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# STUDENT ESSAY

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## UNRAVELLING THE GIAP MYTH

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL MICHAEL W. KEAVENEY, FA

1 APRIL 1984

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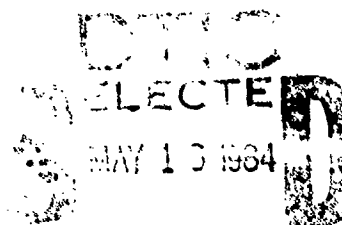
UNRAVELLING THE GIAP MYTH

INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

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ABSTRACT

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Vo Nguyen Giap has been compared to the likes of Rommel and Napoleon and is included in the Army War College's listing of Classical and Contemporary Military Strategists. The basis of this fame is Giap's leadership of the Viet Minh in their victory over the French in the Indochina War. Books, periodicals and unpublished works were researched in gathering data. In general, these were limited to selections which focused on the Indochina War against the French, rather than on later works covering the Vietnam War. It was, after all, against the French where the Giap myth was begun and developed. The conclusions drawn from the research are that Giap's fame as a tactician and strategist were exaggerated, that neither his tactics nor his strategies were new or imaginative. Giap's greatest ability was as an organizer of the masses in a total effort behind the war. Giap successfully combined the roles of civil organizer, politician and battlefield leader in achieving his victory over the French.

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## INTRODUCTION

. . . a dangerous and wily foe who has become something of a legend in both Viet Nams for his stunning defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu. He is one of the principal developers . . . of the art of guerrilla warfare, a tactician of such talents that US military experts have compared him with German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Time magazine reintroduced Vo Nguyen Giap to the world as a legend in his own time. Tet 1968 had burst our pacification bubble in South Vietnam and perhaps it was a little easier to accept that bitter pill knowing that a "legend" was running the show. How else could Time explain their changing opinion of a man whose tactical talents at another place and time were not so glowingly reported:

The Communists poured screaming flesh and blood against the French concrete, wire and land mines. . . . Wave after wave, they came on throughout the night. . . . The Communists were squandering life at Dien Bien Phu to win points at the conference table in Geneva.<sup>2</sup>

Somewhere between Erwin Rommel and the leader who gains victory utilizing human wave tactics stands a school teacher who was to become North Vietnam's minister of national defense and commander-in-chief of the Vietnam People's Army.

### Background

General Giap took pride in the fact that his military schooling was not one of prestigious military academies but of the bush.<sup>3</sup> How then was such a man able to defeat a modern nation's military force with troops often ill-equipped and semi-trained? Was Giap a tactician the likes of Rommel or as others would suggest, Napoleon?<sup>4</sup> Or was his

overall success against the French the result of other factors? Much has been written about France's reluctance to send more forces to Indochina as the war progressed. One must keep in mind, however, that France had some of her most elite units already involved in that war. Troops and officers were battle tested, their bravery and skill already proven. Giap had to contend with one of the world's most professional armies, not only skilled individually but also armed with relatively sophisticated weapons and equipment. How then did Giap offset the French strengths, counter their airborne, land and aviation threats? This study will attempt to answer these questions.

#### Research Limitations

For Giap, armed conflict in Indochina/Vietnam must have seemed more like the norm than any type of peace. In one way or another he had been involved in the fighting in that part of the world since the American OSS missions and weapons were parachuted to the Viet Minh in 1944. At that time Giap and Ho Chi Minh were leading native guerrilla groups against the Japanese.<sup>5</sup> Fighting by significantly sized forces led by Giap did not occur until the Indochina War fought against the French from 1946 to 1954. These eight years then will limit the period to be covered in this study. During this timeframe, Giap gained the fame, reputation and supposed position among history's tacticians and strategists which will be examined in this research.

Battles of this period will be discussed but not covered in detail. Only those aspects which led to victory or defeat; tactics, strengths, weaknesses, errors and stupidity will be highlighted. From 1946 to 1954 the significant campaigns which will be discussed include those along Route 4, the Red River Delta, Groupement Mobile 100, and Dien Bien Phu.



Obviously there were many more, however this limited yet significant selection highlights those encounters which reveal key changes in tactics and strategy, describe weaknesses and strengths in planning and execution, and signal both the doom of French efforts and ascendancy of Vo Nguyen Giap's fame.

#### Organization of the Paper

Control of Route 4 covers a series of battles involving the French garrisons at Dong Khe, Cao Bang and That Khe. Bernard Fall felt that with their loss the Indochina War was lost for the French.<sup>6</sup>

The Red River Delta details the tactics and mistakes made by Giap in his frontal attacks in that offensive which marked Giap's first major reversal in four years of fighting.

