

VETERANS OF SPECIAL GUERRILLA UNITS AND IRREGULAR FORCES IN LAOS

Advisory Task Force

Report to the Minnesota Legislature

Appendix A – Detailed meeting summaries for all eight Advisory Task Force Meetings

Materials submitted at the request of individual members of the Task Force or presented during meetings of the Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Unit and Irregular Forces in Laos Advisory Task Force, including submissions from Task Force members, presenters, and interested groups, are publicly available on the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs website at <https://mn.gov/mdva/news/sgu/>. These materials reflect the views of the individual authors and do not represent the official position of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs or the State of Minnesota.

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Minnesota Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Task Force

Meeting 1 Summary – September 30, 2025

Date: September 30, 2025

Time: 9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Location: Veterans Service Building (In-Person & Microsoft Teams)

1. Opening Remarks: MDVA Deputy Commissioner Ben Johnson

MDVA Deputy Commissioner Ben Johnson called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m. Audio connectivity for virtual participants was confirmed. A quorum was present.

Deputy Commissioner Johnson stated that the purpose of the meeting was to convene the Task Force pursuant to 2025 Session Law Chapter 30 and to address initial organizational, legal, and procedural matters. He noted that meetings would be public, recorded, and posted on the MDVA website in accordance with transparency and reporting requirements.

2. Member Introductions

Task Force members, MDVA staff, and invited guests introduced themselves. Introductions reflected a range of perspectives, including SGU veterans, family members of SGU veterans, legislative appointees, veterans service organization representatives, and individuals with historical or operational expertise related to U.S. operations in Laos.

3. Legal Overview – Kristen Root, MDVA General Counsel

Kristen Root presented on three areas of law:

a) Minnesota Open Meeting Law (Ch. 13D)

Meetings are subject to public notice and quorum requirements, with materials and recordings made publicly available.

b) Task Force Enacting Law (2025 Session Law, Ch. 30, Sec. 13)

The Task Force is advisory in nature and charged with developing criteria and a protocol to assist the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs in determining eligibility for recognition as a Veteran of the Secret War in Laos for individuals not already covered under federal naturalization law. The Task Force must submit a report to the Legislature by February 15, 2026.

c) Naturalization Law (Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000):

Federal law established a naturalization pathway for certain SGU veterans and spouses and remains distinct from Minnesota's 2025 statute, which addresses eligibility determinations for individuals not previously naturalized under that federal act.

Discussion Points:

Discussion emphasized that the Task Force's role is limited to developing recommended criteria and protocols; final determinations and any statutory changes remain within legislative authority. Members acknowledged the importance of clarity regarding scope, timelines, and the advisory nature of the Task Force's work.

4. Election of Task Force Chair/Vice Chair: MDVA Deputy Commissioner Ben Johnson

Chair Election Votes:

Member	Voted For
Trent Dilks	Sen. Susan Pha
Tou T. Yang	Sen. Susan Pha
Rep. Bidal Duran	Initially Scott Walker → later changed to Sen. Susan Pha
Rep. Ethan Cha	Sen. Susan Pha
Gia T. Lee	Sen. Susan Pha
Tong Vang	Sen. Susan Pha
Scott Walker	Sen. Susan Pha
Sen. Susan Pha	Sen. Susan Pha

Sen. Jeff Howe	Absent at vote (left early)
Ben Johnson	Sen. Susan Pha
Bill Strusinski	Absent
William F. Roleau	Absent

Chair: Senator Susan Pha was elected Chair by majority vote, with unanimous support following a change in vote.

Vice Chair: Ben Johnson was confirmed as Vice Chair without objection.

5. Discuss and Establish Task Force Meeting Rules: Task Force Chair

The Task Force discussed and reached consensus on initial procedural matters, including:

Quorum: Seven members constitute a quorum. Informational or working discussions may occur with fewer members present.

Meeting Cadence: Tentative plan for twice-monthly meetings.

Meeting Format: Hybrid meetings hosted at the Veterans Service Building with remote participation available via Microsoft Teams.

Work Plan: The Task Force aims to develop a draft report in early 2026, with final review and submission by mid-February 2026.

6. Next Steps & Adjournment

Members reminded to complete oath of office filings with Secretary of State.

Ideas for future agenda items welcomed to be sent to MDVA.

Meeting adjourned by Chair Sen. Susan Pha at 10:30 a.m.

Key Action Items

- Kristen Root to make available PowerPoint materials & legislative excerpts.
- Task Force Members to complete Secretary of State oath filings.
- MDVA Staff to post meeting minutes, materials, and recordings on MDVA SGU Task Force webpage.

- Chair Sen. Pha to finalize cadence and agendas for upcoming meetings.
- MDVA to look into Mr. Kirk's application to fill vacant position on Task Force.

Minnesota Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Task Force

Meeting 2 Summary – October 20, 2025

Date October 20, 2025
Time 2:00 p.m.–4:08 p.m.
Location Veterans Service Building (Hybrid – Teams)

1. Opening Remarks – Chair Pha

Chair Pha outlined objectives: review statutory benefits, confirm meeting procedures, and identify future agenda topics.

2. Roll Call was taken by Vice Chair Johnson. Quorum is met.

3. Overview of Benefits and Privileges for Veterans of the Secret War in Laos

a) Memorial Affairs – David Swantek (MDVA Memorial Affairs)

Programs Reviewed: Minn. Stat. §§ 197.23 (Purchase of Grave Markers), 197.231 (Honor Guards), and 197.236 (State Veterans Cemeteries).

Grave Marker Program: Provides grave markers for eligible veterans interred in private Minnesota cemeteries. The program is administered through County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs), who must submit requests within the same calendar year as the veteran's burial.

- Eligibility: Veterans defined under Minn. Stat. § 197.447 or 197.448 who are buried in Minnesota.
- MDVA has been unable to issue bronze markers for the past three years due to cost increases, limited manufacturing sources, and constrained budget appropriations.

Honor Guards: Under Minn. Stat. § 197.231, the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs shall pay, within available funds and upon request by a local unit of a congressionally chartered veterans' organization or its auxiliary, up to \$50 to the local unit for each time that local unit provides an honor guard detail at the funeral of a deceased veteran.

State Veterans Cemeteries: Governed by Minn. Stat. § 197.236, these cemeteries provide burial for veterans, spouses, and dependents as defined under 38 U.S.C. § 2402(a). Interment for veterans is free of charge. Spouses and eligible dependents may also be buried there, subject to a fee.

- In March 2018, Congress amended 38 U.S.C. § 2402(a)(10) (via Public Law 115-141) to allow interment in VA national cemeteries for:

- Individuals who died on or after March 23, 2018,
- Were naturalized under the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000, or
- Were determined by the VA Secretary to have served honorably with a special guerrilla unit or irregular forces operating from a base in Laos, and who were U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents at the time of death.

Spouses and surviving spouses are excluded.

