

Audio tour script

Viengxay Caves

MEDIA SCRIPT - ENGLISH

NARROWCASTERS
10 NOVEMBER 2009

1.

SAIBADEE/WELCOME

This is a Narrowcasters audio tour. It is an extensive tour that probably covers more caves than you will see today. Should that be the case, you may wish to return to the gardens of the Cave Office and listen to the remaining commentary.

We are standing in an extraordinary landscape. Extraordinary as much for what we don't see, as for what we do. The towering jagged peaks surrounding us conceal a vast network of caves. These caves were vitally important in the struggle for a nation free of colonial occupation and foreign domination.

From 1893 Laos was part of French Indochina, a colonial empire that included Vietnam and Cambodia. If you were here before the 1960s, all you would have seen were four small villages. These were traditional communities where people raised their children, ploughed their fields, and tended their animals, in much the same way as they had for hundreds of years.

The world's political climate changed dramatically after the Second World War. Global politics was defined by two political movements – anti-colonialism and the Cold War. These two sometimes conflicting ideologies, had a profound effect on the country. Many of Lao's political activists had studied in North Vietnam where they developed a communist ideology on which they based their plans for independence.

A major Lao nationalist movement was the Lao Patriotic Front, which eventually became known as the Pathet Lao. They established their power base in two provinces in the north-east of the country – here, in Houaphanh Province, and further north along the Chinese border, in Phongsali Province. These two mountainous regions became the left-wing revolutionary heartland of Laos.

When the French Indochinese Empire was formally dissolved in 1954, America began pouring money into Laos. The United States and other Western democracies did not want countries to establish socialist or communist governments. They feared this would increase the power of the Soviet Union, their Cold War enemy. The US wanted Laos to act as a buffer between communist North Vietnam and other countries in the region.

Their goal was to influence Laos's internal politics.

At the time, there were just one million people in the country, most of them, subsistence farmers. The influx of US dollars never reached them. Corruption kept the money concentrated in the cities, and a few well-placed officials became very, very rich.

There was much political instability. America was also spending a lot of money undermining local elections.

The increasing impact of this US influence, demonstrated to many patriots that the Lao people were still not in control their own destiny. Laos essentially became a victim of its own geography, and was caught between the escalating military conflict between the United States and Vietnam.

In the early days, America's support was purely financial, but slowly that shifted. They secretly built an airstrip at Long Cheng, a high plateau to the south-west of here, protected and hidden by the mountains. They stationed fighter planes there, as well as in Udon Thani, a huge airbase in Thailand. But unlike the war they were waging in Vietnam, which everyone saw on their TV screens, the battle for Laos was a well-kept secret.

Some of the secrets of the war are hidden in the mountains around us. The Pathet Lao and some neutralist politicians made their headquarters in the caves in and around Viengxay. The people who came to join the command centre of the resistance sheltered here from American bombs. For nine years – from 1964 until 1973 – they lived in the caves and took cover in the forests.

In one way or another, this conflict touched the lives of every person living in Laos... and continues to do so to this day.

2.

PRESIDENT KAYSONE PHOMVIHANE'S HOUSE

In 1963, after a series of political arrests and assassinations, many leaders and supporters of the Pathet Lao left Vientiane, and headed for the Plain of Jars. The Plain of Jars had become a fierce battleground, so the patriots continued on to Houaphan Province, the political heartland of the Pathet Lao.

The leadership first established a base in Xieng Xeu, a village seven kilometres from here. They didn't think it would remain safe enough, so they sent out scouts to find more permanent shelter. Mr Souvandy Sisavath was one of the scouts.

(11) SOUVANDY SISAVATH

06.30 – 09.17

The government guessed the US air raids would continue. So, that's why we had to move to Viengxay District. Mr Saly Vongkhamsao, the head of the central office, asked me to go to talk to the local people in Viengxay District. I met an employee, Mr Somchanh Thavikham and he helped me learn how many villages there were in that area. We went searching for caves and holes which the Revolutionary Party officials could use as hiding places.

They found this area which was then just a few small villages, and when Xieng Xeu was bombed, they moved to these caves where they could continue their work.

(11) SOUVANDY SISAVATH

11.04 –

On the 19th of April, 1964, while I was searching for suitable caves or holes, an American plane began shooting at a truck on its way to the central headquarters in Xieng Xeu Village. This was the first such attack in Viengxay. This is why the leaders moved their headquarters from Xieng Xeu to the caves in Viengxay. As each organisation found a suitable cave, they moved bit-by-bit between 1964 and 1965. Throughout this time the US bombing raids increased from three to four a day, up to more than nine or ten a day.

During the war years, people came from all around the country to join the revolution. One of the early arrivals was Ms Kongta Thammathong, a young school nurse.

(1) KONGTA THAMMATHONG:

1.37 – 3.22

I moved to Viengxay District because I felt great pride in the revolution, and wanted to be a part of it, working for my country, my people and myself. When I first arrived in Viengxay there was no village - there were only a few people, and some caves. The central office was already established in a simple traditional Lao style wooden house.

Others came to Viengxay at the request of the central organisation in Houaphanh Province. Ms Kounlavong and her husband, were both Pathet Lao agents operating secretly in Vientiane.

(17) MS Y. KOUNLAVONG

1.03.40 –

In 1966 I was ordered to move to the Centre. My husband and I went together. The journey was quite difficult and it took us one year to get there. We had to climb up and down many mountains. It was impossible to travel in a straight line because of enemy attacks so we had to make many detours. We travelled along the Mekong, mostly at night, walking up and down steep mountain sides.

Many orange trees grew on these mountains. Whenever you wanted to eat an orange you just kicked a tree and an orange fell down. When you wanted to sit down to relax you had to use your feet to steady the tree to make sure that oranges wouldn't fall on your head.

We slept in the forest. On the days that I met other people I was able to get some rice, but there were times when I had nothing to eat. This was the difficult part of my journey.

The caves were vital to the survival and operations of the leadership – but even their stone walls could not always keep the people safe. Mr Changsy Pengmany remembers a particular air attack that occurred on a September afternoon in 1967.

(38) CHANSY PENGMAN:

21.56 – 27.57

An F plane mounted an attack at Hang Cave where there were monks and a temple. The houses below the cave were set on fire first and then the fire spread upwards into the cave. It filled with smoke and the interior of the cave collapsed, killing six people.

My younger brother was one of the monks in the temple at that time. All their possessions were destroyed. This included the images of the Buddha, the gong, the cymbals, the bells, and the cupboards full of books. These were all completely destroyed.

As we stand in President Kaysone's peaceful garden, let me recount some cold, hard facts. From 1964 until 1973, over 2-million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos. That's about 20 tons per square kilometre, or two tons per person.

Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes. Three and a half thousand (3,500) villages in the Pathet Lao zone were almost entirely destroyed. This devastation cost the United States about seven billion dollars – or two million dollars a day. Because a lot of the areas which were bombed were very remote, we will never know how many people were killed.

Laos holds the sad record of being the most heavily bombed nation, per person, in history. And this legacy continues to affect everyone in the country. Unexploded ordnance, also referred to as UXO, remain hidden under the ground and can blow up at any time.

3. PRESIDENT KAYSONE PHOMVIHANE'S CAVE

Like many nationalist movements throughout the world, the Pathet Lao was inspired by socialist and communist ideas. Here in Kaysone Phomvihane's office there are symbols of the political movements that fascinated him. Mr Kaysone was given gifts by friendly eastern-bloc countries – like the statue of Lenin we see on the shelf. As you can see from some of his books, he studied and analysed many political ideologies. He spoke many languages, including Vietnamese, French, English and Russian. Despite the necessity of having to move from place to place over many years, he never abandoned his books and remained a passionate scholar throughout his life.

Kaysone Phomvihane was born in 1920, in the southern Laos province of Savannakhet. His father was a Vietnamese civil servant, and his mother a Lao farmer. As a young man he went off to study law at Hanoi University. This was a meeting place for many young Indochinese patriots.

He brought his vision for a new state back to Laos. Together with a group of fellow nationalists they founded the Lao People's Party, which later became known as the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. They held their first congress in 1955 at a place called Lao Houng, near the Vietnamese border. This core group would remain at the centre of the Lao revolution over the next twenty years.

This particular cave was selected for Mr Kaysone because it was the largest. It has eight rooms, and it accommodated 15 people. Floors were cemented, roofing was added to stop leakage, and to prevent guided missiles exploding inside the cave, blast walls were built at some of the more exposed entrances.

Mr Bouaphone Bounmaxay arrived in Viengxay in 1967. In the morning he would attend school, and in the afternoons he worked on one of the cave renovation teams.

(7) BOUAPHONE BOUNMAXAY:

15.33 – 18.40

Our main work was to enlarge the caves by cutting out rocks. During the day one team dynamited the rock walls and then at seven o'clock in the evening, another team would take over, and remove the broken rocks. Dynamiting was dangerous work - one person was killed and two were injured.

Before we had dynamite, we had to cut out the rocks by hand with long metal spikes and heavy 5-pound sledge hammers. It might take three days to make a single hole. Sometimes the sledgehammers would hit the backs of the people holding the spikes.

Various tunnels were created to connect the caves and to provide ways out when there were bombing raids.

We'll now head to the room where policies were debated and major decisions were taken – the Politburo Meeting room.

**4.
THE POLITBURO MEETING ROOM**

In this cave, from this room, around the table right here, leaders of the struggle held regular meetings. This is where they laid the groundwork for restoring rule to their shattered country.

Their system of leadership was based on the Soviet model. It consisted of a Politburo made up of seven leaders elected from a Central Committee.

Each member of the Politburo had specific areas of responsibility.

Kaysone Phomvihane, the General Secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, sat at the head of the table. In 1975, he became the first Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and then served as President from 1991 until his death in 1992.

To his right sat Nounhak Phoumsavan. Nounhak Phoumsavan, was involved in politics from the 1940s. He was responsible for economics and finance in Viengxay, and later in government. He was President of the Lao PDR from 1992 to 1998. He died in 2008 at the age of 98.

To his left was Prince Souphanouvong, who was a member of the Lao royal family. Like the other leaders he dedicated his life to the struggle for an independent nation. He was leader of the Lao Patriotic Front. In 1975 he became the first President of the Lao PDR.

Sitting on Prince Souphanouvong's right was Phoumi Vongvichid. He was a historian and poet who directed education, sport and religious matters. Mr Vongvichid was also responsible for building relationships with international communist organisations and he signed the cease-fire in 1973.

Then Sisomphon Lovanxay, who was responsible for organising the Central Committee. His role was essential to ensuring their survival. Seated opposite him was Phoun Sipaseuth who took charge foreign affairs. It was his role to ensure support for the struggle from other countries. The final member of the Politburo was Mr Kamtay Siphadone, the commander in chief of the Lao People's Liberation Army.

For nine long years the bombs fell. People were killed, the countryside was shattered and homes were destroyed. All the while, the leadership stayed focused on protecting the people, spreading political influence, and planning for an independent nation.

As the Special War continued, the Pathet Lao grew stronger. Mr Chansy Pengmany explains how the leaders shared a great solidarity with the common people.

(38) CHANSY PENGMAN:

1.15.15 – 1.17.05

The Government and the Party were worried about the lives of the people and would not abandon them. Then government officials from the agricultural or military sectors were sent to work in the field, and

everyone lived with the villagers. We can say that the officials and the villagers were like fish and water, which are inseparable. The officials shared all their rations like rice and canned food with the villagers and when the villagers had something they shared this with the officials. Everybody helped one another. It wasn't like a business transaction as it is now. Help was given with sincerity and that's why we are alive today.

Mr Thongphiu Chengmixay, who became a soldier in 1948, describes the relationship between the leaders and the people in another way.

(3) THONGPHIU CHENGMIXAY:
18.25 – 21.14

Our officials were of one heart and worked together in solidarity. This was the deciding factor in whether we would lose or win. Our motto was, "Better to be a dead ghost than a living slave."

The egalitarian nature of the leadership appealed to many people, Ms Khamphone Phimmaseng.

(27) KHAMPHONE PHIMMASENG:
1.04.36 – 1.08.32

The Party and the government paid attention to promoting solidarity and in particular solidarity with the ethnic minority groups. When I was working in education, our committee included Lao Soung and Lao Theung people. We were all treated as equals. We should all be like one big Lao family. When somebody was sick, or had had a baby we would really take care of each other. This was particularly important in the Liberation Zone where the men were busy fighting, and only able to visit their families once a year.

What's remarkable is that the Pathet Lao leadership remained constant over several decades. The same group that formed the Lao People's Party in the 1950s remained at the core of the politburo during the war years. And then after the war, they went on to form the government that has ruled the Lao PDR since the 1970s.

5. **NOUHAK PHOUMSAVAN'S HOUSE**

In 1973, when the bombs stopped and peace finally came to Viengxay, the leaders built homes in front of the very caves that had kept them

safe. This house belonged to Nouhak Phoumsavan, one of the founding fathers of the Pathet Lao. In 1946 he became chairman of the Committee for Lao Resistance in the East, working for national liberation, and in the early 1950s he worked alongside Kaysone Phomvihane setting up the Lao People's Party. Nouhak Phoumsavan and Kaysone Phomvihane's association was a long one. Both men were dedicated politicians, and were key partners during the long years of struggle from colonialism to government.

