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# ***MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES***

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**AUTHOR: Major Paul J. Kennedy, USMC**

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**Mentor: Dr. Donald F. Bittner, Professor of History**

**Approved: \_\_\_\_\_**

**Date: \_\_\_\_\_**

**Mentor: LtCol D.M. Watson, USMC**

**Approved: \_\_\_\_\_**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Title:** *Dinassaut* Operations in Indochina: 1946-1954

**Author:** Major Paul J. Kennedy, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** The French *Division d'Infanterie Navale d'Assaut*, more commonly referred to as the *Dinassaut*, developed riverine doctrine during the First Indochina War to a level not attained since by Expeditionary Forces. The United States Navy borrowed heavily from the French experience during its own river wars in Vietnam ten years later. However, renewed interest by the Marine Corps in riverine operations as part of Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare overlooks these lessons as only a small solution to a unique war. The Marine Corps is heading in the wrong direction.

**Discussion:** The formation of the *Dinassaut* can be dismissed as a small solution to a very complex war. The nature of the war required mobile forces, to include those capable of controlling the waterways. These agile and flexible units were involved in every major operation in the lowlands from 1946 until 1954. The vulnerability to French combined arms, mobility, and coordinated use of infantry, coupled with the loss of interior lines, wrought horrendous damage on the VLA as they were exposed the full strength of the French Expeditionary Corps.

The lessons for the present day are not so much different. Greater relative mobility is the key to successfully outmaneuvering an enemy that will not stand toe-to-toe with conventional forces. The French understood the inland waterways were key to their control of the interior of Vietnam. They matched the VLA in terms of relative mobility within this medium. The physical control of the rivers was not as important as the ability to transverse those waterways carrying combat power and then projecting it ashore in pursuit of the enemy. During operations where the French employed only one means of mobility the enemy was usually able to escape, especially when employing airborne and airmobile force. The same will be true for the Marine Corps in future operations.

The Marine Corps places great faith in the ability to maneuver forces directly against operational objectives. The advanced technology of the MV-22, AAV, and LCAC will not overcome the obstacles to mobility and trafficability once those forces secure their objectives and find that the enemy has eluded them. The EMW doctrine places too much emphasis on the methods for getting from amphibious shipping to objectives ashore and does little to address the form of maneuver once those forces have been inserted. The primary means of mobility ashore apparently will be on foot. As witnessed by many of the infantry operations in the early portion of the Indochina War, foot mobile infantry is ill-suited for extended operations. Like the French, our formations will get to the battlefield in good order but will soon find themselves outmaneuvered, outnumbered and outfought. The capability to operate along the interior of countries like Vietnam, Colombia and others may very well depend upon developing a credible riverine force.

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**Conclusion:** The Marine Corps needs to develop a riverine force better suited to a wide variety of conventional and unconventional operations if it hopes to attain greater relative mobility in future operations. The success of the Dinassaut in overcoming the very same problems should serve as a positive example on which to tailor our forces. Our present direction of utilizing light craft with small forces is not suitable across the spectrum. Until this shortcoming is addressed, the Marine Corps may very well find itself posturing off the coast in a crisis, unable to execute tactical maneuver ashore because of a lack of means to get the job done.

# Table of Contents

MMS Cover Sheet .....	i
DISCLAIMER .....	ii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	iii
PROLOGUE .....	iv
CHAPTER 1: Indochine .....	1
CHAPTER 2: The River Wars .....	9
CHAPTER 3: Operations in the Mekong .....	14
CHAPTER 4: Conception: Birth of the Naval Assault Division .....	17
CHAPTER 5: War for the Red River Delta, 1947-48 .....	21
CHAPTER 6: A New Face of the War .....	27
CHAPTER 7: The Dinassaut Come of Age .....	30
CHAPTER 8: The Final Years, 1953-54 .....	39
CHAPTER 9: Riverine Operations: 2001 .....	44
CONCLUSION: .....	47
APPENDIX A: Chronology of Events .....	50
APPENDIX B: French Riverine Craft .....	52
APPENDIX C: USMC River Craft .....	54
APPENDIX D: Abbreviations and Acronyms .....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY: .....	56

## List of Illustrations

Map 1: The French Indochina Union .....	2
Map 2: Tonkin .....	4
Map 3: My Tho .....	14
Map 4: Nam Dinh .....	23
Map 5: Operations <i>LEA</i> and <i>CEINTURE</i> .....	24
Map 6: Gian Khau .....	25
Map 7: VLA 1950 Offensive .....	29
Map 8: VLA 1951 Offensive .....	31
Map 9: Hoa Binh .....	33
Map 10: Operation LORRAINE .....	36
Map 11: Na San .....	38
Map 12: Operation ATLANTE .....	41



## Prologue

The French attempted to match Viet-minh mobility on foot with the mechanical mobility so essential to warfare against forces equally mechanized. Again the Viet-minh made use of the jungle to nullify French mechanized mobility and power. Even when the French took the offensive, the initiative remained with the Viet-Minh, who could attack at will from the jungle, choosing their targets, and, at will, retire into the jungle again. All this presented a problem the French never managed to solve, burdened as they were with the doctrine saddled on them by their mechanization... They did approach a solution in the formation, equipment and tactical employment of their *Dinassaut*.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is the story of the little known brown-water naval war which the French prosecuted between 1946 and 1954, specifically that from 1950. It is the story of the *Division d'Infanterie Navale d'Assaut*, or more commonly referred to as *Dinassaut*. Within the context of the entire Indochinese conflict the operations of these small armored naval columns contributed only modestly to the outcome as a whole. However, in a war in which nearly all of their tactical solutions to the conundrum of guerilla warfare failed, the few gleaming nuggets of success merit special attention. Tall among these achievements stands the story of the *Dinassaut*.

The story is worth reviewing, as much for the historical significance as for the possible application today. However, a good portion of this record has been lost or is superficially noted. Also, although many of the participants are still alive, their lessons are not widely recognized as genuinely important to the greater body of military knowledge. For Marines today the peculiar circumstances of riverine operations in Vietnam do not fit the force structure, doctrine, and equipping of the contemporary Corps. Ironically, the U.S. Navy was the direct heir of the *Dinassaut*, reflected in the mobile river formations of TF117 during the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, yet its lessons and capabilities have also passed silently into the historical record.

Author Kenneth Hagan, in his book *This People's Navy*, offers the opinion that “brown water” operations ran counter to the Navy’s modern heritage of a “blue water” focus; a “hitch” with the brown water side was detrimental to the career progression of those officers assigned.<sup>2</sup>

The thrust of this paper is historical in nature, however the theme will provoke questions concerning modern day applicability. United States Marine Corps doctrine of Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare (EMW) has refocused naval forces from large scale, set piece conflicts between developed countries and to the littoral regions of the world. These littoral regions, in which the bulk of the world's population resides, have become the battlespace for Naval expeditionary forces. However, our definition narrowly limits the discussion to the coastal regions, almost to the exclusion of ubiquitous intercoastal waterways, alluvial land masses, and estuarine drainage that leads much of the world to their coasts. River travel represents the sole form of transportation and trafficability in many of the regions Marines expect to deploy and fight. Yet, if these geographic formations are present within the targeted littoral areas, how does the United States plan on conducting expeditionary operations where the existing infrastructure and access to the interior is at odds with its capabilities to project power? If all conflicts could be prosecuted within ten miles of the coast, there is no problem. However, this is also a convenient illusion.

Studying the French experience in Indochina is germane to our appreciation of Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare. Unlike the U.S. involvement some ten years later, the French fought this war "on a shoestring" budget against an ideologically driven and mobile enemy. With less than 125,000 troops in the entire theater, the French were forced to fight their own

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy*, (Harrisburg, PA., The Stackpole Company, 1961), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Hagan, *This People's Navy: the Making of American Sea Power*, New York, NY, Free Press; Toronto, Collier MacMillan, 1991

form of mobile warfare making the best use of combined arms and technology. Their enemy was less conventionally armed but possessed of a drive and determination to rid themselves of foreign influence and of a desire for independence. This closely resembles our own assessment of future adversaries against which U.S. forces may deploy. The French Expeditionary Corps practiced many of the same concepts present in the new doctrine of EMW, albeit in more primitive form.

The purpose for focusing on a single aspect of the first Indochina War is that riverine operations are a missing capability in our present doctrine. The Marine Corps has been charged with developing riverine doctrine for the department of defense since 1989, yet nothing of any worth has been produced except for minor techniques and procedures for the handling of small boats.<sup>3</sup> In 1990 a Navy/Marine Corps board, drawing on a document for riverine warfare called the Worthington Study, tasked their respective services to develop a concept to field and exercise a battalion size riverine assault capability. A report date of February 1991 was assigned for action.<sup>4</sup> The board has yet to achieve this goal. The U.S. Navy does not appear any more inclined to conduct brown water operations than they did thirty years ago except in support of special operations. Virtually the entire fleet of specialized riverine assault craft has been retired or mothballed. There is no plan on developing a suitable riverine craft for the future. Given the abundance of geographic regions that possess such inland waterways, this appears to fly in the face of reality.

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<sup>3</sup> Iris M. Gonzalez, "The Columbian Riverine Program: A Case Study of Naval International Programs and National Strategy", Alexandria, VA, Center for Naval Analyses, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Admiral G.R Worthington, "Riverine Warfare Study" dtd. 10 December 1990. Miami, FL, Booz-Allen & Hamilton.



## Chapter 1

### Indochine

**The Land.** To understand the character of the French-Indochina war one must comprehend the geographic and climatic conditions that ultimately defined its direction and shape. The climate and topography in Southeast Asia is similar to other countries that straddle the Tropic of Cancer: hot and humid, covered by vast expanses of tropical growth, with jagged mountains cut by the drainage of +60 inches of annual precipitation, and lowlands nearly completely covered by rice paddies.<sup>5</sup> Water is the common denominator on the Indochinese peninsula. It serves as a primary means of transportation, nourishes the ubiquitous rice paddies, isolates great stretches of the interior by flooding, and washes out thousands of miles of road each year. The rain and fog during the monsoon season likewise restrict air travel, thereby increasing the sense of incontinuity. The land is thus traditionally compartmented, the people semi-isolated, and life moves slowly in this part of the world.

Vietnam is the eastern-most country in southeast Asia, with Laos and Cambodia to the immediate west, and China along the north. A mostly agricultural nation, it has been described as two rice baskets hanging on opposite ends of a pole.<sup>6</sup> The baskets are formed by its fertile and populated regions, known as Tonkin and Cochin China, in the north and south respectively, and

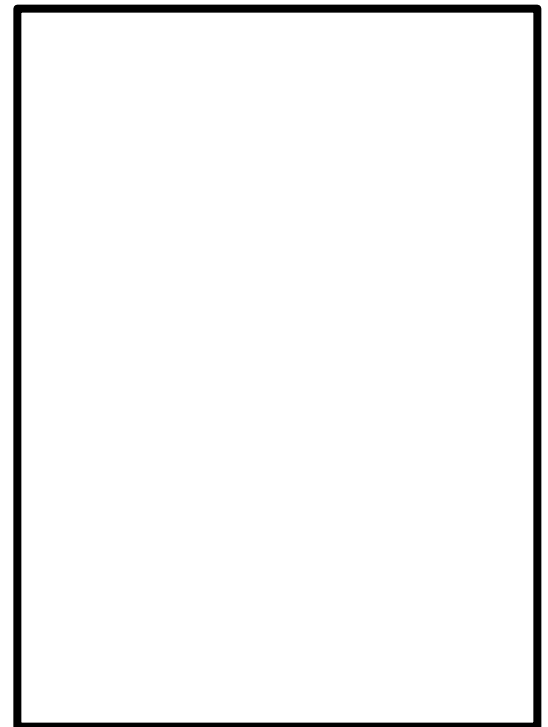
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<sup>5</sup> Harvey H. Smith, Area handbook for South Vietnam, (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Doyle, Edward and Samuel Lipsman. The Vietnam Experience: Setting the Stage. (Boston, MA. Boston Publishing Co., 1981), 37.

bisected by a central mountain range in the area known as Annam. Each of these three regions was settled in sequence from north to south, and over the last several hundred years each developed its own distinct local culture and customs. In spite of this variation along the 1,200 miles of the interior and the semi-isolated nature of the population, the inhabitants coalesced around a Pan-Vietnamese identity, a people distinctly independent, living under the shadow of menacing China. The presence of this giant, always posing a constant threat of invasion, helped spark, then nurture, the fierce flame of Vietnamese ethnicity as the culture developed. That the northern region more stridently protected this identity, a result of sharing the border with the Chinese, exacerbated the relationship with their modern colonial masters from France.<sup>7</sup>

The mountainous regions within Vietnam are found primarily in northern Tonkin and central Annam. In the north these mountains, known as the Viet Bac, are forbidding natural obstacles to both invading armies and to the development of viable population centers. They provide the drainage that shapes the rest of northern Vietnam. Outside of the navigable rivers, providing the limited trafficability that the people depend upon, the area was largely inaccessible to ground transportation. Single and narrow unimproved roads serviced much of the region; these were twisting nightmares prone to yearly washout and disruption. Malaria and other jungle-borne diseases also contributed to the limited population growth.



