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Extracted from : Friday, July 22, 1994/ Press-Telegram
By : William Mullen, Chicago Tribune

Vietnamese refugee's ongoing journey takes him to Jupiter via South Pole

Chicago - It's hard to yop the adventure of being stranded for nine months at the South Pole to take the beat seat on Earth for watching the comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 slamming into Jupiter.

But a University of Chicago astronomer who is sending back amazing photographs of the celestial collision from his deep frozen polar base figures his life was even more adventurous when he was 17 years old. That was in 1981, when Nguyen Trong Hien and an older brother said goodbye to their parents and boarded a 60-foot boat with 59 of their countrymen to escape Vietnam.

Since then he has been on a grand journey that is perhaps peculiar to the late 20th century, marred by violence and repression and blessed by breathtaking advances in knowledge and technology.

It has taken him from defeated South Vietnam to a refugee camp in Hongkong and eventual resettlement in California. Starting in a junior college, he graduated with a degree in Physics from Berkeley and, last year, earned a Ph.D. in astrophysics from Princeton University.

"I finally left (Vietnam) because of the promise of a good education", Nguyen said Tuesday in an interview via a computer hookup between Chicago and his South Pole laboratory." The risks we faced at the time were not great enough to stop us.

"At the worst, I knew that I would end up in a prison or in a shark's stomach out in the Pacific Ocean. I was only 17. What did I know?" Nguyen so impressed the Priceton faculty that his mentors there urged the University of Chicago to hire him for its SPIREX (South Pole Infrared Explorer) project in Antarctica.

Chocago scientists last year built an ultrasophiticated, prototypical, 24-inch, infrared telescope and installed it at the South Pole.

On Wednesday, Nguyen was busily recording what his colleagues have dubbed a "Four-Peat Bull's-Eye", four comet fragments hitting Jupiter in the same spot overa 17-hour period.

SPIREX is one of several ultrasophiticated machines being tested at the base to search the universe for clues to the origin of stars and galaxies.

"Our telescope measures the lighth of things that are warm" said Mark Hereld, pricipal SPIREX scientists,"so it helps to have it someplace that is cold."

On Tuesday night, Nguyen checked the outside temperature at the Pole. It was minus 83 degrees Fahrenheit. With a 12-knot wind, the windchill factor was 140 degrees below zero.

The base camp is in a domed building less than 100 yards from the actual

South Pole. The dedicate scientific equipment is in a building a mile away, separated from artificial lighth and the camp's noisy diesel generators. Instead, Hereld and a half-dozen scientists in Chicago work closely with Nguyen in Antarctica by computer, giving him instructions much like a ground crew does with an astronaut. SPIREX was going to Antarctica long before the impending collision of the comet and Jupiter was discovered, so watching the collision has been a bonus for the Chicago team (...Boss vu*a' vao' ne^ n ta.m ngu*'ng)