Mr Souvanthon Nolasin remembers this area as a glorious wilderness where rivers flowed and animals roamed.

(2) SOUVANTHON NOLASIN:

13.09 – 14.06

In the past, this area was a mixture of many pine trees, and tall grasses grew here. There were also many tigers - so many that sometimes you only knew they were there when you stepped on one.

Mr Somvichith Taboudy was born in Xieng Xeu, a small town seven kilometres away. He remembers that when the planes began bombing, the villagers hid wherever they could.

(41) SOMVICHITH TABOUDY:

9.56 – 11.42

There was a time when the caves were under heavy attacks from the air, and we were unable to live in them. The people divided up and lived in four or five different places. Not much more than ten families were able to live in one small cave. Others lived in the middle of the forest near the stream called Houay Thao. They dug holes to live in. Other places were in the middle of the forests in NaHai and NaHin where they also dug holes. So there were three places in the forests and one in a cave.

Any movement on the ground could result in a bomb being dropped or being shot at from a plane. So people sheltered by day, and worked by night. Mr Vankham Saysomphon describes how they lived.

(43) VANKHAM SAYSOMPHON:

10.30 – 12.19

We would work in the fields from half past six in the evening to nine or ten o'clock at night. If the moon was full or very bright, then we would work until eleven, or we would work from three o'clock to half past six in the morning. We had to stop then because it would be getting light, and we had to go back inside the cave, before the planes began to come. Sometimes they would come earlier, so we could only take care of our rice in two shifts during the evening and night.

As the daily bombardments became a way of life, more strategies were put in place to keep people safe. Colour, as Mr Souvanthon Nolasin explains, took on a whole new meaning.

(2) SOUVANTHON NOLASIN:

8.20 – 11.46

The only clothes which were safe to wear were those that were of dark colours. Any shirts which had previously been white, were soaked in puddles around trees and then rolled in the mud. We were not even allowed to keep ducks or chickens which were white or red. Any birds like this had to be killed and then eaten or sold. This was because these colours could be easily spotted from the air.

We learnt this from questioning a captured English-speaking bomber pilot. He answered all our questions truthfully. He explained that he had not been given a specific target area, but ordered simply to look for areas where there were ducks and chickens. That was why we had to kill any brightly coloured poultry.

On cloudy days the planes were less predictable. But even if you couldn't set your watch by it, the one thing you could be sure of was that every new day would bring new bombs.

For nine long years, life was exceedingly difficult for everyone.

6.

NOUHAK PHOUMSAVAN'S CAVE

Thousands of people came to take shelter in Viengxay. Many spent time here on the way to the battlefield. Mr Vongxay Lovanxay, the son of Politburo member Sisomphon Lovanxay, remembers details of his childhood home in cave on the way to the Vietnamese border.

(18) VONGXAY LOVANXAY:

40.30 – 43.15

I remember my father had a bed made of bamboo, supported on four Y-shaped pieces of wood. Every house had the same sort of bed. For bed covers, we used green Chinese or Vietnamese-made quilts filled with feathers or cotton. Some made by the local Sam Neua people were filled with kapok. Bedspreads were like tarpaulins or made from parachute silk. Pillows were small and filled with cotton or kapok. Although some soldiers used their Vietnamese-made helmets as pillows, most used their back packs and slept on Chinese mats.

Viengxay became a highly organised region where up to 20,000 people lived. The Central Organising Committee ensured that every aspect necessary for survival was taken care of. There was a cave for banking, a cave for baking, a cave for fixing cars and a fuel depot. There was a Women's Union cave, a school dormitory cave, and one that housed huge printing presses. There was even a cave for entertainment – we'll be visiting that one later in our tour – and a cave where the circus troupe and other entertainers lived and trained.

But finding food was the most pressing task for people living under continuous air bombardment.

(43) VANKHAM SAYSOMPHON:

45.59 -47.30

During the fighting, because we were living in the cave we had only two kinds of food. If we wanted to eat vegetables or bamboo shoots we had to gather them when there were no planes. We could leave the cave to hunt for food. We would go out in the morning and return in the evening. We would bring back enough for two or three days. If we wanted meat, we had to request a supply from the province or swap vegetables for meat from the people.

(27) KHAMPHONE PHIMASENG:

58.48 – 1.00.11

There were many difficulties with food. We relied on food including rice provided by our friendly neighbouring countries. This was supplemented by small crop cultivation. Married couples were able to keep ducks and chickens. However the young single people couldn't do this, they just grew some vegetables. We also had dried salted fish from Vietnam and canned meat from Mongolia. We would use the fish and vegetables to make soup.

Cooking was risky. If smoke from an outdoor kitchen was spotted, it could be deadly. Ms Khampot Saysouma, a young mother at the time, describes her daily routine.

(13) KHAMPOT SAYSOUMA:

21.00 – 23.09

Every day we got up at five o'clock and cooked all the meals for the day, and then hurried to clear everything away and put it all in the cave. Even those of us with young babies, woke them up and tied them onto our backs. It was still dark at five.

It got light around six o'clock, when the planes started to come on their attacks. This meant that everything should remain as if undisturbed. At six o'clock in the evening we would quickly cook again because at seven o'clock the planes would come again. The planes had searchlights which lit up everything. When this happened we couldn't do any work at all. We just had to stay in the cave. We cooked outside the cave. If we cooked inside, the smoke meant that it was difficult to breathe. Also, we only had oil lamps to see by. The only place with light was the cave where the printing was done. When the planes came, we stayed inside. We only went outside when there were no planes

The highly organised distribution and support system for food and clothes, combined with the help of friendly countries, meant that although people sometimes went to bed feeling hungry, they never starved.

7. PRINCE SOUPHANOUVONG'S GARDEN

This is the home of Prince Souphanouvong, the royal who became a revolutionary. He was born into the royal family in Luang Prabang in 1909, and educated in the customary manner – first in Hanoi, and then on to university in Paris where he studied civil engineering at the Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées.

In the late 1930s he returned to Indochina and worked in South Vietnam as an engineer, where he met his wife. During his time in Vietnam he met Ho Chi Minh, who later became the revolutionary president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. They spent many hours together, discussing freedom from colonialism, nationalism, and communist ideals. The long friendship between the two men was based on mutual respect and a shared ideology.

At the end of the Second World War, when a free Laos seemed about to be achieved, Prince Souphanouvong's half-brother Prince Phetsarath asked him to return to Laos to become part of a new independent government. Prince Souphanouvong became the commander of the Lao Army of Liberation and Defence. But just three days after a battle at Thakek in 1946, where he was injured, the French regained power in Vientiane.

