

The Yankee 'King' of Laos

By DON SCHANCHE

THE STRONGEST FORCE behind the headlines in the strange, secret war of the CIA-supported Meo guerillas in Laos is a 57-year-old retired Indiana farmer whose bizarre career as humanitarian, battle tactician and homespun philosopher combines the qualities of Albert Schweitzer, Lawrence of Arabia and Will Rogers.

He is Edgar (Pop) Buell, area coordinator for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Northeast Laos and key figure in the long struggle against the Communist Pathet Lao. The primitive Meo tribesmen think of him as a demi-god. His close friendship with their mysterious chieftain, Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, has often turned the course of the war and influenced American policy in that war-torn little country.

The aging Hoosier, a plain and homely man even by Grant Wood standards, has lived with the Meo in the mountains around the famed Plaine des Jarres since 1961. He has led them in victory, rallied them in defeat, founded their first schools and hospitals, performed emergency surgery, including 30 amputations, and taught them a crude but efficient "new" kind of 19th century agriculture.

"If I can get 'em from a thousand years behind the rest of the world to only 70 or 80 years behind," Buell said, "they're that much better off, ain't they?"

In his devotion to the welfare of the half million Meo and Lao refugees under his care, Buell frequently boils over with irritation at American bureaucrats and diplomats who resist his demands for short-cuts in speeding supplies to

the displaced people. His deep friendships not only with Gen. Vang Pao and other Meo leaders, but with Premier Souvanna Phouma and dozens of other Laotian leaders, including King Savang Vatthana himself, has made even high State Department officials reluctant to cross swords with him.

As I write this, Buell and his close friend, Vang Pao, a tough tribal leader who rules like an old-fashioned Chinese

war lord, are on the run. The Indianan fled under Communist fire just a few days ago from his refugee headquarters and supply base at Sam Thong, a provincial capital he founded seven years ago on a high mountain plateau 15 miles south of the Plaine des Jarres.

THE MEO GENERAL, who calls Buell "my father" and occasionally ignores his CIA advisers to follow the old farmer's advice, is fighting to save his own headquarters 19 miles away. It is an equally "new" town called Long Tieng and it has been swollen to the proportions of an American suburb by a vast infusion of equipment and men from the CIA, the U.S. Air Force and the Army of Thailand.

When I first visited Long Tieng eight years ago, it was an abandoned opium poppy field in a bowl-like delicately high in the mountains. When I saw the Meo stronghold last year, it was the second largest city in Laos, bigger than the royal capital of Luang Prabang and almost as large as the political capital, Vientiane.

Communist capture of these two mountain bases in the crazy-quilt little war will be a disaster comparable, on Laos' small scale, to what the American command in Vietnam would face if Danang and Saigon were to be seized by the Viet Cong.

Ironically, all Buell and Vang Pao ever sought was a period of peace in the mountains and an opportunity to integrate the backward Meo into the social fabric of Laos. What has happened instead is that both have become tragically

embroiled in a 10-year war in which American involvement has grown from a few bags of rice, given by Pop Buell to Meo war refugees in 1961, to a losing, last-ditch stand involving hundreds of American fighter bombers, more than a billion dollars worth of munitions, a hundred-odd U.S. Army unit advisers and dozens of CIA counter-insurgency experts.

When President Nixon minimizes American involvement in ground combat in Laos, he obviously hasn't been told about Pop Buell, just as he reportedly was not told about the death of Army Captain Joseph Bush in combat at Muong Souk, Laos, which I reported, to the consternation of the White House, a few weeks ago.

BUELL has led Meo troops in battle many times. On one occasion a few years ago, his presence alone was credited with holding together a pitifully weak defense of a small town called Nam Quang

during a bloody, three-day enemy attack. Once, he personally trained and led a Meo commando demolition team that blew up 30 kilometers of the Communists' main supply highway from Hanoi to the Plaine des Jarres, stalling the enemy's war in Laos for a precious six months.

On another occasion, Buell advanced with a guerrilla patrol to the fenceline of the Pathet Lao's main headquarters in Sam Neua city, close to the North Vietnamese border. After helping to reconnoiter the stronghold, he caught pneumonia on the lone trek back to his own base camp and almost died.

Twenty times in the last 10 years, Buell has been forced to flee under fire into the darkened jungle to escape Communist attacks against villages in which he was sleeping, and each time he has led thousands of terrified refugees out with him. On one night alone, early in the war, he saved 9,000 Meo and Lao people from slaughter by leading them away from a pursuing enemy force. For these actions and his unstinting humanitarian work among Laotian and Meo war refugees, King Savang Vatthana of Laos awarded him the highest decoration a foreigner can receive, the Order of a Million Elephants. The Meo have given him divine status and call him "Tan Pop," which means "Mister Sent From Above."

Buell has had one near-fatal heart attack in the Laos mountains and suffers almost every month from recurring bouts of malaria. He has survived four mountain plane crashes and has been under fire almost daily for 10 years, yet he never has been wounded. Vang Pao, on the other hand, has been shot twice

and seriously injured several times in crashes of the small courier planes he and Edgar Buell use to hop around the mountains of northeast Laos.

Both are tireless workers. It is rare to find either putting in less than an 18-hour day. "I was always of the opinion that I ought to do a little bit extra after I did my day's work," said Buell. "It's that little bit that sells America to these people."

The fates of Laos and American interests in that country have been intertwined since the two small men (each is 5'4") first met in a native restaurant in the village of Lhat Houang, just south of the Plaine des Jarres in 1960. They sealed a personal pact that night which has often overshadowed the policies of both the Laotian government and the United States.

Buell then was a volunteer agricultural adviser, receiving token pay of \$65 a month from International Volunteer Services, a private peace corps which still works under contract to USAID.

