

 MONTAGNARDS

Montagnards Revisited: In Search of the Past

BY ROY C. RUSSELL III

The Central Highlands of Vietnam, homeland of the indigenous Montagnard peoples, is once again open to western visitors. Having kept the Highlands off limits to Americans for 18 years since the end of the Vietnam War, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) decided in the spring of 1993 to allow unrestricted and unsupervised travel in the area for the first time. Until then, visits had been limited to occasional, cursory trips by European anthropologists and humanitarian aid delegations, some from the United States, all closely chaperoned by government guides and official agents. Verifiable information about the Montagnards has been scarce since the end of the war in 1975. The historic animosity between them and the ethnic Vietnamese, sharpened by the Marxist-Leninist strategy of cultural leveling, has given rise to well founded fears that the Montagnards might cease to exist as a separate culture. A Montagnard delegation expressed these concerns in a detailed paper presented to the eleventh session of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, in July 1993. Yet very little hard data or first hand observations have been available to help assess current Montagnard conditions.

 In March, 1994, four US Army veterans, a group that included this author, returned to Vietnam for such an appraisal. Each of us had had extensive contact with the Montagnards during the war on both a military and a social level. We had become generally familiar with Montagnard culture and have remained personally involved with the Montagnard community in the US. During the war, each of us had made close Montagnard friends whom we hoped to find during our return trip, and we also carried gifts and greetings from other Montagnards who immigrated to the US after the war, leaving families and friends behind.

Even though our purposes were entirely personal and humanitarian, we were duly concerned about the reaction of the Vietnamese government to a group of four US Army veterans visiting their old comrades. We were also reminded that in the absence of diplomatic relations between the US and Vietnam, we would be on our own in the event of trouble. We resolved to keep the trip both quiet and apolitical. We booked our travel through a US travel agent, who provided airline tickets as far as Pleiku, our gateway into the Highlands. In Pleiku, we planned to hire ground transportation and visit as many villages as we could in the six days available to us. Two of us would travel south from Pleiku, through the area formerly known as Phu Bon Province, to a final destination south of Ban Me Thuot. This route would take us through regions inhabited by the Jarai and the Rhade peoples. The other team would explore Bahnar country from Pleiku through Kontum to Dak To, then to the east through the Mang Yang pass to An Khe.

 While our travel to Pleiku aboard Air Vietnam, the national airline, obviously was subject to government knowledge and control, we had decided not to volunteer any information about our ground itineraries and or to request prior permission to travel into the Montagnard villages. To do so would simply have been to

invite an official veto, which would have brought our entire trip to an early halt. We decided to go as far as we could, as fast as we could, and deal with obstacles as they might occur. As it turned out, we were never stopped or questioned even though much of our time was spent inside areas clearly posted with signs in both Vietnamese and English that prohibited entry. It was never clear to us whether these signs that marked expansive restricted areas were still meant to be observed or were just relics from the period before the Vietnamese government lifted the Highlands travel ban. We chose to infer the latter, reminding ourselves of why American travel had been banned there in the first place.

The official reason given by the SRV had been lack of military security and the threat of physical harm to travelers in the region. Until September 1992, remnants of the Montagnard guerrilla independence movement reportedly were still making occasional raids against government installations and small Vietnamese Army patrols in the field. Once numbering 10,000 people, this Montagnard army of The Unified Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (known by its French acronym FULRO) had dwindled to only a few hundred by 1992. Then, the last known unit of any significant size, numbering about 400, crossed the border into Cambodia, where they made contact with United Nations Peacekeeping forces. Sick, exhausted, and out of material, these last FULRO guerrillas surrendered their weapons and their flag in return for safe transit to the US. Thus, the SRV's official objection to tourism in the Highlands the threat to physical safety evaporated along with the last remnants of FULRO.

Another unstated objection also shrank in importance: the SRV had long been concerned that contacts between the Montagnards and American veterans would serve only to enflame and encourage FULRO sympathizers, who had been among the United States' fiercest and most loyal allies during the war. Recruited, trained, and led by US Special Forces (Green Berets), the Montagnards were a mainstay in blocking communist advances into South Vietnam from their sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. While suffering devastating losses (200,000 killed, 85% of their villages destroyed), they remained a very effective fighting force until the American military completed its withdrawal in the early 1970s. From that point on, as with many other indigenous populations, the fate of the Montagnards hinged on their historic relationship with the ruling ethnic Vietnamese, whose domination of them had produced longterm enmity.

Under the French colonial government, which ended with the Geneva Accords in 1954, the Montagnards had achieved a degree of political autonomy unprecedented since the first Vietnamese incursions into the highlands centuries earlier. Indigenous schools, courts, and churches were protected and encouraged, a policy culminating in 1946 in a federal ordinance that established a special Montagnard administrative division separate from the other Indochinese colonies and governed by its own commissioner.

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