Prince Souphanouvong and his two half-brothers, Prince Phetsarath and Prince Souvanna Phouma, fled across the Mekong River. In Thailand, they established a government in exile called Lao Issara - a name that translates as Free Laos. Each of them, with their own political ideology, came to represent different approaches within Lao politics.

Prince Souphanouvong became known in the Western media as the 'Red Prince'. He refused to compromise on anything less than a completely independent country. In 1949, he secretly crossed back into Laos. Ho Chi Minh sent a troop of men to meet him and they walked to the safety of North Vietnam. There, Prince Souphanouvong met Kaysone Phomvihane, and in 1950 the core group that became the Pathet Lao was formed.

Thirteen years later, with the other leaders and many members of his family, Prince Souphanouvong took shelter in these caves.

Mr Mot Soukthala worked as Prince Souphanouvong's bodyguard and he remembers the prince's love of the garden.

(29) MOT SOUKTHALA:

32.00 – 38.00

After work, President Souphanouvong worked in his garden planting many trees. In the mornings he would do his exercises, and then do some gardening before his bath and breakfast. He worked in his garden by himself. He planted grapefruit, and bougainvillea from Luang Prabang. Wherever he happened to be living he would always grow flowers and fruit.

**8.
STUPA**

Prince Souphanouvong and his wife had ten children. Like so many families in Laos, the Souphanouvong family suffered their own tragic losses. This stupa, a traditional cemetery memorial, was built by Prince Souphanouvong and his wife in memory of their eldest son, Mr Ariya Thammasin.

Mr Ariya Thammasin was educated in the Soviet Union. When he finished his Ph.D. he wrote to his father saying, 'Now I have finished my pen'. Prince Souphanouvong thought about this for three days, thinking perhaps the Russian shops had run out of pens for sale. Then he realized his son meant he had finished his education, so he replied – 'Return to Laos where you can learn farming from the Lao people.' And that is what he did.

In 1967, while he was working with the villagers, he was captured and murdered by enemy agents. Prince Souphanouvong's daughter, Ms Nhotkeomany Souphanouvong speaks about her brother's death.

(26) NHOTKEOMANY SOUPHANOUVONG:

11.09 – 17.16

In 1967 I had to cope with a great loss – the death of my older brother. Before this we were happy because we were able to be in the warm embrace of our parents, the organisation, and the Vietnamese experts who had come to help and stood beside us. In September 1967, we celebrated my brother's wedding. He was the first member of our family to marry.

After his marriage he went to live more closely with the people.

Then in December, he was killed. Our family suffered its greatest loss. Our enemies wanted to wipe out our family because it constituted half of the revolution, and was highly educated and knowledgeable.

At that time, my sister-in-law was two months pregnant and the baby never knew its father.

This made us even angrier with our enemies and made us even more determined to continue fighting for the revolution.

My father's hair turned grey overnight but he was even more considerate to his children. The organisation continued to take care of us. Our anger became our power for the fight.

Those that died during the war had to be buried, rather than risk attracting attention from the smoke of cremation fires. Mr Buaphone Bounmaxay, who was based in Viengxay during this period, explains:

(7) BOUPHONE BOUNMAXAY:

48.15 – 49.58

During the war, when somebody died, it was impossible to cremate the body. Even the leaders couldn't be cremated. There were also no coffins available. The bodies were usually just shrouded in plastic and buried. Mr Souphanouvong's son's body was not cremated until 1985. Usually bodies were buried because cremation was dangerous, so the bodies were put in a vehicle during the night and driven to a burial site.

Constant air attacks confused local people. Many had never heard of America, let alone the Cold War conflict between east and west.

Dr Khamlieng Phonsena felt great anger at what was happening in his country. In 1963 his brother, who was a minister in the coalition government, was assassinated and he returned from France to join the revolution in Viengxay.

(30) KAMLIENG PHONSENA:

27.54 – 29.00 (approx.)

What made me really angry was that the Americans came and killed our people - people who knew nothing about them. They didn't know who the Americans were and why they were killing us. This made me furious. I used my anger, my hunger and my poverty to make me powerful.

9. PRINCE SOUPHANOUVONG'S CAVE

Water interacting with limestone over thousands of years has given this landscape its sculptural forms. It took just nine years of sustained bombing to alter the shapes. Sides lopped off mountains, heavy rock falls, and craters as deep as lakes mark the terrain. For every bomb that fell, there was an aftermath – a human toll exacted.

Mr Sipanh Vangdeuayang, who became Director of the Cave Office that preserves these sites, was ten years old when his village was hit.

(45) SIPANH VANGDEUAYANG: 8.40 – 19.00

In April of 1967, at about five o'clock in the evening a bomb from an American plane landed on my house. Our home was destroyed. The walls of my house were made of wood. There was one big tree just beside the house, and when the bomb landed the shrapnel was stopped by this. That's why I didn't die.

Those who weren't protected by this big tree all died. My grandfather, who had taken cover behind a big jack fruit tree, didn't have the same protection from the shrapnel and a piece about the size of a hand penetrated the left side of his back. He fell down into a ditch. He just lay there covered in blood.

My younger brother was hit in the knees. My aunt was hit in the arm and it left a big hole. I went over to where my brother and sister had landed after having been blown away by the explosion. They were not hurt. I put my sister on my back and held my brother's hand and we walked over to where my grandfather was lying in a pool of blood. My grandfather said, 'I'm dying. So just leave me here and run away.' He had no sooner spoken these words than he just died.

My grandmother was not hurt and she was shouting angrily at the

planes, 'Is there something wrong with your eyes? Are you blind? Why are you dropping bombs on people? I've lived a good and honest life, why don't you shoot at your own house?' She was crying and mumbling at the same time.

After the burial my father was crying and trying to dry his tears at one and the same time. They brought some rice back with them for us. But, on that day, the food was tasteless.

The United States was determined to do whatever was required to stop the spread of communism. To do this, they had to block traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail which was North Vietnam's supply route to the south. The trail wound in and out of Lao territory following the long border with Vietnam. Bombing Laos was a secretive sideshow to the American's open hostilities toward Vietnam. The Vietnamese supported the Pathet Lao offering military supplies, food aid and technical advice.

(18) VONGXAY LOVANXAY:

19.00 – 21.30

Between 1969 and 1972, the Vietnamese soldiers taught us how to recognise the differences between spotter, bomber and fighter planes. Once we were able to do this, we were then able to take the appropriate action. If we saw a plane flying low at a constant height, and making no attempt at a rapid descent, then there was no problem, but if it descended suddenly then we should take cover immediately because it would then begin attacking.