Groupement Mobile 100 discusses how French Groupement Mobile 100 was cut to ribbons in a number of brilliantly executed ambushes.

Dien Bien Phu culminates many of the errors which went before it into one great and final defeat. There the Communists demonstrated the effectiveness of a "new" tactic known as siege by seepage.<sup>7</sup>

People as Weapons discusses Giap's apparent disregard for the value of human life as seen in his conduct of operations.

The summary draws conclusions with regard to Giap's tactics, methods and contributions to the military art.

#### CONTROL OF ROUTE 4

Although the French Indochina War began in 1946 it remained relatively one sided until 1950. The changes which occurred and were demonstrated in the battles for control of Route 4 during 1950 marked a turning point in the war, an escalation of the Viet Minh's fighting

ability and an indication of the French Colonial Force's tenuous position in Indochina. In November 1949, Chinese Communist forces had arrived on the border of North Vietnam. The Viet Minh were thus provided a sanctuary and training base allowing them to refit and reorganize their forces for the coming battles. The French installations nearest this sanctuary were those lying along Route 4; Cao Bang, Dong Khe and That Khe. As early as May 1949 the Chief of the General Staff, General Revers, recommended to the French government that these isolated garrisons be evacuated. They "... were a drain on French resources and could probably not withstand a serious attack. . . . His recommendation shared the fate of most later ones--being misunderstood or disregarded."<sup>8</sup> By 1950 the location of these garrisons some 300 miles from the French main line of resistance was further complicated when it became known "... that Giap had increased the number of his regulars . . . had provided them with formidable weapons."<sup>9</sup> This increased threat was realized when Giap selected Dong Khe as the first testing ground for his newly trained and armed divisions. Only after shattering the defenses by the weight of his newly acquired firepower did Giap attack with four battalions in the early hours of 28 May 1950.<sup>10</sup> Although the Viet Minh later withdrew, they had successfully demonstrated a quantum jump in their means and ability to wage war. Unfortunately for the French, they would see these capabilities again. They did not learn from their lessons. As late as August 1950, "... after three years of unsuccessful campaigns, the army still underestimated the enemy and grossly overestimated its own valor."<sup>11</sup>

Armed with what had been learned at Dong Khe, Giap finalized plans for an offensive aimed at driving the French from their outposts along

Route 4. Giap chose the bad weather of September to launch his Operation Le Hong Phong II. His plan was to cut Route 4 by taking and holding Dong Khe, thus severing the link between Cao Bang and That Khe. Having surrounded the latter two outposts, he would wait for either or both to attempt to get through to the other. Out of the fortifications the French would be vulnerable to ambush. Giap hoped he could wipe out both garrisons without the costly losses involved in assaulting them.<sup>12</sup> The French fell neatly into the trap. Dong Khe was taken in the first artillery duel of the Indochina War. Using a tactic which later "surprised" the French at Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh fired "from above with scattered guns while the French fired from below with guns grouped together."<sup>13</sup> The garrison at Cao Bang to the north, now cut off, was given the order to evacuate the post and leave behind all heavy supplies and material. The garrison failed to obey orders, bringing with it artillery and trucks, as it made its way south towards Dong Khe. Meanwhile a force of 3500 was fighting its way from That Khe to Dong Khe, intending to take Dong Khe long enough for the Cao Bang force to link up. Both forces were destroyed near Dong Khe, outnumbered 3 to 1. With the loss of these three garrisons the French, at the key fort of Lang Son, which lay further south along Route 4, panicked. Although the French could have defended the fort for a time, they elected to abandon it, along with 1300 tons of supplies and the fort's artillery still intact.<sup>14</sup> Total losses along Route 4 amounted to enough equipment for an additional Viet Minh division--13 artillery pieces, 125 mortars, 450 trucks and three armored platoons, 940 machine guns, 1200 sub-machine guns and more than 8000 rifles.<sup>15</sup> The French also lost some 6000 troops, in what was considered up to that time to be "the greatest

military debacle in the colonial history of France."<sup>16</sup> The loss of Route 4 forced the French south into the Red River Delta from which they later never successfully ventured with any permanence. The French were now in a real war. Ten thousand French troops had just lost round one to thirteen battalions of Viet Minh regular infantry backed by three battalions of artillery.

