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## In Case You Missed It: Uncle Ho and Uncle Sam

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April 20, 2009 in [In Case You Missed It](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

By A. Tom Grunfeld

*Uncle Ho and Uncle Sam, Produced by Richard Bradley, BBC/Arts and Entertainment Networks co-production, 1995. 50 minutes. A TimeWatch film. [BBC documentary series]*

During the wars in Indochina, Americans exhibited little interest in the histories of the nations their country was ravaging. This is not so dissimilar from today, as the United States wages wars in Iraq and Afghanistan without any discernable uptick in the sales of history books which would allow for a greater understanding of current events in a broader historical perspective.

The vast majority of Americans remained ignorant of the history of Vietnamese-American relations;



especially of one of the most fascinating and improbable events – the brief period when the Vietnamese nationalist and communist leader Ho Chi Minh worked for the US government.

During the war the US wartime intelligence service, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), was operating in southern China and Southeast Asia out of Kunming in Yunnan province. Their activities in Vietnam consisted of collecting reports from French agents then living under loose Japanese rule. In March 1945 the Japanese took full control of Vietnam and arrested all French citizens, including the OSS contacts, leaving American intelligence blind in that region.

Just about then a group of Vietnamese nationalists emerged out of the jungles escorting a downed U.S. flyer to safety in Kunming. The group was led by Ho Chi Minh who had been agitating, in one way or another, for Vietnamese independence for 25 years. The OSS knew from their counterparts on the French side that Ho, a leader of the nationalist Viet Minh, was a communist but instructions from Washington were to ignore that as he was too valuable at that moment and communists, after all, were wartime allies against the Japanese.

Ho and his band of patriots had similar goals to the United States: defeat Japan and support, rhetorically at least on the American side, independence from colonial rule. The OSS decided to work with Ho and he became, in official OSS parlance, Agent 19, code name Lucius.

During the summer of 1945 seven Americans parachuted into Ho's jungle base on the Vietnam-China border after Ho had returned from Kunming accompanied by Frank Tan, a Chinese-American OSS officer and a Chinese OSS radio operator from Hong Kong named Mac Shin.

The goal of this alliance was to have Ho's group provide weather information, vital intelligence for the air force at a time before weather satellites, to interdict Japanese troops, rescue downed American flyers and to provide whatever intelligence about the Japanese that they could obtain.

The war ended soon after and the joint OSS-Viet Minh operation was never fully engaged. OSS officers were in Hanoi when Ho declared independence in September and were, in fact occupied in developing their own intelligence service in Vietnam, separate from the British and French. These activities caused considerable friction among the allies as did American sympathy for Vietnamese independence at a time when the British and the French were trying to re-establish French colonial rule in Indochina.

This unlikely and little known relationship is the subject of this extraordinary film. Jointly produced by the BBC television program, TimeWatch and the American Arts & Entertainment Network in 1995, the film's strengths are its use of rare footage (including Ho washing his clothes and demonstrating hand-to-hand combat, Ho declaring independence in Hanoi) and interviews with Vietnamese, French (who, astonishingly continue to spout colonist rhetoric four decades after losing their southeast Asian colonies), and American participants.

The film traces the history of this relationship between the OSS officers and their Viet Minh counterparts. The film also addresses the post-war rivalries among the allies. We hear a little about the motivations of the French and far more about the political disputes on the American side, but nothing about the thinking on the Vietnamese side apart from the most obvious. It will be a long time, I would think, before we have sufficient access to the Vietnamese archives for this period. Unfortunately the film ends in 1945 and does not mention the repeated attempts by Ho in the years immediately after the war to reach out to the United States for assistance and support in his anti-colonial struggle. He wrote several letters to Harry S. Truman and the Department of State; letters that were not only not answered, but never even acknowledged.

It is clear that the American participants in these events believed that the United States lost an opportunity in Vietnam. The unspoken, but pretty obvious conclusion they draw is that if Washington had been more accommodating to Ho in the 1940s, there would have been no Vietnam War years later. The OSS officers were quite fond of Ho and his band of rebels and believed that Ho was a nationalist more than a communist. Their superiors in Washington felt otherwise.

In 1995 the living participants met in Vietnam for an oral history project sponsored by the Ford Foundation and the Vietnam USA Society. Then, in September 1997, they met again in New York City culminating in a public one-day conference on September 24 at the Asia Society. It was at that event that "Uncle Ho and Uncle Sam" was shown and it may have been the single public viewing in the United States. The film was shown in 1995 on BBC television in the United Kingdom and on the A&E Network in the United States as part of their "Investigative Reports" series.

You can see an annotated list of who participated in the oral history and the New York City reunion at [this website](#).

This is a wonderful and compelling documentary, an important historical document in itself. It should have been shown widely and should be shown, especially in schools and colleges. Instead it saw the light of day ever so briefly and has disappeared from memory and marketplace. I could not find any traces of it on the BBC or A&E websites, nor is it on sale commercially or on eBay. This a valuable documentary record which needs to be resurrected and widely distributed.

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For a story of the Vietnamese honoring surviving OSS member, Mac Shin, in 2008, see [here](#).

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**Tags:** [Ho Chi Minh](#), [Vietnam](#)