

Pathfinder

November 1, 1950: p. 24

Uncle Ho Strikes Back

Col. Jean Constant, tough commandant of the French Foreign Legion outpost at Langson in Indochina, received unexpected reinforcements last week. But the tanned, half-naked Legionnaires and the barefooted Viet-Nameese troops who came down from the green hills of the northeast were no sign of new French strength.

They were the badly beaten survivors of a month-long series of running battles with Moscow-trained Ho Chi-minh's Communist guerillas.

Outnumbered 10 to 1, these men of many nations who had signed up to fight for the French in Indochina had lost most of their original force of 3,500 men. They were driven out of six towns and a string of log blockhouses along the 300-mile border.

At Langson, within mortar range of the China border, they sipped water and *vin rouge*, cursed "Uncle Ho," but they didn't stay long. Colonel Constant, with a proud record of Foreign Legion service on four continents, soon got his marching orders, pulled out and moved south toward Hanoi, biggest city in Indochina, 80 miles away.

Peaceful Warriors. Ho Chi-minh is a frail man of 58 whose wispy beard makes him look like a sinister character out of a Fu Manchu thriller. For five years, his guerillas, rice farmers by day and fighters by night, have forced France to keep an army of 150,000 in Indochina. The cost: \$1 million a day, or a third of France's defense budget.

The significant news of Ho's October offensive was that he was using better-trained men and more powerful weapons. For that, Ho owes thanks to friends in Communist China. Jean Letourneau, French Minister of Associated States who flew to Indochina to survey the disaster, said: "Beyond any doubt, that is the turning point of this war."

Ho denies he is ready to launch a major offensive, but the monsoons are about over and the six-month dry season lies just ahead, and Frenchmen expect the Communists to shoot the works. Communists around the world could use a major victory in Indochina to take away the sting of defeat in Korea.

In the Communist clutch, Korea would have been a Red dagger pointed at the heart of Japan. But conquest of Indochina, only 900 miles across the China Sea from the Philippines, would provide a springboard for thrusts at Burma, Thailand, Malaya and on to India.

Asiatic Storehouse. Aside from its strategic position on the Asian invasion highway, no thinking Communist overlooks that Indochina is one of the richest economic prizes in the Far East. Before the war, Indochina exported a million

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tons of rice a year, mostly to India and Japan. Red China's Mao Tse-tung has a market for all the rice Indochina could supply to make up for foodstuffs the Russians now take out of Manchuria. The Communists also could use Indochina's coal, tin, zinc, tungsten, lumber, rubber and tea.

With the dry season coming on and the West still concentrating on Korea, Ho will never have a better opportunity to strike than the weeks ahead. French morale is at its lowest ebb. Although they are by no means Communists, 90% of the peasants obey Ho's orders. That's because they want peace and independence and think they have a better chance with Ho than with the French or their Viet-Nam government headed by Bao Dai, the "nightclub Emperor," who returned last week after three gay months on the Riviera.

Humane War. What one French officer said last spring still holds: "We can't win a guerilla war unless we have the support of the people. Frankly, we have not got it. Hitler or the Russians could conquer this country in two months with mass executions, wholesale reprisals and concentration camps. To fight this war and remain humanitarian is difficult."

Last week Viet-Nam's Premier Tran Van Huu lost patience with the French. He assailed the Paris government for its "impossible attitude" in demanding control of all Viet-Nam "down to the tiniest details." He went over French heads, asked the U.S. to help form a 40,000-man Viet-Nam army.

Some Paris military observers say that's only a tenth of the force needed to do the job. The French also need more planes and better weapons. The U.S. promised aid last spring, but commitments in Korea have delayed delivery.