

**THOMAS A. DOOLEY, M. D.**

# *The Night They Burned the Mountain*

Author of

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

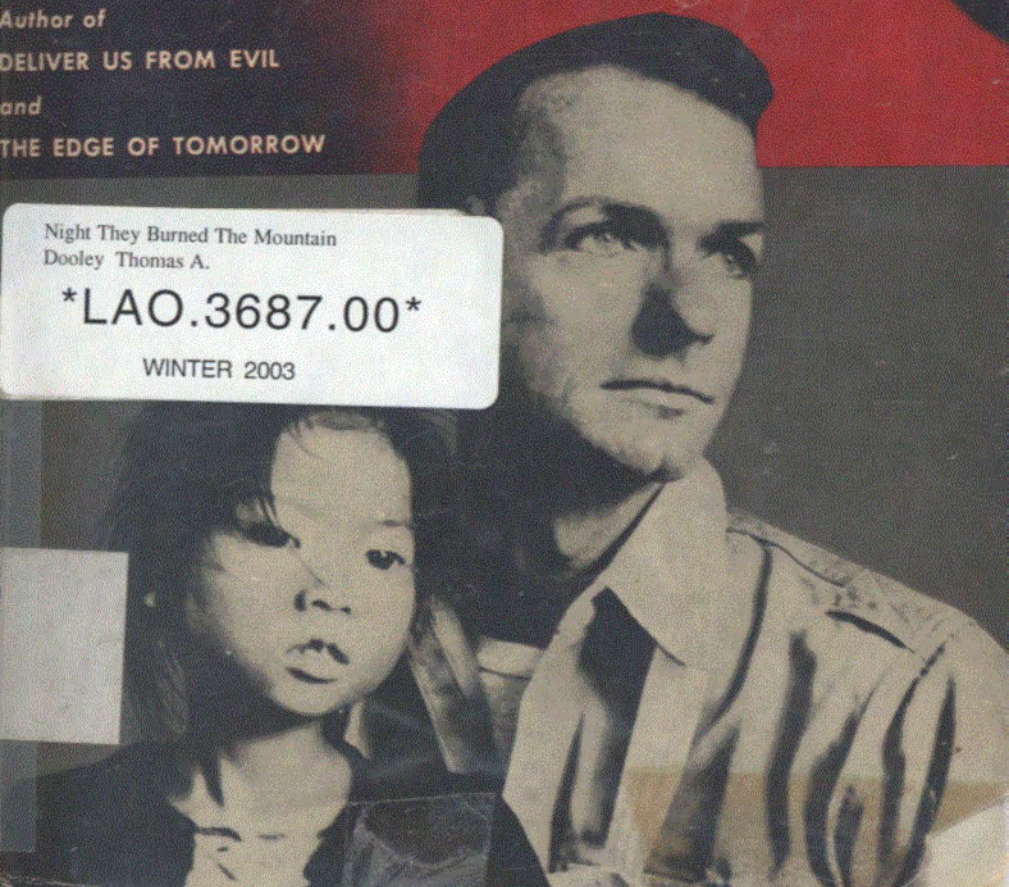
and

THE EDGE OF TOMORROW

Night They Burned The Mountain  
Dooley Thomas A.

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WINTER 2003



THOMAS A. DOOLEY, M.D.

# *The Night They Burned the Mountain*

*Illustrated with photographs  
by Erica Anderson*

The saga of Doctor Tom Dooley—"the Splendid American," as he has been called—continues to grow as a national legend. *The Night They Burned the Mountain* is the latest installment of his inspirational story of healing the sick in remote and primitive lands beyond the reach of modern medicine.

After establishing a hospital in Laos, in the village of Nam Tha, Dr. Dooley turned it over to natives whom he had trained to carry on. He then returned to America to help in launching MEDICO, a non-profit organization which raises money to send doctors and medical help to underdeveloped countries. Having done this, Dr. Dooley returned to Laos again to found another hospital, the subject of this book.

