

Hmong honor former CIA boss in Vietnam

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OUT FRONT COMMON BOND

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On the chalkboard in the basement of the modest house on Edmund Avenue, someone had written, "You Are Welcome Bill" in big, block letters.

Right beneath it was a similar message in the curvy script of Lao.

William Egan Colby, the St. Paul boy who rose through the ranks of spy-dom to become Central Intelligence Agency director in 1973, sat comfortably at a table in front of the chalkboard.

He had stopped over to the house during a visit to his hometown to be reunited with about 35 Hmong men, his former comrades in the business of covert war.

Now well into middle age, they once formed an army of young, fierce CIA-trained guerrillas Colby helped recruit to carry out a secret battle with communists along the Ho Chi Minh Trail along the boundary between Laos and Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

"It always is a pleasure to visit with old friends," he told the veterans who crowded into the basement Wednesday night to honor the man who was their highest patron in the U.S. government.

"The last time I had this happen," he said, nodding at the party decorations around him, "was at Long Tien."

Many of the men nodded and smiled at the mention of a familiar place from their past. Long Tien was the CIA's secret base in the highlands of Laos, where the Hmong trained and were supplied during the 1960s and early 1970s.

The Hmong, a proud and isolated hill people, eventually had to flee their country when Laos fell to the communists in 1975. Those who survived the journey had to wait in Thai refugee camps — where 100,000 of their cohorts and families remain — before being allowed to emigrate to the United States and elsewhere.

An estimated 15,500 Hmong live in St. Paul. The Twin Cities have

the country's second-largest concentration of Hmong, behind Fresno, Calif.

Near the head of Colby's table, a giant floral centerpiece towered over him, while farther away, a roast pig stared at him from a platter. A dish of fruit and boiled eggs, all sacred objects in the Hmong religious beliefs, was placed in front of Colby for his consumption.

The Hmong had invited Colby to a baci ceremony — pronounced "ba-see" — to wish him good fortune and a long life, said Nkajlo Vangh, chairman of Lao Family Community, a Hmong self-help organization headed mainly by ex-CIA Hmong war veterans.

Each of the Hmong veterans bowed and tied pieces of string to Colby's right wrist, which grew steadily thicker like a cast. The string symbolizes the giver's good wishes.

Appointed CIA director by President Richard Nixon, Colby was fired by President Gerald Ford and replaced by George Bush in 1976.

In the 1960s, as CIA bureau chief in Saigon, Colby masterminded the CIA's covert operations in Southeast Asia.

He recently wrote a book on the Vietnam War, "Lost Victory," which argues that the United States actually had won the struggle by 1972, partly through its efforts to arm civilian patrols.

But South Vietnam eventually fell in 1975 because the American people wanted to withdraw from Southeast Asia and would not support the South Vietnamese Army any more.

"Despite the problems that occurred in Laos, despite the fact that you had to come here, we guard our relationship as a very close one, where we once worked together as comrades in arms," Colby told the Hmong through a translator.

Colby was in St. Paul to deliver a speech on trade in Asia to the Minnesota Trade Office on Thursday, said Stephen Young, a St. Paul attorney who is a close friend of Colby's from Vietnam.

When members of the city's Hmong community heard the ex-CIA chief was coming, they asked to honor him with a ceremony Wednesday night.

"They wanted to tell him, 'We remember you. We want you to remember us,'" Young said.

Many of the Hmong veterans believe that since they fought under and with U.S. forces they should be entitled to veterans benefits. But Colby said that under U.S. law they cannot collect benefits because they weren't officially part of the U.S. armed forces.

"We did what we could within the limits," Colby said. "We certainly did try to help them get out of the camps."