

Dien Bien Phu: 55 days of hell

Fight when you can, run away when you cannot.

Dien Bien Phu was the battle that ended the First Indochina War. For 55 days 10 000 French Union soldiers attempted to hold an armed camp, in the middle of a valley, against nearly 50 000 Viet Minh forces. The defeat of this French garrison was one of the worst disasters in French military history and it brought to an end French control in Indochina.

By 1954 517 000 French forces were in action in Indochina. The French government, with opposition at home, wanted to end the war quickly. In fact there were indications of an imminent ceasefire by November 1953.

The French plan

General Henri Navarre, French commander-in-chief in Indochina (since 1953) had a simple strategy. He hoped to trap and destroy the best Viet Minh units by offering them the bait of a French armed camp. Navarre thought his men would have enough machine gun, heavy artillery, tanks and planes to hold off an attacking force of up to 20 000 Viet Minh.

Dien Bien Phu was a village in a valley surrounded by mountains and thick jungle. Its only link to Hanoi, France's main supply base, was by a mountainous road. Navarre relied on air transport to bring his 10 000 troops and their supplies in by plane. Viet Minh soldiers in the

mountains watched this operation. Colonel Christian de Castries was appointed to command the newly built camp. Most of his troops were not used to fighting in such terrain.

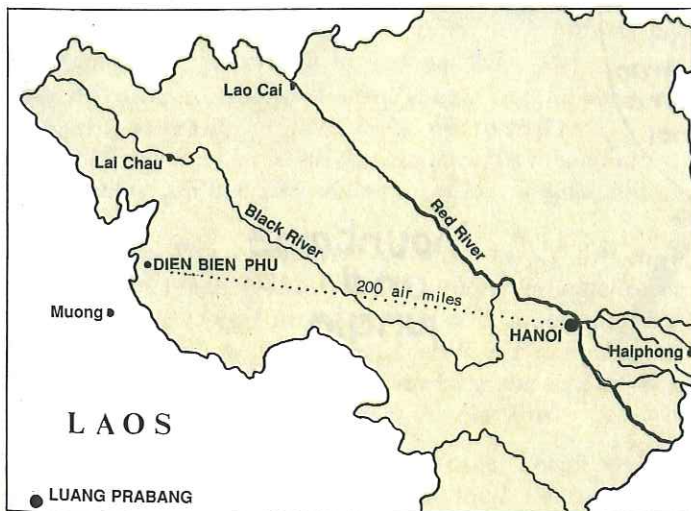
The Viet Minh strategy

As the mists and rain swirled around the mountains Giap moved his supplies, enlisting thousands of supporters as porters. They walked along the jungle-shrouded tracks at night from his base, Juan Giao, 120 kilometres away. By January 1954 40-50 000 Viet Minh combat troops looked down on Dien Bien Phu. What General Navarre could not know however was that the Viet Minh had also brought in a vastly superior artillery firepower.

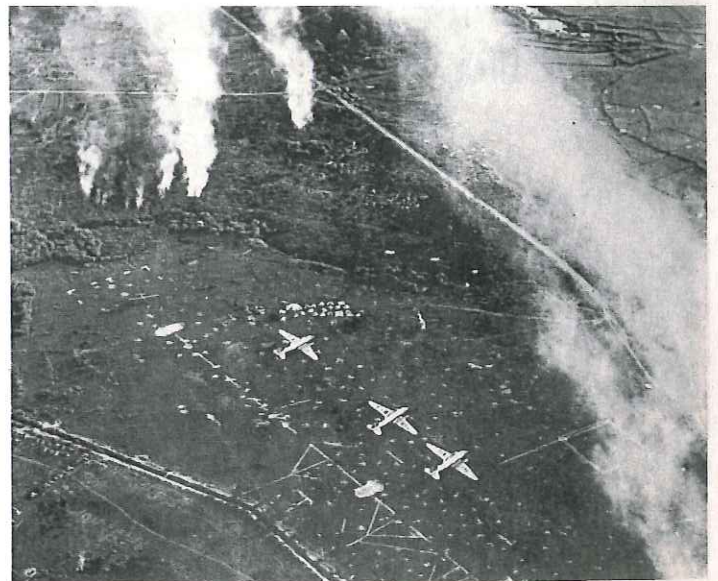
I lunched there one day with the battalion officers just a few weeks before the Viet Minh attack. The officers' mess was a strip of tarpaulin stretched over the top of a dust-covered and fly-infested table . . . 'Take these and have a look at those hills', said a captain, handing me his field glasses. 'What you'll see up there are all Viet Minh.' Like spectators crowding into the seats of a stadium, the Viet Minh were taking up their positions for the battle to come.

D. Warner, *The Last Confucian*, 1964

(A) The air route from Dien Bien Phu to Hanoi



The aerodrome at Dien Bien Phu



The last battle

A conference was scheduled to open in Geneva in April to discuss ceasefire possibilities in Indochina. Both sides hoped to gain advantage at the negotiating table with a victory at Dien Bien Phu. Giap launched his attack on 13 March 1954.

Viet Minh artillery pounded the French camp and defeat was obvious by the end of the first day. The French artillery commander committed suicide, the Viet Minh built tunnels into the camp, the monsoon rains poured down and French troops fell back into an area of only a few hundred square metres.

The possibility of America becoming directly involved

in the war with a massive air strike was promoted by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Vice-President Richard Nixon. However both President Eisenhower and America's allies, the British, argued in favour of settling the issue at the Geneva Conference table.

FALLING DOMINOES

... On 7 April, Eisenhower explained to the public the strategic importance of Indochina by citing the falling domino principle: the fall of Indochina would lead to the fall of Burma, Thailand, Malaya and Indonesia; India would then be hemmed in by Communism, and Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Formosa and Japan would all be gravely threatened.

(B) D. Horowitz, *From Yalta to Vietnam*, 1965

After seven weeks of steady bombardment almost half of the camp's defenders were either dead or seriously wounded. Survivors existed in rain and mud in World War I conditions. However Viet Minh conditions were no better as they charged French gun positions night after night. In the 55 days of fighting about:

- 7900 Viet Minh soldiers were killed and 15 000 wounded.
- 13 000 French soldiers out of 16 000 were killed (some 10 000 died in the prison camps or on the gruelling trek to them).

DE CASTRIES' FAILURE

Colonel de Castries . . . who was assisted until well into the battle by an attractive female secretary, though certainly not lacking in courage, . . . was not often seen outside his command post. According to Colonel Jules Roy, . . . de Castries, a thrice wounded cavalryman, 'timidly used his reserves to stop gaps or mend holes, not to strike . . .'

Day by day the Viet Minh dug out trenches to the French strongpoints, gradually encircling them for the final assault