Eligible individuals under this provision may receive:

- Casket or cremation burial in a VA national cemetery (if space is available), or
- A government-furnished headstone or marker for private cemetery burials.

VA programs unaffected by this law include:

- Burial in VA-grant funded State or Tribal Veterans Cemeteries,
- Medallions, memorial headstones, burial flags, Presidential Memorial Certificates, and military funeral honors provided by DoD.

In December 2024, the FY25 National Defense Authorization Act amended 38 U.S.C. § 2402 to allow individuals described in paragraph (10)—those naturalized under the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000 or determined by the VA Secretary to have served honorably with a special guerrilla or irregular unit in Laos who are U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents—to be interred in VA-grant-funded State or Tribal Veterans Cemeteries without jeopardizing current or past federal grant funding. When requested, the VA will determine and confirm such eligibility for use by those cemeteries. The amendment does not cover federal burial allowances, memorial items, military funeral honors, or spouses and surviving spouses.

Follow-Up: MDVA will prepare a comparative chart summarizing eligibility requirements that are and are not available through the Federal government for Task Force review.

MDVA to provide link to Federal Register.

b) Veterans Preference – Dennis Devereaux (MDVA Education & Employment)

- Purpose: recognize military service and support transition to civilian employment (limited preference).
- Eligibility: Minn. Stat. § 197.447 veterans, including qualifying SGU veterans; disabled veterans; certain spouses. (note: SGU veterans are not currently eligible for federal service-connected disability benefits).
- Scope: § 197.455 (local governments); § 197.4551 (allows but does not require private employer preference).
- State agency hiring governed by §§ 43A.11 and 43A.111 (separate from local government preference).

c) Department of Public Safety – Jacquelyn Eiffler (DVS)

- Veteran designation on DL/ID authorized by Minn. Stat. § 171.07 subd. 15; currently there are no approved eligibility documents DVS can accept for an SGU Veteran.
- Documentation submitted once and kept on file; designation does not affect federal VA benefits but aids recognition/discounts.
- Laos War Veterans license plate requires proof of service and documentation from authorized organizations.

Follow-up: Provide statutory language and criteria used for license plate issuance at next meeting.

d) Vital Records, Certified Copies – Dan Tengwall (MDVA Government Affairs)

- Minn. Stat. § 197.63 authorizes recorders to issue vital records (e.g., marriage, death certificates) for veteran benefits purposes.
- Issued documents include notation limiting use to veteran benefits, preventing misuse for non-benefit purposes.

4. Discussion of Meeting Procedures

- Public input at end of meetings; up to 5 minutes per speaker; written comments encouraged in advance.
- Meeting summaries, access to slides, and recordings are sufficient; full transcripts and official meeting minutes not required.
- Materials and slides posted on MDVA website within three business days; distribute materials earlier when possible.

5. Discussion of Future Meeting Topics

- Reserve final two meetings for drafting and approving recommendations to the Legislature.
- Request to legislators involved to give rationale used to create bill and how they define SGU veteran, including criteria used.
- Discussion about groups who are excluded from bill.
- Provide testimony or proof of groups omitted from bill.
- Discuss criteria that VA uses for eligibility criteria.
- Invite Dr. Lee Pao Xiong (discuss history)
- Invite someone from National Cemeteries Administration (federal burial eligibility).

6. Adjourned at 4:08 p.m.

Key Action Items

	Action Item	Responsible	Due Date / Follow-Up
1	Prepare federal/state eligibility comparison chart for SGU veterans	MDVA	By next meeting (Oct 27)
2	Provide Laos Veteran plate statutory language and eligibility criteria	DVS/MDVA	By next meeting
3	Provide written background on criteria used for bill	Authors of bill	
4	Invite Dr. Lee Pao Xiong	Chair Pha / MDVA Staff	Before Meeting 3
5	Post meeting summary and slides to MDVA website	MDVA Communications	By Oct 23
6	Confirm attendance of absent members for future sessions	Chair Pha / Vice Chair Johnson	Before Meeting 3
7	Information on 38 USC 2402	MDVA	Before Meeting 3

Minnesota Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Task Force

Meeting 3 Summary – October 27, 2025

Date	October 27, 2025
Time	10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.
Location	Veterans Service Building (Hybrid – Teams)

1. Call to Order

Chair Pha called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. Roll call was conducted by Vice Chair Johnson. Quorum was confirmed.

2. Opening Remarks (Chair Pha)

Chair Pha welcomed members and noted minor additions to the agenda. The day's focus was to provide historical and legislative context regarding the Secret War in Laos, review the origins and legislative intent behind the 2025 Session Law, and begin defining criteria for veteran eligibility. Chair Pha emphasized that this conversation represents the beginning of several sessions dedicated to refining eligibility criteria. Public comment would occur at the end of the meeting.

3. Legislative Intent Overview (Rep. Ethan Cha & Chair Pha)

Rep. Cha provided an overview of the legislative history behind the bill (SF 1959/Chapter 30). He explained that the initiative emerged from community interest in recognizing refugees and immigrants who served with a special guerrilla unit or with irregular forces that operated from a base in Laos in support of the armed forces of the United States during the Vietnam War period. The law has bipartisan support and was designed to honor and extend certain state veteran benefits to these individuals.

Chair Pha reiterated that the law's scope was always intended to include all irregular forces operating in Laos under U.S. direction from 1961 to 1975, not solely Hmong veterans. The Task Force's charge is to recommend clear criteria and a verification process consistent with the legislative framework.

Mr. Walker expressed concern that the conversation may have broadened the scope beyond what was legislated. Chair Pha and Rep. Cha clarified that irregular forces were explicitly included within the statutory definition and that the legislative intent was to be inclusive of all ethnic groups meeting the operational criteria outlined in law. Professor Lee Pao Xiong confirmed this understanding, noting that multiple groups contributed to the drafting process and that the statute reflects inclusivity.

4. Secret War Historical Overview

a. **Professor Lee Pao Xiong, Concordia University**

Professor Xiong provided a comprehensive historical overview of the Secret War in Laos, referencing CIA Operation Momentum and the organization of Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs). He explained that the SGUs were covert units funded, trained, and directed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (“CIA”) to support U.S. strategic objectives during the Vietnam conflict. He clarified the distinction between regular and irregular forces, noting that the Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) were irregular formations organized outside the formal structure of the Royal Lao Armed Forces.

Professor Xiong emphasized that the statute’s reference to operations “from a base in Laos” was consistent with historical missions conducted under the direction of U.S. personnel. He also emphasized the inclusion of diverse ethnic groups (49 in total) who fought under the SGU structure. He noted that the Special Guerrilla Units played a critical role in rescuing downed American pilots, gathering intelligence, and supporting broader U.S. operations in the region.