#### THE RED RIVER DELTA

Although Giap's "divide and conquer" tactics along Route 4 were neither unique nor original, they did suggest that Giap, through his ability to successfully carry off such an operation, was a general to be reckoned with. Perhaps flushed with victory, Giap planned his next move against the French, a frontal attack on the Red River Delta area. The delta area was ground of French choosing, where they had the interior lines and the opportunity to use their superior weaponry. The Viet Minh had left the protection of the jungle to fight in the open fields against French air, naval and armored forces.<sup>17</sup> On 13 January 1951 Giap launched the first of his three attacks in the delta campaign. The battle of Vinh Yen basically amounted to one Communist division making successive ground attacks, supported by heavy mortars and heavy machine guns, against four hills to the north and east of Vinh Yen. The French reinforced the one mobile group originally defending in the area with two other mobile groups as the battle progressed. The key to victory for the French in this battle was their heavy use of air attacks on the massing Viet Minh. Napalm and the losses incurred through Giap's first utilization of "human sea" attacks cost the Viet Minh dearly.<sup>18</sup> When the smoke had cleared, Giap had lost the fighting strength of two divisions; 6000 dead, 500 POWs and 8000 WIA.<sup>19</sup> In four years of fighting,

Vinh Yen represented Giap's first major reversal. Undeterred, Giap launched his second offensive in the Haiphong area. On 23 March he pitted three infantry divisions against a series of outposts surrounding Mao Khe. "Only after eight days of fruitless attacks, costly in men whose heroism was completely futile, did Giap recognize that despite his vast numerical superiority he had failed once more."<sup>20</sup> This time Giap had lost 3000 more men, not to French air power, but to the French Navy. By concentrating their firepower, three nearby destroyers and two landing ships had prevented the Viet Minh from penetrating Mao Khe itself.<sup>21</sup> Giap's final efforts in the delta were against the defenders of the Day River Line, a string of weak French outposts along the southern flank of the delta. Giap's plan was simple. Three divisions would frontally assault the Line while two regiments would attack from within, having previously infiltrated the area. Giap's strategy failed however, because the French were not forced to commit their reserve, ". . . popular support, so vital for Viet Minh military success was conspicuously lacking in the regions inhabited by Catholics," the French Navy cut Viet Minh supply lines and the French Air Force again made effective use of napalm.<sup>22</sup> "Since Giap was a very determined man, but apparently not yet a great general, it had taken another [a third] debacle before he learned his lesson."<sup>23</sup> Having now suffered the loss of a better part of three new divisions while fighting in the Red River Delta and Haiphong areas, Giap finally withdrew, never again to seriously challenge the French in the open coastal plains. Several significant conclusions can be drawn from these three battles. Although the Viet Minh forces had improved considerably, their numerical superiority was no match for French firepower, where the French could use it effectively. Giap recognized this and in

1951 changed the Viet Minh strategy. The highlands would become the major target, and the Red River and Mekong Deltas the prizes. In the highlands the Viet Minh could neutralize French firepower while benefitting from their own better cross country mobility.<sup>24</sup> Giap had paid the price of over 20,000 killed and wounded before he realized that conventional, open warfare against the French was a tactic not particularly suited to his forces. Lastly, the battles of the delta demonstrated another capability of the Viet Minh which the French later chose to discount or ignore until it was too late. Out of their own element, the Viet Minh were still able to resupply large forces in battle through the use of porters. Twenty thousand soldiers were logistically supported by 100,000 porters in the battle of the Day River. In the battle of Vinh Yen, 180,000 porters supported eighteen of Giap's battalions.<sup>25</sup> One of the major misconceptions held by the French at the later battle of Dien Bien Phu was that the Viet Minh would never be able to support their forces surrounding that fortress. Giap had learned his lesson in the delta. The French had yet to learn theirs.

#### GROUPEMENT MOBILE 100

On a small scale, the demise of GROUPEMENT MOBILE 100 (GM 100) typifies the whole story of fighting in Indochina by the French. GM 100 was a highly mobile, regimental task force, consisting of battle-hardened troops who had served well in the Korean War. GM 100 began combat operations in Indochina during December 1953. By the end of June 1954 GM 100 had ceased to exist as a fighting unit.

