

Marine Shares His Story, Predicts Brighter Future for the Next Generation of Afghan Refugees

By Capt Seree Chang, USMC

The recent stories coming out of Afghanistan are heartbreaking. The image of a helicopter evacuating American citizens from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul gave me a sense of what my grandfather must have felt when the United States evacuated the U.S. Embassy in Saigon in 1975.

The military cargo aircraft at the Hamid Karzai International Airport, surrounded by desperate Afghans, brought back painful memories for the hundreds of Hmong Americans who had witnessed an airplane taking off from a Vietnamese airport without them. My family was one of those left behind after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

It is my hope that my story can be shared with all the Afghan refugees fleeing political persecution, from a country they once called home. Their journey to a new life in a new country is the start of their pursuit of the American dream. My story is an example of that dream. I am a refugee who fled political persecution, and I am a captain in the United States Marine Corps. This was possible due to the United States granting my family political asylum because my grandfather pledged allegiance to and fought on behalf of the United States during the Secret War.

Recently in an auditorium at the Army Logistics University (ALU) in Fort Lee, Va., the cadre spoke to a room full of Army captains, international officers and three Marine officers including myself. We were all attending the Logistics Captains Career Course and were halfway through the six-month course. They asked, “Who is currently staying at the Holiday Inn Express on post? Please raise your hand.”

I hesitantly raised my hand. I looked around and noticed that I was the only officer who was not an international officer staying at the Holiday Inn Express on post. The cadre continued, “If you are staying at the Holiday Inn Express on post, you have 96 hours to vacate ... for the Afghan refugees that are inbound to the United States.”

There was an immediate sense of curiosity throughout the auditorium. The cadre spoke about America’s moral obligation to bring all Afghan nationals to the United States who, in one way or another, assisted the United States military during the 20-year war in Afghanistan. This includes interpreters, contractors and their families. He answered questions regarding the upgraded Force Protection Condition (FPCON) status, increased security posture surrounding ALU, and general concerns about the relocation of the Afghan refugees to Fort Lee.

As the conversation continued in the auditorium, my mind immediately went somewhere else. Somewhere else, back in 1991, when my family immigrated to the United States as political refugees from a war that has long since been a secret from the history books taught

