

Battle of Dien Bien Phu

ROHIT SINGH

Introduction

The region of Indochina comprising present day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia first came under the French influence in 1884. After a long phase of French colonialism, the area fell to the Japanese in 1941 for a brief period. During the Second World War, Japan, France and Thailand fought battles to retain their influence in the region. However, after the end of the Second World War, the French once again established their colony in Indochina. After the armistice was signed between the United States and Japan, a Franco-British expeditionary force landed at Saigon on 13 September 1945. The force led by Sir Douglas Gracey consisted of an airborne detachment, two British companies of the 20th Indian Division and the French 5th Colonial Infantry Regiment. This marked the beginning of a new phase of struggle by the Vietnamese against Imperial rule. The People's Army under the leadership of General Vo Ngyuen Giap suffered reverses in 1946 and 1951 but dramatically managed to turn the tables at Dien Bien Phu in the summer of 1954. The French rout at Dien Bien Phu finally struck the death knell for nearly 70 years of French colonialism in Indochina.

The Situation in 1953

By the beginning of the year 1953, the French were relegated to a small area near the Chinese border and along the coast around Hue and Tourange (Da Nang). The Viet Minh forces controlled most of the areas including the North Western parts bordering Laos and the Deltas of the Saigon, upper reaches of the Red and Black rivers and the Ca Mau Peninsula. The Hanoi-Haiphong Railway and key roads in the Red River Delta which were critical to the French efforts were also regularly harassed by the guerrillas.

Disposition of forces and the arrival of Gen Navarre

The combined strength of the French forces stood at 2,30,000. However, out of these only 90,000 were French volunteers. The other nationalities which made up the French Far-East Expeditionary Force comprised of 40,000 Foreign Legionnaires and another 50,000 consisted of soldiers from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Senegal and French West Africa. 50,000 Vietnamese nationals as well as private armies from the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects were also fighting for the French. Following a 1950 agreement, American supplies to the French forces had peaked to 100,000 tons a month by 1954. On the other hand, the Viet Minh forces led by Gen Vo Nguyen Giap consisted of over 1,25,000 full-time regulars organised into six divisions, six independent regiments, and several independent battalions. In Giap's view, "France faced two main problems: the difficulty of manoeuvring in a land without fronts, with only a series of strong points amid a hostile population, and the shortage of manpower for its military".

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"There had been no long-range plan since de Lattre's departure. Everything was conducted on a day-to-day, reactive basis. Combat operations were undertaken only in response to enemy moves or threats. There was no comprehensive plan to develop the organisation and build up the equipment of the Expeditionary force. Finally, Navarre, the intellectual, the cold and professional soldier, was shocked by the "school's out" attitude of Salan and his senior commanders and staff officers. They were going home, not as victors or heroes, but then, not as clear losers either. To them the important thing was that they were getting out of Indochina with their reputations frayed, but intact. They gave little thought to, or concern for, the problems of their successors."

Keeping this vulnerability and the mismatch in manpower, Navarre decided to divide Indo-China into two theatres and to avoid conflict in the Northern theatre comprising Northern Vietnam and Laos during the 1953-54 campaign season so that he could build up his forces there. At the same time, he launched

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Op Atlante to seek out Viet Minh forces in the Southern highlands. However, the French troops who landed on the Southern Annam coast at Tuy Hoa found no Viet Minh regulars (who had been diverted to the north) to fight. Instead, they were harassed by guerillas. Then Giap's 316th Division took Kontum and Pleiku and finally moved into Laos, towards Luang Prabang. Five French battalions were directed towards Laos in a blocking position leading Giap to redirect his division towards Dien Bien Phu. Thus, Navarre was forced into a direct confrontation with the Viet Minh forces which he had hoped to avoid until the 1954-55 campaign season.

Operation Castor

Gen Navarre decided to establish a northern "*mooring point*", a centre of operations from which French patrols could go out in search of Giap's units. He had hoped that establishing such a centre at Dien Bien Phu would split the Viet Minh forces between the delta and the mountains, thereby isolating them from their main base in northwest Tonkin. He felt that the French lacked a strong mobile force to seek out Giap's forces and thus decided to concentrate his forces more centrally from their thousands of scattered positions to cope with guerilla warfare. By the end of 1953, Navarre had 84 battalions spread over the whole of Indo-China. The slogan given by Gen Navarre to his men was, "Always keep the initiative" and "always on the offensive". Navarre's subordinate officers were Maj Gen Rene Cogy for Tonkin and Col Christian Marie Ferdinand de la Croix de Castries to command the forces at Dien Bien Phu. Op Castor was launched on 20 November 1953 to establish the strong centre at Dien Bien Phu with the airdrop of French airborne troopers.