Following his disastrous Red River Delta campaign, Giap withdrew and fought the French in areas which maximized his manpower and ground mobility advantages, while neutralizing French firepower. From 1951,

until the end of the war, the "... central ingredient of Giap's strategy was the brilliant campaign of diversion that drew the French battalions into remote regions or tied them down in unproductive tasks."<sup>26</sup> Giap accomplished this by forcing the French to spread themselves thin in the four corners of Indochina--the Red River Delta, Dien Bien Phu, Seno and Luang Prabang, Pleiku and the Western Highlands, to name a few divergent areas. Giap later stated,

The enemy, who had made great efforts to regroup fairly strong mobile forces on a single battlefield--the Red River Delta--was compelled to change his plan by concentrating his forces on a smaller scale at many different points. . . . The much vaunted mobile reserves in the delta had been reduced from 44 to 20 battalions.<sup>27</sup>

The inability to maintain a significant reserve doomed France's plan for conducting the war as conceived by General Navarre, French Commander in Chief in Indochina from 1953 until the war's conclusion. The "Navarre Plan" envisioned harassing the Viet Minh to prevent them from bringing their forces together in combined action, while maintaining a highly mobile reserve to strike the deciding blow in major engagements with the enemy.<sup>28</sup> Giap took Navarre's plan and turned it against him. The "Navarre Plan" failed for the same reasons that caused GM 100 to be destroyed. In general the French forces and in particular GM 100 were given extended missions beyond their capabilities. Both groups were whittled down by minor engagements. Both suffered large losses when the Viet Minh picked the time, place and circumstances in which to inflict them. Neither could counter or force the enemy to stand and fight when he did not desire to do so. Both were ham-strung by their lack of real ground mobility and dependence upon surface transportation and available roads.

Following is a brief chronological account of GM 100's final days as described by Bernard Fall in Street Without Joy. GM 100's final six months in 1954 mirror France's eight years of ups and downs, little wins and big losses.

4 Jan	Mission received to open 70 mile road, Route 7, between Cheo Reo and Tuy Hoa.
28 Jan	Road opened. One battalion immediately given mission of reinforcing Pleiku (160 km away) and one battalion minus the mission of reinforcing Kontum (220 km away).
1 Feb	Entire GM 100 ordered to Kontum because of heavy enemy pressure.
7 Feb	GM 100 evacuates Kontum to avoid encirclement by an enemy regiment.
Feb-Mar	After numerous minor engagements and casualties contact with the enemy is lost. GM 100 required to continue road opening, patrolling and convoy protection from Pleiku to An Khe.
22 Mar	GM 100 attacked by a Viet Minh regiment suffering heavy casualties and the expenditure of all ammunition and medical supplies.
1 April	GM 100 required to assume semi static defense of the whole central plateau area. This involved another long road march from Plei Rinh to An Khe. GM 100 ambushed enroute again, suffering heavy losses. Since December GM 100 strength down 25 percent below full strength.
Apr-June	Road clearing, patrolling and convoy escort missions continued.



24 June      An Khe evacuated. GM 100 begins move to Pleiku along Road 19 to counter new Communist push in the plateau area. GM 100 never makes it as a unit, being ambushed repeatedly by two enemy regiments along Road 19.

29 June      Survivors reach Pleiku.

Overall, GM 100 was on the road from December 1953 to June 1954. Casualties had reduced battalion strength by 50 per cent. Equipment losses included 85 percent of the vehicles, 100 per cent of the artillery, 68 per cent of the signal equipment and 50 per cent of the machine guns and automatic weapons.<sup>29</sup> In the final analysis, GM 100's imagined mobility never achieved any real advantage. Instead it tied the group to the available roads making it an easy target for the Viet Minh. By June 1954 even that imagined advantage was lost, as was the war, following the fall of Dien Bien Phu on 8 May of the same year.

#### DIEN BIEN PHU

Although a battle not at all typical of the fighting in Indochina, the sequence of errors made by the French in the battle of Dien Bien Phu epitomized and ended their efforts in that war. The reasons and needs for the French occupation of Dien Bien Phu on 20 November 1953 are still subjects of controversy. It is generally agreed that the defense and subsequent evacuation of the airhead at Na San on 12 August 1953 may have misled French planners in their consideration of the capability of the French forces to again occupy such an airhead and to evacuate it successfully under enemy pressure. Because Na San had been able to withstand a massive Communist assault, it became the shining symbol of French ability to defend an organized position. The victory at Na San

provided the foundation for a new approach to fighting in Indochina, that being the control and interdiction of an area from an airhead.<sup>30</sup> With respect to Dien Bien Phu, its occupation also "... was to serve the dual purpose of protecting Laos and forcing the Viets to attack a strongly held position to their own detriment."<sup>31</sup> Giap's strategy of fighting in the highlands, maximizing his advantages while minimizing those of the French could not have been better suited than at Dien Bien Phu. Giap's only real disadvantage was that the base was heavily defended. In a way, however, that could also be considered an advantage in that Giap now had some of France's more elite and mobile forces pinned down in an area which he controlled. The French were thus deprived of initiative throughout the rest of Indochina, much of their reserve strength and air support being tied up supporting the airhead. When Giap realized how tenuous was the French position he "... decided to wipe out at all costs the whole enemy force at Dien Bien Phu."<sup>32</sup> The French had found the set piece battle they had been looking for in the Indochina War. However, they had chosen a mountainous region, completely isolated from the bulk of their forces, where their only means of supply was by air and the enemy outnumbered them five to one.<sup>33</sup> Here the new approach to fighting conceived at Na San was destined for failure.

