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Dien Bien Phu



FRENCH LEAVE

After Dien Bien Phu, French troops quickly withdrew, ending colonial rule of Vietnam.

1954 battle changed Vietnam's history

By Bruce Kennedy
CNN Interactive

It is seen by many military scholars as one of the great battles of the 20th century -- and a defining moment in the history of Southeast Asia. And yet the Battle of Dien Bien Phu receives rarely more than a passing mention in most history texts.

After World War II, France was able to reinstall its colonial government in what was then known as Indochina. By 1946 a Vietnamese independence movement, led by communist Ho Chi Minh, was fighting French troops for control of northern Vietnam. The Viet Minh, as the insurgents were called, used guerrilla tactics that the French found difficult to counter.

In late 1953, as both sides prepared for peace talks in the Indochina War, French military commanders picked Dien Bien Phu, a village in northwestern Vietnam near the Laotian and Chinese borders, as the place to pick a fight with the Viet Minh.

"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," says Douglas Johnson, research professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute. "The enemy could then be lured into a killing ground. There was definitely some of that thinking involved."

Hoping to draw Ho Chi Minh's guerrillas into a classic battle, the French began to build up their garrison at Dien Bien Phu. The stronghold was located at the bottom of a bowl-shaped river valley, about 10 miles long. Most French troops and supplies entered Dien Bien Phu from the air -- either landing at the fort's airstrip or dropping in via parachute.



ROUND ONE

The Viet Minh celebrated victory, but decades of struggle still lay ahead.

Dien Bien Phu's main garrison also would be supported by a series of firebases -- strongpoints on nearby hills that could bring down fire on an attacker. The strongpoints were given women's names, supposedly after the mistresses of the French commander, Gen. Christian de Castries. The French assumed any assaults on their heavily fortified positions would fail or be broken up by their artillery.

The size of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu swelled to somewhere between 13,000 and 16,000 troops by March 1954. About 70 percent of that force was made up of members of the French Foreign Legion, soldiers from French colonies in North Africa, and loyal Vietnamese.

Viet Minh guerrillas and troops from the People's Army of Vietnam surrounded Dien Bien Phu during the buildup within the French garrison. Their assault on March 13 proved almost immediately how vulnerable and flawed the French defenses were.

Dien Bien Phu's outlying firebases were overrun within days of the initial assault. And the main part of the garrison was amazed to find itself coming under heavy, withering artillery fire from the surrounding hills. In a major logistical feat, the Viet Minh had dragged scores of artillery pieces up steeply forested hillsides the French had written off as impassable.

The French artillery commander, distraught at his inability to bring counterfire on the well-defended and well-camouflaged Viet Minh batteries, went into his dugout and killed himself.

The heavy Viet Minh bombardment also closed Dien Bien Phu's airstrip. French attempts to resupply and reinforce the garrison via parachute were frustrated -- as pilots attempting to fly over the region found themselves facing a barrage from anti-aircraft guns. It was during the resupply effort that two civilian pilots, James McGovern and Wallace Buford, became the first Americans killed in Vietnam combat.

The supply planes were forced to fly higher, and their parachute drops became less accurate. Much of what was intended for the French forces -- including food, ammunition and, in one case, essential intelligence information -- landed instead in Viet Minh territory. Meanwhile, the Viet Minh steadily reduced the French-held area -- using what their commander, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, called "a tactic of combined nibbling and full-scale attack."

Closed off from the outside world, under constant fire, and flooded by monsoon rains, conditions inside Dien Bien Phu became inhuman. Casualties piled up

inside the garrison's hospital.

Dien Bien Phu fell to the Viet Minh on May 7. At least 2,200 members of the French forces died during the siege -- with thousands more taken prisoner. Of the 50,000 or so Vietnamese who besieged the garrison, there were about 23,000 casualties -- including an estimated 8,000 killed.

The fall of Dien Bien Phu shocked France and brought an end to French Indochina.

"The very first memory I have of talking foreign affairs with my father was when Dien Bien Phu fell," Anil Malhotra, a World Bank official from India, said in a recent interview. "It was a source of great pride in the developing world. A small Asian nation had defeated a colonial power, convincingly. It changed history."

Following the French withdrawal, Vietnam was officially divided into a communist North and non-communist South -- setting the stage for U.S. involvement.

In 1963, as Washington was deepening its commitment in Vietnam, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev made a telling remark to a U.S. official.

"If you want to, go ahead and fight in the jungles of Vietnam," Khrushchev said. "The French fought there for seven years and still had to quit in the end. Perhaps the Americans will be able to stick it out for a little longer, but eventually they will have to quit, too."

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