The Terrain of Dien Bien Phu

Dien Bien Phu was a village consisting of 112 houses. The village situated at the junction of four roads, one of which led north into China, had little strategic significance except that it was only eight miles from the Laotian border. The name Dien Bien Phu meant "the location of the country government". Its main crops were rice and opium. Located in a flat, heart-shaped basin twelve miles long from north to south and six miles wide, the settlement was ringed with jungle and surrounded by low but steep hills. Meo tribes lived on the slopes. A small river, the Nam Oum, ran through the basin from north to south. Two airstrips were located in the valley from where the French pilots operated.

Force concentrations and the Fortification

The French garrison at Dien Bien Phu comprised of 12 battalions, supported by two groups of 75 mm and two of 105 mm artillery, backed up by four 155 mm howitzers and a large number of heavy mortars. The air support elements were made up of an helicopter and six fighter-bombers. Ten light tanks and a transport company distributed supplies and personnel to all the fortifications. Gen Giap responded by sending four of his divisions to ring the perimeter around Dien Bien Phu. It had some 200 pieces of artillery apart from a Chinese artillery division standing-by. They were also well stocked with 10,000 barrels of gasoline, 3000 rifles of all types, 2.4 million rounds of ammunition, 60,000 artillery rounds and nearly 1.7 million tonnes of rice.

American planes flown by French pilots transported the 6th BPC, the Dextieme Battalion, Premier Regiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes (2nd Battalion, 1st Para Light Regiment), and the Premier Battalion Etranger de Parachutistes (1st Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion, abbreviated as 1st BEP), composed in part, of the former Nazi Schutzstaffel or SS. The first unit in was the 17th Airborne Engineer Company followed by the 3rd Company, 31st Engineer Battalion.

Out of a total strength of 10,814 men, 7000 were combat soldiers, one-third of the garrison at Dien Bien Phu was Vietnamese and other soldiers came from Morocco, Lebanon, Syria, Chad, Guadeloupe, and Madagascar.

The French established four main outposts. Giving female names, Col De Castries named the artillery strongpoints: Dominique to the northeast, Eliane to the east, Claudine to the south and Huguette to the west. The inter-locking and mutually supportive fortifications were clustered near the main airstrip and the village. The command bunker was established in the centre. Each of the fortifications was located on low knolls rising up from the plain. Four other independent defended areas, each held by a French battalion were established slightly apart from the main fortifications. Beatrice was just a mile away on a high ground to the north, Gabrielle, two miles to the north and Anne-Marie sat perched on a rise about one and a half miles to the northwest from the airstrip. Isabelle was located about four miles to the south, near the small airstrip. This position was held by three French battalions, a tank platoon and a 105 mm artillery group.

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Preparation

Since July 1950, close to 70 Chinese advisers who formed part of the 'South China Sea Action Group' had remained with Gen Giap and his men. They advised him to launch a human wave attack akin to the one in Korea to achieve quick result. However, after due deliberations with his men, Gen Giap decided to strike surely and advance surely. In his own words, "we strictly followed this fundamental principle of the conduct of a revolutionary war: strike to win, strike only when success is certain; if it is not, then don't strike."

