STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE BATTLE OF DIEN BIEN PHU: STRATEGIC, OPERATIONAL, AND TACTICAL FAILURE

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL PATRICK W. SHULL
United States Army

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LTC Patrick W. Shull
United States Army

Professor Brian D. Moore
Project Advisor

U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: LTC Patrick W. Shull

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This strategy research project is a case-study examination of the battle of Dien Bien Phu during the French-Indochina War of 1946 to 1954. This battle was the decisive event of the war. The paper focuses on: French failure to craft a viable strategy for winning the war or this battle against their enemy, the Vietnamese communists or Viet Minh; French operational errors that helped ensure their defeat at Dien Bien Phu; and the most important tactical mistake that the French made fighting the battle. Studying the lessons learned from this battle and French failure at each level of war - strategic, operational, and tactical, will add to the professional understanding of future United States Army War College students and other interested military officers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

SOURCE: William Seymour, "The Siege of Dien Bien Phu 13 March-8 May 1954," in Decisive Factors in Twenty Great Battles of the World (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1989, 340.

INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu is listed in several historical battle compilations of "famous" or "great" battles. This engagement is cited in most of these books because it was the decisive battle of the first Indochina War (1946-1954). The French lost the battle to the Vietminh, or Vietnamese Communists, because of a flawed overall strategy, gross operational miscalculations, and tactical bungling.

Although the French were successful in numerous battles throughout the war, they were doomed to ultimate defeat because they did not commit enough resources to win either this particular battle or the war. This lack of commitment reflected an absence of a winning strategy. Not being prepared for a revolutionary war, or expecting the fierce Vietminh resistance that they encountered throughout the war, the French simply expected to eventually win. It did not occur to them that a modern European force, armed with tanks, aircraft, and other resources could be defeated by an agrarian, peasant society. Therefore, the war effort drifted from 1946 onward with no clear government policy[1]. The French would not send conscripts to Indochina, raise taxes to support a larger military effort, or negotiate in good faith with the Vietminh until forced to do so

based on the unfavorable military situation after the battle at Dien Bien Phu. Succinctly, the French lacked the national will to make the sacrifices necessary to win.

The most glaring operational failure at Dien Bien Phu was French underestimation of Viet Minh capabilities, and their greatest tactical failure was their inability to logistically support their force during the battle. In other words, the French failed at every level of war - strategic, operational, and tactical, and soon lost the war.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the primary failures at each level of war cited above, and **not** to list every mistake the French made nor provide a detailed account of the battle. The main lessons learned from this event are worth remembering, something that the United States failed to do when it entered into a later round of the Vietnam War.

BACKGROUND

The French army re-occupied the village of Dien Bien Phu and surrounding airstrip located in northwest Vietnam on 20 November 1953, and began combat operations in the area. The main battle was a 56 day siege that began on 13 March 1954 and ended on 7 May when the Vietminh finally overran the French garrison. This proved to be the decisive battle of an eight-year war.

Roots of War. French involvement in Vietnam began with the arrival of missionaries in the 17th Century. By 1862 France ruled Vietnam as a colonial power. Japanese invasion of Vietnam and their wresting control from the French during World War II set the conditions for eventual French loss of their colony.

With the defeat of the Japanese, the French hoped to reestablish control over Vietnam and return to pre-war status as a global colonial power.[2] However, the Vietminh communist revolutionary group led by Ho Chi Minh took advantage of the Japanese surrender in August 1945 to a British force, and the resulting confusion, to establish a puppet government backed by a guerrilla force in the northern province of Tonkin. Although the Nationalist Chinese and British both played a role in stabilizing the country in late 1945 and 1946, the British supported restoration of French rule by removing the Vietminh

from governing.[3] France significantly reinforced its colonial army in November 1945 and the British and Chinese soon departed. The French and Vietminh negotiated over peace terms for several months until the talks collapsed. By November 1946, the French and Vietminh were at war.

Indochina War 1946-53. The first seven years of the war was a "see-saw" affair. Neither side could land a knockout blow. The Vietminh army steadily grew in size and professionalism while the French searched for a winning strategy.

The 1949 victory by the communists in China paved the way for the beginning of Chinese aid to the Vietminh. In April 1950 the Chinese Communists agreed to provide arms, ammunition, and advisors to the Vietminh. Subsequently the United States began providing cash and military equipment to the French.

FLAWED STRATEGY

France had several incentives to maintain her colonies after World War II. Her economic interests in Vietnam, in particular, were quite extensive. However, many business interests left well before the end of the war, and the ultimate loss of Vietnam was approximately a $10 billion cost to the French in raw materials and markets.[4]

Regaining national prestige after the humiliations suffered during World War II was undoubtedly a factor in the French attempt to maintain their standing as a colonial power and, hence, a major world power.[5] France formed a loose association of colonies, known as the French Union. However, unlike the British Commonwealth, France never granted significant autonomy to their southeast Asian colonies until forced to do so by their unfavorable position at the end of the Indochina War.