High flying planes could be ignored since they were only surveying the area. We had to be particularly careful with two kinds of planes - those which had an opening in their tails, and the fighter planes. The fighter planes made a distinctive sound.

The Vietnamese also taught us how to distinguish between enemy American planes and the friendly Vietnamese planes in pursuit.

The spotter planes Mr Lovanxay refers to might have been the small US aircraft secretly flying from Long Cheng on reconnaissance missions to identify targets for the air strikes. These planes were flown by a select group of pilots known as the Ravens. The Ravens were

employed by Air America, which was a private company that operated a transport service throughout Southeast Asia and beyond. The company's slogan was "Anything, Anywhere, Anytime, Professionally".

Air America operated a range of small planes with big cargo holds. All their aircraft had one thing in common – they could take off and land on tiny runways scattered throughout the mountains and forests of Laos.

The missions flown by the Ravens were tough and hazardous. The planes operated under strict secrecy. Apart from supporting the bombers, they delivered aid and ammunition, carried spies and refugees, and sometimes opium. These wild men operated in a lawless environment. If they were discovered in Laos, they would not be publicly acknowledged by the forces that gave them their orders.

Up to 400 Air America planes were operating in Laos during the 1960s. And when the war was over, it was revealed that Air America was fully owned and operated by the CIA.

10. PHOUMI VONGVICHID'S CAVE

Phoumi Vongvichid was a politician with a broad intellect and an expansive general knowledge. He was a well-respected historian, a writer and a Lao poet. He served as governor of Houaphanh Province at the end of the Second World War, but when the French returned in 1945, he joined Prince Souphanouvong in the Lao Issara.

Mr Vongvichid served in the Second Coalition government, but in 1963, after a series of political assassinations, Phoumi left Vientiane with other Pathet Lao ministers. He was a member of the Politburo, responsible for education and public health.

Education featured prominently in the vision for a new nation, and everything possible was done to accommodate it during the war years.

(41) SOMVICHITH TABOUDY:
40.25 – 47.28

Children were supposed to study mornings and afternoons, but in reality, usually were able to study only in the mornings. Trenches were dug for the children to get to school safely. It was very difficult.

In addition to a school cave, there was also a school dormitory cave. Mr Hansana Sisan, who lived in the dormitory cave, describes the routine.

(23) HANSANA SISAN:
37.37 – 39.24

Every morning we had to get up early and do exercises. After which we would have a bath and when the school bell rang we would go to school. A bell would ring at the end of school when we would leave. Strict timekeeping was important. In Viengxay district most of the people played volleyball. I like volleyball. Places to play volleyball were easy to find.

Because of the lack of educational resources, as well as the danger of living in a war zone, many children were sent to study in friendly countries. Groups of brothers, sisters, cousins and friends – some of them very young - studied in special Lao schools with Lao teachers. Mr Khamchay Lobriayao was one of them.

(32) KHAMCHAY LOBRIAYAO:
30.29-33.42

Older students went to study in Vietnam while the children went to China. I studied in China for four years from 1968 to 1972 when I returned to Viengxay. I had two younger brothers and a sister who also studied in China. In 1977, I finished high school and I went to study in the Soviet Union until 1983.

Under Phoumi Vongvichid's leadership, the Pathet Lao established a curriculum that focused on national culture. He was determined to preserve and develop the Lao language, and he wrote the standard text on Lao grammar. Books and newspapers were printed on printing presses in the caves, and Lao history was taught in Lao language. They also piloted ambitious literacy programs.

In the 1960s, Ms Khamphone Phimmaseng's job was to proofread textbooks for the Education Department.

(27) KHAMPHONE PHIMMASENG:
39.06 – 43.31

One day something funny happened - not in the place for education but in the entertainment centre. I can't remember the year. The central headquarters asked us to try to reduce the number of illiterate people. We had to choose pilot villages. We discussed this and chose 2 villages where we would establish literacy centres. We were all still single then. By chance a reporter got to hear about it and published the news. Everyone in the Liberation Zone sent telegrams congratulating us. Since the story had already appeared in the news it meant that we had to work really hard to make sure that it was successful. With our hard work and with help from the Centre, success was achieved in six months.

We will now make our way to the cave.

11. SITHONE KOMMADAM'S CAVE

Laos is one of the most ethnically diverse nations in Southeast Asia. Many different languages are spoken amongst about fifty ethnicities. This is not surprising, since Laos is in the middle of five countries. There's Thailand to the west, Myanmar to the north-west, China to the north, Vietnam to the east, and Cambodia to the south – each with their own wide mix of peoples and cultures.

Sithone Kommadam who was one of the key figures in the Pathet Lao, came from the Loven group in the south of Laos. His father was killed resisting French troops near the Vietnamese border, and Sithone grew up surrounded by resistance to colonial rule. His wife, Ms Sounthavong Kommadam, tells of the hardships he suffered in the early years.

(9) SOUNTHAVONG KOMMADAM:

44.27 - ?

After his father had died, Mr Sithone's life was difficult. When the Japanese came during the Second World War, they gained control very quickly. However, when they were defeated Mr Sithone and the other prisoners were freed. Mr Sithone and one soldier walked to Luang Prabang, walking all day and all night. On his arrival, he visited the Governor of Luang Prabang, and was arrested again because of his anti-French activities. He spent another two years in prison in Luang Prabang. Altogether he was in prison for eight years and three months.

Sithone gained a reputation as a fierce resistance fighter. Some people believed he was a magic man who could not be hurt by bullets. His wife remembers him as a gentler man who nurtured friendships and took great care of others.

(9) SOUNTHAVONG KOMMADAM:

15.03 – 17.37

Mr Sithone's educational level was the same as mine, but he had his own teacher and studied other documents by himself. After his reading, he would do his exercises, and feed the birds and the ducks.

He liked to do everything himself even though there were lots of soldiers and people around the house. He didn't like to exert too much authority in his life. Although he seemed to be quite serious, in reality he was a very kind person. Those police officers who lived with him, never wanted to leave him. He loved everybody. He shared all his meals with everybody eating the same food. He never ate alone.

He particularly liked to play the khene, and dance the lamvong. Whenever there were people dancing, he would join in. He enjoyed exercising, and sometimes he would play table tennis. After his exercises, he would do some shadow boxing. He loved wearing his boots and walking to the office with his hat on his head. He didn't like to be driven. Sometimes he would walk to play table tennis with Mr Kaysone. We still keep his hat to remind us of him

When Sithon joined the patriotic forces, many other people from his region did too. This was a feature of recruitment throughout Laos, where strong loyalties often endured. Mr Faidang Lobriayao, a politician with a Hmong background, was part of the leadership in Viengxay. His son, Mr Khamchay Lobriayao remembers his father's role in encouraging ethnic minorities to join the revolution.

