

Mister Pop: The Adventures of A Peaceful
Schanche Don A.

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MISTER POP

The adventures
of a peaceful man
in a small war

Don A. Schanche

The inside story of the
American involvement in Laos

"I think Pop is an example of how the ancient gods were born. . . . Whether you believe it or not, there are still giants in the earth."

John Steinbeck, Laos, 1967

In Laos, retired Indiana farmer Edgar Buell is affectionately referred to as "Mister Pop." To the tribesmen this means, simply, "sent from above."

The legend and reality of Edgar Buell have, for good reason, grown into godlike proportions. Since his arrival in Laos in 1960, his superhuman efforts on behalf of the Meo tribesmen have been nothing short of miraculous.

When the Communists drove the Meo from the Plaine des Jarres into the hills, he masterminded airlifts of food, clothing, and medicine, and managed to keep alive half a million homeless tribesmen as they fled from one village to the next in a desperate, unceasing attempt to survive. To protect his refugees, Mister Pop helped to organize, train, and lead a 5,000-man guerrilla army that held off North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces.

Buell set up the first medical training schools in the area. His school system, the first in the history of the mountain people, was begun in one room, and has now grown to include more than 80,000 students.

This is a moving account of a peace-loving man and his crusade to help a bewildered, impoverished people to

(continued on back flap)



MISTER POP



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by

DON A. SCHANCHE

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MISTER POP

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TO MARYBELLE

*Djong chia dao,
hua chan dao*

**“Diplomacy ain’t all white shirts, nice pants,
and money runnin’ out’a your pockets.”**

Edgar Pop Buell

A Letter from John Steinbeck

LAOS has mountains, the strangest I have ever seen. In some places thin shafts of limestone stand high, thin and sharp as knife blades. And then there are the ones that look like animals, like cats and furry snakes, and like hornless cattle. Much of the mountain country of the north and middle is heavy with brush which on approach turn out to be trees.

Foot trails wind in the canyons by the water courses connecting little villages—houses set high on posts, with woven bamboo siding and palm-thatched roofs. And where the hills are gentle enough so that a man does not fall off, the little fields of slash-and-burn agriculture can be seen from the air. The trees are cut and the brush slashed down and burned. Then the mountain farmer plants his rice, sometimes tethering himself to a stump lest he fall off his farm.

The cut trees lying in careful patterns hold back eroding soil in the hard rainy season and draw and hold moisture in the dry. But in about five years when the trees have rotted so that the water escapes, at just about this time, the thin soil is chopped out and the farmer must find another place to slash out a field and burn in a little richness. His old field goes back to jungle and perhaps in 20 years, he or his sons may slash it out again. It is a haphazard wasteful way of staying alive, but it is the only way the mountain people have.

From Pak Pong, I flew to Sam Thong, the kingdom of Pop Buell, in about 30 minutes. I asked how far it is, and was told eight days on foot, with belongings, meaning women and children; four days by

the river, but then there are rapids and the Pathet Lao; and 30 minutes by Porter airplane. It doesn't seem fair.

Pop Buell, the middle-aged, mid-western American farmer sometimes known as Mr. Laos, had just returned from a trip to the States and was being welcomed with an enthusiasm that might well make the Lao king a little restless. Pop Buell founded Sam Thong. He walked all over these, I almost said God's, mountains. He brought in the hospital, the school, worked away at the small dusty airfield. But mostly he built his structure with the bodies and brains of the Meo tribesmen. Once over lightly is not good enough for Pop Buell. He deserves and will undoubtedly have a book written about him.

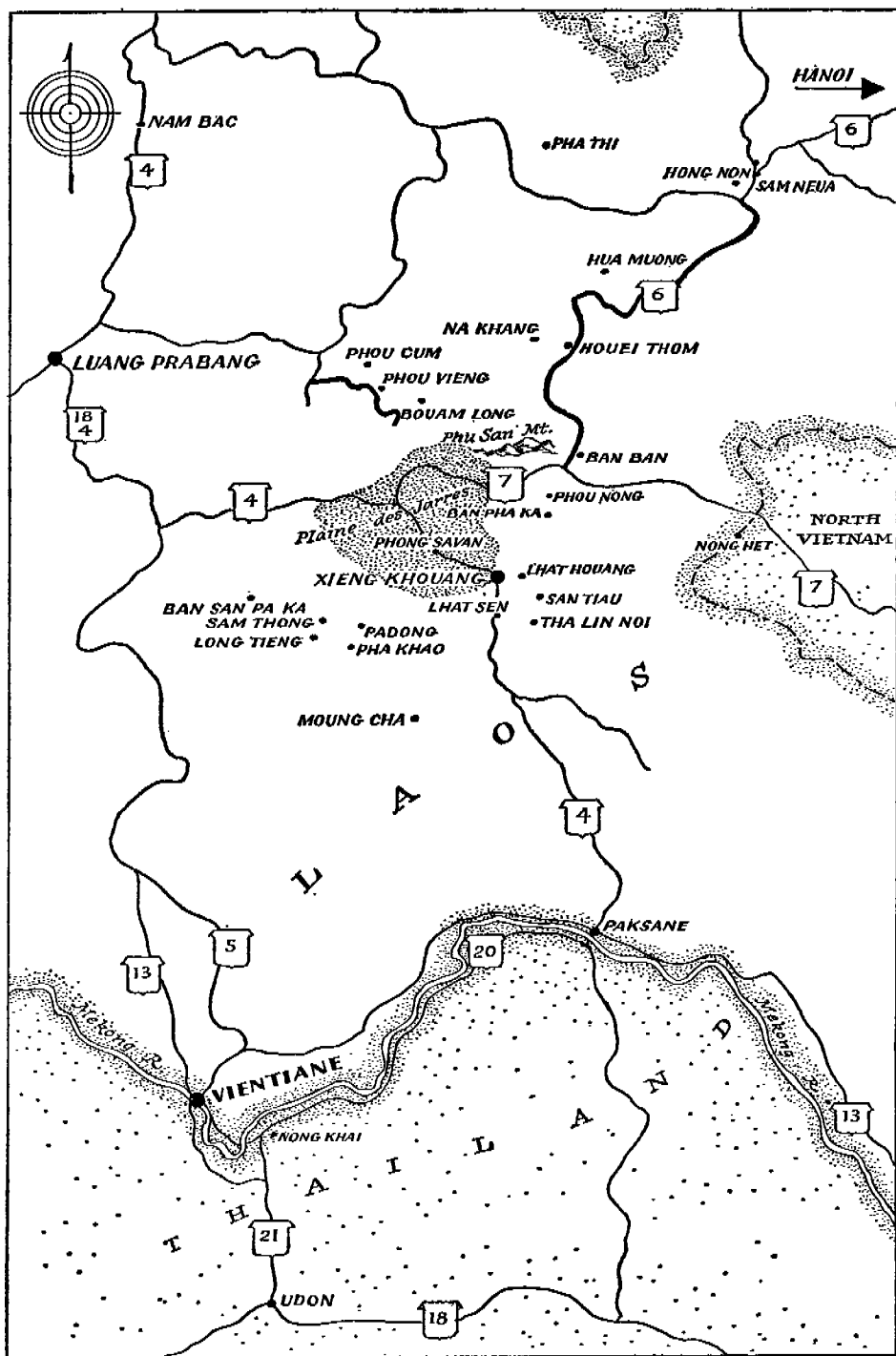
I think Pop is an example of how the ancient gods were born and preserved in the minds and the graven images of people all over the world. Remember, the story invariably goes—in olden times the people did not live well as they do now and they practiced abominations.

Then a stranger appeared and he taught us to use the plow and how to sow and how to harvest. He brought us writing so we could keep records. And he gave us healing medicines to make us healthy, and he gave us pride so we would not be afraid and, when we had learned these things, he went away. He was translated. That is his figure there, carved in limestone.

Well, I don't think Pop is likely to be taken up in a sweet chariot even if he had the time or the inclination, but that ancient story is Pop Buell's story. Whether you believe it or not, there are still giants in the earth.

JOHN STEINBECK
Laos, April, 1967

MISTER POP



Chapter 1

Everybody should know that nobody knows everything in this world, no one is a complete and perfect person, no one works without doing wrong and nobody appears or comes from the sky, water and ground, but I think that everybody comes from the sex.

—THE LETTERS OF THONGSAR BOUPHA

TSENG lived close to the bedrock of civilization in northeasternmost Sam Neua Province of the Kingdom of Laos on the top of a 5,000-foot mountain from which he could see twenty miles in every direction. To the south and the east on this crisp, dry day he had a particularly clear view of the meandering dirt highway, which was one of his special concerns, coursing through the valley like a crease in a rumpled blanket. From the boulder on which he squatted, Tseng observed the tiny figure of a man dressed in black, trotting along the road from the south. The man paused, then left the highway to resume his quick pace on a pathway that led up Thom mountain to Houei Thom, Tseng's village. Even from a distance Tseng recognized him, although the man obviously was a stranger to the village because he had taken the first pathway to the mountain, a trail so steep it normally was used only for descent. A second footpath partially hidden behind a small karst outcropping was favored by ascending villagers because it was easier to climb. Tseng was frightened by the appearance of the unwelcome stranger.

The landscape around Tseng's village was breathtaking, a rising and crowded course of forested mountains stacked like irregular books on staggered shelves extending along the Annamite chain from southern

China through Laos to the central highlands of Vietnam. In the valleys which swirled like rivers around the mountains, Tseng could see no signs of human activity save the lone figure on the dirt highway, which was the only man-made scar in the leafy rain forest far below. The towering, umbrella-like treetops made an almost continuous green cushion, broken by the occasional splash of wild orchids and ferns growing among the giant liana vines that climbed the trees. Beneath the green cushion lay the valley floor. It was crossed by narrow pathways of umber clay, smoothed by the bare feet of mountain tribesmen who for many years had moved restlessly from one slope to the next in search of wild game, edible jungle shoots, and barely arable mountainsides that would accept their peculiar agriculture.

As the forest climbed the mountain slopes, it gave way to scrubby patches of vegetation and occasional stands of softwood trees surrounded by thickets of bamboo, rhododendron, wild ferns, ginger, and tall grass. Finally there remained only a patchwork of scrawny bushes and clumps of grass sprouting from the washed dirt and rocks of the mountaintops.

At wide intervals along the slopes, near the peaks of the mountains for as far as Tseng could see, plumes of dark gray smoke rose like waterspouts into the air, forming great mushroom crowns that merged thousands of feet in the sky to cast a gray ceiling over the landscape. Tseng lifted the field glasses that the American Army had given him before he left the lowlands and carefully traced each plume to its source, a raging fire along a mountain's steep side, consuming the softwood trees and simmering among the ferns that died in clouds of dark smoke. These were controlled fires, lit by the mountaineers as the most direct means of clearing land for crops. The Meo people, among whom Tseng lived and worked, are highland nomads, fiercely independent men who prize the freedom of the mountaintops and scorn the valley people below. No one knows with certainty where they came from, but their Mongol ancestry is so clearly written in red-brown skin and high cheekbones that the few anthropologists who have observed them assume the Meo are descendants of Genghis Khan's ruthless armies that invaded Southeast Asia almost 700 years ago. They may have come even earlier. Some, perhaps, migrated south from northeast

Asia millennia before Genghis Khan, at the time when the nomadic ancestors of North and Central American Indians, whom the Meo resemble, moved across the soon washed-out land bridge of the Bering Strait to begin settling a virgin continent. It is certain, however, that less than two centuries ago the Meo lived in Yunnan Province of southwest China, then fled from it, following the Annamese cordillera southward to widely scattered new mountain settlements in Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Vietnam.

Tseng could easily trace the pathways of their migrations through the Sam Neua Province by noting the fire-blackened clearings along the high mountain slopes that had been burned, tilled, harvested, and abandoned when the already weak soil was leached of its nourishment. Each of the smoke plumes he now observed represented a new vertical farm being prepared by one of the dozens of small mountain villages in the area. This burn-and-slash mode of agriculture continued for periods of ten or fifteen years on the high ground adjacent to a village, but a decade and a half of such neolithic land management drew the very soul out of a mountain, and the villagers, after solemnly propitiating the spirits to be left behind, loaded all of their simple possessions on bamboo frames and the backs of shaggy Tibetan ponies and moved, en masse, to another mountain to begin the cycle again. "There is always another mountain," the Meo say, and along the jungled spines of the Annamites, which stretch like many-fingered roots southward from the perpendicular trunks of the Himalayas, the saying is true. In Laos alone there are enough mountains for each of the half-million Meo who prize them, and, as homeland, the peaks belong to the Meo alone, for no other Asian people will accept such hard isolation and primeval conditions merely to preserve their independence. The Meo have no use for most of civilized man's inventions, such as the wheel, because the mountains, by their lumpy nature, are hostile to mechanical contrivances.

When the Meo were still in South China, Portuguese and Dutch missionaries brought them the only modern artifacts the tribes considered adopting into their way of life: steel knives and long-barreled flintlock muskets. Now every large Meo village contains a family of smiths who hammer scavenged scrap metal into curved knife blades,

adzes, and axes, and artfully construct four- and five-foot muskets so sturdy they can fire any missile that can be jammed down the barrel, from tightly wadded bamboo pellets to rusty roofing nails.

Tseng noticed one tower of smoke rising three miles away from a mountain that he knew to be uninhabited, evidence that another band of Meo tribesmen had moved and were only now beginning to establish their tenuous hold on a new hillside. He took a folded map from the bulging breast pocket of his American Army field jacket and jotted down the location of the new settlement. Tomorrow he would send Teu Ying and his scouts to the newly inhabited mountain to ask the villagers where they came from and whether they had seen Vietminh and Pathet Lao soldiers on the way. Did they move because they had exhausted their old mountain? Had they fled from their former home to escape being drafted into coolie labor battalions by the Communists? Or were they sent here by the enemy to settle close to Houei Thom and to construct a base under the innocent façade of a Meo village for an attack on Na Khang, a large and important Royal Government headquarters a day's walk west of Tseng's outpost?

Tseng was a secret agent, trained and paid by the United States Army Counter Intelligence Corps to lead six teams of intelligence-gathering saboteurs into Communist-held regions of Sam Neua Province. His mission was to continuously observe and report the activities of enemy units, watch their movements of men and supplies along the dirt road that was called Highway 6, and destroy their trucks and kill their men when he could. Tseng and his 36 Meo guerrilla scouts had been extremely successful in their quick commando raids against Communist traffic along Highway 6, which led from Hanoi in North Vietnam to a village called Ban Ban near the Plaine des Jarres of Laos. His control officer, an American major at U.S. Army Intelligence headquarters in Bangkok, praised the frequent detailed reports that Tseng radioed directly to him and said Tseng was the best secret agent in Laos. He was nineteen years old.

On this particular day Tseng was nervous and frightened, because he knew what the stranger in black wanted in Houei Thom and he expected another visitor, an American whom he idolized above any friend he had, to arrive momentarily in a small airplane. The Ameri-

can's name was Edgar Monroe Buell, an aging rustic from Steuben County, Indiana. Like everyone else in Laos, Tseng called the old American *Tan Pop*, which means Mister Sent from Above, as if he were a living deity. To most of the people who knew Pop Buell, he was a deity, and it terrified Tseng to consider what might happen if the old American and the frightening stranger in black arrived simultaneously at Houei Thom. The stranger had to be stopped. Casually, as if pulling cramps from his folded legs, Tseng rose from the rock on which he had been sitting and stretched to hide his nervousness; then he set off at a leisurely pace toward the steepest path down Thom mountain. Without hurrying he could intercept the stranger before he had climbed half of the eastern slope.

Tseng had lived in Houei Thom for more than a year. Except for his name, which was Chinese, and the slightly jaundiced cast of his skin, he was indistinguishable from the other residents of the village. He was a small man, about a head taller than the shoulders of a water buffalo. His feet were Meo feet: scarred, leathery, and widely flattened with dexterous, prehensile toes that spread out and grabbed at the earth when he walked in the short, quick gait the Meo affect in their incessant wanderings. The Meo reckon distances in the time it takes to walk them, not in abstractions like miles and kilometers. A destination may be eight days' walk, or a half-day's walk. A healthy Meo man can walk steadily, in fast short steps, across valleys, up steep slopes and down, over boulders, along forest pathways almost choked by vines, through tall grass fields and bamboo thickets for twenty hours without pausing and without apparent exhaustion. A valley dweller or lowland tribesman on the same route will be left behind in two hours, and after eighteen hours he will fall back a full day's march. "The world is as big as a man can walk," the Meo used to say. "After that, the world ends."

Tseng's hands, too, were Meo hands. They were tough enough to reflect hard work in the fields, and they were embossed like the face of a relief map with tiny scars that revealed the slips of his blade in dressing wild game or in hacking bamboo and thick grass for shelter. His fingernails were chewed close, down to the quick. This surprised and pleased the villagers of Houei Thom, who saw short nails not as a

sign of neurosis but as a natural result of hard work. Tseng was an educated young man, and it surprised them that a man of such obvious learning did not display the long fingernails which lowlanders who could read and write proudly preserved as proof that they worked with their minds, not their hands. Tseng could read, write, and speak Lao, Chinese, French, and English, and he spoke the Meo dialects of Houei Thom and several other areas to the south in Xieng Khouang Province, where the Meo clustered in large numbers on the mountains surrounding the softly rolling, tropically hot Plaine des Jarres. Although the Meo have no written language, Tseng had succeeded not long after he came to Houei Thom in teaching some of the village children to write the plump round letters of the Lao alphabet, derived many centuries ago from Indian Sanskrit. Later, his American friend Tan Pop, whom he venerated as if he were his own father, had brought writing materials and books to begin a regular school for the children of Houei Thom. Besides Tseng, only two people in Houei Thom could read and write the Lao language. One was the village *taesing*, the mayor, and the other was one of his sons who had attended a three-year Lao elementary school in Sam Neua city, the provincial capital fifty miles north on Highway 6. Although his intellectual attainments were limited to reading, writing, and simple arithmetic, the *taesing*'s son became the schoolteacher. Tseng's venerable American friend was delighted with the choice and visited the village when he could to bring pencils, pads, chalk, and slates for the children.

"If all they learn is readin' and writin'," he told Tseng one morning, "they's better off than they was, h'ain't they? Look at 'em. They don't need no school bell. They're in that hut when the teacher comes, and they're there to learn. I don't care if they only get six months or a year of school before the Communists come; it's better than nothin'. There's no tellin' what they might pick up in six months."

As Tseng proceeded down the trail, he looked neither right nor left, and to all but one of the few villagers who watched him go he seemed as innocent as any of them, unhurriedly following his private thoughts down the well-worn path that all of them used to descend the mountain, because it was steep and quick. They did not know that a stranger was ascending it. Watching his gait and his appearance, in fact, any

observer not a resident of Houei Thom would have taken him for an ordinary young man of the village. His cheekbones were high like those of the Meo, rising in soft mounds on the sides of his face almost on a line between his slightly rounded eyes and ears. A reddish tint, the gift of sun and exposure, overlaid the basic sallowness of his skin, and his jet-black hair grew soft and straight over a high forehead. He was not conspicuous by physical difference from the other men in the village.

There were 342 men, 359 women, and 483 children at Houei Thom, which was very small even for a Meo village. Life was hard, but not completely bleak. The villagers had enough silver, their only tangible wealth except for chickens, pigs, and a few caribou, to provide each adult woman with at least one heavy silver necklace, a tubelike collar from which hung two strands of heavy chain supporting a large ornamental pendant worked with the tribal pattern. Every man and boy wore a soft silver ring surmounted by a flat signet colored in a yellow and blue plaid design and rectangularly surrounded by ten silver beads. This was their tribal mark. Tseng wore a Meo ring similar to theirs, but its design criss-crossed in an unfamiliar way. It was the mark of a tribe in the south, near Xieng Khouang, where Tseng had worked before he became a spy.

"*Nhajong*," Tseng called in Meo greeting as the stranger climbed the ten yards that separated them on the steeply inclined path. He glanced quickly behind to assure himself that they were unobserved beneath the leafy overhang of bamboo vines that made an archway over the trail.

"*Nhajong*," the stranger replied. "*Mi ban ha*."

"Troubles?" Tseng inquired. "How could there be troubles? I gave you the correct map. It locates the landing strip for the small airplanes. That is all I was asked to give you."

"I don't know, I am only the courier. This message is for you. They told me we have trouble . . . *mi ban ha*. It is for you to solve. I am to return with a message from you."

Tseng unfolded the note, meticulously spelled out in Lao on a sheet of cheap, lined paper. "*Cao ba di*," he cursed in Lao, "cut their throats!" The courier smiled.

"Go into the forest down there and hide," said Tseng, pointing down the trail. "I will meet you again at this place after sundown. You will have your message." Without another word he turned and ascended the path to the village.

At the top of Houei Thom a gently sloping crestline had been flattened into a rising roadway, 30 feet wide and 400 feet long. It looked as if a bulldozer had begun to carve a clay boulevard through the center of the small village, then stopped when it reached an abrupt precipice at the low end of the crest. Clustered together on the small, uneven plateau on either side of the dirt strip were the dun-colored huts of the village, family residences, a school hut, and a rice and opium storage building. Each, like its neighbor, was a long rectangular structure with stout bamboo corner poles and studs supporting a gable-roof frame, which was overlapped by bundles of grass thatching that descended in even tiers from the peak to deep, overhanging eaves five feet off the ground. The walls were a latticework of split bamboo, woven tightly to break the force of the constant wind that blew coolly across the Sam Neua hills.

A tall bamboo pole beside one of the huts trailed a limp antenna wire. Tseng waited there for the airplane that he heard, now, in the distance. It swooped low past the eastern slope of Thom mountain, a glistening aluminum-skinned machine with a high, broad wing and a single engine at the nose of its slender fuselage. Two huge flaps drooped from the trailing edge of the wing, and an awkward narrow flap, which looked like an aluminum plank attached to the wing as an afterthought, extended slightly from the leading edge. The engine bellowed loudly as the small Helio-Courier airplane climbed beyond the mountain and banked sharply toward what looked like a suicidal attempt to place its landing gear and tail wheel on the abbreviated runway of Houei Thom. All three points touched firmly at the low end of the sloping dirt strip and the airplane seemed to stop its uphill run abruptly in a stinging cloud of dust raised by its reversed propeller and wheel brakes. It taxied to the high end of the 400-foot roadway, bounced awkwardly as it turned around to face downhill, and halted with its engine running and propeller spinning noisily in neutral pitch. From the right rear door, which opened to reveal a tubelike six-foot

cargo space, jumped a small, balding American whose eyes bulged behind heavy horn-rimmed glasses as he searched among the village huts. Suddenly spying Tseng, he grinned happily and pulled a large, battered cardboard box from the airplane. He closed the door, waved to the pilot, and stepped back as the plane jounced quickly down the crude runway, lifted before it reached the precipice, and banked away to the right.

Tseng ran across the strip. As he did, the entrance to the nearby school but disgorged a bunched stream of small children who raced to beat Tseng to Edgar "Pop" Buell and his cardboard box.

The American blinked through his thick-lensed glasses and awaited the happy onslaught. He was a slight runt of a man, and the most charitable description of him then, as now, would synthesize in the old-fashioned generalization, "homely." His brow was scarred and furrowed. Deep, cheek-puffing lines dropped like parentheses from the sides of a pudgy nose to the down-slanting edges of his lower lip, and the flesh beneath his eyes was crinkled and baggy. His dour countenance, like a carved souvenir coconut, coupled to a small body and uncommonly short, slightly bowed legs, would have been the physical representation of a rather grim personality had it not been for the genial earnestness, even joy, with which he went about his work.

"*Sawadi-baw, Tan Pop,*" cried Tseng, laughing with delight for the first time that day. Quickly he raised his two hands in a prayerlike gesture of respectful greeting.

"*Sawadi-baw-baw, Tseng,*" laughed Pop Buell. He repeated Tseng's gesture, then reached out to hug the young Chinese-Meo and pound him vigorously on the back.

"Let me take care of these kids, Tseng," he said, breaking away. "I and you got all night to visit 'cause I'm stayin' over. I ain't spent the night here lately, and it's time I showed these people that I care just a little bit for 'em."

He pulled a huge plastic bag full of brightly wrapped candy from beneath a gray wool blanket in the box and advanced in a mock menacing way on the children, who squealed delightedly.

"Line up two abreast," he called in their own Meo dialect. Quickly the children formed two ranks on the airstrip.

"Now, the littlest one in each line come up here to me," he said. Heads turned and the lines writhed like snakes as the giggling children scrambled to see who was the tiniest. A small boy and a small girl shyly approached Edgar Buell, ducked their heads over prayer-clasped hands, and said "*Sawadi, Tan Pop.*"

"When it's time for sharing," said Buell in Meo, "none of you are any better than these two little ones. I don't care how big you are, or how strong you are, or who your daddy is, or whether you're a boy or a girl. All of you are equal and you share equally."

"Now," he turned to the small pair in front of him, "pass out the candy."

He chuckled happily as the two children solemnly moved down the lines giving candy to each of their schoolmates. "Whoa, whoa," he cried. "Don't forget this one over here, or that one." He pointed to two infants strapped papoose-like in blankets on their mothers' backs. "They're equal, too. Share and share alike."

"By Godalmighty, Tseng," he called aside in English, "I think I just made up a new Meo saying. Share and share alike. They're a whole lot better at it than the kids back in Indiana."

"The Meo already have that saying," said Tseng, laughing.

With the village *taesing* on one side and Tseng on the other, Buell walked away from the lines of children, which broke into tumbling clutches of arms and legs as they scrambled to retrieve a handful of candy he purposely dropped behind him. He moved slowly through a group of village women dressed in billowing black pants and jackets, tied with bright sashes that matched the crimson piping around their collars. To each he said "*Nhajong*," the all-purpose Meo greeting, and with each he passed a few moments idly chatting about children and food. One woman, toothless and lined of face but probably no more than forty years old, removed the black cotton turban from her head and complained of a sore on her scalp. Buell, a lithe but stubby little man who at five-feet-four was shorter than many of the Meo, leaned into the big cardboard box that Tseng was carrying for him and pulled out a soiled canvas bag. From it he extracted a tube of antibiotic salve and dabbed it on the woman's cankered skin.

"Might not do her a damned bit of good, but she sure as hell feels better for it, don't she?" he remarked to Tseng.

By late afternoon Buell had entered most of the houses in the village, squatted by their open fires, and visited with each Meo family. In one he found an old man huddled in fetal position on a rack-like bamboo bed, dreamily inhaling from a pipeful of opium at half-hour intervals. His son, head of the household, husband of three wives and father, at twenty-eight, of four living and eight dead children, dutifully tamped the tarry ball of opium sap into the old man's pipe and held a burning stick of bamboo over the bowl while his totally stoned father pulled the pain-relieving smoke into his lungs. He was tubercular, *from what cause no one knew*, and he had not long to live. What life remained to him would pass in a euphoric cloud, a better fate, surely, than death in the midst of deep and unrelieved visceral pain. The Meo are probably the world's most accomplished cultivators of opium, and in the underground drug markets of the world no product is more prized than the opium of Sam Neua Province. Yet, except in old age and during painful illness when the logic of its pleasant anesthesia is irrefutable to any but the most doctrinaire narcotics agent, few Meo smoke opium, which they call *Nao*, and almost none are addicted to it. For many years their only contact with the outside world came through their yearly trade of freshly harvested poppy sap—from which raw opium is boiled like sugar from the oozing of a maple tree—with Corsican smugglers who moved the rich stuff into the mainstream of civilized criminal commerce. Since the tragic escalation of the Vietnam war, which spilled over into Laos like rainstorms around the edges of a hurricane, the Corsicans had sought more prosaic trades in happier surroundings, and the opium traffic had been taken over by the North Vietnamese and Chinese Communists, and even a few Americans. Share and share alike, the Meo say.

Buell patted the old man on the shoulder and squatted beside him for a few moments, but said nothing. Conversation would have been pointless, and the dying man was happy enough without it. Then he left the hut and as dusk approached stood looking out over the mountains and down upon Highway 6. He dropped to his haunches on the very boulder upon which Tseng had sat earlier in

the day and waved as Tseng ducked into his hut to make his nightly radio contact with Bangkok.

Seeing Buell alone for the first time that afternoon, Teu Ying, the wiry, self-effacing Meo who was Tseng's leading scout and second in command of his guerrilla intelligence unit, dropped on folded legs beside him.

"*Tan Pop*," he said, using the only name by which the Meo knew Edgar Buell. *Tan* is a Lao honorific, and *Pop* a Meo deific that means "sent from above." In his years with the hill tribes in the mountains of northeast Laos, Buell had earned the divine sobriquet, not because he sometimes descended into the villages by airplane and helicopter, nor because he was capable of magically calling into his portable radio transmitter and causing huge airplanes to appear spilling pallets and parachute-loads of rice, salt, pots and pans, steel bars, blankets, and garden seeds. They called him *Tan Pop* because they felt a divine charisma about him. Besides, *Pop* is not too far removed from *Paw*, which means grandfather, and by his lonely efforts for their welfare, his willingness to live with them in what they who suffered knew to be extremely hazardous conditions, his eagerness even to fight with them when they were under attack, and his calm, which was as beatific as the face of Buddha even at the worst times, he had become a venerable grandfather to them all.

"Hello, Teu Ying," said Buell in Meo. "Beautiful sunset, ain't it?"

Teu Ying smiled at Buell's quaint use of his language. His employment of the five lilting tones of the tongue was crude and often confusing, and his syntax even in primitive Meo, which lacks sesquipedal words and in fact is almost wholly monosyllabic, was atrocious. But he talked with ease and without embarrassment, and, bad as it was, Buell's pronunciation of a voluminous vocabulary, which he delivered with the blunt but sure aim of a pitching machine spitting baseballs, adapted itself in an understandable way to all of the Meo dialects. In short, he spoke the language wretchedly, as he also spoke Lao and Thai, but like his idol, the late Will Rogers, whose syntax and grammar were rotten, he communicated eloquently. Besides, at the time Buell learned it, there was only one other American in all of Southeast Asia who spoke more than a few words of Meo. For an

Indiana farmer educated in a one-room shack and a mediocre small-town high school, Buell did considerably better than all right.

"*Tan Pop, mi ban ha*," said Teu Ying, arching his brows so that his high forehead wrinkled and the fat epicanthic folds of his Mongol eyes stretched worriedly flat.

"What kind of trouble, Teu Ying?" asked Buell, shifting a half-chewed bamboo toothpick from right to left in his mouth.

"I am ashamed to tell you because I may be wrong and I fear lying," said Teu Ying. "Yet I fear the enemy more."

"What do you mean?"

"Tseng is your good friend, isn't he, Tan Pop?"

"One of my best friends, Teu Ying. Been one of my best friends since I came to Laos. Him and Mua Chung was the first friends I had here, and I still think they are my best friends."

"I believe Tseng is working for the enemy, Tan Pop," said Teu Ying in a rushed, quiet voice.

Buell turned slowly to face the Meo beside him. Teu Ying did not drop his eyes to avoid Pop's searching, questioning stare. His brow remained wrinkled, his eyebrows arched, but his only display of tension was the slow ripple of muscle on his right forearm as he rhythmically gripped and released the reed-bound bamboo handle of his heavy-bladed knife, sheathed in a light wood scabbard.

"Two weeks ago a strange Meo appeared in the village, Tan Pop. He talked to Tseng, gave him a paper. I watched. I don't think Tseng knew him, but he took him into his house and they stayed a short time. Then the stranger left."

Buell relaxed his gaze and thoughtfully shifted the toothpick from side to side in his unsmiling mouth. "I don't think that's any reason to be suspicious of Tseng," he said.

"No, it isn't," said Teu Ying. "Five days later, Tseng left his hut after sunset. In a short time I took two of my scouts and followed him down the steep descending path. I wasn't thinking about the stranger or about treachery, believe me, Tan Pop. I was afraid for Tseng going down the hill alone at night, and I brought my men to cover him if there was trouble. We went very quietly because I was afraid Tseng might be alarmed and shoot at us in the darkness. Near the bottom

of the descending path we saw him. He was talking to the same stranger. He gave the man some paper. I don't know what was on it. Maybe a map. I don't know."

Buell lightly shifted his position so that he was sitting on the rock with his legs stretched out before him. He propped himself on both arms, leaned back and looked at the sky, now glowing in a multitude of pink colors as the setting sun's rays bounced from the ceiling of haze that had been fed all day by the burning mountainsides. Teu Ying now looked away from Pop's face and passed the time of his long silence quietly slipping the blade of his knife in and out of its scabbard.

"Does anybody else know about this?" Buell broke the silence.

"No. Only the two scouts. We have not discussed it. I told them to remain watchful, but to say nothing to anyone. One of them saw Tseng go down the descending path today, before you came. He was afraid to follow. I don't know if Tseng met the stranger or not. He was not gone long enough to walk all the way down the mountain and back. He could have gone no more than halfway."

"Well, Teu Ying. Maybe we got a problem. Maybe we ain't. Don't you say nothing at all, especially not to Tseng. Tell your men to be quiet. Just keep your eyes open. I'll watch Tseng tonight, and I'll be back here in a couple of weeks. Talk to me then."

"I am sorry, Tan Pop. I bring you bad news," said Teu Ying.

"Don't be sorry. You said Tseng is my friend. He is. If he's in trouble, I want to know about it, no matter what kind of trouble it is. I want to help him."

Tseng emerged from his hut and joined the two men at the boulder, but as he sat down beside Buell, Teu Ying arose.

"*Muashi?*" asked Tseng, inquiring where Teu Ying was going.

"*Mua jai,*" he replied, meaning "to my house."

"*Hua chan dao, Teu Ying,*" Buell called an elaborate thank-you in parting. The Meo scout waved and padded softly away toward the cluster of huts beside the airstrip.

"Thanks for what?" asked Tseng in English.

"For helpin' me learn some new Meo words," Buell lied without flinching. "I don't do it as often as I should, but I'm tryin' to add a

couple new words every day. Asked him how to say 'skinny,' 'cause I'm losin' weight again and I'm afraid I might blow away. '*Kadoot sassu*,' he says. Means 'bones only,' or 'skin and bones,' I reckon."

"That's right, Tan Pop. Skin and bones."

"That's gonna be me, too, if I don't get some rice in my old belly pretty soon, Tseng. The *taesing*'s wives is fixin' us somethin' to eat up at his house now. Let's go up there and get started."

"I'll be along in a few minutes, Tan Pop," Tseng said evenly. "You go ahead. I won't be long."

The sun was down, and darkness came so abruptly over Houei Thom that it was almost as if a wave so soft and gentle that it touched only the sense of sight had engulfed the mountain. Pop watched sadly as the shadowy figure of Tseng again affecting a casual stroll ambled away and disappeared down the descending path to meet the mysterious stranger.

At the *taesing*'s house that night Tseng seemed relaxed and happy, joyfully stirring memories of his long friendship with Pop Buell for the benefit of his host and the four village *nhibons* who were gathered on benches around a hewn wood table. The *nhibons*, acting as village councilors, ranked just a notch below the *taesing* in the hierarchy of Houei Thom and were his chief assistants in leading the village, apportioning community work assignments and sitting as a court over disputant villagers and the rare wrongdoer caught in a crime. As in any small tribal society, real crime was rare among the Meo, if only because the intimacy and cooperation demanded by their hard life left little privacy for plotting and carrying out sins against their neighbors. Moreover, almost every Meo was convinced without the slightest doubt that a crowded pantheon of spirits, some good, some evil, watched their every move and were implacable in their vengeance against wrongdoers. The spirits lived in the bamboo houses—the most powerful, a Christlike spirit/man, occupied the heavy stud-pole on the right side of the doorway—in the plants and trees, in most animals, and in the mountain itself. On another level of this largely animistic spirit world dwelt the numerous souls of each man, sometimes five, representing each of the senses, sometimes more to represent arms and legs, or major organs, depending upon which school of theology in

the Meo's oral religious tradition the village *shaman*, or medicine man, espoused. This shamanism and spirit worship was another of the still unexplored anthropological links between the Meo, the Mongol people of north Asia, and some of the Indians of the Western Hemisphere.

"When I first met Tan Pop a long time ago," said Tseng for the benefit of his village leaders. "he was a very old man and a very sick man, and he was very unhappy, too. He came from America to our village of Lhat Houang near the Plaine des Jarres where the many ancient jars for dead bodies are found. We thought he was like one of the other Americans, a stern man who would not drink the *lau lau* or love the Lao girls." Tseng smiled and Pop Buell laughed heartily as he sipped a glass of *lau lau*, a fiery corn whiskey.

"We learned that he looked angry only because his back ached and his stomach hurt from the wound inside called an ulcer. When he met the Meo and the Lao people and became one of them, the pains went away and he was happy, not like a stern man any more. He was a man, not a worn-out grandfather, even though he was ancient—forty-seven years old."

Buell interrupted to explain that in America he was still a young man, even though he did not look it, and when the *lau lau* flowed he did not feel it, either. To the Meo, life was not so generous in its gift of time. They were lucky if they survived childbirth and luckier still if they reached adulthood, when they could expect seven of every ten children they produced to die. If they were among the few who reached age forty, they willingly stepped aside as wasted ancients, to let their sons and daughters take over. Almost miraculously, a very few, to whom the spirits had been especially kind, lived into their seventies.

"My friend Mua Chung and I worked for the other American man in Lhat Houang," Tseng continued. "He made us sing songs every day and listen to a Christian prayer before each meal. Mua Chung is Meo and I am Chinese, although my father's father was Meo. We didn't like that man, but we gave him respect. Some Lao people who worked with us were Buddhists, and they didn't like him, either. Neither did the young Americans who worked there, although they were Christians, too. They said they were not the same kind of

Christian as the old man. They had to hide away when they wanted to drink *lau lau* or love the girls, because the man believed pleasant things were evil and he would send them back to America if he caught them having pleasure.

"That was a long time ago..."

Buell smiled at the Meo expression for "long time." It could mean any long period of time from six months to six years. Actually, at this time in 1963 it had been three years since he arrived in Laos. His extraordinary life in the primitive country was in a sense just beginning.

Chapter 2

As my Lord Buddha said, "The more you know, the more you do right; the more you understand well, the more you can give and explain much to others; the more you practice, the more you get the experience in your knowledge."

—THE LETTERS OF THONGSAR BOUPHA

WHEN Edgar Buell flew for the first time toward the Plaine des Jarres airfield the pains in his back and his stomach sent alternating currents of agony through his nervous system. He had been traveling almost continuously for five days.

"He was humped over so low his nose almost drug the ground," said Forrest "Choke" Buell, his younger brother, after seeing Edgar off at the Fort Wayne airport.

"Why does he want to go halfway around the world to a place he never heard of when his roots are here and his kids need him?" asked an unhappy Elson Buell, Edgar's father. "Besides, his farm is paying off good. He's going to live the life of Riley out there when he ought to be back here working."

"He's not going to live the life of Riley in a place like that," said Margie, the wife of Lee "Toad" Buell, youngest of Grandpa Elson's five sons. "The sooner some people around here realize that, the better. Besides, the kids don't need him. They're both married, and Edgar has turned the farm over to Howard and Bonnie. Do you think they want him around telling them how to run it?"

"It just don't seem right," said Grandpa Buell.

And to Edgar Buell it didn't seem right, either. He told himself he had come to Laos to help people who were not able to help themselves.

But what could he accomplish here? He was an Indiana farmer, not a missionary or a diplomat. When it came to planting corn or wheat, raising cattle and hogs, or truck farming, he was as good as or better than anyone in Steuben County. But what could he do here? What he had seen of the country so far was at best bewildering. One day in the capital of Vientiane, a mud-road frontier "city" that reminded him of a reconstructed cow town in a Western movie, had offered no time for acclimatization, and an instinctive diffidence in the face of so much that was alien to the depressed Indiana farmer left him almost speechless. Moreover, he had been kept awake most of the night by what he took to be baby alligators darting up the walls and across the ceiling of his dormitory bedroom. Henri Guillou, the French interpreter who met him at the muddy pasture called Wattay airport in Vientiane, had tried to explain that the *gecko*, the tiny, deep-throated lizards with suction-cupped feet, were harmless, but the explanation stopped at Buell's ear, attuned to the vernacular of north-east Indiana with its nasal tones and functional vocabulary.

Now he was scrunched nervously and painfully into the canvas bucket seat of an old DC-3 with seven other passengers and seven barrels of gasoline, the entire ship rattling like an empty oil drum as it strained to stay above the thick cloud layer whose moisture drenched the invisible mountains and valleys below. He was convinced that whatever passed for farming here, even though he had not yet seen the land, was not his kind of agriculture. Even if it was, how could he teach these people?

"You'll find that almost no one in Laos speaks English," Dr. Noffsinger, the director of International Voluntary Services, told him when he went to Washington—was it only two weeks ago?—to be briefed on his new job as a volunteer field worker. "But don't let that bother you. We've got a couple of good interpreters working for us, and no one expects a man your age to learn the language. Our biggest problem in Laos is with our own people. We've got five young American volunteers at a place called Lhat Houang. They're good kids, but they're all threatening to quit because they can't get along with our field manager there. We picked you because you've had a lot of experience working with youth groups in Indiana. You're an older

man, and maybe you can bridge the gap between those people, or at least find out what's wrong."

Deeper than the personnel problems of I.V.S. or the technical needs of the obviously primitive farmers of Laos, however, was a troubling selfish motive for being here. In his typically forthright way, Buell had recognized his problem a year ago. His wife Mattie Loren, called Malorene by all who knew her, had died. For months Buell was inconsolable. "Me an' Malorene was a team," he told sympathetic friends. "With that one good horse off the team, it just don't seem like I can pull the wagon alone." His son Howard was away in the Army, and his daughter Harriet was married and living with her school-teacher husband in Ohio, which generated a loneliness that made the grief even worse. In addition to his emotional problems, Edgar suffered physically. A dislocated vertebra, the result of an automobile accident, made walking difficult, and a painful stomach ulcer reminded him constantly of his frail condition.

He sought help from Dr. Franklin Bryan of nearby Fort Wayne, who had become a close friend and counselor during the difficult years of the spinal injury and the agonizing two months of Malorene's terminal illness.

"I got somethin' wrong upstairs, Doctor Bryan," said Edgar. "It seems I just can't stop grievin', and I'm gettin' worse all the time."

Dr. Bryan talked bluntly to the troubled widower about the natural depression that follows any personal tragedy and the possibility that it could trigger a long-lasting depressive neurosis, which it seemed to be doing now. "Get away from here for five or six months, Edgar," he said, "all the way out of the country, if you can. It'll do you good." Later, when completing the medical forms for I.V.S. so that Edgar could be hired as a \$65-a-month volunteer, Dr. Bryan happily concealed the dismal state of his patient's health.

"If they knew how bad off you really are, they wouldn't send you anywhere," he said before Buell left to join the private peace corps whose international programs of technical and agricultural assistance were conducted under contract to the Government's Point Four AID program abroad. "Take care of the ulcer, and don't do anything to

make your back any worse than it is. In about six months you'll be over this depression and ready to come back to Indiana."

"I'm still not right in the head," Buell told himself as the plane prepared to land. His depression had been abruptly increased by a young American sitting next to him.

"What are you doing here?" asked the homely middle-aged farmer, attempting to open a conversation with his seat companion.

"I'm a technician for P.E.O.," said the crew-cut American, whose khaki pants and short-sleeved sports shirt made him look like a G.I. half-dressed for a weekend pass.

"What's P.E.O.?" asked Buell.

"Programs Evaluation Office," the boy curtly replied.

"Well, I'm new here and I don't know what that means." Buell smiled despite the rebuff. "What I wanted to know was what kind of work you do. Is it Government work?"

"Look, mister," said the boy in a gruff tone, "I don't know you. I'm a technician for P.E.O. Let's leave it at that, huh?" With that the young American turned his face to the window and the conversation was finished.

"Godalmighty, what are people out here tryin' to hide?" said Buell to the back of the young man's head. His ignorance of "Programs Evaluation" was shared by the entire population of the United States at this time in June, 1960. Not until 1961, when a *New York Times* reporter began tracing the whereabouts of a distinguished U.S. Army brigadier general whose name had mysteriously vanished from the Army's active roster, was P.E.O. explained. The officer was Brigadier General John A. Heintges, whose combat record in World War II had clearly marked him for an outstanding postwar career. In 1959 General Heintges's name unaccountably disappeared from active records, as if Pentagon bureaucracy had dropped a stitch in its personnel fabric, and he was gone almost without a trace. At the same time, Mr. John A. Heintges joined an unpublicized office of the American foreign aid program in Laos and took command of a staff of 400 "technicians" whose names also had fallen from the Army lists. The disguised soldiers organized, equipped, trained, and paid the 25,000-man Forces Armée Royale de Laos, uniquely distinguished as

the only foreign army in the world that was supported entirely by the United States of America. Its accomplishments in combat so far against the small bands of insurgent Pathet Lao nationalists had been devastating only to its own units, which were handsomely equipped with surplus American World War II tanks and other weapons perfectly suited for set-piece military engagements in almost any terrain except that of Laos. The entire military force was far more impressive off the field, marching behind its rumbling equipment along broad Lan Xang boulevard in Vientiane, where 80,000 citizens cheerfully interrupted their work schedule almost every week for a national holiday.

Many American military leaders and diplomats thought a small national police force in Laos would have been more effective, at less cost. But John Foster Dulles, then Secretary of State, had urged the creation of this Alice-in-Wonderland army to "fill the vacuum" left when the French were driven out of Indochina. The American taxpayer and the people of Laos were stuck ever after with Dulles's decision.

When Buell stepped down from the airplane into the mud that clung like cake frosting to his shoes, he was greeted solemnly by an unsmiling middle-aged man, the I.V.S. field manager. He looked questioningly at Edgar, then at his soldierly young seatmate, who hurried away.

"Don't ask any questions about P.E.O. or about the Central Intelligence Agency. They're here, too," said Edgar's dour host. Perfunctorily, then, he waved at four young Americans who had been standing beside him, and the youths slogged through the mud to board the plane. "They're my team here, taking off for the weekend in Vientiane. All they think about is their weekends," he grumbled. He helped Edgar into the back seat of a Land Rover and they began a bumpy ride across the Plaine des Jarres from the airport town of Phong Savan to the tiny village fifteen miles south called Lhat Houang.

As they jounced uncomfortably in the back seat of the Land Rover, the manager explained that he was deeply upset by the departed youngsters, who, he feared, had become so attached to the natives around Lhat Houang that they were losing their perspective. "They're

too concerned about the people and not concerned enough about what I think they should be doing. I don't know why else they would have so much trouble getting along with me," he said piously, shaking his head. "I hope you can help, but for heaven's sake don't waste your time trying to learn the language or getting close to the people. It's just not worth it. And, another thing: We have two Frenchmen working in our motor pool who just can't seem to take anything seriously. I'd avoid having any more to do with them than you have to."

"Thanks," said Buell. "I'll do what I can." He winced at the pain in his spine.

In the front seat of the Land Rover a 16-year-old Meo boy named Mua Chung turned and arched his eyebrows. The driver, Tseng, also sixteen, smiled and shook his head. Their unspoken communication clearly affirmed agreement that the airplane from Vientiane had brought them another dour puritan, when what they needed was an amiable diplomat. Interpreting for the Americans was difficult enough without having to cope with the intrinsic suspicions and misunderstandings that these old Americans seemed to carry with a martyr's pride, like crosses on their backs.

Lhat Houang was a village of fewer than a thousand people whose stilted, unpainted frame houses sat behind crude wooden fences along a single narrow roadway. The business district ran for a hundred yards in the center of town, a series of narrow wooden buildings and open stalls that displayed live chickens, freshly killed meats, a sprinkling of luxury items such as flashlights and batteries, and bolts of black cloth and multicolored yard goods. Separated by a short stretch of road from the rest of the village was a large white house with green board shutters and a green roof. It rested on a raised concrete platform in a large fenced yard, which the Land Rover entered through a swinging gate. Tseng parked the boxy station wagon not far from the house, near a stream that ran past an outhouse behind the big building that was the I.V.S. headquarters.

Inside, Buell found an open community room surrounded by cell-like bedrooms for each of the seven volunteers, whose recreation, from the look of the furnishings, seemed to consist entirely of playing

Ping-Pong, pounding on an old upright piano which was shoved against one wall, and eating together at a long dining table. Buell slept without difficulty on a comfortable cot in the small bedroom that the scowling I.V.S. manager assigned him, oblivious now of the throaty croaking of the *gecko* on the ceiling. He was exhausted, and not even the crushing memories of Malorene's wan smile before she died—a moment of the past that he had relived each day since she had said, "I'm sleepy, Edgar. Maybe you'd better go home"—could keep him awake. As he slept, Tseng and Mua Chung quietly discussed the likelihood that their lives would become more difficult with the addition of this sour old man to the I.V.S. mission.

Mua Chung was a muscular young man who had achieved his full growth and manhood among the Meo before his sixteenth birthday. His gleaming black hair grew thickly from the middle of his brow and rose lightly over his scalp like a puffy beret. His high-cheeked face was broad and firm, and crinkles at the edges of his alert hazel eyes responded quickly to laughter. Like Tseng, he had worked for the Americans at Lhat Houang for two years. A natural facility for languages that already had brought fluency in French, Thai, Lao, and Vietnamese, in addition to most of the dialects of his native Meo, quickly brought English as well. Like Tseng, he studied the language daily, and each new word that he heard was added to his own vocabulary the next day. His family, the Mua clan, were famous among the Meo and had migrated westward toward the Plaine des Jarres from a Xieng Khouang provincial village called Nong Het, a few miles from the border of North Vietnam. The Mua were among the few Meo *seng*, or clans, that had stored away enough opium wealth over the years to afford the French schools of the lowlands for some of their children, and Chung had graduated from an advanced elementary school called a Group Scholare in Xieng Khouang city when he was thirteen. The Meo around the Plaine des Jarres, and especially in Phou Vieng, a village just north of the plain where his family now lived, looked upon his accomplishments with pride and expected him, one day, to become a significant leader of all the tribes. He was conscious of his unspoken future responsibility, aware that his education was like a prized jewel to his untutored people,

and he made a point of roaming far and wide around Xieng Khouang Province to become acquainted with isolated Mco villages and to keep abreast of their troubles and desires. But, as with any boy of sixteen, there was a strong ambivalence to his ambitions. On the one hand, he wanted to help his people, particularly now that they were being harassed in their mountain homeland by the Communists from North Vietnam on one side, the Pathet Lao insurgents on another, and the Royal Government of Laos on still a third. At the same time, he had become enamored in two years of what little he had seen of the American way of life. His fondest hope was that he could play a significant role in bringing peace to his people. In his adolescent day-dreams he thought that might take a year, perhaps two. With peace established, he would prepare for a university education in the United States, which he would win, somehow, through his American friends in I.V.S. Only one man in the history of the Mco people had attended college. His name was Touby Ly Fong, and as a result of his education in France, achieved under the sponsorship of a sympathetic aristocrat in the lowlands, he was known to all of the tribes in Laos and was considered King of the Mco. Chung wanted to achieve as much, at least in the way of education. After that, perhaps he would return to a peaceful Laos and help to unite all of the people in modern prosperity, although the thought of staying in the United States, becoming an American, appealed to him more. Chung had carefully explained all of this to his childhood sweetheart, Mi Si, who happily accepted his ambitions, as any good prospective wife should, although she did not know where America was. Chung told her it was too far away to walk.

Edgar Buell had barely finished breakfast on his first Sunday morning in Lhat Houang when Chung asked him to come in the Land Rover for a ride around the Plaine. They spent a full day churning over mud roads that remained sticky throughout the rainy season from May to September, then billowed with dust for the rest of the year. Here and there they stopped to inspect the ancient four-foot earthenware jars scattered about the plain. No one knew with certainty what the jars had been used for, or by whom, but they had remained untouched on the 3,000-foot-high mountain plateau for

hundreds of years. Since it was assumed they had been used as burial urns by some prehistoric people of the hills, the mud-encrusted jars were left alone, lest the spirits of their long-departed residents be disturbed.

Before the day was half done, Chung had altered his first impression of Edgar Buell. The American's farmyard speech was too salty to be that of a straightlaced man like the puritanical I.V.S. manager, and this new old man listened eagerly as Chung told him about the Meo and the other people of Laos. In each of the small villages they visited that day, the aging farmer showed none of the fear and repugnance most Americans displayed when they first encountered the dirt and disease that were a dismal hallmark of life in this primitive land. He seemed to be relaxed even though he obviously suffered from some pain in his back whose cause he had not yet explained to Chung. He also walked humbly beside Chung when they entered the houses of the villages, aware that he did not know the customs of the people and reluctant to offend them with the arrogance that was typical of some of his countrymen.

"Meo people pride themselves in reading a man's character when they see his face the first time," said Chung as they drove back to Lhat Houang late in the day. "I thought you were a stern and unhappy man when I saw you yesterday. Now I see that you are not that kind of man. You do not hurry to know everything and to tell people they are wrong. I like you."

Surprised, Buell smiled.

"I'm pretty much the same way, Chung. I liked you and that other young fella, Tseng, soon as I saw you. The way I look at it, working with your people, here, is going to be pretty much the same as working with my own people, back in Indiana. You got to take it slow and easy. H'ain't it the same?"

"I think I would like Indiana," said Chung.

Chapter 3

Telling the truth; the truth never die, never be rotten,
never be broken and never spoil your feelings and thinkings,
but the truth makes you believe and finish in what you
are wishing and interesting to do.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupha

OF the two French mechanics in the motor pool Edgar Buell liked Albert Fouré better, although there was an excruciating problem of communication, since neither spoke the other's language. Albert was so thoroughly Gallic that the bouillabaisse air of his native Marseilles seemed to trail like a hint of alien perfume behind his chunky, grease-stained body. Each had difficulty with the other's name. Buell had given up on "Ahlbaire" and settled for a last-name friendship instead. He called the Frenchman "Four," as in the number. Albert, in his turn, despaired entirely of pronouncing either Edgar or Buell in a way that pleased his friend and settled instead on "mon ami." They had taken to visiting Xieng Khouang city together to sit in a café that Albert owned, drinking wine and getting along in their private language of hand signals and painfully mispronounced, monosyllabic French and English words. The conversation was interrupted frequently by long, satisfying pauses during which Fouré's Vietnamese wife, who managed the café, replenished their glasses and the two friends watched the small world of sarong-clad Lao men and women strolling by the open front of the modest establishment.

The pious I.V.S. manager, increasingly unhappy over the easygoing behavior of the frequently profane farmer, who had come ostensibly to

help him reestablish good relations with his field staff, frowned on the friendship. The manager had to maintain formal relations with the French community in the Plaine des Jarres because he was the senior American civilian in the area, but he was wary of becoming close, a fact that did not displease the French. In addition to about fifty civilians, most of whom, like Albert Fouré, were former French soldiers discharged after the French-Indochinese war, there was a small French military unit stationed at a town called Khang Khay, a few miles north of Xieng Khouang city. Under the terms of the 1954 Geneva agreement, which technically ended the war, France was permitted to keep a military advisory mission in Laos, and this, in theory, is what the French unit was for. Actually, the Lao army took all of its support from the disguised American technicians of P.E.O., so there was little for the French officers and men of Khang Khay to do. Nevertheless, they remained as leaders of the French social community on the Plaine; it was to the officers of the unit that the I.V.S. field executive paid his respects, when he had to.

"The French are having a Bastille Day party in Khang Khay tonight," he said one day to Buell. "You can come along with me if you like, because I have to go. I won't stay late, however. Those people tend to get out of hand when they're celebrating. They drink."

"Thank you, sir," said Edgar to the unbending boss who was six years his junior, "but I've already been invited, and I'm goin' with my friend Four."

"I don't think it's a very good idea for you to get so thick with those people," said the manager distastefully.

"I can take care of myself," said Edgar.

Then, together with five young Americans, as well as Chung and Tseng, Buell grimaced painfully as the unhappy manager played "Rock of Ages" on the untuned upright piano and delivered a Southern Baptist supplication to God before sitting down to lunch at the long table. It was his practice to sing a hymn and pray vigorously and loudly before each meal. None of the Americans liked the practice, partly because none were Southern Baptists. Chung and Tseng shared their displeasure. Just three days after Buell arrived in Lhat Houang, two of the young American field workers had cornered him

privately with a petition to ask their leader to halt the practice. One of them was Dick Bowman, a handsome, dark-haired, six-foot-six-inch veterinarian, and the other was Mary Jane St. Marie, a lithe, lovely brunette nurse who operated the only medical facility in the area.

"We've got Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Buddhists, Confucians, and animists around here," said Bowman. "If he doesn't stop these damned ceremonies every time we eat, we're all going to quit."

"I'm with you," said Edgar. "If a man's a Baptist, then he should *be* a Baptist, but not so it bothers the rest of us. Give me a little time to get to know him, and I'll ease him off some of this stuff."

The young staff members identified more and more with Buell after that, especially when he disregarded the manager's advice and began rising early every morning, and staying awake late every night, to study the Lao language.

"About a week of wanderin' around here not bein' able to talk to nobody has been enough to convince me," Edgar said. "I can't help these people, or America, by keepin' my mouth shut. And they ain't about to learn my kind of English."

But in a month's time, Buell still had not succeeded in modifying the inappropriate routines. Dick, Mary Jane, and the others were growing restive.

Albert introduced his *ami* to the French community at Khang Khay that Bastille night, and along with other mechanics, chefs, bar owners, farmers, and French soldiers, Edgar enjoyed a convivial evening of drink and song that was marred only by the unmasked disapproval of his boss. Before leaving early, as he had promised, the manager tugged on Buell's sleeve.

"Let's go now, Mr. Buell," he said, "before this gets any worse. It's not very good for our position here to have you drinking with these people."

"Hell, sir," said Edgar. "These people is my friends. Nobody's drunk, they're just happy, and ain't none of them gettin' out of hand. You go on home if you want to, but I'm stayin' with my friends. I and Four'll come home together. Don't you get upset, now."

The disgruntled manager left. He grimly confronted Edgar in the morning.

"Mr. Buell, you were completely out of place last night," he said. "You drank more than you should, against my explicit warning."

"Sir, I'm not a child," said Edgar benignly, his lips still showing a lingering half-smile from the pleasures of the night before. "I can take care of myself. Now, if you think I've hurt the American image up here, you can just write me out a ticket and I'll leave right now."

"No, no," said the manager. "That's not necessary."

But he wouldn't leave the subject alone. At lunchtime he confronted Buell again. "I think it's regrettable that you felt you had to get so close to those people last night," he said.

"Now you listen to me, mister," replied Buell in a quiet voice, "I don't have to work. I got my retirement money in the bank back home. And I sure as hell ain't makin' a profit on the \$65 a month I.V.S. pays me. So you can ship me out of here right now and it won't make no difference to me. But if I'm going to stay, there's gonna be some changes around here beginning right now."

Surprised by Buell's sudden firmness, the somber manager hesitated.

"Uh... what changes do you have in mind, Mr. Buell?" he asked.

"First," said Edgar, "there's gonna be no more prayin' at the table. If you want to pray, do it silently and ever'body'll respect your silence."

"Second, if I hear that pie-anna tune up one more time with a church hymn, I'm gonna throw it right out the goddamned door."

"And third, these young folks here has been champion' at the bit to do some good for the people, and you're gettin' in the way. From now on, you and I together are gonna discuss the things the young people want to do and the things I want to do. When I'm right, we're gonna do 'em. When you're right, we'll do it your way. But you and I are gonna agree first."

The shocked I.V.S. manager withdrew in silence, but within a few minutes he entered Buell's small bedroom and shook his hand. His appeasing smile was strained. "We'll do it your way," he said. And for the brief time that the I.V.S. mission remained intact at

Lhat Houang, it functioned smoothly under the joint direction of an increasingly relaxed Southern Baptist and an unflappable Indiana farmer. Neither could guess that within a year the concrete floor upon which they were standing would be smeared with the blood of a dead American.

Chapter 4

The good profession of the Meo people is to do farmings; to plant rice, corns, and vegetables on the high hill. Some of them make a merchandisc and there are a few of them which are merchants per each village. Only one thing that the Meo people like to plant most and best, that is the opium for all their lives. They said that the opium is a kind of best medicine for everything in their bodies.

—THE STORY OF THE MEO PEOPLE
by Thongsar Boupha

DURING the work days of Lhat Houang, Chung became Edgar Buell's constant companion, although the bandylegged farmer had less and less use for the Meo boy's services as an interpreter. The Lao language contains few abstractions or grammatical complexities, and, while Buell's vocabulary was limited, it was serviceable. He employed it unashamedly with the workmen on the buildings of the technical school that I.V.S. was erecting under contract to the U.S. foreign aid program, and with the peasants who worked on the AID program's model farm, which I.V.S. also supervised. The construction work was well along by August, but the farm, like so many well-intentioned endpoints of American generosity, was a conspicuous disaster.

"I can't believe my eyes," Buell said to Chung and Dick Bowman as he toured the farm for the first time. "We've got two tractors, modern corn planters, a power mowing machine, a big grain drill, and better disc harrows than I've got back in Indiana, and this is the scrubbiest two hundred acres of ground I ever saw."

"Your people are making a bad mistake here," said Chung. "This land is generations old. The soul is gone from it. It won't grow anything. And you are showing off here with these wonderful machines when most of our people can't afford to buy a buffalo. The people are laughing at you, but they will say nothing. They have decided that now it is time for the Americans to learn. They are watching to see if you learn."

"All of us feel the same way," said Bowman, "but we've got orders to run this kind of demonstration farm on this land."

"Ain't they sent any technicians up here to test the soil and figure what kind of farming methods is best for these people?"

"Sure, that's where the orders came from. They've been up from the AID mission in Vientiane," Bowman replied. "This is what they recommended."

"Bunch of goddam educated fools," said Buell. "It ain't worth nothin', and it never will be. From what I've seen, these Lao farmers haven't even learned to use steel tips on their wooden plows. We ain't gonna put 'em on no tractors in one jump, and we'll damn sure never show 'em how to grow crops on this plot of ground."

"Orders are orders," said Bowman ruefully.

By mid-August, the cornstalks on the demonstration farm had grown knee high, turned yellow, and died. It was the only crop that grew at all. Nine years later, when Edgar Buell flew across the Plaine des Jarres taking bullet holes in the wings of the light plane that carried him, he still could make out the fenced borders of the American demonstration farm, which had been captured long since by the Communists. The land still remained so depleted that no living thing grew on it. Share and share alike, the Meo say.

In the evenings Chung often took his elderly American friend to a small Lao restaurant in Lhat Houang. There they would sit at a table rolling glutinous rice into balls with their fingers, dipping the tidbits into a peppery fish sauce and then popping them into their mouths. While Edgar practiced his Lao on the restaurant's patrons, Chung whispered quietly in Meo to fellow tribesmen who shuffled into and out of the small eating place. One night a handsome young Meo entered the restaurant dressed in the crisp American-style khaki

uniform of a Lao Army major. Chung chatted softly with him for a time at another table, then led him to Edgar Buell.

"This is my friend, Major Va Vang Pao," said Chung. "He is the only Meo officer in the Royal Army. He is a great leader. He will bring peace to our people."

Buell stood to make the traditional respects with prayer-clasped hands, then grasped the right hand of the smiling major, whose level eyes were at the same height as his own. Vang Pao removed a maroon beret from his close-cropped head and spoke in English.

"Mua Chung says you are friend of the Meo people. We need an American friend."

"If they's all like Chung, Major," said Buell, "you've got one."

After that Chung began driving the Indiana farmer farther and farther from Lhat Houang to meet the Meo tribes on the mountains surrounding the Plaine des Jarres. First they went to the village of Chung's sweetheart, Mi Si, not far above the low, rolling foothills of Lhat Houang. As they entered the house of Mi Si's father, Chung said in English:

"I detest this man because he smokes opium even though he is not sick. He is not to be trusted by other Meo. But I love his daughter. We are arranging the marriage."

"You ain't but sixteen years old, Chung," said Buell. "You daresn't get married so young."

Chung laughed. "I am old, Mister Bewoer," he stumbled on the *l's* in Edgar's name. "By sixteen, most Meo men already are married and have made a baby. Mi Si thinks I have waited a long time. We have been friends since we were nine years old, and there has never been anyone else for either of us. For six months now, I have had to be respectful to her father, although I hate him, because we are courting. Tonight he will give me his answer."

Mi Si sat on the dirt floor by the fire with her mother, tending pots of boiling meat broth with a large bamboo spoon, and pretending not to notice that Chung and his American friend had entered the house. Her father, an emaciated man who appeared to shrink beneath the baggy black cotton pants and tunic of a Meo gentleman, smiled ingratiatingly and scurried nervously around the table, seating the

American guest and the village *taesing* and *nhibons* on long wooden benches that flanked it. In deference to the occasion, he had smoked no opium that day.

On the long table, befitting a well-off opium trader who lived close to a lowland village, were shallow porcelain metal bowls and steel spoons for each of the guests. Mi Si, who at fourteen had a graceful, straight carriage and delicate soft features lending beauty to an impassive but dignified face, helped her mother serve a dozen communal bowls brimful of broth, boiled buffalo tripe, cabbage, beans, and fluffy, dry hill rice. Heaped in a large bowl at the center of the table was a dry-baked chicken haphazardly dismembered with a heavy knife into so many bony pieces that only the head, which still wore its beak and singed comb, and the feet, clawing at the broth in the bottom of the bowl, were recognizable.

"*Mutsa kun sambaii*," said the *taesing*, lifting a small glass of what looked like water to toast "all the people." He reached across the table and urged Edgar to take up the small water glass beside his own bowl. Buell, a drinking man who believed that his gullet had long since experienced its last liquid surprise, knocked back a medium sip. As his Meo dinner companions looked on with increasing pleasure, his eyes watered, he wheezed and growled in pain, and his cheeks bloomed a sudden flushed pink as if pigmented by a blowtorch.

"Man, that's good corn whiskey," he lied through his constricted throat. It tasted like a soup made of dirty tennis shoes boiled in a pot of kerosene. In his anxiety to please his host and the other Meo guests, he praised the brew again. It was his first major mistake with the mountain people, for his feigned pleasure looked so real that they pressed him ever after to drink huge quantities of the stuff. In proof of the adage that one can become accustomed to any cruel punishment if it is repeated often enough, Buell ultimately acquired a taste for the *lau lau* of the mountains, which the Meo call *nom saly*, and even developed a connoisseur's ability to distinguish the distillate of one tribe from that of another, a useless distinction, since no matter where he was entertained he had to drink the local corn whiskey, anyway.

After two more drinks, which went down less painfully than the first, he made his second major mistake. Mi Si's father politely asked,

through Chung, which part of the hacked-up chicken was his favorite.

"It don't matter," said Buell, "one looks pretty much the same as another."

"You will be honored, then," said Chung, "with the piece that is the favorite of all the Meo people," and he passed Buell the fire-shrunken head. "Hold it by the beak and suck the brain out first," said Chung. "Then eat the comb and the cheeks." Again Buell began a practice that would continue as long as he remained in the mountains, where he became known as "the man who eats chicken like the Meo." Rather than offend his hosts, generous Edgar praised the Meo food as being the same as his own cuisine in Indiana. It pleased them to discover such a strong culinary link with America, and in time the retired farmer became so accustomed to feigning relish over indeterminate dishes such as congealed blood, boiled animal entrails, and an occasional fire-baked squirrel that looked suspiciously like a rat, that he actually preferred them to the bland gravies and boiled potatoes of home.

After dinner, Mi Si and her mother abandoned the open wood fire at the center of the hut to the men, who perched on low bamboo stools in a ring around the blaze and drank gulp-sized draughts of *nom saly*. It was then that Mi Si's father announced that after six months of chaste courting, during which period Chung according to custom had spent many evenings talking to him rather than to his daughter, the boy was accepted as a prospective son-in-law. Tomorrow night the old man would lead Chung to Mi Si's bed, where he could resume the courtship in earnest.

"*Ealy?*" asked Chung, which means "really?" in English.

"*Ealy*," said Mi Si's father. "Soon I will talk to the shaman about a good time for the marriage."

"*Djong chia dao*," said Chung, "I am very happy."

The evening ended with ribald stories and good wishes to Chung.

The following night was no time for male companionship. Chung left the I.V.S. house at Lhat Houang alone, in time to reach his sweetheart's house by dusk. Her father welcomed him and the two men ate together, wordlessly. When the dishes had been cleaned and the leftover food stored away on a shelf in the corner, Mi Si slipped

quickly through the blanket drapery that screened a springy, woven bamboo platform from the rest of the rectangular hut. Proudly, her father led Chung to the bed, drew back the curtain, and bade him join Mi Si. Then he retired to the fire to listen with deep satisfaction as the international sounds that need no translation slowed, quickened, and repeated themselves through the evening.

There was nothing perfunctory about their lovemaking, as one might expect of a primitive tribal couple instinctively propagating their own kind. Nor had their sophistication in sexual play come from the French, who governed Laos for fifty years. It was as old as the tribes that a man and a woman show artistry in their passion, playing the instruments of mutual joy with a virtuosity of tender touch and innocent gusto that experimental lovers anywhere on earth would envy.

Without boasting, but with guiltless, ingenuous pride, Chung described the joyous experience in entrancing detail to Edgar the next day. It helped the monastic widower not at all that he added to his anthropological knowledge of Meo engagement customs by experiencing, vicariously, Chung's innocent erotica. But it gave him his first great insight into the character of the Meo, who are a passionate, inventive, and warmhearted people. Chung also made it clear to him that the Meo are unforgiving in one respect. The greatest crime a Meo man can commit is to make love to a Meo girl he does not intend to marry. His punishment, if he is caught, is automatic. He is executed by three men firing flintlock muskets. For the relief of seminal tension or just for the hell of it, however, he is perfectly free to sleep with any non-Meo woman he can seduce.