The French also rationalized that the Vietminh were part of a world wide communist movement, and they especially played on American fears in this regard. The United States, adhering to its historical anti-colonialist position, preferred that Vietnam become a self-governing, non-Communist state, closely associated with the West and France.[6] Moreover, on several occasions the U.S. urged France to grant Vietnam independence.[7] Simultaneously, the U.S. also desired full French participation

in the European Defense Community, the military aspect of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Strategic Impasse. France never anticipated that reasserting control in Vietnam would be so elusive. Beset by the severe internal problems of rebuilding their country and modernizing their army after WWII, suffering through several changes of government during the period 1945 to 1946, and facing internal and external Communist challenges, it was difficult to focus on crafting a winning strategy in Indochina. In retrospect it is apparent that France **could not win** in Indochina because they simply did not possess the national will and allocate resources to win. As the war continued year after year, the French public grew war weary and less supportive of the effort. As one author stated, "Incapable of making the material sacrifices necessary for the execution of the war in Indochina and even refusing to commit the regular army, France depended on its American ally to finance the war."[8]

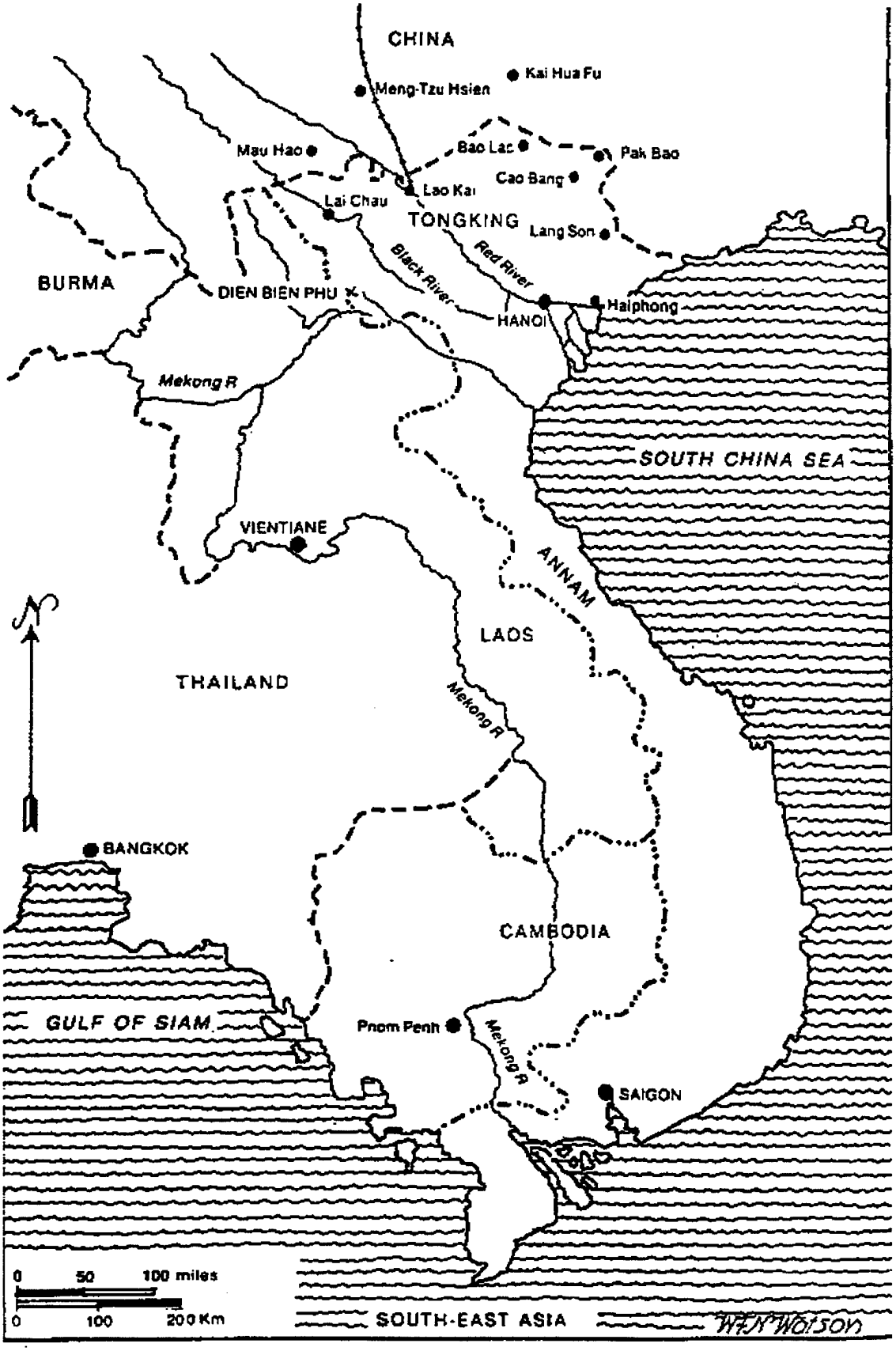
Bernard Fall stated that considering its NATO obligations and other factors, France never had the strength for a "large-scale unilateral commitment."[9] An example of this was that a French law passed in 1950 forbade draftees from serving in Indochina.[10] Conversely, France was hesitant in rapidly building their allied Vietnamese National Army (VNA) to significant