**The French Indochina Union**

The few existing valleys and open areas were isolated pockets and had been settled for

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<sup>7</sup> Doyle, 51.

agricultural interests; chief among them are Lai Chu, Na San, and Dien Bien Phu. Likewise, the central mountains of Annam, known as the Chaine Annamitique, are sparsely populated and largely undeveloped. Here the future battlefields of Pleiku and Khe Sanh would attest to the difficulty of fighting a mobile enemy in such a remote region of the world. It has been estimated that 70% of the roads in this area are rendered unserviceable by the annual monsoons.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps not too ironically, in a war of mismatched mobility, the most decisive battles of the war, with all their political implications, would be settled in these remote valleys and mountain passes.

Under the unique climatic conditions imposed by the considerable annual rainfall, the people have become dependent upon the internal network of rivers, canals, and estuarine waterways to conduct their lives. The principal rivers common to this study are the Mekong and the Red River.<sup>9</sup> The Mekong River is the dominant geographic feature in Indochina, starting in the Tibetan highlands and meandering some 2,800 miles down the peninsula to the sea.<sup>10</sup> As the Mekong travels north to south through Laos, most of that country's western border is demarcated from Burma and Thailand, respectively.<sup>11</sup> Cambodia's highlands are pierced, and the country is split, as the river makes its way toward the sea.<sup>12</sup> Eventually passing through southern Vietnam, the Mekong splits into a broad alluvial system of smaller rivers and empties into the sea.<sup>13</sup> The Mekong Delta covers some 26,000 square miles, with 2,750 miles of inland waterways.<sup>14</sup> River traffic on the Mekong is possible up to 70 miles past Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia.<sup>15</sup> Saigon, the largest city and busiest port in Cochin China, is accessed by the Dong Nai River.

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<sup>8</sup> Connor, Weiner, Wilson, The Land Border of South Vietnam: Some Physical and Cultural Characteristics, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey H. Smith, Area handbook for North Vietnam, (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 45.

<sup>10</sup> Area handbook for North Vietnam

<sup>11</sup> Edited by Andrea Savada, Laos: A country study, (Federal Research Division, 1994), 81.

<sup>12</sup> Donald P. Whitaker, Area Handbook for the Khmer Republic (Cambodia), (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), 11.

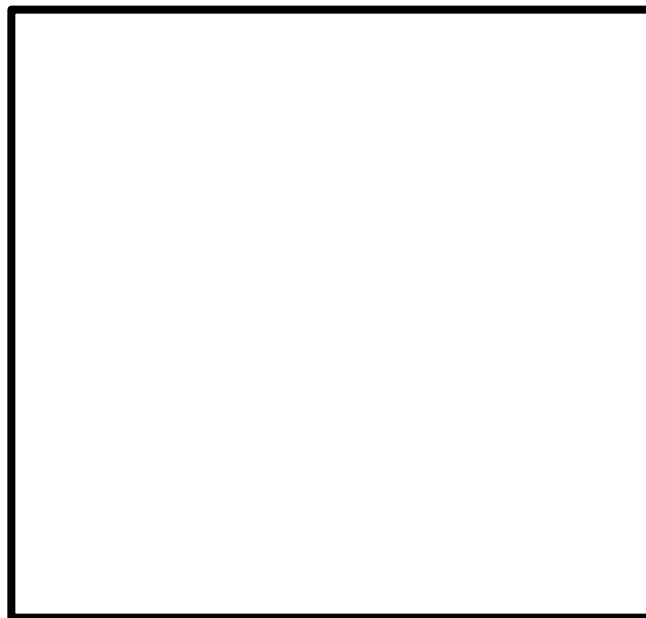
<sup>13</sup> Area handbook, South. Vietnam, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Area handbook, South. Vietnam, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Area handbook, South. Vietnam, 13.

Adjacent to Saigon is the Rung Sat Special Zone, a 300 square mile swamp, known as the “Forest of Assassins”.<sup>16</sup> This nearly inaccessible natural obstacle could and did provide refuge to guerillas and bandits alike.

The Red River, as it relates to Indochina, is confined entirely to the Tonkin region of Vietnam, and is really a system of rivers.<sup>17</sup> The Red River proper flows south from China’s Yunnan province for nearly 800 miles into the gulf of Tonkin. No less than three additional rivers, including the Black, the Clear, and the Thai Binh, comprise the navigable tributaries to this system.<sup>18</sup> The Red River delta, approximately 1800 square miles, is one of the most bountiful farming regions in the world, capable of producing two rice crops a



**TONKIN**

year.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it has also become one of the most densely populated agricultural regions in the world. One U.S. Navy history described it in the following way: “[strategically], economically, and politically, the Red River Delta was the key to control of Tonkin.”<sup>20</sup> Most of the delta is barely one meter above sea level and is crisscrossed by innumerable canals, paddies, and dikes. Hanoi lies just below the confluence of the Red River and the Thai Binh. From there the waters pass through the port city of Haiphong to the sea. All of the other major cities in the Tonkin

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<sup>16</sup> Edwin B. Hooper, Dean C. Allard, and Oscar P. Fitzgerald. The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict: The Setting of the Stage to 1959. (Washington, D.C.: Naval History Division, 1976), 326.

<sup>17</sup> Area handbook, North Vietnam. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Setting the Stage, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Setting the Stage

<sup>20</sup> Hooper, U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Conflict, 185.



region sit astride or adjacent to the delta rivers. The Red River is navigable for nearly its entire length, the Black River for 45 miles past Hanoi, and the Clear River for 70 miles past the capital. In all, there are 3,000 miles of navigable waterways in Tonkin.<sup>21</sup> Due to the lack of any substantial road network, most traffic within the Delta floats along these river. They would become key avenues of approach and lines of communications to both armies, especially to the French as they never became truly adept in moving through the forests and over the mountains. It was along the rivers of this delta that the most of the naval war was fought.

### **History.**

The roots of this conflict can be traced back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when western influence intruded into the region. It was not until the advent of the industrial revolution that the French now set their sights on turning Indochina into their "balcony on the Pacific." Da Nang was occupied in 1858 forcing the Vietnamese emperor to cede Cochinchina to France. Cambodia was also added to this protectorate. Later the French would expand their control into the Red River and the Tonkin region, and with the inclusion of Laos cemented their hold over what was now called the French Indochinese Union. This Union would last for the next 80 years.

Under the pretext of civilizing the Indochina peninsula, Paris sowed the seeds of destroying its new "colony." The stated goal of increasing the individual rights of the Vietnamese through economic independence and the implementation of representative government actually worked contrary to French design. It was seen as a weak charade in which the people of Indochina acted as beneficiaries of French goodwill when virtually all the sources of income were owned and operated by outsiders. Attempts at developing local cottage

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<sup>21</sup> Area Handbook N. Vietnam, 332.

industries were crushed when conflict arose from competition with French imports. The Vietnamese were deemed unfit to govern and provide for themselves outside of agriculture.

The resentment of the colonial power, particularly in Tonkin, manifested itself in minor revolts that the French suppressed. Nevertheless, a strong nationalist spirit was born and simmered beneath the surface. Many Vietnamese, educated and socialized along Western lines, began to aspire for national independence. The humiliation of foreign rule provoked many of these younger men and women to form political organizations in anticipation of shaking off French control. Many of these groups agitated against the colonial government without addressing the real concerns of the largest body of the population, the peasant class. Land reform, reduced taxes, and improved working conditions were the real issues. This was the political climate out of which Ho Chi Minh eventually emerged.

Ho, the educated son of a middle class civil servant, traveled to Paris following WWI and attended the Versailles Peace conference. It was here that the unlikely political upstart would first petition the world for Vietnamese independence. He was ignored by the allied powers, but quickly established himself among the Vietnamese expatriates living in Paris. One of the founding members of the French Communist Party he experimented with similar organizations amongst his own countrymen and in 1930 founded the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). The irony of Ho's affiliation with the Communists was that the relationship was born out of desperation and not ideology. Ho was a Vietnamese nationalist first and a socialist second.

World War II provided the necessary catalyst to fire this nationalism into action. The impact of the weak Vichy government contributed to the waning of French influence throughout the world, particularly in Asia. The Japanese, recognizing the opportunity to expand their influence at the expense of Paris, occupied Tonkin as a pretext for action into southern China.

They established airbases and naval ports on Vietnamese soil, and later leached the local economy to help finance their larger war with the Allies. Effectively, French rule had been replaced by imperial Japanese rule. To the Vietnamese, one colonial master had been replaced by another, in this case an Asian master. They were no more content under the French, and the idea of domination from a neighboring and foreign state was too much for the Vietnamese to bear.

During this period, several factions vied for power in the anticipation of a post-war period free of foreign domination. China herself backed the anti-colonialists, both for ideological and purely survivalist motivations. The Indochinese Communist Party, established by the little known firebrand Ho Chi Minh and financed by Mao Tse Tung, found fertile ground among a peasantry eager to dispossess themselves of any foreign influence. In May 1941, the Vietnam Independence League (known as the Vietminh) was established with a twofold purpose: first, to establish a political infrastructure within the villages and peasantry; and second, to develop guerilla formations for eventual attacks against the foreign invaders.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the Vietminh were supported and supplied by the Allies during the war to operate against the Japanese; equally ironic was the use of such support by the Vietminh to further attacks against the remaining French outposts. By 1944, the military wing of the Vietminh, the Vietnam Liberation Army (VLA), was formed.<sup>23</sup> The foundation had been set for future conflict.

Following the Japanese surrender, Vietnam remained divided along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, Tonkin controlled by the Chinese and Cochin eventually controlled by the Gaullist forces. After some political wrangling, at the expense of Ho and the Vietminh, the Chinese relinquished control and the French returned. Paris, now supported by the United States, in turn signed an

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<sup>22</sup> Area Handbook N. Vietnam, 174.

<sup>23</sup> Philip B. Davidson, Vietnam at War: the History 1946-1975, (Novato, CA, Presidio Press, 1988), 8.

agreement with the Vietminh that decolonization would begin with inclusion of a free Tonkin within the French League and the withdrawal of colonial troops after five years.<sup>24</sup> What at first seemed an acceptable agreement was later unmasked as a hollow concession. Tensions between the two sides continued to escalate and, by late 1946, led to overt conflict.

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<sup>24</sup> Doyle, 20.

## Chapter 2

### **Birth of the River Wars**

Although the FEC forces had not anticipated fighting their way back into the former colony, the conditions they faced were not strange to them. French commerce and agricultural shipping was accustomed to the meandering waterways that dominate this part of the world. As far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, riverine operations were included in the repertoire of the French military to insure unhampered economic penetration. In 1873 a naval expedition sailed from Saigon to Hanoi for the purpose of linking Indochina to China proper along the Red River. Three gunboats and 200 men under the command of Lieutenant Francois Garnier arrived in Hanoi on 5 November, and after failing to win concessions from the mandarins attacked and seized the citadel in the name of the new Third Republic. Despite the grand success that this first riverine expedition won for the governor in Saigon, its lasting effect, or lack there of, would presage the course of events 80 years later. Lt. Garnier himself would be killed in an ambush one month later. In 1878, the commander of another naval force, Captain Henri Riviere, would meet the same fate as Garnier as he led his amphibious assault troops against a stronger rebel ambush.<sup>25</sup> French indignation and the alarm over the threat to her economic interest mandated that a stronger waterborne presence would hereafter have to be established to control the peninsula.

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<sup>25</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 19-20.