(32) KHAMCHAY LOBRIAYAO:

13.10 – 18.10

The fighting was on many fronts - political, cultural and military. One of the major problems was that of convincing the people of the necessity of fighting. Everything possible was done to bolster their confidence and safeguard their lives.

My father delegated this work to his nephew, who was responsible for producing songs and dances to be performed at the various festivals. The central themes were those related to fighting and labouring, quite different to those of the enemy which were only about love. Our songs were about the fight, the resentment, the work, and solidarity. They were designed as part of the campaign to encourage the people to believe in the need to work and to change their opinions on the value of their labour to the revolution through songs in both Lao and Lao Soung languages.

Some people were forced to support community leaders in a conflict they had no understanding of. Mr Sipanh Vangdeuayang remembers escaping to the forest with other villagers. They were hiding from local militias operating for the US under the command of a leader called Vang Pao.

(45) SIPANH VANGDEUAYANG

28.10

Those who refused to join the militias had an explosive device hung around their necks and were pulled like buffalo towards the group of Vangphao's soldiers. If a person stood still and refused to move, then the device would explode so everybody had to go along with this.

One of the strengths of the Pathet Lao's vision for an independent Laos was the belief in equality between people of all backgrounds and cultures. Highland animists were as important to the nation as lowland Buddhists.

People who lived in Viengxay during the war remember the great solidarity among people there.

(18) VONGXAY LOVANXAY:

25.05 – 28.15

Helping each other was most important it was something which my parents taught me. It was also important since, not only Lao Loum people lived inside the cave but there were also Lao Soung, Lao Theung and other ethnic minority groups, each with different educations. When we all had to live together there were quite a lot of problems. Mr

Souphanouvong would come to spend two or three days with us and would always talk to us about the importance of solidarity, helping each other, and not splitting up into separate groups depending on ethnic minority, wealth or education, and living without jealousy. We shared everything we had together.

(17) MS Y. KOUNLAVONG:

1.00.48 – 1.03.40

Mr Kaysone said that the blood ties between revolutionaries are stronger than those between families. Every fighting group should become like a big revolutionary family, and everybody in the country should be part of this revolutionary family. He taught us like this.

12.

SMALL HOSPITAL CAVE

Administration for the health ministry was located in this cave. Constant bombing sometimes made it very difficult to travel safely, even to hospital, so it was also set up as a small hospital for treating the leaders. There were staff specially trained in basic medical care to look after people where they lived.

(3) THONGPHIU CHENGMIXAY:

49.41 – 51.30

At that time, there was no hospital for people when they were sick. There were only medical packs in the village, and there was a village nurse. Those, who were seriously ill and who couldn't be treated by the nurse, had to be taken to the nearest provincial hospital during the night. Daytime coming and going was not possible.

The largest hospital in the region was built in a huge cave situated about seven kilometres east of Vientiane. It stretched across three karst formations and had three wards – one for men, one for women and one for intensive care. There were also several operating rooms. Inside it was tiled and fitted with a low ceiling to protect patients from water dripping through the rocks.

The hospital was built with Vietnamese help. It was staffed by Lao doctors and nurses, Vietnamese professors and Cuban doctors, who were sent by their governments to support the people of the area – it was called the Friendship Hospital.

Ms Kounlavong remembers the wonderful care she had from the nurses when her son was born in the hospital cave. It also proved to be a difficult experience.

(17) MS KOUNLAVONG

Three of my children were born in Viengxay 3, Many people died in that area but it was too dangerous to remove the dead bodies. I, myself saw 4 or 5 dead bodies while going to the place to give birth since I was already in labour. It was about 9 o'clock at night when I got to the cave. I was taken inside where it was very dark. Electricity was supplied by a generator and so only important places had light. There was no light in the mortuary and no light in the passages, there was only light close to the place where babies were born. But my child was born even before I could get to the proper place. When I woke up the next morning, they asked me, "Sister Ee weren't you scared last night? You walked through an area where there were many dead bodies." I said, "What was there to frighten me? I had such pains that I thought I had already died!"

Dr Khamlieng Phonsena lived and worked in this small hospital cave during the war.

(30) DR KHAMLIENG PHONSENA:

30.00 - 32.00

When I was living in the cave, my life consisted of taking care of the sick and the injured, not only taking care of their bodies but also taking care of their hearts.

1.06.39 – 1.10.30

Buddhism has many lessons for us. The saying 'OthPhaNee AhNeeMoTaNa' means 'Help yourself' and instructs us that 'if you want to become a person of high status then you must study, if you want to become a millionaire or a rich person you need to be productive and be economical in your spending'

Another Buddhist saying is 'MehTaSamPhaNa OuPehKa' which means

that you need to love the small people like you love yourself'. For example, if you are a senior person you must love your staff. When they work well you must congratulate them. If you are friends with ministers then you must be happy to be with them and not to be envious of them. You need to invite them to eat with you. These are the lessons from the Buddha.

13. KHAMTAY SIPHANDONE'S HOUSE

The Pathet Lao was so much more than a fighting force - it was a movement for social revolution. They fought against French colonialism, and then against the feudal rule of an aristocracy which was first supported by the French, and then by the Americans. Khamtay Siphandone was the commander in chief of the Lao People's Liberation Army. He was also a member of the Politburo.

One of the most important components of the Pathet Lao's policy was to develop the consciousness of the people of Laos. This included all the ethnic groups who mostly live in the mountainous areas. For the first time in their history, these politically marginalised citizens had an outlet for political and social change. People like Khamphone Phimmaseng, who left home when she was very young to come to Houaphanh.

(27) MS KHAMPHONE PHIMMASENG 03.34

I decided to pack my things and move into the forest. I had no clear aim at that time and felt no anger towards the enemy. My main objective was simply to go to study. There were some schools in my village but they were just like the schools in the caves. I had heard that there were schools in Vietnam and I decided I would go there to study.

American bombs helped the Pathet Lao recruit people. In 1964, before the bombing began, they were a fighting force of approximately 20,000. Seven years later, the Lao People's Liberation Army numbered around 50,000.

When the Pathet Lao claimed victory in 1975, the Lao People's Liberation Army dropped 'liberation' from its name, becoming simply the Lao People's Army.

14.

KAMTAY SIPHANDONE'S CAVE

This more than just one cave. It is in fact a network of caves and it was used as the Pathet Lao's military headquarters. It was also a meeting hall, which doubled as a theatre, and as a barracks it housed up to 2,000 soldiers. The supreme military commander, General Khamtay Siphandone lived and worked here from 1968 until 1973.