Task Force members discussed the need for greater clarity regarding who qualifies as a member of a Special Guerrilla Unit or other irregular forces. Mr. Walker emphasized the importance of ensuring that the final legislative report clearly delineates inclusion and exclusion criteria. Chair Pha reaffirmed that the statute limits eligibility to individuals who were recruited, trained, and paid by the Central Intelligence Agency to operate in Laos.

b. **Statement for the Record – (C.I.A. Guerrilla Operations in Laos (1961-1975) Presentation - U.S. Covert & Irregular Operations in Southeast Asia (1961-1975) - Legislative Overview) - Thomas Briggs**

Mr. Briggs, a former CIA case officer, provided an eyewitness account of the Secret War in Laos. He described his experience training village defense units and the subsequent transition of these groups into SGUs. He emphasized that CIA operations during the period did not maintain formal personnel documentation, which complicates present-day verification efforts. Mr. Briggs cautioned that falsified or unreliable records could surface and underscored the importance of relying on verified primary sources whenever possible.

Chair Pha invited suggestions regarding potential methods of verification. Mr. Briggs advised caution in relying on unverified affidavits or photographs, noting the absence of centralized personnel records from the period. The following factors were identified for consideration when determining eligibility:

- Sworn affidavits verified under penalty of perjury
- Photographic evidence, including authenticated training photographs
- Command identification through reference to known officers or unit leaders
- Age parameters consistent with the historical period of service

It was noted that federal precedent under the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000 provides a model for verification processes. MDVA could review that framework to help inform the Task Force's forthcoming recommendations. Members discussed defining 'irregular forces' as a key next step to reduce ambiguity.

MDVA staff summarized the eligibility criteria outlined under the Naturalization Act, referencing H. Rept. 106-563 (106th Congress) – Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000:

SEC. 4. DOCUMENTATION OF QUALIFYING SERVICE.

A person seeking an exemption under section 2 or special consideration under section 3 shall submit to the Attorney General documentation of their, or their spouse's, service with a special guerrilla unit, or irregular forces, described in section 2(1)(B), in the form of--

- (1) original documents;
- (2) an affidavit of the serving person's superior officer;
- (3) two affidavits from other individuals who also were serving with such a special guerrilla unit, or irregular forces, and who personally knew of the person's service; or
- (4) other appropriate proof.

The statute directs MDVA to await legislative approval of criteria before issuing eligibility certificates. The Task Force must finalize recommendations by February 15, 2026.

5. Public Comment

No members of the public requested to speak.

6. Closing Discussion and Next Steps

Mr. Kirk inquired about the estimated number of SGU and irregular forces veterans in Minnesota that would be affected. Chair Pha estimated that between 1,000 and 2,000 individuals may qualify, noting that the precise number remains uncertain.

Mr. Walker introduced a motion, which was tabled until Meeting 4 due to time constraints. Vice Chair Johnson requested additional time for members to review the motion independently prior to the next meeting.

Members were encouraged to email suggestions regarding eligibility criteria ahead of the next meeting.

Next meeting will be held on November 13 from 2:00 – 4:00 pm. It is intended to get into the eligibility criteria in greater detail at this meeting.

7. Meeting was adjourned at 12:01 p.m.

Action Items

Action Item	Responsible Party	Due Date / Follow-Up
Compile list of possible eligibility documentation types to begin a master table for Task Force	Bill Strusinski	Prior to Meeting 4
Share Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act verification process summary to serve as a reference model for Task Force review	MDVA	Prior to Meeting 4
Distribute Mr. Walker's written motion to Task Force Members	MDVA Staff	Prior to Meeting 4
Develop draft definition for 'Irregular Forces'	Task Force Workgroup	Prior to Meeting 4
Post meeting summary and materials on MDVA website	MDVA Communications	Within 3 business days

Note Taker: Shambrie Lesniak

Next Meeting: November 13, 2025 (2:00–4:00 p.m.)

Location: Veterans Service Building / Microsoft Teams

VETERANS OF SPECIAL GUERRILLA UNITS AND IRREGULAR FORCES IN LAOS

Advisory Task Force

Minnesota Session Law – 2025, Regular Session - [Chapter 30, SF Number 1959, Article 2, Sec. 6](#)

November 13, 2025

2:00PM CT

MEETING AGENDA

1. Call Meeting to Order: Chair Pha

Chair Pha called the meeting to order at 2:00pm.

2. Roll Call & Introductions: Vice Chair Johnson

Vice Chair Johnson conducted roll call and introductions. All members present except for Stephen (Tim) Kirk and Sen. Jeff Howe.

3. Opening Remarks: Chair Pha

Senator Pha opened the meeting by acknowledging the committee's significant progress and expressing her gratitude for the time and effort dedicated by all members. She then introduced a motion proposed by Scott Walker that had been postponed from the previous session due to time constraints.

Regarding the pre-circulated materials, the Senator referenced the documents provided by Jon Kelly in an email prior to the meeting. She stated that a general recap of the handouts was unnecessary, as all attendees were expected to have reviewed the information in advance.

Finally, she set ground rules for the discussion, emphasizing the need to respect all viewpoints and requesting that comments from Scott Walker be limited to a maximum of two minutes to ensure efficient use of time.

4. Discussion Topics

a. Scott Walker Motion

During a task force meeting, a motion was presented by Scott Walker to pause legislative advancement and request a legal review concerning veteran-qualifying documentation. Discussion ensued regarding the task force's authority, the precedent for creating veteran subclasses.

- i. Scott Walker began discussing his motion at 2:08pm which centered around three topics: DEI, Verification of Service and Potential Conflict between the U.S. definition of Veteran and the new the MN State category of Veteran of the

Secret War in Laos – Foreign Nationals (Lao and Hmong). In summary, the motion is to suspend the work the Task Force is assigned to do and send this back to the legislature to have the law reviewed and refined. Scott Walker concluded his remarks at 2:13pm.

1. During this discussion, Vice Chair Johnson redirected Scott Walker to put this Motion up for vote, rather than recite the motion in its entirety, as all members have been able to review the document ahead of time.
- ii. Chair Pha thanks Scott Walker for his motion but acknowledges that this motion violates the legislative mandate that was passed into law in 2025 and oversteps the authority of the Task Force. Furthermore, pausing or suspending this work is not the job of the Task Force, as it is the duty of the Task Force to carry out the law that is already in place to develop eligibility criteria for the SGU and Irregular Forces. Therefore, Chair Pha asks everyone to vote against this motion.
1. As a result of Chair Pha’s comments, Scott Walker makes an amendment to his motion and presented that to Chair Pha and the Task Force.
- iii. A large discussion took place from some of the members as noted below, which consumed the first 36 minutes of the meeting:
1. Trent Dilks disagrees with all the points of Scott Walker’s motion but will not go into details with each. He will vote against this motion.
 2. Rep. Cha reviewed all seven points of Scott Walker’s motion and disagrees with all of them. Stating that this legislative bill was vetted and passed and to suggest that we pause this legislation is not the task nor duty of this Task Force. It is our job to advise the Commissioner as to what needs to go back to the legislature in February.
 3. Tou Yang states that the Task Force cannot adopt a motion to suspend without legislative authority, as that is not the duty of the Task Force and respectfully will not support this motion.
 4. Bill Strusinski highlights the good discussion and agrees that the Task Force exists to develop criteria to give people an opportunity to apply for state level benefits. He has some suggestions for what criteria could be created and hopes to discuss those at the next meeting. He stated he will not support the motion.
 5. Mr. Roleau makes a statement as it relates to one of Scott Walker’s points, that it’s not just the Hmong, it’s all ethnic groups of Veterans. Public law from 2000, at the time the SGU members were brought into the country, required certain documents to receive benefits. Chair Pha acknowledges Mr. Roleau’s comments regarding the Official Documents and Records.

iv. VOTE ON MOTION: 10 No, 1 Yes, 2 Absent. Motion fails.