French interests in this colony remained chiefly economic through ownership of the plantations to provide raw material and the industries to produce finished goods, Paris enjoyed a near monopoly in the financial affairs of her colony. It is no wonder that Indochina would be so jealously guarded from outsiders over the next sixty years. The French navy was the prime guarantor of her interests. China, herself weakened from years of foreign interference, could not challenge this mobile and lethal military force capable and willing to respond to the slightest provocation. Ownership of the seacoast, and especially of the intercoastal waterways, effectively kept the Vietnamese suppressed. While keeping a watchful eye on any interference from the other powers, the governor in Saigon paid little heed to the growing discontent among his subjects. This all changed with World War II. After the fall of Paris in 1940 the domination of this European power over Indochina would diminish. As previously stated, the Japanese occupation of the country put the French on the defensive, even though overt hostilities had been avoided. As the French were slowly pushed out of their strongholds in Saigon and Hanoi, her military forces retreated into the interior and along the broken coast of Vietnam. Their weakness did not go unnoticed by Ho Chi Minh. Surrender of the rivers allowed his small, but growing, insurgency access to the population and provisions previously denied them by the government.

The defeat of the Japanese in 1945 by no means ensured a French return to the status quo ante with regard to their colonies. Algeria had been in turmoil since the German surrender in May of that year. The Vietminh declared their own independence in September following Tokyo's surrender. Both countries were inspired by the success of the allies and the statement within the Atlantic Pact of a people's right to self-determination.<sup>26</sup> The nationalist forces in both countries were inclined to interpret the recent victories as signals to their own freedom. But

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Dalloz, The War in Indo-China: 1945-54, Translated by Josephine Bacon, (Dublin, Ireland, Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1990) 51.

France had a different purpose; and Charles De Gaulle had made statements as early as March of 1945 that he intended to restore French national honor by first defeating the Germans and later by liberating Indochina.<sup>27</sup>

By the time of Japanese surrender the only credible force left in the country, by which the French could re-exert control, was the remains of a naval brigade under the command of Lieutenant Commander Henri Picheral.<sup>28</sup> This force reported to British liberation forces and were immediately involved in combat operations. By the end of 1945 an additional 1,000 man naval force arrived in Saigon. The French were coming back.

The after five years of humiliation, first at the hands of the Axis powers and later in the insolent behavior of the Vietminh upstarts, the French high commissioner was given orders to restore French sovereignty but Paris was also war weary after fighting twice in three decades. The politicians did not have the stomach for fighting an insurrection in terms of money, materiel, or manpower. The Vietminh had a different view altogether. A communist newspaper published in November 1945, proclaimed “The threat of the restoration of colonial domination in its previous form is unacceptable to the people of Indo-China and is facing growing resistance. The sympathies...of the entire world are unanimously on the side of the masses.”<sup>29</sup>

The VLA, ably led by Vo Nguyen Giap, numbered no more than 25,000 men scattered over the entire country. No match for even the smallest units of professional French soldiers, the insurgents began an indirect approach by attacking the French by means of ambushes and small unit raids. They could not stand and fight toe to toe with the conventionally trained and armed Europeans. One author cites “It is a difficult and unrewarding task in a land of water and mud,

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<sup>27</sup> Dalloz, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Charles W Koburger, The French Navy in Indochina: Riverine and Coastal Forces, 1945-54, (WestPort, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1991), xxiii.

paddy-fields...segmented by complicated networks of canals, rivers...accessible only by water. The rebels were in their element.”<sup>30</sup> The Vietminh repeatedly frustrated the ill-equipped French units that repeatedly attacked an enemy that would not stand and fight.

The real establishment of a permanent military presence commenced under the command of Lieutenant General Jacques-Philippe de Hautecloque, more commonly referred to as Leclerc.<sup>31</sup> This hero of the Free French Forces in Europe, and the man who represented France at the Japanese surrender in Tokyo, came to re-establish control by the force of arms; armored columns would sweep the countryside, while artillery and airplanes would crush armed resistance. Leclerc, like many of his successors, could not comprehend that Indochina was not a European battlefield, and that a different form of warfare would be called for. The new war would not be like the 19<sup>th</sup>, or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, colonial, constabulary, anti-bandit, or anti-tribal war. The character of the enemy had changed.

Fortunately for Leclerc, he was well-served by men of vision and experience who tailored the force to the task at hand. Such a force was found within FEC as the Brigade Marine d’ Extreme-Orient, or BMEO.<sup>32</sup> A pair of visionaries, Captain Robert Kilian and Commander Francois Jaubert, established command within the BMEO and set to work on the problem of mobility.<sup>33</sup> These capable naval officers were saddled with the dual responsibility of procuring suitable craft for patrolling the interior waterways, and in convincing a skeptical commanding general of the utility in riverine operations. The BMEO was lucky indeed to have such men.

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<sup>29</sup> Dalloz, 61.

<sup>30</sup> Dalloz, 62.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 91.

<sup>32</sup> Koburger, xxiv

<sup>33</sup> Koburger.



Jaubert established a headquarters at the Saigon Yacht club and immediately canvassed the countryside for serviceable river craft.<sup>34</sup> Within a short time he had procured and outfitted a small force that heralded the birth of the future *Dinassaut*. Although this flotilla would be grateful for any vessel they could acquire, the real enabler for the BMEO to conduct mobile river assault would be in the discovery of abandoned rice barges. According to one source, these “...rusty old Gressier barges...could go anywhere, almost. For short distances they were capable of carrying a whole rifle company complete with its equipment.”<sup>35</sup> This was real power projection. Although the Gressier barges offered little in the way of speed or accommodation, they were of shallow draft, sturdy, and able to carry significant combat forces, perfect for the mission they would soon carry out.

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<sup>34</sup> Koburger, 2.

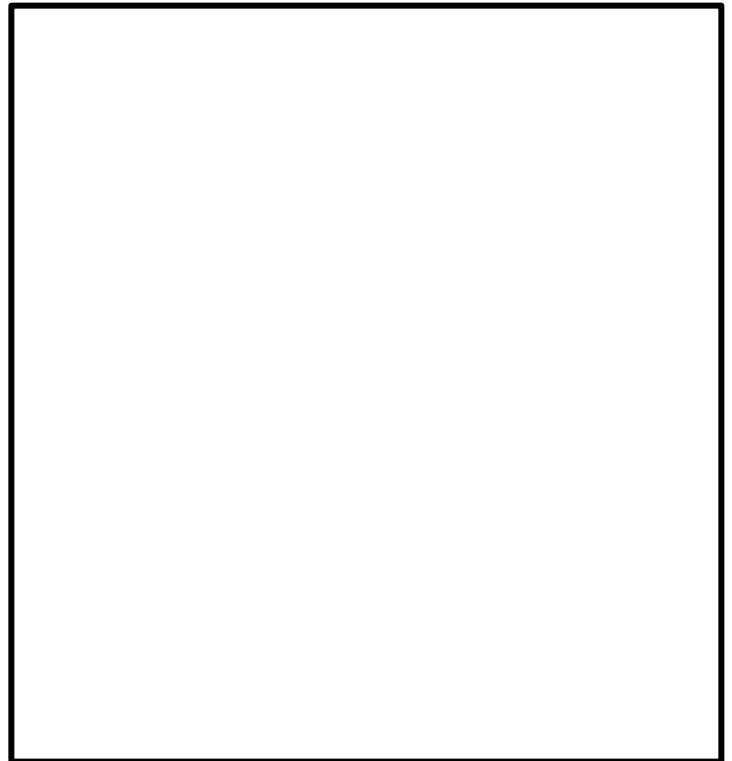
<sup>35</sup> Koburger, 4.

## Chapter 3

### Operations in the Mekong

Although not the favored children of Leclerc's growing military forces, the BMEO acquitted itself admirably during initial operations within the Mekong Delta, in October 1945. Operation *Moussac* would initiate formal military action to pacify Cochin-china by seizing a string of key cities.

The first of these objectives was the provincial capital My Tho. A joint army/navy task force operating from Saigon would seize this city, situated along the northern branch of the Mekong as it diverges to the sea. Almost immediate to their departure along the old colonial track, the army troops found this cross-country route tough-going, as "...units moving overland from Saigon via Route 4 had initially been detailed to seize My Tho from the Viet Minh. However, the French column found the road sabotaged, and their vehicles repeatedly bogged down in the sponge-like



**My Tho**

delta.”<sup>36</sup> The city was taken instead by the BMEO via river assault in the last week of October.

The naval brigade subsequently seized the cities of Vinh Long (29 Oct.) and Can Tho (mid-Nov.), carrying out the second and third phases of *Moussac*, respectively.<sup>37</sup> These last two phases, also conceived of as joint army-navy ventures, proved to be ill suited for ground forces traveling by means of a sketchy road network. The naval force speedily navigated the delta waters, often under cover of darkness, offering tactical surprise and mobility outside the reach of their road-bound brethren. One observer stated:

Progress across rice paddies and mangrove thickets forced the [army infantry] most of the time to struggle through water and mud...[crossing] river channels became exhausting; in fact, owing to the absence of roads, it was necessary to carry on one's back not only regular kit but also all the ammunition and weapons, such as machineguns and mortar...And finally, for these drenched men, veritable hunks of ambulating mud, the leaden sun added to their torment.<sup>38</sup>

General Leclerc was impressed enough with the success of the BMEO to approve the formation of the Naval Infantry River Flotilla, commanded by Jaubert.<sup>39</sup> This riverine force of five boats and smaller craft, a subset of the BMEO, vigilantly patrolled the river network of the Mekong and the Bassac to maintain open lines of communication and to respond by landing troops as a “fire brigade” when needed. During this period, some forty-two other landing operations were carried out to secure the central delta.<sup>40</sup>

The riverine force, in its fledgling state, received an unexpected boon when newer vessels arrived. The aircraft transport *Bearn* delivered a mix of twenty landing craft, of LCA and LCVP

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<sup>36</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 95

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 96.

<sup>38</sup> McClintock, quoting E. Le Breton: "Les Fusiliers Marins en Indochine", (*La Revue Maritime*, Oct. 1948), 1304.

<sup>39</sup> McClintock, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Victor Croizat, Vietnam River Warfare, 1945-1975, (Blandford Press, Dorset, England, 1984), 40.

type, to augment it.<sup>41</sup> This infusion of enhanced mobility platforms allowed Jaubert to form a second riverine force. The unit was now comprised of two companies (approximately 400 men) who worked, ate, and slept aboard these vessels.<sup>42</sup> The added maneuver element gave depth and allowed Leclerc to conduct more complex operations farther inland without the fear of the immediate waterways being threatened.

By early 1946 the success of joint FEC operations in the Mekong delta and around Saigon ensured Cochin-china would be a relatively peaceful sector of the war. Still, even the riverine forces were susceptible to ambushes as the gallant Commander Jaubert met the same fate as his 19th century predecessors Garnier and Riviere: he was killed while directing the fighting of his beloved riverine forces in action around Saigon.<sup>43</sup> He would not be the last to pay the ultimate price in this “dirty war”.

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<sup>41</sup> Koburger, 8.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 96.

<sup>43</sup> Koburger, 10.

## Chapter 4

### **Conception: Birth of the Naval Assault Division**

Following the initial success of the Naval River Flotilla in controlling the vital inland waterways, more and more resources were directed toward this endeavor. The actual birth of the *Division d'Infanterie Navale d'Assaut*, came some time after 1 January 1947 with the break up of the Naval Brigade into its two river flotillas. Naval Amphibious Force, Indochina now came under the command of a French admiral and with this change the organization shed its former title bequeathed it by General LeClerc. Four riverine groups were permanently assigned to the north while only two remained in the south.

The term *Dinassaut* referred to the division as a whole, however the individual squadrons also went by that name. Each smaller *Dinassaut* would have a slightly different organization and equipment, but generally the units contained similar capabilities. Commanded by a naval Lieutenant, each unit was comprised of approximately twelve to fourteen craft. The mix of craft broke into functional areas: the opening, the command, assault transport, and support groups. This organization provided for a high level of mobility, lethal firepower, close coordination with supporting arms, and sustainability. Not surprisingly this very effective task organization remained throughout the war and was later reflected in the organization of U.S. Naval Task Force 117 twenty years later.

The opening group was in reality an advanced scouting and patrol element. Unlike the other groups, it combined a variety of watercraft to provide unimpeded movement for the main body. Heavy firepower was present in the form of converted LCM-8 landing craft converted to armored “monitors.” These “monitors” carried an impressive array of firepower: 40mm cannon, heavy and medium machineguns, and 81mm mortars. The French innovations also included mounted tank turrets, while others were fitted with flamethrowers and rockets. These monitors could uncover and suppress enemy ambush sites while the bulk of the force maneuvered to the flanks. Other elements of the opening group included minesweepers and lighter patrol craft. The wider use of the riverine force brought a counter reaction by the Vietminh who employed command detonated mines and ambushes from the river banks. The sweepers and patrol craft would clear ahead of the main body, under the protection of the “monitors” and ensure the clear passage of the convoys.