Some time later, the young lovers were sitting close together observing Edgar at play. Since Chung's engagement party, Buell had visited many Meo villages and shared breakfast and dinner, the only two meals the tribes favor, so often that he had grown to love the food as well as the people. Now he was energetically teaching the children of Mi Si's village to play volleyball. Leaping on his short legs, running and bouncing about the crude volleyball court, he played with the energy, if not the grace, of a teen-aged boy.

"Your back does not hurt any more?" called Chung during a pause in the game.

"H'ain't give it a thought for the last two weeks," Buell laughed. "Damned if I know why, but it just don't hurt me no more. That whiskey ain't hurt my stomach none, either. I must have found a cure."

"Mister Bowoer," said Chung, tongue-tied as he always was over the *l*'s in Buell's name, "many of the Meo people who have met you want to give you a name. I have been asked to learn from you if you will accept it. They want to call you *Tan Pop*."

"It's a damned sight easier for you to say than 'Mister Buell,' Chung. I don't mind being called Pop. They called me that in the Army."

"Okay, Tan Pop," said Chung, and that was the name of the American friend of the Meo that spread from village to village across the mountains. Although he had begun now to study the Meo language as well as Lao, it was months before Edgar discovered that Tan Pop meant "Mister Sent From Above."

For the time being, he was very much bound to the ground around Lhat Houang. Having despaired over the future of the model farm, Pop asked Chung to drive him all around the Plaine and to walk with him into the hills so that he could examine the farming methods of the valley-dwelling Lao, the mid-slope settlers called the Lao Thung, who are considered by many to be descendants of the aboriginal people of Laos, and the Meo high on the mountains. Each, he found, used man-drawn wooden plows, only rarely harnessed to buffalo by wealthier farmers. As they had for centuries, the plows broke easily and blunted quickly in the rocky soil. Planting, he found, followed a shotgun pattern with handfuls of seeds hurled helter-skelter on a single patch of ground so that their crowded growth could not easily be cultivated or weeded. Buell ignored the model farm completely now and spent all his weekends, and as much time as he could take from the school construction, patiently teaching farmers to plant their seeds in rows. With the zeal of a successful scrounger, he found a blacksmith and appropriated enough scrap metal to begin production of the first steel plow tips in the history of northeast Laos.

"If you're gonna help out in a country like this," he explained when officials in Vientiane inquired about the project, "you first got to find

out what the people can do for themselves. 'The closer you can git to the lowest man out here, the quicker you find out what he needs. That's what I'm doin'. They need steel points on their wooden plows, and their own blacksmiths are makin' 'em. Now they're only about fifty years, instead of two hundred years, behind the rest of the world."

It was the first fully successful program in agricultural development the United States of America had achieved in the nation of Laos.

In other ways, too, Pop Buell began to lose the naiveté that had accompanied him to the country. One Sunday morning, Chung asked him if he could borrow one of the I.V.S. jeeps to transport some goods for his Meo friends.

"Sure," said Pop. "I'll go with ya."

Not far away they picked up two Meo men who loaded eighteen burlap-wrapped, half-a-foot-square cubes, which seemed unusually heavy for their size, into the jeep. An inner wrapping of banana leaves hid whatever the packages contained, and Pop did not bother to ask about them because he was more interested in the landscape as they drove over a rain-swollen stream and headed northward across the Plaine des Jarres. Soon they arrived at the mud field airport in Phong Savan, and Chung drove the jeep close beside a small airplane that in its antiquity resembled the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Pop thought the pilot was French, although he looked Italian and was, in fact, Corsican. The men tossed the packages from the jeep into the airplane. Its engine started, and it taxied away.

Two weeks later, Chung again asked for the jeep, and again Edgar accompanied him as he picked up the strange Meo with their burlap-wrapped packages and transported them to Phong Savan airport.

"What's goin' on, Chung?" asked Pop. "What is this stuff?"

"I thought you knew," said Chung. "It's opium, of course."

"Godalmighty, Chung. You tryin' to make me into an opium smuggler?"

"No, Tan Pop. We don't smuggle opium, the pilot does. He flies it to Saigon from here. It's okay for us to sell opium in Laos. It's what you Americans call a cash crop. Opium is the only thing the Meo have to get money for buying blankets and cooking utensils. We also get silver with it, to save. It is our only wealth."

A few nights later Edgar was sitting with Albert Fouré in his restaurant in Xieng Khouang, idly watching as a young Lao girl in a sarong tugged a shapely foot out of the ankle-deep mud in the road. The downpour that came every day during the rainy season had ended, and the sky was clear and moonlit, casting a pale luminescence that softened the unkempt harshness of the town. He remained troubled over his experience with Chung and tried to explain it to Albert.

"Ah, oui, mon ami," said Fouré, "much opium here. Come. I show you."

Together they slogged down the road to a small bar called The Million Elephants after the national motto of Laos, the Land of a Million Elephants. To the Americans in the area it was known as the White Elephant, and few of them felt welcome there, but with the garrulous mechanic as his companion, Buell was accepted. Fouré led his friend to a storage room in the back of the establishment. It contained more than a ton of raw opium, packaged in burlap and ready for shipping. The White Elephant was the focal point of the opium trade for all of northeast Laos.

Many days later, Buell drove with Albert to Phong Savan and watched from the side of the airstrip as a modern twin-engined plane took on a huge load of opium. Beneath the wing, talking heatedly with the plane's Corsican pilot, was a slender woman dressed in long white silk pants and *ao d'ai*, the side-slit, high necked gown of Vietnam. Her body was exquisitely formed, and her darkly beautiful face wore a clear expression of authority. Even Buell could see that she was Vietnamese, not Lao.

"Zat," said Fouré, "is ze grande madame of opium from Saigon."

Edgar never learned her name, but he recognized the unforgettable face and figure when the picture of the wife of an important South Vietnamese politician appeared months later in an American news-magazine.

The opium growers of Laos, Pop discovered, were not unlike non-smoking tobacco farmers of North Carolina, and Chung was typical in his unquestioning acceptance of a double standard concerning the stuff. He detested any Meo who smoked the sap of the flowering plant

for any but medicinal purposes. Yet he recognized the economic value of the colorful poppies to his people, and while Chung hated his prospective father-in-law for smoking opium, he actively took part in the addicted man's commercial trade. Buell privately decided to try, in the months ahead, to find more profitable cash crops for his friends. He did not realize then that time for such an educational program in international ethics and agriculture was running out.

The first warning came on August 8, when Mary Jane St. Marie received an urgent radio call from the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane. Without explanation, she was ordered to fly to the capital immediately.

Chapter 5

Since the last famous King of Laos, his name was Chao Anou, the war has always broken out among the Lao people . . . It has never stopped fighting and killing each other before and now it will not stop either to have a crazy war like this, except one big power nation comes to occupy every piece of ancient properties and the whole land of Laos. But everybody knows that the whole things in Laos will get a big piece of peace and finish the main problems in their head and the confusing terrible action by only proper honest Lao people to the Lao people absolutely.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupba

THE news of the coup de'état arrived slowly in Lhat Houang, and had it not been for Mary Jane's sudden departure, no one would have been prepared for it. The Plaine des Jarres was placid, as it had been since the fall of Dienbienphu, 140 miles to the north, in 1954. While the Pathet Lao insurgents fought an occasional skirmish in the north, and political chaos was the order of the day in Vientiane, none of Pop Buell's fellow workers expected an explosion. But Mary Jane was called back to Vientiane because the U.S. Embassy sensed that something was about to give way in the tiny country and feared that Xieng Khouang would be the focal point. The diplomats didn't want to risk the life of the only American woman in the area. The next day Mary Jane was barely settled into her apartment in Vientiane when misguided rounds from automatic weapons in the hands of revolutionary soldiers spattered random white pimples in her plaster

walls. Miraculously, neither she nor anyone else in Vientiane was hurt by the gunfire. Within twenty-four hours a shy but rebellious young Royal Army captain named Kong Le, acting with pure motives and great naiveté, took over the government.

The situation was confusing and will be doubly so here if we do not swallow, in as small a gulp as possible, some of the historical and social background of Laos, which existed between civil wars in a nervous state of armed truce, the real nature of which confused the Lao themselves. Except for the somewhat modern appearance of the armies involved, and the presence of numerous outsiders supporting, advising, and applying pressure to the many factions of the nation that were in conflict, the confusion was nothing new. Since its beginnings as Lan Xang (Kingdom of the Million Elephants) in the fourteenth century, Laos has co-existed, for the most part quite happily, with political disorder, ethnic conflict, and uncertainty about its own nationhood. With a population of between three and four million people, it is the only underpopulated country in Asia. And as a landlocked kingdom whose mountains rise so steeply from such cramped valleys that there is little room for mechanized agriculture except in the fertile valley of the Mekong River, no one has cared much about it. Internationally it has served no function at all, except as a natural buffer between the historically hostile Thai and Vietnamese people.

Unlike Tseng's Meo grandfather, who included a Chinese woman among his several wives, the varied and frequently hostile ethnic groups of Laos rarely mix and seldom intermarry. Generally their physical distribution in the country matches their ethnic origin; a man's race usually can be determined by the altitude at which he lives. The original inhabitants of the area, who once were called *Kha* but are now called Lao Thung, occupy the mid-slopes of the mountains. They are a dark-skinned people, possibly akin to the Dyaks of Borneo, who may have migrated from the islands of Indonesia 3,000 or more years ago. It is even conceivable that they evolved long before that from a neolithic community whose traces were discovered by a captive Dutch archeologist as he dug postholes beneath the infamous bridge on the river Kwai for his Japanese captors during World War II. While their origin is anthropologically uncertain, it is known

that the Lao Thung received their historically dismal social status as well as their original name (*Kha* in the Thai and Lao languages means "slave") from the Thai people who began to push into South-east Asia from South China during the first millennium. As is usually the case with aboriginal inhabitants who have the misfortune to be gradually overwhelmed by a more advanced people, the Lao Thung were driven away from the fertile valleys and into poorer land, in this case the rugged mountain country of Laos. There they settled on the barely arable mid-slopes, and there they remain, still poor and still at the base of what passes for a social pyramid in the 90,000-square-mile kingdom.

The Thai peoples, who initially belonged to the ancient military kingdom of Nan Chao in South China, moved into Southeast Asia along the Mekong River valley and by the fourteenth century dominated what is now Thailand, Laos, and much of Cambodia. Their descendants today make up about half of the population of Laos and are called Lao, although they remain closely akin to the much more numerous (17 million) modern-day Thais in speech and culture. Although transient Chinese and Vietnamese merchants tend to dominate what little commerce exists in Laos, the Lao people command its politics and rule through a tiny elite descended from an ancient nobility. Until a few years ago, no more than a few hundred of them had been educated beyond the level of junior high school, and the influence of professionalism in Lao society was best indicated by the presence of only one native physician in the entire country.

Other Thai peoples, nomads all, moved into Laos during the same general migration from South China and settled for the most part in the high mountain valleys. They were identified by the clothing they wore and are still so distinguished as Black Thai, Red Thai, and White Thai. Although their ethnic origin is the same as that of the Lao, they long ago rejected Buddhism in favor of animism and chose social exclusivity, settling far from the low valleys. Hence they, too, occupy an unexalted position in the social hierarchy of Laos and are considered just a cut above the Lao Thung. As a group they are usually called, simply, hill Lao.

Still other smaller ethnic groups live here and there, creating a babel of languages. In the extreme northern province of Phong Saly, for example, at least nineteen different tongues are spoken; however, in linguistics as in other areas, no one has ever cared enough about Laos to bother cataloguing all of them.

The Meo are the most numerous ethnic minority in Laos. They number at least a half-million. Like the Gurkhas of Nepal, they are a warrior race, but not an aggressive one. During their relatively brief history in the country they have been content to be left alone on their mountaintops, but when disturbed, they have resisted fiercely and well. Until the present century, when modern weapons made mountains as vulnerable as the rest of the earth, their presence in Laos was hardly noticed, and even today there remain a few Meo villages that have never been visited by a white man, although their number is dwindling. Share and share alike, the Meo say.

During the French-Indochinese war, hundreds of Meo were pressed into military service by both sides and were known as the best guerrilla fighters in Southeast Asia. But they remained politically unsophisticated. In 1954, when the Communist Vietminh forced the French to give up their Southeast Asian colonial empire, most of the Meo soldiers returned to the isolated freedom of their mountains. For a few years after the French loss, they lived peaceably. One of them, a young man of the Va clan, who had become a sergeant in the French Army, decided to stick with his military career, despite the fact that his dismal social status as a Meo would make life as a junior officer in the Royal Army of Laos difficult. He was Vang Pao, the same man whom Pop Buell met in the tiny restaurant in Lhat Houang.

On the political side of Laos, disharmony and factional squabbling is almost a revered national tradition. It was a united kingdom only once in its ancient history, during the three centuries following its founding as Lan Xang in 1353. The Japanese briefly reunited it under a surrogate Thai government during World War II, and the French made a pass at unity after the war, but by then the governing elite had become so factionalized that no government could speak for the entire country. Intrigue was a constant fact of life in both the political

capital of Vientiane and the royal capital of Luang Prabang, where the king received the lip service of everyone. Out of a welter of contentious parties, two genuine nationalists emerged from the ruling groups. They were half-brothers, Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong, the sons of the king's viceroy. Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong were eleven years apart in age and at least as far apart in the tactical application of their nationalist political ideology. While the easygoing older brother, Souvanna Phouma, was willing to work toward a gradual independence under the French, his impatient younger brother joined the Vietminh and learned to live and fight among the people in the mountains and the forests. From this hostile germination, cultivated by various right-wing elitists who disliked both of the royal half-brothers, burst the seeds of the sometimes ludicrous, often tragic, disorder that was Laos at the time Edgar Buell arrived in Lhat Houang.

A month before Buell's painful flight to Laos, an effort to create a stable government by democratic elections failed by its own overwhelmingly pro-American success. The election was so blatantly rigged by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and Department of Defense (through its P.E.O. representatives), in collaboration with right-wing Lao military officers, that the democratic experiment helped rather than hurt its anti-American losers. Souphanouvong's insurgent Pathet Lao forces, who had remained holed up in the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua after the French defeat, realized that in such a rigged "democracy" they could not gain power by the ballot. So the Pathet Lao intensified their previously sporadic efforts to gain it by force. They were eagerly supported by their old comrades-in-arms, the Communist Vietminh of North Vietnam, who had their own stake in maintaining free access to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran along the eastern border of Laos into South Vietnam.

Captain Kong Le, a sturdily built five-foot-one-inch paratrooper whose 2nd Paratroop Battalion was the most effective unit in the Royal Army, was neither Pathet Lao, which literally means "Land of the Lao," nor right-wing. With the simple yearnings of the peasant soldier that he was, he believed that a neutralist government under

Prince Souvanna Phouma would miraculously end foreign interference in Laos and clean out the corrupt elite who ran the country.

The country's politics at the time were as unharmonious as a broken lute, and much of the motive power behind the break had come from the United States Central Intelligence Agency and the clandestine U.S. Army. Following a coup by right-wing Lao Army generals the year before, national elections had been held in April. But the "interim" government that supervised them gerrymandered election districts throughout the country, disqualified leftist and Pathet Lao candidates on the basis of education and financial resources, and finally stuffed ballot boxes to assure right-wing success. The U.S. Army and Central Intelligence Agency played a major role in planning the fixed election, and one embittered U.S. Embassy official, appalled at what his own countrymen were doing, even told of observing an American C.I.A. agent handing out bundles of money to village headmen in exchange for their votes.

One military unit sent into southern Laos to mop up Pathet Lao units in preparation for the rigged election was the 2nd Paratroop Battalion, commanded by Kong Le. As in the past, the young officer dutifully followed orders and once again was acknowledged as the most effective unit commander in the Lao military. After the election, he was posted to Vientiane with his unit and expected some kind of reward in the form of decent quarters for his men and a respite from the fighting that had occupied his paratroopers since 1959. But the battle-weary unit was unceremoniously bivouacked on a mud flat outside the capital. At that point, Kong Le began seriously questioning the wisdom of his right-wing leaders in the Army; and he thought seriously as well about the ill effect foreign interference, particularly from the Americans who had trained him at one of their bases in the Philippines, was having on his country. He complained of the miserable living conditions of his unit, and was promptly ordered to saddle up for combat operations again.

Kong Le loaded his troops and combat arms on trucks, ostensibly to return to combat. But the last order had been, to him, the last straw. Instead of heading for their assigned combat area outside of

Vientiane, the paratroopers rolled into the sleeping capital city. Except for the wounding of two guards who resisted his advance, no blood was spilled as Kong Le seized all Government ministries, the airport, power station, radio station, and telegraph office. He wasn't quite sure what he wanted, but he knew he wanted Souvanna Phouma in charge of it, and he hoped the foreigners would go away and leave Laos in peace.

He quickly became a national hero in a country that had precious few, and the already fragmented population of Laos became still more of an international political pawn and was more divided than ever.

Both the Soviet Union and China added their voices to that of Hanoi and the Pathet Lao in tentatively congratulating the young revolutionary, which was unfortunate, because the United States Embassy in Vientiane wanted to back him and his choice of Souvanna Phouma, too. With such allies, the Embassy didn't stand a chance, although subsequent events proved that the neutralist prince was by far the best choice at the time. The C.I.A. and the American military, who had created the mess in the first place by fixing the elections a few months before, swung in behind a right-wing general named Phoumi Nosavan, who had the backing of a third prince, unrelated to the two half-brothers, named Boun Oum.

Obviously it was a period of great confusion, even to those observers who knew the cast of characters and understood the volatile politics of the tiny country. Its resolution, if there was to be one, was completely unpredictable, because the Soviet Union and China, by their verbal entry into the fray, and the C.I.A. and Defense Department, by actively opposing their own embassy, had generated a believable case of international war jitters. While Kong Le blithely ignored the ugly waves his bloodless coup had generated, the United States seriously entertained the appalling notion of sending troops to confront the Communist menace in the mountainous, landlocked country. It was never completely clear just which side the U.S. Army would support, or whom it would fight when it got there. Share and share alike, the Meo say.

In any case, virtually the entire U.S. AID program came to a standstill after Kong Le's naive but extremely competent military coup,

and the embassy nervously began evacuating American civilians from their soon-to-become-insecure posts around the country. At peaceful Lhat Houang, two Americans volunteered to remain behind to try as best they could to hold the I.V.S. program together. They were Edgar Buell and Dick Bowman.

Chapter 6

In the olden day, was about five thousand years ago, there was only one land, the land was very small like the trace of the deer. There was only one tree, the tree was very small like the smallest candle. There was also only one hermit who stayed on that land. When the age of that hermit was one thousand years old he took clays to make one man and one woman by his own magic, a man whose name was Phaou Sank See, and a woman whose name was Ya Sank Sar. Both of them stayed together for many and many years. They have had only one son and their son's name was Sin Sai. He was a powerful, grateful and kindly man...

When the age of Sin Sai was about twenty-five years old, his own town was very much trouble about the big bad giant who wants to kill him... So Sin Sai, he sent the message to that big bad giant that he wants to make a war with it...

Its both eyes were red like the fire hell. On that day the big bad giant could not stay on its house. It growled and cried like the bad thunder. It went around the sky and it also transformed itself into thousands and thousands of small giants for making war with a great Sin Sai who was a son of two people, Phaou Sank See and Ya Sank Sar... Sin Sai he said in his mind, "Oh, my dear old parents and my dear respecting hermit." So Sin Sai he took grains of rice to put in his mouth and then he spit out all of grains of rice, and all grains of rice became soldiers by his good magical action...

Well, when all of bad giants including the big bad one had died altogether, Sin Sai he said that, "If I shall stay in men's world there is no use at all for me. I have to go to

kill bad giant or bad spirits at the other world." When he finished his saying like that, he called all his soldiers come. He briefed them and gave them a good compliment that they got win of fighting with all bad giants.

The last word of his saying to his all soldiers, "I have to leave you all soldiers in man's world, and you will not forget to stay on the high hill, because when I am not here, there might have many bad giants or spirits will come to make you all trouble; and also you all are my powerful soldiers and have to wait for me until I will come back to stay with you people again!" When Sin Sai he finished his saying he burnt himself away in one minute. So right now all Meo people said they are one kind of Sin Sai's soldiers.

—THE STORY OF THE MEO PEOPLE
by Thongsar Bouphe

THE day after Thanksgiving, Edgar wrote to his newly married son and daughter-in-law, who had taken over the operation of his farm near Metz, Indiana. It was a true measure of how deeply involved in Laos he had become that not once did he ask about the 250-acre farm or try to tell his son how to run it.

Dear Howard and Bonnie:

Well, kids, who would have ever thought one year ago I would have ate Thanksgiving dinner in far off Southeast Asia in the north part of a little country called Laos?

It was a beautiful day, the temperature I would guess 80°, the beautiful pine trees in and on the mountainsides, the bamboo in the lowlands showing off beautiful green against the pastures and grasslands which is slowly turning to a dark brown, all because Mr. Dry Season has come upon them. Also the huge banana trees trying to give battle with large greenish-yellow leaves, and large bunches of bananas hanging on. The poinsettias are in full bloom, so huge and bright, more like small trees and by far the largest I ever saw. Orchids are blooming, oh so beautiful in the forests, by far the most beautiful flowers in Laos.

At present and probably for God knows how long there is only Dick Bowman and myself here; one American missionary in Xieng Khouang; and the seven American military advisers at Khang Khay about 25 miles away. That is it in all north Laos. Each day Mr. Pop, who is in full charge, makes some most difficult and unusual decisions. To us, seemingly, the U.S. is on the wrong side. We are supporting both sides with arms and money, but are trying to make believe we are going with the Vientiane government. Here we are supposed to just keep quiet and go along. But believe me I think these people, plus most of Laos outside Vientiane Province, are right. Anyway I have been asked to make a stand here. We will make it, but Mr. Pop and Dick has to live here, not Vientiane or Washington. I will see it through the way I see it and one way or another I will win. You know, when and if the day ever comes for Dick and I to walk out, it won't be Washington's, it will be our legs.

We had a big pinochle game last night with the American military. They only stay six months. They all leave next week except the colonel. You call them all "Mr. So and So" because they are not supposed to be with the regular army. But you holler "captain" or "sergeant" and they look up, right now! Ha.

Now from this letter you may think I am bitching. I still am very happy, love my work. But just a little—no, a lot—tired off at our foreign policy here. Believe me, it stinks. It's too damned bad. You should see these airplanes come in here and what they are loaded with. There will be ten today, C-46s and C-47s, all kinds of World War II guns, ammo, clothes, etc.

You will never know what a consolation it is to have Chung. He probably is the most intelligent Meo boy in Laos. He knows the country, how to live in the wild, and how to hunt animals as well as humans. There is no question when I leave this country Chung will go with me.

As I made my radio check Thanksgiving morning (we have contact with five stations in Laos) no one else seemed to have anything to be thankful for. I blew my stack over the radio. I told them we have much to be thankful for.

Dick got the dozer stuck in a ditch today. He thought I would tear him up for it. Imagine me against six feet six inches of man! He feels bad about it, but I have him understanding that these things will happen.

Lots of love,
Your Dad

Dick Bowman noticed the bulldozer first, or rather paid attention to it before Pop figured out how they would use it. The heavy-tracked machine had been parked near the proposed dam site south of Lhat Houang for so long that it had become a fixture that no one took seriously. Although weathered from exposure to two successive rainy seasons, its diesel engine revved up like a warm, purring cat when they started it, and the drums of oil stored nearby were enough to keep it running for months. It had been brought there, over a tortuous one-lane road that snaked through the mountains from Vientiane, more than a year ago and remained parked in an ever-deepening bed of mud at Lhat Sen, its delivery site, waiting for work to begin on a small irrigation dam that the United States had agreed to build for the Lao rice farmers in the area. For almost three years American technicians and surveyors had visited the site periodically, studying the small stream that was to be dammed and marking off the parched land around it. The dam, like the model farm, was another of the American AID projects that the natives viewed with amusement. They were convinced the project never would be completed, and it looked as if they were right.

Actually, Chung inspired Pop's idea for the use of the bulldozer. Ignoring the risk of passing through territory that was solidly controlled by the Pathet Lao, he drove Edgar to many Communist-leaning villages. Then he took him far north along Highways 7 and 6 one day, almost as far as Houei Thom on the edge of Sam Neua Province. They stopped, finally, at the ford of a small stream engorged with flood waters and were warmly greeted by a dozen Lao farmers and two soldierly looking Lao men dressed in pale khakis.

"We are preparing to build a bridge here," said one of the farmers.

"Good," said Buell, beaming. "If you need any equipment or material, maybe I can help you."

"Thank you for your kindness," said one of the men in khaki. "But they will not need your help. We are helping them."

"That's even better," said Buell. "Good luck." Chung backed and turned the jeep and retraced their route along Highway 6 to Highway 7, which connected Ban Ban to Khang Khay and Xieng Khouang.

"Them was good, self-sufficient people," said Edgar. "It makes you feel good to see 'em gettin' along so well on their own."

"They were Pathet Lao, Tan Pop," said Chung. "They will make the bridge with fallen trees and mud and in two weeks it will be finished. The people will praise them for it."

"Goddammit, why can't we do things that fast?"

"I don't know, Tan Pop. I think Americans study too long. The dam at Lhat Sen has been studied for three years. Still it is not built."

That night Buell talked to Dick about the dam and the bulldozer.

"They'd like the dam, but the people down there say they'd rather have a road to connect some of their hill villages to the market place," Bowman said. "They can't build either one themselves, though. That ground's too rough for hand work."

"Why don't we use that bulldozer you keep talkin' about?"

"It's not ours, Pop. I think the American Mission in Vientiane would raise hell if we appropriated it. We're supposed to stick to our knitting with the technical school and the farm, right here."

"Tomorrow we're gonna start buildin' them people a road," said Pop.

"It might not be that easy, Pop," said Bowman. "One reason the dam never got started is that the Public Works people were afraid there are some Pathet Lao around that area. They never felt it was safe to work down there."

"Chung and I have visited a dozen Pathet Lao villages in the last few weeks, Dick," Buell said. "I've doctored 'em with the medicines Mary Jane left here for us. Hell, they didn't bother me none. They were glad to see me. They didn't look like they was gonna tear anybody up."

On the radio that night, Buell talked with Ed Hogan, the head of the Agriculture Department in the U.S. mission at Vientiane.

"Go ahead and use it, Pop," said Hogan. "It's against every rule in the book for I.V.S. to use our equipment, but nobody's going to know about it. Keep your head down."

The next day Bowman began moving dirt with the heavy machine. Pop organized work parties from the villages around Lhat Sen to build small bridges of logs and oil drums over the gullies and streams that the bulldozer traversed. In four weeks the two men and their volunteer helpers had built a 20-mile road, as good as most of the uncertain highways in Laos. They also completed the long-awaited dam. Except for Ed Hogan, who wisely kept his silence rather than face the sea of red tape and paperwork that would be required to explain the unorthodox project, no one in the U.S. mission in Vientiane learned that the road and dam had joined steel plow tips and row planting as lasting evidences of American largesse in the Plaine des Jarres area.

The largesse, however, was running dry. With the evacuation of most American civilians from the area and a tightening of American pursestrings in Vientiane, ostensibly to pressure the Lao Government into resolving its political crisis, the flow of money from AID to the two-man mission in Lhat Houang ceased.

"We're going to have to fire all our local helpers and stop work. We can't even pay token wages," said Dick Bowman.

"Like hell we are," said Edgar. "You just wait right here and I'll get us some money. We ain't firing nobody."

With Tseng at the wheel of the jeep, Buell drove quickly to Khang Khay, where the seven U.S. military advisers lived.

"Colonel," he said to the leader of the group, "I want to cash a check."

"For Christ's sake, Pop, quit calling me colonel," said the colonel. "You know you're supposed to call me mister. And I can't cash a check for you. It's against regulations to cash checks for civilians."

"Well, Mister Colonel, it seems like we's all civilians up here right now. But since you got regulations, I'll tell you what I'll do. You know that bulldozer me and Dick has down at Lhat Sen?"

"Sure, Pop. I also know it isn't your bulldozer."

"Well, we got the keys and the fuel for it, so it's as good as ours. I reckon you'd like to use it, wouldn't you?"

"As a matter of fact, we would like to use that bulldozer. We want to build up some revetments around here. These Lao troops won't even dig foxholes."

"I reckon you can use it now and then, Mister Colonel. But it's gonna be awful hard to find the keys if I don't get this here check cashed. Think you can handle it?"

"You win, Pop. Give me that check. And, for Christ's sake, quit calling me colonel."

"Yes, sir, mister. Dick'll run the dozer for you whenever you need it."

In time the colonel cashed more than \$2,000 worth of Buell's checks, all drawn against his retirement account. Each week, as soberly as a government paymaster, the bowlegged farmer set up a small table in front of the I.V.S. headquarters and paid every construction worker, every I.V.S. helper, and every other recipient of U.S. aid in full. For three months, through the bizarre financial stream that meandered from Lhat Houang, through the United States Army, the Edgar Buell retirement fund was the only source of American foreign aid in northeast Laos. Before the year was out, Pop had spent \$7,000 of his own money to meet U.S. Government obligations. Buell never asked for, or received, a reimbursement for the private investment that kept the AID program going in Xieng Khouang Province. When he completed Form 1040 for the U.S. Internal Revenue Service the following year, he even forgot to take the private investment in his country's good reputation as a tax deduction.

When Edgar left the colonel's small office at Khang Khay, he found Tseng standing beside the jeep, talking to a diminutive Lao dressed in a misassorted collection of military clothing and combat boots too large for his tiny feet. The man was four feet eleven inches tall, but strongly built, with broad shoulders that swelled through a tattered military T-shirt, and arms that bulged around the Thompson sub-machine gun he carried. In contrast to this rather forbidding appearance below the neck, the young Lao's dusky freckled face was almost beatific and broke immediately into a smile of great expectation as Buell approached.

"I have heard much about Tan Pop. When I saw you come here, I waited with Tseng to meet you," he said in carefully articulated English. "You are a great man. One day I will work for you."

"Whoa, just a minute," said Buell, returning the happy smile. "Who's this?" he asked Tseng.

"He is Thongsar Boupha, Tan Pop. He is a Buddhist priest who has left the temple. Now he helps the Americans teach Royal Army soldiers how to shoot guns."

"I don't like the guns or the killing," said Thongsar. "I want to see a big piece of peace for all the peoples of Laos. But I must help to make the victory against the red-eyed Communist rascals who only make war."

"Is that why you're not a priest no more?" asked Pop.

"No, Tan Pop. For seventeen years I was a *bonze* for my Lord Buddha. Many priests see the beautiful fairy girls in Bangkok or Vientiane and say, 'Oh, my dear Lord Buddha won't mind if I have the warm comforts of the beautiful girl once in a while,' and they have the sex and say 'No matter.' But I can't do like that, absolutely. My Lord Buddha said a priest don't have the sex. So when I can't resist any more my strong feelings for the beautiful girls, I must be honest and truthful to my Lord Buddha. So I quit being a priest."

Each time Buell visited the small American military mission at Khang Khay he talked to Thongsar, who laughed quickly and easily and liked to play practical jokes. One day Thongsar unsmilingly handed him a yellow jungle fruit that looked like an oversized grapefruit.

"What's this for, Thongsar?"

"I have saved it especially for you because you are a great man," said Thongsar solemnly.

Buell, pardonably proud of his growing reputation as a doer of good works, was so touched by the gesture that he glowed. To show his gratitude, he cut the fruit open and took a large sip of its juice. His mouth puckered as if pulled tight by a drawstring, and all the muscles of his dour face contracted.

Thongsar laughed at the sight. Buell, at first shocked by the foul

juice of his gift, then angered, then infected by Thongsar's boisterous good nature, laughed, too.

"My Lord Buddha says absolutely that the great man and the humble man are all one man when they eat the sour fruit," said Thongsar. From that day on, whenever overweening pride in his accomplishments infected the sentimental little farmer from Indiana, his mouth involuntarily puckered, and he remembered the fruit and Thongsar's remark about humility. It worked both ways, for Pop never was awed by any other great personage, either.

"I guess you was tryin' to tell me that no matter how big a man gits, he still has to put his pants on one leg at a time," Buell said to Thongsar.

"That's a good one, Tan Pop," said Thongsar, still laughing. "Most Lao men wear sarongs."

Thongsar Boupba was a city-born Lao from Champassak in the south of Laos. When he was eight years old, at the end of World War II, his father and mother, along with many Lao, resisted the return of French soldiers to Laos. They were killed in a skirmish with French troops. The orphan boy was taken in by the orange-robed *bonzes* of a local temple, and soon he began to study with them. By the time he was twelve, he had passed the verbal examinations of priesthood. His tutors sent him to Bangkok, where he won a rare place in the Marble Temple, an honor even for an elderly *bonze*, and he continued his largely theological studies. Within a few years Thongsar took up a wandering pilgrimage, living as all *bonzes* do on the spontaneous offerings of the faithful, whose women arise at dawn each day to kneel at the roadsides with bowls of rice, nuts, and vegetables for passing priests. He walked through Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. In Burma he remained for a while, attending to his priestly duty of contemplation and working strenuously, as time permitted, with a Japanese judo instructor left behind in the wake of the war. By the time his wanderings came to an end and he surrendered to the enormous attraction of the young female laity, Thongsar had mastered black belt judo and twelve languages, among them the tribal tongues of the Shan of Burma, the Meo and the Lao Thung of Laos, and Japanese, French, and English. He was a

brilliant student. Although he had never in his priestly life touched a gun, he was the best weapons instructor at Khang Khay. He also remained the best Buddhist, the local *bonzes* notwithstanding. Except for an occasional fling with a willing young lady, permissible now that he had left the priesthood, he lived by the precepts of his faith, never taking meat or stimulating drinks. While he taught other men to shoot, he never aimed his guns at animals or people.

"What makes you think you'll work for me some day?" asked Buell.

"My Lord has told me," said Thongsar. "Now is not the time. He will tell me when my time comes."

Although Edgar remained as close as ever to Chung, he found himself more and more in the company of Tseng as the fall dry season progressed. With the good weather, which left the sky so darkly crystalline each night that even stars in the Milky Way's cloudy mass assumed the individuality of paint dots in a pointillist landscape, it was understandable that Chung excused himself nightly to visit his beloved Mi Si.

Tseng, too, had an overwhelming love that dominated his private life and, like Chung, he shared it proudly with Tan Pop. Tseng's father, a true product of his mixed Sino-Meo parentage, had retained his mother's Chinese customs and taste for commerce while living among his father's independent mountain tribesmen in North Vietnam, not far east of Chung's ancestral home at Nong Het. In time he married a Chinese woman and became a petty merchant, like his mother's ancestors, but he remained with his father's Meo. Thus his son Tseng grew within two cultures. Tseng adapted instinctively to rigid Meo standards when he was among his grandfather's people in the mountains, as well as to the more cosmopolitan life of the small town where he attended school. When he was twelve years old, his father died, and Tseng became the head of his still young mother's household. The natural fraternal love he held for his three small sisters, whose happy innocent faces descended like three risers of a carpeted stairway beneath the neatly trimmed bowl haircuts that Tseng applied, turned gradually to parental love. To each of them he was no longer brother, but father. He had no taste for his father's small trade in cloth and utensils, however, so he moved the family to Xieng

Khouang city, where his mother worked as a seamstress, and he found a job with the Americans of I.V.S. As he learned the English language, he became invaluable to the small AID mission and grew as close to Dick Bowman as Chung had grown to Edgar Buell. But in the evenings, like any good father, he basked in the warmth of his family.

There was another young Chinese boy who worked as a servant and handyman for the I.V.S. mission. His name was Wang and, perhaps because he lacked the emotionalism of Tseng's Meo heritage, he was constantly at odds with his compatriot. In the evenings he drank *lau lau* and played teasingly with a pair of easygoing Lao girls in Lhat Houang. Because he knew that it made Tseng uncomfortable, he sometimes brought the girls to the yard of the I.V.S. house and taunted him to join them. "What good are the females in your house?" he would cry. Tseng ignored Wang's taunts and went home to his family. Frequently he took Dick and Pop along to his small house in Xieng Khouang. There, all three romped joyfully with the delightful sisters, who were now twelve, thirteen, and fourteen years old. Aside from helping Dick—learning in the process the rudiments of veterinary medicine, as well as the operation of heavy farm equipment and the bulldozer—Tseng had no other love than this all-consuming passion for his family. He told Pop that his mother and sisters were more dear to him than life itself. He was proud to share them with his American friends.

Chung, meanwhile, showed an increasing anxiety and impatience to finish each day's work so that he could leave his American companions. Acutely aware of the exquisite pleasures of courtship, which Chung had described to him after the first night with Mi Si, Pop put Chung's impatience down to simple lover's heat and excused his helper's abrupt departures and frequent late arrivals in the mornings. On the weekends, however, it was a different story, and to Pop it made no sense at all. Freed to spend an entire forty-eight hours with Mi Si if he wished, Chung instead planned elaborate hunting trips in the mountains surrounding the Plaine des Jarres, and he asked Pop to accompany him on these all-male excursions.

After many primitive safaris, each to a wholly different mountain

area and with an almost completely changed cast of Meo hunters whom Chung gathered in small groups from many villages, he asked Pop to join a tiger hunt. They journeyed to the southeast as far as they could go in a jeep one Friday night and climbed to a Meo village, where they spent the night with the village *taesing*. The next morning, more than one hundred strange Meo from a dozen different villages gathered at the foot of the mountain, dressed in floppy black jackets and pantaloons and carrying crossbows and flintlock muskets. Pop brought a 30-30 Marlin, which he had borrowed from Dick Bowman. The awed Meo assured him that with such a weapon he surely would make the kill.

After stationing Buell behind a stump on a small hillock overlooking the jungled valley, the army of Meo hunters, accompanied by a disconsolate pack of shaggy dogs whose perpetually frowning faces reflected misery even when their tails wagged, fanned out through the forest growth to beat the bushes. One of the huge, tawny Asian tigers that abound in the jungles of Laos had been spotted there by the villagers two days before. Only that morning, fresh tiger droppings had been found within fifty yards of Edgar's tree-stump hunting blind. By three o'clock in the afternoon, the yelping of the dogs had become as routine as the background hum of engines on a racetrack, and Pop's daydreams were interrupted only by the occasional sizzling thump of a musket explosion or the quiet wheeze of a crossbow arrow in flight. But, relaxed as he was, he was alert to the movements below him.

A bamboo thicket parted abruptly at the edge of a small clearing three hundred yards away. Buell responded immediately to his first tiger. It stood three feet high and stretched seven feet from nose to haunches. The animal's striped, black-tipped tail, almost white in underlying color in contrast to the tawny, almost orange cast of its body fur, twitched nervously as it paused to sniff. Because he sat in the lee of the gentle breeze that whiffed across the valley, Pop was confident the beast was unaware of him. Gently he lifted the Marlin and aimed. The tiger, shielded by the fickle wind from the terrifying odor of his executioner, trotted toward Edgar's stump. Pop slowly squeezed the trigger. At a range of thirty-five yards the big cat looked

as if it could spring to the stump in a single bound. He fired. As an ex-cavalryman and rural rodent hunter who used a gun as casually as a golfer employs a putter, Buell was a superb shot. His aim at the animal's shoulder was steady and he knew it had to be true because he had zeroed the gun's sights the day before. At the sound of the loud crack of the rifle, however, the tiger broke into a dead run and disappeared into the forest.

"I could have bawled," Pop said to Chung as they pushed through the jungle an hour later, heading toward the cacaphonic sounds of the yowling dogs, which now were concentrated a quarter of a mile away. They found the beast slumped near the trunk of a towering hardwood tree, its bleeding carcass surrounded by laughing Meo hunters and a ring of excited but still doleful-looking dogs. The tiger had been brought down, finally, by a Meo musket, firing an indeterminate glob of iron ball and wadding from a distance of fifty yards. When they examined the body it contained the shaft of a bamboo arrow and eight bullet holes, one of which was Edgar Buell's true shot to the shoulder. The powerful beast had not even flinched when it was hit by the heavy Marlin slug.

That night all of the hunters gathered in the village and celebrated the kill with repeated draughts of *lau lau* that left Pop drowsy and ready for another night's sleep on the elevated bamboo guest pallet in the *taesing's* house. Before retiring, however, he noticed that Chung was not drinking. The sturdy Meo boy had spent the entire evening moving casually from group to group among the tribal hunters, talking earnestly to each of them. Frequently he used the name "Vang Pao." Buell privately wondered what Chung was talking about, but wearily dismissed the question from his mind and went to sleep.

Three nights later, after watching Chung depart from the I.V.S. house, Pop journeyed alone to Mi Si's village to visit with his friends there and to pay his respects to the young lovers, whose passions, he expected, should by now have cooled enough to permit normal social intercourse. As he arrived, Mi Si greeted him with an engaging grin as if encountering, unexpectedly, a long-lost friend. Her welcome was followed by a gentle reproof.

"You have made Chung work too many nights for you, Tan Pop.

I see him so seldom since my father agreed to the marriage that I wonder if he still loves me."

Buell tried to hide his surprise.

"He loves you as much as ever, Mi Si," he said. "I guess he's just been busier than usual since the other Americans were evacuated."

"Do you know how much Chung loves America, Tan Pop?" she asked. "He told me that one day we will go to your country so he can study. I am studying, too, so I will be ready. Chung has begun to teach me English, but I cannot speak it yet. I think if he spent more time with me, he would be happier and I would learn faster."

A few days after Thanksgiving, Pop spoke sharply to Chung for the first time since their friendship began.

"You're tryin' to pull the wool over someone's eyes, Chung," he admonished. "I don't know what you're up to, but it's makin' me nervous and it's breakin' your girlfriend's heart."

"Oh, Mi Si shouldn't worry," Chung laughed in response. "She knows I love only her. There is no one else. I am very busy, Tan Pop. Mi Si will understand."

"What do you mean, you're busy? Out every night, and God knows where or why."

"I have much to do, Tan Pop. Most nights I go to the restaurant. I'm sorry, but I cannot explain now."

Chung left on foot and headed toward the market place of Lhat Houang. A week later he asked Buell to accompany him. They arrived at the small restaurant and sat at a table eating glutinous rice balls as they had many times before. Soon they were joined by Major Vang Pao and two other Meo men whose clothes were traditional but whose bearing seemed as military as the major's own. Chung introduced them. The most militant was a distant relative named Mua Shen Fu. The other was a Meo policeman named Tu Yeah. For a time the five men talked aimlessly about the weather and the increasing dustiness of their surroundings, now that the dry season had arrived. Then Vang Pao warmly clasped Buell's hand and nodded affirmatively to Chung.

"Tan Pop," Chung began, "in a short time you have become the only

good American friend of the Meo people. It is time for us to share our secret with you."

"I'd be pretty dumb if I didn't know something was goin' on with you people, Chung, but I ain't been able to figure out what it is," Pop said. "This restaurant is some kind of communications center for you, I can see that. And all them weekend hunting trips we been takin' lately has gotta mean something, too, 'cause we been goin' to a different place with different people every time. And whenever I hear you talkin' to 'em you keep mentioning the name of Major Vang Pao here. Now he looks to me like a man who means business, so I know you'uns is up to somethin'. What is it?"

"Not any American knows, Tan Pop, not even the military people who work with Major Vang Pao. Not your C.I.A. people, either. Only you will know, and only you must know. You must not yet tell the others. We tell you now because we believe that you will be the American who will help us in the future."

Chung explained then that with the continued political bickering in Laos, the Communist Vietminh had reinforced their Pathet Lao dependents in Sam Neua and parts of Xieng Khouang Provinces. Moreover, Captain Kong Le's revolutionary neutralists were now on the verge of a shooting war with Royal Army rightists intent on recapturing the government. Major Vang Pao had become convinced that open warfare involving all three factions was imminent and that it would center in northeast Laos, where most of the Meo lived.

"The Royal Army is weak and will not stand against the Communists, Tan Pop," Chung said. "They will collapse, and this entire area will fall quickly."

"If that happens, what good am I gonna be to you?" Buell asked. "I can't stay here if the Communists take over, and I won't be no help to you if I'm evacuated out of here."

"You will be the only man on the outside who knows what the Meo are doing and where we are," Chung said, "and you can help by getting the Americans to support us. We have a plan. We will stay in the mountains and fight the Communists."

Months before, Chung explained, Major Vang Pao had drawn up a scheme to unify many of the Meo tribes in Xieng Khouang Province

and to draw them together. When the time came, they would form a guerrilla army that would encircle the Plaine des Jarres. The moment the enemy showed signs of seizing the Plaine, 70,000 Meo would abandon 200 scattered villages and trek by foot to seven preselected mountains. Each of these was strategically located to cut off any further enemy advance and to threaten his supply lines. From this perimeter around the Plaine, the Meo would harass the enemy and eventually drive him back to the borders of North Vietnam. Major Vang Pao would lead them from a place called Padong, not far to the south.

With great care, Chung pinpointed each of the strategic retreats on a map for the American farmer. Buell thereafter kept his silence and went about his normal activities at Lhat Houang, overseeing the construction of the technical school, whose final building, a dormitory, was nearing completion. He also operated Mary Jane's old medical aid station at the I.V.S. house. One day, while his veterinarian colleague was in Vientiane on a brief leave, he faced an emergency. The wife of the I.V.S. cook, pregnant now for almost seven months, complained of abdominal pains and bleeding.

"Git her in bed," he ordered the cook. "Damned if I know what's happening, but it don't look good."

Urgently he called Vientiane and got Mary Jane on the radio.

"I pulled out plenty of calves in my day," he told her, "but I never saw one start comin' like this. What'll I do?"

The nurse explained in medical terms the process and the problems of premature birth. "It may be *placenta previa* or abnormal fetal rejection, but it's probably simple miscarriage."

"Should I stick my arm in after it and pull it out?" Pop inquired.

"No, no, Pop," she screamed over the radio. "Let's go through that again." She explained again, this time in barnyard language, and urged Buell to assist the mother in holding the baby to full term if she could. "Elevate her feet and keep her in bed."

As Pop prepared to go off the air, the five other field stations on the network clicked on, one at a time, to thank Mary Jane for clarifying the bewildering medical explanation. "Appreciate it more than you know, Mary Jane," radioed Bill Wimpish, a brawny construction

engineer stationed in Savannakhet far to the south. "I think I got a case like that down here, too."

While the unlicensed rural practitioner made his rounds among both Pathet Lao and Royal Government villages in November and early December, events in Vientiane and elsewhere in Laos conspired to prove that Chung and Major Vang Pao were correct in their prediction of imminent war. Kong Le had been harassed from the east of Vientiane by right-wing troops and had withdrawn most of his forces to Wattay airport on the western edge of town. Prince Souvanna Phouma, despairing over the abysmal response of American-supported right-wing forces to his overtures for a coalition government, and feeling double double-crossed because the U.S. Embassy had lamely withdrawn its support of his neutralist government, went into exile in Cambodia. One of his cabinet ministers leaped in the Prince's absence to sign a formal agreement of alliance between Kong Le and the Communists in Hanoi. And the first open manifestation of the alliance appeared a day later at Wattay airport as red-faced Americans, who continued to use the field, watched. A fleet of Russian Ilyushin transport planes arrived from Hanoi bearing food, ammunition, and 105-millimeter howitzers for Kong Le's small army. In addition to their uneasy Soviet pilots, the planes carried crews of North Vietnamese artillerymen to make up for Kong Le's lack of trained gunners.

The first shots were fired two days later, on December 13, and for 76 hours a fight that was unlike any previous engagement in the formerly gentle civil war raged through the capital as right-wing troops pressed in from the east. Artillery shells and tracer bullets arched overhead, whole buildings exploded, and fighting broke out in the streets as Kong Le's troops fell back toward their airport headquarters. Once again Mary Jane's plaster walls were pimpled by bullets, and once again she huddled on the floor unscathed. But 340 other people, almost all of them Lao civilians, died before Kong Le abandoned the airport and withdrew, with all of his men and equipment, to the north.

At the town of Ban Ban, just northeast of the Plaine des Jarres, Pathet Lao forces, rallied by Prince Souphanouvong, prepared to link

up with the rebellious neutralists and seize everything that Pop Buell and Dick Bowman had been working for.

The Ilyushins, old World War II transports that were dented from hard use and bore the same tail numbers as a fleet of Russian planes seen working in the Congo the year before, dropped the first wave of Kong Le's paratroopers near the Plaine a few days later. Edgar was the first American to encounter them. It was rather late in the evening when a runner from a small village in the hills south of Lhat Houang trotted, panting, into the yard of the I.V.S. house. Chung talked to him.

"A pregnant woman in his village is unable to expel her baby," he told Edgar. "She has been in labor for twenty-three hours. He was sent to fetch you. They fear she is dying."

With Chung and a fourteen-year-old girl named Chua, who had been working as an untutored assistant to Mary Jane St. Marie, Pop led the exhausted messenger to the jeep, and Chung steered it rapidly along the rutted road to the troubled village. The runner led them to a one-room, lodge-like hut, and Buell hurried to the open earth hearth at the center. A young woman, her legs splayed wide apart, lay still beside the fire, dressed only in a dirty cotton vest. Her globular belly was smeared with white powder. The village shaman, emitting a blubbering chant through a spray of spittle from his lips, squatted beside her. He paused, as if punctuating his lip-smacking ritual, and groped with his right hand in a dirty wooden bucket filled with the sticky sap of a tree. Then he firmly slapped a handful of the unsanitary pitch on the woman's pudendum and resumed his chant.

Ignoring the stench of the medicine man's ablutions which, by custom, imbued the newborn with a favorable link to good spirits, Buell knelt beside the young woman and placed an ear against her encrusted abdomen. He heard a gurgling and what sounded like a faint heartbeat. Her baby was alive. Quickly, he pressed an ear against the woman's breast. She was dead. Without hesitation he grabbed a pan of boiling water from the fire and poured it over the dead woman's encrusted groin and belly, motioning to Chua to wipe away the putrescence plastered there by the shaman.

"Chua," he called urgently, "don't pay no attention to the medicine man. Try to get the baby out. It's still alive."

"How?" she cried. "I don't know."

"Just reach in," he said. "I know it don't sound right, but it's the only way. The woman's dead."

Blindly, Chua did as Pop directed, but she had neither the experience nor the strength to succeed. Buell pushed her aside and performed the crude delivery himself, just as he had done countless times with calves on his Indiana farm.

"Git me a pan of cold water, Chung, quick," he shouted as he lifted a tiny boy from its dead mother and cut and tied its umbilical cord. In less than a minute Chung returned with a large pan of cold water. Pop dipped the baby. It gasped. Then the infant emitted a faint cry and began breathing.

Five minutes later, as Buell scrubbed his hands and the medicine man continued his doleful chant, the child joined its mother in death. The shaman stopped his ritual as Chua placed the dead baby boy beside his unfortunate parent. The shaman glared at Edgar across the dim glow of the fire. Around bodies, a circle of relatives and village women averted their eyes and remained silent.

"I'm sorry," said Edgar quietly. "It was the only thing I knew to do. The baby would surely have died. I tried. I'm sorry." He stumbled toward the exit as Chung translated. No one responded. Chung followed Buell to the jeep. "I asked Chua to stay behind," he said. "Perhaps she can explain to them."

"I should have left well enough alone," Buell sighed as they drove away from the village. "My God, I should have left her alone. They looked like they was gonna kill us. They hate me, Chung. God, what a fool I am."

"No, Tan Pop. You did what you had to do. You tried. For a while the boy lived. Tomorrow they will not hate you. Not even the shaman, for now they cannot blame him."

Buell stared morosely at the shadows of trees and jungle growth that lined the narrow, twisting road through the hills. He could not shake from his mind the vivid picture of the wriggling living child as he raised it from its dead mother.

Suddenly he saw a quick sparkling, like a dozen fireflies simultaneously triggering their love glow, from the dense undergrowth of a hillock that sloped upward beside the road. Instantly the bright sparks were driven from his consciousness by urgent buzzings, as if supersonic bees were hurtling past his ears, trailing the rapid pop, pop, pop of shockwaves in their wake. Gunfire. The jeep swerved and slid into a ditch beside the road.

"Out, Tan Pop, quick, they've hit us," shouted Chung. They slid out of the tilting vehicle and scurried away from it up the gully, then lay flat.

"This just ain't my night," Buell muttered.

"Listen," whispered Chung. "They've stopped. They're running away from the road, up the hill."

The two men waited quietly in the ditch and listened to the diminishing sounds as their ambushers hurried away. When the sounds faded entirely, they returned to the jeep.

"They was either damned poor shots or they was just tryin' to scare us, and far's I'm concerned, they succeeded," said Buell. "Look here. All they done to the jeep was shoot out the rear tires."

They slowly drove the disabled vehicle back to Lhat Houang and retired. Buell could not sleep. Not even the frightening exhilaration of the ambush could drive the image of his failure with the dead mother from his mind.

After a sleepless night he drove to Khang Khay and reported the ambush to Colonel Sarith, the Lao Army commander whose headquarters adjoined the American advisers' compound. The colonel laughed.

"You make a mistake, Mister Buell," said the Lao colonel in soft French-accented English. "There are no enemy there. They could not be Kong Le's men. *Bopinyan*. It does not matter. Perhaps you imagine it, yes?"

"Hell, no," said Buell as he stalked away toward the office of his banker, the chief of the advisory detachment.

"I think it's gonna git rough around here pretty damn quick and we better enjoy ourselves while we can, Colonel," he said to the ill-disguised American officer. "Dick's comin' back today and tonight I

and Dick is coming up here for a party. It's Christmas Eve, and it'll be a cold day in hell when a Buell don't celebrate Christmas."

"Dammit, Pop, quit calling me colonel," said the colonel.

Christmas, traditionally, was the only important holiday celebrated by the Buells of Indiana, and its onset now briefly drove the tragedy of the night before from his mind. It was the one time of the year when his father, Elson Buell, abandoned his spartan ways and swept all six of his children and their mother, Clara Buell, along in days of open gaiety and gift-giving. Edgar remembered, above all, his first Christmas with Malorene and their infant son Howard. It was during the peak of the Depression in 1936, when crops that had seemed promising in the spring were not worth harvesting by autumn. They were almost broke.

"Malorene," he said one day in November, "I'm goin' up to the bank and borrow fifty dollars."

"Why?" she asked. "We can make it through the winter all right, and there's nothing we need on the farm until spring."

"It ain't livin' money we need," he said. "It's Christmas money."

"Edgar," said his slender, attractive brunette wife, "we can get through Christmas on love, the same as lots of other people do. We don't have to give presents. The folks will understand."

"Malorene, the Buells always had a good Christmas, no matter how poor Dad was. As long as I'm a Buell, this house is always going to have a good Christmas."

"But the Edon National Bank doesn't loan money just so people can buy Christmas presents."

"I'm going to tell the banker, Mr. Mauerhan, that we need the fifty dollars for a new calf. He'll give me money for a calf. He don't ever have to know that it's for Christmas."

"Edgar, that's a lie," said Malorene. "You can't do it!"

"We gotta have Christmas," said Edgar, and he left the house.

Art Mauerhan is dead now, but he remembered all his life that bitter cold day in late November when the awkward young farmer entered the bank at Edon, Ohio, not far from Metz, Indiana, and stomped the snow from his boots.

"What can I do for you, Edgar?" he called.

Buell grimly tugged a wool cap from his head, and his face flushed.

"Mr. Maurerhan, I come in here to tell you I need fifty dollars for a new calf," he said. "That ain't true. I was gonna lie to get that fifty dollars because I and Malorene needs it for Christmas. We ain't gonna have Christmas this year if I don't get some money."

Maurerhan had dealt with Elson Buell and his two oldest sons, Elmer and Emory, for twenty years. They had never lied to him, and they had never delayed repayment of a loan. He frowned.

"I probably would have given you the money if you had lied, Edgar," he said. "Sooner or later, though, I suppose I would have found out that you didn't buy a calf. I wouldn't have any choice then. You'd never get another dime out of this bank."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Maurerhan."

"I guess it just isn't in a Buell to tell a lie," said the banker. "I'll lend you your Christmas money. And any time you need to, you come on in here, Edgar. You've got all the credit here you'll ever want."

Malorene was happy when he told her what had happened. "Still," she said, "I don't think we need that much money for Christmas."

A few days later he was working on a pasture fence with Rollie Fraley, a rawboned, undernourished, and impoverished Kentuckian who had migrated to Indiana with his wife and six children and did odd jobs in exchange for a small plot of ground and a shack on the Buell property. When there was heavy work to do, Edgar paid Rollie Fraley \$1.50 a day, which was twice the going rate for day labor on the farms of Steuben County at that time. It was a happy arrangement because it gave the Kentuckian a chance at a new life in better farm country than he had left, and it gave Buell an extra hand on the farm when he needed it, which was often. Finished with the fence, Edgar went into house, where he found Malorene standing by the kitchen window, deeply engrossed in something out by the barn.

As she turned to him there were tears in her eyes.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"It's the Fraley kids," she said, pointing to the window. "Two of them are out there by the silo gathering up silage."

"Playin', I guess," he said.

"Edgar," said Malorene quietly, "they're going to take it home and eat it. That's all they've got to eat. Silage and scraps." Silently, she cried.

Buell took his wife in his arms, and in that almost magical closeness that true lovers sometimes feel, Christmas began.

"You was right, honey," he whispered. "We don't need that much money for Christmas. We're gonna make Christmas for the Fraleys this year. Mr. Maurhan don't know it, and he never will, but that's why he gave me that fifty dollars."

For the next twenty-three years Edgar Buell put aside part of his farm earnings, which in time became quite substantial, and set out each of the four nights before Christmas along the macadam and dirt roads of Steuben County, Indiana, to play Santa Claus to needy children. All around the county today you can find young adults who remember Edgar's Christmas visits and his parting words after leaving toys and candy.

"May the good Lord be just a little good to you," he said.

That night at Khang Khay, Laos, the nine Americans pooled their drinking supply, nine assorted quarts of bourbon and Scotch for themselves and their Lao guests.

"Let's drink her all down," said Pop.

"Not on your life," said the colonel. "We'll celebrate Christmas with three bottles and save six for New Year's Eve."

Reluctantly the party agreed to the colonel's prudence, and at midnight Christmas was greeted with relative sobriety by all. It was just as well, for Pop was awakened early in the morning. At the door of the house stood the messenger who had come for him two nights before. With him was the father of the woman who had died in childbirth. Together with Chung the men asked him to return to the unhappy village. There, to his surprise, they were the honored guests at a three-hour breakfast feast.

"We honor you, Tan Pop, because you cared enough about us to come when we called," said the father. "My daughter was dead before you came. You tried to save the baby, and you brought it a small piece of life before it died. We love you because you cared."

Uncertainly, Edgar began to shed his mixed feelings of fear and

guilt. From the jeep he extracted a large bag of hard candy, and as he passed among the village children offering handfuls of the colorfully wrapped sweets, he said, "May the good Lord be just a little good to you." It was a perfect Buell Christmas.

On December 30, the war began in earnest. Kong Le's main force moved quickly in from the west under a barrage of artillery fire accurately dropped upon the surprised Colonel Sarith's positions by North Vietnamese gunners. Pathet Lao and Vietminh troops pressed down from Ban Ban in the north. Sarith's men panicked and ran. In a last-ditch effort to reinforce them, right-wing paratroopers were dropped nearby. But they panicked, too, abandoning their parachutes and equipment to join the fleeing Royal Army infantrymen. In 200 scattered villages of Xieng Khouang Province, 70,000 Meo tribesmen gathered their possessions and began walking toward the seven friendly mountains around the Plaine.

Buell and Bowman, isolated in Lhat Houang, abandoned their prosaic chores on the technical school, which lacked only a few finishing touches before its scheduled dedication on New Year's Day. Hopefully, they brought the I.V.S. Land Rover and jeeps to the assistance of the few defenders of the Plaine who had not fled in terror. In one nightmarish dash, Edgar and Tseng barreled up the road toward Ban Ban with the policeman, Tu Yeah, who hoped to rally a band of Meo farmers, like Minutemen, to cut off the Pathet Lao advance. But it was too late for such heroics. They were driven back by gunfire. By New Year's Eve, Khang Khay was all but abandoned. Amid sounds of gunfire from all directions, Pop drove to Xieng Khouang city with Tseng. Together they entered Tseng's house.

"Tell your mother to pack what she needs. She and the girls can evacuate with the Meo to Padong. They'll be safe there. When things settle down a little, we can get 'em down to Vientiane," Pop said.

"The girls want to be with me, Tan Pop," said Tseng. "My mother wants to remain here. But I am afraid that if she does, the enemy will learn that I work for the Americans, and they will kill her."

Tseng argued animatedly in Chinese with his mother and sisters

while Buell waited impatiently, listening to the gunfire outside. Suddenly Tseng's sisters broke into tears, and all three clutched at him.

"I wish to stay with them, Tan Pop. But my mother insists that the enemy will kill me if they find me here. I will go with you. My mother refuses to take the girls with the Meo. She says it will be too dangerous for them, more dangerous than remaining here. They will stay."

Tseng's final farewell to his family was solemn, as if he never expected to see them again. The three small girls, stair-stepped beside their stoically tearless mother, stood in the doorway and cried as the Land Rover drove away.

Tseng turned into the gate of the I.V.S. compound just as Chung and Dick started out in one of the jeeps. The second jeep was parked in the yard. Gunfire erupted close by.

"I've pulled the radio, Pop," Dick called. "Vientiane didn't know how bad the situation is up here. They're sending planes to evacuate us. Let's get to the airport, quick."

"Have you seen Mi Si?" Pop yelled to Chung.

"We said goodbye yesterday," Chung called back. "She is walking to Padong with the rest of the Meo."

"Wait a minute, Tseng," Pop said, and ran toward the house.

"For Christ's sake, Pop, stop," Dick shouted after him. "The enemy is on the other side of the stream behind the house. They're shooting."

"I hear 'em," Pop called, and ducked into the house.

In the kitchen at the back he found the cook quietly huddled over his wife, who lay on a cot with her legs raised, still holding in her womb the child who almost had appeared prematurely the month before.

"Can you drive a jeep?" Buell asked the cook in Lao.

"Yes, Tan Pop," said the cook.

"Then take the extra jeep and get her to the airport. And be careful you don't bounce her around too much."

Outside he helped the cook put his wife in the jeep and waited until they eased gently over the bumps in the yard and drove north toward Phong Savan.

"Let's go," he cried as he hopped into the Land Rover beside Tseng.

He looked back as they passed through the gate. Enemy soldiers had crossed the stream and were firing from the outbuilding behind the house. He couldn't tell whether they were Kong Le's paratroopers, Pathet Lao, or North Vietnamese. It didn't matter.

At the airport, Dick already stood beside the open door of a C-47 when Pop and Tseng arrived. With a grim smile on his face he reached calmly down from his towering height and methodically lifted frightened Royal Army soldiers from the crowd of women and children who were clamoring to board the flight to safety. Pop helped him drive the panicked soldiers away from the plane and made sure the cook's pregnant wife was safely inside before the door closed.

The American military advisers, who had retreated to the airport after they were abandoned by their Royal Army students at Khang Khay, struggled vainly to set up three howitzers that had been brought in by one of the evacuation planes from Vientiane.

"Where's Thongsar?" Pop called.

"He's walking out," said one of the soldiers. "He stuck with us until it was time to go. When we left, he said he'd rather make it on his own."

A mortar round spewed a cloud of flying dirt thirty yards from one of the planes. Puffs of smoke appeared at the far end of the runway, and Buell and the others watched advancing enemy soldiers raise their rifles as the first evacuation plane took off.

"Blow those guns and let's go," the colonel yelled. Down each barrel dropped a hand grenade and as the breeches exploded behind them the men raced for the last plane from the Plaine des Jarres.

"Are you taking these guys with you?" the colonel indicated Chung and Tseng as he shouted over the noise of the airplane's engines.

"If they don't go, I don't go," Pop replied.

"Let's go, then," cried the colonel. As the plane took off, they could see a line of Kong Le's soldiers, dressed in paratroopers' camouflage suits, raising their rifles at the end of the airstrip. Curiously, none of them seemed to be firing.

(A few years later Buell learned why, when, under happier circumstances, he met then General Kong Le. "That was our last mortar round that hit the airstrip, and we were out of ammunition," he

explained. "You could have held us off at that point with a .22 rifle.")

In the evacuation plane, now droning safely southward toward Vientiane, Pop looked reproachfully at the colonel.

"Where's them six bottles of whiskey, Colonel? This is New Year's Eve."

"I guess Prince Souphanouvong just added our booze to his private stock, Pop. We left 'em in Khang Khay."

"You'd make a lousy poker player, Colonel. Never hold back your chips when you got a good hand. I coulda told you on Christmas that we was playin' our last good hand right then. From now on, boy, when you got it, drink it."

Chapter 7

As the proverb said, "a time and a tide wait for no men at all." We now must help or assist these people as good as we can and as soon as we can go to help. Because these people are still loving their own free properties, their own free homeland, their own free idea and their own freedom and they still do not like the pressing governing of Communism in this wide area of the human's world . . . The world knows well that we are generous, kind, free, friendly, faithful and thoughtful people.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupba

"I WAS pretty scared when I got in this airplane," Edgar said to the young Thai paratroop officer in the seat beside him. "And I'm more scared now that it's time to get out."

The ancient C-46 cargo plane vibrated like a lawn mower as its engines strained to lift it above the next range of mountains, and Buell stared out the open doorway at the jungle growth passing by below. A red light blinked on over the cabin door.

"Three minutes," said the phlegmatic Thai. "Stand up. I'll check your straps."

Buell steadied himself against the rattling side of the ship as the young officer slowly ran his hands over the parachute. He tightened both of the legstraps that looped through the farmer's crotch and around his hips to form a seat in the harness of webbing. "Keep these snug," he muttered. "Don't want to castrate yourself, do you?"

Edgar paled, adding another apprehension to the already terrifying

prospect of stepping out of the old airplane 3,000 feet above a high mountain valley he had never seen before. The Thai paratroop officer was the only skilled parachutist they could find in Vientiane. He cheerfully had volunteered to teach Edgar the rudiments of jumping and to push him safely out of the plane. The lesson was brief. "Step out, pull the D-ring of the ripcord, and keep your knees bent when you land," said the Thai.

At the door, the Thai tapped him on the shoulder and pushed lightly. Buell fell. The horrifying plunge ended with a snap as the big, mottled green camouflage parachute popped open. In the distance, perhaps seven miles to the north, he thought he could make out Vang Pao's encampment at Padong.

"If I don't break my legs," he muttered to himself, "I got a long walk ahead of me." At this moment in May, 1961, he did not know just how long his walk eventually would be.

When observing descending parachutes from the ground, Buell always envied their lazy trails across the sky and the unimpeded softness of their gentle descents. Now, from this parachute, whose harness dug tightly into the soft flesh of his thighs as it swung sickeningly beneath the big canopy, he was alarmed to feel how speedily the whole thing plunged toward the trees and high elephant grass of the valley below. It did not descend gently or lazily at all. His thin bandy legs, dangling almost numbly from the tight harness, were strong, but not heavily muscled, and he was convinced that both would snap like twigs when he struck the ground. The chute seemed to rush now at a steeply inclined angle toward a clump of tall, angular trees. Before he could bend his legs or brace his body for the impact, the big chute was snatched fast by leafy branches and he found himself swinging, like the pendulum of a rundown clock, with his boots only a few feet from the ground. He released the buckles of his harness and eased himself down, thus ending his first and only parachute jump without a jolt or a scratch.

As he bent to rub the circulation back into his legs, Edgar had not the slightest idea whether his descent had been observed by friend or foe, or whether, in fact, he was at this moment in enemy-held territory. The reason he had taken this unorthodox and terrifying transportation

into the mountainous northeast was that neither he nor his colleagues in the skeleton crew now running U.S. AID in Vientiane were quite certain any more where anyone was. It had been a confusing winter. Ironically, there would have been no need for the parachute jump if the U.S. agencies at work in Laos had been coordinated, instead of operating in secret independence, as they did.

After the hair-raising evacuation from the Plaine des Jarres on New Year's Eve, Buell, Bowman, and their two young native friends were flown to Bangkok. There they separated when Dick, whose tour of duty had ended, went home to Pennsylvania. During Buell's month in Bangkok, neutralist and Communist soldiers, supplied by the Russian airlift from Hanoi, turned Khang Khay and the entire Plaine into an armed camp. Vang Pao, now a lieutenant colonel, quickly moved his 70,000 tribesmen to their new mountain retreats, but he was out of touch, and there was serious danger of mass starvation among his refugees. All the Meo who were part of his evacuation plan had left their mountainside farms unharvested. Except for the extra rice they carried with them during the long walk, they had only jungle growth and wild game to eat. Within a matter of weeks they would begin starving. But no one except Pop and Chung knew exactly where the Meo were.

The United States Government wasn't sure of exactly where it was, in Laos, either. A new American administration under President John F. Kennedy found itself in the embarrassing position of supporting the unpopular right-wing regime of General Phoumi Nosavan, which was now tenuously in control in Vientiane. Kennedy hoped for a breathing spell during which he could resolve interagency rivalry between Army, State Department, and C.I.A., and gracefully return U.S. support to a coalition government under the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma. Hopefully, this would take Kong Le out of the Communist camp and prevent the Pathet Lao, now completely dominated by Hanoi, from seizing control of the entire country. In the meantime, however, General Phoumi's Royal Army soldiers, many of whom resented their leaders and envied Kong Le, seemed incapable of withstanding the combined neutralist-Communist forces long enough for a peaceful solution to be constructed. A concerted enemy drive from the Plaine

into the rich valley of the Mekong and toward Vientiane would threaten Thailand and possibly ignite the fire of war throughout Southeast Asia. It was a perilous time in the bizarre history of the region, which was soon to feel even more tragic pressures in Vietnam. And the American military units that later were sent to an unhappy destiny in Vietnam very nearly began their war earlier and in a different place. Kennedy seriously considered rushing U.S. troops to Laos to block the threatened Communist advance. It seemed imperative that the Hanoi-reinforced Pathet Lao, who now had thousands of North Vietnamese officers and soldiers in their ranks, and their hapless ally Kong Le, must be stopped from pouring south out of the Plaine. Some American strategists believed that the only chance of blocking a Communist advance, short of sending American soldiers into jungled mountains for which they were ill-prepared, lay with Vang Pao's large band of hungry, displaced Meo tribesmen. Thus was Edgar Buell drawn into international geopolitics. He and Chung told U.S. intelligence officers in Bangkok how many Meo were there, and where they could find Vang Pao.