strength, fearing that they might be tempted to back an independence movement.[11]

Enter Navarre. The United States also grew weary of the war, which they viewed that they must support to contain the expansion of communism, and to keep the French in NATO. Further, in 1950 the Soviet Union and China recognized the Vietminh government, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, as the legal government of the Vietnamese people, and it seemed by 1953 that the Vietminh were winning.[12]

The U.S. increased financial and material assistance to the point that by 1954 they were providing 80% of all French resources.[13] As the Korean War approached a resolution in 1953 the U.S. began to pressure France to win in Indochina.[14] France needed support, but kept the U.S. at "arms-length" regarding the strategy and direction of the war.[15] Among other measures, the U.S. wanted the French to develop a winning strategy, build up the VNA, and replace the French theater commander in Indochina, General Salan.[16]

It was definitely time for the French to "get on with it". "Each month saw more U.S. involvement in the war effort. The AID (Agency for International Development) mission expanded, the embassy grew, and more USIA officers arrived."[17] To their credit, "the Americans never tried to influence the details of French policy, only its broad outlines."[18]


CHINA
Kai Hua Fu
Meng-Tzu Hsien
Mau Hao
Bao Lac
Pak Bao
Cao Bang
Lao Kai
Lai Chau
TONGKING
Lang Son
Red River
Black River
BURMA
DIEN BIEN PHU
HANOI
Haiphong
Mekong R
SOUTH CHINA SEA
VIENTIANE
ANNAM
LAOS
THAILAND
Mekong R
BANGKOK
CAMBODIA
GULF OF SIAM
Pnom Penh
Mekong R
SAIGON
0 50 100 miles
0 100 200 Km
SOUTH-EAST ASIA
W.A.N. WATSON

General Henri Navarre took command of the French Expeditionary Corps (FEC) in Indochina on May 19, 1953, the sixth commander since 1946. He was tasked by the French prime minister to bring the war to a satisfactory stage in order to negotiate an honorable settlement.[19] Hence, by this time, the French government did **not** expect to win the war, therefore, General Navarre should not have expected the support necessary to win.

When Navarre took command the FEC numbered 189,000 soldiers comprised of 54,000 French (most of these units were integrated with Vietnamese), 20,000 Foreign Legionnaires, 30,000 North Africans, 70,000 Vietnamese, 10,000 in the Air Force, and 5,000 naval troops.[20] Significantly at least 100,000 soldiers were committed to defending urban areas, military facilities, and local regions.[21] This, coupled with the fact that the enemy had the equivalent of nine regular army divisions, resulted in the Vietminh having at least a two to one advantage in troops for ground offensive action in Tonkin province.[22] Although the French were skilled at airborne operations and perceived that they had a tactical mobility advantage, the amount of combat and transport aircraft proved to be wholly inadequate to support large scale ground operations throughout the theater.[23]

Navarre's Plan. After reviewing the situation in Indochina for himself, Navarre returned to France in July 1953 to brief

the French civilian government and military leaders on his strategy. The essence of his position as presented to the leadership is that he would build a greater offensive capability and conduct a more mobile war, taking the fight to the enemy. The French government promised only ten additional battalions of reinforcements to prosecute his plan.[24] Later Navarre would again request more troops in November and in April 1954, only to be refused each time.[25]

As explained by General Davidson, Navarre's plan also contained the following elements:

> Defend Indochina along the 18th parallel and southern theater, and defend in the north, the area of the Vietminh's greatest strength. However, the FEC would conduct a series of raids, sorties, and spoiling attacks, (example - Dien Bien Phu), to throw the Vietminh off balance. Navarre planned to pacify the Tonkin delta and accelerate the build-up of the Vietnamese National Army, which would free more FEC troops for mobile, offensive action by late 1954 and early 1955. By then Navarre would seek a major battle with the Vietminh. However, Navarre's initial offensive would be in Annam and the Central Highlands, where it appeared that the French had a greater near-term chance of success.[26]

While meeting with French leaders, Navarre expressed reservations about his ability to defend Laos, mentioning that an airhead at Dien Bien Phu "might do it."[27] Navarre's responsibility to defend Laos became an unresolved issue that came back later to haunt the French. The government was purposely vague because they were more interested in peace negotiations than in defending Laos.[28] In other words, the

disconnect between Navarre and the civilian leadership concerning basic war aims precluded Navarre from executing a military strategy that the government could support.