Communication between caves and throughout the area was vital. A wind-up telephone system that operated through a central exchange in a cave to the east of the town could reach every main cave. Connections were based on code names and passwords.

Mr Buoaphone Bounmaxay was 14 when he came to Viengxay to join the revolution. He was trained in military communications.

(7) BUAPHONE POUNMAXAY:

49.58 -52.25

Vietnam supported communications in Viengxay during that time. A communications section was established. Every organisation was able to use a telephone line and dial centre who could then connect them to whichever section they wanted. Every section had its own number. The leaders also had their own special numbers. I followed the leaders' orders which meant that I had to make sure that the leaders could only be reached through me. There were two separate telephone systems. The first was used only by the leaders. If this line was cut or damaged in an air attack then I had to repair it, even in the dark.

There were many forms of communication in Viengxay. Sirens were set up beside lookout posts to warn of planes. Runners delivered messages between the caves, and the printing cave produced newspapers, posters and books that were distributed throughout the Pathet Lao zone.

(41) SOMVICHITH TABOUDY:

19.35 – 20.13

In order to keep the people safe, we didn't use the big roads but used only the small paths. We would walk, usually at night, to

meet each other. Sometimes, during the day, we would take a small path through the forest or up the mountain if we were going to a traditional celebration or a wedding. If there were no air-raids then we could enjoy these different ceremonies.

There was even a cave where a radio station was set up to broadcast across the country. Mr Souvanthon Nolasin describes it.

(2) SOUVANTHON NOLASIN:

There were up to about 40 Lao staff, there were six vehicles which could run on electric power. The electricity came from 106 megawatt diesel generators, and there were electric lights.

The original telegraph radio belonged to the Tsar of Russian. It was the real radio.

The telegraph office was operated by the women in Battalion 21. Throughout the war, women often filled two roles as worker and as mother. With their husbands away on duty, they had to work especially hard to provide food and look after their children. Ms Khounlavong was a group captain in the Army Intelligence Corps. She remembers how hard work could be for the women in Battalion 21.

(17) Y KHOUNLAVONG:

uring that time, the people who worked the hardest were those who work in the offices particularly those working in administration and doing the typing. The communications people also worked hard, working for 24 hours at a time. One lady, Ms Am, the telegraph operator, had twins and would put them in their cradle and take them to work with her. When the babies were crying it was difficult for her, she would tie one baby on her front and one on her back, and use her hands to operate the telegraph machine. She ate while she worked.

**15.
SOLDIERS' CAVE BARRACKS**

This large cave was the military barracks. Many soldiers were stationed here protecting Viengxay, and thousands passed through on their way to different battlefronts.

Mr Somthon Vonglanuek was a provincial soldier. He served in Houaphanh province from 1968 to 1971.

(44) SOMTHONG VONGLANUEK:

37.33 – 41.11

Every man, particularly, the young men, had to go to fight. Some were away for a month, others for maybe three months, and for those involved in security for even six months. This meant that there was a lack of labour in the village, so it was necessary to teach the women, both old and young, about ploughing. Some women volunteered for village security duties. The revolutionary atmosphere was quite exhilarating. Everyone wanted to help protect their country. District soldiers also came to give various kinds of training.

Ms Phengsy Sommany was part of the Village Defence Group of Xieng Xeu, a group of men and women who protected their village.

(40) PHENGSY SOMMANY:

6.24 – 10.33

The village people handed over the responsibility of their staying alive to the security guards. When it was time to cook the evening meal at six o'clock, a bell was rung and the cooking fire was lit. If the bell was rung at any other time, then that was a warning that a plane was approaching. This constituted our air security, while land security was maintained through checking the people coming and going.

These people were asked, 'Where have you come from? Which village, taseng or district? Do you have any travel documents?'

After the Unit had been established the air raids got worse and were more terrible every day. 1965, 66, 67 and 68 were the most terrible years.

Ms Khamphone Phimmaseng was in a group of musicians who travelled from battlefield to battlefield entertaining the troops. Their journeys were often arduous. They walked for many days, and sometimes weeks or months, through forests and jungles to reach the battlefield.



(27) KHAMPHONE PHIMMASENG:

24.47 – 26.31

When our soldiers were fighting on the battlefield we had to supply them with food. We followed the slogan, “when the soldiers at the front ask, those behind must give them unconditional support”. Even though the transportation of supplies was very tiring, we were happy. When I had to carry rice up to the top of Phou Bong Mountain, I was never afraid of being killed on the way, but when I got to the top I was so tired that I was nearly dead! We would compete with each other to see who could get to the top first, and we would tell each other stories to make us forget our tiredness.

**16.
ARTILLERY CAVE**

From up here, soldiers would scan the skies for planes. Heavy anti-aircraft artillery was positioned here. There were also anti-aircraft guns all around the area, as Mr Buaphone BounmaxAy explains.

(7) BUAPHONE BOUNMAXAY:

22.40 – 25.25

The anti-aircraft guns were sited where the Viengxay market now stands. This location was elevated which meant that they were able to see aircraft approaching from any direction.

Once, I watched many planes attacking day and night. These included F-19s and spotter planes. At six o'clock helicopters came. It was quite early in the evening and sometimes it seemed quite pretty to watch the tracers of the bullets. Many people came out of the caves to watch.

Mr Souvanthon Nolasin describes what happened when a plane was hit.

(2) SOUVANTHON NOLASIN:

37.06 – 41.49

We promised that whenever we saw a plane approaching, we would all open fire on it. When we shot down the plane, it was quite close and everybody went to capture the crew but I was the last in the line. So we

were able to warn them that we had anti-aircraft guns. For example, when a plane was downed in Nachong, the pilot hid in a hole, and we tried to use a piece of wood to make him come out, but he wouldn't climb out. Then the support planes came and shot up the area around him and we ran away. A helicopter came and took him away. This was because we didn't shoot at the support planes so the helicopters were able to rescue the crew.

Many different types of bombs were dropped on Laos. The consequences of these bombs were far-reaching, especially in the case of bombs made from napalm, phosphorous or other poisonous substances. They affected everyone and everything. Mr Somvichith Taboudy explains.

(41) SOMVICHITH TABOUDY:

49.23 – 51.44

There were many different kinds of bombs; some light and some heavy. Some didn't explode on landing, but only exploded when they were touched. They were scattered throughout the rice fields. When they were touched they detonated. This was one kind in the rice fields. If cows, buffalos, horses or other animals ate these, then they would die. For example, if ducks tried to peck them, they would explode killing the ducks.