The command group was usually represented by a larger LSIL or LSSL type landing craft. These were larger vessels that allowed the command element better visual control over the formation while maintaining a more robust communications suite for the control of artillery, close air support, and the maneuver of adjacent units. These craft were similarly armed as the “monitors” and often supplied the heaviest firepower, sometimes as large as 3-inch guns, to be employed at the direction of the commander himself. These ships were armored along the sides and sandbagged along the bridge to counter the growing enemy threat. While not fast by today’s standards, these vessels were reinforced to withstand considerable damage.

The transport group was comprised generally of LCM-5’s and -8’s. Travelling in column, or often in multiple columns, this group contained the ground elements. Each LCM was capable of carrying a platoon of infantry or the equivalent. Some larger craft carried light tanks,

armored vehicles, and trucks. Initially these LCMs were unarmored, but as the Vietminh developed tactics of volley firing rocket-propelled grenades under suppressive machinegun fire it became necessary to weld armor to the flat sides for survivability.

The ground units were assigned to the *Dinassaut* on an availability basis. Initially, French naval commandos operated as the landing parties. These elite troops would be landed ashore to assault inland objectives or would be used as a maneuver element against the river ambushes in order for the convoys to pass. Later, Vietnamese commandos were recruited and served effectively as permanent troops. Unfortunately, they were too few in number to fulfill the troop requirement and were usually only a supporting element temporarily assigned to a larger army unit. This was the greatest failing with the organization, with its attendant inefficiency guaranteed under such an ad hoc organization. This would later become an issue for the U.S. Navy during its own riverine experience. Any landing force is optimized when it enjoys a habitual relationship with the crew and command element of the task force. Nevertheless, the system worked, even on a large scale. Some *Dinassaut* operations would involve the employment of several infantry battalions and multiple squadrons of riverine craft.

As the war progressed the individual *Dinassauts* would be formed into larger formations for self protection and to carry larger combat elements. The boats also saw an increase in the armor protection and firepower that each craft could employ. Rivers do not afford the maneuver element any appreciable cover or concealment; when taken under fire the boats cannot “dig in.” The best protection was the ability to react quickly, with overwhelming firepower, while possessing some limited ability to withstand fire. Armor allowed the craft to survive the initial shock of an ambush, however, if a boat was disabled and not moving it was an easy target. Retired Marine Colonel Victor Croizat stated, “For these craft to serve on inland waters they had

to be armored to withstand the shock of surprise encounters at short ranges. They also needed substantial armament to deliver promptly the heavy volume of fire to counter an ambush. Armament, moreover, had to include a mix of high and flat trajectory weapons to ensure that all types of targets along the waterways and over the river banks could be taken under fire.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Croizat, 59.



## Chapter 5

### **The War for the Red River Delta, 1947-48**

Once Cochinchina had come under acceptable control by Leclerc, the focus shifted to the north where the great prize of the Red River delta beckoned. The Chinese, never intent on remaining in Tonkin, squeezed certain concessions from the French as a guarantee to future access to key transportation and shipping nodes. Once granted, would be followed by Chinese withdrawal from Indochina by the end of 1946, which the French were happy to concede.

On 7 March 1946 French troops landed at Haiphong and within ten days had entered Hanoi.<sup>45</sup> Once again the Tricolor flew over the north. This served only to infuriate the Vietminh. A series of terse negotiations commenced in which Ho Chi Minh attempted to secure a pledge of full independence for Vietnam from Paris. The situation was exacerbated when the French governor-general recognized the Republic of Cochinchina, on 1 June.<sup>46</sup> Tensions mounted throughout the remaining year, interspersed with minor clashes between the Vietminh and the French Union forces. By October the situation had so deteriorated that Giap had fortified sections of Hanoi and Haiphong against the impending conflict.

Irreconcilable dispute over the control of the customs house in Haiphong harbor finally launched the war that would last for the next eight years. On 19 December 1946, the Vietminh

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<sup>45</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 115.

<sup>46</sup> Dalloz, 73.

attacked French military and civilian personnel in Hanoi.<sup>47</sup> Leclerc's forces, while not in controlling positions to immediately respond to Giap's small force, were nonetheless able to maneuver units throughout the country to shape the coming war. The key to his shifting of troops would be, once again, control of the riverine highways and inland waterways. Amphibious units were landed at points along the coast while the Naval River Flotilla took command of the interior. As testament to the critical sector in the north, "Five sections of naval commandos were assigned to Tonkin and two to Cochin china."<sup>48</sup> The two deltas, the Red River and Mekong, were identified as decisive points. They provided the food and economic means to keep the communists' war effort going, and most importantly were susceptible to attack by the full use of joint army-navy strength.

The first test of French ability to project power in Tonkin occurred along the Red River midway between Hanoi and Haiphong. On 21 December, a joint naval task force, embarking a Foreign Legion battalion, landed along the river to clear potential ambushes.<sup>49</sup> A series of swift leapfrog landings over the next three days placed the battalion, by way of their riverine transport, astride their objective at Hai Duong. The defenders were overwhelmed and quickly driven from the city. Captured documents "...revealed that the French had been expected, but by road. The use of the river had gained the element of surprise..."<sup>50</sup>

Within the same time period a relief operation took place at the town of Nam Dinh by a mixed force of paratroopers and naval riverine craft. Several hundred civilians were stranded south of Hanoi and, lest the Vietminh capture them, were targeted for evacuation by a joint

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<sup>47</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 122.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 123.

<sup>49</sup> Croizat, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Croizat, 61

amphibious task force. The planned date for the landings was 6 January, 1947.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, this combined arms operation would point out the shortfalls in the French appraisal of appropriate relative mobility. The plan called for paratroopers, as the first wave of rescuers, to



**Nam Dinh**

be airdropped into landing areas adjacent to the river. From there they would move to the river and secure beach landing sites for the naval force and provide security during the evacuation. As events unfolded, the paratroopers were detected on their final approach to the drop zone and the aircraft were immediately taken under fire.

None of the beach landing sites were secured for the follow-on relief column. Automatic weapons fire greeted the riverine force as it approached the river banks. The commander of the flotilla, rather than retiring to safety, unexpectedly landed his commandos on the opposite bank and set up suppressive-fire positions.<sup>52</sup> This enabled the paratroopers to fight their way to the link-up and clear the area. By 1630, the evacuation commenced loading aboard the *Dinassaut* landing craft and the civilians were taken south to Haiphong.<sup>53</sup>

Although the French would dispatch columns to Nam Dinh again throughout the following year, they would not face the same type of coordinated resistance. In fact, much of the remainder of 1947 would involve routine patrols and occasional assault landings; the initial

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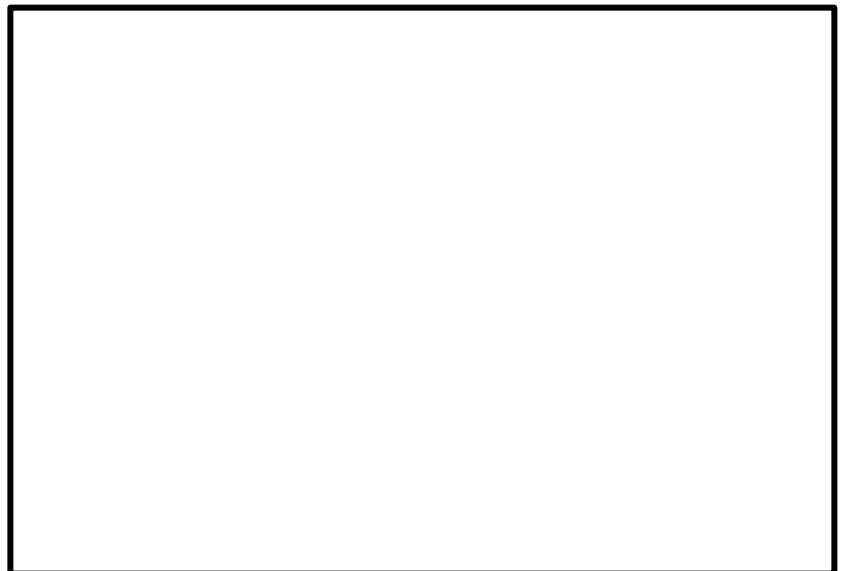
<sup>51</sup> Koburger, 23.

<sup>52</sup> Croizat, 61.

impulse to hostilities subsided while the two sides gained appreciation for the other's strengths and intentions. The Vietminh were not strong enough to launch another major offensive for some time to come.

The year closed with two fruitless operations, dubbed *LEA* and *CEINTURE*. Both operations involved heavy use of joint forces working in close coordination to trap the Vietminh leadership and destroy its logistics bases. *Lea* commenced on 7 October 1947 with a multi-prong assault into the Viet Bac mountains, the stronghold of Ho Chi Minh. Airborne and armor stabs deep into enemy territory yielded little result as the communists managed to sideslip encirclement by infiltrating past the heavily armed French. A riverine force of three battalions, the largest undertaking for the *Dinassaut* at this time, departed along the Red and Black rivers enroute to their link-up with the other task forces. After running aground in several places along the Black river (for this was the dry season), the *Dinassaut*, too, met with frustration in their inability to outmatch the VLA in terms of relative mobility. Once again, sandaled infantry outmaneuvered the latest means of mobile warfare by reigning supreme in the "primary medium." Within a month of its kick-off, Operation *LEA* came to a close.<sup>54</sup>

Operation *CEINTURE* was likewise a failure. Despite the same use of airborne, armor,



### **Operations *Lea* and *Ceinture***

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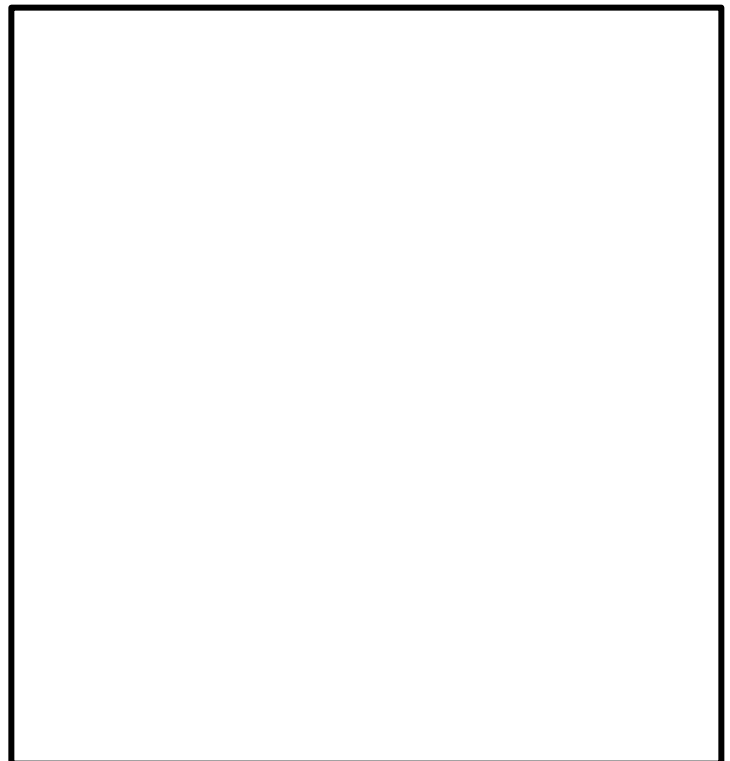
<sup>53</sup> Koburger, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Fall, 28-30.

and *Dinassaut*, the Vietminh could not be pinned down. Eighteen landing craft of the naval assault division plied the waters of the Clear and Thai Binh rivers without successfully engaging the enemy force. The naval commandos made numerous landings to secure terrain and villages, but only at the expense of their own combat strength. With forces too thinly spread, holding real estate of questionable value was a liability in such a war. The dispersion of FEC units along the rivers, compartmented within difficult terrain, offered lucrative targets for the communists. The French sensed the danger and withdrew to the lowlands around Hanoi. Operation *Ceinture* closed out the year 1947.<sup>55</sup>

### **1948.**

Although the final events of 1947 highlighted the difficulty of precision operations wielding the cumbersome instruments of airborne and armor formations, the FEC occasionally showed some flair for outmaneuvering the VLA. In early 1948, the *dinassaut* carried out a raid deep into Vietminh held territory to destroy caches of arms and equipment. Targeting the village of Gian Khau, some 65 miles up the Day river from their base of operations, the *Dinassaut* moved swiftly and silently under the cover of darkness.



