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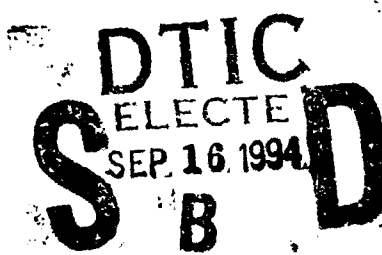
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The Generalship of General Henri E. Navarre
During the Battle of Dien Bien Phu

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This study examines the generalship of the French Commander in Chief in Indochina, General Henri E. Navarre, during the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This thesis employs a model of generalship from the United States Army doctrinal publication, Field Manual 22-103, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels, to analyze the actions of General Navarre. Through the application of the model, this thesis tests whether American doctrine supports or refutes the judgment of history. The conclusion reached is that the defeat of the French forces at the battle of Dien Bien Phu was largely due to a failure of senior level leadership on the part of General Henri E. Navarre.

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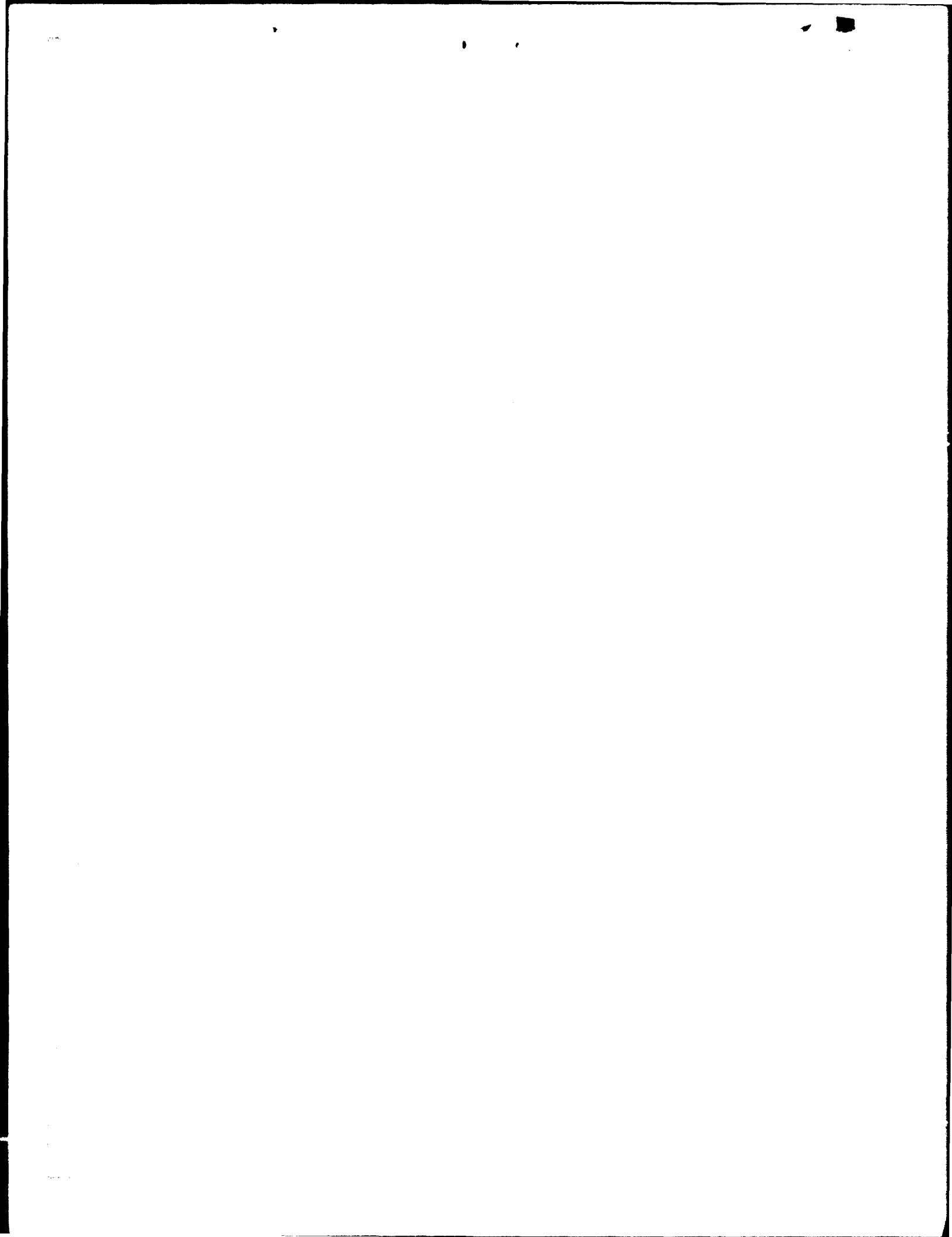
Navarre, Dien Bien Phu, Generalship

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DURING THE BATTLE OF DIEN BIEN PHU

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

BRUCE H. HUPE, MAJ, USA
B.A., University of California, Davis, California, 1981

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

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ABSTRACT

THE GENERALSHIP OF GENERAL HENRI E. NAVARRE DURING THE BATTLE OF
DIEN BIEN PHU by Bruce H. Hupe, USA, 124 pages.

