

SAIGON—At 43, Jerry Hickey is an old-timer who has been around long enough to be called "poppa-san" by the noseless leper begging in the doorway of the Roman Catholic cathedral.

His handsome, almost boyish face is inset with the weary eyes of someone who has seen too much of human misery and still can't bring himself to believe all he has seen.

Gerald C. Hickey came to Vietnam when Saigon was a whisper of bicycles along boulevards fragrant with the falling blossoms of the tamarind trees. "A million and a half Hondas ago," he places it in time. The Caravelle Hotel hadn't been built yet. The Vietnamese air force had all of 15 planes, and the American mission had only one, an exhaust-blackened C-46 that lumbered back and forth between Laos and Cambodia.

It was late spring, 1956.

"An exciting time . . . Peace was in the air, like now," he reminisced over a *citron-pressé* in the garden of the Continental Palace Hotel. "Forty thousand French troops were waiting to go home. The young Vietnamese students were coming back from Paris full of enthusiasm for the new government of Ngo Dinh Diem. They thought the social revolution the Vietminh had promised for so long was at hand."

Hickey was a graduate student at the University of Chicago who had come to Vietnam with a Michigan State group advising Diem, "because no one else would give a research fellowship for Indochina. It was considered too unsettled." He was 27 years old, from Chicago, by way of Paris where he had been researching his specialty: Loatian, Cambodian and Vietnamese ethnic groups. Now the land he had daydreamed over in university libraries lay waiting.

"We could drive everywhere. Dalat. War Zone D. The Plain of Reeds. There was a cease-fire, which is all the Geneva accords ever were. Elections were scheduled for July 20. The French and Vietminh wanted them to be held; the South Vietnamese and the Americans didn't. A joke was going around: Everyone in the North would vote for Diem, and everyone in the South for Ho Chi Minh."

Hickey thumbed through his memories at one of the same bamboo tables that Graham Greene occupied when he wrote "The Quiet American." As if by osmosis, he recreated the past in interludes of introspection, the way a novelist fleshes out a character with flashbacks.

### Tigers and Elephants

PEACE WAS AT HAND then, but yesterday's war was nearer. The rubber plantations were in ruins; the roads and bridges in chaotic disrepair. Camau was a rubble of bomb-wrecked houses and fish piers. He recalled driving to Pleiku along Highway 19 and seeing a tiger placidly swishing its tail, then suddenly encountering the remnants of Groupe Mobile 100, charred vehicles rusting in the bright sun, the jungle overrunning the vestigial remains of the last French convoy in 1954.

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"If you spoke English, the people still thought you were French. They blamed everything on the French. When the lights went off or the water failed, it was always the fault of the French. But there was no real hostility to the French. The Vietnamese have always had this wonderful willingness to accept people as individuals."

The young anthropologist hired a tutor and began learning Vietnamese. One day a week he went to the palace to teach English to Diem's vice presidents. Nights and weekends, he worked on his doctorate thesis, which compared the black Thai and the Tho, a Thai-speaking people in the mountains of North Vietnam, with the Vietnamese peasants. Every chance he got, he traveled the country. He never got into North Vietnam, but he went all the way to the Chinese border in northern Laos.

"The cities were all tacky and run-down, but the Vietnamese set to work fixing them up. By the end of 1957, Saigon was lovely with parks and sidewalk cafes. Dalat was beautiful. They even got the railroad running. You could take a *couchette-deluxe* at 7:30 p.m. and be in Nhatrang next morning. It had a wood-burning engine with polished brass fittings and an excellent dining car. Francois Sully, the late French correspondent, was on the train when it was attacked by a herd of elephants. The engine had knocked down an enormous old bull, and the engineer had to keep blowing his whistle to frighten the rest of them off.

"Never in our wildest dreams did we perceive the nightmare that was to come," Hickey said, trying to place in time when he first saw a crew-cut American coming out of a hotel with a pack on his back and a carbine in his hand.

"There was a clandestine MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) buildup under a variety of different covers, such as units to dispose of French military property. Everybody violated the cease-fire. The Vietminh left their cadres in the country, and the Americans were openly living in tents in Banmethuet and here they had opened billets at the Brink, the Five Oceans and the Dai Nam."

Some in the Michigan group urged formation of a local counter-guerrilla force. "But Diem wanted a big army with lots of tanks parading by the palace," Hickey said, and shook his head.

### Coming Apart

THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION that Diem had promised kept getting postponed. "Diem made the mistake of keeping the old Mandarin system and adding on the elaborate French bureaucracy of functionaries. All his old cronies who came down from the North had to be given jobs. The only recommendation you couldn't make was to cut staff. The Americans kept saying, 'Well, you can't expect to impose democracy overnight.' There was corruption, too, but it was child's play compared with now."

Was that when it all began to come apart?

Hickey's backward glance is episodic: The terror blast at the Five Oceans. The attack on the Bienhoa air

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# Vietnam, a Million Hondas Later

*By Hugh A. Mulligan*

Associated Press



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base while the Americans were watching a movie. More and more bombs placed in MAAG houses. The first air raid over War Zone D by old T-28 trainers. A Vietcong battalion in new suntan uniforms surfacing at a rubber plantation in Locninh.

"By the end of 1959, more hamlets were being overrun. District chiefs, teachers, and officials were being assassinated, and Diem was becoming very heavy-handed, relying more and more on his police," he said.