**Gian Khau**

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<sup>55</sup> Fall, 30.

On 2 February, a combined force of naval commandos and army infantry stormed ashore virtually undetected. They swept through four villages and destroyed several enemy installations. The commandos re-embarked aboard their protective craft and anchored overnight. The next day, the raid force commander intuitively sensed a Vietminh river ambush along their route of withdrawal. This assumption proved correct as the river bank exploded with fire at noon.<sup>56</sup> The tactic of providing overwhelming suppressive fire coupled with rapid maneuver to the flank of the ambush provided the necessary edge to defeat the communists and safely withdraw to Nam Dinh.

The rest of the year reflected a consolidation of positions. While attempting to focus troops around their string of outposts and strong points, control of the inland waterways remained paramount. Denial of the rivers complicated the Vietminh ability to efficiently shift troops and supplies given the paucity of developed roads. Critical points along the key rivers were occupied. Beginning in October, the naval assault division seized a series of cities in an attempt to consolidate control: Thanh Hoa in the southern Tonkin delta; Son Tay, north of Hanoi; Hoa Binh, controlling access to the Black river; and finally, Phu Ly, west of Nam Dinh. By the end of the year the FEC settled into their fortifications and waited.

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<sup>56</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 133.

## Chapter 6

### A New Face of War, 1949-50

Following a period of relatively high activity, the next several months were defined by routine patrolling and small unit action for the *Dinassaut*. This trend was generally true for the FEC throughout Vietnam. The “oil spot” tactics of dispersing French troops throughout the interior was taking its toll on men and equipment. The frustrated Paris government appointed a new commander of the Expeditionary Corps, General Marcel Carpentier, who promptly ordered a further the consolidation of the French position.<sup>57</sup> Withdrawal into a handful of key outposts and forts along the Chinese border reflected the growing concern that the present “insurrection” would escalate once Ho Chi Minh received outside assistance. The war till then had been fought by limited means, focusing mainly on the delta around Hanoi. Here the FEC enjoyed near parity in their ability to move troops against Vietminh positions; along the frontier they would find a wholly different environment. Although the forts could ostensibly be reinforced by powerful mobile reserves, these forces would be affected by the limited infrastructure and the effects of poor weather - both vastly different from the area around Hanoi.

The system of roads that the French had built prior to the war serviced the forts of Cao Bang, Dong Khe, and Lang Son. The old colonial Route 4 (RC 4) represented the only reliable link. The *Dinassaut*, along with their duties of patrolling the southern waterways within range of Hanoi, were now also tasked with providing escort and logistics transportation up the Song Thai

Binh river system. The navigable stretches would not allow the navy to fully support the forts, but they helped ease the transportation problem to a limited degree. Building these forts so far from the river network, serviced only by a single and poorly developed road, almost ensured their complete isolation in the coming months.

On 1 October 1949 the civil war in China ended with the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China. Mao turned his attention to assisting the fraternal communist movement in Vietnam. The newly reinforced VLA then began offensive operations with a surprise attack, seizing the city of Lao Kay in February 1950.<sup>58</sup> This marked a dramatic turn in the war, as the Red River was now partially controlled by the Vietminh. Formidable defenses and a patchwork of ambush sites denied future access into the upper stretches of this river.

Sensing the shift in the nature of the war, Paris requested a large infusion of United States assistance, particularly in the form of naval equipment. Chief among a \$100 million dollar shopping list was the "...immediate delivering of 36 LCVPs, 6 river craft (shallow draft with speeds greater than 12 knots)."<sup>59</sup> This reflected the need for increased river-borne mobility. The *dinassaut* would essentially quadruple from the modest two-company fleet of 1946; six flotillas would be stationed in Tonkin, while two operated in Cochin-china. Of the 12,000 naval personnel stationed in Indochina, over three quarters were now assigned to the riverine, amphibious, or logistics forces. This arrangement flew in the face of traditional "blue water" naval officers, but nevertheless reflected a maturation of meeting circumstances with means.

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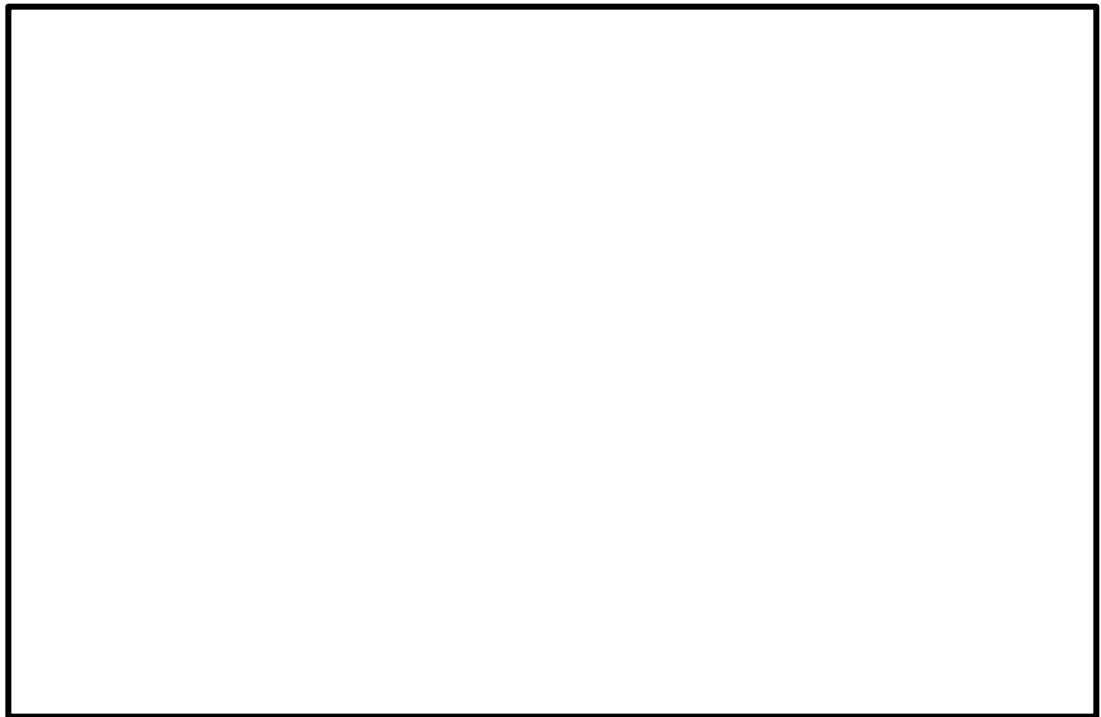
<sup>57</sup> Dalloz, 125.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 172.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 173.



After a relatively slow period of rebuilding his forces, Giap commenced large scale offensive operations against French positions along the Chinese border. This offensive caught the French totally unaware. On 28 May 1950 the French outpost of Dong Khe fell. Over the next six months the VLA launched offensive operations along RC 4, taking each outpost in succession. The key French fort, in the town of Lang Son, sensing the fate of the previous strongpoints was evacuated in October without a shot being fired. Over 1300 tons of supplies and equipment were abandoned, enough to outfit an entire division of the VLA.<sup>60</sup> This was the worst disaster in the war as of that date. The fall of Lang Son effectively surrendered the frontier to the Vietminh.



### **VLA 1950 OFFENSIVE**

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<sup>60</sup> Setting the Stage, 65.

## Chapter 7

### The *Dinassaut* Come of Age, 1951-52

#### 1951.

The French government was not willing to concede defeat nor was it willing to compromise. On 17 December 1950 one of the heroes of the Free French Forces during WWII, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, was assigned to Indochina as the commissioner general and the commander in chief of the French Expeditionary Corps.<sup>61</sup> De Lattre, known as King Jean, was a man of considerable power. He immediately set about fortifying the environs surrounding Hanoi (in what would later be known as the de Lattre Line) within the Red River Delta. Equally or more important, he buoyed what he perceived as flagging French spirit with a call to action. The morale of the FEC apparently improved and they commenced serious mobile operations within the Red River plain. Less than one month later, Giap obliged de Lattre by launching his Winter-Spring offensive against the resuscitated FEC.

On 13 January 1951, the VLA attacked the village and outpost of Vinh Yen just north of Hanoi.<sup>62</sup> The tactic of human wave assaults shocked the FEC defenders who, nevertheless, were able to beat back the Vietminh through the concentrated use of artillery and napalm. De Lattre quickly reinforced the area, throwing three Mobile Groups (G.M.) into the defense and rushing reinforcements up the Red River. Fully one-third of all reinforcements arrived by way of the

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<sup>61</sup> Fall, 36.

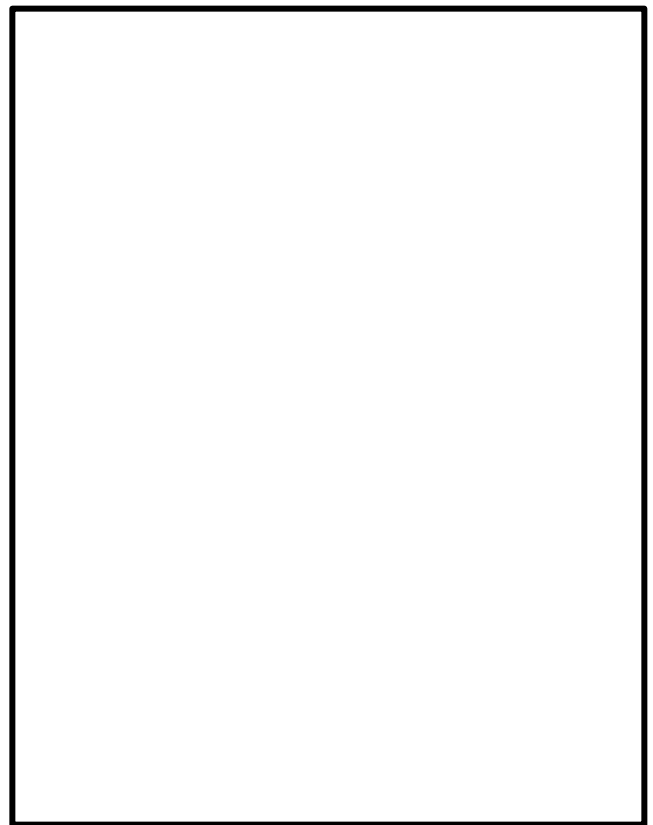
<sup>62</sup> Fall.

navy and the *Dinassaut*.<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, the better part of two VLA Divisions, 6,000 killed alone, were beaten back by the FEC.<sup>64</sup> Casualties notwithstanding, Giap was undeterred in pressing the offensive.

The outpost of Mao Khe, east of Hanoi and north of Haiphong, was attacked on 23 March.<sup>65</sup> Initially more poorly defended than Vinh Yen, the post held against furious human wave attacks. French paratroopers thwarted the VLA assault and killed nearly 3,000 of the enemy. *Dinassaut* 1 played a critical role by supporting the ground forces with its automatic weapons, mortars, and heavier caliber guns. The 6<sup>th</sup> Parachute Battalion arrived and was put ashore by the naval assault division. By the 28<sup>th</sup> the battle was over. Once again, Giap was defeated by timely and massed use of firepower, to include naval guns, and the quick introduction of mobile forces. Nevertheless, the communists were learning that they were no match for the FEC in battles where the French fought on their own terms. A third attack would soon appear in the offing.

The assault along the Day River, directly south of Hanoi, commenced on 28 May 1951 against several weak outposts.<sup>66</sup> Centered around village of Ninh Binh, the Vietminh struck

#### VLA 1951 OFFENSIVE



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<sup>63</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam p.187

<sup>64</sup> Fall, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Fall, 41.

<sup>66</sup> Croizat, 44.

the French garrison under the cover of darkness. The *Dinassaut*, already on station with only 80 naval commandos, held the post against the initial assault, losing all but 19 men. General de Lattre quickly responded with a powerful mobile force consisting of two *dinassaut* and three mobile groups (GM).

*Dinassaut* 3 was ambushed the next day, 12 kilometers south of Ninh Binh, by infantry along both sides of the Day River.<sup>67</sup> Bazookas, recoilless rifles, and automatic weapons raked the assault craft causing severe damage. However, the commandos managed to beat back the attack and continued up the river. The riverine force was able to sever the VLA line of communication by denying them any further use of the river. Bernard Fall describes "...the bulk of the enemy troops, now hampered by the ravages of the French river craft and aircraft among the hundreds of small junks and sampans which constituted the enemy's supply line across the Day River, began to fall back to the limestone hills...[however] the third battle for the delta had ended."<sup>68</sup>

In the two weeks of fighting the communists suffered 1,159 dead, 287 wounded, and 154 prisoners.<sup>69</sup> The VLA proved not quite ready for the general counter offensive. Giap returned to his previous guerilla strategy and slowly rebuilt his shattered army. The FEC took away the lessons that the Vietminh, once lured away from the protection of the jungles and mountains, were neatly defeated by the combination of massive firepower and mobile exploitation forces. The *Dinassaut* was credited with providing the decisive combat power and support in two out of the three battles.