MDVA Deputy Commissioner Ben Johnson	No
Trent Dilks (DAV of MN)	No
Bill Strusinski	No
Tou T. Yang	No
Gia T. Lee	No
Tong Vang	No
Scott Walker	Yes
William F. Roleau	No
Stephen (Tim) Kirk	Absent
Rep. Ethan Cha	No
Rep. Bidal Duran	No
Sen. Jeff Howe	Absent
Sen. Susan Pha	No

b. Eligibility Protocol Discussion

- i. Thank you from Chair Pha to Ben Johnson and Jon Kelly for Eligibility Protocol Recommendations.
- ii. Jon Kelly goes through the document labeled “Eligibility for State Veterans Benefits and Privileges Protocol – Veterans of the Secret War in Lao”.
- iii. Discussion
 1. Tou Yang asked if the Veteran must apply for the Federal Burial Benefit before they can apply for the State Burial Benefit? Jon Kelly provides information that eligibility criteria for burial is the same process at both levels.
 2. Trent Dilks likes this format and the layout of these criteria. The only comment he had was that if an appeal reaches the Commissioner’s Level, perhaps the Task Force could establish a panel of three SGU Veterans, as an advisory board to the Commissioner to ensure the information is factual.
 3. Rep. Cha agrees with Mr. Dilks points and does like the idea of advisory board.
 4. Tong Vang, Scott Walker and Gia Lee all made short comments.
 5. Chair Pha stated the application deadline of 2 years is not long enough, and recommends it be increased to a minimum of 4 years, if not 6 years. Consensus is that increasing the timeline is a great idea.

NEXT MEETING: The next meeting should focus on taking the recommendations – concrete recommendations, language changes or ideas, and brainstorm or get feedback on why it could or couldn't work and then evaluate all of them to determine which items the Task Force supports or does not support.

5. Public Comment

No members of public requested to speak.

6. Adjourn: Chair Pha

a. Chair Pha called the meeting adjourned at 3:54pm.

Action Items

Everyone is to bring proposed edits.

Bill Strusinski will share a Documents List with the group.

Next Meeting: Monday, November 24, 2025, at 10:00am

Location: Veterans Service Building/Microsoft Teams

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

MDVA Deputy Commissioner Ben Johnson – *The Minnesota Department of Veteran Affairs Commissioner, or a designee*

Mr. Trent Dilks (DAV of MN) - *A representative of the Minnesota Commanders Task Force designated by the Commanders Task Force*

Mr. Bill Strusinski - *A United States armed forces veteran who served on active duty in Vietnam during the Vietnam War*

Mr. Tou T. Yang - *A Hmong American Minnesota resident who served in the United States armed forces*

Mr. Gia T. Lee - *A veteran of a special guerilla unit or irregular forces in Laos*

Mr. Tong Vang - *A veteran of a special guerilla unit or irregular forces in Laos*

Mr. Scott Walker - *A member with expertise in the history of allied irregular and surrogate forces*

Mr. William F. Roleau - *A member with direct experience in United States intelligence or special operations in Southeast Asia*

Mr. Stephen (Tim) Kirk - *A member with direct experience in Military Assistance Command Vietnam Special Forces operations*

Rep. Ethan Cha - *A member appointed by the MN House Democratic-Farmer-Labor leader*

Rep. Bidal Duran - *A member each appointed by the Speaker of the MN House of Representatives*

Sen. Jeff Howe - *A member appointed by the MN Senate Minority Leader*

Sen. Susan Pha - *A member appointed by the MN Senate Majority Leader*

2025 Session Law Excerpts Regarding “Veteran of the Secret War in Laos”

Reference: Chapter 30 – SF Number 1959, Article 2 (Military Affairs and Veterans Affairs Policy)

Section 9. [197.448] **VETERAN OF THE SECRET WAR IN LAOS.**

Subdivision 1. **Definition.** As used in this section, the term "Veteran of the Secret War in Laos" means a person who resides in Minnesota and who:

(1) was naturalized as provided in section 2(1) of the federal Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000, Public Law 106-207; or

(2) is a person who the commissioner of veterans affairs determines served honorably with a special guerrilla unit or with irregular forces that operated from a base in Laos in support of the armed forces of the United States at any time during the period beginning February 28, 1961, and ending May 14, 1975, and is a citizen of the United States or an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States.

Subd. 2. **Eligibility for benefits and privileges.** (a) A veteran of the Secret War in Laos, as defined in subdivision 1, clause (1), is entitled to the benefits and privileges listed in paragraph (d) the day following the effective date of this act.

(b) A veteran of the Secret War in Laos, as defined in subdivision 1, clause (2), is entitled to the benefits and privileges listed in paragraph (d) after the commissioner of veterans affairs verifies the person's veteran status. The commissioner must not begin accepting applications for verification under this paragraph until the legislature enacts criteria and a protocol to determine:

(1) which Minnesotans served in special guerilla units or with irregular forces in Laos; and

(2) which of the Minnesotans who served in special guerilla units or with irregular forces in Laos are deserving of Minnesota veterans benefits.

(c) If the commissioner verifies a person's status as a veteran of the Secret War in Laos, the commissioner must provide the person with a certificate of eligibility for the benefits and privileges listed in paragraph (d) on a form developed by the commissioner for this purpose. The commissioner must develop the form required under this paragraph no later than September 15, 2025.

(d) The following statutory benefits and privileges available to a veteran, as defined in section 197.447, are also available to a veteran of the Secret War in Laos: section 171.07, subdivision 15 (veteran designation on drivers' licenses and state identification cards); section 197.23 (purchase of grave markers); section 197.231 (honor guards); section 197.236 (state veterans cemeteries); section 197.455 (veterans preference); section 197.4551 (permissive preference for veterans in private employment); section 197.63 (vital records, certified copies); section 197.65 (renewal of professional licenses, motor vehicle registration, and drivers' licenses); and section 197.987 (honor and remember flag).