Hickey became deeply immersed in the problems of the Montagnards, the scattering of aboriginal highland tribes. He mastered several of their obscure, difficult languages. He wrote a report criticizing Diem's policy of assimilating the Montagnards into Viet-

namese society and saturating their tribal lands and hunting grounds with refugees from North Vietnam.

Hickey was banned at the palace. He went back to America and taught Southeast Asian courses, missing Diem's downfall and assassination. In January, 1964, he returned to Vietnam with the Rand Corp., the Santa Monica, Calif., think tank, to do a study on how American advisers were getting on with their Vietnamese counterparts.

### "Sinking Feeling"

**H**ICKEY RETURNED to find 26,000 Americans in Vietnam "and the United States getting ready to expand the effort."

His study of American advisers took

him to Nandong, a Special Forces camp with 10 Americans in the mountains near Danang. He was there when the Vietcong tried to overrun the camp in suicide waves. Capt. Roger Donlon of Saugerties, N.Y., was severely wounded several times in leading the defense of the tiny outpost and, for his heroism, won the first Medal of Honor in Vietnam. For Hickey it was one of many "hairy days" that happen to people who hang on too long in Vietnam.

"You go down a road you've gone down before and look at that green jungle, and suddenly everything becomes ominous. You get that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach that you've come too far."

Hickey was in the U.S. Operations Mission house in Banmethuot at Tet, 1968, when American pilots began dropping napalm into the grotto of the Catholic church across the street, where he had herded Montagnard refugees. The airmen had mistaken it for a Protestant mission where North Vietnamese troops were reported hiding.

Early on, his study of the American advisory effort convinced him: "It was hopeless to bring in masses of U.S. troops to fight the war for the Vietnamese. With their colonial background, the Vietnamese were fully prepared to watch from the sidelines with dispassionate calm as we pushed them aside. We had come to teach instead of to learn. There was a certain arrogance in the American stance that we had the solution to their war."

### A Flood of Experts

AS THE LITTLE WAR inexorably became a big war in the Johnson-McNamara years, Hickey grew equally critical of the civilian effort: "We had this insane notion of flooding the country with experts who weren't really experts in anything. All sorts of screwballs were hired. The empire builders. The do-gooders. USAID took over all the posh apartments to house people who came for all the wrong reasons. The camp followers and civilian contractors and the automobile salesmen. It was like the Cherokee land rush, it couldn't be believed."

To stem the inevitable inflation, Hickey witnessed with horror and amazement what came to be called "The Honda Revolution" and its attending corruption of an already corrupt Mandarin system.

"We flooded the country with our wealth, the TV sets and motorbikes and automobiles, to soak up the piastres. Everyone was living beyond their means. In an underdeveloped country, I visited one rural school where 60 per cent of the children parked their Hondas in the schoolyard. There was this simplistic idea that if we made them little capitalists they would never become Communists. It never occurred to the nation builders that a man could ride around on a Honda thinking VC thoughts."

Early in 1966, Hickey was urging accommodation and coalition with the Vietcong as the only way out, and wrote a Rand report outlining the pro-

spects. Like most others, it was ignored.

"By the end of 1968, after Tet and mini-Tet, it was clear we were winning the war we were fighting, and they, the Communists, were winning the war they were fighting."

Such views were unpopular when Americans were dying at the rate of 1,000 a month. At cocktail parties, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker murmured a polite hello and quickly moved away. For nearly two years after it was built, Hickey was not invited to "Pentagon East," the headquarters for the vast American end-the-war machine.

### Full Circle

LOOKING BACK on it all now, Hickey can't find very many things "positive" that the Americans will leave behind other than eight jet airfields and a couple of deep-water ports.

"We effectively restructured Vietnamese society from predominantly rural to urban, with the bombing, the employment boom and a lot of help from the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) as people sought the security of the towns. In the highlands, 85 per cent of the Montagnard villages have been relocated. There isn't one left in I Corps."

After all the hairy days, the innumerable water buffalo sacrifices with the Montagnard tribes, the bouts with diarrhea, hepatitis, salmonella and "all the other diseases except malaria which I somehow managed to escape," Hickey's own personal burden of war, both physical and spiritual, is still unweighed in his mind.

"There is no feeling of guilt that I can personally identify with," he said of the question asked so often by college audiences.

"We as a nation have a grave responsibility to rebuild here, to study the effects of the herbicide and the bomb cratering. Look at all the wounded around, all the homeless, all the beggars. We need to provide some help, North and South, that will let the people do it for themselves and not make the same mistake of flooding the country with the so-called experts."

He is involved in the defoliation and herbicide study ordered by Congress, but like all the old-timers he talks about going home someday. Not long ago he went to Camranh Bay, and for him Vietnam had come more than full circle.

The huge jet complex and deepwater port the Americans had built was blown over with sand, and the barracks doors were flapping in the wind like a ghost town. When Hickey came to Vietnam in 1956, Camranh Bay was a sleepy fishing village boasting one Chinese hotel with an old desk clerk who vividly recalled the day in 1903 when the Russian fleet anchored in the bay.

This time even the Chinese hotel was gone. Only the vast emptiness left by the Americans remained.

The old-timer asked himself whether in 50 years time anyone would be around to recall the American presence here. And what would they tell their grandchildren?