One reason that Navarre was concerned about his ability to defend Laos was that the Vietminh had successfully invaded Laos in the spring of 1953 (only to depart within a month). This invasion prompted the Americans to press their recommendations on the French for a more forceful theater commander, and a winning strategy. Navarre was highly attuned to U.S. impatience with the French effort and American desire for victory over the communists. His plan, therefore, reflected American urging for a more aggressive strategy. "In September 1953 the United States approved the Navarre Plan and provided some $770 million for its implementation while extracting from the French a pledge to pursue it vigorously."[29]

When Navarre arrived in theater, the main French base was at Hanoi in the northern province of Tonkin, which was a hotly contested battleground. Meanwhile, the French generally controlled the southern part of the country, or Cochin China, and the middle area, or waist of Vietnam - Annam was mainly controlled by the Vietminh. Navarre intended to fight a strategic defensive in the north and conduct his main offensive in Annam.[30]

Interestingly the main effort of 1954, Operation Atlante, in January and February was a miserable failure for the French. Considering that Amman was not critically important to the Vietminh, but the loss of over 10,000 FEC soldiers at Dien Bien Phu was devastating to the French, Atlante was gross strategic mistake.[31]

In August 1953, the French successfully evacuated an airhead at Na San, near Dien Bien Phu in northwest Tonkin. This operation probably helped convince General Navarre that the FEC could successfully launch and recover airborne forces in Vietminh controlled territory.[32] Navarre's predecessor, General Salan, had also thought that reoccupation of Dien Bien Phu (eight miles from Laos), which had two airfields nearby, would be a viable way to defend Laos.[33] Navarre's subordinate commander in Tonkin, Major General Cogny, also suggested using Dien Bien Phu as a base.

As the operational aspects of Navarre's plan were developed, he decided to conduct mobile operations to defend Laos using Dien Bien Phu as a base. This was to be a secondary attack, not his main effort in theater. There were several other purposes of this action including: break the Vietminh lines of communication into Laos; disrupt rice growing and harvesting; interrupt opium (which was grown in the area) trade with the Chinese; gain greater support from local T'ai tribesmen

who were hostile to the Vietminh; and maintain French initiative in the north by throwing the enemy off-balance.

Prior to launching the Dien Bien Phu campaign, the French Prime Minister, Joseph Laniel, announced publicly in November 1953 that his government was willing to "accept any honorable solution to the war in Indochina, and was not trying to force the Vietminh to unconditional surrender."[34] Ho Chi Minh signaled his intention to talk also, and the complexion of the war suddenly changed for both sides. Now the Vietminh knew that the French were no longer fighting to win, but only to gain a better bargaining position at any future peace conference.[35] The Vietminh saw the impending negotiations as an incentive to attempt achieving total victory in the last campaigns.[36]

Laos became a member of the French Union in October 1953. This seemed to buttress Navarre's intent to defend Laos, and he launched the Dien Bien Phu air-drop the next month. Navarre did not expect to fight a major battle at Dien Bien Phu, believing that only one combat division of Vietminh would fight there. This idea was partially based on his assumption that the Vietminh could not support more than one division far from its main logistics base, and that French airpower could interrupt Vietminh reinforcement and resupply.

General Navarre issued an order on December 3 that Dien Bien Phu "must be held at all costs."[37] However, Navarre

received notification on December 4, 1953 relieving him of his responsibility to defend upper Laos.[38] At this point, Navarre was committed to his plan to fight a mobile campaign from Dien Bien Phu, which had been in progress for two weeks. The French government decision regarding Laos was probably based on the idea that impending peace negotiations made it less critical to risk further French casualties, and, partly a political decision to excuse the Laniel government from blame for a potential military disaster at Dien Bien Phu.