Sec. 13. **ADVISORY TASK FORCE ESTABLISHED; VETERANS OF SPECIAL GUERRILLA UNITS AND IRREGULAR FORCES IN LAOS.**

Subdivision 1. **Establishment; membership.** (a) The commissioner of veterans affairs must establish a Veterans of Special Guerilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Advisory Task Force.

(b) The advisory task force must consist of the commissioner, or a designee, and the following additional 12 members appointed by the commissioner, except as otherwise provided:

(1) a representative of the Minnesota Commanders Task Force designated by the Commanders Task Force;

(2) one member with direct experience in Military Assistance Command Vietnam Special Forces operations during the dates established in Minnesota Statutes, section 197.448, subdivision 1, clause (2);

(3) a United States armed forces veteran who served on active duty in Vietnam during the Vietnam War;

(4) a Hmong American Minnesota resident who served in the United States armed forces;

(5) two veterans of a special guerilla unit or irregular forces in Laos;

(6) one member with expertise in the history of allied irregular and surrogate forces during the dates established in Minnesota Statutes, section 197.448, subdivision 1, clause (2);

(7) one member with direct experience in United States intelligence or special operations in Southeast Asia during the dates established in Minnesota Statutes, section 197.448, subdivision 1, clause (2); and

(8) four legislators, with one member each appointed by the speaker of the house of representatives, the house Democratic-Farmer-Labor leader, the senate majority leader, and the senate minority leader.

Subd. 2. Duties; report. (a) The task force must:

(1) establish criteria for determining which Minnesotans served in the special guerrilla units or with irregular forces in Laos; and

(2) establish criteria and a protocol to determine which Minnesotans who served in the special guerilla units or with irregular forces in Laos are deserving of the benefits of a veteran under Minnesota law and which veterans benefits should be extended to these Minnesotans.

(b) The task force must prepare a report to the legislature that includes the findings, criteria, protocol, and recommendations required under paragraph (a). The commissioner must deliver the report to the chairs and ranking minority members of the legislative committees with jurisdiction over veterans affairs policy and finance by February 15, 2026.

Subd. 3. Administration; terms of membership. The commissioner shall convene the first meeting of the advisory task force by September 15, 2025, and provide staff support to the advisory task force. Minnesota Statutes, section 15.059, subdivision 6, governs the terms and removal of members of the advisory task force. Members of the task force serve without compensation or per diem.

Subd. 4. Expiration. The task force expires February 15, 2026.

Minnesota Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Task Force

Meeting 5 Summary – November 24, 2025

Date: November 24, 2025

Time: 10:00 a.m.–12:11 p.m.

Location: Hybrid Meeting (In-Person & Microsoft Teams)

1. Call to Order

Chair Pha called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. Roll call was conducted, and quorum was confirmed. The Chair noted that today's meeting would be discussion-heavy and focused primarily on refining potential eligibility criteria for veterans of the Secret War in Laos.

2. Opening Remarks – Chair Pha

Chair Pha provided an overview of last week's progress, including the presentation by MDVA staff on the initial Eligibility Protocol Draft and early framework for documentation verification. She reiterated that no voting would occur today; the purpose of this session was to share ideas, refine and categorize potential documentation types, and begin further shaping a workable draft protocol for MDVA to review.

MDVA staff also reported ongoing efforts to secure National Cemetery Administration (NCA) staff and the Ramsey County Veteran Service Officer (VSO) for the December 10 meeting.

3. Discussion: Eligibility Verification Criteria and Documentation Framework

3.1 Overview of Initial Documentation List – Strusinski

Mr. Strusinski presented a draft list of potential documentation types that may help verify service in SGU or irregular forces during the Secret War in Laos. He emphasized that the list was illustrative, not exhaustive, and is intended to serve as the Task Force's starting point. Examples included:

- U.S. military records
- Hmong, Lao, Royal Laotian, or Pathet Lao records (if any exist)
- ID cards, photos, personal letters
- Refugee camp documentation
- Possible CIA or liaison records
- Affidavits of various types
- Organizational records held by SGU veteran groups

4. Cultural, Historical, and Practical Barriers to Documentation

4.1 Oral Tradition and Loss of Records – Tou T. Yang

Mr. Yang provided extensive historical context, explaining that:

- The Hmong written language was not widely used until the mid-1900s, resulting in very few written personal or military records.
- SGU soldiers were paid in cash through covert financial channels; no receipts or payroll logs exist.
- When forced to flee Laos in 1975, most families left with nothing. Documents were burned, buried, or abandoned for safety.
- CIA records remain classified or unobtainable, even through FOIA requests.
- Many refugees entered the U.S. through different immigration programs, and many of those programs did not document or inquire about SGU military service; therefore, SGU participation may not appear in immigration records.

These factors mean that most Hmong applicants cannot provide formal records.

4.2 Documentation Non-Existence – Tong Vang

Mr. Vang reiterated that:

- SGU units were not part of the Royal Lao Army, so no formal military rosters exist.
- Any existing lists of SGU members were intentionally destroyed during the war for safety reasons.
- Immigration records vary widely based on refugee program pathways, and many do not reflect SGU service.

Ultimately, only SGU veterans themselves knew who served, making affidavits a primary verification tool.

4.3 U.S. and CIA Operational Secrecy

Mr. Rouleau noted parallels to U.S. special operations units, where individuals were required to sign multidecade Non-Disclosure Agreements. He explained that most American personnel took operational details “to the grave,” and that SGU veterans returning to Thailand also faced strict rules and secrecy documentation. This reinforces the reality that formal records were not preserved and may never be recoverable.

Members emphasized the importance of protecting personal safety and urged the Task Force to incorporate strong data-privacy safeguards to ensure applicants are not exposed to risk.

5. Affidavits: Benefits, Limitations, and Use-Case Structure

5.1 Importance of Affidavits

Members broadly agreed that affidavits—whether from commanders, battalion-level officers, or peers—will be a core component of the verification process. Several emphasized that:

- Women, spouses, and older children often served as primary historical memory-keepers.
- Many SGU officers are now deceased. Requiring affidavits from direct superiors would be overly restrictive and would unintentionally disqualify legitimate veterans.
- Many Task Force members acknowledged that affidavit requirements need flexibility

5.2 Concerns Regarding Reliability

MDVA expressed concerns regarding:

- Hearsay, especially from family members.
- Inconsistent or contradictory accounts.
- Potential pressure on witnesses in close-knit communities.

Rep. Cha proposed a balanced approach:

- Family affidavits should be allowed as supplemental evidence, but not primary.
- Multiple supporting affidavits should be encouraged.

5.3 Chain-of-Command Affidavit Model

A chain-of-identity or chain-of-honor model was discussed, including:

- Command certification (if feasible)
- Peer or battle buddy affidavits
- A multi-tier system assigning different evidentiary weights

Walker explained that federal precedent under the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act included similar concepts.