Looking back and discussing Dien Bien Phu's numerous errors and miscalculations seems improper unless mention is made of the many acts of heroism performed by the French and their allies at Dien Bien Phu. Let it simply be stated that for sheer bravery the men who fought and died at Dien Bien Phu would be hard to match anywhere. However, they died in vain, their very bravery perhaps the foundation for their worst error, a gross overestimation of their own capability combined with a

contemptful underestimation of the enemy's capabilities as an infantryman, artilleryman and supply carrier.<sup>34</sup>

Generally French errors can be categorized as those made with regard to estimating (1) enemy ground forces, (2) relative artillery strengths, (3) supply capabilities, and (4) construction requirements within the fortress. For instance, French Air Force intelligence estimated that the enemy's strength would be about 49,000, within 10% of reality.<sup>35</sup> General Navarre chose to disregard this estimate until it was too late. He maintained that the different forces moving towards Dien Bien Phu in late November 1953 were only elements of several divisions.<sup>36</sup> Navarre continued in this belief even as the picture around Dien Bien Phu grew grimmer, maintaining there was but one enemy division in the region, that although it could be reinforced, it would not multiply.<sup>37</sup> In spite of intelligence reports from Dien Bien Phu indicating the existence of three enemy division command posts located around the fortress with a fourth on the way, General Navarre chose to plan and launch Operation Atlante in January 1954. This operation was to last over a month, involve twenty-five battalions and tie up Air Force supply capabilities without being of any value to the French.<sup>38</sup> As late as 25 February 1954 General Fay, Chief of Air Staff, after viewing the situation first hand, tried to convince Navarre to evacuate Dien Bien Phu.<sup>39</sup> By 13 March 1954, when the battle began in earnest, it was too late to evacuate Dien Bien Phu. The fortress had already suffered over 1100 casualties and was now in fact surrounded by at least four Communist divisions.<sup>40</sup>

In planning for the defense of Dien Bien Phu the French realized that it was preferable to hold the high ground. They counted on an

anticipated superiority in firepower to compensate for their unfavorable position.<sup>41</sup> Obviously contemptuous of Giap's firepower, the French placed their own artillery in open circular pits with no overhead cover.<sup>42</sup> Both the artillery and air force advisors felt that any strong concentration of enemy artillery would be easily located and knocked out before it could do any harm. French intelligence credited the Viet Minh with only 40 to 60 medium howitzers capable of firing 25,000 rounds.<sup>43</sup> They also counted on the French Air Force to prevent further sizeable amounts of ammunition from reaching the Viet Minh gunners.<sup>44</sup> Looking up at the ridges surrounding them, knowledgeable Frenchmen must have had some gnawing doubts. General Navarre's advisor, Colonel Berteil, suggested that the Viet Minh might use their artillery as had the Communist Chinese in Korea. There, artillery was placed under casements in a direct fire role. This idea was dismissed due to the large number of pieces required and the construction effort involved.<sup>45</sup> As the days passed and both forces built up their combat strength it became apparent that the French counterbattery fire was having little effect upon the Communist artillery. Even more ominous was the fact that rather than being on the reverse slope of the ridges, the Communists had dug in on the forward slopes.<sup>46</sup> Still things didn't seem so bad because one French belief seemed confirmed; the Viet Minh were incapable of digging in anything larger than pack 75s.<sup>47</sup> That belief came crashing down around the French when the first 105 mm and larger rounds impacted at Dien Bien Phu. Through 27 January 1954, Giap had been using only 75mm artillery as part of his deception plan. In retrospect, Giap had played upon a French weakness and led them to believe what they desperately hoped was true. As it turned out, Giap's capability far exceeded French intelligence estimates. Ringing Dien Bien Phu were 144 field pieces,

thirty 75mm recoilless cannons, some 36 heavy flak pieces, and in the last few days of the battle, between 12 and 16 Soviet 6-tube rocket launchers. Altogether 103,000 shells of 75mm caliber, or larger, were fired into the fortress before the French capitulated.<sup>48</sup> The French had been outwitted and ended up outgunned, their own number of artillery pieces above 57mm never exceeding sixty. Because the French Air Force proved unable to offset Giap's four to one advantage, artillery truly ruled at Dien Bien Phu as the King of Battle.<sup>49</sup> The 351st Heavy Division, with its concentrated artillery, broke the back of French resistance at Dien Bien Phu. Altogether seventy-five percent of all French losses were attributed to artillery fire rather than infantry combat.<sup>50</sup>