The buffalos and cows thought they were like salt, when they ate them, they would explode inside their stomachs killing them.

However, no phosphorus or gas bombs were dropped. These bombs were silent but ignited fires. These also could contaminate the grass and when they were eaten by horses it would burn their stomachs.

Mr Hansana Sisan, who was just a schoolboy then, remembers when the Na Pha area was bombed.

(23) HANSANA SISAN:

21.10 – 22.26

When I was living in the cave I can remember the bombing raids and the people's houses being set on fire. I lived quite high up and had a good view. I could see those bombs which didn't explode. They lay together just like fat pigs.

XANGLLOT CAVE

This is Xanglot cave. It's a huge natural space that is perfect for large gatherings. This is where party rallies were held. It's also where films were shown, and artists came to play music and perform dances.

Throughout the years of conflict, life went on. Although weddings and traditional festivals were celebrated in simpler ways than before, they were still celebrated. Ms Khamphot Saysouma explains.

(13) KHAMPHOT SAYSOUMA

44.05 – 45.25

Weddings were held in the cave. The ceremony was quite short. The organisation read the marriage approval document. Tables and chairs were set out in the wider part of the cave for the 20 to 30 guests; quite a small number. Usually there was only the reading of the personal histories of the couple and the approval of the marriage. The guests ate whatever the host was able to provide. If there was no meat, then the guests just had tea, biscuits and *laokhao*. There would be dancing of the *Lamvong*.

Whenever there was an opportunity, people gathered to be entertained. Ms Kongta Thammathong remembers these joyful moments.

(1) KONGTA THAMMATHONG:

22.50 – 24.13

We did celebrate many special days but we could only do so in Xanglot cave and we couldn't celebrate exactly as we wished because we were frightened of bombing raids. So the celebrations were quite limited. We had celebrations on the important days because the political office had been built just in front of the cave.

There wasn't much for children to do, and they often had to stay inside the caves for days at a time. Mr Vongxay remembers how much they looked forward to film screening in Maa Long cave where he lived, and to events held here in Xanglot.

(18) VONGXAY LOVANXAY:

30.31

The films shown were mostly from Vietnam and the Soviet Union. It was quite easy to show films because the cave was already dark and we just had to put up a screen. Movies were shown every Friday. The favourite was “The 17th Parallel - Vietnam” which was watched again and again. I remember the 17th Parallel because it was shown so often.

**18.
VICTORY**

The United States, the world’s most powerful nation, was unable to stop Laos and Vietnam from achieving their chosen form of government. All the bombs that dropped from 1964 to 1973 failed to halt the operations of the Pathet Lao in Viengxay, or stop traffic on the Ho Chi Minh trail. The US army faced increasing opposition at home to the war being fought so far away.

The different alliances operating during the long conflict meant that peace in Laos was dependent on peace in Vietnam. A cease-fire between Vietnam and the United States was signed in January 1973, and in February a cease-fire was signed between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao.

Peace had finally come to Viengxay.

There was an outburst of jubilation and joyous celebration.

(45) SIPANH VANGDEUAYANG:

1.05.39 – 1.05.50

In 1975, I had just finished studying to become a teacher, and I had a small radio and a gun which I carried with me. I listened to the news all day and night. There was a radio announcement saying that we had won the war. Everybody was singing, clapping their hands and dancing.

(40) PHENGSY SOMMANY:

1.18.21 – 1.20.24

After the ceasefire in the Viengxay District of Houaphanh, and in particular in our village, there was a good atmosphere. There was lots of entertainment and traditional shows outside the caves. Everybody in the village, young and old alike, came to have a look at what was happening outside the caves. There was no longer any fighting. There was the chance to re-build the buildings which had been damaged or destroyed. Everybody was so happy and enjoyed the shows and the movies. Every household closed the door of their house and came to join in the singing and dancing.

But despite their relief and happiness that the terrible bombing raids had stopped, many people were unable to celebrate wholeheartedly. People like Ms Buagnan Napasoua, who worked both in the Art troupe and clearing unexploded ordinance.

(14) BUAGNAN NAPASOUA

1. 03.13

When we had heard the news that the fighting had stopped, everyone was very, very happy. There was a great atmosphere, with lots of announcements over the speaker system so that every organisation knew that the fighting had stopped, and there would be no more air raids. Everybody knew that there would be no more deaths. There were smiles everywhere because there was peace. Even though we were happy about this, we still remembered those who had died. Why couldn't there have been peace before these people died? Why did they have to die? I was able to experience the peace, but so many of my friends couldn't. So I was happy, but at the same time I was crying for my dead friends.

The town of Viengxay, as we see it today, started to be built from 1973, with a limited budget. The focus was on improving living conditions of the people. Wide roads, pavements and street lighting were very unusual in the rural areas in the 1970s, and showed the importance of Viengxay as the capital of the liberated zone.

The name Viengxay itself had only begun to be used in 1970. Before that, the area was called the 'special zone'. Viengxay means 'City of victory', and it was also the code name used for Kaysone Phomvihane. Mr Onchan Sommany is a composer and singer of traditional *Kep Sam Neua* folk songs. He wrote and sang during the war about events happening around him.

(46) MR ONCHAN SOMMANY

0.48 – 6.43

I would like to tell you how the provincial capital came to be called Viengxay. In the past, it was called Long Khou and the mountain pass was called Long NaKai. There were caves and big holes in the mountain slopes and forests of big trees. There were big and small deer and squirrels, and leopards which hunted for meat every day. In 1963, the fight between America and its allies, and the three Lao governments was escalating. Bombs were causing destruction everywhere. The central headquarters were established and halted the destruction.

The central headquarters chose an appropriate name which was accepted unanimously – this was Mr Kaysone's code name. On May 10th 1968, the name Viengxay was formally declared, and remains in use until today. Because of those days that's why we are able to be here today.

Now, all these years later, the war is still having its effect on children born decades after the conflict ended. UXO – explosive ordnance that didn't detonate when fired or dropped – contaminates the whole country and prevents people from using land for their development. They might be hidden under a school playing field or a house, or in fields where people need to grow food. When they are disturbed, by digging or often by children picking them up and playing with them, they explode. UXO kills and injures one person a day every day in Laos. There are major UXO clearance operations working around Laos, but it will take another 20 years just to clear the land for farming.

At a meeting held in Oslo on the 3rd of December 2008, 94 governments signed the Convention on Cluster Munitions. This bans the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of these deadly weapons, and commits member states to help those countries contaminated by them to clear their land and care for victims. The Government of the Lao PDR played a major role in campaigning for the global ban. The United States did not sign the Convention in Oslo.

Thank you for spending time with us today.

This has been a NARROWCASTERS audio tour.