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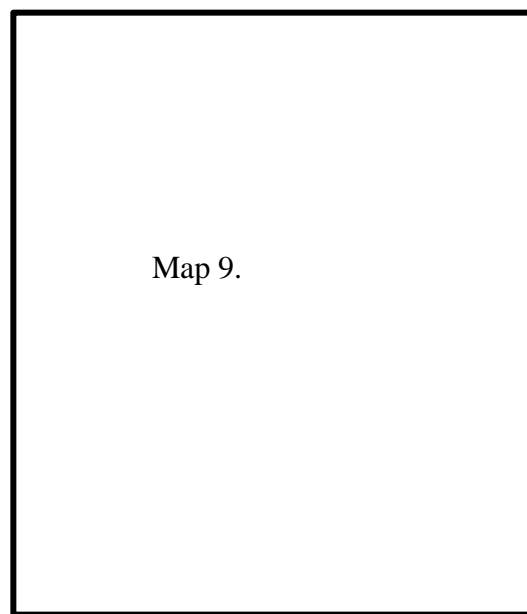
<sup>67</sup> Koburger, 44.

<sup>68</sup> Fall, 46.

<sup>69</sup> Croizat, 45.

As Giap retreated, de Lattre weighed the cost of awaiting the next round of assaults against the souring of the political support back home. On 14 November 1951, three parachute battalions attacked west of Hanoi into the small city of Hoa Binh.<sup>70</sup> In what would ultimately be known as the “meat grinder battle” a joint taskforce of paratroopers, naval assault units, and mobile groups clashed with five VLA divisions. De Lattre sought to control the Black River and deny its use as a supply route into southern Tonkin. The success of the operation would “depend on riverine operations and transportation of supplies, mainly by water, to sustain the French Army.”<sup>71</sup> A temporary *dinassaut*, comprised of eight LCMs and four patrol craft, was assigned to this operation and performed a wide range of missions. The use of the navy some sixty miles north and west of Hanoi was pushing the capability of the *dinassaut* to its limit.

Giap, although stung by the defeats in his Winter-Spring campaign, recognized an opportunity to deal the FEC a crushing blow along an extended line of communications. The land route to Hoa Binh, RC 6, was in such a state of disrepair that the French army would take months to make it serviceable. The VLA General recognized this and concentrated his forces in severing the river so as to isolate the strongpoint. Mechanical ambushes, utilizing mines, rocket-propelled grenades, and machineguns, were established from the high ground overlooking the river. One such ambush occurred on 12 January 1952. The naval forces were thwarted in



Map 9.

**HOA BINH**

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<sup>70</sup> Croizat

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 188.

their attempts to suppress the fires from the river banks and were turned back.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the operation that was intended to cut the routes of supply for the Vietminh reversed itself as the French committed more and more formations to keeping the river open.

General Raoul Salan, the former Chief of Staff who had replaced the cancer stricken De Lattre in January, decided that he could no longer pay the price for supplying such a costly piece of ground. By 24 February he had withdrawn all forces. As Bernard Fall later wrote:

The [FEC] had been compelled to draw nearly one-third of all their mobile forces available in the Red River Delta into an area where those forces became unable to contribute to the mopping-up of enemy guerillas now infiltrating the vital Red River plain on an increasing massive scale...the Vietminh used the battle for [Hoa Binh] as a sort of dress rehearsal or as a portent for things to come [read Dien Bien Phu].<sup>73</sup>

As a token to the futility of maintaining tenuous lines of communication in face of an ever-widening conflict, two LCMs of the dinassaut were abandoned near Hoa Binh as they were cutoff from the evacuation due to low water. One would be destroyed by the Vietminh, the other scuttled by her crew.<sup>74</sup>

## **1952.**

Operations in the sixth year of the war reflected the growing French frustration with the inability to lure Giap into an open and set-piece battle where the strength of the FEC could be brought to bear. For a conventionally trained army, designed for mobile and armored warfare in Europe, the elusive tactics of the VLA seemed to offer only a slow dissipating death. General Salan, little different from his predecessors, found the situation of waiting unbearable. The occupation of the airheads at Na San and Lai Chau in the T'ai foothills would reflect this thinking. Ten battalions of infantry, plus their support, established a fortified camp and airstrip

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<sup>72</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam ,189.

<sup>73</sup> Fall, 59-60.

<sup>74</sup> Koburger,49.

to lure the Vietminh into combat. Totally dependent on air bases of resupply nearly 200 kilometers away, the forces at Na San were deprived of alternative means of reinforcement and support that were so crucial in the Tonkin riverine forces.

The *Dinassaut* would not participate in the fighting in the mountains as Na San and Lai Chau came under assault. While not important to the history of the brown-water navy, the operations in northwestern Tonkin reflected a sense of desperation growing in the FEC. Popular support in Paris, while never strong during the entire war, was now stretched to the limit. With the prospect of no reinforcement, no money, and an enemy growing in strength every day, the French general turned away from the proven methods of a multi-dimensional offensive capability (riverine, airborne, armor, and light infantry) and opted instead for primarily an airborne and airmobile force. Limiting the variety of operations allowed the communists to then focus on the defeat of one.

Giap, the Vietminh general, had been faulted with failing to appreciate the French strength and in precipitating the General Offensive in the previous year (1951). While this may be true, he also learned invaluable lessons about the French that he would capitalize on in future confrontations. One of these was in under-appreciating the use of French naval forces, particularly those of the *Dinassaut*, in his battle along the Day River. Giap's dependence on the inland waterways for supply in the attack of Ninh Binh was proof of his ignorance in the speed and lethality of the riverine force. That he had no personal experience with the naval brigade would prove his undoing; that he was highly adaptive and would not repeat similar mistakes was reflected in the battles around Hoa Binh. The ultimate tactical center of gravity of the French lay in their combined air and naval forces. Giap would offer battle where those strengths could not weigh so effectively against him. Fighting would be offered away from the Tonkin Delta,

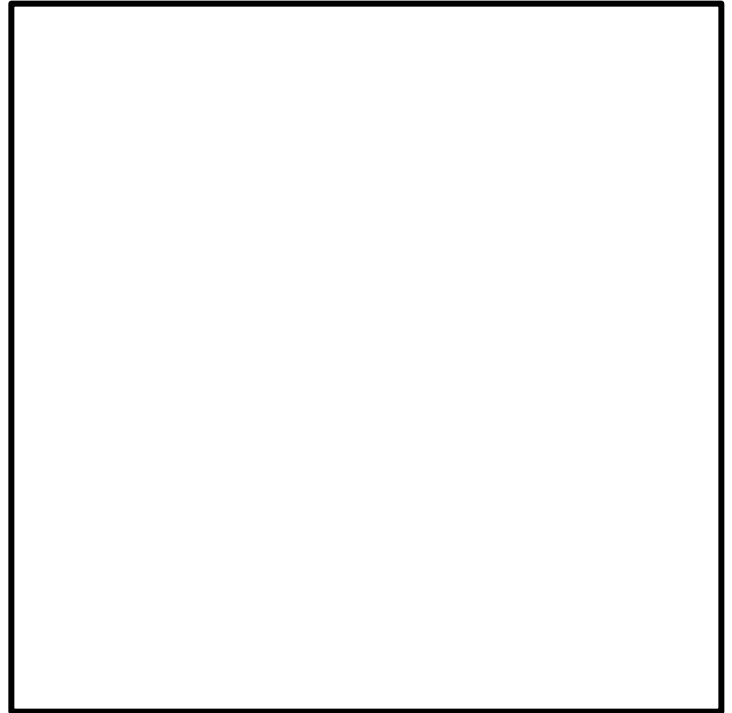
limiting both the number of troops and the number of sorties the French could muster so far from the base of operations.

The battles in the northwest mountains would last until the summer of 1953. At first these operations promised to exclude the naval force that so distinguished itself in previous battles. However, Salan concluded that Giap's line of supply needed to be cutoff if the airheads were to become viable.

Operation *LORRAINE* was thus born. A force of 30,000 troops was assembled to strike into the Viet Bac along multiple axes, similar to Leclerc's plan in 1947. A mixed flotilla, drawn primarily from *dinassaut* 3 and 12,

advanced up the Red, Clear, and Chay rivers.<sup>75</sup> The boats ferried troops and supplies to staging areas during October 1952. On 29 October, the river force motored quietly up the Red River and landed advanced forces north of Trung Ha, securing a beachhead for the follow-on armored column.<sup>76</sup> Supporting those columns that continued north, the naval commandos and embarked infantry cleared the river and occasionally landed to engage the Vietminh. They would eventually secure three beachheads along the route.

Their objective was at the confluence of the Chay and the Clear, the VLA supply base at Phu Doan. On 9 November the *Dinassaut* linked up with the paratroopers and ferried them



### **OPERATION LORRAINE**

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<sup>75</sup> U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 191-192.

<sup>76</sup> Fall, 80.



unopposed to the objective.<sup>77</sup> The defenders were taken by surprise, never taking into account the speed with which this combined French force could move. The subsequent search of the town yielded small arms, ammunition, and a few trucks. However, this was not enough to justify the operation. If the French were serious in their attempt to force Giap to turn and fight, they aimed the stab too shallow. Only two VLA regiments were left in the vicinity to defend Ho's stronghold. Giap was after a bigger objective further the west. On 14 November, General Salan realized that further advance into the hills would cost him security in the delta and dangerously siphon off support for Na San. He thus ordered the end to *LORRAINE*. French forces were then harassed in their withdrawal back to the de Lattre line. The operation, designed to trap and destroy a critical base of support, failed due to the cost in men and material.

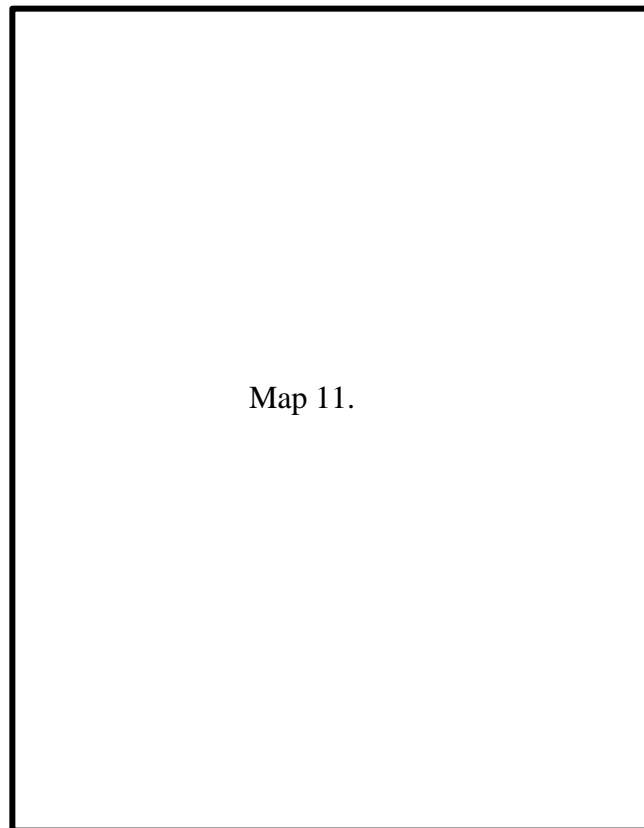
The close of 1952 marked the long awaited assault at Na San. General Giap, after successfully avoiding the attacks along the rivers, assembled his assault divisions and laid siege. On 23 November he began the first of several assaults to destroy the airhead. Each successive wave, borne by larger and larger formations, failed against the combination of fortifications, air delivered napalm, and concentrated artillery. His final assault on 2 December left 1,000 of his troops dead; the fearful total of 7,000 ill-spared combat troops for the failed seizure of the fort was a steep price.<sup>78</sup> Although the French held their position, the two sides drew different conclusions. For the French, it appeared that decisive battle, making full use of combined arms and fortifications, was the key to defeating the communists at the tactical level. While maintaining recognition of their vital interests in the delta, the FEC provided it would win the war through military action on the frontier. Paris still did not recognize that the key to winning the war required not a military solution but rather a political one. For the Vietminh, the lessons

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<sup>77</sup> Davidson, 144-145.