Quietly, unknown even to Edgar, small training detachments of U.S. Army Special Forces, the Green Berets of whom Kennedy and the C.I.A. were so fond, were flown into the hills from Thailand to help Vang Pao build a guerrilla army. Some of them were the same "civilian" soldiers who had been at Khang Khay before. Chung and Tseng, now jobless and entirely dependent, in a strange city, on Pop Buell's personal funds, were pressed into the guerrilla war, too. Both were recruited by U.S. Army Intelligence and trained as spies. Each received a four-month cram course in radio, information-gathering, sabotage, and map reading at a secret American "safe house" somewhere in Thailand. It was a long time before Pop saw either of them again, and by then he had unwittingly become a guerrilla leader himself. For the moment, however, he remained largely unaware of the strategic plans of his Government or of the quiet intervention of C.I.A. men and Green Berets. Edgar knew only that the United States had decided to help the hill people, and that there were at least 70,000 Meo refugees facing starvation. That is all that really concerned him, then, or ever.

At the end of January, Buell and twenty-seven other American AID and I.V.S. workers volunteered to return to Vientiane to establish a makeshift refugee relief program and piece back together what they could of the shattered U.S. economic and technical assistance program in the warring country. Since only he knew where to find them, the \$65-a-month volunteer-farmer organized and conducted the emergency airlift of rice, salt, blankets, clothing, cooking utensils, and seeds to Vang Pao's displaced people.

From dawn to dusk every day for three months Buell clambered around the cargo compartment of an old C-47 while two tough veterans of General Chennault's World War II Flying Tigers, Dutch Brongersma and Johnny Lee, banked the plane through narrow mountain passes to drop life-saving supplies on the mountain retreats Chung had pinpointed for him months before.

The two pilots worked for a curious "airline" called Air America, ostensibly a subsidiary of the American-owned, Taiwan-based commercial airline, Civil Air Transport, which, like the old Flying Tigers, was founded by General Claire Chennault. In part, Air America was the private airline of the Central Intelligence Agency, used throughout Southeast Asia to support intelligence operatives in the field. On a more innocent, humanitarian level, it was what it pretended to be, a civilian charter service working under contract to other U.S. Government agencies such as U.S. AID and the U.S. Information Service. Most of the pilots were former military fliers, gambling that they would survive a few months or a few years of almost suicidal flying in old, unarmed planes in order to build a quick financial nest egg. Depending upon the number of hours they flew and the hazards they faced, the pilots earned as much as \$4,000 a month.

"They earn every penny of it," said Edgar Buell, who flew with them every day. He still earned only \$65 a month.

In Vientiane, John Tobler, a lean, mustached man of infinite patience and calm who was director of the AID mission, broke quickly through the red tape that got in the way of Pop's makeshift airlift. His deputy, Randy Frakes, and the American rural development director in Laos, John Cool, worked tirelessly at every kind of job

from arranging emergency rice shipments from Bangkok to helping Edgar load the planes.

(The skeleton force of 28 volunteers was to remain on emergency duty for almost a year, during which they accomplished more in getting American aid through to the people of Laos than a 350-man mission had achieved before the evacuation or a 1,000-man mission has accomplished since. While they worked 18-hour days and 7-day weeks, their erstwhile colleagues in the mission performed token jobs in Bangkok and drew per diem payments of \$18 a day for themselves and each member of their families. The special payment was called SCOLA, for Special Cost of Living Allowance. One mission member with six children drew \$144 a day in per diem. "SCOLA," he toasted his wife each evening in their comfortable Bangkok apartment. "SCOLA," replied his wife.)

"How many bullet holes can this old bucket take before it comes apart?" said Edgar to Dutch Brongersma as they inspected the wings of the C-47 at the Wattay airfield in early May.

"Just one, Pop, if it's in the right place." With a red grease pencil Dutch nonchalantly drew twenty-seven circles around the holes in the wings. They had been fired upon every day of the airlift. Each day, too, Buell had spotted more refugees than the 70,000 Meo who were gathered in Vang Pao's emergency encampments. It was obvious that enemy actions around the Plaine and farther to the north had displaced many more than the original tribal evacuees, and a way had to be found to locate and help them. With Tobler's reluctant permission, Edgar decided to go to Padong to learn what he could of the new refugee movements from Vang Pao.

Neither Tobler nor Edgar nor anyone in the AID volunteer mission was fully informed about what had happened at Padong. They knew, as did the world, that General Phoumi Nosavan, the neutralists, and the Pathet Lao were even now negotiating a cease-fire on the Plaine under the anxious eyes of both the United States and the Soviet Union. Both big nations, having gone to the slippery edge of war in their somewhat slapdash support of the warring elements of Laos, now were eager to draw back and let the perplexing little country once again become a peaceful buffer state with a coalition

government dominated by the neutralists. Coalition was still a long way off, but a formal cease-fire agreement was expected any day.

Except for what he could see from his daily flights over the Meo encampments when he dropped relief supplies, Buell had no idea what Colonel Vang Pao was doing. He was not even certain that his supplies were falling safely on all of the Meo retreats. But with a cease-fire just around the corner, it seemed safe enough now to go into the mountains and find out. At first he tried, through Dutch and Johnny, to get a helicopter from Air America. None was available. So he took the only transportation he could find, by parachute from a C-46.

Buell left the clump of trees in which he landed and began walking slowly along a dry creek bed that led in the direction of Padong. He was unarmed save for a folding pocketknife, and his only portable links with the civilization he left behind were a small ground-to-air radio, a razor, a toothbrush, soap, and a flattened roll of toilet paper, stuffed into the pockets of his jacket and his rough workshirt and pants. He had no desire to frighten or to kill anyone, but as he stumbled along the gravel bed of the dry stream that was his pathway, he wondered if he might not feel more secure with Dick's Marlin rifle in his hands. His uncertain thoughts were abruptly interrupted.

Four men, dressed in baggy black pants and jackets, appeared around a bend in the pathway ahead of him. Each carried a carbine at the ready position before his chest. The men stopped the moment they saw him. They lifted their weapons.

"*Nhajong*," he called apprehensively.

The face of their leader broke into a broad smile. "*Nhajong*, Tan Pop," he replied. They were friendly Meo from a tiny village on a hill overlooking the small valley in which Edgar landed. Before he left the Plaine, Edgar had liked the Meo. Now he loved them.

"This is Colonel Vang Pao's farm," the leader explained as he led Buell through a newly planted rice field on the side of the hill. "We planted the seed rice you dropped to us from the airplane. Colonel Vang Pao has told all of the Meo about Tan Pop who is their friend. When we saw the parachute come from the airplane, we knew it must be Tan Pop."

At dawn the next day the same four men began guiding him to Padong. After trekking through leech-infested jungle and over steep hills, they arrived at nightfall, exhausted. And the first sight Edgar saw as he walked up the pathway to the huge Meo refugee encampment on the mountain was an olive-drab American helicopter. A crew of Meo men were at work nearby with crude steel knives, hacking underbrush from a plateau on the hillside in preparation for a short, rough airstrip. A cluster of U.S. Army tents stood not far away. Hundreds of makeshift shelters, some covered with grass thatching, others with mottled green parachute nylon, still others with the brilliant orange-and-white-striped chutes Pop had used in dropping emergency refugee supplies, were scattered around the mountainside. After learning that Vang Pao was away from Padong for the night and would not return until the next day, Edgar searched among the Army tents until he found an American Special Forces captain and a fatigue-clad American civilian who identified himself cryptically as "Uncle Dan." Both were astonished to see him.

"What the hell are you doing up here?" asked the civilian.

"I'm gonna ask you the same question," said Buell. "Goddammit, I risked my neck to jump out of a goddamned airplane with a parachute, into a goddam jungle which I didn't know was friendly or enemy. Then I walk a whole goddam day with bushes in my face and leeches on my legs. I git here and see a goddam chopper just sittin' there like somebody's limousine. I'm supposed to be feedin' 70,000 people up here. I think there's at least 50,000 more starvin' people wanderin' around out there who need my help. Now I find you Americans sittin' here with transportation, and nobody in Vientiane knows a goddam thing about you."

"That makes us even," said the captain. "We didn't know about you, either. We knew somebody was feeding these people, but we never knew who."

"Well you're lookin' at him, buddy, and that old routine of each American agency runnin' around up here without tellin' the other ones what he's doin' has got to stop, right now. You're in the Army, and this feller here must be one of them people ridin' a broomstick around for the C.I.A. I'm an I.V.S. volunteer, but I represent AID.

Far as I'm concerned it don't matter what outfit you belong to; all of us is Americans, and all of us is supposed to be here helpin' these people. From now on we either work together, or nothin's gonna work at all."

Buell had not until that moment had any dealings with the secret U.S. intelligence agency which, in later years, became the principal source of military and political power in Laos. He was not particularly happy to find the agency at work among the Meo now, but he always had been a pragmatist, and he knew that he had nothing to gain by ignoring "Uncle Dan's" presence at Padong. Moreover, Dan was an amiable young man and, like all covert operatives of the Agency, a pragmatist himself. So was the Green Beret officer. He was new to Laos, with no knowledge of the people, the languages, or the country, and he needed all the help he could get if he was to assist Vang Pao in building an undercover army out of an unhappy band of displaced refugees. The three men agreed to cooperate.

Thus was born, albeit at an extremely low level in the hierarchy of U.S. foreign policy, the first fully coordinated American program of political, military, and civil assistance in the history of Southeast Asia. It worked so well, in fact, and Buell's good will became so invaluable to Army Intelligence and the C.I.A. that both agencies attempted to recruit him as their own clandestine agent. He told them to go to hell. "I like you just fine," he told Dan and in almost the same words the dozens of other young secret agents who followed him, "but I ain't been a goddamned bit impressed by some of the things your outfit's been tryin' to do out here. I'll tell you people what I'm doin', where I'm goin', and what's goin' on there, but I'll expect you to scratch my back a little bit, too. When I need a little somethin' extra for my refugees, I reckon you'll just have to help me out."

Vang Pao greeted Tan Pop as if he were his own father, although the two had met only a few times at Lhat Houang. "Without your airlift," he said, "all of my people would have starved. I can organize an army and fight, but I must have you to help the civilians. Without the support of the people my soldiers cannot live. You must help them settle into new villages. Feed them and clothe them until they can take care of themselves. The enemy has been very harsh in Sam Neua

and Xieng Khouang. Here refugees are coming to us every day, some of them Lao and Lao Thung people. You will never know how much we need you."

Buell told the wiry Meo officer about the wandering bands of refugees he had spotted from the drop plane in recent weeks.

"There are many," said Vang Pao, "but none of us knows how many. Someone must find them and help them. Many are starving. Tomorrow you should go to Ban Na to see with your own eyes."

"After the cease-fire maybe we can get around a little easier and round 'em up," said Pop.

Vang Pao laughed scornfully. "The enemy talks of truce, but I do not think he means it. They will have a cease-fire in the cities. Here in the mountains the fighting will go on."

That afternoon Edgar found Mi Si, living with her family in a parachute tent among the other refugees from her old village. She was ecstatic when he told her that Chung had been evacuated with him to Bangkok.

"I didn't know," she said. "My father thought he stayed behind and maybe he was killed. When will he come?"

"I don't know, Mi Si. He's got a new job. He'll be back in Laos soon, I'm sure."

"Does he love me, Tan Pop?"

"Don't worry, Mi Si. He loves you."

"Then it is time he came to me. It is time to be married."

"Are you worried about a baby, Mi Si?"

"No." She smiled sadly. "If there was a baby he would come, I know. But before at Lhat Houang he told me that we must be careful and not have a baby until there is peace. He said that if the baby comes now, it will be dangerous. We will not be like other Meo couples. We will be married without the baby."

Pop chatted for a while with Mi Si's father, who was relieved to know that his prospective son-in-law was alive and might soon return to Laos. Chung was, after all, one of the wealthiest and most promising young men of all the Meo. Life in Padong had been grim for the first two months, he said, but it was better now. There was enough food

for everyone, and the Meo had begun to plant crops on the hills nearby so that the mountain retreat might be self-sufficient within a few months.

"But I am a merchant," he sighed, "and there is little opium here for me to trade. When it is safe, I will move my family to Vientiane so that I can work. If you see Chung, tell him he will find us here."

That night Edgar made plans to go to Ban Na, at Colonel Vang Pao's urging. "The people there are desperate. You must help them." Before he retired for the night, Edgar had talked Dan into lifting him across the thirty miles of jungle and mountain between Padong and Ban Na by helicopter, and he had wheedled a case of penicillin, aspirin, and sulfa drugs from the Green Berets.

Chapter 8

I still remembered that from the first beginning of setting up the schools and supporting and furnishing all the school supplies, Tan Pop he really did give the gifts from his own little pocket to donate to all young children for going to their schools . . . because we have heard the good Lord did say that if we are good people then we must love, help, support and train all the young groups of children . . .

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Bouppha

THE helicopter fluttered slowly over rivers of clouds that flowed like viscous liquid through the mountain passes and into the valleys. Edgar was almost deafened by the thumping of the rotor and the high whine of the engine. It was his first helicopter ride. A parachute at least had the virtue of silence, he thought, as the ungainly ship found a hole in the swirling bank of fog and descended toward a grassy swale below the unhappy village of Ban Na. Through the open door he could see the jumble of makeshift shelters descending the slopes like discarded junk from the original small village on the mountaintop. It reminded him of pictures showing the dwellings of poverty-stricken Brazilian peasants on the muddy hillsides of Rio. Ban Na was far worse, dirtier, more crowded. There were 5,000 Meo clustered on the small mountain, and they were sick, hungry, and spiritless. Aside from the reasonably well-fed and organized evacuees he had observed at Padong, these were the first true refugees Buell had seen, face to face. They looked far more wretched, and they were. Small children sat quietly in the ocher mud of the hillside, too en-

ervated to seek dryness or comfort, and too weak even to plead for help as their vacant eyes, many caked with the drying pus of conjunctivitis, stared blankly through him. A woman whose brown teats hung like empty leather pockets from her open tunic tried vainly to pacify her tiny daughter, almost mummified in starvation, with a nipple that was as dry as a pipestem. As he surveyed the desolate hillside, crowded with people who seemed to move to the tedious rhythm of a dirge, an emaciated Meo man emerged from a bamboo lean-to shelter and fired his flintlock musket into the air, laboriously reloaded and fired again, then reloaded a third time and fired. Three shots, thus aimed at the sky, Buell knew, were the Meo signal for death. Someone had just expired in the lean-to. From farther up the hill, as if echoing the shots, came three more reports. Another death. Even the doleful Meo dogs, squatting on bone-sharp haunches and snarling weakly at one another, were too spiritless to move.

Pop recognized the leader of the miserable refugee encampment. He was Tu Yeah, the former Meo policeman at Lhat Houang, whom Edgar and Tseng had helped in a vain effort to block the Pathet Lao on the day before the fall of the Plaine des Jarres. He, too, was weak with hunger. Without delay he told Buell how many adults and children were gathered on the hillside. They had been without food or medicines for three weeks. Pop cupped his small radio handset to his mouth and ear and called the pilot of the helicopter, which, after depositing him in the swale, was now rapidly disappearing westward. Quickly he pleaded with the pilot to reach the U.S. AID radio operator in Vientiane.

"Tell 'em I want drop planes in here beginning right now, with all the rice, salt, and blankets they can bring in before nightfall. Give 'em the map coordinates and tell 'em I'll mark out a drop zone down here in the valley."

For the rest of the day, as Buell moved from shelter to shelter in the refugee camp administering the penicillin, aspirin, and sulfa drugs he had scrounged from the Special Forces officer at Padong, Dutch, Johnny Lee, and four other pilots shuttled back and forth across the hundred miles of hostile country between Vientiane and Ban Na bringing a fresh chance at life to the starving people. It was no wonder

that the Meo refugees, from Tu Yeah down to the nursing mother with her dried-leather mammaries, stood in awe of Tan Pop when night fell. Everyone in the encampment had eaten, for the first time in days, and the funereal movements of the morning had quickened to the pace of real life as children and even the dogs tentatively began playing again. The mournful reports of the death guns still sounded after dark, but less frequently, less like echoes of one another, than they had during the day. To the hundreds of pained and dying invalids treated with wonder medicines by the stubby American who spoke oddly but reassuringly in their own language, good health seemed once again a reasonable possibility. It would have been hard to convince any of these Meo that Pop Buell was not a god, perhaps even Sin Sai himself, returned to rally his army of the mountaintops against the evil giant.

That night in a bamboo hut at the top of the mountain of Ban Na, Edgar sat with Tu Yeah and four elders of the refugee encampment and talked about the future, which, at that moment, looked bleak despite the freshly dropped emergency supplies, enough to last for a month.

"It is bad now, worse than it ever has been for the Meo," said one of the elders, "but someday peace will return and our children will prosper."

"One day we may even have schools," said Tu Yeah.

"You might have to wait for peace, and you sure as hell are gonna have to wait for prosperity," said Buell. "But there ain't no reason why you can't have schools right now."

"No, Tan Pop. There is no time for such things. The enemy might drive us from this mountain tomorrow or the day after tomorrow."

"You've got a saying that 'there's always another mountain,' haven't you?" Buell asked.

"Yes, Tan Pop. If this mountain goes, we will move to another. Many of these refugees must move very soon, anyway, because this mountain cannot support so many people. There are other friendly mountains. They can settle nearby. But the enemy may chase them away from those mountains, too. Life is too uncertain for schools in

these villages. We have never had a school for Meo children. Now is not the time to begin."

"Why haven't the Meo had schools before?"

"For most of our history we have been alone in the mountains. We did not even know that language could be written. In this century a few Meo attended school in the valleys, so now we know about education and we want it for our children. But the Lao will permit only a few Meo into their schools. When the French were here, they did not care about the Meo. They would not help us with education. In my memory, only the Pathet Lao have succeeded in making schools for the Meo, far north of here in Sam Neua. But they are few."

"Well, if they can do it, so can we," said Pop. "And if you have to leave here for a second mountain, why, you can just build a second school. That's all."

"You will build the school and operate it, Tan Pop?"

"No, I won't do that. But I'll help you help yourselves, and I'll see that you get enough school supplies to keep it going. America can do that much for you."

The next morning, roiling banks of clouds hugged the slopes of the mountain and the small valley below. Edgar heard a helicopter pass over and assumed it was Dan, who had promised to return for him. But the ship could not land. For three days the fog remained unbroken, and Pop worked alongside Tu Yeah and two dozen other men of the encampment. When the chopper settled into the swale on the fifth day of Edgar's visit to Ban Na, the entire area was bustling with life, as if starvation and despair were only a bad memory. Tu Yeah and his crew were laying the last clumps of thatching on the eaves of a new 30-by-60-foot schoolhouse. On the swept dirt floor of the open, bamboo building stood long benches and desks hewn by hand from hardwood logs. Centered in front of the desks was a fire-blackened wood panel, which five days before had been a plywood cargo pallet supporting ten bags of rice dropped on Ban Na from an airplane. Now it was a blackboard. A pile of limestone slivers, chipped from an outcropping of karst on the mountainside, served as chalk. Among the workers laying thatch on the eaves of the hut was an eighteen-year-old Meo man, married and the father of two children.

He was one of the lucky few among the hill people who could read and write. Now he was the schoolteacher.

"I'll be goin' to Vientiane in a few days," said Edgar, "and I'll be back soon with books and paper and pencils. You go ahead and start teachin' with what you have. Just start teachin' 'em how to read and write the way you learned."

Thus began a school system that eventually was to include more than 80,000 students, heirs to the ancient tribal affliction of illiteracy. Within a relatively short time the institution begun in this hastily erected bamboo shack at Ban Na would play a major part in healing some of the deep ethnic incisions that scarred the social and political face of Laos, for in time the schools included thousands of students from all the hill tribes and many lowland Lao, as well, working together for the first time in harmony. It would even lead some of the sons and daughters of ignorant mountain tribesmen to universities in Europe and America, an intellectual level only one Meo in all history, Touby Ly Fong, had achieved before. But it grew only over the strident protests of professional educationists within the Agency for International Development. Assigned to assist the government of Laos in upgrading educational standards throughout the country, the professionals of AID were appalled by Pop's innocent re-invention of Couéism, a simple, gradeless, "each one teach one" school system. When the little farmer, who graduated from a one-room elementary school not far from the old Buell place in Steuben County, asked the education branch of AID for help, he was turned away with an explanation that, in bureaucratic terms, was foolproof. His buildings were substandard. He had no qualified college-educated teachers, and none were available. His school curriculum seemed ill-defined at best. And certain officials in the government of Laos were not anxious to see education spread among the ignorant men of the mountains. The experiment, Pop was told, must be abandoned.

Most low-level government workers, thus chastised by their high-level colleagues, would surrender to such logic. "Educated fools," he snorted. He called on the U.S. Information Agency in Vientiane and resumed his acquaintance there with the only other American in Laos who spoke the Meo language. He was a bearded, banjo-playing,

free spirit of twenty-seven named Ivan Klecka. Before the Kong Le revolt, Ivan had wandered through the mountains with a portable projector, pausing in Lao, Lao Thung, and Meo villages to show movies about America and the free world. He was anxious now for an excuse to return to the hills and work once again among the people. Pop, with his ready access to the northeast, showed the way. Through the resources of the Information Agency, and by telling a few lily-white lies, Ivan bypassed the professional educators in the U.S. mission in Vientiane and acquired a huge supply of basic school-books, a kind of Lao version of *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers*. Pop called informally on the local headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency, whose budget is vast and secret and whose resources presumably are limitless, and quietly placed an order for a continuing supply of slates, chalk, pencils, and notebooks. Where the C.I.A. men found the old-fashioned school slates, and how they explained their interest in elementary education to the National Intelligence Assessment Board, which oversees the secret agency's budget in the White House, we shall never know. Buell also enlisted the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Edon, Ohio, which, through his insurance man, John Foster, periodically collected odds and ends such as children's clothing, erasers, compasses, protractors, and other items and shipped them to Laos.

The first school at Ban Na opened with twenty-seven pupils and doubled in size within a month. By the end of the first year there were twenty-eight schools, including the one Tseng began at Houei Thom. In five years, after the entire U.S. mission and the Lao Government belatedly got behind the school program, there were almost three hundred. By 1969 the system had expanded to include nine Groupes Scholares (junior high schools), two high schools, and a teacher training school. Three hundred Meo students attended the most prestigious French high school in Vientiane that year, and the highest-ranking graduates in both the liberal arts and science tracks of the school were Meo. Another seventy were enrolled in the local English-language school. At the same time, two dozen Meo students were enrolled in universities in Australia, France, and the United States.

"They have went pretty far from that shack in Ban Na," says Edgar. But we are getting ahead of his story.

When Uncle Dan arrived at Ban Na in the helicopter, he was not at all certain he would be able to make good his promise to return Edgar to Padong. He tried to explain as the chopper headed south over the hills. The cease-fire had been signed a few days before, but as far as Padong and a number of other remote areas of Laos were concerned, the "truce" was academic. Enemy troops, emplaced in the valley into which Edgar had parachuted only a week before, were now dropping mortar shells into the Padong encampment. They were oblivious to the cease fire, and it looked as if they might attack the encampment, in force, at any moment. Two days earlier, a helicopter bearing seven Lao soldiers, two American crewmen, and a National Broadcasting Company cameraman named Grant Wolfkill had either crashed or been shot down in the area of Pop's parachute jump not far from Padong. All three Americans had been taken prisoner. Another chopper had crashed at Padong itself, killing two Air America crewmen and seriously injuring one of the men from the Green Beret detachment. (Not long before, the same enemy force that was now shelling Padong had overwhelmed a Royal Army unit at a road junction to the southeast called Vang Vieng, capturing four Americans, including an Army captain named Walter Moon. It was Moon's blood that within a few months would stain the concrete floor of the I.V.S. house, now a prison, in Lhat Houang. Grant Wolfkill would watch helplessly through a crack in the door of his own cell, once Pop Buell's bedroom, as North Vietnamese guards dragged the executed Moon's body away for disposal.)

The situation at Padong, said Uncle Dan, was hairy and looked as if it would become much worse. Moreover, the rainy season had begun in earnest, casting a screen of dense fog over most of the muddy slopes and effectively covering any movements the enemy troops made. If the chopper pilot could not find his way safely into Padong, they would have to return to Ban Na or locate a level place for emergency landing somewhere in between. Luckily, the pilot picked a hole in the cloud bank and descended quickly to the unfinished landing strip at Padong. But as he cut his engines and the

free-swinging rotor slowed, a mortar shell landed nearby. The enemy barrage was continuing.

By ten o'clock in the morning, a thousand enemy soldiers, most of them armed with American weapons captured from the lackluster Royal Army, had gained a foothold in the valley that led up to the encampment at Padong. Buell took cover and watched as Vang Pao and his Green Beret advisers urgently rallied the raggle-taggle band of ill-trained Meo defenders. Slowly, but in astonishingly good order for an untrained defense force, the Meo fell back toward the refugee tents. The enemy mortar barrage grew more intense. Automatic weapons fire ripped through parachute tents, leaving ragged nylon streamers in its path.

Suddenly, as if she had materialized from the tree behind which he was crouching, a small Meo girl, who seemed totally unperturbed by the battle, appeared at Edgar's side. Cradled lightly in her right arm was a bulky American M-1 rifle. A cotton bandolier of extra ammunition clips for the gun was slung around her chest and shoulder.

"Don't worry, Tan Pop," she said quietly. "I will protect you." Unhurriedly she lifted the heavy military rifle and squeezed off a single shot in the direction of the enemy advance.

"I'll be goddamned," said Edgar. "What's your name?"

"I am Lau Lu, Tan Pop. Please do not try to send me away. It is my job to protect you. I am honored to stay with you." She continued firing, with deliberate calm, as Pop watched Vang Pao running back and forth among his irregular soldiers forty yards to their left. The Meo leader dashed across a slippery open space on the muddy hillside and dropped lightly beside Edgar. He nodded approvingly at the girl, even though the Meo usually hate to see women play any role that is traditionally a man's.

"We cannot hold much longer, Tan Pop. They are too many. But they will pay dearly to take Padong. We will fight as long as we can. We must move back now to the other side of the mountain. I want you to get the old people and all of the women and children together and be ready to take them out of here when darkness comes."

Without awaiting a reply he jumped up and ran to a mortar tube

twenty yards away, where one of the Green Berets was helping two Meo guerrillas place counterfire on the enemy troops below.

"Okay, Lau Lu, if you want to stay with me, let's go," Pop called, and the two small figures scrambled up the slippery hillside away from the fighting. Twice she paused in the hurried ascent and turned to fire again at the enemy.

"How old are you?" Pop asked her when they reached safety on the reverse slope, where most of the refugees had gathered.

"I am fourteen years old," said Lau Lu.

"Stick with me," he said. "You're the best protection a man ever had. Ain't you even a little bit scared?"

"Of course I am afraid, Tan Pop. But I am more afraid that you will die."

"Well, I've got as big a yella streak as any man, Lau Lu. I'm scared, too. But I reckon you and me daresn't show it to the rest of these people, or they'll get to worryin'. Let's get 'em organized."

Together the small Indianan and the little native girl moved among the 2,000-odd women, children, and old people who sat patiently on the hillside clutching small bundles of their belongings, waiting to be told what to do. "When it is dark, we will escape together. Wait for the signal," said Edgar again and again as he and Lau Lu moved among them. In vain he searched for Mi Si and her family. Then he found a young boy of their village whom, long ago, he had taught to play volleyball. "They left three days ago," the boy said. "They said they would walk to Vientiane." He hoped they were safe.

Daylight was literally washed away by a pelting rainstorm. It hit just as night came, filling the gullies of the mountainside with angry streams of muddy water and lubricating the slopes so that movement became more a matter of skiing than walking. Four of Vang Pao's soldiers came in the darkness to guide them away from Padong.

"We will walk to Yat Mu," said one of them.

"How far is that?"

"Maybe one day, maybe longer. The children and the old people cannot walk very fast."

Buell signaled to the people to follow, and the great exodus began. Two thousand Meo, struggling to form a narrow line, began slithering

down the slushy incline, sliding, losing balance, stumbling, occasionally tumbling face first in the gooey mud. As he reached the bottom of the hill, following the guides along a path that cut through the snaking liana vines of the forest, he came abreast of a woman who staggered as if she were ending rather than beginning her flight. Strapped like a papoose in a blanket on her back was a swaddled child of about three. In her left arm she carried a two-year-old. In her right she clutched a cotton sack of wooden pots, cooked rice, and bamboo spoons.

"Lau Lu, carry that sack for her. Here," he said, turning to the woman, "give me the baby." He lifted the two-year-old girl to his shoulders and moved ahead.

For the first three hours that the mile-long line of evacuees padded silently along the wet, darkened jungle trail away from Padong, they could hear the gunfire continuing behind them. Then it stopped. After eighteen hours of continuous fighting, the first battle of the ill-observed truce in Laos had ended. Conscious that the women, the children, and the elderly were now safely away from the enemy, Vang Pao broke away and fled with his exhausted troops, their Green Beret advisers, and Uncle Dan. But it was another eighteen hours before Edgar and his helpless followers rested. Uncertain whether they were being pursued by enemy soldiers, they pressed on through the jungle all night and the next day. Occasionally Edgar paused to shift the baby on his shoulders or to raise his pantlegs to burn leeches away from his skin with the glowing end of a cigarette. But without complaint the seemingly endless line of refugees kept going, never pausing for food or rest. And when they arrived at Yat Mu, another mountain retreat very similar to the wretched Ban Na, most of them wished they had stayed to face the enemy instead. The encampment already contained 9,000 Meo refugees. They had run out of food several days before and the constant presence of heavy clouds and fog in the area made emergency deliveries of rice impossible. The human conditions at Yat Mu made Ban Na seem a pleasant retreat. It was intolerable. Now, Buell thought, he had aided 2,000 more helpless people to the dismal scene and, unless the clouds lifted soon, most of them would starve. He wept, and Lau Lu, crying too, tried to comfort him.

It was then that Edgar saw two alien figures moving among the desolate people, pausing to talk, laughing, and doing their best to bring some small cheer to an utterly cheerless situation. One of them was a muscular youth of medium height with light brown hair and a full beard that seemed too tangled to reflect either its raw silk color or the umber shade of the mud that caked it. The other man was older, and his brown, vaguely Spanish features beamed beneath springy locks of curly black hair.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Felix Romero," he called out to Buell. "This is Ivan Klecka. You must be Pop Buell."

The smiling pair explained that they had bummed a ride to Padong in an Army helicopter from Vientiane a few days before, then had asked to be dropped off at Yat Mu when they heard that the people needed help. The weather had closed in after they landed, and they had been stranded here since. Buell ruefully told them that he had come by parachute and on foot. Everyone in Laos, it seemed, traveled better than he did.

Romero was an American-trained physician from Manila who had joined a voluntary Filipino medical relief group called Operation Brotherhood that began working in Southeast Asia at the end of the French-Indochinese war. Its accomplishments, almost unknown outside of Laos, were extraordinary. In six hospitals, all staffed by volunteer Filipino doctors and nurses, O.B. handled 150,000 cases a year, and its physicians were ready, like Romero, to walk or fly any place in the country at any time to handle emergencies. Ironically, a far less effective private medical group established by the physician-promoter Tom Dooley, who later died of cancer, leaving his Dooley Foundation to continue his limited medical program in Laos, received some of the acclaim for the Filipinos' efforts. But the O.B. people never complained and graciously helped out when the two tiny but extremely well-financed Dooley hospitals in Laos needed assistance. Operation Brotherhood received its own funds from the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Manila and Vientiane, as well as from a few generous American supporters who had learned of its work.

Klecka had become fascinated with the Meo when he worked among some of them in northeast Thailand a year earlier. He was a field

information officer for the U.S. Information Agency, but he did not restrict his activities to propagandizing for the United States. Like Buell, Ivan carried simple medicines with him wherever he went and tried in many ways both to help and to learn from the hill people. As a member of a small information mission, however, he was often bound to office routine in Vientiane. He bolted for the hills whenever he had the chance, but opportunities were few, and this was his first field trip since the evacuation in January.

Felix explained that food supplies at Yat Mu had been exhausted since they arrived and that the effects on the 9,000 refugees in the encampment were now severe. What medicines he had brought for dysentery and other diseases had been exhausted on the first day.

"There is very little we can do now," he said. "We try to smile and appear cheerful only to give them hope. That is all they have."

While Vang Pao moved his weary army south to another mountain retreat named Pha Khao, Buell, Klecka, and Romero remained behind, sharing the grim fate of the Meo refugees. None of them any longer likes to revive the memory of Yat Mu. Almost half of the refugees, already emaciated from hunger, were afflicted with dysentery, too weak even to move away from their own watery trails of excrement on the rain-soaked hillside. Those who retained the strength to descend the hill foraged in the underbrush of the valley forest for greens, which seemed to make the disease even worse. By the third day more than one hundred were dead. Then the daily mortality rate suddenly shot upward. Dozens of the sick and the starving, beyond all hope, committed suicide each day by swallowing raw opium, saved for such a contingency. To those who ingested it, opium offered a painless and quick way out of life's misery. A pea-sized ball of the potent poppy sap killed a weakened man within seconds. Hundreds more died naturally after days of suffering. More than a thousand despaired of ever surviving Yat Mu and stumbled off into the jungle, uncertain where they were going, but determined to get away. By the eleventh day the no longer smiling uplift committee of three was almost indistinguishable from the people they had come to help. Then the heavy overcast broke, and Dutch and his fellow pilots swooped low over Yat Mu as Lao helpers kicked hundreds of bags

of rice, salt, blankets, and pots and pans from the cargo doors of the old airplanes. Some of the free-falling bags of rice split open when they struck the hillside, and the people scrambled weakly to collect each spilled grain. Later in the day a helicopter arrived and took the two Americans to Vientiane. Dr. Romero remained behind with a fresh supply of medicines to treat the sick.

A few days later the U.S. mission in Vientiane sent an inspection team of four experts to Yat Mu to confirm Buell's dismal report on the condition of the refugees, which he knew now, was typical of most of the mountain people who had been displaced by the war. The makeshift emergency airlift of refugee commodities that Buell and his colleagues had been dropping blindly on the seven encampments they knew about had helped to stave off complete disaster, but it had been woefully insufficient. Vang Pao had begun his mass evacuation confident that he was relocating 70,000 people. Now, although it was impossible to take an accurate count, it looked as if there were half again that many in the area of the seven encampments alone. Another 50,000 or more were living off the land, wandering from hill to hill in search of livable new mountains and desperately in need of rice. Padong, it seemed, had been the only retreat that was adequately supplied, and now it was in enemy hands. One of the most smoothly executed mass evacuations of a primitive people in history was rapidly becoming a miserable shambles.

Urgently the small volunteer AID mission in Vientiane expanded Buell's previously informal refugee relief program. More Air America planes were chartered. Dutch acquired two old surplus Navy planes, which had been converted to carry cargo, and started a second charter air service of his own to help carry the load. With immediate official approval and a multimillion-dollar commitment of funds from Washington (air transportation costs alone eventually exceeded \$8 million per year) the massive refugee relief program overnight became the largest single element of the U.S. AID program in Laos. Edgar was its architect and director. His salary remained \$65 a month.

Chapter 9

Where are we working? I myself would say that we all are working on the tremendous mountains . . . the rough, tough, dangerous, mean, deep, short, long and many high hills and unsmooth valleys. There are three kinds of mountains altogether: dangerous mountains; treasuring or valuable mountains; harmless or quiet mountains.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupba

THE five men had arisen with the first sounds of the morning birds and chattering monkeys along the forested riverbank. Edgar had lost track of the days. He knew only that it was now dry season, because it had not rained for more than a week, and that he had been walking with his four Meo guides for at least a month. A week ago they had left the last village, Phou Fa, where 7,000 Meo had gathered. Now, after hacking slowly through a trackless wilderness for six days, finding few signs of human life, they had reached the narrow Nam Khan River, which ambled southward toward the Plaine des Jarres. Here, the people of Phou Fa had told them, they need no longer worry about stumbling into enemy booby traps or patrols. From the river to Phou Vieng, twenty miles north of the Plaine, it would be safe to walk in daylight on the trails. The prospect of moving safely along cleared pathways put all five in a cheerful mood as they began picking their way along the riverbank in search of a crossing. Chopping with heavy, machete-like hand knives through bamboo thickets, knotted liana vines, dense ferns, and woody plants that formed trunks as large as small trees had been exhausting, but

the added irritation of stinging insects, mosquitoes, and leeches that gained a purchase on the ankle, then scooted like urgent inchworms up to the tender skin of thigh and crotch, was almost unbearable. Now it was safe to appear in the open, if they could trust the villagers of Phou Fa. Another day of easy walking on well-established trails should bring them to Phou Vieng, home of Chung's own Mua clan. They crossed without wetting their feet at a boulder-strewn rapid of the narrow riverbed and by 10:00 A.M. found the level trail through the jungle on the other side. It was clearly well traveled, because it was wide and free of jungle growth. Ahead they could see a junction where it met another path. Without pausing, they set off briskly, one by one, at intervals of fifteen feet. The jungle was so peaceful that the abrupt sound, when it came, was for a moment incredible.

The hot shock wave, followed instantly by an explosive *carrumph*, jarred even Edgar, who was last in line. With the three men ahead of him he sprinted forward. The lead man lay on the ground. His skull was crushed. His jaw was gone. A shallow crater a few feet away, at the junction of the paths, showed where the crude land mine had exploded. Curiously, it left its victim's feet, legs, and body unscathed, but his head wounds clearly would be fatal. For an hour the man, still conscious, lay in stoic awareness of the inevitable as his comrades squatted comfortably beside him. Soundlessly, then, he died. Buell marveled at the cool efficiency with which the Meo guides chanted brief prayers to the spirits of the dead man. With no further sign of emotion, they buried him beside the junction. The mountain tribesmen's concern, he had seen before, was for the living, not the dead. They had been loving and comforting when their companion lay mortally wounded. But further emotion was pointless when life ceased to exist. "Maybe it's better their way," Buell mused, thinking of his own bitter emotional state after Malorene's death, "than to go on grievin' the way we do." After covering the body of the dead man, they moved back into the jungle. Perhaps this was the only mine and the rest of the trail was safe, as the villagers of Phou Fa had maintained, but they knew the untracked jungle was safer.

Edgar's long walk had begun at Pha Khao a month before. The great airlift from Vientiane was running smoothly now. He had organized it in such a way that an all-Lao staff automatically dispatched refugee relief commodities on a regular, scheduled basis, anticipating shortages in the refugee encampments before they became acute. All of the known refugee settlements around the Plaine des Jarres were at last adequately supplied. But still many thousands of Meo, Lao, and Lao Thung refugees were at large in the mountains and valleys, undiscovered and in most cases unaware even of what had happened after they had been driven from their native villages by neutralist and Communist troops.

"We must win all of the people, Tan Pop," Vang Pao told him, "but first we must know where they are, how many of them are willing to bear arms, and how many men are left to protect the new villages and plant new crops."

"I reckon our goals is the same, Colonel," said Buell. "I want to help all the people who need help, and I want to keep the Communists from capturin' them or pushin' them around any more than they already has. I and you will just have our own counter-insurgency program right here. You take care of the military, and I'll take care of the civilians. And if I'm going to take care of 'em, I'd better be the one who goes out and finds 'em."

At first Vang Pao suggested that Pop use a helicopter to search the mountains and valleys around the Plaine.

"Hell, that'll just git me from one place to another place and I'll miss all the people in between. I ain't crazy about walkin' in this country, but it looks like I'm gonna have to."

Thus began his long walk. He set out from Pha Khao, unarmed and bearing only a change of clothes, a sleeping bag, and the same food provisions as his four Meo guides, a one-week supply of plain mountain rice. As they moved northward from Pha Khao, which was twenty miles south of the Communist-neutralist stronghold on the Plaine, the five men traveled almost entirely by night, staying atop the high ridges when they could and chopping their way through the jungle, rather than risking exposure on open trails when they had to descend into the valleys. Never certain whether they were encountering

friends or hostile Meo groups who had joined the Pathet Lao, as some had done, Buell and his four trackers walked boldly into every tribal village or encampment they encountered. It astonished him to discover that so many villagers already knew who he was. Although they had heard of Tan Pop, most of them were thoroughly bewildered by what had happened to them in recent months. Their villages had been raided by North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops, their rice and opium stores plundered. Many of their men had been drafted to work as coolies for the enemy, and some of the young men had been taken away to serve as soldiers. Word quickly passed by runner from village to village that it was better to flee when the Communists appeared than to remain and face forced labor with their military units.

Buell and his companions remained with each village long enough to describe Vang Pao's strategy for resisting the Communists. He hoped to harass them to distraction. Some of the villages already knew and were sending guerrilla units into the valleys to blow up trucks and ambush enemy units on the roads around the Plaine. Others were completely uninformed. Buell explained that Touby Ly Fong, who as a gesture to the mountain tribes had been appointed Minister of Health and Education in the Vientiane Government, supported Vang Pao's plan and that the colonel needed only the support of the people to hold fast against the enemy. Many of the Meo men were anxious to join Vang Pao's army and went south to Pha Khao to enlist. Most were urged to remain where they were in order to protect their villages and raise fresh crops. After one or two nights in a village, Pop sent a runner back to Pha Khao to report the new refugees' location and needs. Then he and his guides accepted enough rice to carry them through a few more days of their arduous journey, and departed, heading northward close to the western edge of the Plaine.

In one small encampment where the refugees were just beginning to build huts for a new village on a previously uninhabited mountain, he was greeted with mixed joy and concern. The villagers urged him to enter a small hut. Before he ducked through the doorway he heard the blubbing chant of a Meo shaman and knew that someone inside was sick or dying. It was difficult to adjust his eyes to the gloom of the hut, but when he did, he saw the shaman crouched over a young man

who lay near the small open fire at the base of the center pole of the building. The young man's left hand was hanging by strings of rotting flesh to a swollen, blood-caked wrist. The smell of gangrene was heavy in the hut. Edgar squatted beside the fire and examined the foul wound. Shattered bone ends protruded through blackened muscle and skin tissue. Above the wrist, the forearm was peppered with smaller wounds, and one huge chunk had been torn away below the elbow, completely severing tendons and muscle and exposing more shattered bone.

"How did it happen?" Edgar asked.

The young man smiled through his throbbing pain. "A tree exploded," he said. He had touched a booby trap.

"Take him outside where I can see what I'm doing," said Edgar to his companions, who lifted the young man and carried him out the door.

"Get some *lau lau* down him," said Buell to the Meo guide, who later was to lose his own life to a land mine. "I'm going to take that arm off. If I don't, this man ain't gonna live more than a couple more days."

"The spirits will not like that, Tan Pop," said the Meo. "The Meo believe that if a man loses any part of his body he loses a good spirit as well. It is forbidden to cut the body. Maybe it is better if you let this man die."

Patiently, Pop explained to the wounded man, to the shaman, and to the village leaders that the wound was rotten with gangrene. No matter what prayers were offered to the spirits, the man could not live. While he was not a doctor and had never performed such an operation as this, he believed that he could save the man's life by cutting off the rotten part of his arm. He had a small amount of medicine called penicillin that was more powerful than the spirits and would make the wound heal after it was cut. The man must decide whether he wanted a chance to survive with half an arm, or die. Buell went back inside the hut and sat beside the fire as the village leaders and the wounded man heatedly discussed what Pop had told them. Then the *taesing* of the village entered the hut and squatted beside him.

"Tan Pop, we pray that your medicine is stronger than the spirits.

You may take the man's arm. We will give it a Meo burial. If the man dies, we will bury him with it. If he lives, he will remember where his arm is buried and return to it when he is ready to die."

Buell boiled the blade of a razor-sharp knife and made a sterile pitch of boiled tree sap while the patient drank down a pint of *lau lau*. By the time the knife was ready, the man lay in a stupor on his pallet outside the hut.

"If I knew what I was doin'," the farmer muttered to himself, "I could probably save a few inches of this arm below the elbow. But I reckon I'd better handle this boy the same as if I was butcherin' an animal and take it off at the joint. I'll cut a flap of skin to tuck over the end of it, though."

While his companions restrained the mostly listless patient, Edgar dismembered the arm, neatly severing tendons, ligaments and muscle at the elbow. With the pitch of boiled tree sap he cauterized the bleeding wound, drew the skin flap tight and cauterized it, too. Then he injected penicillin all around the stump and wrapped it tightly with a clean cotton cloth. Later that day, with the litter-borne living remainder of the deceased in interested attendance, a funeral was held for the shattered dead hand and arm. The man lived, as did all three dozen of the amputees operated on by the Indiana farmer during his decade in the mountains of Laos. And the old spirit-fear of cutting or losing any member of the body is only rarely encountered among the Meo today.

After burying their companion near the junction of the pathways where the land mine exploded, Edgar and his remaining three guides returned to the jungle and remained in silence for the rest of the day, not far from the scene of the explosion. At nightfall they resumed their wearying, hacking progress toward Phou Vieng. "We're goin' sideways more'n we're goin' ahead," Buell complained, but they continued through that night and the next. On the following day they returned to the pathway and almost immediately were upon an old village they had hoped to bypass. It was not Meo, and the guides were fearful of entering it.

"When Vang Pao says we need to win the people over and have

their support, he don't just mean the Meo people," Buell lectured his companions. "This looks like a Lao Thung village. They're good people if you give 'em half a chance. I've doctored 'em," he added, remembering the baby he had tried to save from the body of the dead woman near Lhat Houang.

Like the Meo guides, the leaders of the Lao Thung village were suspicious of the strangers and at first urged them to hurry on. In Lao Thung, as in Meo and many other primitive languages, the word for stranger and enemy is the same. The more remote tribal people had found little reason, historically, to make a distinction between the two. The men of the Lao Thung village, two of whom carried crossbows with strings tautly drawn, carefully avoided abrupt hostile gestures, but their meaning was clear as they pointed along the trail toward Phou Vieng and said "Meo... Meo... Phou Vieng."

Buell smiled. Discovering that the leader of the village spoke Lao, he asked if he could sit in the shade for a few moments and talk. The village leader agreed. Within two hours most of the men of the Lao Thung village had formed a circle around Edgar, who sat with his legs crossed under an acacia tree. Dramatically, he described the mass migration of the Meo and the activities of the Pathet Lao on the Plaine des Jarres. They asked questions about Vang Pao and his plans for resistance. Would Vang Pao protect them, too? Yes, he told them. Anyone who wished to join in the resistance against the Communists would be protected by Vang Pao. Moreover, if the people needed food, or if they were driven from their village and needed refugee relief, the United States and the Royal Government of Laos would bring it to them from the air. Pop would see to that. Touby Ly Fong, himself, was in charge of the refugee program for the Lao Government. By noontime, the village leaders had agreed to cast their lot with the Meo guerrillas. Even the distrustful Meo guides were convinced of the villagers' sincerity when the leader accompanied them along the mountain pathway to serve as their interpreter and sponsor in a half-dozen other small Lao Thung villages along the way to Phou Vieng. Each of the villages agreed to join the movement, and Edgar carefully noted their names and locations in his diary.

Early the next morning, after walking less than an hour, they were

interrupted on the path by twenty Meo men walking briskly toward them.

"*Nhajong*, Tan Pop," the leader of the group hailed Edger. "We are of the Mua clan. We have come to escort you to Phou Vieng. Our agents told us yesterday that you were approaching."

"The Mua clan? One of my best friends is a Mua," said Pop, thinking of Chung, whom he had not seen or heard from since Bangkok.

"I know," said the leader. "Chung has told us much about Tan Pop."

"He must of told you before we left the Plaine last year, then," Buell retorted. "Chung's down in Bangkok."

"No, Tan Pop. Chung is here, in Phou Vieng. He wanted to come with us to meet you, but he could not leave his radio."

Edgar quickened his pace toward Phou Vieng. A year ago, when he first arrived in Laos, he had wondered if there ever would come a time when he would feel at home with any of the people of Laos. It never entered his mind that he might form natural friendships with men as alien to him as the Caribe Indians had been to Columbus. Now he found himself rushing to meet Mua Chung in a remote mountain village far removed by geography, tradition, and centuries of isolation from any contact with the civilization from which Edgar Buell had sprung. And he realized that this tribal mountain boy was, without reservation, one of his closest friends on earth.

For Chung it was the same. Their greeting was as if neither recognized a difference in age or culture. The warm feeling of mutuality even transcended their common bond of shared experience in Lhat Houang. It was simple friendship, wordlessly understood, like the bond between men who have grown up together, without requirement for conscious explanation of its basis or intensity. Chung was eager for information.

"Have you seen Mi Si?" he asked. "I knew she went to Padong with Colonel Vang Pao. But I heard that Padong has fallen."

"She's all right, Chung. Her and her family left for Vientiane a few days before Padong was attacked. I told her you was coming back to Laos. That girl wants to get married in the worst way, Chung."

"We will marry when it is time," said Chung firmly. "Now I must

stay here, and it is not right to be married if we cannot be together." He explained that he had been assigned by U.S. Army Counter Intelligence to run teams of agents in the area around Phou Vieng and south of it on the Plaine itself. Some of Chung's agents even kept the Russian, Chinese, North Vietnamese, and Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay under observation and reported by radio to him each week. Chung passed his information directly to American officers in Bangkok, and they in turn passed it along to Vang Pao in Pha Khao. "It would be better if I reported directly to Colonel Vang Pao," he said. "After all, I am Meo. But the Americans trained me and sent me here, and I must give them my first loyalty. When you return to Pha Khao or Vientiane, perhaps you will speak to the American officers about this. It is the same with Tseng."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know. In this area, someplace. His job is the same as mine. It is well that we do not know one another's location. If either of us is captured, he cannot betray the other."

Not long after Edgar arrived in the village, a drop plane from Vientiane swooped low over the mountain and disgorged a dozen bundles of heavy steel bars that dug small craters in the ground where they struck.

"Your supply system is working like a clock, Tan Pop," Chung said. "He drops steel bars today so that we can make knives. Next week he will drop a month's supply of rice. The next week after that, he will drop a month's supply of salt." He pointed to a short dirt airstrip that had been hacked by hand in the side of the mountain. "Sometimes a helicopter or a small plane will land and bring medicines so that I may be like Tan Pop and doctor the people."

"Are you gettin' more supplies than you need?"

"No," Chung laughed. "We have enough, but there cannot be too much. We have 1,300 people from the original village of Phou Vieng. In addition there are 1,400 refugees. And we share equally with 800 more people in one of the Lao Thung villages down the mountain."

Edgar told him about the Lao Thung villages he had visited the day before.

"Good. We will share with them, too. I am glad they have promised

to support Colonel Vang Pao. He believes that all of the people of Laos must have unity in order to have peace and to prosper in the future. We must forget old hatreds. I believe that, too. Wherever I go, we will share equally with the Lao Thung or the Lao in the valley or with any other group that wants to share with us. It is a new way for our country. We will come together as your people in America have done."

That night they joined the other leaders of Phou Vieng for the first Meo feast Edgar had experienced since walking out of Pha Khao. In most of the villages where he had slept during his long trek through the mountains he had eaten only rice and vegetables, like his refugee hosts. Occasionally there was a single chicken for a group of twenty diners, or a small antelope to be shared with an entire village, but meat was scarce. Here at Phou Vieng, which had never been raided by the enemy or evacuated, chickens, domesticated razorback pigs, fish from the river below the mountain, and wild game were plentiful. A wiry man to begin with, Buell realized how emaciated he had become in the course of this long walk. His ribs made deep rills along his chest like the corrugated surface of a washboard, and his abdomen had shrunk beneath his rib cage. (Several weeks later he discovered that his weight had fallen, during the long walk, from 136 to 98 pounds.) Even so, he felt surprisingly fit, and it took little of the abundance of meats on the table to fill him.

As they returned to Chung's hut long after dark, Edgar noticed a rustling in the underbrush at the edge of the village.

"Look over there. Looks like two little flashlights shining in the dark. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was a cat."

Chung laughed. "It is a cat, Tan Pop. A tiger. They come every night and wait close by the village for a pony or a dog to wander near them. That one is too bold and has come too close. The guards will kill him."

As Edgar stood transfixed by the gleaming eyes, he saw a flash and heard the loud report of an M-1 rifle. For a few moments the tiger thrashed in the bushes and then was still. "They got him," said Chung nonchalantly. "Come, let us sleep. It is late."

Pop spread his sleeping bag on a bamboo pallet beside Chung's in the tiny six-by-ten-foot shack where the Meo intelligence operative

slept beside his radio. It was the first completely peaceful night's sleep he had enjoyed since leaving Pha Khao more than a month ago. In the morning, Chung produced his only luxury: a large cup of steaming black coffee. Nothing in Vientiane, Bangkok, or even Steuben County could have enhanced Edgar's feeling of well-being as he lay in his sleeping bag, drinking coffee and talking to his old friend.

For two days Edgar felt as if he had begun a vacation in a luxurious mountain retreat, and he was tempted to prolong it, but he knew that he had to move on. He had at least two more major refugee encampments to visit, and the walk would take many more days. Early on the third morning Buell and his three companions shouldered their scanty backpacks and resumed their tiresome journey through jungle and across mountains east of Phou Vieng. Chung waved sadly as they disappeared down the path.

At their first stop, a busy village called Bouam Long, Buell was joyfully greeted by a prepossessing Meo who carried a light machine pistol and wore a bandolier of extra ammunition clips across his chest. His appearance was so fierce that for a moment Edgar was frightened, but then he realized that he had seen the man before. It was Mua Shu Fu, one of Vang Pao's companions on the night Edgar was brought into the confidence of the Meo at the small restaurant in Lhat Houang.

"You did not know it, but we made our plans then," explained Mua Shu Fu that evening. "When the day of evacuation came, I walked up here with my men, and we have been here since, attacking the enemy around Ban Ban and destroying his trucks."

The Meo leader told Pop of a rich village near the Plaine which, like his own and Chung's, was settled by members of the Mua clan. "You should go there now," he said. "They have plenty to eat, and they are very wealthy for Meo. Many refugees have settled with them. But soon they will all be refugees. I tell them this, but they will not listen. They are too close to the enemy. Very soon he will attack them and either capture their people or drive them away. They will need your help."

Wearily Buell and his Meo guides prepared to set out again, in search of the rich village that was perilously close to an enemy en-

campment at Ban Ban. It was an extraordinary Meo village because it rested near the foot, rather than on the crest, of a 3,500-foot mountain called Phu San. Many years ago, the guerrilla leader had explained, an extremely ambitious family of the Mua clan had taken the unusual step of descending from the mountaintop to a low-slope altitude of only 500 feet. At first they had been discouraged by the soggy, tropical warmth of their new homestead, so close to the valley, but in time they had cultivated 500 acres of citrus trees and were raising two crops of rice each year. Moreover, they had located a plot of superb poppy land, and theirs was the best opium grown in Xieng Khouang Province. In the years since the settlement began it had accumulated more than 300 scrawny razorback hogs and many water buffalo. The people were led by a pair of energetic brothers, both of whom had served with the French Army and had become educated. They hoped that other Meo people would follow their example and cultivate the rich lower slopes. Now that war had dislocated most of the Meo around the Plaine, they were uneasy. They had taken in many refugees from other beleaguered villages. But neither of the brothers wanted to abandon what they had worked so hard to build. They hoped that the enemy would leave them alone.

Mua Shu Fu let Pop and his companions join a patrol of irregular soldiers who were going down from Bouam Long toward Phu San mountain, where the extraordinary village was located. After two nights in the jungle the guerrilla patrol put them on the path to Phu San and left them. The next day they were greeted at the foot of the mountain by a dignified man leading a group of Meo toward them on the trail.

"Nhajong, Tan Pop. We heard you were coming." Buell was startled by the speed with which the mountain grapevine seemed to pass information concerning his whereabouts. "I am Teu Lu. This is my brother Blea Vu," he said, indicating a portly, balding man whose scrubbed face was wreathed in the crinkles of a broad, welcoming smile.

The brothers proudly showed him their village and the many new huts that had been erected for the 3,000 refugees who had settled around it. "We think we are safe here," said Blea Vu. "The enemy

has not bothered us and surely, if he planned to attack, he would have done so by now."

Like Phou Vieng, it was a pleasant place, and Edgar felt unusually comfortable and secure as he visited with the villagers and the refugees, trying to determine their needs. On the afternoon of the third day, a Meo scout ran breathlessly into the village and proceeded directly to Teu Lu's bamboo-and-thatch house. "Pathet Lao are coming," he panted.

"How many?" asked Teu Lu.

"I saw many. I did not count them."

"Probably a Pathet Lao patrol," said Blea Vu. "They come this way often, but they do not bother us."

As darkness fell, Edgar noticed many of the refugees leaving their huts after their evening meal. Quietly they disappeared into the bamboo thickets along the forested slopes of the mountain.

"They have heard that the Pathet Lao are near," said Blea Vu. "They go to sleep in the jungle because they fear the enemy will attack. We don't believe he will."

"Maybe we should sleep in the jungle, too, just to be safe," said Edgar.

"It is not necessary," said Blea Vu.

With mixed feelings of exhaustion and apprehension Buell zipped himself into his sleeping bag and dozed off. He was awakened by an urgent hand on his shoulder.

"Hurry, Tan Pop," whispered Blea Vu. "We were wrong." Suddenly a burst of automatic weapons fire stirred an explosive flurry of grass dust as it ripped through the roof of the exposed house. "We have no soldiers and few weapons. We cannot defend ourselves. We must flee."

Quickly Edgar and Blea Vu joined a growing crowd of villagers who were running in panic away from the gunfire on the eastern edge of the village. "Stay with me, Tan Pop," Blea Vu called. "My brother and I will lead them. You must help us." Then, through the night, all of the next day, and the following night the three men walked at the head of a seemingly endless line of stunned evacuees who had thought they were safe at Phu San. Behind Pop and the two brothers, forming a straggling, thin column, were 5,000 people. On the second night

they arrived back at Bouam Long where the tough guerrilla leader who had sent Pop to Phu San grimly refrained from saying "I told you so."

Bouam Long nestled in a bowl-like declivity high on a mountainside. A ridgeline that dropped in steep limestone cliffs on three sides of the bowl made the village seem as safe as a fortress. The 5,000 refugees from Phu San settled like campers in a peaceful park, forming family groups and clan campgrounds around the edges of their host village, whose 2,000 residents loaned firewood and helped them erect small lean-to shelters. By dusk most of the refugees, exhausted from their ordeal, were asleep. On the second day many of them began cutting stout bamboo poles and dragging them to the encampments. They were preparing to erect a new refugee village around the old one. Again, at dusk, most of them fell into exhausted sleep. The gunfire broke out at about midnight.

Edgar rushed from the hut of Mua Shu Fu within seconds after the first shots were fired. From the tops of the cliffs around the village he could see the bright flashes of the Pathet Lao guns as they poured rifle and machine-gun bullets on the villagers below. The security of the natural limestone walls around the bowl of Bouam Long had proved woefully false. Enemy soldiers were perched along the entire semicircular ridge with a clear field of fire on the helpless refugees. As at Phu San, thousands of people were running in panic away from the gunfire. But they halted in a thickening bunch at the open end of the bowl. Pop trotted over to the frightened mass of people and discovered why. His host, the Meo guerrilla leader, had blocked the way out with twenty armed men of his irregular force, letting only women, children, and old people pass.

"Every man over fourteen years old must stay and fight," Mua Shu Fu shouted again and again. "We cannot all panic just because the enemy shoots at us. We must stand and fight. Every man over fourteen! If you try to leave with the women and children, I will kill you!"

Urgently he organized a bizarre defense force, assigning dozens of Meo with crossbows and muskets to fight in squads under the leadership of his own rifle-carrying guerrilla soldiers. As if startled by the

sudden show of resistance after what had looked like a complete rout, the enemy soldiers stopped firing, and the guerrilla leader ordered his men forward, toward the cliffs.

"You, Tan Pop," he called. "Find Blea Vu and Teu Lu and lead the women and children away from here. Take them to Phou Vieng. They will be safe there."

With the brothers at his side shouting to the people to follow, Edgar hurried to the head of the throng of refugees and began the wearying trek back to Phou Vieng. Less than three weeks ago he had left Chung's village with three companions. Now he was returning with more than 6,000.

Chung and the leaders of Phou Vieng did all that they could to help the sudden influx of refugees, but within three days it was apparent that what had seemed like abundance to only 3,000 people now barely made starvation rations for 9,000. It was small consolation to learn from a runner on the second day that the guerrilla leader of Bouam Long and his instant defense force had successfully driven the Pathet Lao away during the battle that followed the evacuation. But Mua Shu Fu did not want his evacuees to return yet, because he feared another attack almost immediately. Pop sent a runner with an urgent request for more supplies.

On Edgar's third day at Phou Vieng an airplane appeared in the distance, its small engine droning ever louder as it neared the mountain.

"It is silver, kill it," cried a Meo soldier standing guard near the airstrip when the plane banked and approached the slash in the mountainside. The Meo soldiers had seen dozens of unpainted Soviet cargo planes passing overhead on their route from Hanoi to the Plaine des Jarres and angrily had taken to firing their rifles at each one that drew near. The friendly airplanes that had come to Phou Vieng in the past had been camouflaged with olive-drab paint.

"Hold your fire," called Edgar, who saw that the gleaming aluminum plane was too small to be a Soviet cargo ship. "If he wants to land, let him. Then if he ain't friendly, you can always kill him when he's on the ground."

Patiently, the squad of soldiers kept their rifles trained on the small plane, but held their fire as it thumped onto the dirt runway and quickly braked to a halt. The door on the left side of the cabin popped open and an American pilot whom Pop had never seen before leaned out. He was wearing the pale-gray flying coveralls of Air America.

"Are you Pop Buell?" he called as Edgar ran to the plane.

"Sure am. Who are you?" Pop shouted over the roar of the idling engine.

"I'm Garry Muhlberg. They said I was supposed to pick up a diplomat named Pop Buell up here someplace. I saw this airstrip and came on in."

"Diplomat? Godalmighty, I guess I am, when you come to think of it. Diplomacy ain't all white shirts, nice pants, and money runnin' outa your pockets, is it?"

"After seeing you, I guess not. They want you to come back to Pha Khao and Vientiane. How long you been gone?"

"I don't know. What day is it?"

"It's September 27th. How's the flying up here?"

"I wouldn't know about that," said Pop. "I left Pha Khao on August 1st. And it's September 27th now. I been walkin' for fifty-eight days."

When he ran back to the radio hut to collect his gear, Chung handed him an envelope. "This is money and a letter for Mi Si," he said. "I have no use for money here. Tell her to go to school. And tell her that I love her. There is no one else. I will return to her as soon as I can."

Chapter 10

All the while I am working for your people I got the ideal statement from my old Lord Buddha, saying that "A good employee has to show his ability, his attempts, his obeisance, his fortitude, his intelligence, his industry and his sincerity to his own boss. But those bosses have to show or give a kind sympathy, soft consolation and gladly reward to their own employees, too."

—THE LETTERS OF THONGSAR BOUPHA

THE headquarters compound of U.S. AID in Laos was as dismally appointed as a prison camp for chained felons on a Mississippi road gang. Within an enormous circular enclosure of chain-link and barbed-wire fence, tucked out of sight a half-mile from Vientiane's busy morning market place, squatted a heterogeneous mixture of frame and concrete structures—houses, office buildings, quonset huts, warehouses, a garage, grocery store, cocktail lounge, coffee shop—erected without apparent esthetic rhyme in helter-skelter disorder, some tilted in the Lao fashion, some firmly anchored to American foundations in steel-reinforced concrete, all thrown together in perfect concert with the ghastly disorder of Vientiane itself, for the comfort, convenience, and labor, when there was any, of the members of the American mission. A half-tilted, half-grounded split-level outhouse near the quonset post office, behind the lapstraked post-exchange grocery store, bore a fading painted sign above its wooden stairs announcing "Rural Development." From this shaky little mess of a building that looked, and was, as impermanent as the program it was designed to headquarter, operated the refugee relief program which now, largely due to

the efforts of Edgar Buell and a few other crude rural Americans like him, was the principal source of food, clothing, agricultural assistance, and hope for half a million people in Laos. The "temporary" program, which was to continue through the decade with no end in sight, cost the American Government upward of \$10 million a year, but if the true measure of its effectiveness was in how little of the refugee supplies were wasted, it was an extraordinary success. Virtually every pound of supplies that was dropped, parachuted, or landed in the jungles and mountains went into the stomachs, on the backs, or into the households of genuine refugees, not politicians. Edgar Buell, of course, was not the only Johnny Appleseed of democracy working wonders in the boondocks of Laos. Other Americans were as deeply touched by the plight of war refugees in other parts of the small country, and they, too, frequently risked their lives. Some of them—Bob Dakin, Aubrey Elliot, Jack Williamson, Tom Ward, Walt Cowart, to name a few—worked closely with Pop. Others performed their own miracles elsewhere in the country. But none stayed as long, managed as well, or made quite as many friends as Edgar. Nor did they have quite as much to do. About half of Laos's refugees were in Buell's northeastern section of the country. It was a huge program to stem from such an unprepossessing, even ramshackle, little building.

As he approached the building, Edgar instantly recognized the small, muscular figure sitting erectly, like a cavalryman at saddled attention, on the wooden steps beneath the Rural Development sign. It was Thongsar Boupha, and the expression on his freckled brown face was, as usual, beatific, with only a Buddha-like half-smile disturbing its repose. The smile opened around a mouthful of teeth as Buell approached.

"*Sawadi-baw*, Tan Daddy Pop," he cried. "I knew I would not have long to wait before you came."

Edgar hugged his old friend from the Plaine, gleefully expressing his joy at the unexpected reunion. "What do you mean, you wouldn't have long to wait? How long you been waitin'? Nobody knew I was comin' here today."

"I waited only half an hour, Daddy Pop," said Thongsar, whose English vocabulary had been strongly affected by his year as a

weapons instructor with the American military advisers at Khang Khay. "My Lord Buddha told me that you would come today. The time has come that I go to work for you to help bring a piece of peace to our people and drive away the red-eyed rascals. I, Thongsar Boupba, am here to become your good employee, absolutely."

"Come on in with me, Thongsar, and we'll git you a job," Edgar laughed, and the two walked arm in arm into the Rural Development office. While Thongsar waited in an anteroom, Buell called on his colleagues in the relief program, reviewing the expanded needs of Vang Pao's refugees in the northeast. After his long walk, the refugee count in the area around the Plaine des Jarres, alone, had grown close to 200,000, and an expanded program of relocation, resettlement, relief supplies, and agricultural planning had to be devised. There was much to do. As his fellow workers began drawing up orders for an expanded airlift and more refugee commodities, Edgar left the diary of his journey to be typed by a secretary. Then he called on the personnel office to secure a suitable position for his friend who waited patiently outside. At the time, it was axiomatic that any Lao national who spoke passable English and did not wear the uniform of the enemy army was instantly employable by the American AID program, if only as an interpreter, since almost none of the Americans in the country spoke Lao.

"I've sent him to every office in the American mission—here, to the embassy, and to the offices of the Army and Air Force attachés. I'm sorry, Pop, but no one wants to hire this man," said the personnel officer of U.S. AID. "I can't explain why. Nobody wants him. That's all."

Buell was flabbergasted. "What in tarnation you been doin' since I seen you last, Thongsar?" he asked. "Nobody here wants to give you a job."

"I have not worked since I left Khang Khay, Daddy," said Thongsar, who seemed neither surprised nor concerned. "It is true that when I sought work here, many men wanted to talk with me. But each one said there is no job for me. Perhaps they think I am stupid? *Bopinyan*. No matter. I will work for you."

"You wait right here, Thongsar. I'm gonna get to the bottom of this." Buell hurried down the narrow, linoleum-covered hallway to

the office of his old friend Henri Guillou. The handsome, middle-aged Frenchman had been a civil servant in the French colonial administration that was swept out by the Vietminh in 1954. Posted to Laos and married to a Vietnamese woman, he had remained behind when his countrymen went home. Now he watched with a certain unhappy bewilderment as the Americans muddled through Southeast Asia making the same kinds of judgmental and moral errors that depleted the French imperial forces they replaced. As an alien employee of the U.S. Government, he was glad to be working for Rural Development, where he at least felt a sense of accomplishment in helping the people of his adopted country while at the same time living in reasonable comfort on an ungenerous salary, far below that paid to any of the Americans.

"Oui, Pop, I know about your friend Thongsar," said Guillou. "He is a brilliant man. His English, I think, is better than mine, no? They are fools that they do not hire him."

"Tell me the truth, Henry," said Buell, pronouncing Henri in the Indiana fashion. "Is it a security problem? Do they think he's an enemy agent?"

"No, no, Pop. It is not that. After all, this man worked for the American Army, no? No one suspect him. That is not it."

"Well, what the hell is it, then?"

"This Thongsar, he is very smart, no? Quickly you realize that. He does not keep silent. He speak up clearly, right away. Nobody likes that here, I think. He do not act like a native, like the other Lao, no? How you say in America? He is 'uppity'? That is why they do not like him."

"Jesus Christ," Buell muttered. "Some people can't give up havin' niggers back home, think they gotta make their own new ones out here." Thoughtfully he left Guillou's office, but by the time he had retraced his steps to the anteroom he was walking briskly.

