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april 16, 1965

SAIGON--Exactly twenty years ago this month, an efficient, but straggly band of guerrillas wandered through the forests of Indo-China searching for downed American pilots.

"We walked fifty kilometers (thirty miles) a day, up and down the hills," one Saigon businessman recalled. "That was a long way. I remember the first day I started walking, I made only twenty kilometers (12 miles). I thought it was the end of the world. When we picked up the American pilots, they weren't used to walking either--and they wanted to ride our pack horses. We used to get so mad at them, because the horses slowed us down--and we had to keep moving fast.

"I remember we picked up one American flyer ~~from a French hospital~~ with a brain wound. The French had moved out a French Legionnaire from the hospital bed and gave it to the American flyer, telling the ~~Japan~~ Japanese authorities he was French. We took him all the way into China --but I don't think he ^{was} much good after that."

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The leader of the guerrilla band was Ho Chi Minh, now the President of North Viet Nam. Today, twenty years later, American flyers are bombing his country.

"I remember sleeping every night on the rice mat on the ground beside Ho Chi Minh," the businessman continued. "I'll never forget seeing Ho Chi Minh sleeping one night in the back of a dirty bakery shop. He stayed there for three weeks--and for three weeks in a nearby house a Chinese (Nationalist) intelligence agent slept. The Chinese had been sent to arrest Ho Chi Minh--but he didn't even know Ho Chi Minh when he saw him. Everyone had heard of Ho Chi Minh as an important leader--but the Chinese ~~expect~~ expected him to travel with a big entourage and a number of bodyguards--but he never did."

The irony of rescuing American flyers--and twenty years later to receive airstrikes by them--was one of the many paradoxes of politics witnessed by Ho Chi Minh during his three-quarters of a century of living.

He was first a member of the French Communist Party--but thirty years later was to lead the resistance war against the French colonialists in Viet Nam. He ^{is} a recruit of the Moscow Communist Party--and thirty years later cold-shouldered the Russians.

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Representing the Russian Communist Party, he was assigned as a military instructor and advisor with a Russian delegation to the Whampoo Military Academy near Canton--where he helped train Chinese troops for General Chiang Kai-shek. During this period, he was to witness the Russians assisting the Nationalist Chinese--instead of the Chinese Communists--which ~~was~~ was the initial split between the Russian and Chinese Communist Parties. Later, while he was at Whampoo, The Chinese Nationalists attempted to crush the Chinese Communists, and a young party member named Mao Tse-Tung fled the area.

Ho Chi Minh was a Bolshevik before a young Russian official named Joseph Stalin had been heard of; he was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party when a youthful Chinese named Mao Tse-Tung was only a provincial resistance leader.

~~Ho Chi Minh~~

Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam--including anti-Communist South Vietnam--is both a man and a myth. Long ago fact has become inter-twinned with fiction. He was born about 1890; his real name was probably Nguyen Chi Thanh (The Most Sincere), but no one knows for certain. He later wrote under the ~~name~~ name of Nguyen Nguyen Ai-Quoc (Nguyen The Patriot), and much later used the alias of Ho Chi Minh--which means the most enlightened Enlightened One."

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Ho Chi Minh was born in Nghe An province, north of the 17th parallel, of which the provincial capital is Vinh, which was bombed during the Tonkin Gulf crisis in August and which was raided frequently in the airstrikes by American planes since February. His father was a Chinese-educated scholar, but Ho Chi Minh's ancestors had been mandarins serving the imperial administrative system. Ho Chi Minh's father--either because he failed or was anti-French--refused to become a mandarin, and as a virtually penniless teacher traveled to Saigon, leaving behind his children. When Ho Chi Minh was a young teenager, he, too, traveled to Saigon to see his father--who ~~mandarin~~ reportedly told him he was old enough to take care of himself. Like his father, Ho Chi Minh became a drifter--but the Communists still call Saigon "the city of Ho Chi Minh."

"When we were walking through the jungles, we'd ask Ho Chi Minh about his family," the Saigon businessman explained. "But he never said anything about them. He talked only about the country--but not about his family."