<sup>78</sup> Davidson, 147.

were altogether different. The French could be defeated by military means; they were to be lured away from their strength in the delta and fought at the limit of their supporting arms. A crushing military defeat, even involving limited forces, would evaporate any remaining French political support for this unpopular war. The T'ai mountains offered both the distance and inaccessibility they needed to defeat the FEC. The next year would prove decisive.



Map 11.

**Na San**

## Chapter 8

### The Final Years, 1953-54

Conclusions as to how to achieve a decision shunted river operations to now a minor supporting role until the end of the war. The *Dinassaut* were certainly kept busy maintaining the inland waterways within the sweep of the de Lattre line, however they did not participate in major operations until after the climatic battle at Dien Bien Phu. This final battle, fought at the extreme end of French operational reach, offered little to the history of brown water operations.

On 27 May 1953 the new commander of the French Expeditionary Corps arrived in Saigon.<sup>79</sup> General Henri Navarre came to Indochina under curious instructions from the politicians in Paris. He was ordered not to expand the war any further and “to create the conditions for an honorable political situation.”<sup>80</sup> He was also told he could not expect any additional resources, neither in men, money nor materiel. After assessing the situation he developed what would later become known as the Navarre Plan. His design was to:

Adopt an offensive attitude, harry the enemy to prevent him from bringing his divisions together in a combined action and destroy him wherever he was outnumbered...."my principal aim is to break the force of habit. The [FEC] lacks aggressiveness and mobility. I am going to do my best to give it back these qualities."<sup>81</sup>

Commencing immediate to his arrival, French forces established a strategic defense throughout Tonkin; the de Lattre line was reinforced throughout the delta, while a number of

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<sup>79</sup> Doyle, 62

<sup>80</sup> Jules Roy, The Battle of Dienbienphu, trans. by Robert Baldick (New York: Harper&Row Publishers, 1965), 5.

advance bases and positions were established for future operations. Phase I would last through the rest of 1953 and into the spring of 1954. During this period the FEC would rebuild its strength and consolidate its position. Following phase I, the FEC would transition to the offense making use of their forward bases and conduct sweeps throughout Tonkin in the hopes of either driving the VLA from the field or dealing a crushing blow. Navarre was not so naïve to believe that Giap could be decisively defeated, but a fresh string of French victories would prove a powerful bargaining chip during the planned peace talks in 1955. The plan, dubbed operation *CASTOR*, called for establishing airheads in the northwest starting with Dien Bien Phu and reinforcing Lai Chau; mobile groups would sweep through the Red River Delta and the central highlands around Pleiku. The airheads would become meat-grinder battles to tie a substantial portion of the VLA down while protecting Hanoi and the south. Navarre thus thought the safety of Cochin China and of Laos to be of paramount importance.

Amphibious forces would flush large VLA units out of Annam. This would have a multiple purpose: first, it would prevent the enemy from accessing the Mekong and threatening southern Laos; second, it would deprive guerilla forces in the south (Cochin-china) from reinforcements; and third, it would drive the VLA back into the relatively open area of the Red River Delta exposing Giap to strong French combined arms attacks. The plan appeared to be an attempt at shaping the conditions preceding the eventual peace settlement. Tonkin would never be pacified; creating a buffer in Annam and scouring Cochinchina clean of any remaining communist pockets would be an acceptable compromise.

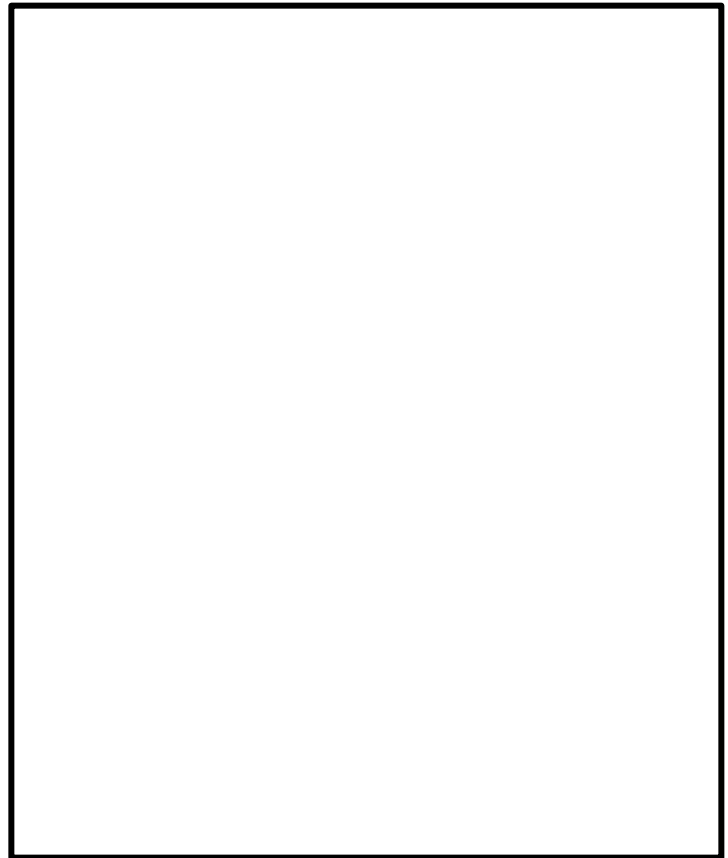
### **Operation *ATLANTE***

By December, Navarre had developed an offensive plan to attack VLA units within the central highlands under the title *ATLANTE*. This plan would involve amphibious assaults along

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<sup>81</sup> Roy, 16.

the central coast, linking up with GM100 and some of the newly formed Vietnamese National Army units. The operation, while tying up troops and assets in what would prove to be a fruitless pursuit, has been described as a “one long, thirsty promenade in the blazing sun.”<sup>82</sup> Once again the FEC failed to understand the tactics of their enemy who would not stand and fight on unfavorable terms. Executing an amphibious assault at Tuy-Hoa, all that awaited this force of some twenty four battalions were ambushes, mines and



### **OPERATION *ATLANTE***

snipers. General Rene Cogny, commander of French forces in Tonkin, could ill-afford to squander these assets and pleaded with Navarre to cancel the operation.<sup>83</sup> Eventually, thirty-three battalions would be committed to this operation, battalions that could have been used in reinforcement of the Red River Delta and Dien Bien Phu. Navarre insistently viewed this operation as equally important as *CASTOR* to his strategy. Now the fate of the French Union would hang on the precarious air-delivered lifeline in the Northwest. Ironically, while described as an unproductive thrashing around in the bush, *ATLANTE* would end with the destruction of the most famous mobile group (GM 100) by another rapid concentration of VLA forces.

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<sup>82</sup> Simpson, 45.

<sup>83</sup> Roy, 35.

*Dinassaut* operations during this last phase of the war were routine. Maintaining their presence along the rivers and canals around the Red River, the navy allowed Navarre to free up troops for his operations in the north and in Annam. While Dien Bien Phu remained inaccessible to river traffic, the *Dinassaut* did contribute to the effort by ferrying supplies up the Red and Black rivers for final delivery by air. Later in the campaign, when the besieged garrison was hopelessly cut off, a relief column was dispatched in the hopes of linking up south of Dien Bien Phu. A portion of this column was ferried by river out of Laos with *Dinassaut*-type units. Without a clear line of advance for continued support by river, the effort was doomed from the start. On 7 May 1954 the garrison at Dien Bien Phu surrendered and the war wound down to the end. Navarre was sacked and replaced by the last Commander in Chief, General Paul Ely.

Peace talks commenced the following the surrender. The concessions wrought from Paris by the communist negotiators ceded the entire north to the Vietminh. By mid-July the French had pulled their forces tightly into the area around Hanoi and prepared for evacuation of the southern portion of the Delta. The *Dinassaut*, now approaching a state of exhaustion, would carry out this operation. Civilians and supplies, as well as a large formation of troops, were removed by the efforts of three naval flotillas towards Saigon. In order to deceive the Vietminh as to the nature of the operation, naval commandos landed ashore under the pretext of continuing French presence. This delicate withdrawal often occurred while in contact and under fire, but by 1 July the movements were completed.<sup>84</sup> No more large scale operations would be conducted involving the riverine group, although they would support along the shortened frontage to the end. Many were taken down river to Haiphong in anticipation of the general withdrawal to Cochin.

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<sup>84</sup> Koburger,86.

After the signing of the Geneva accords on 21 July 1954, the FEC was given less than one year to evacuate Tonkin.<sup>85</sup> Assembling within 15 days, the former colonial troops were ferried to transfer points by the naval group to Haiphong and Along Bay. The workhorse of the inland waterways worked right up until the end. The LCT *La Foudre* picked up the remaining small craft of the dinassaut and sailed for Saigon.<sup>86</sup> The war was finally over. Within two years all French forces were gone from Indochina.

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<sup>85</sup> Doyle, 90.

<sup>86</sup> Koburger, 88.

## Chapter 9

### **Riverine Operations: 2001**

Riverine operations have played a prominent place in U.S. military history, to include the War of 1812, the 2nd Seminole Indian War, the Civil War, and lastly our own war in Vietnam. They have usually been ad hoc collaborations between the navy and whatever ground forces could be scraped together. True riverine capability usually manifests itself after major combat operations necessitate their advent, the notable exception being the strategy of U.S. Grant along the Mississippi during the Civil War. Often the rivers are viewed as mere obstacles; only later are they perceived as avenues of approach and key terrain for our forces to exploit. A recent example is our own experience in the Vietnam War. The force most capable of performing amphibious operations along the interior waterways, the Marine Corps, was tasked with extended ground combat in the central highlands, often far from the reach of their Navy counterparts. The rugged terrain of I Corps could not have been a more alien environment to the amphibious Marines. The formation of Task Force 117 and the Mobile Riverine Force was completed using the U.S. Army's 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, a unit with no history in riverine warfare. To their credit, TF 117 performed magnificently in the tradition of the *Dinassaut*. However, many lives and much wasted energy could have been saved with some forethought.

The United States can draw great lessons from the experience of the French. In fact the similarities to present day operations is greater than perhaps even 1965, when we entered



Vietnam conflict. Sea basing, operational maneuver from the sea (OMFTS), and ship to objective maneuver (STOM), these were all techniques attempted by the FEC. Like the French, the United States, especially the Marine Corps/Navy team, expects to conduct expeditionary warfare on a limited budget without the convenience of robust supporting infrastructure. Our armed forces expect to maintain greater operational and tactical maneuverability than our adversaries. Although mobility in itself does not define our doctrine, it does rest on the ability to position and maneuver our own forces against an exposed enemy. This implies tactical mobility.

In 1989 the United States Marine Corps was appointed the executive agency by the Department of Defense for developing riverine doctrine.<sup>87</sup> This requirement was the result of then-president George Bush expressing interest in assisting Colombia in the war against drugs. The conditions of this war, while certainly well below the threshold of even the opening stages of the 1946, reflects some similarities with the French experience. Colombia, like Indochina, is heavily dependent upon its rivers and inland waterways for transportation. There are 30,000 navigable miles of river, providing 20 entry points from the ocean.<sup>88</sup> Drug traffickers make great use of these waterways to supply, manufacture, and ship their products. Later in 1989 then-Commandant of the Marine Corps Alfred Gray issued “CMC guidance for Latin America”, which basically authorized the Corps to develop an exportable riverine capability supported by mobile training teams (MTT).<sup>89</sup> This guidance is still in effect.

Today, the Marine Corps riverine capability resides in the Small Craft Company (SSCo) of the II Marine Expeditionary Force. This company, created in 1992, is the only one of its kind

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<sup>87</sup> Iris M. Gonzalez, “The Columbian Riverine Program: A Case Study of Naval International Programs and National Strategy”, Alexandria, VA, Center for Naval Analyses, 1995, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Gonzalez, 10.

<sup>89</sup> Gonzalez, 12.

within the United States.<sup>90</sup> Designed primarily for operating under the conditions of low intensity conflict, the SSCo is capable of a variety of missions such as waterborne security, command and control, and limited mobility / assault support operations. The company can transport approximately 550 Marines at ranges up to 70 nautical miles. Under semi-permissive conditions this gives a MAGTF commander a limited ability to project power. However, in mid or high intensity conflict this force is inadequately equipped.