This study examines the generalship of the French Commander-in-Chief in Indochina, General Henri E. Navarre, during the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This thesis employs a model of generalship from the United States Army doctrinal publication, Field Manual 22-103, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels, to analyze the actions of General Navarre. Through the application of the model, this thesis tests whether American doctrine supports or refutes the judgment of history. The conclusion reached is that the defeat of the French forces at the battle of Dien Bien Phu was largely due to a failure of senior level leadership on the part of General Henri E. Navarre.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The defeat of the French forces at the battle of Dien Bien Phu was largely due to a failure in the application of senior military professional skills by the Commander-in-Chief, General Henri E. Navarre. Conventional historical wisdom holds that General Henri Navarre is to blame for the French defeat at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. This thesis tests that commonly held perception by applying a model taken from United States Army doctrine on senior military leadership. The application of this model should confirm the judgment of history by concluding that General Navarre's professional skills were less than adequate.

The methodology employed in this thesis applies a standard of generalship drawn from the U.S. Army's Field Manual 22-103, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels. Field Manual 22-103 describes fourteen professional skills that are the "yardstick by which senior professionals are judged by their soldiers, other professionals, and even their enemies."¹ The fourteen skills are classified in three categories, they are: conceptual skills, competency skills, and communications skills. In this thesis, General Navarre's plans for French military operations in Indochina are the basis for the study of his conceptual skills. Actual events and the execution of those plans are examined to assess his professional competency. Lastly, General Navarre's relationships to other key members of his command provide the medium for examining his communications skills.

Subordinate Questions

A slightly adapted version of the Command and General Staff College's Campaign Analysis Methodology provides the basis for key subordinate questions and place the battle of Dien Bien Phu in proper historical context.² The subordinate questions are as follows:

1. The historical context
 - a. When and where did the battle occur?
 - b. How were the adversaries organized and equipped?
 - c. Who was General Navarre, what was his background and what can be inferred from his past that affected his actions?
2. The strategic setting
 - a. What were the French political and military goals? Did the military goals support the national ones?
 - b. What were the strategic strengths and weaknesses of each side?
3. The operational setting
 - a. Did the operational military plans support the French strategic objectives?
 - b. What military operations preceded the battle of Dien Bien Phu and what were their significance?
 - c. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the French operational plans? What was the rationale for them to fight there and was it sound?
 - d. What were the effects of logistical considerations at Dien Bien Phu? Were they decisive in determining the outcome of the battle?
 - e. What was the French organizational command structure at the battle and how did it effect the outcome?

4. The tactical setting

- a. What was the French tactical plan, was it sound and how well was it executed? What forces were there and how were they employed?
- b. How did terrain, geography and climate effect the battle? How did the French include these factors in their plans?

Background and Context of the Problem and the Research Question

Leadership is an absolutely crucial and definitive aspect of military operations. The preeminent war fighting manual of the United States Army, FM 100-5, Operations, describes leadership as "the most essential dynamic of combat power" and further states that "the regular study of military doctrine, theory, history and biographies of military leaders are invaluable."³ It is in this statement that the importance and validity of this thesis is grounded. In the United States the American involvement in Vietnam is widely studied, but the First Indochina War is less widely known. In February 1977, an academic seminar entitled "The Dien Bien Phu Crisis: Franco-American Diplomatic Relations" was hosted at the Wilson Center Library in Washington, D.C. , by Professor Dominique Moisi. One of the attendees, Herbert Y. Schandler, a national defense specialist for the Congressional Research Service said, "I once asked (General) Westmoreland in Chapel Hill if he had ever studied the French experience in Indochina, and he replied that he had once talked to a French general in Washington."⁴ A closer study of the French experience by the American commander might well have produced useful insights in the later development of U.S. strategy in Vietnam. Students of American military history can learn much by studying the experiences of other nations.