6. Categorizing Evidence into “Buckets”

Chair Pha led the Task Force in grouping documentation into structured categories to aid MDVA in future verification:

Category 1 – Formal / Original Service-Related Documentation

Examples:

- SGU organization rosters
- ID cards
- Immigration or refugee documents referencing military status
- Any available foreign military records
- U.S. training records for select officers
- Verified Naturalization Act records

Category 2 – Affidavits

- Former superior officers
- Battle buddies or peers
- Eyewitness community members
- Supplemental family affidavits (can't be primary)

Category 3 – Other Appropriate Proof

- Media accounts, books, interviews, documentaries, archival materials, oral histories

Category 4 – Photographic / Supplemental Evidence

- Photos in uniform or with identifiable SGU officers
- Photos corroborated by witnesses

Category 5 – Supporting Documentation

- Flexible category for additional materials

MDVA will consult the Commissioner on feasibility and evidentiary weight.

7. Procedural and Administrative Considerations

7.1 Applicant Interviews

Members discussed whether interviews should be included. Concerns included:

- Language barriers
- Logistical burden on elderly applicants
- Risk of inequity

It was suggested that interviews could occur only after an initial denial and only as an optional step. Further discussion to be had on this.

The Task Force discussed whether MDVA has any obligation to assist applicants in locating documentation.

7.2 Advisory Council Concept

Mr. Dilks proposed an SGU Advisory Council to serve as a pre-review body. MDVA expressed interest but noted resource constraints.

7.3 Fraud and Document Validity

Members discussed fake DD-214 forms circulating in the community. Some elders possess fake or recreated DD-214s that they did not create and do not understand are fake.

Consensus:

- Documentation must be legitimate.
- Applicants should not be prosecuted for unknowingly submitting invalid documents.
- The protocol must account for community vulnerabilities - The protocol must be designed

in a way that recognizes the historical, cultural, and practical challenges SGU veterans face, so applicants are not disadvantaged by circumstances beyond their control.

8. Federal Precedent and Walker Materials

MDVA referenced the Naturalization Act verification process and its reliance on affidavits and contextual documentation. Mr. Walker submitted a research and audio package for distribution.

9. December 10 Meeting Preview

The next meeting will:

- Include the anticipated NCA briefing And Ramsey Co CVSO (Christina Rost) to address the federal application and appeal processes experienced to date.
- Begin assigning documentation examples to evidence buckets
- Discuss weighting (primary vs. supplemental)
- Review federal models and identify gaps

Members were encouraged to prepare refined lists.

10. Public Comment

No public comments were submitted.

11. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 12:11 p.m.

Action Items

Action Item	Responsible Party	Due Date / Follow-Up
Confirm NCA staff and Ramsey County VSO availability for the December 10 briefing	MDVA Staff	Before December 10
Distribute Walker's research packet and audio materials to all Task Force members	MDVA Staff	Before next meeting
Review Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act verification model	All Members	Before December 10
Consult internally on MDVA's capacity to verify documentation	MDVA / Commissioner	
Assess feasibility of optional interviews post-denial	Task Force	Ongoing

Determine primary vs. supplemental evidence types	Task Force Members	At December 10 meeting
Prepare refined eligibility examples for draft protocol	All Members	At December 10 meeting

Note Taker:
Shambrie Lesniak

Next Meeting:
December 10, 2025 (10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.)
Location: Virtual Meeting (Microsoft Teams)

Minnesota Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Task Force

Meeting 6 Summary – December 10, 2025

Date: December 10, 2025

Time: 2:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m.

Location: Hybrid Meeting (In-Person & Microsoft Teams)

1. Call to Order

Chair Pha called the meeting to order at 2:02 p.m. Roll call was conducted, and quorum was confirmed.

2. Opening Remarks – Chair Pha

Chair Pha welcomed members and explained that the meeting would include a federal briefing from the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), information from Ramsey County CVSIO, and a detailed section-by-section review of the Eligibility Protocol Draft. The goal is to refine and improve the protocol so MDVA can begin preparing the Commissioner's statutory verification process.

3. National Cemetery Administration Briefing

Glenn Powers (Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations) and Daniel Catron (National Cemetery Scheduling Office) provided an extensive overview of NCA responsibilities, the evolution of federal eligibility for SGU and irregular forces veterans, and federal evidentiary standards.

3.1 Overview of NCA's Role

Mr. Powers opened by describing NCA's operational responsibilities, including national cemetery operations, scheduling interments, issuing headstones and markers, and overseeing the state cemetery grant program. He highlighted NCA's long and positive partnership with Minnesota State Veterans Cemeteries, noting that Minnesota consistently maintains high-quality facilities.

3.2 Evolution of Federal Eligibility for Laotian and Hmong Veterans

Mr. Catron provided a detailed overview of how federal law has changed over time.

2018 – Consolidated Appropriations Act (PL 115-141)

- Created eligibility based on naturalization under the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000.
- Did not require proof of military service.
- Many who served were not naturalized within the required timeframe.

2021 – FY22 National Defense Authorization Act (PL 117-81)

- Expanded eligibility to individuals the VA Secretary determines served honorably with SGU or irregular forces between Feb. 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975.
- The VA understands that there were Laotians that were not Hmong. They are indeed part of this eligibility criteria.

2023 – Implementation Regulation (38 CFR § 38.619)

The regulation identified four acceptable documentation types:

1. Government-issued original documents
2. Affidavit from a superior officer
3. Two affidavits from peers
4. Other appropriate evidence documenting service, dates, and locations

NCA displayed real-world examples including certificates, community-issued letters, affidavits, and photographs. They emphasized that DD-214 “SGU Form 14” is not authentic and cannot be accepted.

2024 – FY25 Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act (PL 118-159)

- Prohibited NCA from restricting state cemeteries from interring SGU/IF veterans.
- Minnesota already updated its statutes to align with this.

3.3 Trends in Applications and Determinations

- 39 time-of-need burial requests: 9 approved
- 421 pre-need eligibility applications: 85 approved
- Earlier denials were tied to naturalization issues; service-based evidence is improving.

3.4 Discussion with Task Force Members

DD-214 Concerns

- Rep. Cha asked about the origin of SGU-style DD-214 documents.
- Catron confirmed these were community-created and not issued by DoD.

Turnaround Time

- Clear cases may be resolved within minutes.
- Complex cases require USCIS verification or follow-up.

Cultural Burial Preferences

- SGU members described Hmong beliefs and burial preferences leading many families to seek only funeral honors rather than interment.

3.5 Key Takeaways from NCA

- Applicants should submit all possible documentation.
- Pre-need determinations are highly recommended.
- Federal evidentiary categories align with Minnesota’s draft protocol.
- MDVA may rely on VA approvals, while denied applicants have state pathways.

4. CVSO Testimony – Christina Rost

Ms. Rost discussed her extensive work supporting SGU veterans.

4.1 Documentation Challenges

- Applicants often lack formal records.
- Many affidavits require translation.
- Adult children frequently serve as intermediaries.
- Photos and oral histories often supplement written evidence.