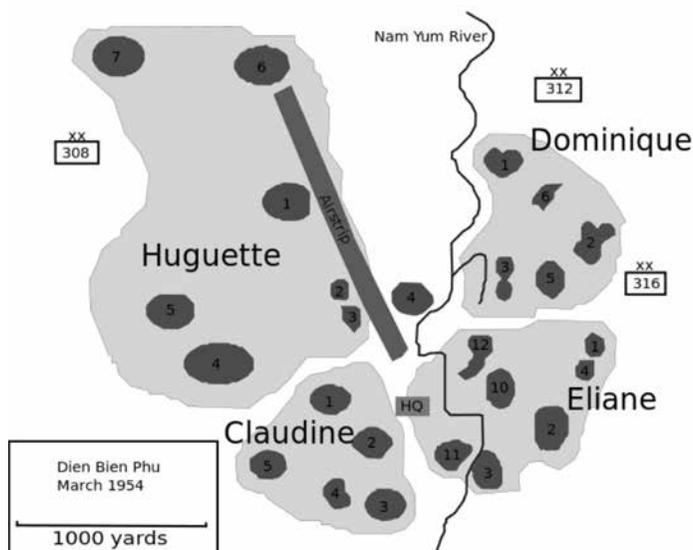
The next few months were spent in conducting a series of tireless practice exercises, building roads and clearing forests from China to haul loads and artillery pieces and constructing a trench system around Dien Bien Phu. By 1954, a load amounting to 4000 tonnes per day was being received from China and Russia. 30,000 Viet Minh soldiers crossed the Black river through the underwater bridges that could not be spotted from the air. Artillery pieces were dismantled and their parts were slung between bicycles along with shells and moved along narrow paths hacked out of jungles and cliff sides. At the same time, Giap maintained pressure on the French elsewhere and destroyed 24 companies of French soldiers in Lai Chau province in December 1953 and launched offensives at Dak To in Kon Tum province and at An Khe where a French Mobile Regiment which had just returned from Korea was decimated. The Vietnamese even sunk some French ships at Saigon harbour. Several surprise attacks were launched at places hundreds of kilometers apart and the soldiers returned to Dien Bien Phu after carrying out these feint attacks. Gen Giap operated from a cave located near Tuan Giao.

D Day

The first contact between the French and Viet Minh soldiers took place on 11 March 1954 when two detachments of the Viet Minh managed to infiltrate the two defences at Gabriele. 54 Vietnamese soldiers were killed in this attack and the French morale rose as they thought that their tactics were working and would be successful in thwarting further attacks.

Gen Giap had hoped to progress his battle in three phases with the aim of destroying the airstrip and capturing the northern sub-sector in the first phase, tighten the siege and capture the central sub-sector in the second phase and wiping out whatever was left in the final phase of the attack. At 0500 h on 13 March 1954, the Vietnamese Artillery which consisted of 144 field guns, 30 75

mm pack howitzers and 36 heavy weapons of other calibers and some 12 to 16 pieces of Soviet six tube rocket launchers, known as *Katyushas* opened up on Him Lam Hill in the middle of the French fortifications. Only on March 13 did Gen Giap order no calibers above 105 mm to be fired thus deceiving the French into believing that the Vietnamese only had a few pieces of 75 mm artillery. Many of the guns were dug into casements covered with dirt on the hills facing the French and only a small hole was left uncovered for the shells to exit. In the absence of sufficient training, forward observation officers and communication systems, they relied heavily on “gun-target” and “line of sight fire”. As the artillery barrage continued, Viet Minh soldiers closed in on the French by advancing their trenches closer to their positions. At some places, even mine shafts were dug under the French strongpoints and then blown up with TNT. By midnight on day one, Beatrice was captured and not a single French soldier survived that assault. In 15 hours of fighting, the French lost most of their artillery pieces and were left with only six days of ammunition. The Vietnamese casualties were also high and attacks against Anne-Marie and Gabrielle were unsuccessful. On the evening of 14 March, a four-hour truce was declared for both sides to retrieve dead bodies from Beatrice hill. The attack soon resumed and by the morning of 15 March, the French had abandoned Gabrielle. The balance of the French defenders withdrew to Dien Bien Phu and Col Charles Piroth, commander of French artillery at the fortress committed suicide by pulling the pin of a hand-grenade in his bunker.



The Second Phase of the battle

The demoralised French troops hunkered down to the centre at Dien Bien Phu and Viet Minh patrols prevented their link up with Isabelle to the south. The relentless artillery barrages kept the French confined to their bunkers. Even the French aerial staffing failed to restrict the endless flow of Vietnamese soldiers and volunteers carrying supplies into the battle field. In fact, the white smoke from napalm bombings helped in further concealing the Vietnamese artillery entrenchments. The arrival of Chinese 37 mm anti-aircraft guns beefed up their air defences. On 23 March, as the French perimeter continued to shrink rapidly and with supplies running thin, Gen Navarre, for the first time spoke to Vo Nguyen Giap over the radio and addressed him as “General”. His request not to fire on medical aircraft was met with a stony silence. On 30 March, the Viet Minh forces from their trenches which they had pushed close to the French fortifications attacked Dominique in the northeast. After some intense battles at very close range, the airfield fell to the Vietnamese by mid-April. The Viet Minh had also succeeded in encircling Isabelle to the south and preventing its occupants from breaking out.