As the fallacies concerning their superior mobility and firepower became apparent, the French began to realize another one of their shortcomings. The belligerent with the preponderance of mechanization, and the only force capable of aerial resupply, was soon to lose the logistical battle to the rather primitive coolie. The French had expected the Viet Minh to run out of supplies after four days of concentrated action.<sup>51</sup> Considering the lessons they should have learned in the Red River Delta, the French were still unwilling to believe in the capabilities of hundreds of thousands of coolies. Although there is some disagreement concerning exact load capabilities, Navarre had been forewarned concerning the coolie use of bicycles for carrying substantial loads over great distances. From a historical point of view it is interesting to note that Giap credits this capability at only 100 pounds, while the Frenchman, Jules Roy, cites the herculean weight of 500 pounds.<sup>52</sup> A capability closer to Giap's modest claim appears more credible. The monsoon rains, which the French had counted on to seriously hamper the coolies' abilities, turned

against the French. The coolies were given added protection from roving French fighter aircraft, while the French aerial resupply efforts were grounded. The French simply failed to interdict the coolie resupply effort as they had planned. Even before this occurred senior officers of the French Air Force had warned Navarre that they could not support 10,000 men in a major battle.<sup>53</sup> They felt that Dien Bien Phu's great distance and supply requirements would put a serious strain on the limited number of available French transports and fighter aircraft. Colonel Nicot, the officer commanding air transport, stated in writing that his aircraft were not in a position to maintain a permanent flow of supplies to the fortress.<sup>54</sup> Nicot brought this to Navarre's attention, not after Dien Bien Phu was occupied and its shortcomings realized, but on 11 November 1953, seven days prior to the initial airborne assault. Obviously this did not deter Navarre in his planning. In late December 1953, a contract was drawn up between the commander at Dien Bien Phu, Colonel de Castries, and the general commanding the French Air Force. The Air Force general agreed to deliver 100 tons of supplies per day if de Castries would guarantee maintenance of the landing strip in perfect condition, its protection from direct hits, reinforcement of Gabrielle (a position dominating the take off and parachuting circuits), and the prevention of the enemy's use of anti-aircraft batteries.<sup>55</sup> The guarantee was shortlived, when, on 14 March 1954, one day after the major battle had begun, the French lost Gabrielle and their ability to secure the landing strip. From then on, the Viet Minh had a definite edge in resupply capabilities. The swift loss of Gabrielle was an indication of two serious flaws in the French planning for the defense of Dien Bien Phu. The fortifications were inadequately constructed and the strong points poorly located. The French did not expect to be in the valley

long enough to warrant permanent fortifications. Also the airborne troops, who first jumped in, were too lightly equipped to build anything significant. As a result, little was done to improve their positions during the early days of occupation. Hesitations and counterorders continued until thirty days prior to the actual battle. Then there was not enough time to do what had to be done. The engineers estimated that they were 30,000 tons short of minimal material requirements. They had only enough to protect the headquarters, command post, signal center, and x-ray room of the underground hospital.<sup>56</sup> The French neglected to dig in the land lines between positions. Strong points lacked connecting trench systems, a common belt of barbed wire or even mine fields between all of their positions.<sup>57</sup> Visitors pointed out the lack of overhead cover for the communications trench to the hospital, and the potential inability of the hospital to handle the casualties of a large battle.<sup>58</sup> Finally, when the monsoon rains came, all of the strongpoints immediately took water and the flimsy bunkers and trenches were further weakened. The strongpoints were located within the fortress itself, such that the southern strongpoint, Isabelle, with its large amount of artillery was unable to support strongpoints Gabrielle, Beatrice or Anne Marie. As a result, these three outer strongpoints were lost within the first five days of the main battle, allowing the Viet Minh to prevent use of the airfield, isolate Isabelle and slowly eat away at the main defenses a post at a time.<sup>59</sup>