4.2 High Demand for Funeral Honors

- Many SGU veterans seek recognition rather than burial.
- Funeral honors remain the most requested service.

4.3 Experiences with Appeals

- Appeals succeed when applicants provide additional affidavits or evidence.
- VA denial letters typically include reasons.

5. **Review of Eligibility Protocol Draft**

5.1 **Pre-Filing Requirement**

Consensus: Pre-filing with VA Form 40-10007 must be mandatory. MDVA will accept a VA approval as final. A VA denial leads to the Special Consideration process.

5.2 **CVSO Assistance**

CVSOs must be available to help but applicants are not required to use them.

5.3 **Submission to MDVA**

Upon receiving a VA determination, applicants will submit a cover letter and VA documentation. If approved by VA, MDVA issues certificate; if denied, Applicant enters Special Consideration.

5.4 **Special Consideration Pathway**

Applicants must submit the VA denial letter and at least two pieces of acceptable documentation. MDVA will develop an intake and tracking process and issue determinations within statutory timelines.

5.5 **Acceptable Documentation Categories**

Members discussed four categories: original documents, superior officer affidavits, peer affidavits, and other appropriate evidence. They emphasized expanding “superior officer” to “chain of command,” requiring affidavits to state location, dates, unit, and commander, and refining “other appropriate evidence” to include photos, certificates, and contextual details.

(1) Original Service Documents: Rare; absence should not disadvantage applicants.

(2) Affidavit of Superior Officer: Consider expanding definition to include non-commissioned officers, company commanders, and others in the chain of command.

(3) Two Peer Affidavits: Often the most valuable evidence given SGU historical circumstances.

(4) Other Appropriate Evidence: Should include service region, dates, unit/battalion, chain-of-command references, photographs, and community certificates. These correspond to federal examples presented by NCA.

6. Next Steps

MDVA will incorporate revisions and return with an updated draft at Meeting 7. Focus areas will include strengthening definitions, clarifying evidentiary expectations, and finalizing MDVA workflow for reviews and appeals.

7. Public Comment

No public comment submitted.

8. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 4:03 p.m.

Action Items

Action Item	Responsible Party	Due Date / Follow-Up
Integrate Task Force recommendations into revised Eligibility Protocol Draft	MDVA Staff	Before Meeting 7
Add affidavit clarifications (service location, dates, chain of command)	MDVA Staff	Before Meeting 7
Explore chain-of-command affidavit model	Task Force / MDVA	Ongoing
Clarify whether VA denial letters always include reason for denial	MDVA Staff	Next meeting

**Minnesota Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Advisory Task Force
Meeting 7 Summary – December 19, 2025**

Date: December 19, 2025

Time: 10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

Location: Hybrid Meeting (Microsoft Teams and In-Person)

1. Call to Order

Chair Susan Pha called the meeting to order at 10:06 a.m. Audio connectivity for virtual participants was confirmed.

2. Roll Call and Quorum

Vice Chair Ben Johnson conducted roll call. A quorum was confirmed.

3. Opening Remarks

Chair Pha stated that the purpose of the meeting was to continue section-by-section review of the Eligibility Protocol draft dated November 7, 2025. The Chair emphasized that while unanimous agreement may not be possible, the goal was to surface concerns, seek majority consensus, and complete substantive edits during this meeting so that MDVA staff could prepare a revised draft for subsequent review.

4. Discussion: Eligibility Protocol Review

4.1 Recap of Prior Edits

MDVA staff summarized changes made since the previous meeting, including removal of the requirement to submit a copy of a U.S. Certificate of Naturalization showing an A-number, and technical edits previously agreed upon by the Task Force.

4.2 Section 2 – Affidavits and Chain of Command Verification

The Task Force discussed revised language clarifying that affidavits may be submitted by a commissioned officer, noncommissioned officer, or other member of the applicant's chain of command with direct knowledge of the applicant's service.

- Mr. Rouleau raised the possibility of using immigration "A-files" generated at the time of naturalization as a potential source of corroborating information, noting uncertainty as to whether service-related distinctions were documented.

- Mr. Walker expressed concern about relying on immigration or VA determinations as conclusive proof of SGU service, emphasizing the need for positive identification rather than reliance on a single document.
- Vice Chair Johnson and Chair Pha noted that affidavits are sworn, legally binding statements and that the Task Force must rely on available mechanisms given the passage of time and loss of records.
- Members acknowledged the practical limitations created by the deaths of many superior officers and the classified nature of SGU service.

Consensus was reached to retain the revised affidavit language.

4.3 Section 3 – Prior Federal or State Determinations

Members indicated continued consensus on Section 3 as previously drafted. No additional edits were proposed.

4.4 Section 4 – Additional Supporting Documentation

MDVA staff presented a revised Section 4 incorporating a non-exhaustive list of additional documentation, informed by submissions from community organizations and prior Task Force discussions. The list was framed as “including but not limited to,” to preserve flexibility.

Discussion highlights included:

- Support for allowing applicants’ statements of service, unit information, and narrative descriptions to aid historical plausibility and corroboration.
- Emphasis on evaluating multiple pieces of evidence collectively, rather than elevating any single document as determinative.
- Recognition that applicants may face language barriers and may interpret requirements literally, underscoring the importance of clear guidance and outreach.
- Clarification that affidavits from CIA case officers or individuals in comparable advisory roles could be considered where available.
- Discussion of family affidavits; MDVA leadership stated they did not recommend including spouse or family affidavits due to corroboration limitations.

Community Letters Entered into the Record:

- A letter from the Hmong Committee of 100 emphasized maintaining a state-level process, concerns regarding the feasibility of superior-officer affidavits, and suggested additional forms of proof.
- A letter from Colonel (Ret.) Yee C. Hang recommended a flexible, historically informed evidentiary framework acknowledging the covert and classified nature of SGU service.

Members generally agreed that the revised Section 4 appropriately balanced flexibility with integrity and did not create an unduly burdensome process.

Motion:

Mr. Strusinski moved to adopt the revised Section 4 as presented. The motion was seconded by Vice Chair Johnson. The motion passed by voice vote with no objections.

5. Processing Timeframes, Appeals, and Application Window

5.1 Application Processing and Applicant Scope

The Task Force agreed that a 90-day timeframe for MDVA review of a complete application was reasonable. The Task Force discussed that the eligibility protocol is structured around applications submitted by living veterans and does not address eligibility determinations for individuals who are deceased.

5.2 Appeals

Members discussed the proposed appeal window. Concerns were raised regarding translation needs and mail delays.

Consensus was reached to extend the appeal filing period from 30 days to 60 days.

Members also noted that denial would not preclude reapplication if additional supporting information became available.

5.3 Application Deadline

The Task Force discussed establishing a clear end date for applications to balance access with administrative capacity.

Consensus was reached to set a firm deadline of December 31, 2030.