"Come on, Thongsar," he called without breaking his stride. "We're goin' to the airport. You got a job as of right now, workin' for me."

"Yes, Daddy Pop, I know. My Lord Buddha, he told me."

For the next three months Edgar paid Thongsar's salary each week from his own pocket. It was equivalent to what the former Buddhist

priest would have received had he been employed by the U.S. mission. Within three weeks Thongsar had mastered the details of the entire loading and dispatching program of the refugee airlift, a substantial logistical challenge even for a trained freight and traffic manager. Two months later he was manager of the entire operation. After three months the embarrassed personnel officer shifted him to the official U.S. Government payroll, but only after four other offices in AID reconsidered their earlier rejections and attempted to hire Thongsar away from Pop. Share and share alike, the Meo say.

Buell accomplished several other necessary functions of his own peculiar shirt-sleeve diplomacy during the brief return to Vientiane. Putting first things first, he made inquiries in the small Meo community of the city and located Mi Si and her family. They had walked the hundred-odd miles from Padong to Vientiane without incident. Mi Si's father, slightly high on opium most of his waking hours, had insinuated himself into the local drug trade through connections he had made during his days as a prolific opium trader in Xieng Khouang. While working for others was not as profitable as his own business had been, he managed to rent a small Lao house near the Mekong River and, except for the almost intolerable heat and humidity of the tropical riverside, the family was comfortable. Mi Si was desperate for news of Chung. She was deeply saddened by the long separation from her lover, but not angry. After reading the letter he sent with the envelope of money that Pop transmitted to her, she no longer doubted his love or his determination to return to her. She promised to attend school, but dutifully she gave the money to her father, who diverted it to his own vice. It would have been no consolation to Chung to know that the money was spent with extreme care and went far in supporting his prospective father-in-law's habit. As a professional trader, he got his opium wholesale and smoked nothing but the best stuff from Sam Neua Province.

Before Pop left her, Mi Si thrust upon him a love letter to Chung, the first in a busy correspondence that paved the way for regular postal service between Vientiane and the many refugee villages in the north country. It occurred to Pop that as long as the Air America

planes were operating so extensively in the area, dropping relief supplies and landing frequently on the crude mountain strips, they might as well carry mail, too. And the Meo, while mostly illiterate, were staunch believers in written correspondence, prizing friends and village scribes who could read and write and thus could perform that service for them. In time the postal service grew to become a rather large-scale unofficial adjunct to the refugee program. Uncumbered by such formalities as postage stamps and ZIP codes, it operated with far greater ease and at least as much efficiency as the Central Post Office of New York City.

After leaving Mi Si's house with the letter, Edgar steered his borrowed jeep through a maze of rutted dirt trails that wound through a shantytown of hovels made from scrap lumber and hammered oil drums, not far from the AID compound. He stopped in front of one of the shacks, lifted a case of canned milk from the back seat of the jeep, and carried it to the doorless entrance. Before he could speak, a woman carrying a well-clothed infant in her arms burst through the doorway, laughing happily. It was the wife of the I.V.S. cook at Lhat Houang. Pop, who had arranged for her continued care while he was away from Vientiane, visited her whenever he could and brought food and clothes for her tiny son. Her husband, who had been left behind when the evacuation planes fled from Phong Savan, last had been reported working as a forced laborer for the Pathet Lao.

For a few minutes Edgar held the baby in his arms and chatted easily with the mother. Then the infant fidgeted and began to whimper for its mother's warmth. Edgar smiled and handed him back to her. "Little boy," he said, "you make it all worth while."

Buell also visited and renewed his increasingly close relationship with Touby Ly Fong, the King of the Meo, a short, portly tribal aristocrat of fifty whose urban sophistication and French education had neither bent, nor even dented, his deep attachment to his own people. Tan Touby combined the independence and alertness of a mountaineer with a shrewd intelligence and a strong grasp of the realities of political power. He had been given a ministerial post in the right-wing Gov-

ernment because the Meo, as the largest single minority ethnic group in Laos, seemed at the time to be the last desperate hope of saving the Government from the depredations of the Pathet Lao. Although he held what nominally was a minor post as Minister of Health and Education, Touby was acutely conscious of the fact that he sat in the catbird seat in the Vientiane Government, and he used his considerable diplomatic talents and an awareness of the power he held to get all that he could for his Meo people, while the getting was good. He eagerly supported Pop's burgeoning school system in the mountains of the northeast and applied enough pressure on his colleagues in the Government to assure at the very least that they would not stand in the way of it, even though Pop's own American mission had completely disowned the project. He also took charge, for the Lao Government, of Edgar's refugee relief program and watched over the importation and distribution of welfare commodities so sharply that they were probably the only goods brought into the country that actually reached their intended recipients without being decimated or at least halved by corrupt bureaucrats. For diplomatic reasons, like all American AID programs abroad, the refugee effort was ostensibly run by the local government. It was American-planned, American-purchased, and American-distributed, but it had to be handled every inch of the way by the Lao Government officials, and Tan Touby took his supervisory work seriously. It was well that he did. At one point earlier in the post-French history of Laos, Prince Souphanouvong briefly occupied a key post in a short-lived coalition government and had complete charge of all American AID funds and commodities in Laos. Most of the U.S. money and goods that did not go directly to his own Pathet Lao during that period were siphoned off by corrupt, non-Communist government officials working under the Prince, a fact attested to by the sudden influx on Vientiane's dirt streets of black Mercedes limousines, which they bought with the loot. Let it be said that the Red Prince never took a penny for himself. He was and is, in fact, one of the few scrupulously honest political leaders in Laos, and it is a pity that neither the French nor the Americans supported him two decades ago when he first sought to establish a non-aligned, corruption-free nationalist government. Instead they drove him into

the open arms of the Communists, and Laos, not to mention the rest of Southeast Asia, is still paying for that French and American mistake.

As Minister of Health, Tan Touby had foreseen a need for copious supplies of medicines and some kind of a health program among Vang Pao's beleaguered people in the northeast. Unfortunately, the Americans at that time were relatively indifferent to the country's large-scale public health needs, and there were no funds in the AID budget for the establishment of a rural medical program or for the purchase of medicine. Like his friend Edgar Buell, Touby was an accomplished scrounger, and he had acquired sufficient Lao Government funds—money that came from the Americans for other purposes—to purchase large quantities of penicillin, aspirin, dysentery medicines, antimalarial chlorazine, worm medicines, conjunctivitis salves, equipment for medical aid stations, and other supplies in Bangkok. He was saving these goods in warehouses scattered around Vientiane against the day when Vang Pao would need them. He needed them now. This was the purpose of Pop's visit. He arranged to begin supplying drugs and equipment by air to the people in the mountains, and he promised Tan Touby that he would do what he could to establish some kind of regular medical program to serve all of the refugee encampments, as well as Vang Pao's irregular army.

As his last chore before leaving Vientiane, Pop shopped around for a local medical expert to help him in establishing a health program among the Meo. It was like searching for a college professor at a longshoremen's shape-up. But a handsome 24-year-old Lao named Douang Chanh Chanthavong, who had learned of Pop's search, sought him out. Chanh was delicate, almost effeminate, in manner, not unusual among Lao men, but he was sturdily built and spoke firmly and decisively of his prowess as a paramedic, a trained technician with enough experience to prescribe for most of the common diseases of the country and to perform minor surgery when necessary. He was clearly a man of confidence, compassion, and intelligence.

"Where did you learn your medicine?" Pop inquired.

"I worked four years as the chief assistant to Dr. Tom Dooley."

The next morning Buell took Chanh with him to Pha Khao, where

the Lao technician started a 30-bed tent hospital in collaboration with the American Green Beret medic attached to Vang Pao's headquarters. "How is he? Does he know what he's doin'?" Buell asked the superbly trained American sergeant. "He's damned good, Pop," said the sergeant. "Almost as good as a real doctor. That Dooley guy must have been a helluva good teacher."

Buell helped Chanh erect a medical training school at Pha Khao. The old farmer served, as time permitted, as a visiting professor of general medicine, imparting advice from his growing emergency medical experience in Laos, as well as from what he could remember of First Aid courses he took years before in the Future Farmers of America and in Army basic training. Chanh, he could see, was considerably more sophisticated in his medical knowledge, and Pop willingly let him shoulder the burden of teaching the medics and setting them up to practice in the growing number of refugee villages. Within two years the young Lao had trained more than 100 simple practitioners and placed them strategically around the northeast, thereby bringing the area its first crude but regular medical attention in history. Probably the best measure of the effectiveness of the program was the infant mortality rate, which was roughly 70 percent before the program began. Within a few years, infant mortality fell dramatically to just under 30 percent. Chanh also built a modern 100-bed hospital at a place called Sam Thong, which was to become Pop's semi-permanent mountain headquarters in Laos. There he performed extraordinary feats of surgery, debriding severe head and gut wounds and skillfully amputating hopelessly damaged arms and legs with a surgical saw, not at the joint as Pop had been forced to do. He could handle almost any medical emergency, but when one of the Filipino doctors from Operation Brotherhood was available, Chanh served as a skillful assistant. Felix Romero and the other doctors agreed that Chanh was the best paramedic they had ever encountered. If he had claimed to be a doctor, few would have doubted him.

It was a happy accident, therefore, that Buell was in an uncommon hurry to get back to the mountains on the day that he hired Medic Chanh. Like Indiana hog traders and Meo mountaineers, Edgar usually made up his mind about a man after one good look at his face during

an introductory conversation. While he was not particularly charmed by Chanh's direct but somewhat fey personality, he instantly felt a sense of professional confidence in the young man, and he hired him on the spot. Since they left the very next morning for Pha Khao, there was no time to drop by the headquarters bungalow of the Dooley Foundation in Vientiane to double-check Chanh's self-proclaimed recommendation. Had Edgar done so, a superb rural medical program probably would have died aborning. For Chanh was a complete fraud. He had hung around one of the two Dooley hospitals in Laos for a few months and picked up a smattering of information, although he never met Dr. Dooley. He also had worked as a menial at the O.B. hospital in Vientiane. On his own, he had begun to practice simple medicine among his poverty-stricken countrymen around the capital city. Like his sponsor, Edgar Buell, he was almost entirely self-taught. In any other setting but Laos he might have become a great medical con man. Such bizarre characters crop up from time to time in the Western countries, performing delicate neurosurgery or posing as general practitioners or, more frequently, as psychiatrists, but they invariably have the advantage of access to a substantial body of medical literature from which they have learned medical nomenclature, diagnostic techniques, anatomy, and other essentials. Chanh had never seen a medical textbook or journal in his life. He was simply an extraordinarily talented empirical physician who learned by trial and error. Through accident of birth, culture, and war he spent his best years in the charitable practice of medicine among people who desperately needed him, so he should not be condemned for his fraud. Besides, it beat hell out of menial labor, which is all that his birth and education qualified him to perform. Unhappily the trace of larceny or deceit that led to his gigantic misrepresentation ultimately led to Chanh's downfall. It was as much a loss to the profession of medicine in Laos as it was to him. Chanh's position eventually gave him control over large quantities of American medicines and medical supplies, and he began funneling more and more of them into a lucrative black market that became one of the principal medical supply sources of the Pathet Lao. A small amount of such larceny—even trading with the enemy—is expected of any Southeast Asian who achieves a position

from which he can perpetrate it. But Chanh became too greedy, and he was discovered. Not long after his exposure, he disappeared, whether to assume a new identity elsewhere or to resume the practice of medicine for the Pathet Lao, no one knows to this day.

When Edgar first brought Chanh to Pha Khao, Colonel Vang Pao seemed far more the confident military leader than he had months before after his untrained troops tried valiantly but unsuccessfully to hold Padong against the 18-hour Pathet Lao attack. His guerrilla army now numbered 5,000 men. Their American advisers had equipped most of them with old U.S. carbines and M-1s, and there were a few more sophisticated items such as bazookas, light machine guns, light and heavy mortars, and recoilless rifles, but neither the Green Berets nor the C.I.A. were overgenerous in their allotment of ammunition to the irregulars, and Vang Pao was in no position to withstand a concerted enemy drive against his positions. The long dry season had begun, and his intelligence reports from the Plaine told of heavy movement of troops and supplies down Highways 6 and 7 from North Vietnam and along the road from Ban Ban to Khang Khay. It was clear that the Pathet Lao, who were now engaged in a three-sided negotiation with the right-wing Government and Souvanna Phouma's neutralists, seeking a formula for a peaceful coalition government, were preparing a big military push to enhance their position in the negotiations. Had it been the rainy season, the mud highways would have been impassable and the enemy's supply operation would have had to wait. But with clear skies, scores of North Vietnamese trucks were barreling along the dry roads, and it would not be long before the Pathet Lao army was sufficiently re-equipped to begin a major offensive.

The colonel anxiously sought to devise a way to disrupt the enemy's supply line and thereby forestall serious enemy gains. He shared his concern with Edgar.

"You know, Colonel, I been up and down the road to Ban Ban a hundred times, I guess, and each time I went, I counted the bridges between there and Khang Khay," said Pop. "There's six of 'em. There's also a dozen passes on that road where you could make a rock

slide so deep it'd take 'em three months to dig it out. If I could figure a way to get in close enough, I'd blow that road and those bridges for you. That'd sure slow 'em down."

Vang Pao looked at Buell with interest and respect. "You know demolitions, Tan Pop?" he asked.

"Used to teach demolition in the Army."

"Some day, then, you will blow that road for me. Now we cannot get close enough to it. I must disrupt the enemy's supply line by stinging him north of Ban Ban. That may slow him enough to get us safely through this dry season. But some day we will blow the road. It is not too soon to think about it."

Vang Pao's stinging tactics were enough to unbalance the enemy forces for a while, but they did not prevent a major attack in central Laos, or serious losses for the Meo, losses that he could ill afford. Edgar, meanwhile, braved enemy fire to hop from village to village, overseeing the resettlement of the ever-growing population of displaced Mao, Lao Thung, and lowland Lao who had fled before the aggressive enemy forces. Phou Vieng, heavily overpopulated after accepting the 6,000 refugees Pop had led out from besieged Bouam Long a few weeks before, was a particular problem, and he returned there to start planning the movement of many of the unfortunate Meo tribesmen to new, small refugee villages where they could make a start at becoming self-sufficient again. When he arrived, Chung told him that the enemy still had not succeeded in driving the guerrilla defenders from Bouam Long, but it looked as if they would bypass it and might soon strike Phou Vieng instead.

"One thing I've learned up here, Chung," said Edgar, smiling ruefully, "and that's to begin looking for a way out as soon as I come into one of these villages. If we get hit while I'm here, I'm goin' down that side of the mountain right there," he pointed to the westward slope, "toward the river. 'Cause the enemy's goin' to be comin' up the other side."

Chung was visiting Bouam Long, and Edgar was sleeping in his small shack two nights later when the first mortar shell landed on Phou Vieng with a loud *caar-r-r-umph*. The ordeal of escape under enemy fire was becoming routine. For the third time in a month he

joined the energetic brothers, Teu Lu and Blea Vu, at the head of a column of evacuees. The frightened mob of helpless people had been 5,000 at Phu San. Their number grew to more than 6,000 at Bouam Long. Now, reinforced by the residents and refugees of Phou Vieng, Pop found himself at the head of a throng of 9,000 displaced Meo, all of whom trusted him and the two brothers to lead them to safety. At the foot of the mountain the panicky evacuees moved in hurried disorder to the bank of the river, then stopped, their ranks swelling until the entire 9,000 were bunched on a few acres of ground.

"Why are they stoppin'?" Edgar called to Blea Vu. "We got to git across this river and head north to Phou Cum." The sounds of gunfire from the mountaintop had diminished, and Buell knew that the enemy probably had just discovered that Phou Vieng had been abandoned. Soon enemy troops would pursue the refugees down the mountain.

"It is the wrong time of the month, Tan Pop," replied Blea Vu. "The Meo have many taboos when the moon is waning. They will not enter the river because it is taboo to wet the body above the knees or below the shoulders at this time. The spirits of the water will make them sick. They refuse to cross."

"Tell 'em they have to cross the river. There ain't no other way."

"I agree. It is a foolish superstition. But they will not believe me if I tell them. Maybe they will listen to you, if you are stern with them."

As Blea Vu spoke, a mortar shell, launched from an enemy tube at the top of the mountain, thumped into the underbrush just yards away from the outer edge of the refugee throng. Moments later, another fell.

"If you people want to stay here and be killed by those mortars, it's all right with me," Buell screamed above the tumult. "But I'm scared, and I'm crossing that river. If the water makes me sick, I'll cure myself with medicine. Anybody wants to follow me can have medicine, too, if he needs it."

Hurriedly, then, he waded into the knee-deep water and began stumbling toward the opposite bank, twenty yards away. He glanced back as he reached the middle, not quite hip-deep. A Meo man near Blea Vu stepped hesitantly toward the river's edge. Buell continued

across. A third mortar shell dropped, showering dirt and branches over the refugees. Suddenly, a great swelling sound began, slowly and low like the response of a vast congregation to a priest's liturgical signal. Quickly it grew in volume and intensity to an indecipherable roar. Edgar looked back again. Nine thousand people, crying piercingly in defiance of the spirits, flailed through the taboo water in a disorderly stampede to safety.

Except for this incident, the evacuation was not very different from the three mass escapes Pop had led before the flight from Phou Vieng, or from fifteen other mass night-time escapes under enemy fire that he was to lead in the months and years to come. Each involved a dangerous, dreadfully uncomfortable forced march over jungle pathways, sometimes hacking new trails in the darkness through the tangled undergrowth of the forest. Each included thousands of wretched people, driven from their homes, separated in many cases from their closest relatives, often sick, always hungry and thirsty, but more frightened by the enemy behind them than by the unfamiliar wilderness ahead. But like the amputation of the young man's arm and the discontinuance of infectious tar applications in the accouchement of pregnant Lao Thung women, the river-crossing represented the beginning of the end of a harmful taboo among the primitive people. For centuries the Meo had suffered unnecessary diseases of the skin and internal organs caused entirely by their refusal to bathe except at very special times. For them, the river crossing was a watershed, so to speak, in the tribal history; because after that panicky experience in the night an uncannily rapid mountain grapevine quickly spread the word among all the Meo villages that the water taboo had been successfully defied under the inspiring leadership of Tan Pop Buell. Not one of the 9,000 who stampeded across the river suffered as much as a head cold from the experience. Almost miraculously, none were drowned or trampled, either. Edgar promptly capitalized on the notoriety gained for him by this startling feat of leadership. He ordered tons of soap for the refugee airlift, and wherever he, Blea Vu, and the others went, the story of the river-crossing at Phou Vieng was repeated, and the people were taught how to bathe. Most Meo

today bathe frequently. The new custom has done wonders for their health, as well as for their olfactory presence.

In the months of late 1961 and early 1962, the refugee program that had begun as an emergency operation during the previous winter became systematized and, except for constant harassment by Communist troops, a sense of near normalcy returned to most of the newly established villages on the perimeter of the Plaine. With one American helper, a sturdy six-foot Mormon youth of twenty-five named Walt Cowart, Edgar dispersed the refugees from the original seven overcrowded encampments to dozens of smaller mountain villages. Like an itinerant preacher in frontier America, he moved from village to village, carrying a bag of vegetable-garden seeds with which to begin putting the villagers back on their own feet as farmers, and he supervised the delivery of seed rice for new mountainside farms. Pop also resumed a long-suspended crusade. At several of the new refugee villages he and Walt succeeded in convincing the leaders that sweet potatoes were easier to grow and would make a far better cash crop than poppy, which requires special land and constant care, and still bears only one crop a year. From this beginning, Edgar was convinced, would come a joyous day when opium with all its attendant evils would no longer be the principal export of Laos. Unfortunately, while sweet potatoes would have made an excellent cash crop, there was no way to get them to any market where they could be sold. There were not even enough livestock to consume them. The Meo who took Edgar's advice and lost a year of opium production while gaining an overabundance of sweet potatoes shrugged philosophically—"even Tan Pop makes mistakes"—and went back to their favorite crop which, by packing a big punch in a small bulk, was easier to move to the willing markets of the world.

With Walt's help, Edgar established a mountain headquarters at a place called Long Tieng, a vast mountain plateau surrounded by limestone peaks and ridges, not far from Vang Pao's headquarters at Pha Khao. It was a breathtaking place, frequently shrouded in wisps of fog so that it seemed to emerge as the real embodiment of an ancient Chinese brush painting, bordered by the gnarled shapes of

stunted trees that clung precariously to the limestone cliffs around the plateaus. Near the center of this wide declivity in the ring of hill-tops was a lone karst outcropping, almost barren, that protruded from a moundlike field of white and red poppies like an erect nipple on earth's blushing breast.

Normally, a multimillion-dollar American field operation such as Edgar's, in a place like Long Tieng, would follow a Parkinsonian progression toward more American employees, U.S.-style buildings, power plants, air conditioners, paved roads, and clubby recreational facilities, which is precisely what happened to Long Tieng several years later, after Pop moved on to another forward base called Sam Thong. But wherever he went in northern Laos, Buell resisted Parkinson's law as firmly as he resisted the intrusions of enemy troops against the refugees. He refused not only to permit the beginnings of a Little America under his domain in the mountains, but he also refused to allow more than a handful of Americans to work in the mountains with him. He foresaw, as few others did, that an entirely new era was about to begin in Laos, and that the worst way to prepare for it would be to increase the primitive people's reliance on outsiders like him doing their work and thinking for them. Most Americans, he was certain, would shortly have to leave the tiny country, and the more adept the natives became at taking care of themselves, even handling their own refugee relief, the better off they would be. Consequently, he organized his refugee operations around a staff that was almost exclusively Meo and Lao. In this respect, Pop's operation was unique in the history of U.S.-Laos economic assistance programs. Necessary U.S. AID paperwork was accomplished by Americans and Lao Government office workers in Vientiane. But field operations were conducted with a bare minimum of U.S. supervisors, only Pop and his assistant Walt Cowart. The operation was unique in other respects, too. None of the native leaders who rose within Edgar's establishment was a member of the ruling elite, of a leading Lao family, or of a political power group. All were simple peasants, poorly educated, but instinctively shrewd and quick to learn. Among them were proved natural leaders such as Blea Vu, who became director of the refugee program in the Phou Vieng area. Others had not yet proved

themselves but were selected simply because Edgar sensed they would become leaders. Without exception, they came from the masses, from the base of Laos's social pyramid. As men who had either been exploited or, at the least, ignored all their lives by the ruling establishment, they were conscious of the ruinous effects of a corrupt officialdom upon the people. Consequently, with the exception of Medic Chanh and a few others, they presented a united front against bribery, graft, and corruption in distributing many millions of dollars' worth of food and other precious living commodities. One might shrug and say "So what?" to such an achievement, but in Southeast Asia, with a tradition of corruption that has reached all officials at all levels of business and government since prehistory, the establishment of an almost perfectly clean AID program, supervised by one old, unsophisticated Indiana farmer-volunteer and operated by an army of illiterate ragamuffins, was incredible. Pop organized his refugee relief staff with the expectation that they soon might have to carry on alone, with little or no help from the United States, once an agreement was reached between the warring factions of the country and among the major powers that had instigated the poor little country's troubles.

At the time, progress toward a neutrality agreement in Laos seemed painfully slow. After the ill-kept cease-fire had been agreed upon in May, the world powers, including Communist China and North Vietnam, convened a foreign minister's conference in Geneva for the purpose of drawing up an international accord that would guarantee the neutrality of Laos. Like the tripartite military talks in Laos, this conference had dragged on for months with little progress, prompting homesick Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to remark, impatiently, "One cannot sit indefinitely on the shores of Lake Geneva counting swans." Nevertheless, it was clear that an agreement was in the making, and it appeared almost certain that Prince Souvanna Phouma soon would assume power as the leader of a coalition that would give all three factions a voice in the country's affairs.

Both Edgar and Colonel Vang Pao were acutely conscious of the negotiations, because one of the main points of contention both at Geneva and among representatives of the three sides in Laos was the future status of the Meo. The chief United States negotiator, Am-

bassador Averell Harriman, and the right-wing Government of General Phoumi Nosavan, insisted that the Air America flights in support of the mountain refugees must be allowed to continue. The neutralists waxed hot and cold on the idea, and the Communists resisted it. Air America was, after all, the private airline of the C.I.A. For a time it looked as if the Meo refugees had become political coin to be sacrificed in the game of international politics. Regardless of who owned the airline, most of the refugees were doomed without airlifted supplies. But no matter what happened to the refugees, it was absolutely certain that an agreement on a coalition government in Laos and a guarantee of the country's neutrality by the major powers would mean an end to American military support of Vang Pao's irregular army, as well as of its parent, the ineffective Royal Army. This worried Vang Pao almost as much as the threatened severance of the relief lifeline to his refugee people, because he was convinced that the Communists would ignore the accords to be reached at Geneva just as they had flouted the formal cease-fire agreement the year before, and the enemy military pressure would continue regardless of the surface amity shown in a coalition government in Vientiane. Thus, even as enemy actions against the Meo continued through the dry season of 1962, Vang Pao began stockpiling all the arms and ammunition he could save against the day when the C.I.A. and American Special Forces advisers would be withdrawn and there no longer would be a military pipeline to draw upon. To strengthen his position closer to the Plaine des Jarres, the Meo guerrilla leader moved his headquarters from Pha Khao to Long Tieng, where a long airstrip had been built for Edgar's refugee relief activities. And Edgar prepared to move his own operations northward to Sam Thong, in order to maintain at least the appearance of separation between civilian and military affairs in this Alice-in-Wonderland world where cease-fire meant continued warfare and North Vietnamese negotiators in Geneva spoke of guaranteeing Laos's neutrality while running a stream of trucks loaded with military supplies and regular North Vietnamese infantrymen between Hanoi and Khang Khay.

Chapter 11

They said that during their fighting with the enemies they did have nothing except their sticks, sharpened knives, sharpened rocks, their own Meo rifle, their own feet, and their hands. They did not stop to move to their big aim of their destination until today. They said to themselves that, "Where is a will, there is a way."

—THE STORY OF THE MEO PEOPLE
by Thongsar Bouppha

BAN SAN PA KA was a large village whose hundreds of thatched huts circled the top of a bald, 5,000-foot mountain like the cropped hairs of a tonsure on the skull of a monk. Below the village, at the level of the metaphorical monk's mouth, was a 750-foot slash in the mountainside which, like the fifty-odd other village airstrips in northeast Laos, was bent in a slight dogleg and inclined gently uphill, or downhill, depending upon which way it was approached. On this particular February morning, the village contained 1,359 men, 1,107 women, 720 boys, and 695 girls. The statistic seems meaningless in a world too full of people, but Pop was acutely conscious of it as he waited in the bitter chill of dawn beside the awkward landing strip. A second glance at the population figures of Ban San Pa Ka tells why. The people of the isolated village, thirty miles north of Phou Vieng, had been singularly cursed with a high mortality rate among their children. Most died at birth. Only the lucky survived infancy. Not enough lived on even to replace the adults on a one-to-one ratio. The boys and girls of Ban San Pa Ka, therefore, were particularly precious,

and each young life was guarded as if the tribe's own life depended upon it, which indeed it did.

At Edgar's side on the airstrip was the *taesing* of Ban San Pa Ka. He knew, as did the Indiana farmer, that the number of boys in the village should be 721 this morning, not 720. His own son was missing. He was anxious, and he could not restrain his frequent suspicious glances at Edgar, who had taken the boy away. In a society in which all children are prized, sons, not surprisingly, are the most precious of all. However beloved Edgar might have been to all the other Meo in Laos at this moment, he was not an object of affection to the *taesing*. If the boy whom Edgar had taken away was not returned soon, in good health, the Meo father would not hesitate to cut the throat of his people's benefactor. And Buell knew it, a fact that added a shiver of anxiety to the chill of morning. If Edgar had still retained the forthright Methodism that he professed when he left Steuben County, he would have prayed quite explicitly there by the airstrip. But his prayer, like his religious outlook, was somewhat fuzzily focused now, honestly reflecting his deeper understanding of life, of men and their Jobian capacity for suffering, and of the great varieties of their theological yearnings. This is not to say that his own religious instincts had become dissipated in the spiritual melange in which he worked, crossing paths as he did with ascetic Catholic missionaries, fundamentalist proselytizers, Buddhists such as Thongsar who endlessly hoped for improvement in the snail's-pace turning of karma, animists with their taboos which were not too different, really, from some of the dogmas of the Judeo-Christian sects, and Confucians with their epigrammatic axioms and wise forbearance concerning the preoccupation of other men with the hereafter. If anything, he was far more a man of faith than he had imagined he could be in the years that he simply accepted Methodism without deep contemplation or question. Paradoxically, it was this ripening of a more profound faith in man and God that made Edgar's religiosity almost impossible to define, except, perhaps, with a complex generality like theistic humanism.

"I spent so many days and so many nights with the Meo that I changed," he once explained to Father Lucien Bouchard, the walking American priest of northeast Laos who still wanders purposefully

through the mountains caring for hopeless lepers and seeking converts, a vocation that has consumed twelve years of his life and ultimately will take all of it. "I saw with them the greatest faith I had known. I sure as hell never saw it like that in the Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church, the United Brethren, and the Christian Church. I had a connection with all four of 'em at one time or another when I was comin' up. I have never saw such faith as the Meo had. They'd say, 'Don't worry, Tan Pop, the Man Upstairs and the good spirits is lookin' over us.' 'What d'ya mean?' I'd say, because I didn't really believe that. Well, they believe there's somebody they don't understand up there watchin' out for 'em, and he's got a deputy spirit right there in the house with 'em. If they do something wrong, they've got the deputy right there, and he's gonna stay right there, watchin' 'em, until they make it right. They don't get down on their hands and knees and start prayin' to somethin' nobody understands and figure everything's all straightened out and their conscience is clear. They believe they got to face up to a spirit right there in the house, and they don't just repent, they got to make right whatever they done wrong, because he's watchin' 'em. And they got to satisfy a lot of other spirits. It's the most beautiful religion I ever saw, which ain't sayin' that I believe in it, too. But I can be a part of it, and they're glad to have me. They don't give a damn whether I'm a Methodist or a Catholic or a Buddhist; they reach out and respect anybody's beliefs as bein' just as good as their own. Ain't nothin' exclusive about it, thinkin' they're the only ones in the world that's right and everybody else who don't believe in their spirits has got a false religion, like a lot of Catholics and Methodists do. No, sir. They're happy just so long as a man believes in something.

"Goddamit, you've got to believe in something or you can't live, don't you, Father? Even if all you believe is that men can improve themselves, it's something to live for, ain't it? I've improved. A lot of folks I know has improved. The whole damned human race can improve if people try.

"I don't know any more what my religion ought to be called. I'll probably go on bein' a Methodist on the records for the rest of my

life, even if I ain't the same kind of Methodist I used to be. My faith has changed, it's changed a lot. But my faith has growed.

"Right now, like the Meo, I think there's only one basic requirement of a man. He's got to believe in something. The man that tells me he don't believe in nothing, he's all finished. I don't give a damn if he believes in a piece of wood in the corner, or in the spirit in the house, or in old Buddha, or in Jesus Christ, or in the Pope, or just in the fact that he can be a better man if he tries. It's all right with me. But goddamit, I'm like the Meo. A man's got to believe in something.

"All I know, I guess, is that my faith is stronger. My religious belief in the Man Upstairs is stronger. But if you ask me to tell you just exactly what my belief is—to put it into a creed like the church does—I can't tell you."

Thus Edgar, standing by the airstrip with the suspicious, apprehensive father of a youth he had tried to help, expressed his call to the Almighty more in the form of a fervent but rational hope than a supplication, and so, probably, did the belligerent *taesing*. A month before, Edgar had visited Ban San Pa Ka, arriving at this same airstrip in the small Helio-Courier airplane that had become an aerial workhorse to him in his travels among the mountaineers. He climbed the steep 500-foot pathway to the village, where he delivered a carton of notebooks and pencils to the school that the villagers had built a few months before. Then he took his canvas bag of medicines from the large cardboard box that was his traveling case and began his medical rounds, treating conjunctivitis, instructing young mothers on the correct dosage of worm pills for their children, and cleansing and bandaging minor cuts and abrasions. The *taesing* seemed particularly impatient as he led Edgar from hut to hut in the village. Finally he explained that his own 10-year-old son, the only one of his six children to survive infancy, was gravely ill.

"You should'a said so," Pop admonished him. "You know I'd rather see the really sick people first, instead of wasting time with headaches and cuts and bruises. Let's go."

In the *taesing's* house they found the boy lying on his side, doubled in a fetal position and quietly moaning as if from a stomach ache. With difficulty they turned the child on his back and stretched his

legs. He emitted an anguished cry. Pop saw immediately what was wrong. The child's abdominal wall had ruptured below the appendix and a fist-sized hernia of twisted, choked intestine protruded. Edgar could see the high fever clouding the small boy's bloodshot eyes, and he knew that the child was dying.

"He is very sick. If we don't have help very soon, he will die," Pop said.

"You help him, Tan Pop," the *taesing* pleaded. "You have saved many lives. Save my son. He is all I have."

"I can't. It's too bad for my medicine. Only a doctor can save your son."

"Bring a doctor, Tan Pop. Please."

"There isn't time." Edgar glanced at his watch. It was late afternoon. He could not possibly get word to Felix Romero or the other Operation Brotherhood doctors before morning. It would be at least noon tomorrow before any of them could respond. The child seemed to be far gone with peritonitis. Edgar wondered if he would live through the night.

"There is only one chance to save the boy," he said. "If I put him in my airplane now, I can fly to Vientiane with him and the doctors may be able to save him tonight, at the hospital."

"What will they do?" asked the *taesing*.

"They'll have to cut his stomach to make the guts go back inside. Then they will cure his fever."

"They must not cut my son. It is forbidden."

"They'll have to cut him to save his life. Otherwise he will die. If he stays here he will die tonight."

As quickly as he could, Edgar tried to explain to the *taesing* the necessity of an urgent operation to rearrange the choked intestine. He spoke of the good fortune that had befallen other Meo who had shaken off the old taboo against cutting the body. He described the young man whose arm he had amputated and whom he had seen only a few days before, moving happily about a refugee village near Phou Fa. Reluctantly, the *taesing* agreed to let his son go.

"You may take him, Tan Pop. But I cannot answer for what I

will do if you do not return him to me alive. He is more dear to me than my own life. Or yours," he added ominously.

It occurred to Edgar that the better part of wisdom would be to forget about trying to save the suffering child. His natural death here, in the *taesing's* own house, would not affect future relations with the man or the village. He could go on as before, helping the villagers as best he could without fear of retribution for an ill-conceived grievance. But if the child died in the airplane or at the Operation Brotherhood hospital in Vientiane, Pop could never comfortably visit Ban San Pa Ka again. At the very least, the people would turn against him. At the worst, the *taesing* might kill him.

"Bring him to the airplane, and carry him carefully," said Edgar. "We're goin' to Vientiane, right now."

Bill Smith, the Air America pilot who had brought Pop to Ban San Pa Ka, stood patiently beside the small airplane looking strangely out of place in his starched gray cotton flight suit and gleaming Wellington boots.

"If you've ever made a smooth take-off from one of these awful strips, make it now," Pop told him. "This *taesing* thinks I'm tryin' to kill his little boy, and I don't want to confirm it by crashing before we even get out of here." Edgar was only half-joking. Accidents in take-off and landing on the crude mountain airstrips were so commonplace that the pilots almost expected to bend some part of their airplanes in the course of each mission.

"There are no guarantees on this airline, Pop," Smith said. "But if you're worried, just remember that I'm in the front seat and if we hit anything, I'm the first to go. I make every take-off the smoothest one ever."

Yet while the constant flying of Bill Smith, Dutch, Johnny Lee, and others like them seemed routine because there was so much of it, there was no more hazardous life in the entire world of aviation. Consequently, Pop knew no passenger faced quite as much danger on a daily basis as he did. He was flown into and out of the small airfields four and five times a day, seven days a week. Bad as landings and take-offs on the perilously short, uneven runways could be, level flight in the small airplanes was even worse, because flight patterns traversed

mountain passes that left wingtips with little more than passage room between forested slopes. Often the pilots were left with only memory and guesswork to guide them through cloud-blanketed valleys and around the blunt sides of hidden mountains, as sightless as if they were maneuvering within the shafts of a coal mine. But these were routine hazards they could anticipate, like sandtraps on a golf course. The most insidious hazard of all was the enemy, who was everywhere in northeast Laos and who never refrained from shooting at the slow-flying little planes whenever he saw them. It was the rare flight that did not draw enemy fire, and bullet holes in wings and fuselage were so commonplace that almost no one remarked upon them.

Edgar never entered an airplane, nor put anyone else in one, with any real confidence that it would get off the ground safely and arrive intact at its destination. And this was the sole source of his apprehension as he stood with the *taesing* at the Ban San Pa Ka airstrip on the cold February morning in 1962.

By the time Edgar had evacuated the 10-year-old boy to Vientiane, he was unconscious. But Felix Romero, who had worked in surgery at the O.B. hospital all day, gladly gave most of the night to repairing the hernia and saving the child. He was a full month recovering, however, and the *taesing* had become suspicious of Edgar's report that all was well and that the child would be home soon. Thus, when Buell arrived the afternoon before to tell the village leader that his son would be flown to Ban San Pa Ka from Vientiane early the next morning, he was greeted with the cool response of a deeply distrusting parent whose faith in the homely little American had been stretched to its limit. The *taesing* had begun to doubt that his son still lived, and he was not prepared to believe in the efficacy of Buell's mysterious ways until the boy was returned to him, whole and healthy.

Edgar, not unlike a Steuben County Methodist in a moment of great crisis, crossed his fingers when he heard the lawnmower-like puttering of the small airplane engine in the distance. The pilot at least had come this far safely. Now all he had to do was put the machine on the ground without killing his young passenger, and all would be well. The aluminum wings gleamed in the rays of the morning sun as the plane banked sharply and made a half-circle

around the bald peak of the mountain. Then it fell sharply on one wing as the pilot cut his power. Pop's stomach churned nervously in concert with the side-slipping maneuver. Like a leaf arresting its descent, the plane dished out of the sudden drop and settled firmly down at the lower end of the uphill runway. It taxied to where Buell and the *taesing* now had been joined by hundreds of the residents of the village. And the little boy, whom the villagers last had seen near death, jumped out and leaped into his father's arms.

Edgar did not wait for the feast that the *taesing* wanted to prepare. With more relief than he usually felt when he climbed into the plane, he slipped into the seat beside Bill Smith and said, "I want to go northeast of here to a place called Houei Thom. Never been there before, but I understand they're Vang Pao's people over there and they need some help." As Smith straightened the plane around for take-off, Pop watched the *taesing* and his son. Before the Helio jounced away, the village leader looked through the windshield directly into Edgar's eyes. Buell had never seen such friendliness and gratitude in a human face before. Only a few minutes earlier the same man had been fully prepared to murder him. Now his devotion to Edgar was almost radiant. It said something to Edgar about the depth and the seeming irrationality of parental love. One could not easily condemn a person who behaved oddly out of love for his children. There is no limit, he thought, to how far a man will go to protect, or to revenge, someone he loves.

The meandering dirt pathway called Highway 6 was visible in broken stretches as Smith and Edgar approached Houei Thom, but much of the road appeared to tunnel into the forest of the valley below the mountain, so they did not have a clear view of all of it. From what they could see, it was little more than a rutted dirt track, hardly prepossessing enough to be the principal supply road of the Communist forces in Laos. Yet Pop knew that it was the same Highway 6 he and Chung had driven along more than a year before, and that Houei Thom, which towered above it, was the northernmost outpost of Colonel Vang Pao's fledgling Meo army. As the Helio swooped low over the crest of the mountain, he saw a second airplane parked at

the top of the 600-by-30-foot dirt strip. Standing beside it was the familiar, leather-jacketed figure of the Meo guerrilla chieftain.

Colonel Vang Pao, chauffeured by Dutch Brongersma, had been touring his advance outposts, conferring with his captains and delivering the monthly pay to his irregular troops, which was equivalent to about two dollars per man. All of his outposts were isolated in enemy territory, and his frequent visits helped to reassure the men. Houei Thom, the most tenuous outpost of all, had become particularly nettlesome to him. As a Meo listening post on the edge of Sam Neua Province, it was vital to his future plans, because he intended to use it one day as the jumping-off place for a guerrilla invasion of Souphanouvong's most secure territory. The Red Prince had for years maintained his political headquarters at Sam Neua city, a road-junction provincial capital that was not much larger, really, than Lhat Houang, but nevertheless represented the center of trade, culture, and government in the sparsely populated northeastern province. The entire province was initially captured by Vietminh troops from the French in 1953 and ever since had remained under the control of the Vietminh-dominated Pathet Lao, along with Phong Saly Province in the far north. With its easternmost border lying only eighty miles from Hanoi, it had become the essential staging area for all Communist military operations in Laos, and Vang Pao knew that if ever he was to succeed in his goal of driving the enemy back into North Vietnam, Sam Neua was the key. He had to seize it. But here at Houei Thom, which should have been his most important forward base, he was only nominally in command. The native operative who directed guerrilla intelligence activities in the area that was vital to him was only part Meo. Moreover, he did not even report to Vang Pao. He was a full-time agent of the United States Army. Although Vang Pao received all of the agent's reports, they came to him second-hand, after some delay, from an American counter-intelligence officer in Bangkok. The arrangement was both cumbersome and humiliating. Furthermore, Vang Pao did not altogether trust the agent. He was, after all, more Chinese than Meo, and the colonel feared that his loyalties, like his blood, were too mixed to support the heavy responsibility that he held. The Americans, Vang Pao knew, considered this man to be their best

native agent in all of Laos, despite his youth and inexperience, and so far his work had, indeed, been superb. Still, the colonel remained uncertain. Consequently, he flew to Houei Thom whenever he could to question the young spy face to face.

When Edgar crawled out of the Helio he was greeted immediately by the trim little Meo officer, dressed immaculately in a leather jacket, starched American fatigues, and the jaunty red beret of the Royal Lao Army. The pockets of his flight jacket were stuffed with bundles of Lao Kip, neatly tied in separate packets. It was the payroll of his army, which he had set out to deliver personally to each guerrilla unit in the field. In contrast to Vang Pao, who stood so straight that even tall men were never conscious of his short stature, Dutch leaned against the side of his airplane, his angular figure so relaxed that even while standing, he gave the impression of a man reclining.

Edgar was happy to see both of them because it had been days since he had met with either, but before the three even could begin talking he was startled, then literally leaped with pleasure at the sight of a third familiar figure.

"Tseng," he called loudly. "Tseng! I was beginning to think I'd never see you again." The Chinese-Meo boy and Edgar collided in happy reunion.

"Tan Pop, I feared you would never come," Tseng cried, thumping Edgar on the back in his joy. "I knew you visited many villages, and I hoped you would come to Houei Thom some day. But it has been so long."

"By God, you're a sight for sore eyes, boy. I knew you was up here someplace, but nobody'd tell me where. If the colonel hadn't asked me to come up here today, I don't know if I ever would of seen you. I ain't supposed to go into Sam Neua Province."

Their reunion, like Pop's unexpected meeting with Chung at Phou Vieng, was so deeply affecting and obviously sincere that even Vang Pao was touched by it.

"This man is your friend, Tan Pop?" he asked.

"Next to Chung and you, I'd say he's the best friend I got in Laos," Buell replied happily. "I ain't seen him for a year. Runnin' into him like this is almost as good as comin' across my own son Howard. You

won't find a better person in Laos than Tseng, Colonel. You're lucky to have him."

An ironic smile crossed Vang Pao's ingenuously handsome features. "He works for the American Army, Tan Pop, not for me. I wish it was otherwise."

"Well, let's get him transferred. It was the same with Chung, wasn't it? I talked to the military people in Vientiane, and they said they was transferring Chung back to you. Can't they do the same with Tseng?"

"They have not seen fit to do so. I do not know when they will."

"We'll see about that," said Edgar. "They owe me some favors, and I don't see no reason why this boy shouldn't be under your command just like everybody else up here."

As Dutch started Vang Pao's plane to leave Houei Thom and continue the payroll distribution to the Meo army, the colonel drew Edgar aside.

"You trust this man, Tan Pop?"

"Like my own son, Colonel. I'd trust him with my life. Why, if you ever was to see Tseng taking care of his mother and sisters, you'd know he's one of the finest men you ever met. I still got enough American in me to admire any man who ain't afraid to show his love for his mother."

"Where is his family?"

"They're stuck in Xieng Khouang, Colonel. The mother decided to stay when we were evacuated."

"She is Chinese?"

"Yep. She's a lovely lady. Works her fingers to the bone for her three little girls. So does Tseng."

"Sometimes it is better, Tan Pop, for a man in Tseng's profession to have no family. They live in enemy territory. It must make him nervous."

"Don't you worry none about Tseng, Colonel. If he's got a job to do, he'll do it. You can count on that."

"You are a very good judge of men, Tan Pop. Tseng must be as you say, or he would not be your friend. *Au revoir*, my friend, I will talk with you again at Long Tieng."

That night Edgar sat with Tseng and the *taesing* of Houei Thom,

drinking *lau lau* and talking in the relaxed manner of close friends who had not been separated at all.

"Have you had any news from Xieng Khouang, any word of your mother?" Pop asked.

"None, Tan Pop. It is as if Xieng Khouang had been removed from the earth. I hope they are well, but there is no way to contact them. Every day I curse myself for letting them remain."

"I'm sure they're all right, Tseng. From what I hear, the enemy has left Xieng Khouang city pretty much alone. They've got most of their soldiers at Khang Khay and around the airport at Phong Savan. Don't worry about 'em."

"I cannot help worrying. They are all that I have." He stared morosely into the small fire burning on the earthen hearth in the *taesing's* bamboo house.

"Why cannot you come to Sam Neua Province, Tan Pop?"

"Because it's controlled by the enemy. We got orders to stay out of here because the enemy's been here so long there ain't no friendly people for us to contact, much less to work with."

"That is not true, Tan Pop," said Tseng, thoughtfully. "We have many friends in Sam Neua. The people do not like the Vietminh Communists, and they are suspicious of the Pathet Lao because they always have the Vietminh with them. It is as if the Vietminh are in command of the Pathet Lao everywhere in Sam Neua. Not many people know it, but there are many loyal Government soldiers still hiding in Sam Neua waiting for someone to come and help them fight the Communists."

"That's news to me, Tseng. How'd they get here?"

"Two years ago the Royal Government sent a battalion of Royal Army troops to Sam Neua. It was at the time when the Pathet Lao agreed to unite with the Royal Government to bring peace to the country. Instead, the Pathet Lao fought against the Royal Army battalion. It is still here. Like us, they have become guerrillas. Their leader is Major Thong. He is a powerful man, and he is a fighter. Not like most Royal Army officers. He has remained, holding his battalion together and living with the people, even though his soldiers have had no supplies and no pay for two years. Some day I hope you will

meet him. When Colonel Vang Pao comes to fight in Sam Neua, Major Thong will be his best soldier."

After their reunion, Edgar revisited Houei Thom frequently, bringing medical supplies and slates and books for the small school that Tseng had begun. Each time, he asked Tseng if any word had come yet from his family in Xieng Khouang. "None, Tan Pop. I have lost them," Tseng would reply.

Edgar also met frequently with Chung, who had been moved from Phou Vieng to a fertile mountain area southeast of the Plaine des Jarres called Tha Lin Noi. There, as he had at Phou Vieng, Chung directed teams of guerrilla scouts into the enemy-held countryside, harassing Communist forces and learning as much as he could of Pathet Lao plans and movements. He also had frequent radio contact with Vang Pao's secret agents on the Plaine itself.

"Any chance of getting some kind of report out of your agents about Tseng's family?" Buell asked Chung one day.

"It would be difficult, Tan Pop," said Chung. "I have no agent in Xieng Khouang city because there are no important enemy units billeted there. My nearest agent poses as a pro-Communist Meo farmer north of Khang Khay, on the road to Ban Ban. He could go to Xieng Khouang city, but it would be very dangerous for him, because it would be hard to explain what he was doing so far from his village. I cannot ask him to take that risk. We cannot afford to lose him. His name is Naoh Teu. He is the best Meo spy in Laos."

"I thought you and Tseng was the best, Chung," Edgar laughed.

"No, Tan Pop." Chung smiled modestly. "I think we have become executives, like your C.I.A. men. Others do the most dangerous work for us."

The military leader of Tha Lin Noi, where Chung had his headquarters, was the most ferocious-looking man Edgar had seen in Laos. His name was Jua Pao and he went out of his way each day to demonstrate that sentiment had no place in the heart of a guerrilla captain. Jua Pao's stubby legs and barrel chest made him look as short and blocky as a tree stump. At four feet nine inches, he was squat

even for a Meo, and his unsmiling face had the leathery look of centuries etched in deep lines all around it, although he was only about thirty-five years old. Perhaps in emulation of a cowboy he had seen in one of Ivan Klecka's traveling film shows, he wore a pearl-handled revolver strapped low on his right hip. Whenever any of the irregular soldiers in his guerrilla force showed the slightest reluctance to follow, Jua Pao would draw the revolver, take quick aim at one of the frowning Meo dogs in the vicinity, and shoot. "Next I will kill you," he would shout harshly to the recalcitrant soldier. Despite his spartan discipline and humorless leadership, Jua Pao's soldiers idolized him, because leadership to him meant moving ahead of his troops, and wherever the guerrillas went they knew that Jua Pao risked his own life before he risked theirs.

One day early in June, Chung greeted Edgar excitedly when he arrived at Tha Lin Noi.

"Jua Pao is leading one hundred men to the Plaine des Jarres tomorrow, Tan Pop," he said. "He is going to attack the airport at Phong Savan."

"Is he crazy, Chung? That's one of the biggest enemy bases there is in Laos. Even the Russians is there."

"I know, Tan Pop. But he is determined to do it. He asked Colonel Vang Pao for permission to attack. The colonel thinks Jua Pao is joking. He said 'Go ahead and try.' It is no joke. Come with me and we will watch the battle. I think he will do it."

They joined Jua Pao's ragged column of lightly armed men and walked swiftly through the day and night, skirting the southern edge of the Plaine until they reached a mountain overlooking the airport at Phong Savan. There they rested. Pop never knew whether it was by Jua Pao's craftiness as a jungle tracker or sheer luck that they slipped so close to the enemy stronghold without being observed, but as dawn broke over the airport below, he could see that the enemy was utterly unaware of their presence. Russian and North Vietnamese trucks and jeeps rolled unconcernedly between the small village of Phong Savan and the airport, and work parties behaved perfectly normally as their members trudged from the open cargo doors of an Ilyushin transport to a nearby warehouse carrying heavy

bundles of supplies. The area seemed to be only lightly guarded. Jua Pao flashed a rare smile at Edgar and Chung as he motioned to his troops to follow him down the mountainside. Crouching low, the guerrillas slipped silently toward their objectives, their progress obscured by bamboo thickets, underbrush, and, near the bottom of the hill, tall grass. From the mountaintop, Edgar and Chung had an unobstructed view. The battle, such as it was, was entirely one-sided.

Three of Jua Pao's soldiers set up a mortar tube on the mid-slope of the hill and waited until their ninety-eight companions were in place for attack from the high grass near the edge of the airport. On signal from below, they rapidly dropped a half-dozen 60-millimeter mortar shells on the strip. Simultaneously, Jua Pao's men began firing and running forward. To the startled Pathet Lao, as well as to their Soviet, neutralist, and North Vietnamese colleagues on the other side of the airport, it must have seemed as if a major attack had begun. When silence returned, no one was certain whether the enemy troops had fired even one shot in reply or had simply fled without loading their weapons. In any case, the trucks, jeeps, and running men who bolted down the highway away from Phong Savan looked from the mountaintop vantage point of Pop and Chung like fleeing characters in a speeded-up Mack Sennett movie. Within an hour the only people left in Phong Savan were the unsmiling little guerrilla captain and his one hundred tattered soldiers. Chung happily radioed a description of the rout to an astonished Colonel Vang Pao at Long Tieng. Then he and Edgar waited on the hill to see how the enemy would respond.

No one ever discovered how deeply consternation flowed in the Communist camp that day. A dozen Russian aircraft technicians, who lived in a small French saloon once called the Snow Leopard Inn, but now known as the Friendship Hotel, in Phong Savan dashed to their country's "field" embassy at Khang Khay and presumably gave a reasonably accurate account of what had happened at the airport. But whether the Soviet advisers at Khang Khay were unwilling to appear overbearing by urging their hosts, the Pathet Lao, to take quick counter-action, or whether the confusion that reigned at the airport took hold in Khang Khay as well, no one knows. In any case, Jua Pao and his soldiers hung around Phong Savan all day, itching

for a fight. No enemy troops appeared to challenge them, and it seemed as if the Communists, for the moment at least, were willing to let them have the airport to themselves. It was like a game of king of the mountain in which the chagrined losers decided to go home after one round rather than continue the play.

During the night, with still no sign of counter-action by the enemy, Chung relayed an urgent radio message from Vang Pao to his guerrilla captain.

"He orders you to withdraw tonight. You have done well, but it is enough."

"Withdraw?" cried Jua Pao incredulously. "We have not yet drawn his blood. There has been no battle. I cannot withdraw."

"You must. Colonel Vang Pao orders it."

Swearing mightily, Jua Pao stormed about the Plaine des Jarres airport, once the outlet for most of the opium in Laos and therefore a prize of enormous emotional proportion to any opium-trading Meo such as the guerrilla and his men. Reluctantly he gathered his small force together. They marched out defiantly just before dawn, standing up.

For several weeks Jua Pao and his men sulked at Tha Lin Noi, unwilling to listen to Vang Pao's congratulations or to the colonel's perfectly reasonable explanation of his order to withdraw. "In guerrilla warfare," the colonel tried to explain to the leathery little captain, "the best tactic is one that upsets the enemy, tips him off balance. Drawing him into battle is not always wise. You upset him completely at Phong Savan. It was better than a major battle."

"An army is for fighting. We must kill the enemy," Jua Pao grumbled. "We had the airport, and we gave it up without a fight."

"The objective was to sting the enemy, not to seize the airport."

"My objective was the airport," said Jua Pao.

Vang Pao philosophically desisted, confident that in time he would convince Jua Pao. The little captain clearly would become one of his best guerrilla leaders when he learned that such blunt bloodthirstiness, however heroic, could be tactically disastrous. The bold tactics also could lead to enormous political headaches.

A month after the Phong Savan attack, Jua Pao slipped quietly out

of Tha Lin Noi again. This time he did not alert his commander, nor did he confide in Chung and Edgar. Their first contact with him came by radio from the Plaine two days later, when he reported to Colonel Vang Pao that he had seized Xieng Khouang city, just as he had captured the airport. This time, he announced defiantly, he intended to remain until the enemy drove him out. The repercussions of the audacious little captain's bold move were felt as far away as Geneva, where after more than a year of negotiation the Declaration and Protocol on the Neutrality of Laos, commonly known as the Geneva Accord of 1962, was ready for signing.

Vang Pao was privately delighted with Jua Pao's insubordinate surprise, but he immediately ordered the intransigent guerrilla leader to withdraw. His troops faced certain slaughter if they tried to hold out in the little town on the Plaine. And Vang Pao faced the wrath of both his American supporters and the Royal Government of Laos for making such a dramatic move on the very eve of an international agreement that the entire world hoped would defuse the perplexing, three-sided civil war in Laos.

It took three days of increasingly anguished radio messages to convince the testy little captain that his one hundred lightly armed guerrillas must withdraw without a fight. Jua Pao's pride was deeply hurt. He abandoned Xieng Khouang city only after sending a final radio message. "To hell with all of you," he said. "From now on, Jua Pao will fight his own war." Then, with his troops, he disappeared into the mountains east of the Plaine. It was almost as if he had burrowed under the jungle. For weeks no one spotted him. Whether he was now friend or enemy was uncertain.

Although Jua Pao's future was not Edgar's concern, he joined in the search for the rebellious guerrilla, scanning the valleys and mountainsides east of the Plaine each time his work took him across that territory. Vang Pao himself had all but abandoned the search when Edgar spotted the ragged band, emaciated from weeks of foraging with little more than jungle growth to eat. He dropped a supply of rice to the starving soldiers. The next day he descended by helicopter to talk with Jua Pao. The little captain's wounded pride still was far from healed, but, perhaps out of gratitude for his sudden release

from hunger, he was uncharacteristically sentimental when he greeted Buell.

"You cared enough about us not only to search for us, but to give us food. You are truly my friend. I thought the Americans were angry with me for taking Xieng Khouang."

"I don't know about the rest of 'em," said Edgar, "but I ain't mad about anything. I only wish I'd of knowed you was goin' in there. I'd of asked you to look up a Chinese lady—the mother of a friend of mine—to see how she's gettin' along."

Jua Pao expressed regret that he had not advised Edgar of his plans. Then, at Edgar's urging, he returned to Tha Lin Noi with his troops. He was welcomed like a beloved prodigal. But, in his own eyes at least, he had suffered a loss of face that only time could repair. Without a word he withdrew from the leadership of his guerrilla band and nursed his wounded feelings with a quart of *lau lau* each day for the next two years. By 1965 his name was all but forgotten by most of the Meo guerrillas, and few even remembered his two daring exploits on the Plaine. Then, one day, he appeared at Vang Pao's headquarters. His weathered face was cleanly shaved, and his eyes were clear. Once again he looked ferocious, standing like a small tree stump on stubby legs as firm as the roots of an oak. The pearl-handled pistol, unused for two years, was freshly oiled and rested snug in a holster, low on his right hip.

"I have spent many nights thinking," he told the colonel. "You were right about guerrilla warfare. I want to return now and sting the enemy."

Jua Pao resumed his command, again imperiling the dog population of the hills with his demonstrative temper. While not the smartest of Vang Pao's guerrilla leaders, he remains today the toughest and the most audacious. And he rarely needs to be told when his mission has been accomplished and it is time to withdraw.

Chapter 12

Staying with the rascals will never find happiness.

—THE LETTERS OF THONGSAR BOUPHA

THE Geneva agreements and the “neutral” coalition government in Vientiane were such lightly stitched patches on the crazy quilt of modern Laos that even from the beginning it was doubtful they could hold together the weak fabric of the country. The three sides joined in a government of surface cooperation and amiability in Vientiane, drawing the international supporters of each into uncomfortable proximity in the background. Uncertain which side the new premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, would lean toward, the Soviet Union tried to maintain his tilt to the left by generously giving him nine Russian airplanes. The Ilyushins were welcomed, and their Russian pilots began training Lao fliers to handle them. The United States, too, wooed the neutralists by flying food supplies to Kong Le in Air America planes. As the principal economic benefactor to the Royal Government before the agreements, the U.S. also continued to underwrite the entire national budget of Laos. In doing so, America unwillingly supplied the fuel for the Soviet Ilyushins and paid for the hotel rooms the Russian pilots occupied in Vientiane.

China vied with North Vietnam for a position of power and influence with the Pathet Lao, but the question of Hanoi’s continued dominance was never in doubt, because its cadres led, fed, trained, and armed the Pathet Lao army.

And all three Lao sides jealously retained the military positions and the territory they held at the time the Accord was signed, on

July 23, 1962. Freed by the agreements of his uncomfortable bond with the Pathet Lao, Kong Le, who had become as unhappy with the Communists as he had been with the right-wing Government two years before, moved his headquarters to a place called Muong Soui in the low, rolling hills on the western edge of the Plaine and patrolled the area uneasily, not sure whether he would be attacked next by the Meo, still attached to the Royal Army, or his erstwhile allies, the Pathet Lao. Patrols of all three sides fought bitterly whenever their paths crossed.

The United States, after years of confusing and occasionally dishonorable Machiavellianism in Laos, at first tried harder than any of the other powers directly concerned to live up to the new peace formula that it vainly hoped would unite the little country and return it, once again, to its role as a buffer between Thailand and hostile North Vietnam and China. As a token of its good will, America began withdrawing the military advisers who worked among the Meo a month before the Geneva Accord was signed. Even the Central Intelligence Agency, for the first time firmly under the control of President Kennedy, who had been burned by its autonomy at the Bay of Pigs, was entirely removed from Laos. Uncle Dan said goodbye to Colonel Vang Pao on October 7, the final day of the 75-day deadline for the withdrawal of foreign military elements set by the Geneva agreement. By October 8, the only uniformed Americans, or intelligence officers, left in Laos were the Army and Air Force attachés and their small staffs at the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane.

As a humanitarian gesture, the American refugee relief program, which extended throughout Laos, although Edgar's area in the north-eastern provinces was most active, was permitted to continue. Like many others, Edgar Buell fervently hoped that North Vietnam, too, would honestly withdraw its military forces from the country, because he had not the slightest doubt that if the Pathet Lao were left to their own devices, the people of Laos would be peaceably reunited.

Cynics accustomed to the big-power politics in which, as Mao put it, "power grows out of the barrel of a gun," scoffed at the notion that the Lao could resolve their differences without fighting, but the Lao themselves, whether they supported the right wing, the neutralists, or

the Pathet Lao, did not. They were by tradition, religious dogma, and personality a peace-loving people. Moreover, once divorced from the international conflict of outside powers such as the United States, North Vietnam, and the Soviet Union, the warring sides in Laos had few differences to fight about. There was plenty of land, more than enough to permit hostile ethnic groups a measure of independence if they insisted on maintaining it. The King, Savang Vatthana, who presided over the royal court in Luang Prabang, received the sincere homage of all sides and was capable of ensuring stability and good will without external pressure in a genuine coalition government. The best political leaders of all three sides, but particularly of the Pathet Lao, were anxious to curb graft and corruption in both government and business communities, and to expand education and health facilities throughout the small country. Unlike almost any other country in the world, Laos was not only ripe for unity but eager to resolve its problems peacefully, if only its most bellicose neighbor, North Vietnam, and the United States would leave it alone.

In such an event, Edgar was confident that he could expand his humanitarian work to include refugees on both sides. In a relatively short time, perhaps a year, at the most two, they would again be self-sufficient. But from his vantage point with Colonel Vang Pao at Long Tieng, he could see that there would be no immediate end to the tragedies of Laos. North Vietnam had not the slightest intention of leaving the country alone.

Inspectors of the International Control Commission—Poles, Canadians, and Indians assigned by the Geneva powers to supervise the neutrality accords—dutifully counted each American military adviser as he left the country. There were 666, and it was an accurate count of all who had worked there. Of the estimated 10,000 regular North Vietnamese soldiers in the country when the Accord was signed, just 40 were counted passing through the only checkpoint the Communists permitted I.C.C. representatives to observe. As Vang Pao and many other observers had foreseen, the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Laos was an entirely one-sided affair. Prince Souphanouvong took his seat in his half-brother's Government in Vientiane while his army in the northern provinces made little secret of the fact that with

combat leadership, troops, and supplies from Hanoi they intended to continue fighting for complete control.

One might charitably speculate that Hanoi retained its fighting stance only because it feared that the United States would not live up to the agreement and would attempt to turn Laos into a base from which to blunt North Vietnamese ambitions in South Vietnam. The United States, after all, had not honestly lived up to the 1954 Geneva agreement, which was to have reunited the two Vietnams. Even so, the United States so completely and publicly withdrew its advisers, its intelligence agents, and its military support that its good intentions were unmistakable to all, including Hanoi. I.C.C. teams checked every base from which the Green Berets and the C.I.A. had operated. Except for the diplomats in Vientiane and a handful of agricultural and public works technicians, there were no Americans left in the countryside. In all of northeast Laos, the most sensitive area of all, there was only Edgar Buell.

Unfortunately, there was no way to conduct similar surveillance of the Communists' compliance with the Accord. Except for a few showcase inspection points, the I.C.C. representatives were not permitted to visit Pathet Lao territory. Had they been free to do so, they would have seen, as Edgar did, that the war was far from ended. If anything, it was on the verge of becoming more intense than ever. And it looked as if Vang Pao, cut off now from the American military airlift that had brought him a small but steady stream of arms and ammunition, would bear the brunt of it. Along Highways 6 and 7 from North Vietnam, which joined at Ban Ban to flow into the Plaine des Jarres, the traffic increased frighteningly. Trucks loaded with fresh troops and military supplies were pouring into the Plaine to prepare the Pathet Lao for a major offensive against the Meo.

Chapter 13

I myself always listened to the radio of the enemies. I heard what they said about Tan Pop supporting the hill people. They said if somebody can catch Tan Pop they shall give a good prize, about one million kip, at any time.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupha

THERE was nothing about the appearance of Naoh Teu to mark him as an extraordinary man. Although he was slightly taller than most, he looked like any other Meo farmer in his baggy black pantaloons. When dealing with lowlanders, he broke into the same ingratiating smile, revealing a mouthful of teeth that were blackened with decay. His speech in both Lao and Meo was that of an ignorant man of the hills, not of a keenly curious man who had attended a French Catholic mission school as a boy. Naoh Teu probably would not rate even a footnote in a history of international espionage, but in the world in which he worked, he was a master spy. For twelve years he moved in seeming innocence among masses of Vietminh and Pathet Lao troops, shifting his radio almost daily from one hiding place to another in the jungles of Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. He reported regularly on enemy plans and operations, first to the French, next to the Americans, and finally to Colonel Vang Pao. During all of this time his first allegiance was to the Meo, and even when he reported to French and American intelligence officers, he managed always to communicate the same information to Touby Ly Fong. He neither asked for nor received more than a Lao army private's pay for his covert activity, and when he retired a few years

ago, he walked out of enemy territory with his mother, his wife, and his four children carrying everything that they owned on their backs: an assortment of wooden eating and cooking utensils and some crude farming tools that Naoh Teu had made for himself. His only reward, in retirement, was a set of gold fillings for his teeth, rotted by twelve years of neglect. Pop Buell bought the gold, and a visiting American dentist did the work for nothing. Espionage had not been an enriching career.

At the time of the Geneva Accord, Naoh Teu watched over the Communists on the Plaine. From his pro-Communist village overlooking the road between Ban Ban and Khang Khay, he observed and reported the heavy influx of Vietminh trucks and columns of troops moving south. He knew that this sudden reinforcement, despite the neutrality agreement, meant a major Communist offensive in the offing. Thus, when Chung radioed a request for the exact locations of the six bridges and the twelve narrow passes along the highway, Naoh Teu concluded that an attempt would be made soon to block the heavily trafficked supply line.

Naoh Teu bundled two small pigs into a pair of bamboo baskets, balanced their weight on a pole across his shoulders, and set off down the road to comply with Chung's request. Along the way he carefully noted the size, structure, and location of each of the bridges and the nature of each of the twelve passes. At Khang Khay he took the squealing pigs to a Pathet Lao army encampment and bargained for their sale to a North Vietnamese supply sergeant. The sergeant told him that the Communists soon would defeat all of the Meo in the mountains around the Plaine. Friendly Meo, such as Naoh Teu and the people of his village, would not be harmed, the sergeant said. Naoh Teu made a small profit on the pigs.

As he returned to his village, Naoh Teu wondered how Vang Pao intended to use the information. He assumed that the Meo colonel planned to shell the highway from the mountains, or perhaps even bomb it, if a Royal Lao Air Force pilot could be induced to fly such a mission. In either case, success seemed doubtful. The bridges would be hard to hit, and bomb or shell craters in the road could be repaired quickly. The Meo, he knew, were in for a bad winter. He guessed

from the numbers of troops and the stockpiles of goods he had seen at Khang Khay that a general attack was only a few weeks away. If the enemy supply line remained open, the Communists could continue their offensive against the Meo throughout the entire dry season. It could well be the beginning of the end for the Meo in northeast Laos. That night he slipped away from his village and radioed the requested information to Chung.

While Naoh Teu routinely went about his work as a spy on the Plaine, Edgar was establishing a new refugee relief headquarters at Sam Thong, a tiny village nineteen miles northeast of Long Tieng which had been used, briefly, as a base where the now-departed American Green Berets trained some of Vang Pao's young soldiers. Thongsar joined Edgar there as his chief assistant, and together the two small men, with a few Meo helpers, constructed a distinctly un-American headquarters. It consisted of a dirt-floored, bamboo Meo hut for themselves, and a lodge-like bamboo warehouse for their relief supplies. There were no locks, no luxuries such as chairs and tables, none of the comforts of civilization. They lived as the Meo did. Their only concession to security was the companionship of a dozen Meo soldiers, sent to Sam Thong by Vang Pao to watch over them.

At this pivotal point in his strange career, it was difficult for Edgar to define his role in Laos even to himself. His job was fundamentally humanitarian, helping to keep alive a displaced and war-weary people. Yet to perform this compassionate task, he was finding it necessary to become a Meo guerrilla himself. He still thought of Vang Pao's irregular military activities and of his own civil relief activities as related but entirely separate operations. Yet the two inexorably had become so intertwined that there was no real separation. Neither activity could live without the other, and the continued freedom of the Meo, and thousands of Lao and Lao Thung refugees as well, depended coequally upon Vang Pao's guns and Edgar's rice.

Even if it had been possible to ignore the military problems of the Meo altogether, they involved so much grief and suffering that it is doubtful whether Edgar was emotionally capable of doing so. For the first few days after the American military advisers were withdrawn, Edgar traversed the mountains with high hopes that he might now go

about his work peaceably and that Vang Pao and his soldiers could soon disarm. But the hope was short-lived.

One day he flew into a small Meo village east of the Plaine. It was a poor place that, while still receiving some of its rice from Edgar, was approaching self-sufficiency on its own mountainside rice and poppy fields. Even in the midst of active war in the area, the village had no military significance, and in consequence, Vang Pao had never stationed troops there. It should have remained what Edgar dreamed all Meo villages eventually would become, a peaceful place of no consequence to any but the people who lived in it. But the day before he arrived, the village unhappily earned a few moments of significance to an enemy military unit. What happened there left Edgar with such cold fury in his heart that he never again questioned the intrinsic conflict of his roles as a humanitarian and as an active guerrilla military leader.

