

Dear Chairman Felag and Esteemed Members of the Senate Special Legislation and Veterans Affairs Committee,

I would like to express my strong support for Senate Bill S. 3001 as it comes before you today for your consideration. This bill is designed to put Rhode Island in compliance with already passed Federal guidelines allowing for the burial of Hmong/Laotian Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) veterans in state cemeteries which accept federal funds.

As it has now been over 50 years since the end of the War in Southeast Asia, many in our society today are not aware of the history and sacrifices of that time period. The SGU who fought loyally and faithfully on our behalf in that bitter conflict have generally been afforded no benefits whatsoever for having cast their lot with us and losing their homes, and country, for having done so. Their heroic sacrifices in fighting on our side saved many American lives by conducting interdiction along the North Vietnamese supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, rescuing downed American pilots, and direct combat against highly trained North Vietnamese regular army units. Those who managed to escape the communist re-education camps after the War and get resettled here have become an important part of our American fabric, contributing greatly to the diversity of our society and this great experiment known as The United States of America.

The least the State of Rhode Island can do is afford the few remaining SGU veterans residing here the right to an honorable burial in our beautiful veterans cemetery in Exeter by passing S. 3001. I became involved in this cause about four years ago at the behest of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse when no other veterans organization would afford deceased SGU veterans an honor detail because they weren't issued an "official" DD 214. My organization, Vietnam Veterans of America, has so far put together as best we could for four deceased SGU veterans, an honor guard which included folding the American flag over their caskets. I don't think it is too much of an ask for the State to now shoulder with pride this responsibility.

When she wrote the Veterans Column in the Providence Journal a few years back, Mary Talbot interviewed the late head monk at the Wat Lao Buddhovath Temple in Smithfield. I am including that interview as part of my testimony.

Sincerely,

Brian A Carn
Vice-President
Rhode Island State Council
Vietnam Veterans of America

Veterans Voice: Laotian who served as guerrilla for US now a monk in Smithfield

Mary K. Talbot

Special to The Journal



The people and faces of America are diverse, and so are the stories of the veterans who have risked their lives to defend our country.

The Venerable Phra Ajahn Bounthanh Prasavath, 73, is a reverent man who lives a life of quiet contemplation as the head abbot at Wat Lao Buddhovath Temple in Smithfield.

For the last three decades, he has lived on 22 acres, surrounded by beautiful trees and the occasional call of birds. Speaking through an interpreter, he says it's a life he never could have imagined in the long, physically difficult days as a POW in his native Laos.

It was August 1966 when Prasavath, then 18, was recruited by the CIA and U.S. Special Forces to fight against the Communist forces in Laos, according to his discharge papers. He had been studying to be a monk, training to be a man of peace in the Buddhist tradition.

“Whether you're a Buddhist, or any religion – Catholic, Muslim, Hindu – they teach you to do something good, not bad,” says Prasavath.

However, his life and his country were at stake.

“Nobody wants to kill anybody but we have a lot of enemies over there. They wanted to take over our country,” he explains.

So Prasavath joined a friend and began training to defend Laos. He worked for six months under the watchful eye of Maj. Sar Phouthasack to become a radio operator as a member of one of the U.S. Army’s Special Guerrilla Units, or SGU.

Each radio operator carried a telegraph machine along with his radio. Their packs were heavy and they needed to be light on their feet. They were tasked in ambushing supply lines or enemy troops. Prasavath was one of 155 radio operators that Phouthasack trained over the course of the war.



Prasavath’s first assignment “was on a road watch team along the Ho Chi Minh trail,” where he served alongside Phouthasack in the MR3 military region of Laos, adjacent to the country's intersection with North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

”Sometimes they sent radio operators to the front lines or behind enemy lines to rescue American pilots when they were shot down,” explains Phouthasack.

While Prasavath didn’t rescue any pilots himself, he did put his life on the line every day to help American troops and to stave off the invaders from North Vietnam. More than 35,000 members of the SGU died during the war.

The risk to members of the SGU did not end with the American withdrawal, however. After the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, Prasavath, Phouthasack and others who had served alongside Americans were left extremely vulnerable.

Prasavath became a captive.