This of course was Giap's plan. He intended to confine the French by aggressive patrolling around the perimeter, eliminate the northern centers of resistance and gain control of the airfield, isolate the main position from Isabelle to the south and then gnaw away at the enemy

piecemeal.<sup>60</sup> Giap overcame the French interlocking and supporting fields of fire through his use of trenches and tunnels. The Viet Minh "... would spring up in the midst of the ... barbed wire ... fire ... and disappear again in their little trench."<sup>61</sup> By concentrating his forces he overwhelmed the northern strongpoints at the price of 2500 troops attacking in suicidal waves.<sup>62</sup> Giap then chose to ring every position with a series of trenches and cut off Isabelle with a separate trench line. This completed, Giap drew the rings of trenches tighter, tunneling mine shafts under those positions offering the stiffer resistance. For example, coolies placed almost 3000 pounds of TNT at the end of a 47 meter mine shaft under E2.<sup>63</sup> Following the loss of the northern positions and control of the airfield, the French were faced with a war of attrition lasting for more than two months. Again, Giap had not invented anything new. While he strangled the French positions with his trench network, he interfered with French aerial resupply, continued to pound the French positions, and through the combination of patience, planning, neutralization of firepower and overwhelming numerical superiority, ground out a victory by 8 May 1954. Giap had revived the use of siege tactics in the atomic age. Giap had just won the battle and the war. Although the military power of France had not been destroyed, the government and people of France were now convinced that they could never win.<sup>64</sup>

#### PEOPLE AS WEAPONS

It is estimated that by the time the Indochina War was finally over, the Viet Minh had probably lost more than a half million men.<sup>65</sup> The Viet Minh had won the war but Giap's methods and tactics had made the price extremely high. In the early stages of fighting, when the



French were losing their isolated posts, "Death Volunteers" proved their effectiveness. Members of such units would throw themselves, with a load of explosives, against a perimeter's key bunker or obstacle, blowing up the fortification along with themselves. Until the end of the war, French commanders had to face the problem of having to cope with this threat.<sup>66</sup> Giap, perhaps inspired by the success of human wave attacks in Korea, introduced this tactic to the Indochina War.<sup>67</sup> He rationalized the enormous sacrifices of human life seen in the battles previously described as follows:

. . . sometimes in war there are important battles whose difficulties, whatever they may be, we must determine to overcome at all costs to destroy the enemy. Victories in these battles will create favorable conditions for the success of the entire campaign.<sup>68</sup>

Thus the Viet Minh suffered 23,000 casualties at Dien Bien Phu to achieve a victory which ended the war.<sup>69</sup> The question remains whether or not Giap might have achieved the same victory in either that battle, or the war, at a lesser cost. For example, did the Viet Minh have to lose three divisions in the Red River Delta before Giap learned his lesson there? Did the Viet Minh really have only one full-fledged surgeon to take care of the needs of 50,000 men at Dien Bien Phu?<sup>70</sup> Or was Giap the victim of French propaganda designed to minimize their own defeat by over stressing the losses incurred by Giap?<sup>71</sup> It appears that he was both a successful military leader and a callous man willing to sacrifice lives for an end. After all, Giap's greatest asset on the battlefield was his numerical superiority. He expended bodies like the French expended bullets if the end, in his eyes, justified the means. His reasoning appeared to be that by outnumbering an enemy 4 or 5 to 1, he was provided with an opportunity to offset the enemy's normally superior

firepower with an appropriate expenditure of lives. As previously described, the French often provided him ample opportunity to capitalize on his numerical superiority without having to make such sacrifices. However, when the requirement existed, Giap proved that he was all too willing to respond as necessary without concern for the price. As Giap himself said: "The life or death of a hundred, or a thousand, or of tens of thousands of human beings, even if they are our own compatriots, represents really very little."<sup>72</sup> What counted in the end, was the end itself, not the means.

#### SUMMARY

In the preceding chapters General Giap's role in the Indochina War has been portrayed through his actions in critical battles, the unintended assistance given him by the French, and his own calculated sacrifice of human life in the accomplishment of the mission. This chapter will deal with Giap's real, if any, contribution to the military art. As previously shown, Giap generally reacted well to French actions. He was not as much a great tactician as he was an opportunist. Tactically, Giap did not introduce any significant innovations. Giap was successful because his troops executed the basics well. They conducted the ambush on a scale larger than that considered possible by Western military experts.<sup>73</sup> They attacked at night to nullify French air and artillery support, and because the French were considered poor night fighters.<sup>74</sup> They eliminated the isolated French posts, not with any elaborate tactics, but rather, through a relentless blockade that steadily ground the defenders down, while preventing outside help from getting through. A study of the Viet Minh's successes suggests they were achieved through

three interrelated factors; adherence to simple tactical principles such as mass, maneuver and surprise, full and accurate intelligence, and detailed planning. These principles and factors are nothing new to warfare. Giap, the history teacher, had learned from history, his own mistakes and experiences, and applied that education to the conduct of his war.

As a strategist, Giap was more a carbon copy of Mao than a leader with powers approaching an Asian Napoleon.<sup>75</sup> Giap envisioned the requirement for a long lasting war against the French. Such a protracted war was necessary if the Viet Minh were to build up their combat power and engage in appropriate levels of warfare as their strength developed. Thus, the Viet Minh proceeded from a defensive campaign, into an equilibrium stage, and finally into a counter-offensive.<sup>76</sup> As the balance of power shifted, guerilla warfare gave way to mobile and then to the more conventional form of warfare seen at Dien Bien Phu. The French wanted a quick, decisive victory, with clearly drawn frontlines and maximum utilization of their firepower. Giap, however, was willing to trade space, and sometimes units for time, while he developed his total forces. It is interesting to note that although he received significant aid from Communist China, Giap states a greater part of his army and guerilla units were armed with weapons captured from the French during this building period.<sup>77</sup> Giap traded space for time by avoiding the enemy when he was stronger and attacking when the French were weaker. In scattering and regrouping elsewhere, Giap hoped to wear the French out while making them feel as if they were "submerged in a sea of armed people."<sup>78</sup> This campaign of diversion was previously discussed in reviewing the demise of GM 100. Reacting to his initiative, the French felt compelled to hold everywhere while controlling nowhere. They

committed their reserves and dispersed their forces to distant points, far from the critical arena, the populated areas.<sup>79</sup> As the French spread out they became nailed to these isolated bases and presented lucrative targets for Giap's evolving mobile, and then, regular forces. Only in the Red River Delta did Giap attempt to speed up the process of evolution, which ended in the disaster already discussed.

In spite of Giap's overall success in the Indochina War, much of his larger-than-life image is more a psychological reaction to France's well publicized defeat at Dien Bien Phu, than a reflection of Giap's true capabilities as a military leader. The success of the Viet Minh resulted in ascribing to Giap, and his subsequent writings, a pretension that bordered more on hero-worship than reality.<sup>80</sup> Giap had accomplished something considered impossible. Instead of admitting their own errors in judgment, many chose to elevate Giap to a superhuman level in order to explain the defeat. As a result, Giap's books are claimed to contain universal truisms, but in reality are only recitations of previous works by Mao and Truong Chinh, chief theoretician of Vietnamese Communism.<sup>81</sup>

Beginning in 1951, Giap made a few errors, but in his many years as a field commander he made little contribution to the military art while recording a number of misjudgments comparable to other, lesser known, military commanders. What then can Giap be credited with accomplishing? Besides Giap's strategy of diversion and eventual victory over a well equipped and stronger, modern army, Giap provided in deeds and words a clear description of how to mobilize people into a potent force.<sup>82</sup> As Giap himself said, "On December 19, 1946, the nationwide Resistance War broke out."<sup>83</sup> And "nationwide" it was! The Viet Minh succeeded in organizing, indoctrinating, disciplining and leading the masses in their

war against the French. Certainly the French retained control over specific areas, and maintained the loyalty of many Vietnamese. However, neither the size of the area controlled, nor the amount of population remaining loyal, were large enough to offset the recruiting efforts and successes Giap accomplished. Giap felt that military action should totally involve a nation. Thus he and the other leaders of the Viet Minh set about the task of integrating all of the people in every sphere; political, economic, diplomatic and military. Giap's writings dwell on this accomplishment and propagandize its success. Detractors might claim these leaders depended on terror tactics and coercion in obtaining the support of the people. The final success of the Viet Minh is mute testimony to their ability to organize, indoctrinate, discipline, and lead a relatively unsophisticated mass against one of the world's most professional and modern armies. Terror tactics alone do not recruit, arm and feed an army of 80,000 regulars, 60,000 provincials and 200,000 militiamen. Under Giap this army defeated the French Union Force, which in 1954 numbered 240,000 troops.<sup>84</sup> Giap, alone, did not organize this victorious army from the masses. He did, however, orchestrate its efforts, and the efforts of the hundreds of thousands that supported it, in the battles which eventually led to the downfall of the French in Indochina. Although Giap does not rank with Napoleon or Rommel as either a strategist or tactician, he should be remembered for his ability to simultaneously combine the roles of organizer, politician, and military leader while creating and leading his army. Few other generals have played such all encompassing roles in the history of warfare, especially modern warfare.

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