The Final Phase

The final phase was launched on 01 May 1954 and lasted till 07 May. The French positions which had by now constricted to about 1 sq km fell one after the other. In the midst of heavy fighting, French troops continued to para drop (with the last reinforcements arriving on 02 May) into the fortress but could not turn the tide of the battle. On 07 May around noon, the Viet Min 308th Division launched a massive final attack and broke the enemy resistance for ever. Col de Castries was heard transmitting to his HQ over the radio, “Our resistance is going to be overwhelmed. The Viets are within a few meters of the radio transmitter where I am speaking. I have given orders to carry out maximum destruction. We will not surrender. We will fight to the end. *Vive la France!*” But by evening he had surrendered to the Viet Minh. Isabelle also surrendered on 08 May. The 45 days’ siege of Dien Bien Phu finally came to an end.

Outcome of the battle

At the end of the fighting both sides had run out of most of their supplies and morale was at breaking point. The Viet Minh ranks were in fact almost on the verge of mutiny. Victory went to the side which was more successful in hiding their internal difficulties from the enemy. The case of low morale among the

Vietnamese troops before Dien Bien Phu was explicitly brought out by Giap. Speaking to a Hungarian diplomat in April 1959, he said, “The battle of Dien Bien Phu was the last desperate exertion of the Viet Minh army. Its forces were on the verge of complete exhaustion. The supply of rice was running out. Apathy had spread among the populace to such an extent that it was difficult to draft new fighters. Years of jungle warfare had sent morale in the fighting units to the depths”.

Though only 4 per cent of the French force was destroyed at Dien Bien Phu, psychologically it broke the will of the French. The eight-year war in Indo-China had cost the French millions and 172,000 dead, wounded or missing. Dien Bien Phu thus marked the final nail in the French coffin and precipitated their withdrawal from Indo-China. The Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference signed on 21 July 1954 divided Vietnam into two halves along the 17th Parallel. Laos and Cambodia were to become two independent but neutral kingdoms. The Communists led by Ho Chi Minh came to power in North Vietnam.

Key Facets

- By 1954, the Viet Minh forces had achieved some levels of proficiency in training and equipment through repeated training courses, hard work, discipline and internal democracy. They had overcome some of the earlier difficulties of 1946 and 1951 when they had suffered enormously at the hands of the French.
- Gen Giap had correctly recognised the doctrine of winning the confidence of the local people. The Viet Minh had won their confidence and affection and built a perfect understanding with them. This provided rich dividends as there was never a shortage of civilian volunteers for hauling loads and carrying supplies even in the thick of battle.
- By skilful manoeuvring, Giap had succeeded in transforming the French rear into his own front line. In 1952, Giap had launched his forces on a drive in Northwest Tonkin thus forcing the French to move out of their strong points in the Red River Delta. By adopting this strategy, he forced the French to abandon their strong fortifications and move into areas where they were more vulnerable. In 1953, when the French were moving to block the Viet Minh forces in Laos, Giap moved one of his divisions towards Dien Bien Phu which forced the French into concentrating their forces there.
- The French had made some tactical errors in siting their strongpoints at Dien Bien Phu. They were located on low knolls rising from the plains and the gun

emplacements lacked proper protection and were located in open pits as they had underestimated the enemies' artillery capabilities. The strongpoint Isabelle had one-third of all total French forces at Dien Bien Phu. Yet, it could not come to the aid of the other fortifications as it was located very far (four miles to the south) from the other positions. It was infiltrated and ultimately surrounded by Viet Minh forces as the battle progressed. Even the artillery at Isabelle could not support the other strongpoints.