According to one report, even when Ho Chi Minh was President in 1945, his sister came to the Presidential Palace to see him--but he sent her home after only a half-hour chit-chat.

"But Ho Chi Minh would send me scrawled notes asking me to tea," recalled the Saigon businessman who had helped search for American pilots.

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"Even as President, Ho Chi Minh was a very simple man--very kind and genteel," the businessman explained. "It was his generals who were cruel and ruthless."

After leaving his father in Saigon, Ho Chi Minh became a stowaway ~~and hid himself~~ on a ship to France; he later worked as a sailor traveling to England, Europe--and reportedly even to Boston. He later became a kitchen-hand in famous restaurants in France and England, where he reportedly specialized in pastry-making. He became an apprentice photographer and ~~typ~~ typeog typographer.

In 1919, he attended the Communist Third Internationale as a delegate of the French Communist Party--when Joseph Stalin was still a minor official and Mao-Tse-Tung was a small-fry provincial leader.

As a ~~representative~~ representative of the French Communist Party--not as a Vietnamese--he was sent to Moscow for more training, to attend more conferences throughout Europe and in 1925 he was sent ~~to~~ as a member of a Russian delegation (he was given Russian citizenship and a Russian name) --to Canton to advise the military ~~and~~ Chinese military academy training troops for General Chia-ng Kai-shek. During this period, Chia-ng was i operating in a brief "honeymoon" alliance with the Chinese Communist Party in their common fight against the Chinese warlords. But the honeymoon was shattered in 1927--the Chinese Communists dispersed to fight both the war' warlords and Chia-ng Kai-shek.

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As the Russian delegation fled back to Moscow, Ho Chi Minh ~~disappeared~~ whereabouts became unknown, but he ~~was~~ soon re-appeared in Northeast Thailand and Laos, where he established Communist Party apparatus--and the degree of Communist subversion in these areas has yet to surface to the outside world. In the late 20's, he ~~was named as the first chief of the~~ became chief of the Asian bureau for the Moscow Communist Party--and his responsibilities extended from Japan to India, Indonesia to Indo-China.

On January 6, 1930, Ho Chi Minh founded the ~~Indo-Chinese~~ Indo-China Communist Party; as economic depression and anti-French sentiments spread in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh established recruiting and training centers for his cadre. One of the recruits in 1932 was a young nationalist party member named Truong Chinh--now the leader the most militant pro-Peking wing of the Communist Party in North Vietnam.

During the thirties--Ho Chi Minh virtually faded from the picture, ~~he~~ but the legends about him spread throughout Vietnam. He was for a time in ~~the~~ a British hail in Hong Kong; later he wandered back and forth across the Vietnamese-Chinese border. When the war against Japan ~~in~~ Japan began, he established his ~~headquarters~~ warzones for his guerrilla bands--American flyers ~~and~~ parachuted in supplies during the final days of the war in return for anti-Japanese intelligence information and the rescue of American fliers.

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As World War II ended in the Pacific, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh troops seized control from the Japanese and named Ho Chi Minh as President--^{on September 2} the post he has held and fought to retain ever since. A year later, the French troops returned to Vietnam to re-claim their colony--the Vietna Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh immediately began the anti-colonial war, which they won eight years later.

Now, in their war against te their so-called "American aggressors", Ho Chi Minh at 75 years of age apparently has left most of the decision-making to the younger Party militants, to the Vietnamese generals who succeeded in defeating the French.

"Ho Chi Minh receives guests in the old French Governor-General's Palace," one traveler from Hanoi reported. "But we don't know where ~~z~~ he lives. He still wears his old battered tunic, with an old pair of ~~sh~~ sandals and no socks. He comes along and lights a cigar at a cocktail party and is very gallant, offering chocolates to the ladies, making a few jokes in fluent English--and then he goes off."

But in the words of the Saigon businessman who had searched for American pilots with Ho Chi Minh twenty years ago, "uncle Ho still commands respect, but in decision making, he ^{has} ~~has~~ a tiny voice that is very far away."

It's rather the end of an era.