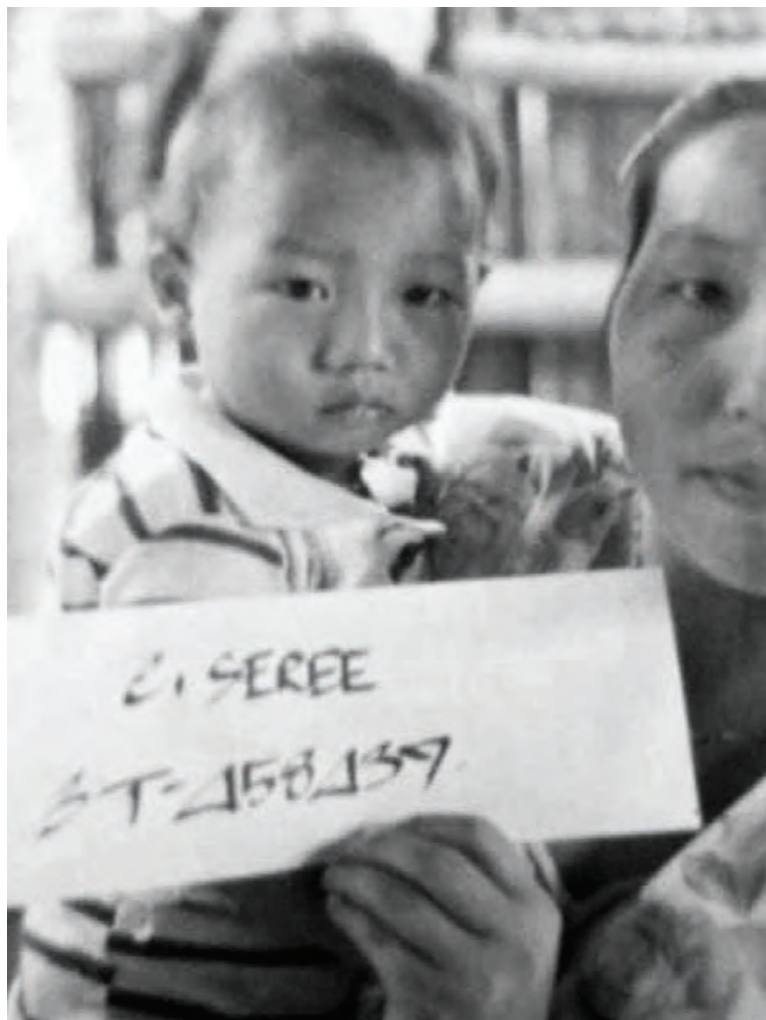


In 1991, Seree Chang (above) was a toddler living in a U.N. refugee camp in Thailand. His family immigrated to the United States as political asylum seekers in 1991. Today, he is a Marine captain (left) currently serving at Camp Johnson, N.C.

throughout schools in America. In the shadow of the Vietnam War, it was simply a war known as the Secret War.

When the Vietnam War began in 1961, the United States was involved in another war within the neighboring country of Laos. This war involved the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Laotian government, and the nomadic Hmong people that lived within the mountainous regions of Laos.

The Hmong people are an indigenous ethnic group that live all throughout Southeast Asia. This includes Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The Hmong people have no official country, no official government nor do they have an official flag. This was presumably one of the reasons why the CIA started to recruit, train and provide military weapons to more than 19,000 Hmong men to



Seree Chang's mother, Khou Thao, holds up a sign displaying her young son's refugee number at a U.N. refugee camp in Thailand in 1991.

fight on behalf of the Americans against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Laotian communist group, "Pathet Lao," during the Vietnam War.

This secret CIA-sponsored operation involved counter attacks and guerilla warfare against the NVA and the Pathet Lao along the portion of the Ho Chi Minh trail that enters into Laos. The Hmongs aligned themselves with the United States to stop the spread of communism through Southeast Asia. It was there that the Hmong soldiers conducted counter attacks against the NVA and Pathet Lao, rescued down American pilots, and assisted in intelligence gathering.

One of those Hmong soldiers recruited by the CIA was my grandfather. His primary job was intelligence gathering along the Ho Chi Minh trail. His involvement with the CIA sealed my family's fate to the mercy of the United States. It was his decision that ultimately brought my family to the United States.

When the United States withdrew from the Vietnam War in 1975, they left the Hmong soldiers who fought alongside the Americans to fend for themselves. Vietnam fell into the hands of the Vietnamese Communist Party and two years later Laos fell to the communist party supported by the Vietnamese Communist Party. The Hmong people were left to fend for themselves against two countries that saw them as traitors for fighting alongside the United States. Fearing persecution and retaliation, the Hmong people hid in the jungle of Laos and Vietnam after the United States withdrew their troops. Their only escape was to cross the Mekong River into United Nations refugee camps in Thailand.

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My grandfather knew that if he remained in the jungle of Laos, the Laotian communist military would find him and my family. The consequences would be death. Fearing certain death, my grandfather decided to trek west toward Thailand. My family eventually crossed the Mekong River into Thailand and settled in a United Nations refugee camp called Ban Vinai. While in the camp, I was given a refugee number. That number was BT-57-39. We remained there until 1991 when the United States finally granted asylum to my family.

Although I do not remember much of the events leading up to my family's relocation to the United States, I can only imagine that back in 1991, there was a young military officer who had to give up his hotel room to accommodate my family's journey to the United States. Just as I had to give up my hotel room to accommodate the next family of refugees fleeing political persecution.

My hope is that this article will inspire the young Afghan refugees who were lucky enough to be granted political asylum to come to the United States to live the American dream. It is also my hope that if I can live the American dream after swapping my refugee number BT-58039 to O-3E in the United States Marine Corps, the possibilities for the next generation of Afghan Americans are endless.

Editor's note: All photos are courtesy of Capt Seree Chang, USMC.

Author's bio: Capt Chang has served in the Marine Corps for more than 12 years. He is currently an instructor and company commander at the Ground Supply School, Marine Corps Combat Service Support Schools, Camp Johnson, N.C. 