The new scene of activity is the village of Muong Sing in the northwest corner of Laos. Not far from Nam Tha as the crow flies (but a day's journey away by land), Muong Sing is situated on the western side of an 8,000-foot mountain about six miles from Red China. With two new American volunteers, Earl Rhine and Dwight Davis of Austin, Texas, Dr. Dooley relieved disease and suffering among the natives, who have their own

*(continued on back flap)*

**THE NIGHT THEY  
BURNED THE MOUNTAIN**

*Books by Dr. Dooley*

**DELIVER US FROM EVIL.**

**THE EDGE OF TOMORROW**

**THE NIGHT THEY BURNED THE MOUNTAIN**

**DOCTOR TOM DOOLEY, MY STORY (*juvenile*)**

*Thomas A. Dooley, M.D.*

THE NIGHT THEY  
BURNED THE MOUNTAIN

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TO MY MOTHER

*with deep gratitude for giving me her tender  
love as a shield against life's winds and storms.*

TO DWIGHT DAVIS AND EARL RHINE

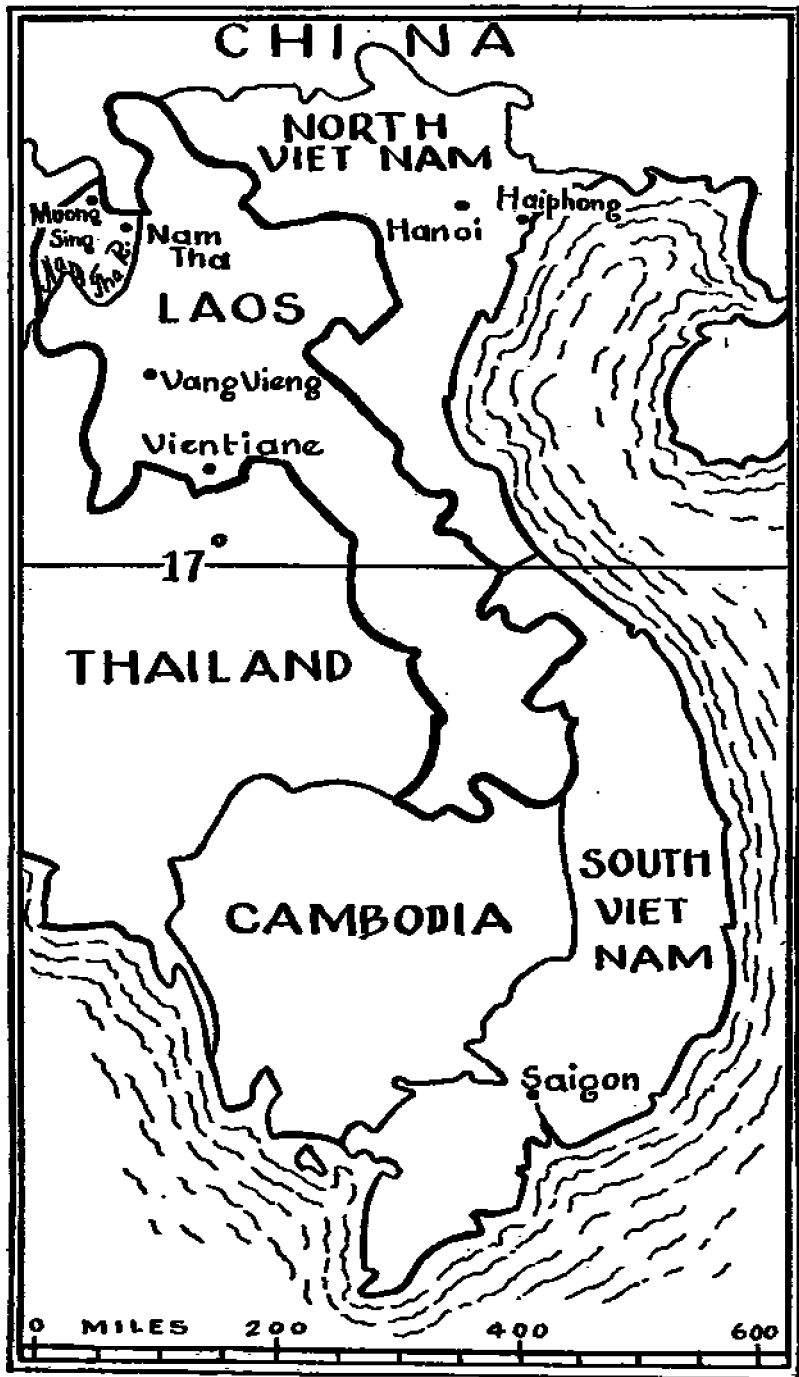
*with whom I've shared joys and worries, dis-  
appointments and quiet triumphs in the fog-  
shrouded valley of Muong Sing.*