“They grabbed a lot of SGU radio operators and they said we are going to have you study a new ‘seminar,’” he says. “You have to learn something new between the new and old governments.”

Prasavath says that in the re-education camps, “They control everything. They limit where you have to go, when you have to go. They keep an eye on you all the time. Every morning. Every day they keep you working hard.

“If you don’t listen to them, you will die. They will kill you. To survive, you have to do, step by step, every day what they give you permission to do.”

“The Communists don’t care if you’re a Buddhist monk. They make you do hard work. Everybody works.”

For nine years, four months and 15 days, Prasavath did what he was told. Then one day, he saw his chance to escape.

“My wife died,” he says, and he asked permission to hold a funeral. “So they gave me a pass and said, ‘Only one month, you go over there [to Thailand] and come back.’” Prasavath agreed to his captors’ conditions and fled on foot, never looking back.

Arriving at a refugee camp in Thailand a little more than a year later, Prasavath again faced obstacles. He told camp officials he was a soldier and had escaped a POW camp.

“They asked, ‘Who did you work for?’”

He told them, “I worked for the CIA, SGU.”

The people allowing access to the camp wanted to know, “What did you do over there?”

He explained that he was a first lieutenant with the SGU. With those words they brought him a map and asked him to point to the spot where he had spent most of the last decade. He pinpointed the camp on the map. They silently nodded and the interrogation stopped.

Applying for asylum in the United States, Prasavath reached out to another former radio operator who was living in Bridgeport, Connecticut, to sponsor him. He arrived in the United States on Aug. 1, 1987.

“We are good people,” says Prasavath with a smile. “I am so happy to become an American citizen.”

Prasavath spent two weeks in Connecticut before moving to Providence and finishing his studies to become a monk. For the next five years, he looked for the perfect site to build a temple in Rhode Island.

Eventually, he found 22 bucolic acres in Smithfield where he has built a welcoming community that can host hundreds of people for special events.

“We welcome everybody,” he says. “If you are my friend or my enemy, or different religion, you are welcome.”

When Phouthasack heard of Prasavath’s escape, they reconnected.

“Right now in this country I still have 33 radio operators, spread out all across this country,” Phouthasack says.

They are a tight group.

“Now whenever the temple holds a ceremony, we will all go.”

Many visits have since transpired, even though Phouthasack lives about 90 miles away in Windsor, Connecticut.

Phouthasack translated for Prasavath during this interview.

Behind both men, the abbot’s American uniform proudly hung, surrounded by photos of elected officials who have visited the temple or made their acquaintance.

There is a picture of Woonsocket Mayor Lisa Baldelli-Hunt in front of a Laotian flag that she flew at City Hall. Congressman David Cicilline is photographed at an event at the temple and there is a close-up image of Phouthasack with U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse.

Whitehouse’s father served as U.S. ambassador to Laos in 1973, Phouthasack is quick to point out.

The two men are clearly proud of their status as American citizens. Prasavath says he applied for a special POW license and was pleased to hear the DMV workers acknowledge his sacrifices.

Although they spoke different languages, Prasavath clearly remembers them saying, “Thank you, POW.”

While their journey to America included many hardships and sacrifices, they appreciate their good fortune here in New England.

“We are good people that survived to become American citizens. ... We are lucky. A lot of people couldn’t escape. They were killed when they escaped. Some people swam in the Mekong River and they died in there. Some got shot along the border of the Mekong River.”

Neither man has wasted his opportunity. While Prasavath built a temple, Phouthasack went on to a career in business and has served as a leader of the Special Guerrilla Unit veterans, advocating for full recognition of their veteran status by the U.S. government.

Both men credit their U.S. citizenship for their success.

Says Phouthasack, "This country allows me to do everything. They give me opportunities. ... I work two jobs to support my family. I have eight kids. Two of my grandkids have become engineers."

And there's no denying his status as a member of the U.S. military.

"I have joined every organization: VFW, AMVETS, American Legion, 82nd Airborne. I am honored. This is my country."

Yet Phouthasack believes that the future of his nation, the United States, is in peril.

"We all are American," he says. "We have to stand together as one nation under God."

Prasavath, the veteran SGU radio operator, POW survivor and Buddhist monk, smiles and nods in agreement, adding, "It's America. We are America."