The son of the village *taesing*, a boy of thirteen whose eyes glistened with revulsion over what they had seen, told what had happened on the day before. An enemy unit of about twenty men, half Pathet Lao and half North Vietnamese, entered the village at midday, not long after most of the villagers had finished their late morning meal. The people were apprehensive, but not alarmed. They assumed they would have to pay some tribute in rice and chickens before the soldiers went away.

"The Pathet Lao soldiers did not look as if they wanted to hurt anyone," said the boy, "but the Vietminh stayed apart and held their guns as if they would shoot. The officer was Vietminh, not Lao. He ordered my father to stand before him. He asked my father if he was the leader of the village.

"I am the *taesing*,' my father told him.

"You were put here by the imperialist Americans. You are the oppressor of the people,' the officer shouted at my father.

"I do not understand what you say. I am a simple man of this village. No one put me here. The people chose me to be their leader,' my father said.

"Then the Vietminh officer ordered that my father's number-one wife—my own mother—must stand in front of him. She did. He shouted

to the people: 'See what happens to lackeys of the imperialists, and learn.' Then he raised his pistol like this," said the boy, pointing a finger across his chest.

"He shot away one of her breasts. My mother fainted. He shot the other one. She died. My father rushed toward her, and the Vietminh officer fired the pistol in his face. It happened very fast. Then they left."

Edgar was ill when the villagers showed him the bodies of the *taesing* and his number-one wife. In the days that followed there were reports of similar incidents in other unarmed villages. Then heavy night-time probing attacks against both refugee villages and Vang Pao's military outposts began in earnest. By the time Naoh Teu's intelligence report on the bridges and passes was received, it was clear that a major enemy attempt to destroy the Meo would begin soon.

Vang Pao flew to Edgar's headquarters at Sam Thong, and the two men spend the night discussing counter-action.

"Last winter when the enemy reinforced in the dry season, we were able to divert him by light, stinging attacks. Now we can only bite like mosquitoes. It does not hurt. We must cut his supply line," said Vang Pao. "If we can stop his supplies now, he cannot sustain an offensive this dry season. In the rainy season he cannot use the roads at all. So if we can break the road now, it will paralyze him for almost a year.

"You told me once that you thought you could blow up that road, Tan Pop. Now is the time. Can you do it?"

"You give me the men, Colonel, and I'll blow that road so high they'll see the dust in Vientiane," said Edgar. "But that alone ain't gonna hold 'em back. They's attackin' us already."

"If we can upset them by cutting their supply line, we can put them on the defensive, Tan Pop. We will attack them all over Xieng Khouang Province. They will think they are being stung by a hornet, not by a mosquito."

"Colonel, you only got 6,000 men and the only ammo you can give 'em is what you saved before the American military left."

"My tactics will be as old as warfare, Tan Pop. The enemy will believe we are strong. By moving my men quickly from place to place we will take the enemy by surprise. A few weapons, strategically

placed and firing fast, as if we are well supplied, will make him think we are stronger than we are. I have studied the writings of their own General Giap and Mao Tse-tung, Tan Pop. As long as you support the people, they will support my guerrillas, Giap and Mao say. The people are the sea. My soldiers are the fish in the sea. The enemy cannot live in that sea if the people will not support him. If you can cut his supply line, he will begin to choke. You must succeed in blowing the road."

Edgar left Thongsar at Sam Thong to supervise the distribution of relief supplies and took thirty-six of Vang Pao's soldiers to Tha Lin Noi. With Chung's help, he divided them into eighteen teams of two men each and began training them as sappers. Guided by Naoh Teu's careful description of each of the bridges and passes, they made a miniature replica of the road in sand and drilled the demolition teams again and again in how to proceed. Edgar showed each man how to attach percussion caps to bundles of dynamite, how to quietly drill blasting holes in the soft limestone cliffs of the gaps through which the road passed, and how to string wire for the detonating charges.

One night early in December he and Chung led the newly taught sappers north from Tha Lin Noi to a 3,500-foot mountain that overlooked Highway 7 near Ban Ban. On the first night the men reconnoitered the road and each team surveyed its own objective while Edgar and Chung waited in hiding on the mountaintop. The road was untraveled through the night, because the Communists, confident that they would not be molested, preferred to move in daylight. At dawn the thirty-six Meo, barefoot and dressed like farmers in black cotton pantaloons and blouses, returned to Edgar's hiding place and rested in silence through the day, watching the enemy traffic that moved openly below. By nightfall the road again was abandoned. Quietly the men slipped down to their targets, this time carrying dynamite, blasting caps, batteries, and wire. Not a single vehicle or pedestrian moved the length of the enemy highway between sunset and 2:30 A.M. By then, all eighteen teams were clear of their objectives.

At exactly 3:00 A.M., by prearrangement, six bridges and twelve mountain passes along fifteen miles of Highway 7 erupted as if one

giant explosion had consumed them all. Edgar's estimate that it would take three months to dig out the choked passes proved conservative. A forced labor battalion of the Pathet Lao was still working to clear the last pass of rubble when the first showers of the rainy season began the following May. The demolition job succeeded in reducing Communist supplies to a trickle through most of the year 1963.

While the Communists worked to clear the highway, Vang Pao reinvented the tactics of biblical Gideon, about whom he had never heard. With light bands of 100 to 300 men he successfully struck superior enemy units again and again in Xieng Khouang Province during the dry season. A few mortar shells fired rapidly gave the initial impression of a heavy barrage, then three or four men wildly fired their automatic weapons to make as much noise as they could, while the others rushed forward shouting but conserving their small supplies of ammunition. Whole enemy encampments in the hills, suddenly put on the defensive, panicked as they had when Jua Pao thrust into Phong Savan and Xieng Khouang. They did not realize their attackers were so poorly equipped. By springtime, Vang Pao was in undisputed control of 75 percent of the province. Communist forces that had been scattered throughout the hills to attack Meo refugee villages and military encampments withdrew in disorder to their strongholds on the Plaine.

One factor that made Vang Pao's task lighter was the unexpected preoccupation of the Communists with Kong Le, who controlled the western edge of the Plaine des Jarres. After the Geneva Accord, friction between the erstwhile allies created heated anger in both camps, and the Communists tried to drive the young paratroop captain out of the Plaine and into the hills of Luang Prabang Province west of it. Their efforts to dislodge him touched off a major battle that extended through the spring. The Communist attack against his own neutralist forces so infuriated Prince Souvanna Phouma that he quietly acquiesced in the urgent dispatch of American military aid to Kong Le. Souphanouvong promptly abandoned his post in the coalition Government and fled to his military headquarters at Khang Khay. And as a consequence of the renewed fighting, which also engaged rightist and Pathet Lao forces in southern Laos, Vang Pao's

Meo guerrilla force again fell into the generous embrace of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Lacking any further reason to doubt North Vietnam's intentions in Laos, America found itself in essentially the same position it had occupied before the Accord, except that in addition to its total support of the rightist army and the Meo guerrillas, the U.S. fully supported Kong Le's neutralist force, as well. This time, however, the U.S. tried harder to keep up appearances of compliance with the Accord, and sent no uniformed military advisers. Military support and advice to the Royal Army, to Kong Le's neutralist force, and to the Meo was handled entirely by the C.I.A. and the U.S. military attaché at the embassy in Vientiane. On the surface, Prince Souvanna's government remained a coalition, as required by the Geneva agreements, but in fact the Pathet Lao withdrew completely from it. The confrontation of forces in Laos, once again, was between the United States, supporting the Royal Government now under Prince Souvanna Phouma, and North Vietnam, supporting the Pathet Lao.

A new C.I.A. agent whom Pop called Uncle Joe because his real name was uncertain took the place of the long-departed Uncle Dan at Vang Pao's headquarters. With Edgar's willing cooperation and a renewed airlift of military supplies from America, Vang Pao consolidated his gains in Xieng Khouang Province and began applying the same Gideonesque tactics to the seizure of the enemy's previously inviolate stronghold, Sam Neua.

The extraordinary and wholly unexpected success came so rapidly that almost before he knew it, Edgar's refugee program expanded to include close to half a million people, only a third of whom were Meo. Buell's friend Colonel Vang Pao was almost as happy with this development as he was with his military success.

"Every day I dream of a Lao phrase. *San mah ki*," he told Pop one day. "When we have *san mah ki*, like you have in America, Laos will be a great and happy country."

"What does it mean?"

"It means 'all the people together'—unity of the people. What you are doing now, bringing many different peoples together as refugees, teaching them to share, to work together, this is bringing a sense of *san mah ki*."

"I ain't so sure we got *san mah ki* in America yet, Colonel, but I see what you mean," Edgar replied. Wherever he could, Edgar brought the people of the mountain tribes together with hill Lao, Lao Thung, and lowland Lao people, and helped them to work together in apportioning refugee commodities, building refugee villages, operating schools, and planning defenses against enemy attack. It was the quickest way he knew to build mutual respect and breach the prejudices of centuries, which separated the disparate ethnic groups. His most devoted assistant in cementing the bonds of *san mah ki* in the mountains of the northeast was a former protégé of Vang Pao's, a one-time guerrilla spy who, like Naoh Teu, had worked for years behind the enemy lines. His name was Neah Ying, and few men in all of northeast Laos were more beloved by those who knew him.

Neah Ying was an angular young man, quick as a rabbit and tireless on jungle pathways, who had become attached to Edgar when Vang Pao first moved his military headquarters to Long Tieng, before the neutrality agreement was signed. His gleaming black hair grew in an unruly mane straight up from a tightly stretched scalp, and his features, while Mongoloid like those of any other Meo, were finely drawn and handsome by any standard of male beauty. No one who knew Neah Ying ever remembered seeing him downcast, even in the most perilous times. Through hunger, in battle, among wounded and dying companions, or palavering around an open fire at night, his lips always turned up in a smile; sometimes sympathetic, sometimes open and outgoing, sometimes sardonic, sometimes sentimental, but always a smile. His entire range of facial expression was happy, as if he had no facial muscles with which to display bitterness, cruelty, sadness, or defeat. Behind this disarming countenance was a tough, analytical mind and a flawless talent for instantly sizing up the people he encountered as he traveled from village to village in Laos with Tan Pop.

"This man is a cheat, that one is a liar, the one over there smokes opium secretly, but that man is honorable and deserves our trust," he would say to Pop within minutes after entering a new village. Invariably he was right. Like Thongsar, Chung, and Tseng, Neah Ying became one of Edgar's closest friends. He was an invaluable refugee worker as well. Often he accompanied Pop on his long treks on foot

and by airplane around the northern mountains. Regardless of the ethnic origin of the tribes among whom he worked, the people became attached to Neah Ying because he laughed in the face of hostility, and it was impossible to dislike him, no matter how deeply racial prejudice against the Meo was ingrained. He was particularly beloved by the Lao Thung, whose historically low position on the social ladder of Laos left them deeply distrustful of all other people, but particularly of the Meo, who had abused them for two hundred years.

One night Edgar joined Neah Ying in a Lao Thung village on the mid-slope of a hill near Long Tieng. The *taesing* of the village had invited them to feast in his house and afterwards to join the men and young virgins of the village in a *lau hai* party. Their food, like that of the lowland Lao, was fiercely hot from copious quantities of small red and green peppers that caused tears to flow from the eyes of anyone unused to them, but it was plentiful. The two prettiest young maidens in the village, each about fourteen, squatty in shape and solemn in manner, obediently served them spoonfuls of food and refilled their glasses of *lau lau* whenever they were emptied. Neah Ying and Edgar belched loudly in appreciation when the meal was finished, and the virgins withdrew to the center of the *taesing*'s hut. There, tied to the center pole, was a huge hollowed bamboo tube, stuffed almost to its brim with sticky, fermented rice. Protruding from the tube were four strawlike stalks of hollow bamboo. The girls poured murky water, taken directly from the open stream outside of the stilted hut, into the large container, and the *lau hai* was ready. The *taesing* and his companions then watched happily as Edgar, Neah Ying, and the two maidens kneeled over the straws and sucked up the almost sickeningly sweet wine, created as the water filtered through the fermented rice. When the level of water that bubbled over the rice began to sink, another maiden of the village added more liquid, and the four, like marathon racers taking encouragement from a crowd, were urged by the onlookers to continue sucking on the reedy bamboo straws until the weakest of them surrendered. Edgar drank as much as he could, suppressed a burp, and gave up, but Neah Ying continued to pull on the mildly alcoholic sauce until the two girls surrendered. He arose from his kneeling position before the *lau*

hai and laughed uproariously, throwing a comradely arm around the *taesing* of the Lao Thung village. Edgar had never before seen such a show of intimacy between a Meo and a Lao Thung man.

"How come you git along with these people so well, Neah Ying?" he asked later. "You speak their language perfect, and they're all your friends."

"It is easier for me than other Meo, Tan Pop," said Neah Ying. "You will understand when I tell you this story. My grandfather was a leader of the Ying clan of the Meo, and he was a very proud and very strong man. His favorite daughter was the oldest child of his number-one wife. He loved her as much as he loved his sons, and he began looking for a husband for her when she was only a little girl. Almost every boy he considered was dismissed because he was unworthy of such a girl. My grandfather wanted only the finest Meo boy to become her husband.

"One day his favorite little daughter walked down the mountain by herself, and near a Lao Thung village down there she met a little boy. They played together. Each day, in secret, she returned, and they became fast friends. From this time until they were both fifteen years old, there was no one else for either of them. But they had to go on as they did when they were children and meet in secret. The boy's father would have been angry if he knew that his son loved a Meo girl. And my grandfather would have killed the Lao Thung boy if he found him with his favorite daughter.

"The girl's mother learned of the affair, but she remained silent. Then my grandfather became suspicious, although he did not know whom his daughter was seeing. Still he looked for a young Meo worthy of tying a wedding knot on her wrist. But he was afraid some unworthy Meo boy was seeing her in secret, so he asked his number-one wife to send the girl away to stay in another village until he succeeded in finding a good husband for her. The wife, of course, had the heart of a woman. She was on her daughter's side. She warned the girl. Before my grandfather could send his daughter away, she ran away with her lover from the Lao Thung village. They were married in another Lao Thung village four mountains away.

"Grandfather was more angry than a wounded tiger. For days he

would not speak to his number-one wife. His daughter sent a message pleading that she be allowed to return to the village with her new husband. This made him even angrier. But his wife worked on him. In time the girl became pregnant, and Grandfather's number-one wife was desperate to see her. Grandfather was unhappy, but he consented to let his daughter come home with her husband to have the baby. I was the baby. My father and my mother remained in Grandfather's village. My father took the clan name and learned all of the ways of the Meo. In time, Grandfather lost his anger, and as he grew to know my father, he loved him. Before he died, Grandfather said that my father was the only man in the world worthy of marrying his daughter.

"So you see why these Lao Thung people are my friends. I am one of them. I learned their language from my father, and I spent many days among them when I was a child. All of my life I have dreamed that the people of Laos who hate each other without reason will one day see both sides, as I have seen. All people are as good and as bad as all other people. There is no reason to hate any man only because of his race."

During one of the months of the winter dry season after he had blown up the road to Khang Khay, Edgar went west into Luang Prabang Province with Neah Ying to gather together 30,000 wandering refugees who had been driven out of their native hills by the fighting then taking place between Kong Le and the Communists. Fifty percent of the refugees were Lao Thung and 40 percent were Meo, so neither Edgar nor Neah Ying had difficulty communicating with them. New village sites on unoccupied mountains far removed from the fighting were found. The *taesings* of the refugee groups were flown to the new sites by helicopter so they could lead their walking people to them. But one group of 3,000, from a tribe that neither Edgar nor Neah Ying had encountered before, presented difficulties. They were Ekau people, members of a small aboriginal tribe of south China, Burma, and Laos, about whose customs little is known. One of their leaders spoke a few words of Lao, but communication was difficult. Misunderstanding developed almost immediately.

"The most important man in this group must fly with me to the new village," Edgar said.

His Ekau interpreter looked perplexed. "The most important man must stay here," he said with difficulty. "He cannot go with you. There is no reason."

"He must come with me," Edgar insisted. "Only then can he lead the people to their new home."

"The most important man cannot lead anyone," the interpreter stammered. "He must stay here with the people."

Edgar insisted, and again the puzzled Ekau refused to bring forth the most important man in the village group. Neah Ying, meanwhile, was circulating happily among a large group of the Ekau tribesmen nearby. Finally he found one who spoke Lao Thung. When the man explained to him why the village could not surrender its most important man to ride in the helicopter, Neah Ying burst into fits of laughter.

"What's so funny?" said Pop, red-faced with frustration over trying to make sense to the stammering Ekau interpreter.

"Tan Pop," Neah Ying gasped, "you have been asking for the 'most important man' in this Ekau group. That is him over there." He pointed to a tired-looking middle-aged man with downcast eyes who was surrounded as if for protection by a dozen young girls.

"He don't look like no leader to me," said Edgar.

"That's the point, he isn't." Neah Ying laughed. "That's what the interpreter has been trying to tell you. He cannot lead anyone. But he is the most important man in the village."

"That don't make sense."

"This man explained to me. Among the Ekau it is the custom for one very sacred man to take every virgin to himself—to break her—before she may marry. That is his only job. He is the most important man in the village. They do not want to risk losing him in the helicopter." Neah Ying doubled up again with laughter. "If the custom was the same in my village, there would be no young men for the girls to marry. They would kill each other fighting to see who became the 'most important man' in the village."

A few days later during the same mass resettlement of the Luang

Prabang refugees, Edgar was showing a group of Meo farmers how to plant lettuce and cabbage seeds in rows so they could be cultivated more efficiently than when planted in clumps according to traditional tribal practice. Watching soberly, as if they, too, were village elders, was a group of small girls. There were seven of them, and the oldest, whose name was Un Chan, was thirteen years old. When the lesson in truck farming was finished, the small girls followed Edgar away from the field toward a waiting helicopter. Curious, he stopped and faced them. Six of the girls clustered behind Un Chan and pushed her forward as their spokesman.

"Tan Pop, we want to help our people, too," said the shy 13-year-old.

"That's good," said Edgar. "Your people need all the help they can get. What do you want to do?"

"We want to learn about medicine, Tan Pop, so that we can cure people when they are sick, and take care of them. Can you teach us about the medicine?"

Edgar frowned thoughtfully. Chanh's medical training program was in full swing at his first hospital in Pha Khao. A half-dozen of the young Meo medics he had trained were working, even now, in the new refugee areas of Luang Prabang, and one of them was operating in this very village. The girls, obviously, had observed him and wanted to emulate him. But medical practice among the Meo, traditionally the province of village shamans alone, remained strictly a male profession. Edgar had once suggested training female nurses for the hospital and even for medical duty in the villages, but Vang Pao had scoffed at the idea. "A wounded Meo would rather die than be treated by a woman, Tan Pop," he had said. "A woman's place is in the fields, in the bed, and by the fire, cooking and caring for children."

Now, however, Chanh had moved to Sam Thong with Edgar, Thongsar, and Neah Ying. He already had a new 100-bed hospital in operation there, and he had been forced to use untrained Meo boys as nurses. They were eager but clumsy helpers, and Chanh wanted to begin another medical training school at Sam Thong to staff the new bamboo frame hospital. Regrettably, most of the young men who were alert and interested enough to become Chanh's students also

were eager to join Vang Pao's guerrilla force and fight the enemy. Recruiting good medical trainees had become difficult.

"Little girl, I think you and me is gonna break some more new ground up here," Edgar told Un Chan. "If your mothers and fathers will let me take you to Sam Thong, I'll see that you girls learn about medicine. You'll be the first real nurses anywhere in northeast Laos."

Edgar won the parents' permission to take the girls away, and the next day lifted them by helicopter to Sam Thong. Chanh had built his hospital at the end of a 2,000-foot dirt airstrip where airplanes and helicopters could unload wounded soldiers and ill villagers almost directly into his emergency room. Adjacent to it, now, he erected a simple hut for the girls. There they lived and studied each day as Chanh taught them the rudiments of first aid and the techniques of caring for bedridden patients. Their hospital knowledge, unfortunately, had to remain largely theoretical, because they were not permitted to handle the Meo patients. Instead, Un Chan and the other girls took care of the hospital cooking and cleaning and learned all they could by observing Chanh at work. They were bright and eager students and, not surprisingly, showed a capacity for tenderness that was far deeper than that of any of Chanh's male trainees. Pop kept their presence in Sam Thong a secret from Colonel Vang Pao.

The Meo guerrilla commander, meanwhile, had begun his long-planned invasion of Sam Neua Province, and once again Edgar was inundated with unexpected new demands upon his refugee program. Vang Pao linked forces with Major Thong, who became his field commander in the enemy-held province, and the Lao and Meo guerrilla units extended the military tactics of Gideon all the way to the borders of North Vietnam. The units moved like chess pieces, sweeping to the sides, leaping over ranks of enemy in the mountains, and audaciously taunting the enemy king in his own once-secure castle—Prince Souphanouvong's political headquarters located just outside the small provincial capital, Sam Neua city. Vang Pao was the strategist, and Uncle Joe was his favorite Knight, leaping from mountain to mountain behind enemy lines to help consolidate the quick military gains. Edgar, like a Bishop on a chessboard, followed obliquely behind

Joe with immediate aid for the civilian populace in the newly seized enemy areas.

"Send up the pots and pans man," Joe would radio after a new area had been taken, and Edgar would walk or fly into the new site, just as Joe prepared to jump off for another attack. Quickly he would direct emergency supplies of rice, salt, pots and pans, blankets, and other necessities for the liberated people, so that the concern of Souvanna Phouma's Royal Government and the American AID program was immediately apparent to the peasants, who had spent years under harsh and abstemious Communist rule. After the first emergency drops, supplies came smoothly on a regularly scheduled basis. The durability of Edgar's relief program was never doubted by its new recipients.

To the officials of AID in Vientiane, who watched Edgar's peripatetic activity in northeast Laos with growing incredulity, it seemed impossible that one man could appear in so many places, smoothly incorporating tens of thousands of new refugees into an intricate airborne supply program, that, in total tonnage and complexity, rivaled the Berlin airlift. To accomplish it, Edgar moved tirelessly throughout Xiang Khouang, Luang Prabang, and Sam Neua Provinces without thought of leisure time or holidays. Along with an equally tireless native staff, he worked eighteen hours every day, with never a day off. When questioned about his exhausting work load, he explained:

"I was always of the opinion that I ought to do a little bit extra after I've done my day's work. It's that little bit that sells America."

In a sincere effort to ease his burden, the AID mission assigned two young Americans named Tom Ward and Blaine Jensen to help him. But the only real change in the program was that now, instead of employing one American relief worker eighteen hours a day, it took the same amount of time and energy from three.

They also talked Edgar into a new, full-time job. As an International Voluntary Services farm adviser, he had long performed beyond the official pale. The massive refugee program called for at least a senior American Foreign Service officer in charge. For months officials of the U.S. mission had urged Edgar to drop his connection with I.V.S. and accept full-time employment with AID. He agreed, finally, and accepted senior rank as a reserve Foreign Service officer in AID. For

the first time he began to receive an adequate salary for his labors, and he was delighted, but not simply because the public payroll was generous. For him a salary of more than \$65 a month was rapidly becoming a necessity. His retirement fund in the Edon bank was running perilously low, and the generous new salary gave him an opportunity to invest even more of his own funds in school equipment and little extras for the refugees.

Chapter 14

Everybody should know and be proud that we are working against time without saying that today is too cold, today is too hot, and today is too rainy. These words are pretending words of the lazy people who the world of peace never wish to see and to stay with. As my old Lord Buddha say, "Where there is a will and then there must have a way."

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupba

FATHER Lucien Bouchard's friends in North Attleboro, Massachusetts, where he was born, called him Luke, but after his arrival in Laos in 1957 as a 26-year-old rural missionary of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, everyone called him Father B. He was a lean young man who kept his curly dark hair close-cropped under a worn farmer's straw hat. His neck was as red as a field hand's, and the only signs of priestliness about him were the open innocence of his handsome, unlined face, and the soft-collared black sports shirts that he wore as a modified sign of the cloth. His faded Levis were shredded by frequent primitive launderings on flat washing rocks in the mountain streams, and his mud-smeared leather boots were those of a hiker who knows that wild snakes usually aim for the shins and calves of a walker's legs. As much as he could, he tried to ignore the war that raged over his parish, which was all of northeast Laos. Whether nature, blind luck, or a benevolent God protects such people as Father B is irrelevant, because the answer is undiscoverable. Whatever the cause, he led a charmed life as he walked from village to village in the mountains, where a century of conversions, accom-

plished mostly by French missionary priests, had left tiny bands of Christians among the Meo, the Lao, and the Lao Thung. Only occasionally did he stumble unwittingly into a battle. He always escaped unhurt, because no matter which side the people were on, they saw that Father B was led safely away from the scene before someone inadvertently shot him. Father B kept his vestments packed beneath the Bible and the breviary in his knapsack. When he arrived in a Christian settlement or in a village that included a family or two of Catholic converts, he put the vestments on and celebrated mass. Sam Thong was a regular stop on his circuit of the mountain country, because it included a small Catholic community among the 4,500 refugees who had built a sprawling village around Edgar Buell's headquarters. Their church was a bamboo hut near a chimney-like karst monolith that reached high above the fertile floor of the bowl-like mountain valley in which Sam Thong nestled. Father B was especially fond of this part of his broad parish, because he was personally responsible for the conversion of many of his congregation there, and it gave him a deep sense of satisfaction to find them keeping the faith whenever he returned from his exhausting excursions elsewhere. Also, he had discovered in Sam Thong that the Lord and Edgar Buell usually answered his prayers and gave him a lift in an Air America plane when his legs got tired. Frequently, too, Edgar helped Father B to move his most numerous and most pitiful constituents to a leper colony near Vientiane. It was his personal crusade to rescue lepers, of whom there are many in Southeast Asia. The task was not easy, not simply a matter of entering a village and ordering all of the lepers to report for inspection. The Meo, Lao, Lao Thung, and smaller ethnic groups of Laos followed the ages-old practice of driving any suspected leper from their midst, and few of the unfortunates survived long, alone, on the hospitality of uninhabited jungle. Over the years Father B had established a first-rate leprosy intelligence network composed of sympathetic people in villages all over the northeast who would report to him as quickly as they could whenever a fellow villager was suspected of having the disease, or when one was discovered and driven from the village. Sometimes he managed to save the hapless lepers before they were ostracized, but more often he had to plunge into the

jungle after them and track them down. He would bring them back to Sam Thong, then, and Edgar would arrange to put them aboard empty cargo planes returning to Vientiane, where they were quickly taken into a French leper colony and treated. The two missionaries, one working for church, the other for country, became fast friends, and whenever Father B showed up in Sam Thong he slept in Edgar's hut.

One day he thumbed a ride on an empty plane from the airstrip at Tha Lin Noi to Sam Thong. With him he brought one leper whose swollen right hand, almost glowing with sickening jaundice in the meaty flesh between thumb and forefinger, had earned him his ostracism and subsequent blessed rescue by the priest. After arranging for the leper's overnight lodging in Medic Chanh's hospital, Father B celebrated mass in the church hut by the karst chimney, then he joined Pop and Thongsar for dinner. Edgar was unusually subdued as the three men chewed the dry mountain rice and spooned up the simple chicken broth that Thongsar had prepared. He shook his head when Thongsar offered a shot of *lau lau*.

"I reckon I just been movin' too fast around here lately," he said. "I ain't felt this tired in years. It's early, but I'm goin' to bed."

Edgar pulled a blanket over his fully clothed body and turned away from the fire. Father B read his Bible by the firelight, and Thongsar cleaned the pots in which he had cooked dinner. Neither of them noticed anything wrong until Father B grew tired of squinting at the book in the bad light and stretched out on the broad bamboo platform that served as a bed for all of them. The platform was trembling as if attached to a strong electric vibrator. Father B took a flashlight from his knapsack and shined it on Edgar. The wizened, drawn features of the old farmer's face glistened with sweat, as if he had just soaked his head in a pail of water. His teeth were clenched, and he was shivering like an overheated one-cylinder engine. Through Edgar's half-opened eyelids, Father B could see bloodshot whites and unfocused pupils. The frail little man was comatose. In an hour's time he had quietly collapsed under the weight of a high fever.

Father B cried out to Thongsar, who rushed to Edgar's side and lifted his head in his hands. Buell groaned, and Father B knelt and began to pray. As Thongsar hurried to a wooden crate in the corner

where Edgar stored his medicines, the priest increased the vocal volume of his prayer. It was loud enough to shake Edgar awake. Tremblingly, he raised his head and stared at the kneeling priest.

"Father B," he said in a weak voice, "cut out that damned prayin' and help Thongsar find me some medicine. I feel just plain awful." Then he lapsed, again, into a coma.

It was a sudden onslaught of bacterial pneumonia that obviously had been brewing in Edgar's undernourished body for days. Typically, he had ignored the symptoms in the preoccupation of his work. It came with devastating force, as pneumonia sometimes will, and Edgar was unconscious before he really knew what hit him. Both Thongsar and Father B had seen too much sudden death in the mountains to be surprised by its nearness now. There was an air of futility to their efforts as they worked over his weakening body, because neither thought he would survive the night. Buell was breathing torturously, as if the air in his lungs had to force its way through layers of pure liquid. His chills, when they came, shook his small body and the bed on which it lay. They could feel the heat of his fever radiating inches away from his skin. Still they worked on. Thongsar cradled Edgar's head in his lap as Father Bouchard bathed his hot skin with cold water, desperately trying to bring the fever down. At half-hour intervals the diminutive ex-Buddhist priest and the Catholic father forced Buell's clenched teeth open and patiently trickled tetracycline syrup down his throat. Thongsar found a vial of penicillin and injected a massive dose into Edgar's buttock. By 4:00 A.M. tears of hopelessness were streaming down the Buddhist's normally placid face, and Father B, again, was praying. Then Edgar awoke with a deep sigh, which Father B mistook, for a moment, as the end of life.

Buell looked up into the tear-streaked face of his small Lao friend. "Thank you, Thongsar," he whispered. "I guess it was a rough night. Thank you."

"Daddy Pop," said Thongsar, almost sobbing, "do you realize that's the first time you ever said 'thank you' to me in your life? Thank you, Daddy Pop."

Buell smiled, wanly. "Father B," he said, "for God's sake, cut out that prayin'. I'm gonna be all right."

It was the first time Edgar had been sick since he left Steuben County, and the first time he had paused to think about his own frailties since forgetting the pain of his injured back and ulcerated stomach at Lhat Houang. During the two weeks of his recuperation, Edgar brooded about his health. Several of the officials of the U.S. mission who came to visit his one-room Vientiane apartment during his convalescence even suggested to him that perhaps he had spent enough of himself in the mountains and that now, near the peak of Vang Pao's successes, would be a good time to quit and go home. He thought, too, about Thongsar's tearful remark.

"Leavin' right now, just when there's so much to do, would be a damned poor way to say 'thank you,' wouldn't it?" he asked rhetorically. "I'm stayin'. If I get sick again, well, that's just the way it is."

Chapter 15

It is one thing that is unbelievable from the outside of some persons' eyes how we could set up and operate the hospitals on the high and dangerous mountains. Everyone should know that it is a different thing than the things which the big world build up by the machine and by the automatic equipments.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Bopha

EDGAR had been in Laos for three years now, and he hardly knew what to make of his overnight visit to Houei Thom and his friend Tseng. The suspicions of Tseng's chief subordinate, Teu Ying, that the young Chinese-Meo had become a double agent, were deeply disturbing. Yet, during the long evening of reminiscence in the *taesing's* hut, Pop had caught no hint in Tseng's behavior to support the suspicions. The boy had seemed a bit nervous earlier, when he went down the mountain by himself just after darkness fell, but later he was relaxed and warm. They were still close friends. If Tseng's allegiance had shifted to the enemy, Edgar was certain that the young spy would be incapable of pretending affection. It was something that could not be feigned. If the boy's nerves were on edge, it was understandable. After all, he had been out of contact with his family for more than two years, and it looked more and more as if he might never hear from them again. Still, Pop thought, it might be a good idea to visit Houei Thom more often in the coming months. If the loyalty of Tseng's guerrilla scouts had become shaken, as clearly was the case with Teu Ying, his young friend would need help in restoring

their confidence. Right now, Edgar had a more important problem on his hands. He had been alerted that the new American public health director from the AID mission in Vientiane was coming to Sam Thong the next day. The freshly posted mission doctor had learned, through a routine report from Pop's headquarters, that a new bamboo hospital established by Medic Chanh, Edgar, and Thongsar, was going to be dedicated in a few days at the small village of Hong Non, deep inside Sam Neua Province. The doctor passed the word that he wanted to attend the dedication and he expected Edgar to take him there.

"Another educated fool," Buell grumbled to Thongsar as he saw the doctor's light plane touch down on the airstrip at Sam Thong. "The public health director of AID ain't never done a goddamned thing for these people, and now this one's comin' up here to horn in on our program. We'll git him straightened out. Just watch."

The new American doctor, small in stature, grey-haired, and distinguished-looking in his freshly pressed casual slacks and sport shirt, entered Edgar's thatched-roof headquarters hut and robustly hailed its two occupants, who were sitting on the edge of a bamboo pallet bed sorting through lists of refuge supplies.

"Hi. I'm Doctor Weldon."

"Don't be in such a goddamned hurry," Pop grumbled without looking up from his work. "We're busy here. When I have time, I'll talk to you."

For two hours, then, Edgar studiously ignored his visitor, as if retaliating for every wasted minute he had spent in the uninspiring waiting rooms of doctors back in Indiana. Weldon waited with obvious impatience until nightfall, when Neah Ying and Blea Vu, who were sharing the hut with Thongsar and Edgar, motioned to him to join them for dinner. The five men sat on benches around a hand-hewn table, eating silently, while Neah Ying's wife served. The uncomfortable visitor, who had spent hours now unaccountably in Coventry with the three mysterious natives and the disgruntled old farmer from Indiana, was beginning to regret even thinking about visiting Sam Thong when Edgar spoke to him.

"Want a drink of whiskey?"

"Sure, I'd like a drink of whiskey," said the doctor in a butter-smooth Louisiana accent, figuratively redolent of hog sausage, grits, and molasses.

"Here," said Pop, pouring a shot of cloudy *lau lau* from a mud-caked bottle that he pulled from under the table. He watched with perverse pleasure, expecting to see his unwelcome guest choke on the fiery, underaged liquor.

Weldon knocked the shot back and smacked his lips. "That's god-dam good corn whiskey, Mr. Buell," he drawled.

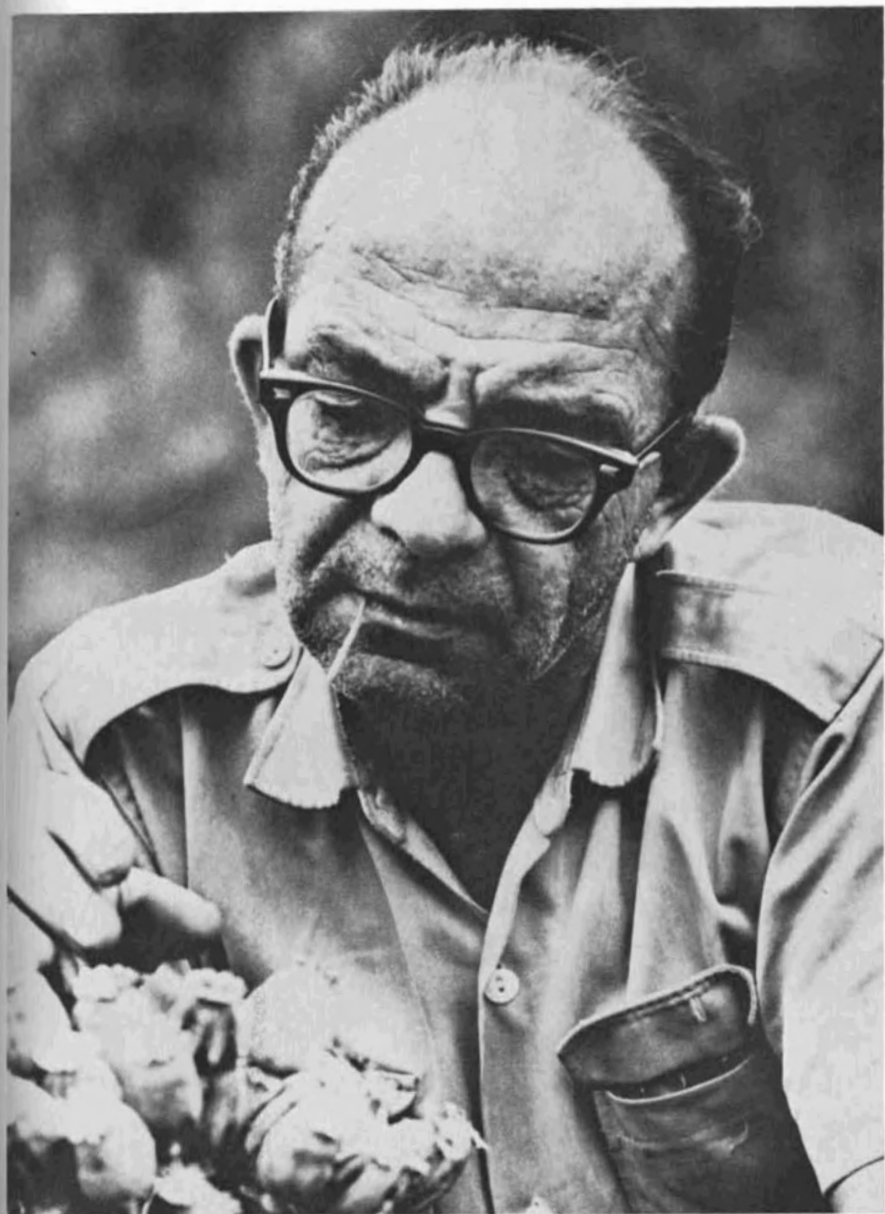
Buell was nonplussed, remembering his own first encounter with the native brew at the house of Mi Si's father three years ago. He decided to take a more direct line of attack against the slow-talking Southern physician. Weldon, he assumed, was like many Americans who had visited Sam Thong in recent months primarily for the thrill of imagining themselves in danger behind enemy lines. Men with only the most tenuous official reasons for doing so had bummed slightly hazardous rides in Air America planes and spent a half-day or a day in the clear mountain air of Sam Thong, a relief after the mugginess of tropical Vientiane. There they observed the quaint natives and walked with feigned sympathy through Chanh's hospital, usually to gag over the misery and gore that were a normal part of the place—severed hands, arms, and legs lying outside the building in fly-crusted basins, awaiting decent Meo burials; patients gazing stoically at the thatched ceiling as they lay on hard wooden hospital beds, uncertain whether life was ebbing or flowing in the throbbing of head and body wounds or the fever of common diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, and hepatitis; Chanh, himself, professionally clamping blood vessels and sawing through bone to save the leg and life of an innocent land-mine victim, untroubled by the appalled stares of the one-day sightseers. Then the visitors would sponge a genuine Meo dinner, which they would find unpalatable, from Edgar and his companions, and wonder why the Indiana farmer didn't offer more appetizing fare. Later, in the comfort of air-conditioned offices in Vientiane, they would compose inflated memoranda, phrased in the mind-deadening ambiguities of their own bureaucratic vocabulary, stressing the positive impact of their dangerous forays into enemy

territory. More than one minor functionary in the U.S. mission to Laos had lived through his entire two-year tour in the country on the anecdotal value of a single brief visit to Edgar's headquarters.

Buell guessed that Doctor Weldon was one more in a long line of ineffective men who had found undemanding professional refuges, and opportunities to live like imperialists in a tropical climate with houses full of native servants to nurse them through their two-year tours. For this, like Edgar, they received adequate Government salaries, plus a 25-percent hardship allowance based on the difficult hazards they faced on the banks of the unlovely Mekong River, with their American commissary, social club, and swimming pool nearby.

"Listen, Doctor," Buell began as Weldon gratefully tossed off his third shot of *lau lau*. "The only goddam reason I'm willing to let you come up here at all is because I figure there's just a small chance you'll go back to Vientiane and get things that we need." Buell explained, then, that during his entire three years in Laos there had been no appropriation in the U.S. AID budget for medical supplies or for a rural health program that would underwrite such activities as Chanh's hospitals and medic training program. After his first supply of medicines from the stocks Touby Ly Fong had scrounged, Edgar himself had kept the medical program going only by threat, cajolery, and subterfuge. He paid Chanh and his medic trainees by illegally including them on the roster of his refugee relief workers, like the laborers who loaded the drop airplanes at Wattay airport in Vientiane. By browbeating the new C.I.A. station chief, he managed to replenish some of his medicines from that agency's secret resources, and with the eager assistance of the professional staff at Operation Brotherhood he arranged for volunteer doctors and nurses to journey into the mountains when they were needed, or to care in their Vientiane hospital for patients too critically ill or wounded to be handled at Sam Thong and Pha Khao.

"There's one more thing I particularly want to tell you, Doctor," Edgar concluded his dour sermonette. "I don't want any of you educated fools comin' up here and tellin' me how to do things. We've done pretty good on our own so far, and the biggest favor you can do for these people up here is to leave us alone. I just want you to go



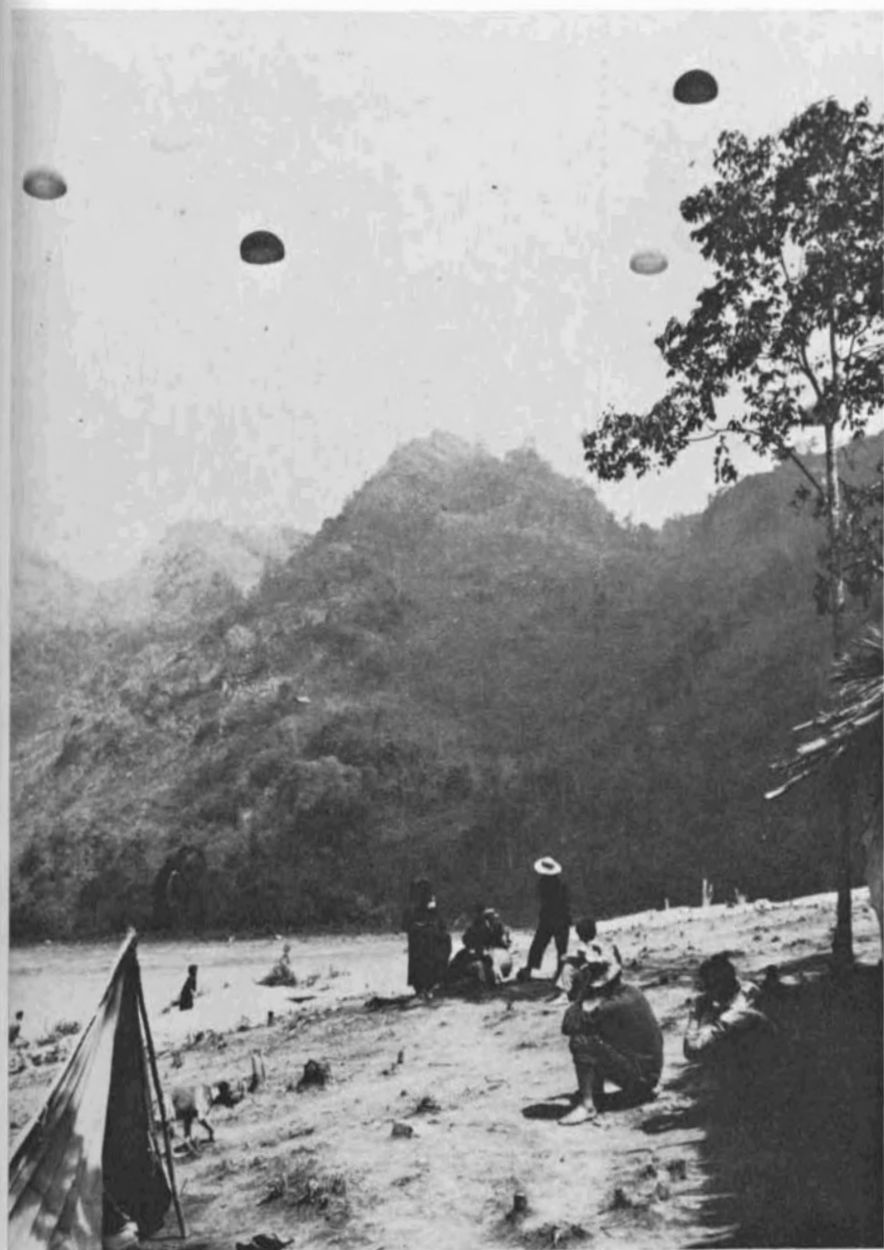
Pop Buell's creased features reflect resignation as he holds a cluster of opium poppies, which grow profusely in northeast Laos.



Old-fashioned ground-to-air radio handset close to his ear, Buell calls to drop plane to parachute rice to Meo war refugees in mountains.



Old and young refugees scramble across mountain plateau to retrieve bags of rice dropped without parachutes. When bags split, they salvage each spilled grain.



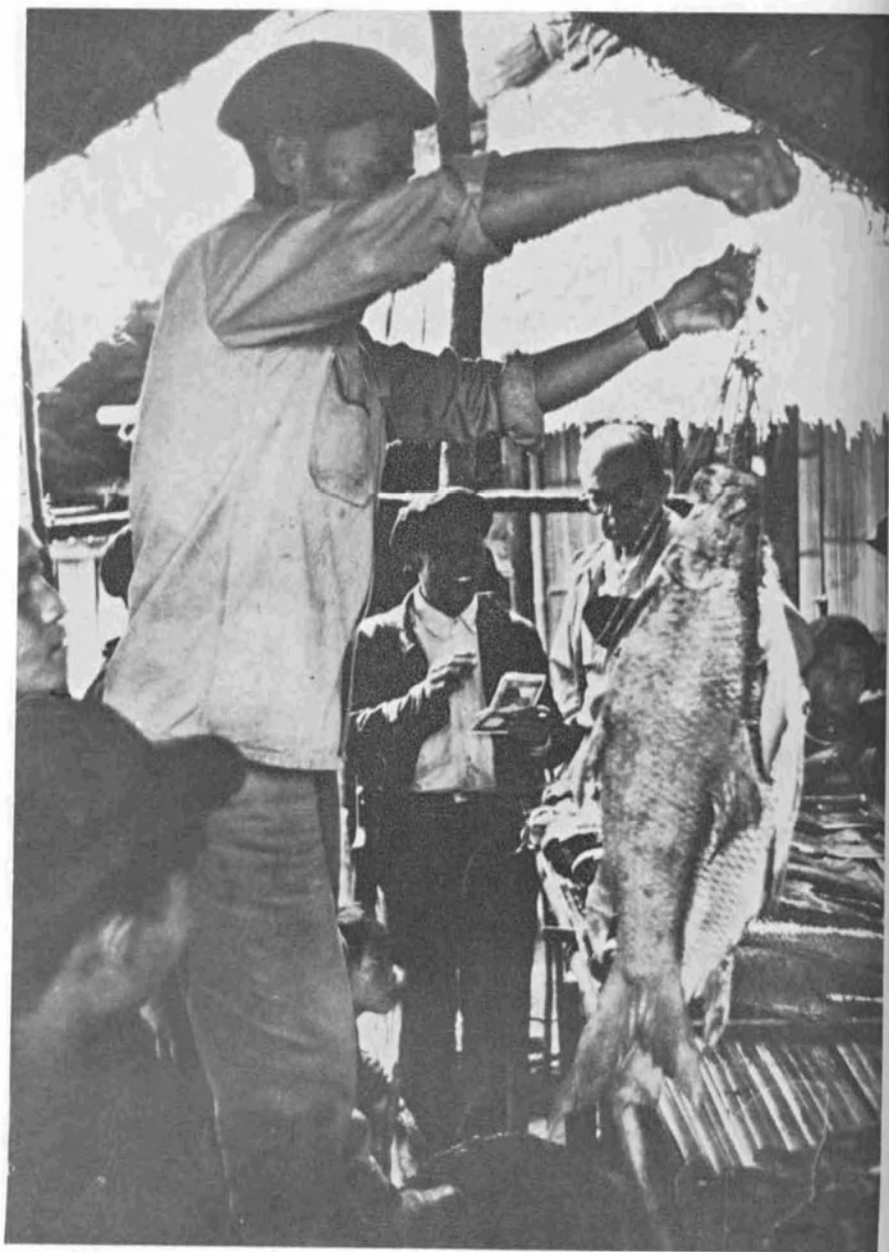
Sent from above, food supplies descend by parachute to a village near Pha Khao, Laos, where many of the refugees are housed in temporary shelters.



Taasing of Long Tieng, Naoh Ying (left), assists Pop in explaining to representatives of Meo and Lao Thung villages that they must share rice.



Garden seeds are apportioned by Pop and Naoh Ying for distribution to refugees seeking to regain self-sufficiency despite ever-present weapons of war.



Meo villager proudly hefts day's catch of fish, a rare delicacy among the tribesmen until Pop Buell introduced breeding ponds to the mountains.



Helio-courier, a light airplane, can land and take off on rough, 300-foot strips. Plane carries pilot and passenger, plus 600-800 pounds of cargo, through fog-shrouded valleys.

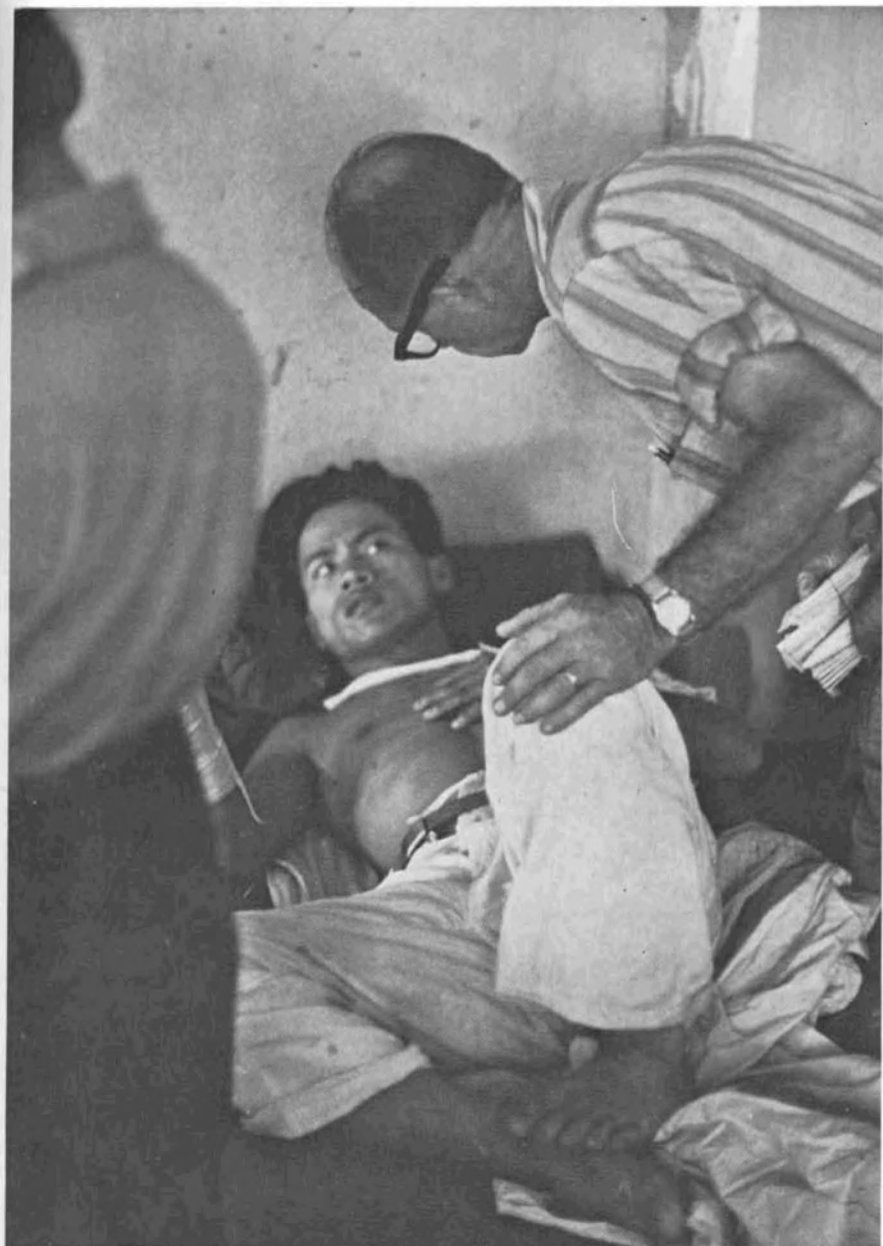




Primitive schoolhouse, one of dozens established by Pop in Laos mountains, offers Meo children their first and only chance at literacy.



Dying opium smoker serenely awaits fate as Buell consoles him. Man has tuberculosis, smokes opium to relieve pain until death ends it.



Pop comforts wounded Meo refugee who lost right hand in grenade blast when Vietminh and Pathet Lao troops over-ran his village near Plaine des Jarres.



Mother and child draw Pop's interest in Meo village. Woman wears silver necklaces, all of her family's wealth. Child's ceremonial hat is strung with French coins.



Smiling Neah Ying observes from background as Buell pauses on mountain pathway to say hello to Meo children out gathering greens for their family table.



"Little boy, you make it all worthwhile," says Pop to the tiny son of his former cook at Lhat Houang. Child's mother would have miscarried without Buell's care.



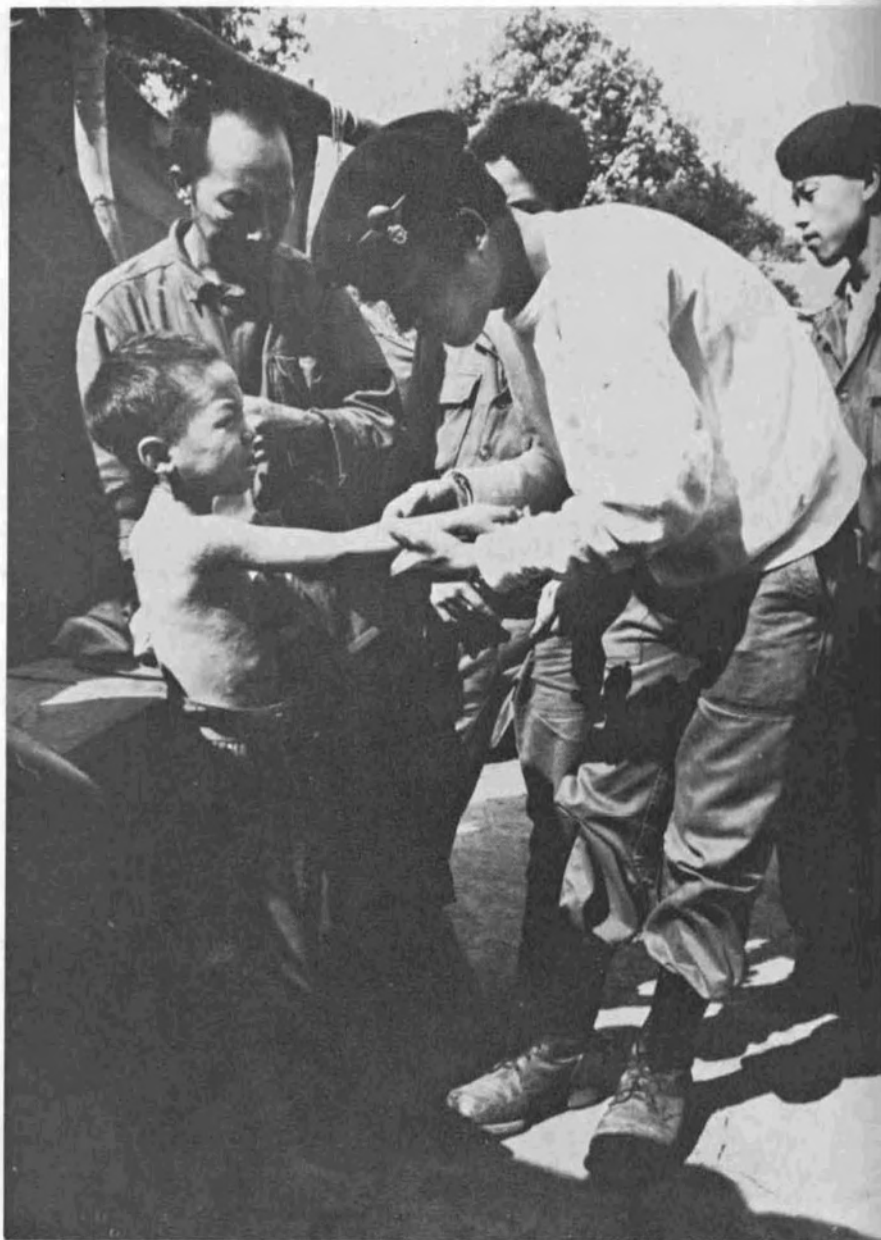
Respectful greeting with prayer-clasped hands brings welcome smile to face of Touby Ly Fong, the "king" of the Meo tribes in Laos.



Guerrilla chieftain, General Va Vang Pao, smiles as he chats with Pop during joint visit to a Meo refugee village called Houei Kinnin.



Author, Don Schanche, pauses on jungle trail near Long Tieng, Laos, during one of many visits to Pop Buell's war-troubled area in northeast Laos.



Medic Chanh, probably the most successful medical fraud and the best paramedic ever to work in Laos, treats boy with skin infection at Pha Khao.

back to Vientiane and tell 'em what we need. You stay down there and see that we get what we need up here, and you and me'll get along all right. But the one thing I don't need is any more educated fools tellin' me what to do."

Early the next morning Pop boosted Weldon into a rain-spattered Helio-Courier and they took off for Hong Non where, Edgar had made it perfectly clear, the doctor would be only an observer. "If you was to make a speech, nobody'd understand you, anyway," he said gruffly. "You don't speak the language, and it ain't likely you'll ever learn."

Hong Non, the most advanced outpost of Vang Pao's invasion of Sam Neua Province, perched in obvious poverty on a 4,800-foot mountain that was the easternmost peak of a jagged 200-square-mile high plateau pimpled all around by scrubby, smaller mountains. At a road junction down in the valley just four miles below Hong Non was Sam Neua city, with Souphanouvong's headquarters on its eastern outskirts. And just twenty-five miles away was the border of North Vietnam. If Dr. Weldon wanted to spend his tour in Laos with the enhanced prestige of anecdotal hazards faced and conquered, he was in a perfect position to collect material for such a raconteurial career right now. By simply landing on the crude dirt airstrip at Hong Non he had come closer to North Vietnam than any American, except Edgar, Uncle Joe, and a few pilots, since the French defeat at Dien-bienphu. But as Edgar was soon to learn, Charles Weldon—called "Jiggs" because even with his weightlifter's arms, bulging pectoral muscles, and boxer's legs, he was no taller than Buell himself—could have retired years before on tales of his own more perilous adventures, had he been that kind of man. In fact he gave hardly a thought to the vulnerability of Hong Non after they landed, when the *taesing* of the village described to Pop the sickness that had come over the people of two other villages a day's walk to the northwest.

"He says they's twelve of 'em died four days ago and twenty-eight more died in the last two days. Sounds like the worst kind of dysentery I ever come across," Buell said. "The *taesing* here thinks it's cholera, but, hell, he don't know. Sounds like real bad dysentery to me."

"Ask him to describe the symptoms," said Weldon.

Buell talked for a few minutes to the *taesing*. "Well, they seems to just come down with diarrhea, and it's steady like it don't stop comin'. Then in twelve to twenty-four hours, they just die, like they was too worn out to live any more."

"My God," said Weldon. "We've got to work fast."

"We got other things to do right now, Doctor. We can send them up some dysentery medicine later, after we dedicate the hospital."

"Listen, mister," said Weldon in a firm, even tone. "There are sick people up here, and they've got cholera. There aren't any other diarrheal diseases in this country that will kill people that fast. To hell with dedicating your hospital."

"You listen to me, Doctor," said Buell. "Dysentery kills people up here every day, and it always has. We've had a dozen cholera scares since I've been in the mountains, and it's never been the real thing yet."

"Mister Buell, this man is describing cholera. If we don't move very fast, thousands of people will die. It's our job to take care of these people, isn't it?"

"What do you think you can do about it?" asked Edgar in a somewhat chastened tone.

"I intend to get all the cholera vaccine I can and begin immunizing the people of this entire area immediately."

"I can tell you're new out here, Doctor. Where you gonna get the vaccine?"

"You get me back to Vientiane and I'll get it, don't worry. These people need help, and they need it right now. Just lend me that airplane and I'll be back up here with enough vaccine for all of these people tomorrow."

Edgar looked at the visitor from Vientiane with respect for the first time since he had gruffly rejected him the day before. "If you can do that, Doctor, you'll be the best man that ever set foot up here. Maybe you ain't no educated fool, after all." But Buell shook his head with doubt as the doctor flew away toward Vientiane on his urgent mission. After three years of dealing with the cumbersome bureaucracy of U.S. AID, he was positive no such massive medical order could be filled with the speed that the apparent epidemic demanded. The doctor clearly was a novice in Government procurement practices. Lacking a

budget for emergencies, he would never acquire the vaccine, even if such a large supply of it could be found.

Weldon rushed directly from Wattay airport to the office of the AID procurement officer, only to confirm, after an hour's frustrating argument, Pop's dismal forecast of defeat. It would have been easier then, and probably better interoffice diplomacy, to abandon the quest and write an unhappy memorandum requesting adequate appropriations in the future to prevent similar medical disasters. But Weldon stormed instead into the office of Charles Mann, director of U.S. AID for Laos, who ranked just a notch under the ambassador in the American hierarchy of Vientiane. Like Weldon, Mann was relatively new to the mission, and the two men were only casually acquainted. Weldon knew, however, that with a few exceptions, Mann's predecessors had been lackluster men, and there was little reason to believe that the new AID director would stick his neck out now to help the angry little Louisiana doctor.

"Goddamit, Mr. Mann, whether you care about the people or not, this epidemic has to be stopped," he began. "The area up there must be important because the United States Government has spent a helluva lot of money taking care of refugees and flying military supplies to Colonel Vang Pao's troops. If we sit here and let that cholera epidemic get out of hand, it will sure as hell spread to the troops, and whoever thinks we ought to be there can just kiss all of Sam Neua goodbye."

Without pausing even to question Weldon's urgency, Mann turned to the procurement officer. "We'll find emergency funds somewhere in the budget. Get the doctor his medicine," he said.

"How soon can I have it here?" Weldon asked.

"Normally it takes about four to six months," said the procurement officer.

"What in the hell are you talkin' about? I want this stuff today."

"That's impossible, Doctor. Even if we could buy the vaccine in Bangkok, it probably would take a couple of weeks."

"No, it won't, Doctor," said Mann calmly reaching for the telephone. "You go back up to Hong Non and the vaccine will be there by noon tomorrow." Mann then personally put pressure on every senior

American official between Vientiane and Bangkok in order to round up all the cholera vaccine that could be found in Thailand, load it aboard a waiting Air America plane, and fly it to Laos.

The next morning Weldon returned to Hong Non, where Buell waited, convinced now by more information from the outlying villages of Sam Neua that the epidemic was real, but still skeptical about the imminent arrival of vaccine. But at noon another Helio-Courier arrived from Vientiane, loaded to full capacity with enough vaccine and sterile syringes to immunize all of Sam Neua Province, if necessary. Chanh, also in Hong Non for the hospital dedication, called in a half-dozen of his medics. After instructing the ragged assortment of medical assistants in giving cholera immunization shots, Weldon divided an area of hundreds of square miles into zones for each team of men to cover. Then he set off with Edgar on a two-week trek by foot and shaggy Tibetan pony to personally do his share of the work in the largest emergency immunization program in the history of Laos. By the end of the journey, much of it through splendid mountains and valleys never before traversed by white men, Weldon, Pop, and their helpers had immunized more than 15,000 lowland, mid-slope, and mountain dwellers, including hundreds from threatened Pathet Lao villages. Their quick work stopped the epidemic. It also made life-long friends of the Louisiana doctor and his initially rude and insulting host, Edgar Buell.

The gray-haired doctor and his wife, Pat McCreedy, also a physician, came to Laos from Samoa, where they had spent two years with their three small children, working to rid the islands of filarial elephantiasis, the disfiguring disease that had been endemic to the otherwise lovely Polynesian paradise since the time of Captain Cook. After completely conquering the disease, they asked for duty in any primitive country that genuinely needed medical help and in which both would be free to go into the field to work directly with the people. They had abandoned a comfortable joint practice in Louisiana and vowed henceforth to work only where need, not money, beckoned; they found a never-ending source of that need in Laos. While Pat remained behind to handle the administrative chores of AID's public health division and to oversee the three most well-rounded and stable American

children in Vientiane, Jiggs flew the length and breadth of Laos, treating patients in need and working at the establishment of a modern health program for the entire country. When Jiggs returned they treated themselves to a brief period of connubial togetherness, then Pat climbed into a light airplane and made the 90,000-square-mile medical rounds, while her husband stayed home. They were tireless.

Even from the beginning of their marriage, they had never withheld their professional talents to indulge their own pleasure. When both were interns after graduating together from L.S.U., they slipped away from the hospital one afternoon to get married. Two hours later, before the young doctors even could begin celebrating their wedding night, a truck overturned on the highway between Lake Ponchartrain and New Orleans, spilling twenty-six Mexican farm workers into bloody disorder beside the road. Pat and Jiggs worked through the entire night in blood-drenched surgical gowns attending to the victims. It was two days before their rigorous schedules as interns allowed time for the consummation of their happy-go-lucky elopement.

Both lived totally, but not always comfortably, within the framework of their deep concern for people in need. After World War II, Jiggs entered medical school following five years as a combat officer with the Third Marine Corps Division in the Pacific. His father, Joe Weldon, a patriarchal Louisiana planter who was born at the end of the Civil War, lived all of his long life as a traditional Southerner. He was a strong and honorable man who died within weeks of his one-hundredth birthday after fathering and raising twelve children by his two wives. His neighbors looked upon Joe Weldon with awe as the very embodiment of the aristocratic Old South. As such, he was accustomed to being obeyed. In 1947 he called Jiggs, his brothers, and his brothers-in-law home from jobs and schools that had scattered them all over the country. It was election time, and under a Federal edict this was the first election in the history of the twentieth-century South in which large numbers of Negroes were expected to attempt to vote. Joe Weldon stationed each of his sons and sons-in-law at a polling place in his home parish, and each of the young war veterans was armed with a loaded weapon. Jiggs had a .45 automatic strapped to his hip as he stood by his duty station when the polling places

opened. A rural youth whom he knew sauntered up with a hickory axe handle over his shoulder.

"Hey there, Weldon, how you?" he drawled, smiling meaningfully at the gun on Jiggs's hip.

"Hey, Ernest," said Jiggs. "What you plannin' to do with that axe handle?"

"I'm gonna use it on the first nigger that steps up to this here pollin' place. I'm gonna hit him up the side of the head so hard ain't none of 'em ever gonna wanta vote again. What you gonna do with that there gun?" He smiled conspiratorially.

"I'm gonna shoot you with it, Ernest, if you try to interfere with anybody who tries to vote. Don't matter whether he's a Negro or a white man, he's got a right to vote, and I'm here to see there's no interference."

"Aw, come on, Weldon. How come you to do a thing like that?" asked Ernest, drawing back nervously from the determined former Marine Corps captain.

"My daddy says times have changed, Ernest. He sent all of us boys out to the polls today to make sure anybody who wants to vote doesn't get interfered with. I aim to use this gun if anybody interferes, Ernest."

"Sh-i-iy-at, Weldon. You ain't gonna shoot nobody."

"Don't tempt me by interferin', Ernest. You know I'm Joe Weldon's boy. And when Joe Weldon tells his boys to do something, they do it. Touch anybody with that axe handle, and you're a dead man, Ernest."

Ernest cast his own vote and left the polling place quietly, and none of the black or white voters who entered the polling places that day were molested.

Weldon and his wife lived and worked with the same polite but unflinching determination in Laos. After the cholera epidemic, Edgar gratefully turned the administration of public health in northeast Laos over to Jiggs and Pat, who in a few months with Charles Mann's collaboration managed to convince the headquarters of U.S. AID in Washington that emergency medical help, as well as a complete rural health program for all of Laos, should be funded as a regular part of the economic assistance allocation. They have worked tirelessly to

modernize medical care in the country ever since and are still there as this is written, alternately making their rounds by plane and on foot through the "rough, tough, dangerous, mean, deep, short, long and many high hills and unsmooth valleys," as beloved by Lao, Lao Thung, Meo, and other tribes as by their closest friend, the scrawny little Indiana farmer who reluctantly introduced them to the country when they came. To fill their spare time, each undertook the study of Lao and French, the official languages of the country. They now read, write, and speak both, and have become the most knowledgeable resident foreign scholars on the history and politics of the tiny landlocked kingdom.

Edgar returned to Houei Thom soon after the cholera epidemic. Tseng appeared more tense than he had a few weeks before, but his open expression of friendship was obviously as genuine as ever, and Buell wondered if he was doubly troubled now by the quiet distrust of his leading guerrilla scout. He sought out Teu Ying while Tseng worked on a report to be radioed to his control officer in Bangkok.

"Tan Pop," said Teu Ying, "I am still unhappy to tell you about Tseng, but I do not fear lying any more."

"Has something else happened? Do you have any proof?" Edgar asked.

"Yes, Tan Pop. I am convinced now. Before, I could not be certain. Now there is no doubt."

"What do you mean?"