**The author wishes to express his thanks to Miss Erica Anderson for the use of her photographs. All but two of the pictures in the thirty-two page insert between pages 64 and 65 were taken by her.**



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## ONE •

### BEFORE MY HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

It was a Saturday, at high noon, when the tired-looking Lao soldier came into my clinic in the little village of Muong Sing in northern Laos. He snapped to a slightly languid salute and said, "*Thank Mo America, mi tayah. Doctor America, you have a telegram.*"

What could this mean? Coming on the military radio, it must be about the war. My heart jumped a little and with a dry mouth I said, "*Ou he kai. Give it to me.*"

He said that it was being held at the radio shack in the fortress, and I should accompany him there. I turned the line of patients over to Earl Rhine, one of my assistants, and walked out into the rain, across the road to the fortress.

There was war in Laos, and there were rumors of more war. Only four days before, the Voice of America had broadcast that over four thousand Red troops were in the two provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly. Other troops were massing on the Vietnamese side of the frontier and a new attack was expected. Would it spread to the China frontier? Would we be able to go on practising medicine much longer in this little village located at a point where Laos, China, and Burma meet?

In the mud radio-shack another Lao soldier thrust a flimsy,

crumpled sheet of blue paper into my hand. He said it had been forwarded from the Lao Army headquarters in the capital. He was sorry he was so many hours late in getting it to me but "*het punh*," the war, you know. This limp piece of paper was to become a turning-point in my life. Noon, Saturday, August 15, in the year 1959.

My knees were shaking. I sat down on the wooden bench beside the radio operator, and smoothed out the thin blue paper on the table. I tried to make out the sentences. As the Lao language has no Roman letters, French is used in telegraph messages. Each letter of the telegram was in a box by itself. When I wrote out the message with its long introductory order to the local Commandant, the part addressed to me looked like this:

FROMPE TER COMAND URAS DOCTOR DOOLEY URGENT RETURN  
TOUS IMMEDIATELY

The message made no sense to me. I asked that it be retransmitted. The operator said that this would take hours, but I insisted. I went back to the clinic and showed the garbled words to the boys. Dwight Davis, my other assistant, took out a pencil and immediately divided the letters so that the sentence read in English as follows:

FROM PETER COMANDURAS: DOCTOR DOOLEY, URGENT RETURN  
TO U. S. IMMEDIATELY

How quickly Dwight grasped and understood that telegram—how strangely quick.

Suddenly the earth seemed to open up underneath me. Return to the U. S. now? I was intending to go in three months anyway. Why *now*? Had something happened to my mother? Had something bad happened to MEXICO? Had the Ambassador to Laos notified the State Department of

my refusal to leave and had they in turn requested Dr. Peter Comanduras, as chief of MEDICO, to order me out? Why didn't Peter explain himself? Why did he just say "Urgent, return to U. S.?" Didn't he know that we were involved in a war? Didn't he know that the wounded might start flowing into this hospital tomorrow? Didn't he know that the mountains of Laos were on fire? What could be so urgent that I must come home *now*, instead of when I was due to go home in a few months? Didn't Peter know that Laos was moving deeper and deeper into the shadows? This was not the time to abandon my work. Didn't he know what the Communists would say if I deserted my hospital? "A typical American reactionary imperialistic coward."

I had complete confidence in Doctor Peter Comanduras as Chief of MEDICO, but why was he ordering me out now, without explanation? He was living in the civilized world. I was living in the world beyond. More than mere miles separated us. How could he judge what must be done when he was not on the scene? It seemed to me that the sky was full of the sound of thunder. It seemed to me that the night was coming at high noon. "Urgent Doctor Dooley return to U. S. immediately." This meant that I must abandon my hospital, abandon all I had done, abandon all the work of the last year. "Urgent, return to U. S. immediately." The letters in that telegram stared up at me and stabbed my soul.

The things that I felt in my heart I said with my mouth. I asked all these questions of my two Texan assistants, Earl and Dwight. They offered no answers. They didn't even try to present anything good, except that Earl said, "Maybe you're going home to do a TV show," at which I growled back in anger.

The message had been sent by the Lao army. How did they get it? Why did Peter wire me through the Lao army?



































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