6. MDVA Statement Read into the Record

Vice Chair Johnson read into the record a written legal opinion from the MDVA General Counsel's Office addressing legal assertions raised in the CAVWV report. The opinion clarified:

- Minn. Stat. § 197.448 already recognizes individuals naturalized under Public Law 106-207 as Veterans of the Secret War in Laos, and the Task Force does not have authority to revisit or reassess that statutory determination.
- The Task Force's role is limited to developing criteria under § 197.448, subdivision 1(2) for individuals not already covered by subdivision 1(1), consistent with its charge under 2025 Session Law Chapter 30.
- Any process or recommendation that would disqualify individuals deemed eligible by statute, or that would replace authority delegated by the Legislature to the Commissioner of MDVA, would exceed the Task Force's authority and raise legal concerns.

Members acknowledged the clarification and thanked MDVA legal counsel for the guidance.

7. Adoption of Eligibility Protocol Draft

Motion:

Mr. Strusinski moved to adopt the Eligibility Protocol draft, as amended during the meeting, for the purpose of preparing a revised draft for further review. The motion was seconded by Mr. Rouleau.

Roll Call Vote:

Member	Vote
Trent Dilks	Yes
Bill Strusinski	Yes
Tou T. Yang	Yes
Gia T. Lee	Yes
Scott Walker	No
William F. Rouleau	Yes
Rep. Ethan Cha	Yes
Rep. Bidal Duran	Yes
Susan Pha (Chair)	Yes
Ben Johnson (Vice Chair)	Yes
Sen. Jeff Howe	No

Vote Tally: 9 Yes, 2 No, 2 Absent

The motion passed.

8. Public Comment

Mr. Briggs commented that no single document constitutes indisputable proof of service and emphasized the importance of corroboration. MDVA leadership reiterated that the protocol relies on evaluation of multiple forms of evidence.

9. Adjournment

Chair Pha adjourned the meeting at 12:04 p.m.

Next Steps:

- MDVA staff will prepare a revised Eligibility Protocol draft incorporating the adopted changes.
- The Task Force will review the revised draft at a subsequent meeting for potential final adoption and inclusion in the legislative report.

**Minnesota Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Advisory Task
Force
Meeting 8 Summary – January 15, 2026**

Date: January 15, 2026

Time: 2:00 p.m.- 4:00 p.m.

Location: Hybrid Meeting (Microsoft Teams and In-Person)

1. Call to Order

Chair Susan Pha called the meeting to order at 2:04 p.m. and thanked Task Force members and MDVA staff for their time, input, and expertise throughout the Task Force process.

2. Roll Call and Quorum

Vice Chair Ben Johnson conducted roll call. A quorum was confirmed.

3. Opening Remarks

Chair Pha stated that the purpose of the meeting was to conduct a final review of the draft Task Force report and appendices, address any remaining issues, and consider approval of the Task Force's recommendations for submission to the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs.

4. Discussion Topics

4.1 Review of Draft Report and Appendices

MDVA staff reviewed the structure and contents of the draft materials, which included three documents:

- Report to the Minnesota Legislature
- Appendix A – Detailed Meeting Summaries
- Appendix B – Enabling State Legislation and Referenced Federal Law

Staff noted that the report includes a cover letter to the Commissioner, background on the enabling 2025 Session Law, a summary of Task Force work and meetings, technical recommendations from MDVA, and the Task Force's eligibility and verification protocol recommendations. Appendices were noted as being posted on the MDVA website for transparency.

Vice Chair Johnson clarified that the report would be transmitted to the legislative committees of jurisdiction, rather than directly to the full Legislature.

MDVA staff also outlined technical recommendations included in the report that were not related to eligibility criteria, including:

- Inclusion of a burial fee reference related to state veterans' cemeteries (Minn. Stat. § 197.236, subd. 9)
- Updates to veterans' preference statutory citations
- Removal of references to certain benefits that do not align with the new veteran category

No objections were raised to these technical recommendations.

4.2 Revision to Training Certificate Language

Discussion focused on language in the eligibility protocol listing examples of acceptable documentation, specifically references to certificates of training (including from Thailand).

Several members expressed concern that explicitly naming Thailand could be misinterpreted as limiting eligibility or excluding other valid training locations.

Motion:

Chair Pha moved to strike the phrase "including from Thailand" and instead reference certificates of training more generally.

Second: Vice Chair Johnson

Vote: Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.

4.3 Veteran Designation Discussion

Rep. Duran raised concerns regarding the distinction between SGU veterans and U.S. armed forces veterans, particularly as it relates to identification and recognition, and suggested that "SGU Veteran" be reflected in benefit designations.

Task Force members discussed potential confusion that could result from using a non-standard designation on driver's licenses or identification cards. Several members noted that consistency with existing veteran designations was important for public recognition and benefit access.

MDVA staff clarified that the statute creates a separate, defined veteran category that is eligible for a limited set of state benefits, but does not create tiers of veterans or override existing veteran preference frameworks.

No motion was made to modify the report language on this issue.

4.4 Eligibility Stringency Clarification

Mr. Walker raised questions regarding whether the state eligibility protocol could be perceived as less stringent than federal processes for U.S. armed forces veterans.

MDVA staff and Task Force members clarified that:

- The protocol applies only to state-administered benefits

- Federal VA determinations are used as a primary pathway
- The Special Consideration process mirrors federal evidentiary standards and is not intended to be less stringent
- The Task Force’s charge is limited to defining eligibility for a newly created state veteran category

Chair Pha summarized that the protocol reflects the Task Force’s prior discussions and consensus decisions.

5. Adoption of Report and Recommendations

Motion:

Chair Pha moved to approve the Task Force report, including findings, eligibility criteria, and recommendations, for submission by the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs to the Minnesota Legislature.

Second: Vice Chair Johnson

Roll Call Vote:

Member	Vote	Status
Bill Strusinski	Yes	Present
Tou T. Yang	Yes	Present
Gia T. Lee	Yes	Present
Tong Vang	Yes	Present
William F. Roleau	Yes	Present
Sen. Susan Pha	Yes	Present
Ben Johnson	Yes	Present
Scott Walker	No	Present
Rep. Bidal Duran	No	Present
Sen. Jeff Howe	No	Present
Rep. Ethan Cha	—	Absent
Trent Dilks	—	Absent
Stephen (Tim) Kirk	—	Absent

Vote Tally: 7 Yes, 3 No, 3 Absent

Result: Motion passed.

6. **Minority Report Discussion**

Mr. Walker moved to allow submission of a minority report.

Second: Sen. Howe

Discussion followed regarding the Task Force's statutory charge, timing constraints, and the absence of a reviewed draft minority report. MDVA leadership noted that individual members may submit materials or testimony independently to the Legislature, but that the Task Force was directed to submit a single report.

Voice Vote: Motion failed by majority opposition.

7. **Public Comment**

No members of the public requested to provide comment, either in person or remotely.

8. **Adjournment**

Chair Pha adjourned the meeting at 3:11 p.m.