"A week ago Tseng met the stranger again near the bottom of the descending path. I saw him leave the village, and I took two men and followed him. He gave the stranger a map. I do not know what was on it. Then the stranger walked the road toward Ban Ban. One of my scouts followed him. He walked two days, all the way to Khang Khay. It was a great risk, but my scout followed him into Khang Khay and saw him go in a big brick building where the Vietminh intelligence officers stay. In an hour the stranger came out of the building. He stopped, I suppose with his family, in a place outside of Khang Khay. The next morning my scout followed him back along the road. He returned to Houei Thom three days ago. Tseng met him

again. The stranger gave Tseng a paper with a note on it. I am sorry, Tan Pop. Tseng is an enemy agent."

"My God, they's got to be some explanation for this," Pop sighed. "I can't believe that boy's a traitor."

"But he is, Tan Pop. There is no question any more. Now all of my men suspect him. If it is not explained soon, they will kill him."

"Please keep your people quiet, Teu Ying," Edgar pleaded. "I'll see that Tseng gets moved out of here as soon as possible. You can't just kill a man like that without giving him a chance to explain."

"I agree, Tan Pop. Tseng has always been a very good leader. He has been the best intelligence agent for the Meo. It would be wrong to kill him. Foolish, too. We should learn what he has told the enemy first. But if the men become more suspicious, someone will shoot him."

Edgar still could not bring himself to confront Tseng directly with the accusation of treachery, although he watched him closely that evening for any signs that might explain his erratic behavior. There were none. Within a few days Pop expected to be in Vientiane. He hoped that Teu Ying could prevent his men from undertaking any rash retaliation against Tseng before he had a chance to discuss Tseng's case with an intelligence officer and return, once again, to Houei Thom. It would be only a few days before he got back, Edgar thought; then the problem could be resolved. But the few days stretched, tragically, into many.

About forty miles due south of Houei Thom, on two high peaks overlooking the Communist road junction of Ban Ban, were the villages of Phou Nong and Ban Pha Ka. Their military leader was a superb Meo guerrilla captain named Shua Ya who, while tough and effective in his raids against the enemy, had become somewhat complacent during a year of many victories over the enemy forces. It was now August, the tail end of the rainy season, and Communist traffic already had begun to move once again on the Ban Ban-Khang Khay road, which Edgar had blown up the previous December. Both Phou Nong and Ban Pha Ka were strategically located above the road. Vang Pao had no doubt that these two villages and Shua Ya's small guerrilla force there would soon be the focus of enemy retaliation, because the

Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese certainly did not intend to leave these important outposts alone in the dry season and risk having them become bases for another sneak demolition attack on the highway.

After Edgar left Houei Thom, he joined Vang Pao at his headquarters and flew with him to Ban Pha Ka, because the guerrilla leader was worried and he wanted Buell to give added strength to what he intended to say. "Together we must urge Shua Ya to evacuate both villages, Tan Pop," Vang Pao said. "There are almost 14,000 refugees in the two places. That is far too many people so close to enemy territory. It is certain that the Pathet Lao will strike them very hard. I am afraid that Shua Ya does not take this danger seriously enough."

Shua Ya listened to the urging of the two men, but he was in no hurry to knuckle under to an enemy who had not yet even begun to attack. "I will wait until he tries to strike," the guerrilla captain said, "then if he is superior, we will evacuate; if he is not superior, we will defeat him."

"Begin your evacuation before you are attacked," cautioned Edgar. "All you're doing by sitting here and waiting like this is risking the lives of these people." Shua Ya dismissed the warning.

Three nights later, almost precisely at midnight, two units of enemy troops composed of more than 500 well-armed men, almost all of whom were North Vietnamese regulars, struck hard at both Ban Pha Ka and Phou Nong, spilling 14,000 terrified refugees and a pitifully weak guerrilla rear guard into the jungles in panicky flight. When villages came under attack in the past, the accommodating enemy usually left an escape route open on one side or another of the besieged mountain. Small pursuit forces then were dispatched along the escape route to harass the fleeing villagers, but the enemy almost never followed up an attack with serious, full-scale pursuit. It simply wasn't worth the effort, since there were so few soldiers among the fleeing people that a full-scale pursuit would have served no purpose other than to further terrorize an already frightened people.

This time, however, nothing proceeded according to previous pattern, and what happened to the refugees of Ban Pha Ka and Phou Nong marked the beginning of a particularly nasty new pattern in the

treatment of large civilian populations by the enemy side. There had been atrocities in Laos before, but like the cruel execution of the *taesing* and his wife that had so aroused Pop the year before, they were mostly rather personal, small-scale demonstrations of individual bestiality. About the only pattern that had emerged from these incidents was that they were almost never committed by native Pathet Lao officers or men, but by North Vietnamese. That pattern, which one supposes is a matter of Vietnamese national style, was not to change.

Unhappily, one observes just as much perverse joy in bloodletting among the South Vietnamese as among the northern ones. It just so happened that the only Vietnamese fighting in Laos during the past decade have been from the north. Thus they have earned the blame and take credit for virtually all of the war atrocities in that unfortunate little country.

The 14,000 refugees of Ban Pha Ka and Phou Nong headed south along jungle trails from their uninhabitable villages almost immediately after the enemy units attacked them, but it was two days before they knew they were up against a largely Vietnamese military force that was hell-bent on breaking the once fairly easygoing, unwritten codicils concerning token pursuit of noncombatant people. The guerrillas who made a rear guard for the fleeing refugees fought off a few light attacks during the first days' forced march southward, but believed that they were being harassed, as was customary, by a light force of enemy troops sent down the escape route just to hurry the defeated people on their way. On the night of the second day, 6,000 refugees from Phou Nong gathered in a large bowl-like mountain declivity which, as we have seen before, was not an uncommon geographic anomaly in northeast Laos. Like Long Tieng, Sam Thong, Moueng Long, and other areas, the refugees' resting place was a high mountain plateau, surrounded by limestone cliffs and pimpled with chimney rocks and mountain peaks—the sort of scenery that in artistic terms was the very antithesis of death and war, it looked so heavenly and so secure from the troubles of the modern world. The refugees were tired, and having fled more than the customary eighteen hours from enemy attack, they had every reason to suppose that they could now burrow down in family and clan encampments and, like tourists at

Yosemite, rest and refuel themselves with whatever they carried in the way of food supplies. Among them was the girl named Lau Lu, who once took up an M-1 to protect Tan Pop at Padong. Now Lau Lu was fleeing in a more prosaic style, unarmed, heavily burdened with household goods that were strapped to her back, and caring as best she could for her aging paternal grandparents. Her mother and father were dead. Camped immediately adjacent to the small lean-to that Lau Lu erected for her grandmother and grandfather was a lowland Lao family of slight prominence that, like many other Lao families, had been driven to refuge with the Meo when the Communists seized their farmland near Ban Ban and attempted to force their men into military units and coolie labor battalions.

The plateau on which the mass of refugees settled for the night was remote from any village, and it contained little clear space, so Colonel Vang Pao, who had flown over the fleeing refugee column during the day, was unable to land there to speak with his subordinate, Shua Ya. With Edgar beside him in the plane, however, he dropped messages urging Shua Ya to move the refugees along to a less vulnerable area. Although the guerrilla colonel and the Indiana farmer had not seen many enemy in pursuit, they sensed that there might be many Communist soldiers hidden in the forests below. Vang Pao was certain of their presence. It was this uncanny sense, which historically characterizes great military leaders, that made Vang Pao stand apart from other military commanders in Laos. Many of his victories stemmed from his ability to divine where the enemy was, even when intelligence information indicated something altogether different. Now he had a hunch that the enemy had not finished toying with these refugees, and he pleaded with Shua Ya to move them back down to the jungle where they could get away from the trails and find safety. Shua Ya was inclined to go along with Vang Pao, whose hunches were notoriously accurate, but the people were tired, so he did not that day order them to move along.

Lau Lu wished for the protective comfort of an M-1 at midnight when the mortar shells began to land on the plateau and the angry rifle flashes sparkled cerily from the cliffs and mountainsides that surrounded the refugee camps. But the true horror of being fired upon

by persons intent upon killing was slow to dawn. First Lau Lu heard the sounds—carrumphing explosions which, while unsettling, are not unattractive noises, because in the dark they seem disembodied; there is a masculine, throat-clearing quality about them that, unless they are very close and can be felt and seen as well as heard, is strangely, deceptively deep and secure. The sound of small-arms gunfire, when it comes from a distance of several hundred yards, as it was coming down on Lau Lu's part of the encampment, is not at first a terribly unsettling sound, either. Mostly, she couldn't hear the actual reports of the weapons being fired. All she heard were the shock waves of the bullets passing close by her ears: *pop, pop pop*, tapping in high and clear, followed by a soft buzzing, like insects who do not intend to stop and bite, but are hurrying on. Since it is impossible in the dark to correlate these sounds with the occasional report of a rifle, slowed in its approach to the ear by the physical law concerning the speed of sound, and the starlight wink of its muzzle blast, hurried to the eye as fast as any light in the universe, the lethal pellet only begins to find true relation to its disjointed audio-visual effects when it demonstrates its awful power, as one now did, three feet from Lau Lu's side. A bullet struck her grandfather with a sound that came to her ears as "*Shush.*" He was dead before she knew whether it was the old man or his *bête noire* that seemed to be urging her to silence. The old man was fortunate to die when he did, with a bullet cleanly severing a carotid as it slapped through his neck, rather than later, as his wife did. And Lau Lu was often to wonder after that night whether she was not unfortunate to have survived, carrying the dreadful memory that burdened her ever after.

The uncoordinated sights and sounds of the enemy attack, so bewildering when they first began, merged terribly in the screams of the first victims and sent quaking waves of panic coursing like the radiating ripples of an earth tremor through the mass of exhausted refugees. Lau Lu left her grandfather's body where it lay and hurried her grandmother away from the lean-to that had been lace-cut by enemy bullets. Without a thought of ethnic differences, she led the old woman to the family group adjacent to them. It was the Lao family, a man and wife, their four children, and his two elderly

parents. The man had been *taesing* of a lowland village near Ban Ban before the Communists drove him out early in 1963, and he had been working as a civil assistant to Shua Ya at Phou Nong since then. His job had been to help supervise the distribution of relief supplies to the large numbers of Lao and Lao Thung refugees who had camped around the Meo villages overlooking Highway 7. Now he made no attempt to separate Lao or Lao Thung from Meo in the urgency of flight from the murderous rain of enemy fire showering upon them. The *taesing* urged all within earshot to follow him quickly to a pathway that he believed would lead away from the vulnerable bowl. Lau Lu tugged her shocked grandmother along with her left hand and joined the family group. In the indescribable confusion the *taesing*'s pretty 12-year-old daughter, a slight child with languid features that were fixed questioningly as if waiting for someone to embrace away her terror, slipped and fell. Her mother, frantically tugging at her three sons like a hen hustling her chicks away from a threatening dog, failed to notice her daughter's sudden disappearance and hurried on. Lau Lu grabbed the child with her free hand, unaware who she was or who, one day, she would become, and hurried her along after the *taesing*'s group, rushing pell-mell toward the south side of the bowl in which they were trapped.

The North Vietnamese, after attacking Ban Pha Ka and Phou Nong, apparently followed a calculated plan to drive the refugees into this death trap. Dispatching only light pursuit forces along the escape trail that wound southeastward from the two abandoned villages, the main body of enemy troops hurried in a forced march to the proposed ambush. Like sheepdogs nipping at the edges of a vast herd, the pursuers herded 6,000 of the refugees in the direction of the high mountain bowl, lightly attacking the rear of the huge column whenever it appeared to lag or change direction. The first comfortable place to pause was the natural bowl in the mountains, and the main enemy force positioned itself there on the encircling high ground before the refugees even arrived. Confidently and cruelly, then, they waited until all had entered the trap. They watched as the refugees slumped in an exhausted sense of false security around improvised shelters and drifted off to sleep. Then they struck.

Had the enemy force merely wished to further terrorize the people and drive them ever farther from Ban Ban, they could easily have accomplished their objective by confining the attack, as they often had in the past, to remote gunshots and mortar fire from the surrounding high ground, for the lethal rain certainly had that effect. Unlike the more or less directed panic that came over the villagers when they were first attacked and fled in single long columns from their beleaguered homes, the terrified disorder of the refugees in the mountain bowl was total. Fluttering mobs of horrified refugees rushed first one way, then another, in their wild attempt to escape the appalling missiles that sprayed over the entire campsite like hailstones in a summer storm. It was a sight that conceivably could afford a brief, sadistic amusement to a heartless attacker. But it was only a prelude.

The ambushers, fiercely armed and more than four hundred strong, ran screaming down the hillsides and slithered down the faces of the limestone cliffs surrounding the bowl. Then they launched into an unspeakable orgy of bloodletting never equaled before or since in the unhappy history of the happy-go-lucky people of Laos. Like sharks stirred to a mad feeding frenzy over the living flotsam of a sinking ship, the North Vietnamese soldiers rushed wildly among the horrified refugees, slashing indiscriminately with knives, hurling hand grenades without discernible targets, firing their weapons blindly into undulating walls of protesting flesh. With the shocked mortal awareness of a condemned man as the noose slips over his neck, the 6,000 refugees realized to a man that these insane soldiers, in their blind fury, intended to murder every living person in the mountain declivity. It was probably this sudden universal awareness of threatened mortality that brought an instinctive, herd-like response from the panic-stricken victims, who bunched together for what protection their own massed bodies offered, and began moving, as if polarized by the twin magnets of race- and self-preservation, in a single vast congregation to the south, away from the bowl. Still the enemy soldiers pressed into the mob and killed.

Lau Lu, moving with the *taesing's* family near the head of the great bunch of terrified people, sensed what was happening behind her, but except for the bullets that still popped overhead and crunched

like breaking dry sticks into the trees around her, she thought she was safe in the vanguard of the escape. Suddenly her grandmother tugged violently on her left hand and screamed so piercingly that the sound struck Lau Lu's ear like a burning arrow. The old woman's hand jerked spasmodically. In the same instant Lau Lu looked to see a soldier in the black pajamas of the Vietminh, his face contorted with rage, drive his arm into the old woman's stomach. It was like watching an angry street fighter throwing all of his weight and strength into a punch below the belt. Then in one violent spasm he pulled the buried fist upward, raising the emaciated old woman from her feet, and withdrew his arm in a sweeping upward stroke. In his fist was an eight-inch knife, and the hand that held it was as bloody as that of a functionary in an abattoir. The old woman fell, gasping, screaming, gurgling, and slowly dying, at Lau Lu's feet. Instinctively Lau Lu turned away from the carnage and knocked the little girl beside her to the ground, then fell on top of her, sobbing as the warm blood of her choking, pain-shattered grandmother soaked them both. Screams and a disordered flailing of arms and legs marked the further advances of the same rampaging enemy soldier through Lau Lu's vanguard position among the fleeing refugees. When she and her small companion arose, the grandmother, still not quite dead, was moaning in semi-consciousness just tenacious enough to prolong her torture. A few feet away, the aged mother and father of the *taesing* were dying similarly of disembowelment. The little Lao girl's mother was screaming hysterically and clutching her two smallest sons. The third, a boy of sixteen, was dragged away alive by the bloody attacker. Sobbing in despair, screaming in terror, the great herd of people pressed on, trying vainly to escape the massacre.

Their pursuers were relentless. Through the night they followed the escapees, like hyenas harrying a wounded prey, chewing great gouges out of its flanks, nipping and lunging to bring the entire organism to its knees. Children were snatched from their mothers' arms and hurled with head-crushing force against rocks. Old men and women were shot in the legs and left to die alone, abandoned both by their young and by their executioners. Women were raped, then disemboweled. On the escape trail young Meo men among the refugees

sadly murdered their own parents as an act of mercy when they collapsed of fatigue, rather than leave them for the enemy to kill more cruelly. By noon, when the attackers abandoned the orgy to trudge back to the north and nurse their own exhaustion, 1,300 Meo, Lao, and Lao Thung refugees lay dead. Few had been killed mercifully by gunfire, grenade, or mortar. Most had been cut horribly by hand-wielded knives. Another 200, mostly young men like the *taesing's* missing son, had been captured.

Edgar and Jiggs Weldon, alerted by Colonel Vang Pao that something had gone terribly wrong with the evacuation of Ban Pha Ka and Phou Nong, were ignorant of the details when they flew over the fleeing mass of refugees after the massacre. Along the jungled ridge line that extended from the fatal bowl to a village called MOUNG MEU, about forty miles to the south, there was no place for a plane or helicopter to land. So, unaware of the massive tragedy through which the people below him had lived, Buell dropped food supplies along their escape trail and waited for the head of the column to reach the friendly village. On the sixth day after the night in the bloody bowl, the Lao *taesing*, his wife, his daughter, and Lau Lu arrived with the first refugees at MOUNG MEU. Lau Lu tried to describe to Edgar what had happened, but she was too exhausted by terror and flight to tell a coherent story. The *taesing*, anxiously holding his daughter in his arms and patting Lau Lu as if she, too, were his own child, described the enemy attack. Like the girl, he was almost incoherent. His two youngest sons had died of some indeterminate disease, complicated by malnutrition and exhaustion on the trail. His mother and father were brutally killed. His eldest son had been kidnapped. Tragically, as Edgar and Jiggs Weldon learned in the ensuing days, his story was typical of every family among the evacuees. None had escaped unscathed. Those who had not lost their loved ones in the massacre of the bowl had seen many of them die later on the trail, or did away with them out of mercy because they would die anyway. For eight days, elements of the refugee column and hundreds of stragglers who had fled into the jungles after the terrible night drifted into MOUNG MEU with their own personal tales of horror. And it was not yet ended. Hundreds of the survivors were near death from dysentery and

massive infections brought on by literally walking the soles off their feet on jagged limestone that paved much of the pathway of their escape.

Jiggs Weldon, two of Chanh's trained medics, Neah Ying, and Edgar began working around the clock with a pitifully small store of medicines to save as many as they could. Ironically, almost none of the escapees required surgery or highly sophisticated medical care. Anyone badly enough hurt or wounded to need a surgeon was dead already. But their festering sores and diseased bodies demanded vitamins, antibiotics, and intensive attention. Moreover, the shattered minds and bodies that survived the night in the bloody bowl had been joined in the trek to Mounng Meo by thousands more refugees, hundreds of whom were just as wretched. By the tenth day after the massacre, there were 20,000 stricken people at Mounng Meo and a thousand more, spurred by knowledge of the massacre or by other enemy attacks in the same broad area of Ban Pha Ka and Phou Nong, were arriving daily. Edgar called for help, and Charles Mann, with characteristic calm precision in the face of crisis, responded immediately. Without hesitation or pause to consider the niceties of bureaucratic custom, he ordered a massive airlift both to supply and to disperse the miserable mob of refugees at Mounng Meo. Within three days, 10,000 of them had been flown to a new refugee encampment called Mounng Cha sixty miles to the west. Thousands more began walking to the same destination.

Weldon, meanwhile, lived for days on urgently gulped snacks of boiled rice and occasional brief catnaps, but neither he nor his medical assistants nor Neah Ying nor Edgar could continue without help much longer. Within three weeks after the massive air evacuation began, there were 25,000 refugees at Mounng Cha. Between thirty and fifty of them died each day. Dysentery spread. Almost none escaped infection of some kind. Each still trembled from the terror he had experienced. Few among them were capable even of nursing their own loved ones. For days the desperate medical work was like swimming vainly against a rip tide, drifting ever farther from the secure shore. At dawn one morning Edgar watched Weldon slump with exhaustion after working without rest through another night.

"Doc, you get in that airplane over there and go over to Sam Thong," he said.

"I can't do that, Pop," said Weldon. "There's too much to do. We can't rest now."

"I don't mean to rest, Doc, I mean to get some help. You go over there and get some of those nurses I been trainin' up at the hospital. You gotta have help, and that's all there is."

"Hell, Pop," Weldon replied resignedly, "we can't use those girls. Vang Pao won't stand for it. He's made that clear. It violates their custom."

"Doc, they's the only trained people there is up here, and we need 'em now. Let's try 'em, anyway. Besides, you can get some sleep in the airplane goin' and comin'. And if you go on like this much longer, you're not gonna do nobody no good."

That afternoon Weldon returned with four of the nurses, led by Un Chan, and by the next morning it was as if medicine never had been an all-male province in northeast Laos. The Meo, Lao, and Lao Thung refugees, so sick and near wits' end that only life itself really mattered any longer, were mostly too weak to resist the attentions of the young girls, however distasteful the idea might have seemed to them a few days earlier. And as they noted the professional efficiency overlaying the natural feminine tenderness of the girls, the victims responded to their ministrations with both respect and gratitude.

Vang Pao arrived at Moung Cha for his daily visit on the next afternoon, and as he walked around the huge encampment, chatting with sick and dejected refugees, he noticed the four Meo girls working professionally over festered feet, wrapping clean dressings, and commiserating with despairing patients. Edgar and Jiggs, walking beside the colonel, were braced for a demonstration of his fiery temper. His expression, already grim, never changed. He said nothing.

"I can't tell whether he was mad or whether he's waitin' to lower some kind of boom on us later," Buell muttered to Weldon as Vang Pao left. "But since he didn't say nothin', let's git the other three girls over here this afternoon and put them to work, too."

Tom Ward, who was managing Buell's base camp at Sam Thong, responded immediately to a radio call and flew the remaining three

nurses to MOUNG CHA before sundown. On the next day, Vang Pao visited the encampment again. Again he watched the girls at work. And again he remained silent and expressionless. That afternoon, Lau Lu told Edgar that the nurses had helped her and the wife of the *taesing* with whom she was staying.

"Tan Pop, we have been friends since Padong. I want to help you and my people again. May I become a nurse?"

"You can start right now, Lau Lu," said Edgar. "I'll fix it so you can help Un Chan and these other girls, and when things settle down here, I'll get you back to Sam Thong, where you can go to school." But Buell wondered if Vang Pao would return and demand that he abandon the entire nurse training program.

On the third day Vang Pao again returned to MOUNG CHA and toured the encampment. Now he saw seven nurses, as well as Lau Lu and several other inexperienced Meo girls, working with the sick. It was almost as if a troop of infinitely wise and skillful Girl Scouts had descended upon the dismal campsite and brought with them a surge of innocent freshness and hope. Calmly, Vang Pao took Jiggs and Edgar aside.

"For three days now I have observed young girls doing a man's medical work with you among the people," he said.

"That's right," said Jiggs. "I think we would have gone under without them."

"It was good that they volunteered to help. It is time for customs to change among my people."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Colonel," said Edgar. "Actually, I was gonna..."

"I have an idea, and I hope you agree with me," interrupted Vang Pao.

"What's that, Colonel?" asked Edgar.

"I think you should begin a nurses' training school at Sam Thong. You can train these girls to be true nurses, and you can train many more to work in the hospitals and with the people. Some, perhaps, will even work with my soldiers."

"Yes, sir, Colonel," said Edgar with a broad smile. "Just as soon as I

get back to Sam Thong, I'll see about expandin'...er...I mean, settin' up a nursing school. You can count on that."

"I know I can," said Vang Pao with an ironic smile. "Oh, Tan Pop. I talked to one of those girls. Her name is Lau Lu. I remember her guarding you at Padong. Take especially good care of her. She wants to become a medic with my army. I want to help her. With her is a beautiful Lao child who will be a woman soon. Take care of her, too."

Chapter 16

Here is your terrific question to ask me about the Pathet Lao and the Vietminh as follows: Did any bad things happen to the people? Here is my exact answer in what I have seen with my eyes, heard with my ears and asked them with my mouth as follows: Yes, there are many bad things happen to the people like they robbed the people's properties, killed them, lied them, pressed them to do in what they did not want to do, too.

—THE LETTERS OF THONGSAR BOUPHA

TSENG sensed that he was living on time borrowed from the diminishing patience of the men around him. Their reactions to his orders had become increasingly surly and often insubordinate. Even Teu Ying, normally a taciturn man, but one who volunteered eagerly when doubtful missions made other men shy, had become testy. "Go yourself," he had barked at Tseng only the day before when the young Chinese-Meo intelligence agent asked him to undertake a scouting foray along Highway 6. Tseng went, alone, only to find Teu Ying even more distant and hostile when he returned. Not for the first time, he wondered how much the men suspected of his duplicity.

Tseng also wondered whether his venerable American friend was suspicious. It had been four weeks since Tan Pop's last visit to Houei Thom. But how could either the scouts or Tan Pop know? The meetings with the Pathet Lao agent had been infrequent. Perhaps the contacts should have been more carefully arranged, but Tseng felt certain he had not been observed. Even if he had, there was nothing compromising about meeting a strange Meo on a pathway and talking

with him. In any case, the clandestine contacts had been few and meaningless, really, and they had not seriously affected the quality of the intelligence work he was providing the Meo and the Americans. His reports to Bangkok had been less frequent and useful lately only because the scouts seemed unwilling to work as hard as they had. In his heart, Tseng felt remorse, but he did not feel remiss. He was certain that if the time ever came when he must tell his story, everyone who knew him would understand. Nevertheless, his nerves were shot to hell, and when Edgar arrived that day, his words fell on Tseng's ears like a reprieve from a death sentence, which at that moment they were.

Buell arrived in his battered small Helio-Courier at noon. He was rested after spending three days in Vientiane following the Herculean resettlement and revival of the Moung Cha refugees. And he was vastly relieved to find Tseng waiting expectantly beside the airstrip, slightly gaunt but still alive. After exhausting his supply of hard candy on the children of Houei Thom and circulating for an hour among the huts of the village, chatting with the many people who had become his dear friends, he retired to Tseng's small hut.

"I been talkin' to the Army intelligence people in Vientiane, Tseng," he said, "and they been in touch with your people in Bangkok."

"Why, Tan Pop? My work is not your concern." Tseng was mildly surprised by Edgar's apparent intrusiveness. He was equally and genuinely concerned that the old man had wasted his own precious rest time in Vientiane looking after the interests of a friend. Perhaps Tan Pop was suspicious, after all, but that seemed unlikely. "Are you still trying to have me transferred from the Americans to Colonel Vang Pao?"

"It ain't that, Tseng. But after I was up here last time, I got to worryin' about you."

The boy started as if now truly shocked. Did Tan Pop know?

"You looked kinda tired and upset to me, and you look even worse now. I just wondered if they didn't think it was time you had a rest. You been up here alone for an awful long time."

"What did they say?"

"Matter of fact, them people in Vientiane talked to your control

officer in Bangkok, and he figured your work ain't as sharp as it used to be. He agreed you need a rest."

"It is not me that has made my reports less valuable, Tan Pop," he said blandly. "It is my men. They do not work for me as well as they did. I do not know why. Maybe they have come to resent me because my mother is Chinese."

"Have you had any word about her?"

"I hope that she and my sisters are well," said Tseng, evading a direct answer to Buell's quiet question. "But concerning my work, maybe you are right. I am tired."

"You call Bangkok tonight, Tseng. I think your officer down there'll tell you to pull the radio and fly to Vientiane in a day or two. I'd take you out with me today, but I think you ought to talk to your control officer first, so's you and him will both know you're doin' the right thing. Besides, there oughtn't to be no big fuss about your leavin' Houei Thom. The people'd get to worryin' about it if you left with me. Things like this got to be done graceful-like."

Tseng was puzzled by Edgar's sudden concern for village diplomacy, but he was enormously relieved that his assignment in Houei Thom was nearing an end. Still, his remorsefulness did not recede. Nor did his nervous state. He had begun to realize that whether his misdeeds were discovered or not, his conscience would give him no rest.

Two days later, Pop was resting in the one-room apartment he kept, but almost never used, in Vientiane. There was a quiet knock on the door. He opened it to see Tseng, still dressed in the rumpled American Army fatigues he had worn at Houei Thom, carrying a small duffel bag in his left hand and his canvas-encased radio in his right. He had come directly from Wattay airport after flying from Houei Thom in an Air America Helio-Courier. In his mind, burning ever since Edgar came two days before to rescue him from what was becoming a nightmare, was a crack of light from his Confucian childhood. *Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles*, his mother had said. He had obeyed that dictum with regard to her, he told himself, but had he been faithful and sincere with Edgar and with others who trusted him? His unhappy nervous state and remorsefulness told him he had not. The paradox of mixed loyalty was beyond

rational understanding to him now, but he had an almost instinctive need to resolve it, and he was prepared to do so by confession, not to his working companions or his professional superiors, but to someone who would understand, a man whom he loved.

However soul-cleansing confession can be to the Confucian, the Christian, or the godless, it is never easy to commence, and for the remainder of the afternoon and evening with Tan Pop, Tseng was diffident and ill at ease. Over dinner in a Cantonese restaurant he talked volubly about food, about how his mother cooked in the crisp-fry Yunnan style, about his little sisters' favorite dishes, about the crude similarities between Meo and southern Chinese cuisine; it was forced, artificial conversation, not the relaxed spoken and unspoken communication of two friends. Edgar knew what was on Tseng's mind, and he was certain that in a very short time his young friend's innate integrity would force it out. As he listened to his dinner companion reach almost desperately for any conversational subject remote from Houei Thom and his work, Pop had a sense of *déjà vu*, puzzled over it for a moment, then remembered the incident in his own past that probably touched it off. A few weeks before his graduation from the Steuben County high school at Metz, Indiana, Edgar was daydreaming at the wheel of his father's car when it drifted too close to the side of the road. The right front wheel turned abruptly in the soft earth at the road's edge and the car crashed into a ditch. The entire right side of the vehicle was crushed, and Edgar, unhurt, was terrified. Elson Buell was a stern man, and Edgar knew that his father's retribution for this witless accident would be terrible. Impulsively, he decided to run away rather than face it. He abandoned the car and walked disconsolately to the Greyhound bus stop at a country store two miles away. For two hours he waited for a bus, leaning casually against a creosoted telephone pole and trying to appear normal to the occasional acquaintance who stopped for gas at the pump in front of the store. His stricken conscience was like a strong wind blowing the waves of his thoughts into disordered foam. He could not think clearly, but he knew that he could not face his father. Nevertheless, he had an overpowering urge to tell someone what he had done and what he intended, now, to do. In retrospect, the entire incident seemed trivial, but

even now, more than thirty years later, Edgar could re-experience the overwhelming emotional pain of his hasty decision to run away and his desperate need of someone whom he admired to listen to his confused rationale. Fortunately, the right person happened along. He was Dr. Meritt Boyer, a towering, athletic former detective whose philosophical attitude toward youthful misbehavior made him the most popular English and mathematics teacher at Metz High School.

For twenty minutes Edgar tried to talk casually, skirting his problem, as if he planned only to catch the bus to Fort Wayne for the day.

"Are you in trouble, Ed?" Boyer asked. Grateful for the opportunity at least to try sorting out his disordered thoughts, Buell told Doc Boyer he was running away, and why.

"Whatever you do, your dad's going to be mad about that car, Ed," said Boyer slowly. "But if you run away, he's also going to be the unhappiest man in Steuben County, and neither he nor you is ever going to believe that scratching a car in a ditch was worth it. What you do is your own business. But if I were you, I'd go on home now and face up to what's coming to me."

Surprised at his own sense of relief and even happy despite the prospect of a terrible verbal thrashing and perhaps a physical one, as well, Edgar went home. As he suspected, his father was furious, but not as violently as the boy had feared. And there was a kind of mystical warmth that came over Edgar, even in the midst of the worst tongue-lashing he had ever received, when he realized that love was irrevocably imbedded in his father's anger and that behind Elson Buell's fury was deep gratitude that his son had returned home unharmed by his own stupidity.

Tseng's difficulty was not comparable, of course, but Edgar did not doubt that the crisis of conscience now so obviously tearing at the young man's emotions was fundamentally the same in kind, if not in content, as his own conflicting desires to hide and to confess to a friend. He decided to give Tseng all the time he needed to bring the problem into the open. It wasn't long.

At breakfast in Edgar's small apartment the next morning, Tseng appeared haggard from sleeplessness. He was silent, not even bothering now to construct another artless conversation for diversion.

"You're in trouble, ain't you, Tseng?" Edgar asked softly. His wizened face was solemn but sympathetic, not foreboding.

"You know? You know, Tan Pop?"

"I know you're in big trouble, Tseng. I got an idea what you been doin'. I don't know why you did it. Do you want to tell me?"

"I will tell you, Tan Pop," Tseng sighed deeply, as if shedding a heavy burden. "I have wanted to tell you since yesterday. I am glad it is you that I tell first." He explained, then, his perfidy.

The strange Meo who had come into Houei Thom a few months before—it seemed like many months, actually—brought with him two notes. The first, written in Chinese ideographs, was from Wang, the former servant at Lhat Houang who had been scornful of Tseng's deep devotion to the females of his house. Tseng burned the note, but he remembered exactly what it said.

"Your females are well. They want to move to Vientiane. I have arranged with a Vietminh officer to send them safely. But first you must do as the man who brings this message tells you. The Vietminh officer needs some small information to pay for their safe conduct. Wang."

After reading the note in surprised silence he ushered the Meo stranger into his small thatched hut. The man looked with interest but without surprise at Tseng's two-way radio, which sat uncovered on a bamboo table, and waited for Tseng to read the second of his two messages. Tseng's feelings churned indecisively between joy that he had at last learned of the well-being of his mother and sisters, shock that his position in this isolated Meo outpost had been discovered, and disgust that the despicable Wang was playing an obvious enemy game with his loved ones as the prize. He read the second note. It was written in Lao, without salutation or signature. There were only three demands.

"List the radio frequencies on which you broadcast. Times?"

"Where are the American airplane landing strips in your area north of Ban Ban?"

Tseng laughed as he read the note, and the stranger smiled at his reaction. The enemy requests were so innocuous that Tseng could hardly believe they were serious. His frequencies and timing could

easily be ascertained by any skilled radio operator ranging the broadcast bands with a radio direction-finder zeroed in on Houci Thom. Obviously the enemy already had located his radio, since this messenger's superiors knew that he was here in this village. It would be simple to monitor his broadcasts. The airstrips also were undisguisable. In a matter of a few weeks this same Meo messenger could walk with only nominal risk to the edge of every one of them, not only locating the strips but measuring their size and the extent of their use. Yet the information must have seemed important to someone who inexplicably did not realize how easily it could be obtained by simple, straightforward espionage. Perhaps because of the emotional relief and excitement brought about by Wang's note, it did not occur to Tseng at this time that the purpose of the messenger's risky mission was not to acquire the simple information that had been requested, but to plant a hook in Tseng upon which he could be dangled in the future. With its implied blackmail, it was the simplest of devices for turning a man into a double agent.

"Write the information quickly," said the stranger. "I must not stay long."

Hastily, Tseng scribbled a note to his mother. It was little more than an expression of love and hope for their reunion. On another piece of paper, ripped from a cheap diary pad, which ironically bore a color picture of King Savang Vatthana of Laos on its cover, he copied his frequencies, the times of his routine radio checks, and the names of the villages that he knew to be located adjacent to the small American landing strips.

"Give this note to Wang," he said, handing the first scribbled message to the stranger.

"Wang?"

"Tell your officer to give it to Wang, then. He will know what to do with it. This one is for your officer. Go now."

The second contact with the messenger upped the ante for his family's safety only slightly. The note from the anonymous Vietminh officer asked which of the villages with landing strips was used to store aviation gasoline. He also wanted each of the villages Tseng had

named in his previous message located on a map that was attached to the note.

"You were here only five days ago," said Tseng. "I don't think anyone saw you come this time, but you must go and hide now. I will mark the location on this map and bring it to you at the bottom of the descending path after dark." It was this contact that Teu Ying and his men had observed.

To Tseng the information still seemed innocuous, and he did not feel as if he had harmed his own side by providing it. He worried, though, that the second contact included no word from or about his family, and for the first time he began to suspect that they had become hostages to guarantee his own unwilling service.

On the third contact, the one that came the same day that Teu Ying first voiced his suspicions of Tseng to Edgar Buell, the hook upon which Tseng dangled was jerked ruthlessly. The anonymous correspondent wrote a lengthier note than before, accusing Tseng of mislocating the airstrips on the map, demanding correct information, and also asking for the names of the Meo military commanders in each of the villages listed. "Your mother and sisters will not be harmed if you answer correctly and promptly," the note concluded. There was no further mention of safe conduct to Vientiane. Tseng knew the reputation of the Vienminh for cruelty as well as anyone in Laos. The implication of possible harm to the four people whom he loved above life itself was drastic. Fortunately, he did not know the names of the guerrilla commanders in any of the villages, so he could honestly stall his new control officer with a delaying reply. In his note that night he reiterated the correct locations of the airstrips and the gasoline storage areas. He promised to try to learn the names of the military commanders, but warned that it might be weeks before he could discover all of them. That night, reminiscing with Tan Pop, it had been difficult to appear calm, but by confining their conversation to the past he had managed to relax and even to forget for a few hours that his mother and sisters were in greater peril than ever before.

"On the next contact I gave them some names, but it was like the airstrips and the radio frequencies. It was information they could have learned without my help. Then there was another note from

the Vietminh officer. He told me that my family would be harmed if I did not send regular reports about Colonel Vang Pao's future plans and movements in Sam Neua Province. He was to send me a radio for these reports, but it has not come yet."

"Are you just tellin' this to me to get it off your chest, Tseng, or are you plannin' to tell your superiors and Colonel Vang Pao, too?"

"I suppose I must tell them, of course. The Meo may want to kill me. Perhaps it is just as well for me. If the Vietminh are going to harm my family, it is too late for me to do anything that will stop them. I think they would do it anyway, even if I had remained at Houei Thom without suspicion and worked for them. I don't want to die, Tan Pop. Tell me what I should do now."

"Just sit there while I do some thinkin'," said Edgar. He stirred two large spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee and mused while Tseng sat quietly across the oilcloth-covered wooden table.

"It ain't my business to get involved in intelligence work in this crazy country, Tseng," he said, "but I just can't seem to help it. Now it looks to me like if this was an ordinary war goin' on, you'd be a traitor, and nobody, includin' me, would think it was out of line to shoot you right on the spot.

"But it ain't that kind of war, and I can't help wonderin' what any man would do if he was in the same spot you was in. If that was Malorene and Howard 'n' Harriet over there in Xieng Khouang, I'd probably of done the same thing you done. I don't know. Maybe not. Trouble is, no man in the world knows what he's gonna do at a time like that, and anyone says he does is either lyin' or stupid.

"You done wrong, ain't no doubt about that. But God, boy, there probably ain't many men in this world wouldn't of done the same thing."

"I am happy that you understand, Tan Pop," said Tseng. "Now maybe it is time that I go and pay for my wrong."

"You ain't gonna do nothing of the kind, Tseng. You stay right here. You're still my friend, and I'm gonna do everything I can to help you. And while I'm workin' on that, you'll be safe if you stay right here in my apartment. Far as anyone around here knows, you're a friend of mine and its perfectly legal for you to be here."

Buell interrupted his brief period of rest in Vientiane to discuss Tseng's confession with the American intelligence officers for whom the young man worked. Since the defected spy was a native agent, involved more with the Meo than with themselves, they simply released Tseng from their payroll and tucked his records away in a dead file: case and agent dismissed. The Meo, they knew, would take care of Tseng in their own way.

"There is nothing we can do to help him, but we won't do anything to hurt him, either," said an Army officer to Edgar. "Whatever happens, it will have to be decided by Colonel Vang Pao and his people. Too bad he doubled on us. We were going to send him to school in the States after this is over."

That afternoon Edgar flew to Long Tieng to talk with Vang Pao, who listened patiently as his American friend recounted Tseng's treachery and the reason for it.

"I am glad that he went to you, my father," Vang Pao broke his silence as Buell completed his story. "It is good that he confessed and lucky for him that he did it to you instead of to the Meo leadership in Vientiane. You see, we already knew that Tseng worked for the other side. Teu Ying told us, and he told us that you were trying to find out what Tseng had given and why he did it. That is why they did not kill him in Houei Thom. But the leadership in Vientiane has condemned him. They will execute him when they find him there."

"Ain't that a bit hasty, Colonel? I mean, it ain't as if the boy gave away anything important or especially damaging to our side. Besides, he was workin' for the American Army when he done it, wasn't he?"

"If what he says is true, there was no damage in what he told the enemy," said Vang Pao. "The fact that he worked for the American Army is a technicality, my old friend. He worked for the benefit of all Lao people, including the Meo; in fact, the Meo most important of all, because he lived among us and was one of us. His work supported my soldiers. His treachery, even if it was not important, was a betrayal of my soldiers, a betrayal of the Meo. It is the Meo who must judge him. He betrayed us. The Meo Council in Vientiane has decided he must die."

"I can understand their feelin' that way, Colonel, but it just don't

seem right to me. Tseng's my friend. It ain't none of my business, I guess, but I want to see him get out of this alive."

"So do I, Tan Pop, but not for the same reason." Vang Pao stared levelly at his American friend. "I value your friendship, and therefore I respect your friendship for this man. I also realize that Tseng could quite easily run away from us. It would be simple for him to make contact with the other side in Vientiane and be spirited away before the Meo catch him."

"He ain't plannin' to do that, Colonel. He's ready to face the music. He told me he's even ready to die if it comes to that."

"Tseng said this in an emotional moment. He stays in your house now, and you are gone. Believe me, he will think better of what you call 'facing the music,' when he considers what will happen. Now that he has confessed and he knows that his treachery is no longer a secret, he will know that he faces execution, because that is the way it is. Life is more precious to a condemned man than to anyone else. He may even now be planning his escape. If not, he will run as soon as he thinks all these things, believe me. If he runs, he will be able to do great harm to us, because he knows many things that the enemy would like to learn. Although the Meo in Vientiane prefer to execute him, I fear for what will happen if they fail. Then we are in a worse position. I would prefer to keep him alive, make him think that he is forgiven for his betrayal because it was unimportant. Then he will stay in the open where we can watch him."

"That sounds kinda complicated to me, Colonel, but if it means you think we can save Tseng from bein' killed, I'll go along with it."

"It will work if I can convince the Meo Council in Vientiane," said Vang Pao. "Tseng does not want to go over to the enemy. He will go only if we frighten him to flight. The enemy bought his brief loyalty with threats to his family. They may try the same thing again. We will watch him closely. Meanwhile, we will buy his loyalty to us with a price as high as the safety of his family—his own life. Here," Vang Pao opened a package on his desk and extracted a thick bundle of outsized Lao banknotes held together by a rubber band. He handed it to Pop. "Give this to him. It is 20,000 Kip, enough to reassure him that we will try to spare his life. Tell him that I will come to Vientiane

soon to try to get the agreement of the Meo leadership there. In the meantime, tell Tan Touby and the other Meo there that he is with you and that I have guaranteed Tseng's safety until we have talked. As long as he remains with you, he will be safe. If he shows any signs of panic, someone will be watching. He will be killed. Meanwhile, he is paroled to you. I trust you, Tan Pop. If this turns out badly for Tseng, if the Meo in Vientiane will not agree with me, I believe you will accept their decision and you will not try to help Tseng escape."

"I trust you, too, Colonel, and I know if you say you'll do everything in your power to save him, you'll do what you say. To tell the truth, I ain't sure what I'll do later, but I'll keep Tseng safe while you're decidin'."

Buell chewed at himself with inward apprehension over just what would happen if Vang Pao failed and it came time to hand Tseng over to the Meo for execution. Could he do it? Could he calmly lead the boy to certain death, hand him over to the people who felt betrayed—were betrayed? Tseng was one of his closest friends. Wouldn't the strands of loyalty and honor, inextricably entwined in the fabric of one of the deepest friendships he had known in his life, force him to go to the last full measure in preserving the boy's life? But Vang Pao and the whole Meo people, too, were his friends. Could he violate that trust? After all, they had honored him with their complete confidence, had embraced him as they had no other non-Meo man in history. There was nothing unjust or even unusual about the execution of a proved spy by a people at war, and they had every reason to assert their right to kill Tseng for his perfidy if they wished, however extra-legal the act might seem. But Edgar knew he could not play the role of Pontius Pilate when the time came. Frankly, as he worriedly made his way back to Vientiane, all he could do was hope desperately that Vang Pao succeeded and there would be no need for him to make the awful choice.

Unhappily Vang Pao's tortured rationale in favor of the preservation of Tseng's life made little sense to his Meo colleagues in Vientiane. They had no doubt that they could locate Tseng, either at Edgar's apartment or elsewhere in the capital city, and kill him cleanly, any time they wanted to. In fact, that is precisely what they had intended

to do before they were forestalled by Vang Pao's temporary guarantee of Tseng's safety. When they heard of his reservations about Tseng escaping, they scoffed. They also pointed out, quite logically, that as long as the enemy held the safety of Tseng's family over his head, he could be turned to their purposes at will. It would be better to kill him promptly and be done with it. For almost two weeks Edgar was aware of the debate taking place in the Meo community, and he knew, too, that Vang Pao was stalling for time by delaying his proposed visit to Vientiane to sit in council with the other Meo for the final judgment of the case. It was evident that the colonel was not completely confident that he could persuade his colleagues to go along with his plea to spare the double agent. Edgar became more convinced with each passing day that a delegation of Meo would come, very soon, to take Tseng away.

Then an improbable and melodramatic accident of history intervened to save Edgar from his continued agony over mixed loyalties. It saved Tseng a bullet in the head.

The International Control Commission, almost totally ineffective in the policing of the Geneva Accord in Laos, had dispiritedly made one of its periodic efforts to instill a feeling of good will among the warring sides in the strange little country. Following the collapse of the Neutralist-Pathet Lao alliance after the Accord was signed, thousands of people who lived on the Plaine des Jarres inevitably were trapped under the control of a group they did not support. Xieng Khouang, Khang Khay, and Phong Savan, now firmly under Vietminh-Pathet Lao control, contained many neutralist supporters. And Muong Soui and the western side of the Plaine, controlled by Kong Le and his army, contained many Pathet Lao supporters. After months of quiet negotiation with the two sides, the I.C.C. arranged for a brief amnesty, during which residents of the Plaine were free to go elsewhere if they wished.

Tseng's mother arrived in Vientiane just three days before his fate was to be decided, finally, by the Meo council. Edgar took Tseng to her, and their reunion was such an overwhelming mixture of joy and grief, punctuated by laughing, sobbing, speechless pauses, torrents of Chinese, and a physical clutching that left mother and son disheveled,

that he was never thereafter able to recreate it clearly in his mind. With her was only the smallest of the sisters, now fifteen and no longer smiling behind the round face of innocence. The older sisters were married to Pathet Lao soldiers. One of them had been sent to Hanoi with her husband. Tseng's mother said the marriages were forced. And as often seems to be the case concerning the promised rewards of treachery, what Tseng's mother had to say made it perfectly clear that her son had been completely hoodwinked by the Vietminh intelligence officer who turned him. The woman had not seen Wang since the evacuation of the Plaine des Jarres. She had never been offered safe conduct to Vientiane, nor had she been threatened with harm. When the time of the amnesty came, she had shown her papers and received official permission to leave Xieng Khouang from the very army which was supposed to be holding her hostage. It was doubtful that the Vietminh intelligence branch had even bothered to check on her whereabouts during the period of Tseng's defection.

Two days later Vang Pao arrived in the city, confident now that he could convince the Meo Council of Tseng's future harmlessness, since the enemy no longer held his family intact, in hostage. It is doubtful that the tribal leaders would have been as generous to an ordinary spy, particularly one who was not a full-blooded Meo. Nor would the Meo colonel have bothered to plead such a man's cause. But Tseng was a friend of Tan Pop, which set him apart. And the threat that he might do further harm to the people of the mountains appeared to have been removed by his mother's arrival in Vientiane. They agreed without much argument to spare his life. But Vang Pao soberly spelled out the conditions of Tseng's reprieve when he announced it that night to Edgar.

"This man is your friend, and he is no longer a threat to the Meo, so he will not die," he said. "The Council agreed that his service to the Meo, even though he worked for the American Army, was mostly meritorious. Therefore we are giving him 50,000 Kip to begin a new life here, where he can do no harm. But he must stay here, and he will be watched, always, even when he does not know we are watching him. If by his words or action he shows even the slightest sign of renewing his betrayal, he will be killed without warning."

After that, the drama and even the soul of Tseng's tragic but adventurous life faded like wisps of steam from a boiling pot set out to cool. It was as if all the meaning of his brief existence had been excised by the breakup of his family and the abrupt, dishonorable end of his career as the best native spy in northeast Laos. Edgar sought to continue the deep friendship that they had known in the past, but his contacts with the boy grew increasingly awkward, as if Tseng no longer cared whether or not he retained the trust of the man whom he had once venerated. Edgar was puzzled when he heard that Tseng often dropped by his apartment when he was away, because the boy never visited him when he was in Vientiane. Then the reason became distressingly clear in the swollen belly of the attractive 17-year-old Lao housemaid who watched over Pop's apartment during his frequent long absences from Vientiane. The father, she said, was Tseng.

"He said that we would be married," she explained, "but now he does not want to see me."

Edgar drove to the small tailor shop that Tseng had opened with his 50,000 Kip. He asked him to do something about the girl's condition.

"It is her problem, not mine," said Tseng coldly.

That ended the friendship of Edgar Buell and Tseng. But Edgar saw the boy in Vientiane from time to time, and he tried, at least, to remain cordial. Usually Tseng was surly in his response. He moved out of his mother's house and saw her only infrequently. His remaining sister married a Chinese shopkeeper who did not like Tseng. The tailor shop failed after two years, and Tseng found a job working as cashier in the American Commissary Club at the AID compound. Then, in 1967, he vanished. Neither his mother nor Edgar, nor anyone else who had once been close to him, knows what happened to Tseng. He may have slipped across the Mekong River into Thailand to begin a new life as tailor, interpreter, merchant, or spy farther south. He may have turned for the second time to the Communists in Laos. Or he may, at last, have been executed by the Meo, who always remained fearful that he would defect. If the Meo killed him, not even Vang Pao would want to acknowledge the fact, for fear of damaging the

tribe's warm friendship with Tan Pop. While not always logical, the Meo are considerate in their friendships.

Edgar was walking down the gentle hill from the new teacher training school at Sam Thong toward his warehouse-home, his legs sliding effortlessly forward in short, quick steps like those the Meo take, when he felt suddenly breathless. He stopped and gasped. Perhaps it was the thinness of the air, or the heat of the afternoon sun. He shrugged and went on. As he reached the door of the warehouse, a sharp pain shot through his left shoulder and caused a dull, aching sensation in his arm. "Smokin' too much," he thought. But as he looked at the small wooden table on which lay page after page of refugee commodity inventories he had planned to check off, he was wholly enervated. He stretched out on his bamboo bed.

Pat McCreedy Weldon entered the warehouse, and her heavy dark eyebrows shot up in surprise as she saw Pop in bed.

"What's the matter, Pop?" she inquired. "It's not like you to crawl into the sack when there's work to do. I heard you were in here taking inventory."

"Dunno, jest ain't feelin' so good," he grumbled. He described his symptoms. "What do you reckon it is?" he asked.

She rummaged in her bag and held a stethoscope to his chest. "Could be a touch of pleurisy," she said, "but I doubt it. Get out of that bed real slow and come with me. We're going to Vientiane."

"I can't," he said. "Too much to do here. Just leave me alone a little while. I'll be all right."

"Not on your life, old man," she said. "Let's go." Gently she led him to her white-painted Porter medical plane and stretched him comfortably in the cargo space behind the pilot's seat.

Twenty minutes after the plane lifted away from the hard-packed clay runway of Sam Thong, Edgar felt the sudden deep, clutching pain of a heart attack. It was as if his heart had been abruptly clamped in a closing vise. Pat had been waiting for it, although she hoped they would reach Vientiane before the attack occurred. She calmed him and held an oxygen mask to his face until the journey ended.

Jiggs Weldon met them at the airport with an ambulance, but

instead of taking him to the Operation Brotherhood hospital, they took him to their own home, where facilities for treating a second attack, if it should come, were probably better.

As Jiggs attached the contact wires of an electrocardiogram machine to his chest, wrists, and ankles, Pop grimaced through the painful heaviness that still throbbed with every beat of his heart, and said:

"I reckon I'll pull through this all right with you two helpin', but if I don't, promise me *one thing*. Just *one thing*. There's a tombstone waitin' for me back in Indiana. Right next to Malorene's. I just want two words writ on it. Two words. Have 'em write *Somebody Cared*. That's all. *Somebody Cared*."

Within six weeks he was back in Sam Thong, working eighteen-hour days, seven days a week. His heart never bothered him again.

Chapter 17

My old Lord Buddha said that you all people have to listen that: "True speech is a way of never dying; disdain or carelessness is a way of dying. Action has to have the reaction, but no action and no reaction at all."

—THE LETTERS OF THONGSAR BOUPHA

MAJOR Thong was promoted to colonel at the same time his commanding officer, Colonel Vang Pao, who had once been a sergeant in the Army of France, became a general in complete command of Military Region II of the Forces Armée Royale de Laos. The Meo guerrilla leader had placed Vietminh and Pathet Lao armies on the defensive in all of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces. He controlled most of the territory of both of them. As a reward, his army of skillful mountaineers no longer was considered a poor second cousin of the Royal Army, but became a regular part of it, and Vang Pao was given sole command not only of his own unorthodox force, but of the few regular army units in his territory as well. The promotion of a Meo to such high office was as astonishing as if a former slave had been named to replace Robert E. Lee after Gettysburg. Vang Pao had his supporters in the Lao army's General Staff, but they were few, and none of them even dreamed of such status for him. But he was without question the best military leader in Laos, the only one, in fact, who had enjoyed any success at all against the Vietminh. In addition to his skill, Vang Pao apparently owed his surprising promotion to pressure from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which holds the purse strings for the entire Lao army. Recalcitrant generals who did not want to see such power granted to a Meo guerrilla chieftain

acquiesced finally because of this pressure and because Vang Pao was simply a better military leader than any of them were.

One divines from this that the quality of the leadership of the Royal Army of Laos was not very good. True. And the problem had nothing to do with politics. Whether a Lao officer was right-wing, neutralist, or left-wing, as a general rule he did not match up favorably in professional quality with a similarly equipped and trained officer of, say, Nigeria or Biafra, or of any other country in the world. One could go on with thousands of words of speculation over why this was and is so, but it is simpler to observe the obvious, which is that Lao people are conditioned by history, religion, and personality to abhor bloodshed, and they simply do not make very good soldiers. In an ideal world, this natural repugnance for bloodshed and war would make the Lao deservedly kings of the earth. It is not an ideal world, especially not in Laos, and given that unhappy fact, both Pathet Lao and royal armies would have been better off if they had had more soldierly leadership.

One of the reasons for Vang Pao's extraordinary successes in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces is that his Meo army faced mostly Lao soldiers of the Pathet Lao in the beginning. Like Lao soldiers of the Royal Army, they had little taste for fighting. The Meo, on the other hand, made superb soldiers. While they are generally a peaceful people who do not believe in killing without reason, they quickly become warlike when attacked, and Pathet Lao units were never a match for them unless they were reinforced by substantial numbers of North Vietnamese officers and men.

But generalizations always are unfair, and it would be wrong to include *all* of the officers of either army in a single unsoldierly characterization. Colonel Thong, for example, was a distinct exception to the general rule, and whether he came by his professional qualities through his training, some of which was undertaken near Fayetteville, North Carolina, or as a reaction to his unhappy family background, is hard to say.

Thong was the son of a lowland Lao farmer near Vientiane, where the frequently overflowing Mekong feeds soil so fertile that anyone with the strength to spend even a small part of his time tilling it can

meet all of his basic needs and have plenty of time left over for the enrichment of life. The underpopulation of the area and the generosity of agriculture, however, generated even more indolence in the region of the capital city than elsewhere in Laos, and Thong's father was a prime example of a man who had the basics of life made and didn't give a damn for the rest. He was an outstanding, practicing hedonist in a region where physical indulgence was the life purpose of many. With the largely irresponsible old man, women came first. Thong was never sure whether his father ever bothered with the formalities of marriage, but he remembered eleven of the old man's wives by name. Since formal divorce is a complicated and expensive legal procedure in Laos, it is probable that most of them were concubines. The old man did as little work as possible, supervising his women and children in the paddy fields and assuring himself from time to time that they cared adequately for the pigs and chickens and the vegetable garden. Most of his time he turned to opium, alcohol, and indiscriminate seduction. Thong and the younger Chanh, his only blood brother among the two dozen children the old man fathered, hated him. Their mother died when Thong was nine years old. Rather than continue to slave for the sake of the old man's excesses, Thong vowed to become a better man and left home. He hired out as a paddy laborer, planting and harvesting rice, and worked his way through the Groupe Scholare in Vientiane, an almost unheard-of demonstration of ambition by a rural Lao boy who was, for all practical purposes, an orphan. After completing the junior high school, Thong realized that he could go no further with self-supported education on the small sums he earned as a laborer, so he joined the French-run Royal Army. With the Groupe Scholare education behind him, he was clearly officer material, and very soon he became a lieutenant. Thong was both brilliant and aggressive in an officer corps not noted for either quality, and he advanced rapidly. At the age of twenty-three, after Dienbienphu, he was sent to the United States to take paratroop training at Fort Bragg. He loved the country. America's abundant evidences of active, aggressive competition struck him as necessary requisites of a good way of life. Like Mua Chung, who adored the American way of life on far less evidence, since all that he ever saw of it was exported by

his few American friends to Laos and Thailand, Thong decided that when peace was restored to Laos he would go to the United States to live among busy, energetic people like himself. Spiritually and psychologically, he was far more a European or American than he was a Lao.

After returning from an unforgettable half-year in America, Thong moved rapidly ahead in the largely ceremonial 25,000-man army of Laos. By his twenty-sixth birthday he was a major. A year later, during one of several periods when Prince Souphanouvong had tentatively agreed to stop fighting and bring his Pathet Lao into a durable coalition that included an integrated army, Thong and an old army friend named Major Khamsao were sent into Sam Neua Province with a battalion of men to begin the integration. Their reception was not friendly. It was, in fact, almost as hostile as if a battalion of Israeli soldiers were sent into Cairo to integrate the government of Egypt. Vietminh and Pathet Lao forces repelled them with gunfire.

Almost any other pair of officers in the Lao army would have shrugged philosophically at the utter futility of the Sam Neua assignment and marched their battalion straight out of the province the moment they heard the first Pathet Lao shot. Not Thong and Khamsao. They observed, quite rightly, that as long as the Pathet Lao resisted the unification of government and armed forces, Laos would remain a nation in civil strife, and military action on behalf of the Royal Government against the home province of the Pathet Lao would continue to be necessary. Instead of marching out, therefore, they withdrew with their modest force into the mountains west of Sam Neua city and reorganized for guerrilla operations. Many of their men deserted, but they won the loyalty of more than half of them. For a few months they received sporadic support and an occasional payroll by air from the right-wing Government, but about a year before the Geneva Accords the remote unit was somehow forgotten by its own bureaucracy. Support ceased, and they had no further contact with the Royal Government.

When Edgar Buell and his friend from the C.I.A., Uncle Joe, first met Thong and Khamsao, the two officers and what remained of their lost battalion had operated as an independent guerrilla force

for more than two years without pay, new weapons, ammunition, uniforms, or supplies of any kind. They had been living off the land entirely, and to Edgar's practiced eye the guerrilla band and its leaders as well looked more undernourished, sick, and ragged than any group of refugees he had ever seen.

His first action, upon encountering the forlorn military group at a village in Sam Neua called Hua Muong, was to put in an urgent call for refugee relief supplies. Other potential refugees in the area—thousands of Meo, Lao Thung, hill Lao, and lowland Lao who were anxious to get out from under Communist domination and genuinely needed Pop's assistance—were so much better off than Thong and his guerrillas that they appeared rich by contrast, although they, too, were near starvation. With his natural affinity for the American way of doing things, Thong was overwhelmed within hours after meeting the wizened old Indiana farmer, when cargo planes appeared overhead and began disgorging rice, salt, pots and pans, woolen blankets, and soap for his ragged army. For more than two years he had foraged, begging villagers for food and black cotton cloth to replace rotted and worn uniforms. Like a good soldier and a first-rate guerrilla, he never plundered innocent villagers, although he occasionally was able to supplement his meager resources by raiding an enemy encampment. Just before Pop and Joe arrived, he was near wits' end. It was an utterly bleak existence, far worse than that of Fidel Castro in the Sierra Madre of southeast Cuba, or of the partisan units that operated behind the lines in Central Europe during World War II, or even of the Vietcong partisans who lived and fought in the jungles of South Vietnam, because the military pickings were slimmer and the friendly villages had little to give for the guerrillas' support. No wonder, then, that Thong took an instant liking to his American benefactors. Almost immediately after Edgar's relief supplies arrived, Uncle Joe produced, by the same kind of American magic, a fresh supply of weapons and ammunition, and the Lao army major who had been forgotten by his own bureaucracy was beside himself with new-found loyalty to these two men who represented Colonel Vang Pao of the Meo. The Royal Army, through Vang Pao, quickly re-established administrative support of the long-lost unit.

Vang Pao sent numbers of his own Meo guerrillas to fight with Thong, who bolstered his own small force by recruiting many more local guerrillas from among the Meo and the hill Lao in the area, and the chess game for control of Sam Neua Province got underway, much as it had, earlier, in Xieng Khouang. By the end of 1963, the guerrilla force, under the administrative direction of Major Khamsao, the tactical leadership of Major Thong, and the strategic command of Colonel Vang Pao—supported by the battlefield advice and logistical support of Uncle Joe, among thousands of partisan civilians who were being fed and cared for by Edgar Buell—dominated Sam Neua Province right up to the borders of North Vietnam. The conquest took courage, sacrifice, and brains. The enemy was by no means passive or quiescent, and fierce battles frequently broke out in the mountains and valleys of the province. But Major Thong, in contrast to his position a year earlier when his troops were starving and he was reduced to a losing struggle for day-to-day survival, was free to move almost any place in the province he wanted to go.

One day in 1964 Edgar landed in his light plane at Hong Non, the advance outpost not far from Sam Neua city where he and Doc Weldon had first learned of the cholera epidemic the year before. As he hopped out of the airplane, the recently promoted Colonel Thong stepped in front of him with his arms thrown wide in welcome. Thong, without reference to romantic guerrilla heroes like Che Guevara, about whom he had never heard, wore a maroon beret, from which his shining black hair cascaded to shoulder length. He presented a startling and unforgettable figure, not unlike an Asian representation of a beardless, square-chinned Christ. At five feet ten inches, Thong towered over most of the Lao and Meo men around him, and his lean body was heavily muscled in the arms, shoulders, and chest. In demeanor he was like Neah Ying, the smiling Meo-Lao Thung refugee worker who hid a tough analytical mind behind an always good-natured countenance, but he was rough as corrugated steel. In contrast to tough, stubby little Jua Pao, who killed at least one dog a day just to remind his troops that their duty was death, Thong led his soldiers with a smile and disdained such hollow demonstrativeness. But if any man in his unit misbehaved, or merely fouled up, in such

a way as to endanger the lives of the others, Thong shot him dead. Not a dog.

Thong skipped the formality of the traditional, gentle Lao greeting—a slight bow over reverently clasped hands—and embraced the much smaller American in what looked like the hug of a grizzly bear. He was a robust man, and he fairly shouted in English, which he spoke excellently:

“Pop! We’re going into Sam Neua city. How’d you like to come along?”

“Are you crazy, Colonel? That’s Souphanouvong’s headquarters.”

“You bet it is. That’s why I want to go in and have a look around.”

“Straight into the city?”

“Sure. Why not?” He laughed. “Don’t worry. I won’t take you all the way in with me, but I’ll put you on a hill where you can watch. I’m going to walk in very quietly, in disguise. I don’t think the city’s worth fighting over just yet.”

While Sam Neua city was only four miles from Hong Non by a direct line, it was much farther by open trail and farther still by the route Thong’s small scouting force followed. It took a day and a half to reach the edge of town, where an uninhabited low hill afforded them a perfectly clear view down the single main street of the provincial capital. Along this artery, which was a small stretch of Highway 6 from Hanoi, were a few dozen brick buildings, elevated on concrete platforms in the French colonial style, and crowded behind and around them were several hundred Lao houses anchored firmly to stilts of thick tree trunks and covered with thatch. It was a sleepy little town of about 3,000 people, and the only things that set it apart from others like it were a few trucks and cars stirring dust clouds as they rolled down the main street, numbers of armed but apparently off-duty Pathet Lao soldiers in pale khaki uniforms, and a huge, fenced encampment just to the east of the town. The camp was Souphanouvong’s headquarters.

“You can’t do it,” said Pop, after sizing up the layout of camp and town. “They’s enemy all over the place, and they’ll grab you for sure.”

“No problem, Pop,” said Thong. “They’ll never know I was there.”

They slept on the hill. Early in the morning Thong and four of his

soldiers, dressed as Lao farmers and exhibiting the almost clownlike diffidence of rural innocents overawed by the big city, strolled into Sam Neua. Pop watched them as they paid ingratiating respect to the soldiers they passed, paused to stare wistfully at cheap flashlights and toilet articles on the mostly bare counters of the commercial stalls that lined the street, and edged around to Souphanouvong's encampment. He lost sight of them then. But they reappeared a few hours later, again bowing deferentially to the soldiers on the street.

Thong laughed when he returned to the low hill and they made ready to depart, after sunset, for Hong Non. "No one stopped us, not even to ask who we were. I saw everything I wanted to see."

"What was it you wanted to see?" asked Edgar.

"Mainly," said Thong, "I wanted to see if I could do it."

Not long after setting out for the return to Hong Non, a light rain began to fall, although it was not the rainy season. Edgar, dressed in ankle-high sneakers, a gray cotton work shirt and twill pants, became soaked. By morning he was shuddering with chills that flashed through his body like electric currents between alternating periods of sweat-drenching fever. Thong halted the procession while Edgar lay down on his side, dropped his trousers, and injected penicillin into his own right buttock. He rested there for a few hours as the fever progressed. A gurgling in his lungs and an increasing shortness of breath confirmed what he already knew. He had pneumonia again. Thong and his men squatted solicitously around him, bathing his forehead with cool water from a nearby spring and covering him with blankets when the chills seemed overwhelming. He lost consciousness, although Thong said he continued to talk in his delirium. Then the chills and the fever subsided, and at three o'clock in the afternoon the procession resumed its trek to Hong Non. One of the men found a pony for Edgar to ride. By the time they returned to the village of Hong Non the next morning, Buell was delirious again. But in his moments of clarity he continued to treat himself with injections of penicillin. He was sorry neither Thongsar nor Father B was with him this time, but he was confident that within a few days he would be well.

Back at Sam Neua city, meanwhile, the enemy still had not learned

that Colonel Thong, who was as famous and feared as Che Guevara among the peasant-soldiers of Bolivia, had walked among them. But on about that day an entirely unrelated incident, which left them convinced he had gone through Sam Neua like Patton through the south of France, began to unfold.

As Pop Buell lay desperately ill at Hong Non, a hill Lao woman, the wife of a farmer, became suspicious of her husband's frequent long absences from home. Once each month, like clockwork, he would leave her, and he would not return for eight or ten days. She became convinced that he was indulging in regular hanky-panky with another woman in a settlement near Sam Neua city. The hill Lao are a continent people and do not accept infidelity as lightly as do the lowland Lao. One means of curbing domestic misbehavior is to complain to the nearest representative of authority, in this case the Pathet Lao officials of Sam Neua city, in hopes that a threat of official action will bring the sinning spouse into line. This the woman did. She told the authorities that her husband went once each month to a village overlooking Highway 6 and he stayed there with four or five friends for eight to ten days at a time, just sitting around all day and staring at the road below. Doubtless he was shackled up with some woman in the evening and had nothing else to do all day but rest in the company of his friends, awaiting the nightly encounter. The Pathet Lao were not as naive as the farmer's wife. They suspected that the village sometimes served as an observation post for Colonel Thong's guerrilla forces, and they concluded, quite correctly, that the woman's husband, unbeknown to her, was one of Thong's observers, assigned to watch the road for any movement in the direction of Hong Non.

The husband's next duty assignment, which he began to perform two weeks later in the company of four other hill Lao observers who worked with him, was cut short by a barrage of Pathet Lao mortar fire, laid down upon the village as a warning, with the intent of frightening the observers away. But instead of frightening the five hill Lao farmers, it made them furious. Hill Lao, unlike lowland Lao, are not Buddhists and have escaped most of the cultural influences that tend to make their valley-dwelling countrymen such happy, peace-loving people. A hill Lao, when aroused, is as bold, as fierce, and as

heedless of life as any Mco, and this the five farmers quickly demonstrated. Forced to flee from their observation post by the enemy mortar fire, they regrouped a few days later and collected, from several hiding places, their own 60-millimeter mortar tube and dozens of rounds of ammunition. Determined to retaliate, they erected the weapon on the same small hill overlooking Sam Neua from which Pop had observed Colonel Thong's harmless foray. Then steadily, continuously, with a great sense of self-satisfaction, the farmers dropped mortar shells all over the previously sleepy town.

Sam Neua reacted like a living organism in spasm. It panicked. So did Pathet Lao headquarters at the edge of town. After a single hour of bombardment from the farmers' mortar tube, headquarters and town alike were completely evacuated and the military and civilian populations of both centers were fleeing in disorder along Highway 6 in the direction of Hanoi.

Satisfied that they had avenged themselves, the farmers folded up their mortar tube and returned undetected to their village. From the time the woman first became suspicious to the shelling of the city was about a month. Edgar, recovering from his second case of pneumonia at the Weldons' house in Vientiane, read about the brief siege of Sam Neua city in a newspaper. The Pathet Lao radio, according to the account in the Bangkok *World*, claimed that Sam Neua city had been invaded by Colonel Thong's guerrilla forces, who rampaged like savages, brutally massacring innocent civilians. Edgar was surprised, because he couldn't believe Thong was either foolish or inhumane enough to do such a thing. Colonel Thong was even more surprised. It took him more than a week after he heard the enemy radio report to track down the true story of the farmers' attack. They told him that they had not bothered to report their action because they looked upon it as a personal vendetta, not a part of the war. They were furious that the enemy had inconsiderately dropped mortar shells around their observation post, because there were many innocent people in the area, and someone might have been hurt. The inconsiderate action deserved reaction in kind. So they retaliated with indiscriminate fire of their own. Since they had no interest in occupying Sam Neua city, they picked up their equipment and went home when

the populace and its defenders fled. The city remained uninhabited for three days.

