

# **The Montanan Smokejumper Who Rescued Over 50,000 Vietnam War Allies**

**By Rick Hull**

America has a new champion in the Tokyo Olympics, following Sunisa "Sunni" Lee capture of the gold medal in the women's all-around gymnastic event.

The 18-year-old from Minnesota is Hmong, and her mother came to the United States as a refugee. Her family supported the Americans during the Vietnam War, and had to flee when Laos fell to the communists in 1975.

Here lies a tale about a Montana smokejumper who played a major role in bringing tens of thousands of Hmong to America, including to his hometown of Missoula.

His name is Jerry Daniels. Though he died in 1982, his legacy is still revered by the Hmong community.

Daniels' parents moved to Helmville, Montana when he was 10 years old. The farm was without running water, and it and a lifetime of hunting and fishing prepared him for the mountains of Laos. He graduated from Missoula County High School in 1959.

Lying about his age, he became a smokejumper at Missoula at 17 years old. For two years he fought fires in Montana in the summer and New Mexico in the spring. In between, and through out his early career, he attended the University of Montana. It took him nine years to graduate.

It was 1960 when the Central Intelligence Agency came knocking. The agency had long realized that smokejumpers were not only experts in parachutes, but they could handle themselves in rough situations. Daniels went to work for Intermountain Aviation in Marana, Arizona. The firm was a CIA contractor, with connections in Missoula.

One of Daniel's projects was the skyhook recovery system. A line tied to a balloon would be snatched by a B-17 bomber, yanking covert operatives to safety. It was originally developed for a mission to an abandoned Soviet station on an Arctic ice flow, and later appear in a James Bond movie.

Daniels was also operating as "kicker" in Southeast Asia, dropping parachute loads out of cargo planes while ignoring the enemy fire. Some covert operations took him over Tibet.

In 1964 Daniels went to work directly for the CIA. He was based in northeast Thailand, just across the Mekong River from Laos. The U.S. was not officially in Laos. But North Vietnam used it for its Ho Chi Minh trail to supply the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. Laos soon became the most heavily bombed nation in history.

The CIA recruited the Hmong to push back against the North Vietnamese Army. The Hmong lived in the Laotian mountains, and they believed could not live on terrain below 3,000 feet. Hmong were considered hillbillies by other Asians, including by their own countrymen.

In 1969, after finally graduating from college, Daniels became a full-fledged CIA Paramilitary Operations Officer under the call sign of "Hog." He worked directly with Van Pao, a major general in the Laotian Royal Army and the acknowledged leader of the Hmong. Always considered intelligent by his friend, Daniels picked up the Laotian language after a couple weeks.

Initially he was at Na Khang, a small outpost near the North Vietnam border. Daniels became known for shooting marauding rats in his bunker at night. He impressed the Laotian soldiers with his willingness to share in their ordeal, and also willing to eat their meals of bats and monkeys.

Daniel was away at the Laotian capital in 1967, when the North Vietnamese attacked Na Khang. Daniel immediately commandeered a small plane, and convinced the pilot to make a touch-and-go landing under fire. Rolling out of the plane, he juggled radios and began calling in air strikes. He refused orders to leave, saying the Americans' presence was the only thing keeping the Hmong from abandoning the outpost.

Na Khang eventually fell while Daniels was attending the University of Montana. Once back in Laos, he moved to Pao's headquarters was at Long Cheng. The isolated mountain base was supplied by air.

Once, when a Hmong outpost was surrounded by North Vietnamese troops and the defenders were out of water, Daniels responded with special parachutes designed to deploy only during the last 150 feet. But those also drifted out of reach. So he loaded up bags with ice, dropping those directly inside the outpost's perimeter.

The Linebacker II bombing of North Vietnam in 1972 resulted in the Paris Peace Accords, and ended direct American involvement in Southeast Asian.

But it doomed the Laotian government and army.

When the North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam in 1975, the Pathet Lao forces made their own advance, and took over Laos. The new communist government vowed revenge and began rounding up dissidents and wartime opponents.

Daniels oversaw the aerial evacuation of 2,500 panicked Hmong soldiers and family from Long Cheng. However that left over 100,000 who fled to refugee camps in Thailand. Among those fleeing across the Mekong River were the parents of Yeev Thoj, Sunisa Lee's mother, and of her stepfather, John Lee.

Van Pao ended up in Hamilton, Montana, courtesy of Daniel, and above the 3,000-foot elevation threshold that Hmong felt they needed to survive. However most were stuck at the CIA-funded refugee camp at Ban Vinai in Thailand.

Many, including the Thais, wondered if the Hmong would be able to adapt to modern life outside of the mountains.

Daniels had faith. Appointed as Ethnic Affairs Officer, he worked at screening Hmong refugee for resettlement in the United States. Among the issues were getting Hmong officially married, and dealing with husbands with two wives. He had to also document the past military service of Hmong in a society that was largely illiterate.

It was estimated that he was responsible for resettling 53,700 Laotians between 1975 and 1982. It was a job he found frustrating, and he talked to friends about his dream of moving to his Montana property and mining gold.

Daniels died unexpected at age 41 in Bangkok, Thailand. It wasn't an enemy bullet, but carbon monoxide poisoning from a malfunctioning water heater. Because his body had not been discovered for several days, it was returned to Missoula for burial in a sealed coffin. Theories circulated that his death was faked, along with speculation that he may have been assassinated or committed suicide. A 2017 DNA test confirmed that the body was Daniel.

An elaborate three-day funeral was held in Missoula, attended by Hmong throughout the country. Many Hmong communities collected donations of \$2 and \$3 each and sent the accumulated money to the family.

Originally many of the Laotians lived in the Bitterroot Valley in Montana. However they discovered they could thrive at lower elevations, and since settled throughout the United States.

Now 330,000 Hmong live in the United States. Among them is Sunisa Lee, whose mother, Yeev Thoj, arrived in St. Paul, Minnesota, with her mother and older sister in 1987.