only slightly better in Thailand where government officials stole from refugees, abused them verbally, and herded them into camps with

minimal accommodations. Some Hmong spent years getting visas and resettlement agreements. All of the people interviewed by Yablonka reached the United States.

For students of the evolution of governments in what once was French Indochina, Yablonka's interviews show that the communist tactics in Laos were comparable to those in Vietnam, but far less severe than those of the Cambodian Killing Fields.

Nevertheless, Hmong people who have found freedom still worry about relatives and friends remaining in Laos. They believe that the CIA and the U.S. government have forgotten their contribution to the war. Few have returned to Laos or want to do so. Yablonka echoes Hmong sentiments about the war and calls for worldwide programs to help them.

Interviews with two Air America helicopter pilots—Dick Casterlin and Allen Cates—provide histories of their unit's organization and background of the secret war. The brief histories are valuable reading because, as Yablonka reminds us, Laos was the “most under-reported and least visited” theater of the Vietnam War era.

The two pilots emphasize that Air America worked for the government and not the Central Intelligence Agency, one of its “customers.” Both men flew in Laos during the 1960s. Their favorite memories are of search-and-rescue missions.

Yablonka is a journalist whose articles have appeared in many military magazines. He served for eight years in the California State Military Reserve, a support brigade of the California National Guard and the U.S. Army Reserves, and did two tours with the Israeli Defense Force. *Tears Across the Mekong* evolved from his master's thesis. He was in college and had a high lottery number and did not participate in the Vietnam War, but he did tour Laos in 1990.

Because the interviewees share similar experiences, their individual stories contain repetitions that tighter editing could have eliminated. Furthermore, although biographies of the two helicopter pilots, of an Air America fixed-wing pilot, and of two foreign war correspondents are interesting, they say little about the continuing plight of the Hmong.

A reminder: Read Jim Morris' *War Story*. It's an honest-to-goodness prizewinner—and it complements Yablonka's perspective on Southeast Asian tribal warriors.

The author's website is [navigator-books.com/marcpyablonka](http://navigator-books.com/marcpyablonka)

—Henry Zeybel



Marc Phillip Yablonka