The current inventory of equipment reflects the Marine Corps vision of operating riverine forces in low-intensity conflicts, primarily in South America. High-speed, lightly armed boats have been purchased to augment the counter-narcotics program, principally as transportation of small teams. These boats were not intended for conventional military operations. Gone are the armored assault craft; gone are the monitors; gone, too, are virtually all of the shallow draft vessels and lighterage that the U.S. riverine forces so successfully employed during the later years of Vietnam. Mobile Riverine Force (MRF), better known as TF117, arguably the finest riverine unit in the world, developed tactics, techniques, and procedures to a high-art form. The U.S. Navy no longer employs such a force. The direction the service is headed in today is more akin to the missions executed by the sister component of the MRF, the River Patrol Group of Task Force 116. The high speed, lightly armed River Patrol Boat (PBR) of TF116 kept a constant surveillance of the Mekong and its tributaries, however, they were not capable of projecting the kind of firepower and ground support of the *Dinassaut*, or of TF 117. Only sturdy armored craft, bristling with direct and indirect fire systems and capable of inserting up to battalion strength, equates to power projection.

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<sup>90</sup> Major John Shafer, "What the Heck is 'Small Craft Company' Anyway?", Marine Corps Gazette, March, 2001, 30.

The current riverine craft is a successor to the PBR-type patrol craft of 1967-69. The Riverine Assault Craft (RAC) currently in the Marine Corps inventory is a high performance vessel capable of speeds triple that of the *Dinassaut*. Their aluminum unarmored hull and the few automatic weapons make it a perfect patrol craft but sorely lacking as an assault craft. Transportation of the ground combat element is effected by Rigid Raiding Craft (RRC) or the Combat Reconnaissance and Raiding Craft (CRRC). The RRC is a fiberglass motorboat while the CRRC is an inflatable rubber boat. Neither craft is armed nor armored and are capable of transporting between 6-10 troops. They are inadequate for hostile landings. Perhaps operating against the handful of narco-terrorists in Colombia does not require the full capability of an MRF, but the Corps should be shaping its requirements around the higher end of the spectrum in anticipation of at least a modestly armed adversary. A RAC would be an unenviable platform in which to receive a volley of rocket propelled grenades, heavy machinegun fire, and mortars shells as opposed to the more heavily armed and armored craft of the *Dinassaut*.

## **Conclusion**

The formation of the *Dinassaut* can be dismissed as one small solution to a very complex war. The nature of the Tonkin region required mobile forces, to include those capable of controlling the waterways. That these agile and flexible units were involved in every major operation in the lowlands understates their importance; the events during the Vietminh's Winter-Spring offensive of 1951 illustrate this. Without the combined firepower, mobility, and coordinated use of infantry, the battles at Vinh Yen and along the Day River might have resulted in disasters for the French. The same is true in the "meat grinder" battles at Hoa Binh. The vulnerability to French combined arms, coupled with the loss of interior lines, wrought horrendous tactical damage on the VLA as they were exposed the full strength of the FEC. These events figure so prominently in the early part of the war that Giap reacted to them as he devised his ultimate winning strategy at Dien Bien Phu: draw the French away from their bases of operation, limit their support to a tenuous line of communication, cut off their escape, and annihilate a significant sized force in a set-piece battle.<sup>91</sup> Such a loss, while representing only 4% of total FEC manpower, would be more than the politicians in Paris could stomach. The fact that Dien Bien Phu is so far from the nearest waterway is no coincidence. Giap could not afford to face the combined arms of ground and naval forces. The choice of such a remote location pays silent tribute to the both effectiveness of French combined arms and the wisdom of their "amateur" general.

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<sup>91</sup> Davidson, 276-277.

The lessons for the present day are not so much different from those of the French. Greater relative mobility was the key to successfully outmaneuvering an enemy that could not and would not stand toe-to-toe with conventional forces until late in the war. The French understood the inland waterways were key to their control of the interior of Vietnam. They were able to match the Vietminh in terms of relative mobility in this medium. The physical control of the rivers was not as important as the ability to transverse those waterways carrying combat power and then projecting it ashore in pursuit of the enemy. During operations where the French employed only one means of mobility the enemy was usually able to escape, especially when employing airborne and airmobile force. The same will be true for the Marine Corps in similar future operations.

The Marine Corps places great faith in the ability to maneuver forces directly against operational objectives. The advanced technology of the MV-22, AAV, and LCAC will not overcome the obstacles to mobility and trafficability once those forces secure their objectives and find that the enemy has eluded them. The EMW doctrine places too much emphasis on the methods for getting from amphibious shipping to objectives ashore and does little to address the form of maneuver once those forces have been inserted. The primary means of mobility ashore apparently will be on foot. As witnessed by many of the infantry operations in the early portion of the Indochina War, foot mobile infantry is ill-suited for extended operations. This will be the same for Marines. If doctrine does not adequately address a variety of means to increase the relative mobility of the Ground Combat Element, then EMW will prove a hollow doctrine. Like the French, our formations will get to the battlefield in good order but will soon find themselves outmaneuvered, outnumbered, and outfought. The capability to operate within the interior of countries like Vietnam, Colombia and others may very well depend upon developing a credible

riverine force. Until this shortcoming is addressed, the Marine Corps may very well find itself posturing off the coast in a crisis, unable to execute tactical maneuver ashore because of a lack of means to get the job done.

## Appendix A: Chronology of Events

- 1802 – Nguyen Anh unites Vietnam for the first time.
- 1858 - French enter Da Nang.
- 1862 – Vietnamese Emperor signs treaty ceding Cochin China to France.
- 1884 – French protectorate over entire country enforced.
- 1896 - 1<sup>st</sup> phase of anti-colonial resistance ends.
- 1919 - Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen Ai Quoc) petitions the allied powers for Vietnamese independence. He is rebuffed.
- 1930 - Founding of Indochinese Communist Party (ICP)
- 1940 - France surrenders to Germany; Japan demands the right to station troops in Indochina.
- 1941 - The League of Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh, is established.
- 1944 - The VLA is formed.
- March 1945 - Japan seizes Indochina from France, ending colonial administration. Vietminh enjoy a rise in popularity as they provide assistance to peasants.
- 1945 - Japan surrenders. French forces, under command of General LeClerc, reenter the country.
- Establishment of the Far East Naval Brigade (BMEO).
- Operation *Moussac* secures objectives surrounding Saigon.
- 1946 -Chinese withdrawal from Tonkin reestablishes French control. Ho Chi Minh appeals to Paris for political solution heading towards Vietnamese independence.
- November 1946 - “Haiphong” incident over prefabricated customs dispute precipitates armed conflict between the Vietminh and the French.
- Redesignation of Naval River Flotilla.
- 19 December 1946 - collaborated attack by the Vietminh against French installations in Hanoi. The war commences.
- January 1947 - Nam Dinh secured; first real test of BMEO in large scale operations.
- Redesignation as Naval Assault Division (*Dinassaut*).

October 1947	- Operation <i>Lea</i>
November 1947	- Operation <i>Ceinture</i>
February 1948	- Gian Khau raid.
October 1949	- End of Chinese Civil War; Vietminh receive aid from Mao.
1950	- Start of Winter-Spring offensive by VLA.  - Dong Khe is overrun; Lang Son evacuated by October; Vietminh in control of border with China.  - General de Lattre arrives in December.
January 1951	- Start of Winter Spring offensive; attack on Vinh Yen.
March 1951	- Attack on Mao Khe.
August 1951	- Attack along Day River; Giap defeated 3 <sup>rd</sup> time; end of 1951 offensive.
November 1951	- Operation <i>Lotus</i>
January 1952	- Attack on Hoa Binh. De Lattre dies of cancer.
October 1952	- Operation <i>Lorraine</i>
November 1952	- Attack on Na San.
May 1953	- Navarre arrives.
November 1953	- Operation <i>Castor</i> (Dien Bien Phu)
December 1953	- Operation <i>Atlante</i> .
March 1954	- Attack on Dien Bien Phu.
May 1954	- Dien Bien Phu surrenders.
July 1954	- Geneva Peace Accords signed. The "First" Vietnam war is over.



## Appendix B: French Riverine Craft

### 1. LSSL - Landing Ship, Support, Large

Displacement: 227 tons / 383 tons full load

Dimensions: 158 x 24 feet (6 ft draft)

Armament: 1- 3" gun  
4 - 40mm gun  
4 - 20mm gun

Speed: 14 kts

### 2. LSIL- Landing Ship, Infantry, Large

Displacement: 227 tons / 383 tons full load

Dimensions: 158 x 24 feet (6 foot draft)

Armament: 1- 3" gun  
1 - 40mm gun  
2 - 20mm guns  
4- HMG  
5- Mortars ( 1-4.2in, 2- 81mm, 2-60mm)

Speed: 14 kts

Note: Both the LSSL and the LSIL were used as command and control ships. These vessels were capable of providing fire support and robust communications. The high bridge allowed the commander unobstructed observation.

### 3. LCU- Landing Craft, Utility

Displacement: 227 tons

Dimensions: 158 x 24 x 6 feet

Armament: 2 - 20mm gun

Speed: 10 kts

4. **LCM**- Landing Craft, Mechanized

Displacement: 36 tons  
Dimensions: 50 x 14 (1.3meter draft)  
Armament: variously armed.  
Speed: 8 kts

Note: The LCM was the workhorse of the riverine fleet. These sturdy landing craft were converted into armored personnel carriers by welding steel plate along the sides and covering the upper portions with mesh deflection screens. Automatic anti-aircraft artillery, tank main guns, and flamethrowers could be mounted in the “monitor” versions. Mortars were invariably added to provided inshore fire support.

5. **LCVP**- Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel

Displacement: 13 tons  
Dimensions: 40 x 12 feet (1.2 meter draft)  
Armament: none  
Speed: 8 kts

Note: these craft were designed primarily for transportation of troops and a single Jeep. Sometimes lashed together, especially under the cover of darkness, for ease in movement.

## 6. Gressier Barges

Displacement: 220 tons  
Dimensions: 100 x 24 feet (1.2 meter draft)  
Armament: 1- 3" gun  
              4 - 40mm gun  
              4 - 20mm gun  
Speed: 4-8 kts

Note: These were the recovered barges the BMEO first employed in 1945-46. Although of questionable seaworthiness, they provided journeyman service in the early days of the riverine force. They were generally armed with one 75mm gun, three mortars, and various automatic weapons. Capable of carrying entire rifle company for short distances.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Koburger, Naval Expeditions, Appendix C

## Appendix C: USMC River Craft

### 1. **RAC** - Riverine Assault Craft\*

Displacement: 8.25 tons

Dimensions: 34 x 9 feet (22-26 inches stationary; 9 inches planing)

Armament: 2- .50 cal or Mk19 HMG  
2 – M240G MMG

Speed: 45 mph

Crew: 4

Troop Cap: 10-15

\*Note: This is an unarmored craft. The aluminum skin is 3/16 of an inch thick. Robust communications suite and great speed make this an ideal pursuit or command craft. No indirect fire capability other than looping trajectory of Mk19.

### 2. **RRC** – Rigid Raiding Craft\*\*

Displacement: n/a

Dimensions: 18.5 x 6.25 feet

Armament: none

Speed: 20-25 mph

Crew: 1

Troop Cap: 6-8

### 3. **CRRC** – Combat Rubber Raiding Craft\*\*

Displacement: n/a  
Dimensions: 15.5 x 7 feet (22-26 inches draft stationary; 18 inches planing)  
Armament: none  
Speed: 15-20 mph  
Crew: 1  
Troop Cap: 6-8

\*\*Note: The RRC has a fiberglass shell with an outboard motor. The CRRC is an inflatable rubber boat that also employs an outboard motor. Neither afford the crew nor passengers protection from hostile fire. Neither boat possesses any weapons systems except for the organic weapons of the embarked troops. Both boats are best suited for clandestine operations.

## **Appendix D: Abbreviations and Acronyms**

ARVN- Army of the Republic of Vietnam

BMEO- *Brigade Marine d'Extreme-Orient*

Blue Water – Ocean

Brown Water- Riverine

Dinassaut (also DNA)- Naval Assault Division (French)

EMW – Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare

FEC – French Expeditionary Corps

ICP- Indochinese Communist Party

LCM- Landing Craft, Mechanized

LCU- Landing Craft, Utility

LCVP- Landing Craft, Vehicles and Personnel

LSIL- Landing Ship, Infantry, Large

LSSL- Landing Ship, Support, Large

MRF- Mobile Riverine Force

OMFTS- Operational Maneuver From The Sea

RAC- Riverine Assault Craft

RRC- Rigid Raiding Craft

STOM- Ship to Objective Maneuver

TF117- Task Force 117

VLA – Vietnamese Liberation Army

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