- The French fortifications were also poorly constructed. Telephone field wire stretched along the ground when it should have been buried. Strongpoints lacked connecting trenches, a common belt of barbed wire, and even minefields. There was no overhead protection for the communications trench to the hospital, which itself was incapable of handling heavy casualties.
- The French Airborne troops who were the first to arrive were too lightly equipped to build substantial defences which also could not be hardened due to lack of adequate warning period prior to the battle. They could only fortify the headquarters, command post, signal centre and the X-ray room of the underground hospital.
- Gen Navarre grossly underestimated the strength of the Viet Minh forces opposite Dien Bien Phu and thought that they would not be able to amass more than a division worth of troops.
- The French intelligence estimated that the Viet Minh artillery consisted of less than 60 pieces of 75 mm calibre guns which could not fire more than 25,000 rounds. They were confident that by their air superiority and ability to mass greater concentrations of artillery fire they would be able to destroy the Viet Minh artillery in no time.
- An authoritative chronicler of the battle, Bernard Fall believed that the greatest folly of the French was a gross over-estimation of their own capabilities. He wrote, "*a national flaw of which my countrymen seem to be afflicted since before Julius Caesar's campaign in Gaul, which, incidentally, culminated in a Gallic Dien Bien Phu at a fortress called Alesia*".
- None of the American advisers or those in the French top brass who visited the fortress at Dien Bien Phu took notice of the overlooking hills and how hopeless the tactical situation for the defenders could become when the battle was joined. Eventually when the Viet Minh forces swarmed the hills, the French patrols were always at the risk of being ambushed and could do little more than restricting themselves to close-in observation of the enemy.

- Gen Navarre had estimated that the Viet Minh would have to employ at least three divisions to besiege the French strongpoints thus tying them down in static defence. He was confident that his supplies would not run out as the airstrips were ringed by defensive positions and that he would ultimately succeed in exhausting the Viet Minh forces in a prolonged siege.
- The French inability to correctly assess the Viet Minh's artillery capabilities cost them dearly. Not only had they underestimated the number of guns and the calibre of weapons which the Vietnamese could field but had no intelligence on the movement of guns to their positions. The Viet Minh soldiers were aided by civilian porters in manhandling artillery pieces to the reverse slopes of the hills overlooking Dien Bien Phu. In some cases, parts of the guns were carried in bicycles and then re-assembled. The concealed pits that were dug up also evaded aerial observation by the French. In the ultimate analysis, the non-expectant and intense artillery barrage that opened up on the French fortifications stunned the defenders and broke their resolve even before hand-to-hand fighting began.

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Lessons Learnt

- **One Overarching Strategy.** General Giap and his political mentor - Ho Chi Minh were on the same page in so far as the decision to evict the French occupation forces from Vietnam was concerned. To achieve this political grand strategy, the military aim of General Giap translated into delivering a lethal, debilitating psychological blow to French forces, such that the latter was forced to withdraw from Vietnam.
- **Military Aim.** Flowing from the political aim, General Giap correctly coined his military aim, which was to cause a decisive military blow to the French. This could be achieved by luring maximum French troops to combat at a given location.
- **Luring Enemy Into Ground of Own Choosing.** General Giap lured French into North Vietnam surrounded by a rabidly anti-foreign forces population.
- **Knowledge of Enemy Tactics.** General Giap was aware of the French propensity to fight from entrenched positions, ala strongholds, from which

area domination patrols were sent out.

- **Killing Ground.** The French played into General Giap's hands by entrenching themselves in a stronghold at Dien Bien Phu. Dien Bien Phu was a virtual death trap as this defensive position was dominated by surrounding hills. Moreover, General Giap effectively managed to drive in all French troops into the garrison, which meant that the French troops were fighting blind, with no information forthcoming on the movement of Giap's forces closing in on Dien Bien Phu from all directions. Coupled with the fact that the French garrison was already sited in a rabidly hostile population, no human intelligence was available to it on activities including massing of artillery near Dien Bien Phu by Giap.
- **Everyone Was a Trooper.** General Giap motivated the people to aid his military efforts in sync with his concept that everyone was a trooper and everyone needed to fight, whether with a stick or with a weapon. These civilians were the ones who manually lugged the artillery pieces to bring Dien Bien Phu into firing range—something unimagined.
- **Improvised Logistics.** With people behind him, General Giap was able to mobilise people into moving logistics including ammunition, water and rations to target a beleaguered and besieged Dien Bien Phu. General Giap showed uncanny improvisation in using bicycles and underwater channels to transport troops to battle positions and place supplies at their disposal to fight.
- **Mutual Support.** The defence position was fragmented with neighbouring sub-locations fighting isolated battles.
- **Inter Locking Fire.** Weapons were not interlocked in fire. As such preponderant fire could not be brought to bear on assaulting troops.
- **Assaulting Troops Kept Closing In.** Assaulting troops kept closing in on the defensive perimeter. As such the French artillery fire could not take on these assaulting troops falling in the dead space of artillery fire.

Rohit Singh is Senior Research Associate and Special Assistant to the Director, Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi