Dien Bien Phu, battle of (1954), victory by 50,000 Vietminh over 15,000 French which all but ended the Indochina war. The valley of Dien Bien Phu may have been the militarily significant route between Tonkin and Laos alleged at the time, but it was undoubtedly important in the opium trade, revenues from which were vital to the cash-starved French forces. Also, peace negotiations were underway and both sides hoped to influence them by winning a major battle. The mistaken calculation by French theatre commander Gen Henri Navarre was that at best his élite airborne forces and French Foreign Legionnaires could turn the valley into a killing ground, at worst they would draw in disproportionate Vietminh forces, granting him greater freedom of manoeuvre elsewhere. The French were therefore airdropped into the valley to build a series of strong points, not all within supporting distance of each other, around the 0.62 mile (1 km) airstrip upon which the fortress was to depend for supplies. In a further fatal miscalculation the hills commanding the valley were only lightly held, in the belief that French artillery could deny them to the enemy.

Giap accepted the provocative invitation without hesitation. In a heroic logistical feat employing mainly bicycles (the secret weapon of the Vietnam wars), he secretly surrounded the position with artillery in dugouts, some tunnelled through from the far side of the hills. From the opening barrage the airstrip and French artillery were neutralized, while anti-aircraft fire was to force supply planes to make drops from a height that precluded accuracy. Many of the defenders, aware that they were doomed, became internal deserters and left the fighting mostly to the Paras under Langlais and Bigeard, who took over direction of the battle from the nominal commander de Castries. The siege proceeded in Vauban style, with the attackers sapping towards the French strong points, all incongruously given girls' names. Following a massive bombardment, outer strong points Beatrice and Isabelle were overrun on 13-14 March, The core positions of Eliane, Dominique, Claudine, and Huguette were closely invested and finally overwhelmed on 7 May, 12,000 French officers and men surrendering. Giap later admitted that his troops suffered severe morale problems during the protracted preparations, but the victory was to give them an aura of invincibility that carried them through the next war, against a far better equipped opponent.

Bibliography


— Christopher Bellamy
Britannica Concise Encyclopedia: Battle of Dien Bien Phu

(1953 - 54) Decisive engagement in the first of the Indochina wars (1946 - 54) that marked the end of French involvement in Southeast Asia. The French fought the Viet Minh (Lien Viet) for control of a small mountain outpost near Laos. The French occupied the outpost, but the Vietnamese cut all the roads into it, leaving the French to rely on air supplies. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap then attacked the base with heavy artillery and a force of 40,000 men; the base fell to him despite heavy U.S. aid to the French.

For more information on Battle of Dien Bien Phu, visit Britannica.com.

Wikipedia: Battle of Dien Bien Phu

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**Combatants**

- French Union
- France
- State of Vietnam
- Hmong mercenaries

**Viet Minh

**Commanders**

- Christian de Castries
- Pierre Langlais
- René Cogny
- Vo Nguyen Giap

**Strength**

As of March 13:

- 10,800 combat personnel
- 15,000 logistical support personnel

**Casualties**

- 2,293 dead
- 5,195 wounded
- 10,998 captured

- 7,950 dead, 15,000 wounded

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu (French: Bataille de

First Indochina War

http://www.answers.com/topic/battle-of-dien-bien-phu
The Battle of Dien Bien Phu, also known as Chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ or the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, was the climactic battle of the First Indochina War between the French Union forces of the French Far East Expeditionary Corps and Vietnamese Viet Minh communist revolutionary forces. The battle occurred between March and May 1954, and culminated in a massive French defeat that effectively ended the war. Dien Bien Phu was "the first time that a non-European colonial independence movement had evolved through all the stages from guerrilla bands to a conventionally organized and equipped army able to defeat a modern Western occupier in pitched battle."\[4\]

As a result of blunders in the French decision-making process, the French undertook to create an air-supplied base at Dien Bien Phu, deep in the hills of Vietnam. Its purpose was to cut off Viet Minh supply lines into the neighboring French protectorate of Laos, at the same time drawing the Viet Minh into a battle that would cripple them. Instead, the Viet Minh, under General Vo Nguyen Giap, surrounded and besieged the French, who were unaware of the Viet Minh's possession of heavy artillery (including anti-aircraft guns) and their ability to move such weapons to the mountain crests overlooking the French encampment. The Viet Minh occupied the highlands around Dien Bien Phu, and were able to fire down accurately onto French positions. Tenacious fighting on the ground ensued, reminiscent of the trench warfare of World War I. The French repeatedly repulsed Viet Minh assaults on their positions. Supplies and reinforcements were delivered by air, although as the French positions were overrun and the anti-aircraft fire took its toll, fewer and fewer of those supplies reached them. After a two month siege, the garrison was overrun and most French surrendered. Despite the loss of most of their best soldiers, the Viet Minh marshalled their remaining forces and pursued those French who did flee into the wilderness, routing them and ending the battle.

Shortly after the battle, the war ended with the 1954 Geneva accords, under which France agreed to withdraw from its former Indochinese colonies. The accords partitioned the country in two; fighting later resumed, among rival Vietnamese forces, in 1959 with the Vietnam War (Second Indochina War).

**Background and preparations**

By 1953, the First Indochina War was not going well for the French. A succession of commands - Philippe Leclerc de Hauteclocque, Jean-Itene Valluy, Roger Blaizot, Marcel-Maurice Carpentier, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, and Raoul Salan - had proven incapable of suppressing the Viet Minh insurrection. During their 1952-53 campaign, the Viet Minh had overrun vast swathes of Laos, a French ally and Vietnam's western neighbor. The French were unable to slow the Viet Minh advance, and the Viet Minh fell back only after outrunning their always-tenuous supply lines. In 1953, the French had begun to strengthen their defenses in the Hanoi delta region to prepare for a series of offensives against Viet Minh staging areas in northwest Vietnam. They had set up fortified towns and outposts in the area, including Lai Chau near the Chinese border to the north,\[5\] Na San to the west of Hanoi,\[6\] and the Plain of Jars in northern Laos.\[7\]

In May 1953, French Premier Rene Mayer appointed Henri Navarre, a trusted colleague, to take command of French Union Forces in Indochina. Mayer had given Navarre a single order - to create military conditions that would lead to an 'honorable political solution.'\[8\] On arrival, Navarre was shocked by what he found. "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 organization 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."\[9\]

**Defense of Laos**
Dien Bien Phu, in Dien Bien Province (shown in green) was sufficiently far from Hanoi, the seat of French military power, that French air transport could not easily keep it supplied.

The most controversial issue surrounding the battle was whether Navarre was also obligated to defend Laos, which was far from the French seat of military power in Hanoi. Although Navarre assumed it was his responsibility, defending it would require his army to operate far from its home base. During meetings with the France's National Defense Committee on July 17 and July 24, Navarre asked if he was responsible for defending northern Laos. These meetings produced a misunderstanding that became the most disputed fact of the controversy surrounding the battle. For years afterwards, Navarre insisted the committee had reached no consensus; French Premier Joseph Laniel insisted that, at that meeting, the Committee had instructed Navarre to abandon Laos if necessary.

"On this key issue, the evidence supports Navarre's claim that on July 24, he was given no clear-cut decision regarding his responsibility for Laos. Over the years, when challenged by Navarre, Laniel has never been able to present any written evidence to support his contention that Navarre was instructed to abandon Laos if necessary."

The committee was reluctant to give Navarre a definitive answer because its proceedings were constantly leaked to the press, and the politicians on the committee did not want to take a politically damaging position on the issue.

Na San and the hedgehog concept

For more details on this topic, see Battle of Na San.

Simultaneously, Navarre had been searching for a way to stop the Viet Minh threat to Laos. Colonel Louis Berteil, commander of Mobile Group 7 and Navarre's main planner, formulated the "hérisson" (hedgehog) concept. The French army would establish a fortified airhead by air-lifting soldiers adjacent to a key Viet Minh supply line to Laos. This would effectively cut off Viet Minh soldiers fighting in Laos and force them to withdraw. "It was an attempt to interdict the enemy's rear area, to stop the flow of supplies and reinforcements, to establish a redoubt in the enemy's rear and disrupt his lines."

The hedgehog concept was based on French experiences at the Battle of Na San. In late November and early December 1952, Giap attacked the French outpost at Na San. Na San was essentially an "air-land base", a fortified camp supplied only by air. Giap's forces were beaten back repeatedly with very heavy losses. The French hoped that by repeating the setup on a larger scale, they would be able to bait Giap into committing the bulk of his forces in a massed assault. This would enable superior French artillery, armor, and air support to wipe out the exposed Viet Minh forces. The experience at Na San convinced Navarre of the viability of the fortified airhead concept.

However, French staff officers failed to take into consideration several important differences between Dien Bien Phu and Na San. First, at Na San, the French commanded most of the high ground with overwhelming artillery.