The farmer whose wife was the cause of it all politely refused to tell Colonel Thong whether there had been any further domestic retaliation.

Jiggs and Pat Weldon insisted that Edgar take a long vacation, preferably at home, away from the demands of friends and duty. But Edgar was not one to think only of himself, even when the delicate state of his health cried out for selfish indulgence.

"I'm gonna take either Chung or Thongsar home with me," he said. "Chung's so anxious to visit America he can taste it, and so's Thongsar. Time both of 'em had a rest, too."

Had Edgar been forced to choose between the two, he probably would have picked Chung for the rare treat, because he had known him longer and his work was a little, but not much, more hazardous than Thongsar's. Since the invasion of Sam Neua, Pop had established an advanced base for refugee operations at Hua Muong, and Thongsar, for a year now, not only had been in charge of it, but had been constantly on the go in small airplanes or on foot among the dozens of new refugee villages in the enemy-held area. Earlier this same year he had been forced to flee from a village under Communist attack and had hidden in the jungle with a small group of refugees for seventeen days before Pop, searching the area in a helicopter, found him. Even then, the helicopter was riddled with bullet holes and one passenger was shot before Thongsar and his companions were safely lifted out. It was scary work.

Chung, on the other hand, faced even chancier hazards. From his base at Tha Lin Noi he frequently led scouting parties down among the complex of paths and roadways along the Lao-Vietnamese border that is called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. There were no Pathet Lao in that stretch of Chung's territory. Only Vietminh. And they were probably the toughest, most carefully trained of all the regular soldiers in the Army of North Vietnam. Spying upon them, even stabbing like the quick thrust of a bayonet at their jungle camps along the trails, was dangerous enough in itself. Because the North Vietnamese were

not simply a passive guard force, posted along the vital supply line that fed their own comrades and the Vietcong who were fighting in South Vietnam. They were well-led, regular military units perfectly capable of mounting counter raids and even offensives of their own. They knew who Chung was and where he came from, and they bent a great deal of their attention toward liquidating him, because he was more than a nuisance to them, he was a positive threat. More and more voices in South Vietnam and in America were calling for the massive aerial bombardment of North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the presence of an observer like Chung watching their every move along the trail was a great potential danger to them. They were out to get Chung, and it was perfectly obvious that his old base at Tha Lin Noi was unsafe. To avoid too much exposure, he moved his base frequently, but still he probed among enemy units constantly.

In addition to the excruciating and almost suicidal demands of his job, there were two other reasons why Chung could not break away for three months to accompany Edgar to the United States, however much he wanted to go. Since Tseng's disgrace, Chung had become the single most skillful and experienced field intelligence officer in the Meo army. When he was not tied down leading his own espionage and sabotage teams southeast of the Plaine, he had to fly north to Tseng's old outpost and supervise intelligence-gathering activities there. His Mua clan kinsman, Teu Lu, one of the French Army-educated brothers who had been with Edgar in the mass evacuations of 1961, was now Vang Pao's chief of intelligence operations. And Chung, although constantly in the field, was second in command. With such heavy responsibility, there seemed little chance that he could take leave to visit America.

But one final reason was conclusive. It was Mi Si.

Edgar visited the quiet, prettily moon-faced girl frequently when she was staying with her family in Vientiane. At every opportunity he carried messages between the two lovers.

"Tell Chung that we can be married even though I cannot live with him," she would plead softly to Pop. "Even if we see each other only once each year, it will be better than this. I love him. Tan Pop... are you sure he still loves me?"

Chung was as eager to conclude the long, dry courtship as his sweetheart, but his work had become so demanding that there simply was no time even to consider visiting her in Vientiane, where she was studying English and had even begun to attend a Lao secretarial school.

The miserable condition of their separation changed for the better in 1963, when Mi Si's father, tired of playing a minor role in the big-business opium traffic of Vientiane, decided to take his family back to the source of his income, the mountains of the northeast. The old opium trader, who often was his own best customer, moved back to his native turf. There, once again, he established himself as a primary dealer in the potent poppy sap, buying directly from Meo farmers and pushing it along, at double the price, to second-level middlemen in Vientiane and elsewhere in Laos. Chung still detested the old man for his habitual smoking, but he could have kissed him for bringing Mi Si back to the mountains, particularly to Sam Thong. As the number-two intelligence commander in all of the northeast, Chung had to visit headquarters at Long Tieng once each month. This aspect of his work became the most blissful of all, because it permitted him to spend one night out of thirty in nearby Sam Thong, engaged in the sheer joy of rediscovering Mi Si in a sporadic but deeply satisfying continuation of the earthy courtship they had begun three years before.

Mi Si was anything but a nag. However, she had a quietly persuasive manner that any man in love could not long ignore. While their delightfully carnal courtship could have gone on, quite legitimately and without shame to either, for many more months, Chung soon became as anxious as his intended bride to formalize it with the enduring tie of marriage. Expressions such as "the tie of marriage," "tie the knot," and "ties that bind" are banal hyperbole in most languages, but to the Meo they have literal meaning, and Edgar, just recovered from double pneumonia and already preparing to go home to Indiana on vacation, was invited back to Sam Thong to preside over a demonstration of it. Bringing a Meo couple formally together is an honor reserved for the oldest and closest friend of a bridal pair, and there was never any question between Mi Si and Chung that the honored knot-tyer at their wedding had to be Edgar Buell.

Except for the funeral of one of Pop's closest friends a few years later, the wedding of Chung and Mi Si was the most memorable Meo ritual ever conducted in the mountains of the northeast. It was known ever after as the 100,000-Kip wedding, because that is how much money Chung spent on silver, caribou, pigs, and chickens to give to Mi Si's parents as a price for his beloved. The extraordinarily high price wasn't set because the crafty old opium trader bargained so high for his daughter's hand. Chung spent that much money, the equivalent of \$500—and a fortune in the mountains—because he thought Mi Si was worth it. To this day, anyone who knows Mi Si agrees.

Like most Meo ceremonies, it was an almost all-male affair, the one exception being the only female considered absolutely necessary to the occasion, the bride. Mi Si's mother and the other women of her family and of the growing Meo village at Sam Thong withdrew a safe distance and watched the big circle of black-clad men, sitting cross-legged before a low wicker table on which were heaped token quantities of the pork, chicken, caribou, eggs, vegetables, corn whiskey, and broths that would become part of a huge wedding feast later. Mi Si sat primly among the men, close by Chung, her eyes downcast. Her long black hair was carefully combed into a bun and covered with a peaked wraparound cap that was tied with a cloth band of a design, similar to a tartan plaid, that was the symbol of her own clan. Her long black skirt and tunic were piped in fresh crimson, and around her neck she wore three heavy silver necklaces, each dangling a huge pendant bearing the tribal design. Edgar, dressed in new sneakers and clean work clothes for the occasion, sat before the pair, beaming happily as his balding head glistened with reflected sunshine and his thick-lensed glasses flashed like mirrors.

The leading shaman of Sam Thong, like a rural preacher who becomes carried away with his own oratory, chanted on and on, his lips blubbering wetly like two flags slapping in a rainstorm. It is doubtful that he overlooked a single spirit in the trees, the animals, the people, or the mountains as he bent his supplications toward all to guarantee the young couple a fecund future. When the shaman stopped, abruptly as if the final spirit had told him to shut up, Edgar

picked up a long white string, carded and twisted from raw cotton grown by the Lao farmers of the valley below. Having been coached by Chung on what was expected of him, he proceeded confidently with the most vital part of the ceremony, the symbolic equivalent of "I now pronounce you man and wife."

The old farmer tenderly looped one end of the simple string around Mi Si's right wrist and tied it with a tight square knot. Then he grasped Chung's left hand and crossed his wrist under Mi Si's. Looping the cotton strand around both wrists, now, he brought it back under, then threaded it between the wrists, over, back, between, and under in a figure eight, which he repeated until he reached the end of the string. This he looped around Chung's wrist and tied with a half-hitch. Gently, then, Edgar picked from the table an eggshell, neatly cracked at the small end and filled with rice. He placed it in their joined hands. Each picked rice from the eggshell and ate. Then he placed a single, small glass of *lau lau* in their hands. With Mi Si's hand and his own joined together, Chung drank. Then Mi Si drank. As they stretched their hands forward, Edgar deftly cut the string with a razor-sharp Meo knife. At this moment, without a sound, Mi Si's mother came forward from the crowd of women, who had drawn back. As if taking the hands of two small children, she reached out to her daughter and her new son-in-law and, before the eyes of an admiring congregation, led them inside her house. There she presented her daughter to Chung on a new bamboo bed, freshly made with a new coverlet of quilted cotton. The mother withdrew to look after the wedding guests, who feasted and drank for the remainder of the day and night, while passion waxed and waned in the privacy of the bamboo house.

The wedding settled Edgar's problem of choice. Chung obviously couldn't go to America just now. So Buell rushed to obtain a passport and a visa for Thongsar, and the two small friends left, by air, for Bangkok. Their first stop in the fabled city of the Thai was the Marble Temple, one of the loveliest shrines in all of Asia, where Thongsar held a reverent but tearful reunion with the most venerable *bonze*, a quiet, leathery old man who, as the Father Superior of the temple, had once been his mentor. When the old priest learned from

his former protégé how dear the bandy-legged American had become to him and the people of Laos, he excused himself for a moment and returned bearing an ancient wooden pendant suspended in a frame of solid gold. It was a small figure of Buddha, a museum piece at least four hundred years old.

The old priest held the Buddha close for Edgar to see. The wood was pale gray, cracked with the fine lines of antiquity. It was dry, as if it had not been touched for many, many years. He spoke to Thongsar in Thai, too quickly for Edgar to understand.

"The venerable *bonze* asks that you hold your wrist for cutting," Thongsar translated.

As Edgar hesitantly proffered his wrist, the priest reached into his yellow robe and brought out a small knife. Quickly, and without pain, he jabbed Edgar's wrist. Then the old priest touched the small figurine to the drop of blood which sprang from the puncture. Slowly, in Thai, he said, "As long as this is with you, you will have no problems; and this Buddha will never be lost." He placed the precious talisman in Edgar's hand.

"Daddy Pop," said Thongsar as they left the temple, "I always worried that the bullets of the red rascals would kill you. Now I worry no more. As long as you carry the wood Buddha on your body, bullets will not penetrate your skin. Now you are safe."

For all of his worldliness and sophistication, there were understandable gaps in Thongsar's education, which he had acquired almost entirely in temple surroundings. Since the concerns of priestly contemplation do not include such subjects as celestial mechanics and geography, Thongsar had never in his life been informed that the world is round. With his friend and host at his side, he flew across the Pacific to America, where they took a rented automobile and drove 13,000 miles, visiting more parts of the land than most Americans encompass in their lifetimes. Thongsar took thousands of pictures with a small Japanese camera that Edgar bought for him along the way. He called them his "notes of our journey. I will show America to my people. It is better than trying to tell them," he explained. They concluded the visit by spending several weeks with Howard and the other Buells in Indiana, and a few more weeks with Harriet and her

family in Ohio, then they left from New York for Europe to finish circumscribing the globe.

Thongsar was slightly puzzled when they flew out over the Atlantic, continuing their journey eastward rather than doubling back to go home to Laos. It had never occurred to Edgar that Thongsar didn't know. He told him that the world is round, like an orange. Thongsar reacted skeptically to the statement, but said no more. When they reached Bangkok he reassured himself that the golden spires and obelisks of the temples were the same that he had left almost three months before. Then he smiled. "Tan Pop," he said, "the world *is* round."

When they returned to Vientiane, Edgar had a heavy gold chain made for his wooden Buddha and hung it round his neck. It seemed a silly superstition, but somehow it made him feel safer to feel the weight of the gold and the bulk of the pendant on his chest.

Chapter 18

But the best things which we are teaching to the all kinds of people oftenly and much explainings—our own four disciplines, as follows: Don't the lazy people; Don't steal; Don't lie; Don't cheat.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Bouphe

THE wooden Buddha that could never be lost disappeared one night early in 1965 at a place called Na Khang, an important Royal Government military base just a few miles west of Tseng's old outpost of Houei Thom. It was Edgar's own fault, really, because he failed to obey the venerable old *bonze's* admonition to keep it always with him. Together with its chain of heavy, pure gold, the kind which most countries of the world forbid to all but jewelers and dentists, and the gold frame in which it was suspended, the Buddha necklace weighed more than a pound. It was a bulky and uncomfortable thing to hang around a neck as scrawny as Edgar's. So he took it off and tucked it among his dirty clothes and extra sneakers in an old canvas flight bag that he carried with him.

Na Khang normally was a secure place, but it was not immune to attack. As one of the northernmost settlements of Xieng Khouang Province, close by the Sam Neua border, it had become a major strategic center and rear headquarters for General Vang Pao's operations in the extreme northeast. As such it grew, fairly quickly after the invasion of Sam Neua, into a major supply point for Colonel Thong's guerrilla forces, and for the regular army units of the Forces Armée Royale. The Central Intelligence Agency kept one anonymous

agent there to help out, and the base also became a listening post for a pair of U.S. Air Force officers who guided Forward Aircraft Controller planes, which in turn directed fighter bombers on missions over North Vietnam. (In later years, when the bombing of North Vietnam was ended, the planes and the Forward Air Controllers were diverted to equally bloody work in Laos, although the United States Government blandly tried to cover up the massive bombardment of enemy forces in the tiny country by insisting that the missions were only for reconnaissance purposes. While the official U.S. lie about air activity over Laos—as many as three hundred bombing sorties a day, often in support of Vang Pao's troops—was common knowledge to both enemy and friend from the moment it began, it was only revealed to the American public late in 1969. Share and share alike, the Meo say.)

The base served another function, as well. Its 2,200-foot hard-clay aircraft runway was the best available field within easy helicopter reach of North Vietnam from which to mount rescue missions when American pilots were shot down. Air America and U.S. Air Force helicopters would settle down on the field in the morning and wait there through the day for emergency calls, then commute back to their bases in Thailand or Vientiane in the evening, when the day's bombing was done. Few of the rescue pilots, however, knew the terrain over which they were flying. Happily for them, Colonel Thong was frequently on hand at Na Khang. When there was time he loved to climb into the choppers, beside the pilots, and guide them through the valleys of Sam Neua Province into North Vietnam. Thong probably was personally responsible for rescuing more than a hundred downed American airmen on these missions.

For his own part, Edgar visited Na Khang often because there were many refugees scattered about the big base. But he rarely spent the night there. His own advanced headquarters was about forty miles to the north of it at a place called Hua Muong, where Thongsar now spent most of his time. But because bad weather had closed in around both Hua Muong and Sam Thong, Pop was sleeping at Na Khang on the night that the wooden Buddha disappeared. He was inside a small Meo hut, stretched out fully clothed and with his shoes on, a nocturnal attire to which he had become accustomed over the years,

because it made flight under fire so much quicker and easier. He was awakened by explosions shortly after midnight. When the mortar shells began dropping near the laterite airstrip, he climbed out of bed, as he had done countless times before, reached instinctively for his canvas flight bag, and scurried out of his hut. He paused, briefly, by the door to see if he could detect any signs of small-arms gunfire that would indicate a physical attack in force by enemy troops. There were none. Only the occasional *car-r-rumph* of mortar shells, some of which landed close enough to stir a hot wind that whipped his clothing. Assured that he would not have to flee, he placed the canvas bag beside the door of his hut, where he could retrieve it in the morning, and went off to find a deep, safe foxhole in which to resume his night's sleep. In the morning he returned to his hut. The canvas bag was gone. Inside it was the wooden Buddha on the gold chain. At breakfast he told Colonel Thong.

Among his other strong qualities, the robust guerrilla colonel possessed one that was somewhat paradoxical. Despite his military role and the sometimes bloodthirsty way in which he pursued it, he was a devout Buddhist who adhered more strictly to the canons of the faith than most Christians or Jews to the Ten Commandments. But like any pious Christian soldier he did not brood over the conflict of his job and his religious beliefs, any more than he tried to curb a natural bent toward sexual promiscuity that, perhaps, was a heritage from his Casanovan father. But when Edgar told him that his prized wooden Buddha had been stolen during the night, Thong was as shocked as Billy Graham would be if someone swiped his Bible. The ever-present smile vanished from his face, and his eyes glassed over as if frozen.

"Believe me, Tan Pop," he spoke sonorously, like a hanging judge reading a sentence of execution, "you will get that Buddha back. No one gets away with stealing another man's Buddha."

Pop was upset by the loss, not because the ten-ounce gold chain had cost \$380, but because the antique Buddha represented the spontaneous love and generosity of the old priest in Bangkok and, as such, the same qualities of spontaneity that had drawn so many Thai, Lao, Meo, and other people of the region to his heart. It also rep-

resented a kind of blood bond with Thongsar. And, besides, he felt safer with it in his possession than without it. But it was gone, and he shrugged unhappily, convinced that he would never see it again.

A few days later he flew to Phou Vieng, about fifty miles to the west. His old comrade Blea Vu was in charge of refugee relief operations there and had called Pop, by radio, to visit as soon as he could. Blea Vu had a problem that he could not explain over the air. Edgar wondered what it could be. Perhaps it was medical or agricultural. Edgar still worked eighteen hours a day, as he does today, literally digging holes in the ground to demonstrate correct planting, experimenting with the introduction of new protein foods among people accustomed only to rice and small portions of meat, caring for the sick when no medic or doctor was available, ordering and dispensing emergency supplies of food, clothing, and other commodities, physically assisting in the construction of school buildings and storage structures, and presiding as a usually, but not always, wise counselor over family disputes, inter-village conflicts, and myriad personal social problems. When he arrived at Phou Vieng, which was now a secure, almost self-sufficient refugee village of 4,000 people, he encountered a new kind of socio-agricultural problem that had Blea Vu stumped. The rotund, French-speaking Meo leader who had once helped lead 9,000 refugees to a fateful river's edge with Pop had called on his own brother, the intelligence chief Teu Lu, for help. But even Teu Lu, with all of his resources, could not solve the problem. It concerned the product of the poppy in the Phou Vieng area. Opium had been harvested in abundance ever since their refugee area was established in 1961. It was top-grade stuff, almost as good as Sam Neua opium, which is to say that it was among the very best in the world.

One natural fact about opium is that, like all organic substances, it has a distinct life span. The Meo women go into the poppy field just before dawn on harvesting day to begin cutting the receptacles of the flowers with sharp three-bladed ring-knives, not unlike the string-cutting rings worn by package handlers in department stores. In a day's time the ovule of the plant has secreted its droplets of rubbery sap through the three slits. From the time the women scoop the

droplets into a banana leaf until it is finally smoked or further refined into morphine, codeine, heroine, and other narcotic alkaloids, not more than three years can elapse. If final use is delayed more than that time, the stuff dies, like an uncorked brandy.

That was Blea Vu's problem. The people of the Phou Vieng area had stored away more than a ton of tight, square little bales of opium. In their earthen-floored bamboo warehouses, piled to the gable poles of the roofs and neatly separated so one crop would not pollute the other, was three years' production. The fourth crop was almost ready to harvest, and still no one had found a way to ship the very first harvest to market. The Corsican fliers, who had moved the sap in the old days from even the most remote corners of Laos, were a casualty of the Geneva agreement and the renewed war. Their last airplane was rotting in a junkyard not far from Wattay airport on the main road into Vientiane, and the last of the pilots had either left Southeast Asia or gone into more prosaic work as restaurateurs and hoteliers. Opium traders such as Mi Si's father as Sam Thong had managed to remain active because there was still enough traffic into and out of the area south of the Plaine to move the goods to Vientiane. But in the north, around Phou Vieng, there was no transportation save an occasional Air America plane, no roads, and no pathways safe from the predations of the Pathet Lao and Vietminh.

"Tan Pop, the farmers are desperate," said Blea Vu, his red-flushed face crinkled with concern. "The first year's crop is almost worthless already. They would trade the whole crop for a bolt of cloth."

Edgar took the problem seriously, because he had learned over the years that this substance, however abhorrent it might be in the West, where drugs are abused for the profit of organized crime, represented the only entry the Meo had into the cash economy of Laos. It was equally important as a major source of foreign exchange to the Royal Government. In fact, however much nationalist yearnings, Communist ideology, and domestic politics might confuse the issue, there are old hands in Laos who swear that any war that brings North Vietnam into Sam Neua and Xiang Khouang provinces is an Opium War, because that is what Hanoi is after. Opium is where the money is. Be that as it may, the people of the Phou Vieng area were at the end of

their rope, as desperate as any Indiana farmer would be if forced to watch helplessly while an entire year's crop rotted to worthlessness.

For a moment Edgar seriously entertained the notion of buying the 3-year-old crop himself. There were slightly more than 300 pounds of the stuff in the first year's batch. At the prices the Meo usually received, a fresh batch was worth about three dollars a pound, a price, incidentally, that rises by geometric progression as it passes from middleman to middleman in its journey from the poppy fields of Xieng Khouang to cities such as New York. What Pop might procure for a few dollars at Phou Vieng would sell for thousands of dollars in the United States, which is what makes the sap so popular with the crime syndicates.

"If I bought it, they'd think I was just givin' 'em a handout," said Edgar, "'cause there's nothin' I could do with it 'cept leave it here to rot, like they's doin'."

"Can you fly it out in one of your airplanes?" asked Blea Vu.

"Not and stay outa jail, I can't. It's a pity these people have to suffer, just 'cause the rest of the world can't control the way this stuff is used, though, ain't it?"

Following the failure of his sweet potato experiment several years before, Edgar had given up as a quixotic dream, at least for the present, his campaign to rid Laos of poppy harvesting. Experience had shown him that few Meo smoked opium, aside from the sick, and that those who did usually were ostracized. If the Meo were going to earn any money in the midst of this war, there was no other source. So he helped them to improve their planting and cultivation, which was primitive. "If you're gonna grow it, grow it good," he said, "but don't let nobody smoke the stuff." In time he even convinced many of the aged and sick that the medicines that he, the Weldons, and the native medics administered were better for them than opium. So, if anything, there was less opium smoked in the mountains after the crops improved than there was before. But there was more opium.

"There is one possible outlet for this crop," said Blea Vu, "but I cannot let the people use it. It would be disloyal. Traitorous."

"What's that?" asked Pop, his interest piqued by the hesitant way

in which the usually forthright Blea Vu used the words "disloyal" and "traitorous."

"Certain contacts have been made," he said, "without my knowledge," he added quickly, "by some of the farmers with the enemy. The Pathet Lao would like to buy the opium." He paused, then concluded without conviction, "I cannot permit trading with the enemy, of course."

"Well, now, just a minute," mused Pop. "We got a whole year's crop that's about to turn bad, ain't we?"

"Yes, Tan Pop."

"And if we don't get rid of it, we'll just have to bury it, ain't that right?"

"Yes, Tan Pop."

"And the farmers need some money, don't they?"

"Yes, Tan Pop."

"Well, what the hell. Let's sell it to the other side. If it's got any punch left, it'll keep the enemy drunk, which don't hurt us none. And these people'll git their money. Now, what's wrong with that?"

"You are very wise, Tan Pop," said Blea Vu with relief.

Contacts were reestablished, and within a few days the 3-year-old crop of opium was loaded on the backs of fourteen ponies and transported across a trail that had been guaranteed safe for the round trip. The caravan leaders returned two days later with two burlap sacks of Royal Lao Government Kip, and the village celebrated. That afternoon, Chung, who had been alerted that the caravan had visited an enemy unit and was anxious to question its leaders, arrived at Phou Vieng. No one had bothered to examine the money carefully before the villagers proudly displayed the two sacks of Kip to the young intelligence officer. Chung took the banknotes out of the sack and inspected them.

"They are false," he said, "counterfeit. The Pathet Lao have been floating a lot of this stuff around the country lately."

There was some consolation in the knowledge that the opium they had traded was no better than the money they received. Share and share alike, the Meo say. But from that time on, the people of

the Phou Vieng area were even more anti-Communist than they had been before.

While the people of Phou Vieng never again traded with the enemy for fear of getting stung, as they felt they had been, thousands of other opium-growing Meo were not so fastidious or naive. Cut off from other outlets, they began an active trade with Vietminh and Pathet Lao buyers, accepting livestock and silver in exchange, rather than the dubious banknotes. This renewed trade became a problem, because with the geometric price progression of opium once it leaves the farm, the enemy clearly stood to make great profits with which to bolster his military force. Then, mysteriously, the clandestine trade with the Communists stopped, as if cut off by an armed embargo, in all areas of Laos that were served regularly by the small planes of Air America. No American civilian in Laos, with the probable exception of men like Uncle Joe and his fellow C.I.A. employees, was ever cut in on the reason. But at the minimal risk of slandering the intelligence agency, it is perfectly obvious where the Meo found the new outlet for their opium. There was no other market. The C.I.A. apparently encouraged Lao opium traders to resume their old business and, since there simply is no other form of transportation in northeast Laos, arranged to help them fly it out. Unfortunately, one can only speculate about this, since like all its other activities in Laos and elsewhere, the C.I.A.'s role in Lao opium smuggling, whatever it is, is a secret neither the agency nor the Lao traders who presumably work at both ends of the chain will talk about. In any case, the opium is moving, and since the Central Intelligence Agency controls the only available mode of transportation, it must be actively involved in the trade. One hopes, perhaps naively, that the Agency has effectively cornered the crop and destroys it each year after paying the Meo tribesmen for their trouble. Such defensive buying would not be very expensive. The opium crop of northeast Laos does not exceed one hundred tons even in time of peace. At farmstand prices it could be gathered up for less than a million dollars a year—peanuts compared to the hundreds of millions of dollars the Agency has poured into the little war in Laos.

As the nearby conflict in Vietnam escalated toward its own woeful plateau of violence, with a half-million American troops and thousands of aircraft lashing in futility along the eastern side of the Annamese peninsula, an unusual calm settled over Laos, whose own horrid little war, like its opium, had moved so secretly that few outsiders knew or cared that it was going on. This brief lull, in 1965, probably stemmed from the increased intensity of the fighting in South Vietnam and the bombing of North Vietnam. Hanoi was too preoccupied at home and in the south to pay much attention to Laos other than to assure, by continued military force, that its supply line, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was kept open.

During the respite, Edgar and his refugee relief workers made extraordinary strides in bringing a sense of normalcy and even improvement to the people of the northeast. By now, with both civil and military control reestablished by the Royal Government in more than three-fourths of the northeast, General Vang Pao's soldiers could no longer be considered guerrillas. In effect, they were in garrison, camped on mountaintops and in valleys in more than a hundred different areas of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua. The Pathet Lao and Vietminh, who still held the Plaine des Jarres, Ban Ban, and Sam Neua city, had been driven underground in the rest of the northeast, an event that reversed the roles of the fighting sides. Vang Pao's was now the occupying army, and the Communists were the guerrillas. As such, they raided, ambushed, and harassed the Royal Government continuously, but most of the countryside remained relatively calm. It was a time for assessment and consolidation.

Since the fighting had begun in earnest late in 1960, some 40,000 people, almost 10 percent of the population of northeast Laos, had been killed or had died of injuries or illnesses related to the war. Few of the remainder had escaped untouched. In any other area of the world, a similar situation would be incredible, but virtually every resident of northeast Laos was at some time a war refugee, either driven from his native village by the action of the two sides, or brought to near starvation by the total disruption of the primitive rural economy of the region. By the end of 1965, Edgar Buell, as the field representative of the people of the United States and their

Agency for International Development, was responsible for the partial or total support of almost 500,000 people.

(The cost of refugee commodities for all of Laos was about \$4.5 million a year. Most of it went to Edgar's area, which was hardest hit by the war. In addition, air transportation costs were \$8.8 million, public health was about \$1.5 million, and education, now supported by the U.S. AID mission, ran \$1.25 million. The latter two expenses were distributed fairly evenly over the kingdom, but air costs, like refugee relief, were expended mostly in support of operations in the northeast.)

Many of the 125,000 Meo Edgar had cared for when the emergency relief program began were now self-sufficient, tilling new mountain-side farms beneath friendly peaks all over the area. Ninety percent of his refugees now were lowland Lao, hill Lao, and Lao Thung, and they had come to admire Pop, even to revere him, at least as much as the Meo did. With his mostly benign but sometimes irascible manner, he pushed them constantly toward self-sufficiency, away from the American dole, and he continued his constant and extremely patient campaign of demonstrative education in better farming. Steel-tipped plows and row-planting were now commonplace, but animal husbandry was as primitive as it had been with neolithic man, and there remained many deleterious taboos among the people. Sometimes it was hard to distinguish taboo from simple, natural bad habits.

The black razorback pig that is native to Laos, for example, was considered imbued with good spirits by both Lao and Meo. Despite its runtiness and the paucity of stringy meat and fat on its bony frame, it was for centuries the only pork that the people raised and consumed. Of the few agriculturists who had noted this fact in years past, most assumed that the taste preference involved an animist taboo. While lamenting the fact that the native pigs were a scant source of protein, no one had bothered trying to change or improve the breed. Edgar, who had now lived as a native for almost five years, naturally developed a more intimate understanding of the razorbacks than anyone before or since. They were constantly underfoot, rooting under his bed at night, and even at times snuggling in with him, a presence that he did not disdain, because the pigs tended to discourage the rats, which also nosed around his bed at night. He knew there was no

mystery about them. The reason the scrawny pigs were prized among the valley and mountain people was the same as the reason the people drank only *lau lau* for their pleasure. There wasn't anything else.

With the help of Tom Ward, who phrased his proposals in more persuasive English than Edgar could manage, he tried to interest the Rural Development branch of U.S. AID in introducing bigger and better breeds of pig among the people of the northeast. The official response was laconic. Then Edgar read in a news magazine about the extraordinary success of an American-sponsored pig-breeding program among the peasants of Vietnam. He wrote to a friend in Saigon and arranged to have four hefty Yorkshire pigs shipped to Vientiane by commercial airliner. He and Tom Ward chipped in to pay for the porkers and the air freight. The imported sows copulated with the aggressive native razorbacks, and the resulting rotund, white-and-black piglets delighted the Meo who received them. If there ever had been a taboo, it vanished overnight. Still unable to interest a skeptical AID mission in joining his pig program, Edgar went to Udon, a city in northern Thailand where a successful breeding experiment had created thousands of huge pigs that were half Yorkshire and half native Thai. With Tom Ward's help, he bought sixty of them and gave fifteen each to two Meo and two Lao villages. Again the breed leaped from bone to fat in one generation. U.S. AID then hastily appointed a supervisor, established criteria, produced volumes of policy memoranda and imported another four hundred pigs from the Thai experimental farm. Today there are more of the healthy mixed-breed pigs in Laos than there were razorbacks before the war started, and none of the natives object to the fact that the animals are fat and black-and-white in color.

The scarcity of protein foods in the northeast was the cause of a great deal of malnutrition and disease among the refugees, and the pigs, while growing in numbers, were not alone sufficient to overcome it. A more readily harvested food source to many of the people should have been fish, but the numerous streams, rivers, and ponds of the mountainous country had never been heavily endowed with aquatic life, and the pickings were slim. Fish was a rare treat among the mountain people. Because he had lived with them for so long and

shared their gustatory delight on the rare occasions when a fish was caught, Edgar knew that any program that increased the fish population of the mountains would be welcomed and would have an almost instantaneous good effect on the health of the people. But, again, AID officials responsible for funding such programs were doubtful. So once again, Edgar flew to Thailand, where experimental programs in marine biology were well established. With one hundred dollars of his own money he bought 2,000 *talapi*, a small fish that grows from one inch to almost half a foot in a few months.

Blaine Jensen, who had also begun to supervise the school program, which now encompassed an annual student population of 22,000, took over the fish hatcheries operation at Sam Thong and Long Tieng, and soon Edgar's hundred-dollar investment burgeoned. But seemingly unaccountably, the fish were not growing as rapidly or as fat as they had at the hatchery in Thailand. Edgar inquired of an American fish specialist in Bangkok. The specialist told him to shovel manure into the fishponds. The Meo were appalled. Unhygienic as many of their traditional habits were, it seemed both unpleasant and illogical to them to pour offal into the fresh, clear ponds in which they were attempting to breed fish for the table. They refused to do it. One of their most respected leaders was a man named Naoh Ying, the *taesing* of Long Tieng. For several years he also had been the most open-minded of the Meo with whom Edgar dealt when it came time for trying new methods in agriculture or for introducing new food crops. After days of patient palaver, Edgar talked Naoh Ying into shoveling manure into his fishpond. Three months later the fish of Long Tieng were twice the size of any other *talapi* in Laos; they tasted better, and they were breeding faster. Other Meo villages quickly adopted the once repugnant practice. Within three years the Lao and Meo people of the northeast were actively harvesting all the fish they needed from 6,000 teeming ponds. Today, when there is no chicken, no pork, and no caribou, even the poorest table offers the succulent fish of the naturally enriched ponds.

As the extraordinary relief program expanded, concerned AID officials in Vientiane pleaded with Edgar to reduce his own work

load and to begin training other Americans to relieve him in case more bad health or exhaustion again put him out of action. One of the young men they assigned to work with him was a good-natured six-foot blond from Seattle named Don Sjustrom, whose Scandinavian affability covered a missionary zeal that was at least as deep as Edgar's own. Sjustrom was a sturdy, athletic University of Washington graduate of twenty-five who was as tireless as Pop was in hiking and flying from mountain to mountain in the northeast to supervise the distribution of refugee commodities, to administer medicines, and to teach the people all that he could of such essential skills as simple carpentry. He worked just as industriously learning from the people, and within a very short time he spoke the Meo language better than any Americans before him, including Edgar. More and more, Buell began to rely upon Sjustrom. Sometimes, when he was very tired, he thought of turning over his job and the entire refugee program in the north country to the bright, energetic Norwegian-American from Seattle. Sjustrom seemed to Edgar to be as determined as he was. He took his job seriously, almost as if it would be his lifetime work, not simply an interesting two-year interlude of adventure in an otherwise routine existence. After a time, Pop decided that when he did leave the mountains, Don Sjustrom would be his successor.

Sometimes jokingly he would tell the tousle-haired blond to prepare to take over. Then he would sing, with false tremolo, an old Cavalry song: "Some of these days, and it won't be long, they'll play reveille, and I'll be gone."

"Cut it out, Pop," Sjustrom told him. "You'll outlast all of us. You'll be up here forever."

One day Sjustrom called Pop on the radio from Na Khang.

"Colonel Thong says he wants you to come up here as soon as you can, Pop," he said. "He says it concerns your wooden Buddha."

Edgar flew to Na Khang, where Colonel Thong was waiting. In his right hand he held the gold-framed Buddha with its heavy gold chain. He passed it back and forth between his hands, like a rosary, then handed it to Buell.

"I told you that you would get this Buddha back, Tan Pop," he said. "Along with it I must give you a difficult decision." Thong

explained that one of his young lieutenants had spotted an adolescent Lao girl wearing the chained Buddha around her neck. He recognized it as Pop's Buddha. Hoping the girl would give it up easily, the officer tried to buy it. She refused to sell. It was a gift, she said, from her lover. The lieutenant reported his discovery to Thong, who sent four soldiers to spy on the girl's house. That evening her lover, a 19-year-old Lao soldier from one of Thong's own units at Na Khang, visited her. The soldiers arrested him and took him to Colonel Thong. They also brought in the girl. Thong confiscated the Buddha, ordered the girl detained, and had the young soldier incarcerated in the only jail cell at Na Khang, a deep wet hole in the ground covered over by a lattice of bamboo. Except for the secure Western-style jails in the civilized towns and cities of Laos, the only form of incarceration known in the country, among either the Lao or the hill people, is the hole. It is a wretched way to serve time for a crime, and few prisoners can stand being thus exposed to the elements in dank solitary confinement, slowly burying themselves in their own excrement. Among the Meo, a sentence of more than a few months in the hole usually is accompanied by the merciful alternative of death by execution. As a rule, miscreants prefer to die before the traditional Meo firing squad of three musketeers.

"He is in the hole now," said Colonel Thong, "but my officers already have decided that he must die for his theft. I have stayed the execution because it was your Buddha, and I think it is for you to decide how and when the man dies."

"Colonel Thong, there's no use killing that boy over this," said Edgar with a pained expression on his face. "He's bound to be so scared by now he'll never steal another thing as long as he lives. Don't you think it'd be enough punishment if you'd just bring him and his girl in to face me? They're only kids."

"If that is what you wish, Tan Pop. But you'd better tell my people here what you intend to do, because they are very angry. They want to kill him."

"Does the boy know that?"

"Yes, he has been told that he is to die."

"Well, it won't hurt him to worry about that overnight. I'll tell

your people what I want to do, and I'll talk to the boy and the girl in the morning."

The next morning the young soldier and his girl friend, their hands bound, were led into the hut in which Pop was staying. They fell to their knees with their heads bowed, and the sight of their remorse pained him so that he hardly had the heart to go on. But with Thong and his officers watching, Edgar forced an appearance of mock anger and lectured the two as if their lives still hung in the balance. Then he ordered their bindings removed and told them to go. They were free. For a moment the boy tottered as if he was going to faint, a reasonable reaction to a reprieve from certain execution. The girl burst into tears. And they left.

Several months later, Hong Non, the base on the high ground overlooking Sam Neua city, came under heavy attack. Uncle Joe was there, helping to hold off the attackers, who were beginning a fresh campaign to roll Vang Pao's forces back. Before the defenders fled, Joe was shot clean through the abdomen by a single round from a Russian AK-47 automatic rifle in the hands of a North Vietnamese soldier. Three of Colonel Thong's young Lao soldiers carried the C.I.A. agent, near death, down the mountain and did what they could to stanch the bleeding of his wound while a rescue helicopter, bearing Jiggs Weldon, criss-crossed the jungle at treetop height searching for him. Weldon spotted the wounded agent, and the chopper settled lightly in a partial clearing, exposed to enemy fire. Joe was lifted aboard. The chopper pilot, fearful that he would be hit by enemy fire, revved his engine to lift away. The semi-conscious C.I.A. agent rose on one elbow and screamed "Wait!" He refused to leave until the three Lao soldiers who had saved his life jumped into the helicopter. Then the chopper roared away to safety.

Weldon flew Uncle Joe to a U.S. Air Force hospital at Udon, Thailand, where surgeons saved his life. He returned to Laos two months later, and when he saw them he thanked the three young Lao soldiers. "Thank God you were there," he said. One of the soldiers was the young man who took Pop's wooden Buddha.

Chapter 19

Sometimes I and Tan Pop and the other fellows have been got a shot and bad hit right to the center of our plane, or sometimes the bullets did hit our plane behind our seat, in front and back, by the group of enemies; but we said that the enemies did play a big trick, and we always said *Bopinyan* (no matter, never mind), because everything in this world is a possible, there will be nothing to be the act permanent, excepted our goodness, kindness, gratefulness and sincerity at this present only.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupha

ONE day late in 1966 Edgar was visiting Na Khang when an urgent message came to the Air Force rescue helicopters there that an American pilot had been shot down close by Highway 6 between Hanoi and the Sam Neua border. Pat Weldon had just arrived, hoping to spend a quiet day checking medical supplies and talking over health problems with the Lao and Meo medics who were stationed at the base. Although the sky was clear, the densely packed red clay of the mountain was almost oily-wet underfoot, because the rainy season was late in ending and a succession of light fall showers had soaked the earth.

Edgar was scraping the mud from his sneakers when he noticed the flurry of activity on the long laterite airstrip. He saw Pat Weldon trot from her medical warehouse nearby toward a helicopter that had just begun to turn over its rotors. Colonel Thong and a young helicopter crew chief were standing beside the open door of the ship, and

Buell could not restrain his curiosity when the tanned lady doctor, dressed in black slacks and carrying a strap-hung medical kit over her shoulder, joined them. He walked to the airstrip.

"I saw them getting ready to leave and thought they might need a doctor," she explained when Edgar arrived at the helicopter. "There's an Air Force pilot down near Highway 6, just inside North Vietnam. Apparently he's not hurt. Yet. One of his buddies is *flying cover* over him and reports that there are *beaucoup* enemy troops around the road looking for him."

"You goin' with 'em?" Edgar asked.

"No. I guess it doesn't make any sense to go, if he isn't hurt. Besides, Colonel Thong won't let me."

"If something bad happens to us inside North Vietnam, I don't think it would look very good to have a civilian American lady aboard when the Vietminh search the wreckage, do you, Tan Pop?" asked Thong.

"Not on your life, Colonel. Anyways, you ain't gonna get shot down. Bring that boy back here, and Pat can take a look at him."

Thong crawled up into the co-pilot's seat of the H-19 helicopter and slipped on a crash helmet. The crew chief made a thumbs-up signal to the pilot and hopped into the big cargo compartment as Pat and Edgar hurried away from the stinging wind of the spinning rotors. The helicopter lifted away with a thumping roar.

"I think ol' Thong gets a bigger kick outa rescuing Americans than anything else he does up here," said Edgar. "He must of pulled out a hundred of 'em. He always says he wants to go back to the States when this is over. I guess he figures if he saves the lives of enough Americans, he'll have plenty of friends around the country when he gets there."

Pat Weldon laughed. "I think he just plain likes Americans, Pop," she said. "It's a good thing he does. Without Thong guiding them, I don't think these rescue pilots could even find most of those boys, much less pick them up."

As they talked, a second rescue helicopter took off and joined Thong's ship, flying slightly behind it and to the left.

"I'm glad they're sending two of 'em," said Edgar. "If the boy is

close to the highway and there's lots of enemy around, they might need the second chopper to rescue the crew of the first one."

The lead helicopter pilot followed Thong's directions through mountain passes that skipped north of Highway 6 and skirted Sam Neua city, then he ducked south toward the highway a few miles after its junction with another road just inside North Vietnam. They saw a day-glo yellow cloth spread on the ground in a small clearing at the hilly edge of the valley, which was split by the wide dirt road. There was a man crouched beside a boulder near the panel, and he waved as the helicopter spun high above the clearing.

"Let's go down," said Thong on the helicopter intercom. "There are Vietminh working through the trees from the highway. If we're quick, we can get down and get him out before they get a good shot at us."

He unstrapped his safety belt and crawled out of the cockpit, dropping lightly into the cargo compartment below to take his place beside the crew chief at the open doorway. When they touched the ground, he would leap out if necessary to help the downed pilot aboard.

The first fusilade of AK fire punched holes in the aluminum sides of the helicopter when it reached two hundred feet. For an agonizing five seconds, the pilot hesitated, gunning his engine and pulling sharply up on his pitch control. It was the worst possible moment to hover, because the chopper already was within range of the enemy guns. Another pelting fusilade struck the ship. The pilot poured on power and lifted rapidly up and away from the fire. In the cargo compartment, Colonel Thong bounced abruptly away from the door as if struck by a sledgehammer and slumped into a canvas sling-seat that hung from the opposite side of the ship. One AK bullet had drilled into his abdomen, expanding its track as it spun through the soft viscera and muscle, until it exited with a fist-sized explosion of flesh on the left side of his spine.

He remained slumped in the blood-soaked seat. It looked bad. The pilot radioed Na Khang requesting that Pat Weldon stand by to evacuate Colonel Thong to a hospital as soon as he landed.

"They'll be back here in thirty minutes, Pop," Pat cried to Edgar. "My Porter is ready to fly right now. You'd better come with us. It's a

gut wound, and it sounds like a bad one. We'll take him to Udon."

Udon was an advanced U.S. Air Force base in Thailand, not far south of Vientiane, from which bombing missions against North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail were run. It included a large field hospital equipped to handle emergencies when pilots returned to the base wounded by enemy antiaircraft fire. For more demanding medical problems, the Air Force also maintained a better-equipped hospital at a place called Korat, east of Bangkok. It was Pop's idea to fly Colonel Thong on to Korat in a fast Air Force medical evacuation plane when they reached Udon. By radio, he arranged to have a jet-assisted C-123 standing by for their arrival.

Thong was still conscious when they pulled him from the helicopter and put him on a stretcher in the back of the idling Porter. He had seen enough gut wounds to know that unnecessary movement of the diaphragm only made things worse, so he said nothing as Pat and Edgar wrapped blankets around his body and began feeding glucose into the vein of his right arm. Except for the occasional quiet reassurances of Pat Weldon, no one talked during the hour's flight to Udon. Edgar was still holding the glucose bottle aloft when the Porter landed and taxied up beside the waiting C-123, whose engines already were turning over.

The pilot of the C-123, a young American Air Force captain, ran to the doorway of the Porter and looked in.

"He the patient?" he asked, pointing at Thong's silent figure on the stretcher.

"Yeah, let's go," cried Pop.

"What's the emergency?" the pilot drawled, turning from the doorway. "We got your message to stand by and thought it was an American who needed help. What's he? A Laotian soldier or something?"

"Buddy," Edgar growled, "you have just saw one of the greatest Americans you will ever lay eyes on in your life. If it wasn't for that man right there, you'd have so many dead American pilots around here you wouldn't have no Air Force."

"Sorry, mister," the captain gulped. "Okay, you guys. Let's go. Balls

to the wall." The C-123 was loaded and off the ground within two minutes.

At Korat, four Air Force surgeons, assisted by Pat Weldon, worked over Thong's wound until ten o'clock that night. It looked as if he would be all right. The next morning Edgar and Pat returned to Laos, assured that their friend would recover. It gave them some reassurance to know his wound was almost identical with the one from which Uncle Joe had recovered the year before. Colonel Thong died in his hospital bed that night. "It was just one of those things," explained one of the surgeons who had worked over him. "He seemed to be doing okay, and then, all of a sudden, bang, his body functions dropped off and he died, just like that."

It is unlikely that the Communist soldier who shot Thong ever knew what he had accomplished, but then few military heroes do. As a matter of fact, it is quite likely that he and his comrades were upbraided rather than praised for their action near Highway 6 that day, because the fighter bomber that flew cover overhead managed to pin them down long enough for the second helicopter to descend and save the unhurt American pilot. But the fatal shooting of Colonel Thong marked the beginning of the end of Meo and Lao success in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang provinces, and that should have been worth something to Hanoi. The unknown soldier deserved a decoration for his service to the Communist side.

Chapter 20

Well, now all the people that are in the same family of that dead person have to make a suffering and crying . . . Then they take a dead body of that person away from their home . . . When they already buried that dead body all relations of that dead person have to put the flower, candle, rice-bowl, spoon, cross-bow, broken Meo rifle and other equipments on the top of that grave and they all go away. That is all.

—THE STORY OF THE MEO PEOPLE
by Thongsar Boupba

CHUNG had spent so much of his young life in peril that fear had become like an old knife honed past the keenness of its tempered edge, so that each new sharpening dulled the cutting blade. At first, the extreme dangers of his mission in enemy territory had whetted the edge of his perceptions and stimulated an exhilarating acuity that was its own instinctive defense against death or capture. There was no greater elation than the flood of sharp memories and the triumphant joy that drowned fear when the danger was past. But now the ebb and flow of imminent catastrophe, washing through him almost daily for more than five years, was not the fiery distillate of old. It had lost its power to stimulate and had become a depressant. He recognized this and tried to compensate for it by forcing himself, incautiously, to face hazards better left alone.

For more than a month, now, he had been at San Tiau, an uncertain outpost that looked down from a 5,000-foot peak along the broad Nam Lin Soung River valley into the city of Xieng Khouang. It was an

extremely dangerous place to stay, because it was only a few miles from the Plaine, exposed to the continuous threat of attack by enemy patrols. More dangerous to him than enemy patrols, however, were the nervous people of San Tiau, and Chung knew it. Even before the great evacuation of 1960, when Chung passed through under cover as a boyish hunter and talked to them about joining Vang Pao's resistance movement, most of the villagers had been wary of becoming involved in war and wanted only to be left alone. When thousands of their fellow Meo moved to the original seven refugee encampments, the people of San Tiau stayed behind in their own village and tried, as best they could, to ignore the fighting that went on around them. True, they accepted refugee relief assistance from Edgar Buell when it was offered, because much of their hillside farmland had been taken and they were hungry. They even permitted Air America to maintain a 750-foot grass airstrip on the mountain. But they tried to maintain good relations with the enemy, too. San Tiau wanted no trouble from either side. Many of the villagers thought Chung was trouble. More than a year ago he had recruited four of the young men of the village to work with him, slipping into Xieng Khouang and even ranging as far as Phong Savan and Khang Khay to spy on the enemy. Occasionally they would drop down into the valley to plant booby traps where enemy units had to pass or to ambush small Communist units as they worked their way eastward along the bamboo-lined riverbanks. But ever since January of 1966, when the United States suspended the bombing of North Vietnam for thirty-seven days, the work of the four agents at San Tiau had become spotty, as if they no longer had the courage or determination to do their job. The reason was clear. During the bombing pause, North Vietnamese soldiers had returned in force to Laos. After Colonel Thong died, the enemy comeback seemed to accelerate. Now, after more than three years of defeat and retreat in the face of Vang Pao's Meo guerrillas, the Communist forces had grabbed the initiative in many parts of Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang provinces and were beginning to retake the areas they had lost. Some pushed westward from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, others eastward from the Plaine. San Tiau was one of the first outposts to become isolated by this new wave of enemy activity. Unlike

most of the Meo who had anxiously packed their belongings and fled to new mountains when the enemy came, the villagers of San Tiau were determined to remain where they were, regardless of who controlled the valley below. They hoped that they would be left alone if they did nothing to provoke either side. Chung tried to dissuade them from their attempted neutrality, but the leaders of the village would not listen.

"You should not be here," said the *taesing*. "Your agents in this village must stop their rash actions. If the Vietminh and Pathet Lao find you here the village will suffer. You are a danger to us."

Chung saw the logic of the *taesing*'s warning, but despite the danger that the villagers might betray him, he felt he had to stay. His agents had performed poorly for months, now, and he had come to direct their operations personally. If he left now, they would slack off again, and the flow of necessary intelligence information from this side of the Plaine would cease. He knew that the hostility of the villagers should frighten him, but he felt no fear. It was his job to remain. Another week or two in San Tiau might stiffen the resolve of some of the villagers who were disappointed in the attempted neutrality of their leaders. It also should help further to bolster the sagging spirits of his agents, who had slacked off in their work because of their own fear of retaliation by the frightened village leaders. The best of the agents, Heah Long, had been especially troublesome. Heah Long was a natural leader, but his loyalty was to money first, then his own village, and last to Chung and General Vang Pao. When the villagers became upset because of his and his companions' mercenary exploits, he reacted by almost completely halting their activity. This pleased San Tiau. He tried to deceive Chung with false activity reports because he and the other three wanted to continue receiving the money that Chung paid them each month for their work. But when the young intelligence officer arrived on the scene, Heah Long and his colleagues faced a dilemma. Either they must quit and thereby lose their small incomes, or they had to go along with Chung, conducting new ambush and espionage missions into the valley and the Plaine, and thereby further antagonizing most of their fellow villagers. Heah Long hoped that Chung would stay only a week or

two, after which he and his comrades could resume their deceit. Chung sensed Heah Long's intentions and stayed on. But he felt none of the exhilaration and joy that fear and single-handed adventure had once provided. In fact, his sense of duty was becoming a nettlesome thing in itself.

The problem at San Tiau, as well as similar nagging troubles with some of his agents farther north, had been all that stood between Chung and the realization of a longtime dream, and while his sense of duty prevailed, it rankled deeply. Before coming to San Tiau he had paused for a few days at Sam Thong, where Mi Si had set up their still barren household about half a mile from the new quonset hut headquarters of Edgar's refugee relief program. Buell then had made an exquisite offer to the young couple.

Mi Si was working for Tan Pop now as a Lao language secretary, a function that had become necessary when the growth of the refugee program and its coordination with activities of the Royal Army and the provincial civil government of Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang had inspired a natural demand for frequent written reports to the Royal Government. The U.S. Government also had increased its demands for inventory and activity reports, and other paperwork that was a necessary adjunct to such a vast undertaking as the multimillion-dollar agricultural, educational, medical, and relief program that operated under Edgar's direction.

But paperwork was Edgar's bane, and he would do almost anything, even hide out in remote villages where the American mission in Vientiane could not communicate with him, to escape it. His superiors in AID ungrudgingly recognized Buell's repulsion from the normal demands of Government work. One of them, a diplomat who wrote Pop's annual efficiency report, noted:

"As a driving force, organizer, relief specialist, rehabilitator of broken lives, spine stiffener and charismatic leader, Mr. Buell stands alone in U.S. AID, Laos, if not in AID world wide. He controls his rice drops and refugee airlifts with a sure hand; his judgment is excellent; his grasp of the microeconomics of refugee resettlement and rehabilitation is of a high order. His handling of the somewhat unusual repre-

sentational responsibilities of his position in the shadow of the battle line is equally good. Second only to General Vang Pao, another living legend, Tan Pop's word is holy writ in the Meo country. His work in bringing about a lessening in the gap which separates the Lao from the Meo and Lao Thung, and the Meo and Lao Thung from each other, has produced results which appeared impossible a short year ago.... In Sam Thong he is outstanding; he might be equally effective with the mountain men in Vietnam. A normal program with its attendant paper work would bore him."

But the paperwork had to be done, and there was a limit to how much of it could be handled by Don Sjustrom and Blaine Jensen, both of whom had willingly shouldered much of Edgar's burden. Since Sam Thong was a relatively secure place, the mission assigned an American girl to join Edgar's headquarters as the staff secretary. Her name was Carol Mills, and the paper log jam at the refugee headquarters cleared within days after she went to work there. Among other tasks she operated the two-way radio that connected Sam Thong with many of the more important refugee areas and military bases in Laos, as well as supervised the work of Mi Si and a handful of Meo and Lao employees in the headquarters warehouse. She also did much to elevate the vernacular of her male colleagues at Sam Thong. Miss Mills was an attractive, well-rounded blonde, but she was a thoroughgoing lady who was neither thrilled nor upset by the fact that she worked and lived in an all-male environment. Buell, Sjustrom, Jensen, and the few other Americans who joined the small work force at Sam Thong reacted to the young West Virginia secretary like a family of Eagle Scouts in the presence of their sister. Noting their respect, the Meo and Lao at Sam Thong, not normally disposed to pay deference to a woman, put her in a special category, too. The occasional itinerant visitor who made an unwelcome pass at Miss Mills usually desisted after one discouragingly glowering look from members of the refugee staff around her.

Sam Thong had changed in other ways, too, and the small but comfortable wood-frame house that was constructed for Carol Mills was only one of several modern structures that made it the second most sophisticated town in the mountains of the northeast. A new three-

winged frame hospital now stood in the place of Chanh's old bamboo infirmary at the south end of the 2,200-foot airstrip. It was equipped with modern X-ray machinery and new surgical equipment that included a spotless operating room with strong overhead light powered by two generators that also brought electricity to Carol's house and to the warehouse in which Edgar and his colleagues worked and lived. Albert Fouré, Edgar's old French friend from Lhat Houang, maintained them and all other mechanical equipment at Sam Thong. There were three other Western-style houses: one for Dr. Khamoon, one of three French-trained native physicians in Laos, whom Jiggs Weldon had recruited to run the hospital; and one for Diana Dick, an American nurse who had been sent to Sam Thong by I.V.S. to direct the nursing school, which now had more than a hundred graduates, and to supervise patient care in the hospital; and one for an American Army major, ostensibly an assistant military attaché to the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, who acted as adviser to the subordinate Royal Army staff headquarters that Vang Pao had established there. Still, it was not a big town, even by Lao standards. Only 4,500 people, comprising two Meo, one Lao, and one Lao Thung village, lived there. Most of them worked for Pop, for Air America, which maintained a small repair facility at the mountain base, or for the Lao army; the others were the dependents of Lao and Meo soldiers in the area. But with its large market place, offering goods ranging from toiletries to small radios that were flown in from Vientiane by a commercial plane under Lao Government subsidy, Sam Thong had become the busy hub of all non-Communist civil activity in the northeast. The governor of Xieng Khouang Province, an honest, hard-working aristocrat named Chao (Prince) Saykham, had moved his capital there, and even King Savang Vatthana and Prince Souvanna Phouma had established a schedule of once-yearly visits to confer with Tan Pop. The town that grew up around Edgar's first bamboo headquarters hut in the bowl-shaped mountain valley of Sam Thong had become an important place.

Far more important and certainly more imposing, however, was Long Tieng, the secret city nineteen miles away, where the C.I.A. was

gradually building its second largest field headquarters in the world (the Agency's urban mission in Saigon was considerably bigger).

Long Tieng was founded by Pop as his first mountain refugee headquarters, but it had long since been taken over by General Vang Pao for his own headquarters, and Edgar had moved on to Sam Thong to preserve at least an appearance of separation between military and civil activities in the area. In time the once beautiful mountain bowl that Pop had discovered virtually uninhabited in 1961 grew to become the second largest city in Laos, after Vientiane. But aside from Edgar and a few other Americans who were obviously needed, no outsider was permitted to visit Long Tieng without special permission, sparingly granted, from the U.S. Ambassador in Vientiane. No American journalists were allowed there. One saw Long Tieng only from the air, where the unplanned urban sprawl under thousands of aluminum roofs gave it the appearance of a tin-roofed Los Angeles suburb. It was clear, however, what took place there besides Vang Pao's necessary command and staff work, and why the Americans felt secrecy was so essential. It was the most forward advanced command post in Laos of the United States Air Force, which directed secret bombing missions first into North Vietnam and then all over Laos itself from buildings beside a mile-long, all-weather macadam runway, the only field in northeast Laos capable of handling jet aircraft in trouble.

No one knows how many C.I.A. men were stationed there—estimates ran from ten to three hundred—but it is likely that the number was relatively small because it did not require vast numbers of men simply to advise Vang Pao and his staff and to keep military supplies flowing in to him. Far more numerous were the "assistant military attachés," ostensibly representatives of the embassy in Vientiane, who fanned out from Long Tieng to work directly as tactical advisers to Royal Lao Army units in the field. There were at least eighty of them in the field at all times, often engaged in active combat with the troops they were advising.

Sam Thong, however, remained fairly well insulated from the more bellicose activities of its larger sister city, and Pop liked it that way. Except for the few Western-style houses and the hospital, it appeared to be just what it was, a crude but effective field headquarters for

refugee relief. Edgar usually could be found near the terminus of its 2,200-foot dirt airstrip, bustling around the hospital, working in his quonset hut warehouse, where he also lived, or sitting on the hood of a battered gray Willys jeep, conferring with native supplicants. On the day that Chung arrived for his brief respite at Sam Thong before taking on his distasteful assignment at San Tiau, Edgar was sitting on the jeep. When Chung alighted from the small plane that brought him, Edgar hailed his old friend.

"C'mere, Chung, and throw your gear in the back of the jeep. I'll drive you down to your place. There's something I want to talk to you and Mi Si about."

At Chung's small clay-floored hut Mi Si greeted her long-absent husband exuberantly, although custom called for a more sedate public display of emotions. But Edgar was one of the family. She smiled warmly at him, as if he, personally, was responsible for bringing Chung home safely. Then she showed the two men to low wicker stools facing the open fire in the center hearth and scurried away to get water for red-bark tea.

"You come on back here, Mi Si," Edgar called. "We don't need no tea right now. I've got something I want to say to both of you." He paused while Mi Si drew up a stool.

"Couple of years ago when I went back to the States to visit, I wanted to take Chung with me," he began. "He couldn't come then, so I took Thongsar. I'm glad I did. Thongsar has showed all them pictures he took to half of the people of Laos since we got back. Them pictures of his has done more to show the real America to these people here than the U.S. Information Agency has been able to do in all the time since I come here. They know now that America ain't just soldiers and bombin' planes and old farmers like me. It's a great big country with every kind of landscape you can think of and every kind of people you can name. Most of 'em's good people."

Chung, smiling, held up a hand. He sensed a long lecture coming on, and he had, after all, just returned home from a month's absence. "Tan Pop, we know. Mi Si and I read everything we can find about America. We have seen Thongsar's pictures and asked him many questions about his travels with you. Our dream is to go there and

to see for ourselves. When my work is finished, I will find a way to get to America, to take Mi Si with me. I will go to school. You don't need to tell us how wonderful your country is, Tan Pop. We know."

"Well, I reckon you don't want an old man hangin' around just now," Buell laughed, "so I'll cut this short. I just thought it was important enough to tell you now, so's you can start thinkin' about it and makin' plans. You only got a couple days to get ready. I'm goin' to America. It's time I got some rest. I'd like to take botha you with me."

Chung sagged as if about to slip unconsciously into the fire, and Mi Si gasped. She looked expectantly at her husband as he straightened. His expression was despairing.

"Wait, now!" said Edgar. "I don't want the answer right away. We got a few days to think about this. And I know what you're fixin' to say, Chung. You think you got too much work to do. Well, there ain't gonna come a time in your life when work won't interfere with what you want to do. But sometimes you just gotta go ahead and do it. I already talked to General Vang Pao. To be honest, he ain't gonna be happy if you leave right now, but he said he won't stand in your way. He'll git along. Teu Lu can take care of everything until you get back. It'll only be three months or so. Just quit worryin' about your work."

"But, Tan Pop..."

"Just don't rush it, Chung. Think about it. And you and Mi Si talk it over. You can decide what to do in a day or two."

Buell hurled himself behind the wheel of his jeep and bounced back along the road to his warehouse home, where Albert Fouré waited.

"You 'ave tell 'im your plan, *mon ami*?"

"No, Four, I ain't told 'im, and I ain't gonna. I asked him and Mi Si to go with me for a few months, but I didn't tell 'em I might not come back with 'em when the trip's over. There ain't no need to get people riled up about it, is there? I'm kinda sorry I even told you."

"If silence is what you weesh, Pop, I talk to no one."

"I think that's best, Four. I really ain't made up my mind yet, and if we hadn't of been drinking wine the other night, I wouldn't of even

told you what I was thinkin'. But it's good to be able to talk to somebody, anyway. I think I've done just about all I can do in this country. Things ain't goin' so good right now. Vang Pao's losin' a lotta ground, and the Royal Army ain't helpin' him none. But when the rainy season starts, he'll take it all back. My work with the refugees will go on pretty much like it's doin' right now. Don Sjustrom can handle it, probably better than I can. He's the first man ever come up here who I felt that way about. Long as he's here, things'll go along good, like they been goin'. It's time he took over on his own. But, like I say, I just ain't made up my mind. Right now, I'm inclined to want to stay home this time and get to know my grandchildren. Howard's got two kids, and so has Harriet. It's time they learned to git along with their grandfather. I'm fifty-four years old, and I'm gettin' tired."

"As you weesh, Pop. I think you find farming dull, no? I think you be back, yes?"

"Don't bet on it, Four. Jus' don't bet on it."

Fouré shrugged his shoulders in mock Gallic resignation. "I take the jeep now. I fix so it run good when you come back. It will be ze best jeep in Laos." He laughed.

Pop's jeep was the first of hundreds of motor vehicles that appeared in the mountains after Long Tieng grew to city size. The Americans who brought their own jeeps had turned over dozens of Army trucks and smaller vehicles to Vang Pao. The Lao army, when it came under the Meo general's command, brought dozens more into the hills. And, local free enterprise being what it is, two privately owned Land Rover taxicabs appeared and began regularly scheduled service between Sam Thong and Long Tieng not long after a connecting road called Freedom Highway was constructed. Pop's gray Willys jeep was one of the few truly private vehicles in that part of Laos. It was the gift of an American movie star named Audrey Meadows, more formally known as Mrs. Robert F. Six. Her husband, the president of Continental Air Lines, also directed Continental Air Services, the successor to Dutch Brongersma's old jackleg charter line at Wattay airport. Dutch stayed on for a few more years, then left after stretching his life odds to the thinness of a hair, to become

an international stockbroker in Hong Kong. The Sixes were adventurous people who took a greater interest in Pop's extraordinary work than they did in their unprofitable charter airline. Whenever they visited Laos, usually twice a year, they flew first to Sam Thong to look in on Edgar, who used Continental charter planes extensively in his refugee work. Like many show people, Mrs. Six was a forthright, no-nonsense sort of woman, despite her soft, wholly feminine appearance. When she saw that Edgar and his crew had to walk miles in their daily work at Sam Thong, she bought the jeep and sent it to him in a Continental plane, with her compliments. For months it served as a refugee truck, hauling tons of relief commodities to distribution and storage points around Sam Thong. Noting its value, AID belatedly assigned a small fleet of trucks and jeeps to Edgar's headquarters.

When Edgar joined Chung and Mi Si for dinner two nights later, he knew, without asking, their answer to his invitation. Chung's canvas-encased radio was propped against a bamboo upright pole near the doorway. Beside it was his rucksack, packed for a morning departure to San Tiau. Mi Si was unsmiling, and Chung seemed unusually grim.

"You decided you got too much work to do to come along with me, ain't you?" Edgar inquired sadly.

"It is harder for me than anything in my life, Tan Pop, but I must stay. There are too many things that Teu Lu cannot handle. Lives depend on information that only I can get. We cannot go with you. Perhaps the next time..."

Pop suddenly decided to break his resolve to remain silent about his own plans. "There may not be no next time, Chung," he said.

"Oh? But you will go again in three years, Tan Pop, won't you?"

"I wasn't gonna say nothin' about this, Chung, and I don't want you to tell no one, not even General Vang Pao. But I'm thinkin' about stayin' home this time. I'm tired, Chung, and it seems like I ain't really needed here no more. I got all my boys workin' good. They can do nearly anything I can do. And Don Sjustrom is gettin' to be a legend among the Meo people on his own. I think it's time I turned it all over to him."

"You must not leave my people, Tan Pop. We love Tan Don. But you have been with us for many years now. Many of the Meo people believe that as long as you remain, we will have victory against the Communists. To the Meo, our freedom depends upon your presence. You think it is superstition, but remember, we are superstitious people, and what you believe is myth seems very real to us. If Tan Pop leaves the mountains, the Meo will lose their freedom. Many of the people believe that. You must return."

"I won't say I ain't flattered by that, Chung, because I am. But you know as well as I do that it just ain't true. Whether I'm here or not ain't gonna make a bit of difference. I'm just one old man who's got a whole lot more outa these people than he ever give in return. Now I think it's time for somebody else."

"I will not say goodbye to you, Tan Pop, because I know you will be back," said Chung firmly. "You are like your wooden Buddha. You may disappear for a few months, but you will return."

"I'm serious, Chung. Don't count on me comin' back here, because I'm pretty sure I won't. Just promise me you won't mention this to no one else. I think it's better if I just go away, so people can start forgettin' me slow like."

Later, as Pop prepared to leave, he clasped Chung's hand and said, "Goodbye."

This was what rankled so, during Chung's interminable weeks at San Tiau. Not only had duty forced him to reject perhaps the only chance he would ever have to visit the United States, but he probably had lost the companionship of his best friend, as well. It annoyed him that he had to cope with a man like Heah Long when he could just as easily be traveling with Edgar Buell in the fabled land he dreamed about. And now, after more than a month in the isolated village with its still frightened population, he knew that the results were not worth the personal sacrifice.

From Heah Long's point of view, Chung's sense of duty was rapidly pushing him and his fellow mercenaries into an intolerable situation. They could not continue to do as Chung demanded, running clandestine missions into enemy territory in the valley below, because the

enemy almost certainly had figured out by now where the annoying attacks came from. Soon, Communist troops from the valley would retaliate against the village. He was a villager himself, and he knew how his fellow citizens would react. They would either turn Chung and his four mercenaries over to the Communists, which meant certain death, or they would conduct their own vengeance and kill each of the agents after the enemy left. Either way, Heah Long would lose much more than his source of income. He would die. Since Chung refused to leave the village voluntarily, Heah Long decided to force him, even at the cost of his monthly income.

"Mua Chung," he said, "the people are angry. They do not want us to go on as we have. You must leave. My three men and I would like to go on working for you, but we cannot. Leave our village. As long as you stay, we are all in danger. If you stay after today, I cannot answer for your safety. Call for an airplane to come and get you. Go."

"You are permitting fear to guide your thinking," said Chung calmly.

"Sometimes fear creates wisdom," said Heah Long. "Even if you are not afraid, you must go. We will no longer work for you. You are alone. The people here hate you, because you are making trouble for them. There is nothing left for you to do here. Go." Then he added in a measured voice, "You will die if you do not leave today or tomorrow. I am sure of that."

"If I die, it will not be you who kills me, Heah Long," said Chung scornfully. "You do not have the courage."

"Don't provoke me," said Heah Long. "Go."

Chung remained unafraid, even after Heah Long's ominous warning, but as a pragmatist he saw the futility of remaining much longer at San Tiau. Without Heah Long and his three agents there was little he could do here unless he wanted to stay on forever as a one-man operation. To do this he would have to abandon equally severe problems in other areas, problems which he already had left alone too long while he attempted to cope with the trouble at San Tiau. The enemy had isolated the village and, while it would be an excellent place from which to run both intelligence and guerrilla missions against the Communists, the people were hostile, so its usefulness

as a base was at an end. Logic, not fear, told him to leave. There simply was no longer any point in remaining.

Carol Mills and Jiggs Weldon were sitting in the warehouse office at Sam Thong listening for a call from Don Sjustrom at Na Khang when they heard Chung's voice. He was calling Long Tieng on an open voice frequency, and he spoke in English to the American C.I.A. radio operator there.

"I'm at Site Six, repeat, Site Six. Request transportation early tomorrow morning, repeat, request transportation early tomorrow morning."

"Is it urgent?" queried the operator.

There was a long silence on the receiver at Sam Thong. Then Chung's voice erupted from it again.