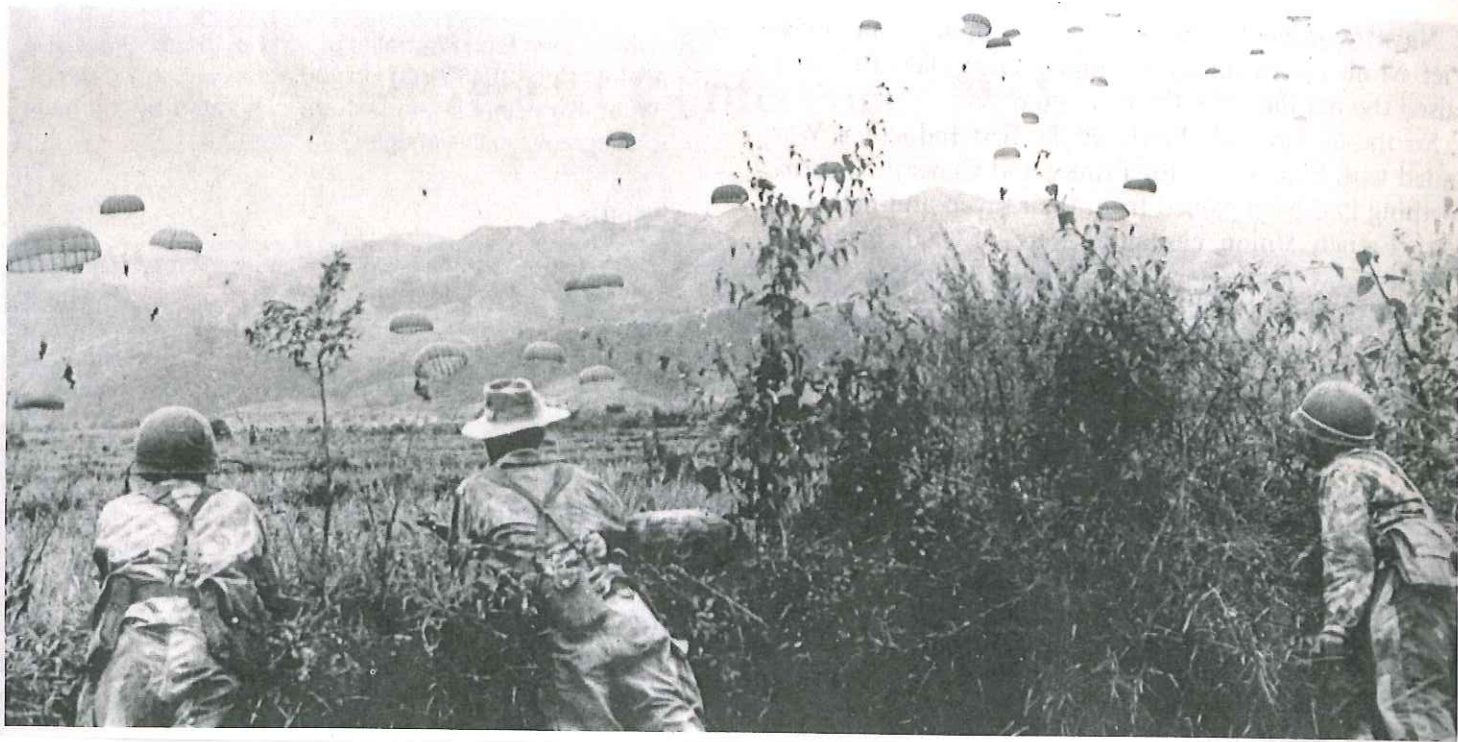
Dien Bien Phu might well be rated one of the most decisive events since 1945 . . . demonstrating the superiority of an underdeveloped irregular force over a conventional army . . . Possibly in years ahead Dien Bien Phu may come to be regarded as the moment marking the end of any prospect of Western ascendancy in the Far East.

(C) A. Horne, 'Dienbienphu',
History of the Twentieth Century, 1968

Dien Bien Phu

Wounded French soldiers at Dien Bien Phu





Navarre ordered a ceasefire at 5.30 pm on 7 May 1954. Viet Minh forces finally swamped Dien Bien Phu and raised the red flag with the large gold star.

So the decisive last battle of the first Indochina War ended with humiliation for France and General Navarre. Nothing had been gained from their seven-and-half-year war. French Union casualties were 253 000, including 92 000 dead. France had been deeply divided over the war and her recovery from World War II was also delayed.

For Ho Chi Minh and General Giap it was a triumph and an inspiration in the tragic years that followed.

NAVARRE'S FUNDAMENTAL ERROR

... Summing up Navarre's fundamental error, a French War College study concluded that he and his staff had wrongly disregarded intelligence that did not fit their prejudices, and instead substituted their preconceived idea of the Viet Minh for the facts ... He misread Giap's ability to move a huge force rapidly ... He rejected the notion that the Viet Minh could devastate his men with artillery deployed on the hills above Dien Bien Phu.

... He failed to anticipate that Giap's howitzers, poised within easy range of his airstrip could cut off flights in and out of the valley.

... He chose a terrain presumed suitable for tanks only to discover that its cover of thick bush entangled armoured vehicles.

S. Karnow, *Vietnam, A History*, 1983

Using the information in this handout, draw a map of Dien Bien Phu, marking on all the information you can.

Text and resource interpretation

1. (a) What disadvantages (location, terrain) for the French are revealed by the map? **(A)**
- (b) Locate the supply bases of the Viet Minh and the French.
- (c) How did the French supply their forces at Dien Bien Phu?
- (d) Why do you think Navarre chose Dien Bien Phu as the site for a showdown with the Viet Minh?
2. List three or four reasons for the triumph of the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu.
3. What role did the Americans play in the French defeat?
4. (a) What is the 'Falling Domino' principle? **(B)**
- (b) How does this affect Great Power attitudes in Indochina?