OPERATIONAL MISCALCULATION

The French failed at the operational level because they overestimated their own strengths and greatly underestimated the skill, resources, and tenacity of their opponent. Put another way by Jules Roy, he stated that by 1953 the French Army was tired, lacked initiative, and their VNA allies were corrupt.[39]

While Dien Bien Phu was not the major French effort at the time, the Vietminh committed 50% of their forces to this engagement. The Vietminh did not simply overwhelm the defenders at Dien Bien Phu with greater numbers, they also beat them in several critical areas including fire support, air defense, logistics, and intelligence. For example, General Navarre's intellligence staff assured him that the Vietminh could not logistically support a major force at Dien Bien Phu, nor bring in much artillery or artillery ammunition.[40] The Vietminh enjoyed an overwhelming advantage in artillery, employed it effectively, and continuously resupplied despite the dense jungle terrain and bad roads. In short, the Vietminh were able to set the terms of battle. Within a month of the French initial airborne insertion and subsequent landing of reinforcements, the Vietminh quickly increased their forces from one regiment to almost three divisions at Dien Bien Phu. This rapid Vietminh build-up, unexpected by Navarre, enabled them to

confine the French to Dien Bien Phu and ensure that a siege would occur vice the mobile defense the French originally envisioned.

Jules Roy believed that Navarre wanted a set-piece battle whereby the Vietminh would be lured into the teeth of superior FEC firepower at Dien Bien Phu and incur huge losses.[41] As stated by Neil Sheehan in the introduction to Roy's book,

> General Navarre and his staff grossly underestimated the skill and the resources of their enemy. They did not realize that these Western military axioms (referring to French assumptions about their own military superiority) would not only fail to succeed against the revolutionary, politico strategy of the enemy, but would actually lead to disaster.[42]

Poor Judgment. Even though his Dien Bien Phu plan was opposed by several senior leaders including Cogny and his senior air force commander[43], Navarre felt that he had to destroy at least part of the enemy's main battle force in theater due to the advent of extensive Chinese and Russian assistance to the Vietminh since the end of the Korean War.[44] Further, Navarre wanted to maintain the battlefield initiative. He simply underestimated the risks to the Dien Bien Phu force. Ultimately it was Navarre that was kept off balance and prevented from rescuing or reinforcing Dien Bien Phu. He was forced to defend against numerous diversionary Vietminh attacks throughout the theater during January and February 1954.

Dien Bien Phu is in a 75 square mile valley bottom ringed by small mountains of 1,400 to 1,800 feet. Once the Vietminh seized these mountains, emplaced artillery, and blocked the French from moving beyond their fortifications, the French loss became inevitable.

At the start of the battle the Vietminh, led by their commander-in-chief General Giap, had a five to one infantry advantage over the French. By the time of the final assault, this ratio climbed to 10 to 1 in favor of the Vietminh. Moreover, the Vietminh dominated the artillery battle with six times the number of heavy tubes compared to the French. The French artillery commander, Colonel Piroth, promised that he would neutralize the Vietminh artillery. He was so confident of French artillery superiority that the FEC did not even dig in their artillery pieces, which contributed to unexpected losses of artillerists and equipment early in the battle. After two days of ineffective French counter-battery fire and Vietminh artillery superiority, Piroth committed suicide on 15 March, after saying that he was "completely dishonored".[45]

In summary, General Navarre and his staff did not realize how quickly their opponents had learned the lessons of war. By the time of the battle the Vietminh Army was a professional, effective force. Extensive Chinese and Russian aid was also instrumental to their success.

LOGISTICS FAILURE

The historian William Seymour cites inadequate French logistics as the decisive factor in their loss at Dien Bien Phu.[46] The French committed other tactical errors, but insufficient resupply was the most fatal.

Air Drop. The French originally planned to have all supplies flown into the two airfields at Dien Bien Phu. However, by the second day of the siege, 14 March, the airfields were both severely damaged and thoroughly covered by enemy fire, rendering them unusable for resupply aircraft landings. Therefore, the French had to rely upon airdrop for all resupply. Further, due to severe Vietminh anti-aircraft fire, on 27 March the French had to cease the more accurate drops from a lower altitude, 2,500 feet, and drop from 6,500 feet which resulted in a high rate of drops into enemy areas.[47] The main defensive position was only 1-½ miles wide. As the battle progressed the secure area continued to shrink until the end of the battle when the main French position was less than one square mile. The impact of the inaccurate drops was an estimated 20% of all airdropped supplies fell on the Vietminh.

The average daily resupply requirement was 150 tons of supplies. Because the French had about 75 to 100 transport planes and some contract aircraft assistance, they averaged only

about 100 tons delivered daily (weather permitting - April was a particularly rainy month) to the besieged garrison, not counting the vast quantity that fell into enemy hands[48]. Moreover, the resupply base at Hanoi was almost 300 miles distant and the rough terrain between Hanoi and Dien Bien Phu precluded building airstrips any closer.[49]. Hence, inadequate air resupply means complicated and exacerbated all the other logistics problems.

Internal Distribution. As of 13 March, the French had 44 jeeps, 47 ¾ ton trucks, and 26 2 ½ tons to recover and distribute dropped supplies.[50] By 22 April all of the trucks were destroyed and the centralized supply system broke down. Soldiers then had to hand drag supplies throughout the French position. In several instances they had to destroy airdropped equipment that they could not reach or drag back to their lines to prevent the enemy from using it.

The French organized Prisoners of War, or PIMs, captured during previous campaigns, into supply parties. The PIMs often recovered supplies under enemy fire or died trying. Significantly only 30 of the 2,440 PIMs (as of 13 March) deserted even though they were loosely guarded and had ready access to airdropped or discarded weapons.[51] This was probably due to the genuine affection that the PIMs had for the French.[52]

Approximately three to four thousand soldiers of the French force became internal deserters, referred to as "the Rats of the

Nam Yung" since they burrowed into the riverbanks and sat out the fighting. However, they consumed various supplies dropped into their areas without contributing to the garrison defense.[53]

Infrastructure. The French Army's initial plan was to conduct an active defense, therefore, they did not bring sufficient materiel to build adequate fortifications. Even after stripping the village and nearby jungle of available lumber, and using the steel plating from the airstrip as it was gradually destroyed, they continued to suffer inordinate losses due to enemy artillery fire on poorly constructed positions. Bernard Fall estimated that they were about 30,000 tons short of their requirement but could not afford to fly in more barrier materiel since other supplies were even more critical.[54] They relied primarily upon considerable barbed wire placement ringing their extensive trench lines, underground corridors, and fighting position system. At the beginning of the battle they also had three bulldozers to assist in building their defense network.

Medical Support. The primary hospital was located near the main command post and there were two other smaller hospitals. The last medical evacuation flight departed on 26 March and the number of wounded under active medical care grew to a high point of 3,000 soldiers attended by 19 physicians. Significantly,

approximately 40% of the French force taken prisoner at the end were wounded.

The French Foreign Legion units were accompanied by two BMC's, or Mobile Field Bordellos (Bordels Mobiles de Campagne).[55] Several of these Algerian and Vietnamese prostitutes served as nurses as the vast number of wounded soldiers stretched the capability of the medical units.

Combat Service Support. In addition to the combat units, the French also had signal, ammunition, military police, postal, and quartermaster soldiers. As part of their support duties they kept the vehicles and other equipment operating until it was too damaged to maintain. One of their most significant accomplishments was receiving ten disassembled tanks before the siege, reassembling them and keep them operating until early May when the last tank was destroyed by enemy fire.[56] They also maintained four water purification units to supply the garrison with potable water. Unfortunately water-carrying parties were decimated through combat losses and several outlying units had to sometimes drink rainwater[57].

The most significant supply shortfall was ammunition. On several occasions French counterattacks failed because they exhausted their ammunition. Usage was carefully controlled throughout the battle, and by the last day several units were totally without ammunition.

Another supply challenge was food provisioning even though it was the lowest priority for airdrops. First, the garrison tried to stock six different types of subsistence to accommodate the diversity within the FEC, including North Africans, Vietnamese, T'ai tribesmen, and various Europeans in the Foreign Legion. On 7 and 14 April they actually ran out of food in the central supply complicated by a direct artillery hit on their stocks. By 29 April, the garrison was on half rations.[58] This dire circumstance was probably a contributor to the fact that several soldiers died from exhaustion while handling supplies or ammunition.

Personnel Replacements. The steady deterioration of combat strength due to death, serious wounds, and internal desertion contributed significantly to the French being out-manned by the Vietminh. According to Bernard Fall, "The most serious negative effect on combat morale was due less to the inadequacy of supplies than to the dribbling numbers of personnel replacements which almost never covered the daily losses".[59] During the siege, 4,291 soldiers parachuted in to join the 10,814 soldiers present on 13 March. But by 28 April there were only 3,250 FEC infantrymen in fighting condition.[60]

OUTCOME

It was announced in January 1954 that the conflicting parties and other interested countries would attend a conference proposed by the Soviet Union to convene at Geneva in April. Ironically, discussions regarding Indochina began on May 7, the day the garrison fell.

US Role. The French requested that the U.S. intervene with airpower at Dien Bien Phu. Bernard Fall, among others believed that U.S. intervention might have "saved" Dien Bien Phu, or at least created a better resolution at Geneva.[61] Given the shaky French-American relations it was probably unrealistic for the French to expect that the Americans would enter the war. In March 1954 Secretary of State Dulles informed French Army Chief Staff Ely "that the U.S. would not intervene except under conditions that ensured success and unless France extended a greater degree of partnership than it had shown in the past".[62] One precondition for American troop involvement was collective action among the allies (including Great Britain) which never materialized.

There were other factors mitigating against a U.S. troop role. The U.S. did not wish to appear to be supporting colonialism, nor did it want to its smaller, "new look" Army to become engaged in a land war in Asia so soon after the Korean War.[63] General Ridgway, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff (and former

Commander-In-Chief, Far East during the Korean War), vigorously opposed U.S. involvement[64]. He believed that it would take at least twelve U.S. combat divisions to positively affect the outcome.

Finally, President Eisenhower believed that Dien Bien Phu was a tactical blunder by the French, and he ultimately did not support direct U.S. troop participation in the battle or the war.[65] The story of the U.S. role is a complicated one and better suited to another paper. I believe that American airpower would not have "saved" the French due to the superior Vietminh strength and tenacity.

Geneva Conference. While the Geneva conference was in session the Laniel government fell on June 12, 1954. Pierre Mendes-France became Prime Minister and he was publicly committed to a quick negotiated settlement.[66] The Vietminh had their own reasons for seeking negotiations, mainly that they were pressured by their benefactors, China and the Soviet Union, to seek peace. China feared greater U.S. involvement in Asia and the Soviets curried favor with France whom they believed might not join the European Defense Community if they received a favorable (under the circumstances) settlement at Geneva.[67] Henry Kissinger expertly summarized the whole situation in his book Diplomacy:

In 1954, an uneasy stalemate developed which none of the parties was as yet in a position to break. The Soviet Union was not prepared for confrontation so soon after Stalin's death and had only marginal national interests in southeast Asia; China feared another war with America less than a year after the end of the Korean conflict (especially in light of the new American doctrine of massive retaliation); France was in the process of withdrawing from the region; the U.S. lacked both a strategy and the public support for intervention; and the Vietminh communists were not yet strong enough to continue the war without outside sources of supply.[68]

The Geneva agreement partitioned Vietnam along the 17th Parallel with the northern half going to the communists. "Heavily pressured by China and Russia, the Vietminh came away with less than virtually everyone had predicted at the start of the Geneva Conference."[69] Conversely, after the astounding Vietminh achievement at Dien Bien Phu and the further deterioration of the first military situation after the battle, this looked to be a pretty good deal for the French. It certainly seemed to be a better outcome than they could have gained by continuing the war, considering their level of commitment. But France was no longer considered a "great" power.[70]

The ramifications of French defeat at Dien Bien Phu were dramatic. One could argue that it seriously affected their relations with America as evidenced by their rejection of European Defense Community membership in August 1954, and the later break with America over the Suez Canal Crisis.[71] The Dien Bien Phu experience also contributed to the unrest in their

North African colonies as the indigenous peoples questioned French control of their countries.

Finally, America gradually entered the war it had sought to avoid as it replaced France as the guarantor of a non-communist government in South Vietnam. America also seemed to make the same mistakes the French had made - overconfidence in their own supposed superiority at arms, and underestimation of North Vietnamese determination and military skill. In fact, the Vietnam War seemed to progress in the same stages as the previous Indochina War; a build-up of opposing forces, escalation of the conflict, protracted combat and attrition, American disillusionment, and finally U.S. disengagement resulting in the 1975 Communist takeover of the entire country.

CONCLUSION

While French strategy and conduct of the Indochina War was flawed, the Vietminh pursued a patient, determined and ultimately successful course. Ho Chi Minh predicted that the struggle would exhaust France - and he was correct.[72] His strategy was to "continue the fight until he had worn down French opinion to the point at which he could dictate the terms of an armistice".[73] The war-weary French could not win because they did not know how to fight a revolutionary war, nor were they prepared to pay the price to win one. In contrast, the Vietminh learned their enemy and how to fight, and they prepared mentally and physically to endure hardship indefinitely until they prevailed.

One of the greatest critics of the French involvement in Indochina and a former French Army colonel in the FEC, Jules Roy, provided other reasons why France was destined to lose. Although it was widely known by the time of the re-occupation of Dien Bien Phu that France was losing, France was "indifferent toward her Army" and "disguised its refusal to lose its dividends and its markets as a crusade against communism".[74] He further described a demoralized army as, "A military elite, fighting without an inspiring objective, felt that it was redeeming an indifferent nation which understood nothing about this war and suspected its government of waging it to protect

obscure interests."[75] Similarly, an American critic, General Ridgway, not only opposed U.S. ground intervention but also "concluded that the U.S. should withdraw material support since the French were conducting the war half-heartedly and had no real prospects of victory."[76]

General Navarre indicated that in his opinion the primary reason for defeat was an "inadequacy of means" referring to insufficient soldiers, air-power, and logistics support.[77] He was not an impartial observer, and General Navarre's mistakes had a significant adverse effect on the final outcome. But he is on the right track. France did have "inadequacies" in their commitment to victory, their willingness to resource the war effort, and in their inability to understand their foe.

The lessons of Dien Bien Phu were many, but unfortunately they seemed to be either forgotten or ignored by America. The U.S., during its own conflict in Vietnam, committed many of the same errors as the French, including underestimating the enemy and failing to adopt a successful counter-revolutionary strategy.

It is meaningful to the professional soldier to study the timeless strategic, operational, and tactical lessons of Dien Bien Phu to be better prepared for the next conflict. Hopefully, our future American political leaders and diplomats will also study the lessons of the Indochina War, the most

compelling, and timeless lesson being that commitment of America's Army to battle must mean that the American people are prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to win.

WORD COUNT = 5,524

ENDNOTES

[1] Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, End of a War: Indochina, 1954 (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1969), 18.

[2] William Seymour, "The Siege of Dien Bien Phu 13 March-8 May 1954," in Decisive Factors In Twenty Great Battles of The World (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 341.

[3] Peter M. Dunn, The First Vietnam War (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 189.

[4] Bernard B. Fall, Hell In A Very Small Place: The Siege Of Dien Bien Phu (Philadelphia/New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1967), viii.

[5] Stanley Karnow, Vietnam A History: The First Complete Account of Vietnam At War (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1983), 159.

[6] Ibid., 171

[7] Melanie Billings-Yun, Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954 (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 22.

[8] Denise Artaud, "Conclusion," in Dien Bien Phu and The Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955, ed. Lawrence S. Kaplan, Denise Artaud, and Mark R. Rubin (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1990), 271.

[9] Fall, viii

[10] Ibid.

[11] Billings-Yun, 10.

[12] Ibid., 4.

[13] Karnow, 170.

[14] George C. Herring, "Franco-American Conflict in Indochina, 1950-1954," in Dien Bien Phu and The Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955, 38.

[15] Ibid., 40.

[16] Ibid., 38.

[17] Howard R. Simpson, Tiger in the Barbed Wire: An American in Vietnam 1952-1991 (New York, NY: Brassey's Inc., 1992), 84.

[18] R.E.M. Irving, The First Indochina War: French and American Policy 1945-54. (New York, NY: Crane, Russak and Company, Inc., 1975), 106.

[19] Seymour, 343.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Phillip B. Davidson, Vietnam At War: The History 1946-1975 (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 163.

[22] Ibid., 162.

[23] Howard R. Simpson, Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot (McLean, VA: Brassey's Inc., 1994), xx.

[24] Seymour, 343.

[25] Artaud, "France Between The Indochina War and The European Defense Community," in Dien Bien Phu and The Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955, 254.

[26] Davidson, 166 and 167.

[27] Davidson, 175.

[28] Karnow, 190.

[29] Herring, 38.

[30] Davidson, 167.

[31] Ibid., 278.

[32] Fall, 30.

[33] Davidson, 173.

[34] Billings-Yun, 9.

[35] Ibid., 11

[36] Davidson, 198.

[37] Ibid., 200.

[38] Ibid., 176.

[39] Jules Roy, The Battle Of Dien Bien Phu (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1963), 5.

[40] Davidson, 189.

[41] Roy, xv.

[42] Neil Sheehan, "Introduction," in The Battle of Dien Bien Phu, Jules Roy, xv.

[43] Davidson, 182.

[44] Fall, ix.

[45] Dennis Karl, "Dien Bien Phu," in Glorious Defiance: Last Stands Throughout History (New York, NY: Paragon House, 1990), 207.

[46] Seymour, 355.

[47] Davidson, 244.

[48] Ibid., 219.

[49] Ibid., 218.

[50] Fall, 268.

[51] Ibid., 252.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 209.

[54] Ibid., 89.

[55] Simpson, 39.

[56] Fall, 97.

[57] Ibid., 95.

[58] Ibid., 247.

[59] Ibid., 268.

[60] Ibid., 328.

[61] Ibid., 455.

[62] Herring, 41.

[63] Richard H. Immerman, "Prologue: Perceptions by the United States of Its Interests in Indochina," in Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955, 15.

[64] George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dien Bien Phu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited, in Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955, 90.

[65] Billings-Yun, 24.

[66] Herring, 45.

[67] Billings-Yun, 11.

[68] Henry Kissinger, "Vietnam: Entry into the Morass; Truman and Eisenhower," in Diplomacy (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 635.

[69] Billings-Yun, 158.

[70] Artaud, 265.

[71] Ibid., 251.

[72] Karnow, 182.

[73] Ibid., 193.

[74] Roy, 290.

[75] Ibid., 13.

[76] Billings-Yun, 47.

[77] Davidson, 273.

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