"No, not urgent. Send a plane as soon as you can."

Weldon turned to Carol. "Site Six is a goddamned dangerous place for him to stay right now," he said. "I've got the medical plane up here. If he waits for Long Tieng to send an airplane without an urgent priority, he'll have to sit around there all day tomorrow. I'm going to fly over there first thing in the morning and pick him up."

Weldon climbed into a lumbering square-winged Porter jet-prop airplane at dawn the following day and cursed at the ground fog that almost completely obscured the end of the Sam Thong runway. "Can we get off?" he asked the pilot.

"No sweat, Doc. But I'm not sure we can get in to Site Six. Let's go see."

Thirty minutes later they flew over San Tiau, which was buried even above its mountaintop in fog. They tried again at noon, and a third time late in the afternoon. Still the fog clung to San Tiau. That evening Weldon raised Chung on the radio and told him they had tried all day to land at San Tiau. He said they would try again the next morning.

"Don't worry about it," said Chung. "The fog's still pretty thick. I've been here this long, I can wait a few more days."

The next morning an even heavier mist boiled around San Tiau. Chung heard the whining engine of Weldon's Porter high overhead not long after dawn, but he knew that the airplane could not land.

Since there was no wind to blow the mist away, it was doubtful that it would clear at all during the day. Rather than waste time idly waiting for an airplane that could not land, Chung picked up his lightweight Armalite rifle and slipped out of the village, down toward the valley, to scout for enemy movements. Heah Long saw him go.

"The fool," he swore softly. "He will get us all killed."

That evening the mist began to lift. Heah Long saw Chung working his way up the pathway toward the village just as darkness began to fall. He looked at the carbine in his hands and hefted it, at the same time suppressing a small tremor. As Chung approached, Heah Long lifted the gun to his shoulder and aimed. Then he shot Mua Chung squarely between the eyes.

The village *taesing* rushed from his hut when he heard the gunshot and looked with disbelief at Chung's body.

"Send someone down to talk with the enemy," Heah Long said quietly to the *taesing*. "Tell them we have killed Vang Pao's most famous agent. They will examine his body. Then they will leave us alone."

Edgar was walking across the small frozen pond a hundred yards behind Harriet's house near Glenford, Ohio, when his daughter called out to him to come to the telephone. It was New Year's Day, 1967. He had been back in the States only two weeks, and already he had formed a pattern of long, solitary walks, because he could not get Laos out of his mind. He knew that time would dim his sharp memories, but now, so soon after his departure, they would not go away. He wished that Chung and Mi Si had come with him. It would be so much easier for him to become reacclimated to America if he had someone with him. In introducing the country to them, he could reintroduce it to himself. Maybe it will be better if they come later, he thought. After I'm settled, I'll send for them. Maybe next year. He hoped that they would accept his invitation, because it would be the only way they would ever meet again. He had made up his mind to resign from AID and stay home.

He hurried to the house, where Harriet patiently held open the

back door. "I think it's Washington," she said. "Some man in the State Department."

"Hello, this is Pop Buell," he spoke into the phone.

"Mr. Buell, this is the Laos desk at State calling. We've got a message here from Vientiane, which they've asked us to pass along to you. It concerns some native out there who I guess they thought you must have known. Anyway, they wanted you to know he's dead. Name's Mua Chung, or something like that. You can't tell, because it looks garbled in the message. M-U-A C-H-U-N-G is what it says here. He was shot day before yesterday at a place I guess you'd know. They call it Site Six. Hey, how's the weather out there?"

"Mister, if what you say is true, I just lost one of the best friends I ever had," said Edgar softly. "Don't ask me about the weather."

Don Sjustrom was by nature as peripatetic as Edgar Buell, although his job could have been performed adequately from the safety of Sam Thong if he had wished to do it that way. It could not be performed *as well* from a desk in Sam Thong, though, and he knew it. In order to be certain that the refugees in remote areas received what they needed, the man in charge of directing relief had to visit them personally. Even more important to the program was the effect of such personal attention on the morale of the people. The presence of an American civilian in areas they knew from their own bitter experience to be extremely hazardous was reassuring to them. As long as the Americans visited, with their food and medicines, the people knew that someone cared about their safety and their freedom.

Occasionally Sjustrom made his overnight base at Na Khang, flying from the airfield there to visit dozens of refugee villages in Sam Neua and northern Xieng Khouang provinces. On many occasions he had been at Na Khang when shaken American Navy and Air Force pilots, shot down over North Vietnam or northeast Laos, were brought in by rescue helicopters. Often the most prominent passenger in the chopper would be Colonel Thong, who climbed in beside the rescue pilots and guided them, in crisp English, through the mountain passes of the northeast, which he knew so well, toward their downed comrades. If the fallen flyer was hurt, Thong would leap from the chopper

himself to lift him to safety. After the missions, Sjustrom liked to talk with Thong about the details.

"You've probably saved more American lives than any man up here, Colonel," he said. "You deserve the Medal of Honor."

It was not the same without him. Today Sjustrom stopped at Na Khang reluctantly, after a long day of village-hopping, a week after Chung was murdered. He had planned to spend the night at Hua Muong, where Thongsar was based. But enemy activity in the area made it seem too insecure to risk sleeping there. Seven Communist battalions had been observed slipping past Hua Muong, and no one knew where they had gone. It seemed likely that the enemy force had broken up into a dozen or more smaller units and was preparing to range over the entire area, attacking targets of opportunity. With some of Vang Pao's troops in a blocking position north of Na Khang, the base itself seemed safe, unless some of the enemy troops had slipped around behind it. But since the entire enemy force had been seen near Hua Muong only a few days before, that seemed unlikely. Na Khang, therefore, was only lightly guarded.

Don Sjustrom went to bed early in the crude bamboo hut that had become the headquarters of the refugee program at Na Khang. He was tired, and a Helio-Courier was due at dawn to begin flying him through another long day of village calls. He fell asleep almost immediately. A young Meo who stayed in the hut shook the lithe young American awake a little after midnight. Sjustrom blinked, because the thatch of the rooftop was quivering, shaking a fine rain of grass dust on his head.

"Enemy come. Enemy come," whispered the young Meo urgently.

The sounds outside the hut were horrendous. Thundering explosions erupted close by. They were satchel charges and grenades, not mortar or rocket shells fired from far away by remote artillerymen. Sjustrom leaped out of bed and grabbed a double-barreled .12-gauge shotgun that was propped against the wall of the hut. He could hear the rapid stuttering of Russian AK-47 rifles, automatics that fire so fast that the explosive sound of each cartridge impinges on that of the next so that the total effect is one of an uninterrupted, tremulous, lethal

monotone. The AKs were spraying their horrid missiles within yards of the hut.

A small enemy commando force, apparently part of the large troop movement noted several days before near Hua Muong, had slipped past the blocking units to the north. By forced march the day before, they had maneuvered into position just south of Na Khang. As most of the defenders dropped off to sleep before midnight, they moved quietly past guardposts until they were in the center of the base. Then they opened fire, indiscriminately, in all directions. It was a terror raid, nothing more, conducted by fewer than fifty Vietminh commandos who banked on the twin elements of surprise and a lackadaisical defense by sleep-prone Lao soldiers for their own safety. Their mission was simply to slip in, shoot up Na Khang for as long as they could before the defenders awakened and began firing back, then to withdraw as they had come. For the most part, they didn't even bother to aim their fire. They just turned their weapons on full automatic and sprayed everything in sight, pausing now and then to ignite a satchel charge or hurl a grenade.

A stream of AK bullets ripped through the walls of Sjustrom's hut. If he lay on the floor, he knew, he probably would be safe unless someone lobbed a hand grenade through the doorway. But he had no way of knowing that the attack was merely a commando raid. It could just as easily have been the beginning of an all-out attempt to seize Na Khang. Someone had to get to a radio to broadcast a report that the base was under attack. His own radio set was in a hut by the airstrip fifty yards away. He whispered to the Meo boy beside him.

"Stay down. Stay here. I'm going to the radio."

Then he burst through the doorway at a dead run, heading for the radio shack. He held the shotgun in front of him.

Three paces from the doorway Don Sjustrom was struck in the head by a single round from an unaimed AK-47. He was dead before his body hit the ground.

The familiar voice from the State Department reached Edgar this time in the warm kitchen of Howard's modern farmhouse near Hamilton, Indiana.

"It's for you, Dad," said his daughter-in-law Bonnie, handing him the phone.

"Mr. Buell, we wanted you to get this information before you hear it on the radio or read it in the papers," said the voice. "Don Sjustrom was killed last night in an attack on Na Khang. I'm sorry."

Edgar quietly put the receiver back on the hook and cried for everyone in Laos.

It was while attending Sjustrom's funeral in Seattle that Edgar finally made up his mind. Howard had forwarded a letter to him from Carol Mills. She reviewed the circumstances of both Chung's murder and the young American's death. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added:

"Yesterday the warehouse burned to the ground. We don't know whether it was an accident or whether someone deliberately set the fires. With you and Don both gone, I think we're going to have an awful time getting back on our feet, and we wonder if it's worth it."

When Edgar said goodbye to Myron Sjustrom, Don's father, in Bothell, Washington, he said, "I'll find out all I can about how Don died, and I'll write you from Laos. After I get back."

Chapter 21

Where is our office? On the high fearful air. We are working on the air because when we got a ride in the planes, from the first start of the plane's take-off and until the plane lands down on the ground, I myself always fixed out and think much about the dangerous mountains and valleys that how I could get out from the planes when the planes are bad shot and cracked down.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupba

A FRIEND of Edgar's once asked him to name his favorite Americans.

"Will Rogers, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln," he said, without pause, "and not necessarily in that order. I put Lincoln in there even though he wasn't a Democrat, because he was a good rural boy from the Midwest, and he used his head with his heart."

He said that Thongsar and the late Colonel Thong were his favorites among the Lao people. But he hesitated when asked about his favorite Meo, because he loved so many of them. Then, slowly, he named them:

"General Vang Pao, Mua Chung, Blea Vu, and Neah Ying. And I don't think I can put *them* in no order, either."

Edgar was close to all four. Vang Pao frequently visited him at Sam Thong, and Pop returned the visits just as often. Along with his five wives, all of whom loved Edgar as much as their husband did, Vang Pao often urged Edgar to take a Meo wife, someone whom he

would select personally. Edgar demurred. Yet, even with such intimacy, their relationship had a slight air of formality about it, the friendship of two professionals, each doing his own job superbly, welcoming the help of the other when it was offered.

Mua Chung had been a very special friend; closer, Edgar thought, than anyone he had ever known. But except for the first half-year at Lhat Houang, the two had spent little time together, and their relationship had become that of a separated father and son who cared deeply but rarely saw one another. Blea Vu was probably the best administrative executive among the untutored Meo with whom Pop worked. Beginning with the flight under fire from Phu San mountain years before, the two men had formed a deep mutual admiration, a perfect business friendship in a bizarre undertaking. The smiling, beet-faced Meo leader, whose rotund body shook with laughter at all but the gravest times, was perfectly capable, Pop thought, of taking over the entire agricultural, educational, and civil relief programs if the Americans ever had to leave. But Neah Ying was for years the closest of all, in terms of proximity, and Edgar's attachment to him became at least as deep as his friendship for any of the others.

Despite his mixed parentage, which ordinarily would have earned for him semi-ostracism from both Meo and Lao Thung societies, the force of Neah Ying's agreeable personality was such that members of all ethnic groups were drawn to him like iron filings to a magnet. There was a charismatic quality that bridged the chasms of prejudice, personality, and even language. In fact, he was so adept at non-verbal communication, using smiling facial expressions, charade-like hand gestures, and quick symbolic scratchings on the ground, that men who couldn't understand a word he said came away from Neah Ying's presence not only convinced that they had formed a durable new friendship but that they had talked meaningfully with him, that they understood everything he said, and that he understood them. He did, too. He could accurately size up a stranger within minutes of meeting him. He had become Vang Pao's protégé early in his youth when the Meo leader, then a junior officer in the Royal Army, was so struck by his happy charm and alertness that he underwrote his education in a Lao primary school not far from the Meo village of Nong Het,

near the Vietnamese border. In becoming the boy's sponsor, Vang Pao was repaying an old debt. As a child in the mountains above Xieng Khouang, he had been similarly befriended by Chao Saykham, the provincial governor, who sent him to school and assured his initial place in the French Army. When Neah Ying completed elementary school, Vang Pao continued the tradition by making a place for him in the Royal Army. The boy became one of the most adept intelligence agents in the Lao military. Pop first met him when Vang Pao moved his headquarters to Long Tieng, shortly before Sam Thong was established. He was instantly attracted to the young man, who lived with his young wife and three daughters within Vang Pao's headquarters. The feeling was mutual. When it came time for Edgar and Thongsar to shift their headquarters to Sam Thong, they needed help. The Meo colonel promised his American friend that he could take any two Meo he wished along to work full-time with the refugee program. Buell chose Blea Vu and Neah Ying. Vang Pao was crestfallen over the loss of his protégé, but he stuck by his promise.

Through the succeeding years of trial and triumph in the northeast, Neah Ying remained at Edgar's right hand, building and leading the native civil organization that handled all aspects of the refugee program. He was a superb leader, although his only power was the force of his own personality and determination to succeed at everything he did, no matter how long he had to persist against disappointment.

The greatest disappointment in Neah Ying's life was his own fatherhood. His wife had borne three daughters, whom he loved dearly, but he wanted a son. Not long after the base at Sam Thong was established and Neah Ying moved with his family to a hut near the chimney rock in the center of the mountain bowl, his wife bore a fourth child. Another daughter.

"I think I will take a second wife, Tan Pop," said Neah Ying after the birth.

"Why do you want to do that?" asked Pop.

"I know that you Americans go to jail for it," he said. "But the Meo often take many wives. You know that. For me it is especially important. I love this wife, but she cannot give me a boy baby. I must have a son."

"You ain't very different from most Americans I know, Neah Ying," said Edgar. "You been to school, and I know you want your children to go to school. You go gittin' another wife and you're gonna wind up with twice as many children, too many to educate."

"Doesn't every man want a son?"

"Sure. And every woman is capable of givin' him one. It's just the odds when you do it, that's all, and you've had bad luck. You try her again, and you'll get a boy next time. If it was a poker hand, I'd bet on it. You got four hearts now. The odds say you ain't gonna draw a flush."

Immediately after she recovered from the fourth childbirth, Neah Ying's wife became pregnant again. The child was born early in 1963.

"Now what do you say, Tan Pop?" asked Neah Ying as the two men stared moodily into the open fire of his hut, thirty minutes after the birth of his fifth daughter.

"I swear, Neah Ying, the odds is in your favor. It's like flippin' a coin. It ain't gonna come up tails six times in a row. Don't go saddlin' yourself down with another wife, hopin' that'll change your luck. The odds is gonna be the same with her as they are with this one. Believe me."

Neah Ying accepted Edgar's counsel, and soon his wife was pregnant again. The sixth daughter was born late in 1963.

"Tan Pop, you are my closest friend. I would give my life for you, and you know that I mean that," said Neah Ying with an ironic smile. "But I think you are wrong about the odds."

"I ain't wrong, Neah Ying, believe me," Pop pleaded. "It just ain't possible to go on havin' girls like that all the time. If you'll just try one more time, I'll even take some of the responsibility for it. If she don't have a boy this time, I'll give you one hundred dollars in American money."

"I'll try," Neah Ying laughed. "But after this, I won't try again for all the money in the world. I want a son. I think I will have to find a second wife."

The 1964 pregnancy was harder on Neah Ying's wife than the previous six had been, and if Jiggs Weldon had not appeared at Sam Thong regularly with medicine and advice, she probably would have

lost the child. But the baby came on schedule, and she was a healthy one. It was Neah Ying's seventh daughter.

"With odds like that, it just don't seem right to lose," said Edgar to Neah Ying, "but here's your hundred dollars. Now what you gonna do?"

"I don't know, Tan Pop," said Neah Ying. "Even if it had been a boy, I think it is the last child my wife should have. I still want a son. Someday I will take a second wife."

A few weeks later Neah Ying was village-hopping by air through Sam Neua Province, carrying supplies to the teachers in the bamboo schools that Edgar had established. One of the schoolteachers was particularly morose when Neah Ying talked with him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I have big trouble," said the teacher. "I got a Lao girl in the valley pregnant. She had the baby last week. She cannot keep it, and I cannot take care of it, or her. My wife does not know. The girl wants to destroy the child. She does not want it. I don't know what to do."

"Is the baby a girl?"

"No, a boy."

"Take me to her house," said Neah Ying with a smile.

That night when the Helio-Courier landed at Sam Thong, Neah Ying emerged with a 10-day-old baby in his arms and whooped delightedly as Pop stepped out of the warehouse hut to greet him.

"He isn't really mine, and he's half Lao, but I have a son," cried Neah Ying, happily.

"What's Momma gonna say when you bring that baby in the house?" asked Edgar after hefting the chubby infant and touching its nose with his lips.

"She'll love him," smiled Neah Ying, and she did. Jiggs Weldon helped to care for the infant, and it became the sturdiest in Sam Thong.

Neah Ying adored the boy, just as he loved his seven daughters, but he remained disappointed because he had not fathered a son of his own. One day he entered Edgar's hut, looking pained. It was the first time Buell had ever seen him without a smile.

"Somethin' wrong?" he asked.

"It is my wife, Tan Pop. Since the last girl was born, we have been

very careful. Another child might kill her. But it is difficult for both of us. I want the doctor to fix her so that she can never become pregnant again. For myself, I am going to take a second wife."

"Well, I ain't gonna try to talk you out of it this time," said Pop. "I've already butted in three times when I should've kept my mouth shut. You got a girl in mind?"

"Yes, Tan Pop. She is a lovely girl, but no other Meo man wants her because she lost one of her eyes when she was a child. I love her almost as much as my wife. She will become my number-two wife, and she will give me a son."

"You got my blessing, if that's what you want, Neah Ying. Quit worryin' now. I'll get somebody to take care of the medical end with your wife. She'll be okay."

"I'm not worried about that, Tan Pop," said Neah Ying. "I'm only anxious for my girl friend to become pregnant so we can be married."

Neah Ying's partially blind fiancée soon developed a rotund belly, and they were married in a simple ceremony in which General Vang Pao tied the wedding knots. The baby was born in the fifth month of her pregnancy. It was a boy. But it died almost immediately.

Neah Ying sulked in his hut with his two wives, seven daughters, and foster son for three days. But when he emerged, he was smiling again. "At least I know she can bear sons," he said. "Now the odds are in my favor."

Under the happy influence of their husband and father, the two wives and eight children in Neah Ying's growing bamboo household got along well. The first wife supervised the housework and garden labor, and the second wife and children willingly performed the most burdensome chores, as custom demanded. Only one thing marred their happiness. All of them were as eager as Neah Ying to see the number-two wife become pregnant again. When it happened, all of them celebrated. Neah Ying burst into the quonset hut and gleefully announced to Edgar that his number-two wife had missed two periods in a row.

"This time," said Edgar, "just to be sure, I'm gonna bet one hundred dollars that it's a girl."

Neah Ying laughed.

In the succeeding months, whenever he visited Sam Thong, Jiggs Weldon went to Neah Ying's house and examined the number-two wife. She was carrying beautifully.

"Quit worrying about her," he drawled to Neah Ying in Lao. "She's the healthiest woman in Sam Thong. I won't guarantee that she will have a boy, but you're going to have a healthy baby."

By the time of her eighth month, Neah Ying had stopped worrying. He had been afraid of another miscarriage, but the time for such fear obviously was over. He was convinced that within a few weeks he would have a son.

"I'm still bettin' a hundred dollars it's a girl," joked Edgar one morning, "just to be safe. It'll be worth the money if I lose."

"You'll lose, Tan Pop," said Neah Ying.

"Right now, we got work to do," said Edgar. "One of us has got to go over to Site 72, and see what's happened over there. They had some trouble last night, and I expect they need help."

"You stay here, Tan Pop. I'll go," said Neah Ying. He shouldered a light rucksack, picked up his carbine, and left the warehouse to board a Helio-Courier that was standing by on the airstrip. Site 72 was the code name of the airstrip at a Meo village called Tha Tam Bleung, about fifteen miles from Sam Thong. There was no road between the two villages, and the mountain pathways wound so tortuously up and down the hills between them that it was more than a day's walk away. The flight took only a few minutes. After landing, Neah Ying talked briefly with the *taesing* of the village as the Helio sat at the end of the runway, its engine idling lazily. A Vietminh patrol had probed during the night, firing on a small outpost located on one of the mountain peaks that rose like an overhanging wall about a quarter of a mile east of the village. West of the village was a narrow valley dominated by a similar wall of mountains about a mile away. Other peaks closed the village in to the north and south. While it would have been a relatively easy place to encircle, there had only been the one light attack. There was no need for either military or refugee help, so Neah Ying cheerfully waved farewell to the *taesing*.

The Helio pilot slipped out to let Neah Ying climb through his

door, crawl across his seat, and strap himself into the co-pilot's seat on the doorless right side of the airplane. It was an awkward means of entry, but it was quicker than opening the single cargo door in the back of the plane and crawling forward to the seat. The pilot climbed back into the plane and pulled his seat belt tight.

"I hate this strip," he muttered. "It's like taking off from the inside of a shoe box." He revved his single engine to full power, pulled full pitch on the propeller, and released his brakes for a short take-off run down the 1,000-foot dirt slash on the mountaintop. Instinctively, he banked gently to the left as the plane lifted away from Tha Tam Bleung. Before the pilot realized his mistake, he was staring at the sheer wall of a limestone mountain. Urgently he kicked full left rudder and banked sharply to avoid the cliffside. He missed it with only a few feet to spare. But the plane had lost lift. Ahead was another mountain. Steep slopes towered above either side. There was no way out. He couldn't climb. Resignedly, he cut his throttle, opened his flaps wide, and nosed down. The plane struck in thick underbrush, skidded into a tree, and flipped over. A wing cracked, and gasoline spewed from a ruptured tank. The pilot urgently unfastened his belt, pushed open the door, and dropped out on his hands. He reached in to unbuckle Neah Ying and pull him out of the wreckage. As he did, the airplane burst into flames. The pilot fell back, then dashed to the cockpit again. Reaching into the flames he unfastened Neah Ying's belt, grabbed him with his own severely burned hands, and dragged him from the plane.

The Helio-Courier was still burning when Edgar arrived in a helicopter ten minutes later. Four Meo men of Tha Tam Bleung were carrying Neah Ying on a stretcher toward the airstrip. The pilot, holding his own seared arms and hands limply before his chest, walked beside them. Edgar looked with horror at his friend Neah Ying. Except for his belt, his shoes and shreds of his shirt and trousers, his clothing had burned away. The flesh of his face, already suppurating, was as black as charred meat. He was unconscious. He was not smiling.

At Sam Thong, Dr. Khamoon injected morphine, picked away the

charred clothing, and began administering glucose to ward off shock while Pop commandeered a plane to fly the horribly burned Neah Ying to Korat. There, in desperate condition with burns over 80 percent of his body, he was treated for two days before Dr. Weldon arranged to transfer him to the more elaborate facilities at Clark Air Force Base outside of Manila. Before he was lifted into the Air Force medical evacuation jet, normally reserved for Americans severely wounded in Vietnam, Neah Ying tried to smile through the seared flesh of his face. "Tan Pop," he said to Edgar, "you did not get my report. The *taesing* of Tha Tam said the attack was not serious. He needs no help."

Two days later a specialist in burns at Clark Field reported that Neah Ying's condition had improved slightly. Jiggs Weldon, sensing a better chance to save his friend's life, arranged to have him transferred by Air Force jet to a special military hospital for fire victims at San Antonio, Texas. The night before his scheduled departure for San Antonio, Neah Ying lapsed into unconsciousness. An hour later he was dead. When his body was returned to Sam Thong, Pop tried to dissuade Neah Ying's Meo family and friends from opening the sealed American casket, but they refused to listen to him. They transferred the disfigured remains to an open wooden box and more than a thousand Meo came from miles around the mountain outpost to take part in the funeral ceremony. By custom, they sat around the open box chattering about old times, playing games, and laughing happily over the memory of their friend. Neah Ying's two widows were kept busy preparing rice and red-bark tea for the guests, and the children enjoyed the sudden onslaught of attention from so many of their father's friends. Edgar, who had not learned how to accept death like the Meo, sat sadly beside Neah Ying's body for seventy-two hours. He thought of Chung, of Colonel Thong, of Don Sjustrom, and of the friend whose body lay beside him, and he cried. Except for the old American's tears, it was a death celebration that Neah Ying would have enjoyed.

Three weeks later the number-two widow gave birth to her baby. It was Neah Ying's first and only natural son. Today Edgar, Jiggs

Weldon and the other Americans, Meo, Lao, and Lao Thung around Sam Thong watch after the small boy as if he were the most special child in Laos. He smiles and laughs constantly, perhaps as a result of so much attention, although it is possible that cheerfulness is a genetic characteristic.

Chapter 22

One thing the Meo do not have is a law to get wives. One man can get five or ten wives, this depend on him. They said if they got much power and rich, they will not count to get five or ten wives, they have to get twenty wives because they said that they are a big boss in the whole family and let all their wives to get to work on the high hill.

—THE STORY OF THE MEO PEOPLE
by Thongsar Bouppha

BY early 1968 the pendulum of war in Laos seemed to have swung as far forward as Vang Pao, his soldiers, Edgar, or anyone else on the Royal Government's side could impel it. Enemy power was increasing throughout the country, and it seemed only a matter of time before it gathered enough force to swing implacably back through Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang provinces. The military situation was grim, and Vang Pao's usually smiling expression when he landed at Sam Thong one morning was so solemn that Edgar thought he had come with dire news of an enemy victory. But it was a personal matter he wished to discuss, and he drew Pop aside where no one could overhear them.

"My Father, do you remember the expression *san mah ki*?" he asked.

"Sure do, General. We talked about it before. It means uniting all the people, bringing 'em together. It's what we been workin' on all this time, ain't it?"

"Yes, I think it is," Vang Pao said. He cleared his throat, awkwardly. "My Father, you told me once that one of things which made unity in America was the 'melting pot'—when many people came together

from many nations and married with one another. Is that true?"

"Well, that ain't the only reason, General. And I ain't so sure we got as much *san mah ki* in America as we think we has. But that's sure one of the reasons people feel some unity back home," said Edgar.

"No nation is perfect, my Father, but yours has more unity than others. I know intermarriage is one of the reasons. That is why I have often urged you to take a Meo wife. It would be good for our bloodlines if they mixed with yours."

"Whoa now, General. I thought we understood each other about that. I respect Meo women as much as you do, you know that. But I ain't marryin' no one. Malorene's been dead near ten years now, but I still love her. I ain't got room in my heart for another wife."

"I understand, Tan Pop," said Vang Pao. "That's not why I came to you today. I came for your advice. I am going to take a new wife."

"I reckon you know what you're doin', General." Pop smiled. "You ain't been wrong very often in the past. But ain't you already got five wives?"

"I have had six, Tan Pop. One died in childbirth, so now I have five. We have twenty-five children, and I think you have met most of them. Sixteen of them live with me in Long Tieng. It is a good family, and I am satisfied. But in my position I cannot think only of my family. I must think of Laos. Most of the men under my command now are Lao, not Meo. In order to keep face with them—to set an example of *san mah ki*—it is time for me to take a Lao wife. That is what I plan to do."

"General," Pop scowled, "I reckon you wanted my advice, or you wouldn't of come here today. I don't mean no offense, but have you thought this through all the way? You take a Lao wife for *san mah ki* now. What you gonna do about the Lao Thung? The Black Thai? The Red Thai? The Ekau? There's lots more, too. Are you plannin' to go on takin' wives like this?"

"If it is necessary, then when the time comes, I will marry others. But perhaps this marriage will be enough, a symbol of *san mah ki*," he smiled.

"Do you love her?" Pop asked.

Vang Pao flushed. "That is beside the point, my Father. I am

determined to marry her. I will not change my mind." His voice softened as he added, "But I want your assurance that you will continue to be my Father—that is how I think of you. As you would say, I want your blessing."

"You know you got that," Pop laughed. "You don't even have to ask. And I'll go along with your idea of *san mah ki*. But if I'm your father, don't never think that father don't know why you really want to marry this girl."

A month later a simple wedding ceremony was held, and the knot was tied by the Meo custom. Pop thought he recognized the 17-year-old bride, whose lovely dark face radiated a kind of innocence that is difficult to retain, even in Laos, after sixteen. As Vang Pao and his bride retired from the wedding feast, Edgar realized where he had seen the girl before. She was the daughter of the Lao *taesing* who lost his sons and his parents in the massacre of the refugees of Ban Pha Ka and Phou Nong, the massacre of the bowl. Her companion in the massacre, the Meo girl Lau Lu, was unable to attend the wedding. She was working as a nurse with Vang Pao's soldiers in the field.

Chapter 23

What are we doing over here? I personally would say that we all are working with the mountain people and the other people in the country of Laos. All the things in the world in that we have known good or bad before, we did try really help them, to tell them the right way and the wrong way, to support them in what they are needing in the case of necessity and the emergency of their sincere fighting lives, to train them, to improve them, to show a good example and to polish them with our pure sweats, with all our powers, with all our wisdoms, with our black bloods, with our equipments, and with our faithfulness from the bottom to the end of our free hearts.

—ANSWERING AND TELLING GENERALLY QUESTIONS
by Thongsar Boupha

"POP BUELL, you're not a boss, you're an experience," cried Anne Bradley in exasperation when Edgar told her that he had invited two hundred people to Thanksgiving dinner at Sam Thong. "You act like the chief pilgrim inviting the Indian tribes to Plymouth Rock. We were only planning a small dinner for our own people!"

Anne, a curvaceous, auburn-haired Philadelphian who had replaced Carol Mills as staff secretary, and Brenda Peters, the new I.V.S. volunteer nurse at the hospital, had ordered two large turkeys, cranberry sauce, and other pre-packaged goods from the American commissary in Vientiane. They planned to feed only the refugee staff, which included Brenda's husband Garry, who was the Sam Thong radio operator, Edgar's three young American assistants—Ernie Kuhn,

Terry Collins, and Paul White—who worked with him in the field, Albert Fouré, Mi Si, Blea Vu, Naoh Teu, the former master spy of the Plaine, and a half-dozen other Meo and Lao peasants who, like the late Ncah Ying, had assumed leadership roles in the organization. Thongsar, too, was still considered a close member of the family, although officially he was no longer a part of it. After spending four years in Sam Neua exposed almost constantly to enemy activity, he had married the daughter of a local Lao *taesing*, fathered two sons, and accepted a safer and better-paying job as the native manager of the Air America refueling and repair base at Sam Thong.

"If we can't take care of a few extra people at the table, then what are we having Thanksgiving for?" asked Edgar querulously, running his fingers through thinning hair that had not felt the touch of a real comb in ten years. He had invited one hundred fifty Meo, Lao Thung, and Lao guests as well as twenty-five AID officials and their wives to come from Vientiane to an outdoor Thanksgiving feast in the mountains.

"Don't worry, old man, we'll manage somehow." Anne laughed and whirled in her crisply starched cotton dress to hurry to the quonset headquarter building and call Vientiane with an order for another thirty turkeys and twenty-five hams. Then she sat down with Don Dougan, a former Green Beret medical sergeant who had retired from the Army to work as the Weldons' assistant, and Brenda, to begin replanning the dinner.

"We'd better count on four hundred," she muttered. "He'll invite everyone he sees around here from now on. Stick around Sam Thong long enough, and that old man will turn you into a supply sergeant. I hope I don't start looking like one." She didn't. With the possible exception of Audrey Meadows, who visited occasionally with her airline-executive husband, Anne was the most attractive American woman ever to venture into the mountains. She dressed stylishly, despite the ever-present dust, and in rainy season, mud of the uncivilized outpost, and her auburn hair, which obviously absorbed a great deal of her time, remained clean and freshly set regardless of the chaos around her.

"I just don't want these people to think all Americans are as sloppy

as these bums," she cracked, pointing to Edgar and his three assistants, who often remained in one set of durable work clothes so long that the underlying color was undistinguishable from the red mud and dust that caked them. It was well-earned dirt, the patina of honest, humanitarian labor. After more than a year of steady defeat in the mountains of the northeast, the four were so burdened with a new onslaught of refugees that there was seldom time to pause for hygienic overhaul. Pop, particularly, showed the strain as 1968 neared its end. His normally dour face sagged, as if its lines had been forcibly tugged down by a tragic gravity of their own. He was so often unshaven that he looked as if he had been born with a three-day beard. And the knees of his stiffening trousers bent permanently into the shape of his bandy legs. But it was only the lack of time and privacy that prevented necessary personal attention, not the lack of facilities.

After nine years in Laos, Pop Buell now had a Western-style house of his own, a bungalow that would do credit to a middle-class American suburb. It included a large living-meeting room with fireplace, which night and day drew dozens of Meo and other native supplicants who needed help, advice in solving personal problems, or just a warm place to sleep, on the floor beside the fire. There also was a small kitchen, a bedroom, and a spacious bathroom with a hot shower. The house was Pop's idea, and it was constructed to be what it appeared to be, a showcase. He did not build it solely for his own comfort, because he still spent most of his nights on bamboo beds amid rooting pigs and foraging rats in outlying native villages. But he thought it was time that the Wood Age people of the mountains discovered the Stone Age. So, for their edification, he constructed a solid stone bungalow, composed almost entirely of medium-sized boulders harvested at random from the mountain slopes around Sam Thong. There were far more rocks in the area than there were bamboo and hardwoods, which the natives had used for millennia to construct their houses. Like the wise little pig, Edgar wanted to show them that a carefully built stone house is better defense than bamboo against rain, wind, and unwelcome visitors. To get the idea across, he had to demonstrate it himself.

An easier, quicker, and useless demonstration of modern building

methods would have been to order a prefabricated American house from the AID mission in Vientiane, which was willing enough to supply it. The Government agency had sent three, at a cost of about \$18,000 apiece, to shelter Fouré and the American members of the refugee staff. They joined the four frame houses already stretched in a neat row opposite the hospital. Pop's far more comfortable and durable bungalow cost just under \$6,000 to build, and the price ran that high only because he insisted on generous payments to the willing native laborers whom he taught how to do the masonry. Blea Vu and many of the other native leaders watched with growing awe as the house was erected. It had never occurred to them to put the basic material of the hills to work in that way. All agreed that when the trouble ended, and peace once again spread over the mountains, they, too, would have stone houses. They also would extend their farms into the fertile, largely unoccupied valleys, husbanding the land wisely as Tan Pop had taught them to do, rather than continuing their wasteful nomadic burn-and-slash agriculture. Each clan would have its own friendly mountain and rich lands, tended from farmhouses and storage buildings that would last for centuries. Then, perhaps, the Meo would wander no more.

Pop's three assistants had as little use for their prefabricated American dwellings as he had for his. The young men, all in their mid-twenties, were constantly in the air or trekking through the jungles north of the Plaine in search of people who needed help. Sadly, their job was no longer one of simply ascertaining the needs of relatively stable refugees and then visiting frequently to help them toward self-sufficiency and to bolster their morale. It had become, once again, a gargantuan task of mass evacuation and relocation involving scores of thousands of newly dislocated people.

Paul White was a graduate student in Far Eastern studies, a brilliant student of Meo, Lao, Japanese, Chinese, and Russian, who had come to Laos after an unhappy romance with a Japanese girl at the University of Hawaii. Like Edgar, he was a native Indianan. Unlike Edgar, he was black. His prospective mother- and father-in-law, descendants of a Samurai family in Tokyo, had politely but firmly refused to give him their daughter's hand because he was a Negro. Laos, with its

own myriad racial problems, had seemed to him a good place to begin working out his fury over the ethnic cruelties civilized and uncivilized societies alike inflict upon themselves and upon each other. In the small kingdom, which paradoxically was so hung up on its own hostilities that the people were relatively unconcerned about the color or beliefs of resident foreigners, Paul was an American without prejudice. He performed his job and lived a thoroughly integrated social life with the same confidence and friendship, and for the same emotional and physical rewards, as his white colleagues. Whether dating a Lao girl or drinking with an American friend, his color was irrelevant. At home, he feared, the deep-seated racism of American society would force him to become a militant revolutionary, if only to preserve his self-respect. Therefore, he was afraid to go home.

With Ernie Kuhn, a former travel agent who had tired of conducting blue-haired widows on tours of the Holy Land and sought adventure as well as social purpose first as a Peace Corpsman in Thailand, then among the refugees of northeast Laos, and Terry Collins, another rural Midwesterner who also came to Edgar after a stint in the Peace Corps in Thailand, Paul combed the jungle mountains of Sam Neua and northern Xieng Khouang provinces rounding up thousands of people who wanted to flee to the south to escape an enormously strengthened enemy army. More than 40,000 fresh North Vietnamese regulars had moved into Laos since Colonel Thong's death. Vang Pao's Meo soldiers and his Royal Army units were losing the war, and each day brought word of another military disaster in the north.

There were so many enemy soldiers roving in force around both provinces that the refugee program had become far more complicated than it ever had been in the past. Further confounding an already difficult task was a new strategy of massive air evacuation. Instead of merely helping threatened mountain people to flee on foot or, as they often did, accept the alternative and remain behind under Communist control, the refugee workers had now begun moving whole populations far to the south by small, shuttling aircraft. When the new Communist advances began, relentlessly, in 1967, many of the Meo, Lao, and Lao Thung had asked Edgar to move them entirely

out of Sam Neua and northern Xieng Khouang provinces, where many had lived under Vietminh control in years past. Pop remembered that Vang Pao had once paraphrased Mao Tse-tung to the effect that the common people were the sea and his soldiers were the fish, who needed the sea to survive.

"If the people are the sea, then let's hurry the tide south," he said. Every native who wanted to disrupt his traditional ties to the hills in which his people had lived for generations was flown more than a hundred miles to the south where, for the time being, at least, the territory was more secure, to begin establishing new homes and villages. Because of its optional nature, the move was not a military success. Too many people remained behind, either by choice or because the Communists already had gained control over them. Moreover, the Vietminh army was not a guerrilla force entirely dependent upon the support of the common people. It was a collection of regular military units, adequately supplied and directed from Hanoi, and while an acquiescent population was helpful to them in terms of supplying labor and supplemental fresh foods, it was not essential. Thus, what for a time looked like a useful counter-insurgency strategy became simply an extremely ambitious, modern device for saving the lives and freedom of those who elected to be saved. Still, there were more than 50,000 of them, probably a third of the rural population of Sam Neua, and shuttling them south over the months in a small fleet of light airplanes was a Herculean undertaking.

Early in 1968, Vang Pao's exhausted and dispirited army rallied briefly and retook a broad area of the province north of Sam Neua city. One of the reasons for his short-lived success against what was now a vastly superior enemy there was a new and still officially unacknowledged dimension that had been added to the war by the Americans. U.S. Air Force and carrier-based Navy fighter bombers, which previously had been wholly occupied over North and South Vietnam, had begun the systematic "secret" bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and of Vietminh-occupied areas of Laos, as well. Under the aegis of the U.S. military and air attachés in Vientiane, they also were being called upon regularly, now, to fly close-support missions,

covering Vang Pao's and other Lao Government troops against the Pathet Lao and Vietminh.

Under this air cover, Vang Pao briefly recaptured the northwest part of the province. Edgar and his young helpers rushed in like first aid men in the wake of a killing storm. Within twelve days they had evacuated more than 10,000 refugees by air, and within thirty days all of the dislocated people had been resettled in new villages south of Sam Thong. Ironically, two small villages in that number were former Pathet Lao strongholds whose residents never quite understood that they could remain behind if they wished. They were resettled on a riverbank about forty miles south of Sam Thong, liked the location and the new lease on life that Buell and U.S. AID provided, and changed their allegiance.

But that was one of the few bright spots in a picture that became more dismal by the day. Vang Pao had no sooner recaptured the area in Sam Neua than he was asked to dispatch 3,000 of his best troops, a third of his total Meo force, to the aid of the Royal Army, which suddenly found itself engaged in the most punishing conventional battle in the history of the war in Laos.

While Vang Pao was retaking his old territory and Edgar and his young helpers were flying out the refugees, the main Communist force bypassed them and formed for conventional battle in a valley called Nam Bac, northeast of the royal capital of Luang Prabang, where King Savang Vatthana still maintained his court and exercised a strong influence over non-Communist and Communist alike. In defense of the king's capital the Royal Government committed 20,000 men, a third of its army, to fight at Nam Bac. The engagement was disastrous. After three weeks of devastating but indecisive battle, the Royal Army was literally decimated. More than 2,400 men were dead or missing. Among them were most of the experienced junior officers and noncommissioned officers in the Lao army. Three hundred of the dead were Vang Pao's Meo soldiers. Both the morale and the fighting ability of the Royal Army, such as it was, were shattered. It had lost its entire mobile reserve and was unable, for a year thereafter, even to send token reinforcements to help Vang Pao's exhausted soldiers in the northeast.

Before the rainy season came to bog enemy activity in a sea of mud, the Communists resumed their relentless pressure on Vang Pao in Sam Neua and began seizing Meo outposts in Xieng Khouang Province, as well. Houei Thom fell in a night. Na Khang fell, was recaptured, fell again, and was recaptured again in the space of two months. No sooner did an outpost in the north crumble than another in the south come under attack. Vang Pao could not shift his small military force rapidly enough to cover one area before another was threatened. Not even hundreds of daily bombing and strafing sorties flown by American jet fighter-bombers seemed to help. When the rains began that May, the Meo general was as close as he had ever been to total defeat. Typically, he was not prepared to admit it.

"When the dry season comes," he predicted confidently, "we will stop the enemy and drive him back. The people are with us. He cannot succeed."

For the first time in nine years, then, General Vang Pao took a vacation. Leaving his staff members under the round-the-clock tutelage of their C.I.A. and U.S. Army advisers, he accepted an official invitation to visit the United States. Two years before, he had stepped briefly on American soil, but not for pleasure. He was flown to Honolulu for a delicate operation on his left arm, which had been shattered below the shoulder by an AK bullet during one of the many attacks the Communists mounted against Na Khang. He was impressed by the heavy traffic and the tall buildings that towered like an impregnable wall over Waikiki Beach, but he didn't like the island state, and he was glad to leave it to return to Laos. Now he was an official guest of the U.S. Government, pampered with luxury hotel accommodations, flown back and forth across the country in plush jet airplanes, and guided, as a very important person, to the most awe-inspiring military and technological centers in America. In Detroit he saw shiny, multi-colored new automobiles rolling endlessly from production lines. At Cape Kennedy, the five-foot-four-inch leader of a mountain people so primitive they had never even adopted the wheel, was led under the rocket nozzles of a 300-foot Saturn booster. Finally, as a respite from the arduous technological tour, his guide took Vang Pao to colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

When the general returned to Laos in August, shortly before the rains ended, he invited Edgar to his large French colonial-style house in Long Tieng. Thirty of his subordinate officers sat entranced at a long banquet table in the main room of the house as Vang Pao energetically described the technical wonders of America. After drawing a word picture of the gigantic rocket he had seen at Cape Kennedy, he turned to Pop, seated at his right.

"It was all very interesting," he said, "but one thing impressed me more than any of these, and for that one impression I am happy that I visited your country."

"What was that, General?"

"Colonial Williamsburg, where everything remains as it was when America was beginning. I saw there things I didn't know. Only two hundred years ago they used wooden plows. Their muskets were not as good as ours. They made their cloth as we do, on hand looms. They cooked as we do, in pots over open fires. My guide said they were a handcraft culture. So are the Meo. The Americans did all of that only two hundreds years ago. Now they send rocket ships to the moon. In two hundred years the Meo will build rockets to visit the moon."

But the general had little time left to contemplate either Williamsburg or moon rockets. The moment the rains ended, he began, once again, to lose ground. His troops were thinly spread over a vast mountain area. And they were tired. They had been continuously at war for eight years. More and more outposts in Sam Neua fell to quick enemy attacks, and as word of each defeat passed along the mountain grapevine, the people began to lose heart. One loss especially distressed them.

It was a formidable limestone mountain due west of Sam Neua city that, for many years, had been known among all the Meo people as the Rock. The mountain was five miles in circumference at its base, and almost a mile high. On top of it was a Meo village called Pha Thi. Three dozen Meo soldiers had managed its defense for five years, and although they were attacked often, enemy soldiers had never succeeded in reaching the village at the top. But during the rainy season the Vietminh threw a ring around the great promontory and cut the narrow dirt road that led to it from the east. They also seized a maze

of caves and natural passages that led into the Rock on its north side, just above the banks of a river that meandered between jungled banks and was Pha Thi's only source of water. When the rainy season ended, the Vietminh effectively blocked the residents of Pha Thi from descending to the river for water. Then they stormed the mountain and overwhelmed its weakened defenders.

In any other war, any place else in the world, the fall of a single limestone mountain rising above a picturesque but unnavigable river in the midst of a lightly inhabited jungle would have no significance whatever. But the Rock was immensely important to the Meo, and this strategic importance grew entirely out of sentiment. It dominated the best opium-farming land in Sam Neua Province, and thus in the world. Even Meo clansmen who lived hundreds of miles away and had never visited Sam Neua knew about and took pride in the small but important Meo village of Pha Thi. When word passed along the grapevine of the hills that the Rock had fallen, the spirits of half a million Meo tribesmen fell with it.

As Thanksgiving approached, Vang Pao, like Napoleon balancing his empire on the road to Moscow, decided that the entire future of the Meo in northeast Laos depended upon a dramatic victory. Regardless of the cost, he had to recapture Pha Thi.

"You daresn't try that, General, at least not right now." Edgar sadly shook his head when Vang Pao told him of his plan. "Your soldiers is bone tired. The ones that fought at Nam Bac ain't recovered from it yet. Their morale is so low a dog couldn't sniff it. What good'll it do?"

"As you say, my Father, morale is low and the soldiers are tired," said Vang Pao, using the intimate, familial form of address he had long affected with Buell. "So are the people. Tired of running. If we lose Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang, where will they go? Will America take them? I don't think so. I must have a big victory to stop the Vietminh now, before they take everything. My people need a victory. The Rock is important to them. There will be refugees. We will need your help."

Vang Pao took 5,000 men, slightly more than half of his army, to Na Khang and moved them north into attack positions on three sides of the big mountain. At Sam Thong, Anne Bradley stopped

Edgar as he jumped from a Heli-Courier and slid into his jeep, which was parked beside the quonset hut headquarters building.

"You look worried, Pop. What's going on?" she asked.

"I been up near Pha Thi all mornin', watchin'. The jets has bombed it with everything they got. Vang Pao started his attack, but his people gets pinned down every time they move. The enemy's dug in like gophers all over that mountain."

"Will it be over by Thanksgiving?" The holiday was only ten days away.

"Don't count on it. He won't leave Pha Thi until he takes it or gets beat. Either way, it's gonna take a long time."

"Are you going to start moving refugees out of there now?"

"Near as I can tell, there's about 6,000 people in the area who want to move, if you count the ones from Pha Thi who moved down to the jungle when the Communists come. But the general don't want me to move 'em yet. He's afraid that if his soldiers see me evacuating refugees, they'll think he's given up on ever taking Pha Thi back."

"Well, that's one less guest for dinner, but I can't say that I'm thankful for it," Anne sighed.

Four days later, Edgar revisited Vang Pao's forward headquarters at a place called Houei Ma, two miles south of the Rock. Still, in spite of continued bombing by Lao Air Force T-28 propeller planes and U.S. jets, his troops had not gained a purchase on the mountain. On the river side it was almost a sheer cliff from the valley floor to the peak. Some of the Meo troops had seized the caves and found large Vietminh stores of salt, rice, blankets, and Meo schoolbooks. It was evident that the North Vietnamese planned to emulate Pop with a refugee program of their own in the area. But the other three slopes of steep, almost barren rock offered little cover for the attackers. No more than three hundred enemy soldiers, dug into bunkers and machine-gun pits near the crest, emerged after each bombing and drove the Meo assault waves away before they had scaled even the lower reaches.

"No problem, my Father," said Vang Pao confidently. "Come back in a few days, and we will have it."

On the day before Thanksgiving, Pop returned. The Meo general's

confident façade was gone. "It is very difficult," he said. "More difficult than I thought. I still think I can win. It will take time."

"Don't get discouraged, General. That rock ain't as important as the people around it. You've already saved 6,000, and we're taking care of 'em. Ernie Kuhn's got 'em all together at Houei Kah Moun, just a few miles from here. You want him to keep 'em there together, don't you? You'll need these people if you do get this mountain back."

Vang Pao searched Pop's eyes thoughtfully with his own. "I still hope I will win, my Father," he said. "But the time has come, I think. Evacuate the refugees. At least they will be saved."

"What shall I tell people when they ask me what you are plannin' to do?" Edgar asked.

"Tell them I will have Pha Thi in another four days." But Pop knew that Vang Pao did not believe it.

Albert Fouré supervised the baking of the hams and the turkeys, which he dressed and placed in military rank and file beside each of the eight propane gas ovens in the Western-style houses of Sam Thong. Anne and Brenda arranged cranberry sauce, relishes, sweet potatoes, and green vegetables, and the widow Mi Si enlisted a dozen village women to boil two hundred pounds of sticky valley rice and dry hill rice for the guests. A giant H-shaped banquet table was laid on the weed-covered slope in front of Pop's stone house, adjacent to the hospital. It was covered in white cotton cloth, normally used by the hospital for shrouding the dead. Two bars, supervised by Garry Peters, were set up at the far ends of the H. Both were well stocked with *lau lau*, Scotch, bourbon, beer, and a rumlike Thai whiskey called Mekong. In front of the great table was a sign, carefully hand-lettered by Anne Bradley:

"Dinner at 2, Leftovers at 6."

The guests began arriving at 10:30 A.M., and among the first were Pat and Jiggs Weldon, who brought two dozen pumpkin pies. By noon there were close to three hundred people gathered clannishly around the still barren banquet table: Lao and Lao Thung at one end, Meo at the other, and the Americans in the center. It was like a garden party that included four castes of Indians, each of whom

thought the others untouchable. Then Edgar disappeared, and the mutual consternation among all of the guests brought them together, mingling freely and anxiously asking one another why Tan Pop had left his own feast before it even began. Absent, too, was Naoh Teu, the gold-toothed former spy, who had helped Anne and Mi Si to recruit dozens of Meo girls to serve the food.

A few minutes before the Thanksgiving feast was to begin, Anne and the others saw two Meo men, one tall and the other squat and short, ambling across the far end of the airstrip a quarter of a mile away. Both wore baggy black pants and tunics, and the silver chains around their necks glistened in the sunlight.

"There's Naoh Teu," she cried, pointing toward the tall one, "but where's Pop? It's almost time to start eating."

As the two drew closer, it was clear that the short Meo, padding across the laterite airstrip on pale-skinned feet, was Edgar Buell. He had become a Meo clansman for the day, and as a Meo he brought all four groups together in the first public occasion at which most of the guests had ever deigned to eat from the same table, talk to and drink with what they had always assumed to be their ethnic inferiors. Many of the Americans at the banquet were no different from the Lao, Lao Thung, and Meo in this respect. As sometimes happens at such celebrations, a sentimental gaiety pervaded the mass of guests, mingling without regard to race as the food was served. Hundreds of small children from the three native communities of Sam Thong hovered near the edge of the banquet crowd and were infected by the apparent cross-cultural good spirits, too. They played freely together, Lao, Lao Thung, and Meo, for the first time. At the end of the dinner, Pop explained the meaning of the American holiday, first in Meo, then in Lao, then in English. Finally, he said:

"Nine years ago, when I had my first Thanksgiving in Laos, a lot of people grumbled and said there wasn't much to be thankful for. It looked bad then, bad for everybody in Laos. But I thought we had a lot to be thankful for, an' I told 'em so. We had friends, we had life, and we had hope. Things are worse in Laos now than they was then. We've lost a lot of friends, a lot of lives. But we've still got hope—hope that this goddamned war will end, hope that no matter how it comes

out, the people can find freedom to live their lives accordin' to their own ambitions, in peace. Hope for more of what we got here today—*san mah ki*, unity of people—so that they have peace among themselves. Hope that we Americans can work out our problems, too, an' have *san mah ki* at home and with the whole world. Hope that when peace comes, the only Americans in Laos will be the ones that come because you want 'em to help you, not because the war an' starvation an' misery don't give you no choice. Well, we still got life, lots of it. An' we still got friends, although some of the best ones are gone. An' we still got hope. I think we still got a lot to be thankful for.

"Anne, take down that sign and give the leftovers to the kids."

Pop revisited Vang Pao's field headquarters near Pha Thi on the fifteenth day of the battle, and again on the twentieth. At the base of the Rock, there was nothing to be thankful for. In almost three weeks of constant fighting, only one company of Meo soldiers had managed to gain a foothold on the mid-slope of the mountain. After a day of punishing fire from the deep stone bunkers near the crest, they were driven off, dragging their dead with them. By the twenty-fifth day, three hundred Meo had been killed. The living were exhausted and rebellious. It was no comfort to know that the enemy lost more men attempting to send replacements and fresh supplies to the fortress-like garrison at Pha Thi. Vang Pao had lost the battle, and he knew it. On the twenty-seventh day he ordered his army to withdraw in defeat toward Na Khang.

Edgar knew that the tough little Meo general was depressed, but he did not sense the depth of his depression until he drove to the French colonial villa in Long Tieng and walked in the door, expecting to find the long dining table set for the evening meal, which Vang Pao always shared with his staff officers. Ordinarily there were thirty places at the table, and every night that Vang Pao was in Long Tieng, the table was full. It was the daily gathering place of the Meo leadership.

Tonight the table was empty. At its end sat Vang Pao, frail and undistinguished in wrinkled slacks and a rumpled cotton sports shirt, as if he had been dressed by a social worker in cast-off, second-hand

clothes. He looked dolefully at Pop, standing in the doorway, and cradled his head in his arms on the table. For the first time since his childhood, the Meo general cried.

"Where is everybody?" asked Pop quietly.

"They are afraid to come here. Afraid to be with me," said Vang Pao, reaching deeply for a breath to still his sobbing. "I have lost face with my people. I have lost face with the whole world."

Edgar moved quickly to the head of the table and laid a hand on the small general's arm. Vang Pao's tears stopped, but still he remained slumped dejectedly in his chair.

"Many years ago," he said, "I read the speeches and writings on guerilla war by Nguyen Vo Giap, the Communist general who defeated the French. Always he concluded his speeches with the phrase, '*and we will win!*' His people believed him, and he won. Always I have done the same. I have told the people again and again that we will win. They believed me. Now I have lost. They will not believe me again."

"Get ahold of yourself," Edgar purposely shouted, to shock the Meo leader. "You lost a battle. You ain't lost the war. And you ain't lost your people, either. Sure, their morale's all shot to hell right now, but they'll get over it."

Vang Pao straightened and looked ruefully at Pop. "I know you speak harshly to me for my own good, my Father," he said. "Maybe it is not as dark as I have been telling myself since I retreated from Pha Thi. But it is bad. You saw my soldiers when you were there. I took you with me to inspect the new recruits. Did you not see them? A third of them were only twelve years old. Their rifles are longer than they are. They should be in school, not fighting. The rest were men in their thirties. They should be farming, not fighting. When you looked at them, couldn't you see?" Again his eyes began to stream tears. "The good ones are all dead, my Father. Dead. These are all I have left. It is late. We have fought for nine years. There is no way we can win."

"But you can hold, General, you can hold."

"Hold what?" asked Vang Pao, staring morosely at the empty doorway behind Edgar. "This mountain? Sam Thong? Maybe." He shifted his weight in the chair as he reached for a handkerchief and wiped his glistening cheeks. "And then where will we go? Do you remember

a long time ago, Tan Pop, when we talked about what we would do when the war ended? We joked. We thought maybe we would go to Thailand and find a friendly mountain. We would raise the best pigs in the world, and we would both be rich. Now we can only go to Thailand as fugitives." He straightened and lifted his chin high.

"I am the Meo General Vang Pao," he said, as if delivering a sentence upon his own head. "The King of Laos believed in me. Prince Souvanna Phouma believed in me. They took me, a Meo peasant, into the King's own Council. Now I have been defeated. I am no longer the great Meo general."

"It ain't all lost, General. You know that. We can figure somethin' out."

"It is already figured out for us, my Father," said Vang Pao. "We must stay here. We must die here. There is no place to go. For many centuries my people have had a saying. They had it long before they left China. There is always another mountain, they said. My Father, there are no more mountains."

Chapter 24

Hoping that you will understand in what I meant about this writing, I am also hoping that you will enjoy to read, to see, to hear, to remember, to study and to do all successes and sincerity for all the Lao people.

Yours faithfully,
Thongsar Boupcha

VANG PAO'S spirits lifted somewhat in the succeeding days, but still he talked depressingly of defeat. One night early in 1969 Edgar asked the general to accompany him to the bamboo-and-thatch home of a Meo friend in Long Tieng. The two men sat on logs before an open fire inside the hut. Vang Pao still was dressed like a derelict, and the surprised host at first did not recognize him. His wife handed a glass of *lau lau* to each of them, and for a time all four chatted about rice and pigs and the growth of agriculture in the hills. Twice the Meo woman refilled their glasses. Then, with her husband, she withdrew.

"You brought me here to talk, Tan Pop? You have problems?" asked Vang Pao.

"No, General, you've got problems," said Pop, "and I'm gonna chew at you until you do something about 'em. It's time somebody shook you up. You're like a little boy sulking because he's lost a game. If you could look at yourself right now, you'd see what I mean. Your face looks weak. You're dressed like a bum, worse'n me, even. You've let your people down. Now you're lettin' your whole army down. Who do you suppose is runnin' the army while you sit around feelin' sorry for yourself? Nobody, that's who. And nobody will, until you crawl out of your tent and start actin' like a man again." Buell was merciless

as he bit into the Meo leader's pride and castigated him for letting a single defeat drive him to total despair. "It ain't the first time you've lost a battle, for God's sakes. Remember Padong? Your people have never been in worse shape than they was then. But you rallied 'em. You told me then it was a time to fall back and rebuild. You told me that you and me together had to lift the people up. I'd take care of the civilians. You'd take care of the soldiers. Well, you sure ain't takin' care of 'em now." Steadily, like a loud drum beating into Vang Pao's ears, Buell's anger throbbed with accusation after accusation until the general, for the second time in his adult life, was on the verge of tears.

"What can I do?" he cried. "Tell me. What can I do?"

"I'll tell you what you can do. You can get off that stool you're sittin' on. I want you to go on home now and go to bed. Tomorrow morning you get up and put on the best uniform you've got, with the brightest general's stars you can find. At dawn you go out to that airfield and tell 'em you want a chopper, right now! You're goin' out to the mountains to give the troops and the people a lift. This ain't just somethin' you *should* do, General. This is somethin' you *must* do."

Silently, Vang Pao drank another glass of *lau lau*. Then he arose from the fire. "Good night, Tan Pop," he said stiffly, and he left.

The next day he was at the airstrip at dawn, and by nightfall he had visited eighteen Meo villages, most of them also military encampments. That night Pop returned to the French colonial house, uncertain how the general would react to the lecture of the night before. The long table was almost filled with staff officers busily talking about future plans. For the first time since Pha Thi, the general seemed relaxed. But he was far from happy.

"Last night you told me what I had to hear," he said to Edgar. "You spoke with anger, but I know that you were not truly angry. You were my Father, telling me to act. You were right. Now we must face the future. It will be hard, awfully hard. Today I saw the people. They welcomed me, and that made me feel better. But they are defeated. It will be very difficult to rebuild, even to hold. I must make plans quickly. You go back and take care of the people. I've committed myself to do my part until the end.

"Now I must speak to you like a Father. Someday, probably soon,

the Americans will have to leave Laos, no matter what happens. I want you to remain, not as a worker for your Government, but as one of us. You have been one of us for many years. We have had bad times and good times since you came. In the future I think we will have mostly bad times. Many people will die. But many will live, and with them the Meo will rise again. They will need you. Not your food and your refugee supplies. Only you. You will never want for a place to live and food to eat and friends. The enemy will never get you. I promise you that. Never."

"I guess I've committed myself, too," said Edgar. "Whatever happens, I reckon we'll both die here."

Since his second attack of pneumonia years before, after reconnoitering Sam Neua city with the bold Colonel Thong, Edgar's health had been surprisingly good, considering the dismal conditions under which he lived. But not long after the death of Neah Ying he had suffered a devastating attack of malaria, a new mutant variety of the mosquito-borne disease that is seemingly immune to chloroquine and other modern medicines. Jiggs Weldon, who contracted the same illness a few months later, cared for him through six weeks of debilitating fever and chills, and wanted to send him home to Indiana for a long, recuperative rest. But Edgar refused.

Now, in the spring of 1969, as he made his way tirelessly through the mountains of Xieng Khouang attempting to rally the spirits of a half-million defeated refugees, the disease struck again. Once again the Weldons took him into their home and cared for him, although Jiggs again suffered a relapse of his own malaria. In May, Pat Weldon personally ordered her old friend evacuated to the United States. This time most of Edgar's friends in Laos said goodbye with unusual sincerity. Few thought they would ever see him again.

"Do you think he'll stay home this time?" asked Charles Mann, back for his second tour as Director of AID in Vientiane.

"No," said Pat. "Not unless someone runs over him before he can catch a plane back."

Paul White moved into Edgar's stone house when the old farmer left Sam Thong, because someone had to stay there to welcome the hundreds of natives who visited and asked, uncertainly, when Tan Pop would return. One night as he sat chatting idly with a friend before a roaring fire in the stone hearth of Edgar's strong house, he said, "He'll be back. I think this is the only real home Pop Buell has." Then he said:

"There are two great doctrines competing with each other in this little part of Asia: the sayings of Mao Tse-tung, and the sayings of Pop Buell. He has to come back to hold up his side. It might be hard to believe that a tired, sick little American farmer, whose English is so bad it makes you wince, has that much influence in a country like this. But it's true. Most of the people are betting that Tan Pop's influence will win out in the end, no matter how the fighting goes. Because Pop doesn't really give a damn about politics, or war, or who wields the power, so long as the people get a fair break. All he really cares about is helping people who have been knocked flat by this war to get back on their own feet. He wants them to have better agriculture so they can feed themselves without help, and maybe even make a profit on food exports. He wants them to build more schools. He wants them to have enough medical care to make their lives useful after thirty, when most of them die, and to keep their kids alive after childbirth. You know what? In a way, he's already succeeded. Education, medicine, and improved agriculture are institutions up here now. It would be hard to tear them down, even with more war. The other side works just as hard as we do to preserve them. They've learned something from Pop. They give away rice and blankets and pots and pans to needy refugees. They've started printing schoolbooks that are even better than ours because they've inaugurated the first written Meo language. But back to the two competing doctrines. The other side is out to capture the people so they can control them in the future. Pop just wants to help them get on their own feet so they can help themselves in the future. That's the difference."

Edgar's health returned during the summer. He relaxed with his high-school teacher son-in-law, Wesley Geddys, and his daughter Har-

riety, on their chicken ranch near Columbus, Ohio, spending his days fishing in their bass pond and playing with his two grandchildren there. Then he visited his own old farm, to which his son Howard and daughter-in-law Bonnie had added eighty acres and more modern equipment. He drove their two children around Steuben County and visited his mother, his brothers, and his old friends. And he realized that at fifty-six he was too old to start farming again, and too young to spend the rest of his days on a bass pond, or playing with his grandchildren. He had to go back.

There was another reason behind his decision. In his absence, Vang Pao had rallied his dispirited army for another, possibly final, attack against the enemy on the Plaine des Jarres. Meo and Lao troops under Vang Pao's command stormed into Xieng Khouang city, much as Jua Pao and his ragged band of guerrillas had done years before, and seized a vast cache of enemy arms and supplies. A month later, after American airplanes had dropped so many bombs that Lhat Houang, Khang Khay, and Ban Ban literally had ceased to exist, Vang Pao's troops took control of the entire Plaine. The pendulum was swinging again, this time with a vicious quality unhappily added by the American Air Force. It left Edgar with mixed emotions, but he knew that the small cataclysm on the Plaine had created thousands of new refugees.

"We say we help them fight their wars," Pop bitterly told a friend after the devastating bombing attacks. "We use them only to fight our wars, wars we start. I still believe never use a man unless in some way he can get equal good from you. You don't only win him, but all who knows him. What I'm after is to prove that with the proper methods, people can be helped, enemies conquered, be it man or disease, with determination, a thinking soul, an understanding of your fellow man, even if he's your enemy, without jealousy or hate. My greatest success came when the enemy started copying me with the schools. If you love a man's children, sooner or later his hate toward you must leave."

As he prepared to leave Harriet's house in Ohio to fly back to Laos, he felt as if he was beginning the frightful task of rescue all over again, like a farmer putting in a new crop after a nine-year drought. A friend asked him why he kept on.

“Everything turns in time, and it’ll turn again in Laos, some day,” he said. “Maybe it’s turnin’ now, maybe it’ll be ten years or fifty years before there’s peace. But when that day comes, these people is gonna remember what Tan Pop stood for, whether they remember me or not. They’ll be just a little better off for my bein’ there, and that’s the only thing that keeps me goin’. No man is big enough or brave enough to go on workin’ like this without some kind of purpose. I’m sowin’ seeds that, by God, someday is gonna grow.”

(continued from front flap)

face the grim realities of a war they don't understand—a war that promises to face the U.S. with another potential Vietnam.

The facts surrounding Mister Pop are incredible. His story, filled with adventures and deep friendships with a cast of native and American companions caught up in the tragedies and hopes of a primitive land, is told by Don Schanche, who came to know him in Laos. It is exciting and unforgettable.

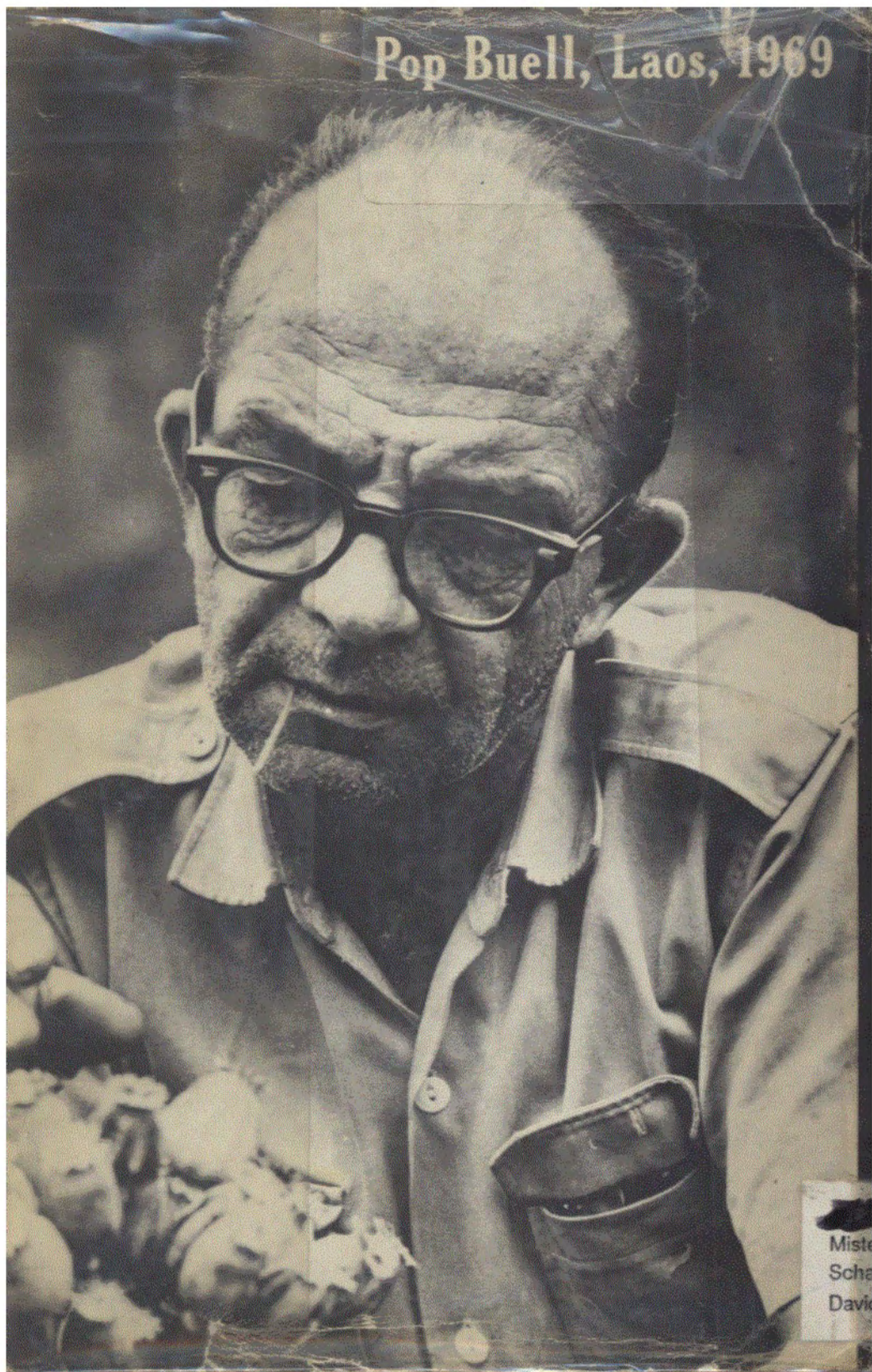
Don A. Schanche is the author of fifty major articles that have appeared in *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Reader's Digest* and other magazines. He has been Managing Editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, an editor of *Sports Illustrated* and *Life*, and editor-in-chief of *Holiday*. Since 1967 he has written on a free-lance basis covering the wars in Laos and Vietnam. He has also written on many other topical subjects. Mr. Schanche lives in Larchmont, New York, with his wife and three children.

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