There are numerous historical parallels, as well as many differences, between the French involvement in Vietnam and the American one. Today

many historians, political scientists, and military leaders point to a flawed strategy as a fundamental cause for America's ultimate defeat in Vietnam. This contrasts with the French experience. The battle of Dien Bien Phu was a singular event that finalized the loss of France's war in Vietnam. It must be studied in terms of the actual tactics used by the combatants. The broader contexts of the operational goals of the French military in Indochina and the military strategy of the French government also bear examination. The views of academics and military and political leaders in assessing the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu provide much of the research material in this study of leadership and military history. The Indochina War collection on microfilm compiled by Douglas Pike at the University of California, Berkeley, has yielded most of the archival primary source documents used. This collection is on file in the Combined Arms Research Library at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Definitions

Numerous studies of generalship exist. However, there is no universally accepted definition of generalship. For the purposes of this thesis, generalship is defined as the successful application of senior-level military professional skills. This definition of successful generalship derives from the model used. The United States Army has published Field Manual 22-103, a doctrinal work that, in its own words, "serves as an instructional text for developing professionals . . . is a ready resource for those already serving in senior positions . . . and serves as a common reference point for the many ongoing initiatives related to leadership and command."⁵ As stated earlier, Field Manual 22-103 describes fourteen professional skills in three categories as the yardstick for measuring senior professionals. Successful generals are senior military professionals who win battles and demonstrate appropriate

mastery of these doctrinal professional skills. The skills listed in Field Manual 22-103 are:

Conceptual
Decision making
Forecasting
Creativity
Intuition

Competency
Perspective
Endurance
Risk taking
Coordination
Assessment

Communications
Interpersonal
Listening
Language
Teaching
Persuasion

The summarized definitions for the specific criteria used in this study are:

Decision making incorporates synthesis and analysis. Synthesis makes the seemingly complex and disorganized meaningful and useful. Data is collected and matched with other data until the pieces fit and results in processed information. Analysis allows generals to view information and judge its importance. Information is taken apart; patterns are established; and priorities for current or future action are constructed. Finally, consistency, timing, and clarity are all key aspects of good decision making.⁶

Forecasting is a general's broad projection of what an organization needs to accomplish over extended periods of time. It is his conception of the future and is realized through a sound vision and the effective use of staff planners.⁷

Creativity refers to the problem solving skills of general officers. It is the ability to find practical and innovative solutions to difficult military problems.⁸

Intuition is the product of intellect and a disciplined thought process. It can be learned from professional study and preparation. The capacity for intuition greatly accelerates a senior leader's decision making. Intuition enables generals to rapidly assess a situation and to rule out that which is not possible. In this manner they greatly increase their ability to choose solutions that do work.⁹

Perspective is the ability to correctly view and determine an event in its proper context and relevance. Generals ground their sense of perspective in history and an understanding of organizations and current needs. Perspective skills enable generals to view transient events in terms of their long-term significance. Perspective emphasizes long-term consequences over short-term achievements.¹⁰

Endurance is both a mental and a physical requirement. Mentally, endurance is the ability of senior leaders to share the hardships of their soldiers and be present at critical places and times. It is their capacity to absorb constant pressure and still maintain their perspective and judgment, even a sense of humor. Physically, endurance is the ability to withstand severe stress and strain caused by extended operations or years of rigorous training.¹¹

Risk taking involves assessing a given situation and making a carefully calculated decision in an environment of varying degrees of uncertainty. Risks are not gambles. Field Manual 100-5, Operations, describes the difference between the two by quoting Erwin Rommel: "a risk is a chance you take; if it fails, you can recover. A gamble is a chance taken; if it fails, recovery is impossible."¹² Generals adept at risk taking see an action taken as an opportunity, realizing that their opponents confront similar uncertainties.¹³

Coordination is the capacity to enhance the ability of different elements of an organization to work together. At senior levels, coordination typically involves orchestrating the activities of a wide variety of joint and combined elements as well as agencies, both internal, and external, to the command.¹⁴

Assessment is the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses of organizations and develop appropriate strategies that respond accordingly. It is particularly important to general officers. Assessment is performed by a variety of means, some examples are: direct observation, subjective evaluations by groups or individuals, inferential evaluations, and self-evaluations.¹⁵

Interpersonal communications skill is a senior leader knowing himself, the biases he carries, and his ability to not let those biases negatively influence an organization. This skill is the foundation of trust between generals and their subordinates. A senior leader understands that every aspect of his behavior, mannerisms and expression, can affect an organization. How well he uses that knowledge is a measure of his interpersonal skill.¹⁶

Language permits the communication of orders and intent. Language should be precise and appropriate. Without this skill, misunderstandings may occur.¹⁷

Teaching is the method generals use to pass on to their subordinates the procedures and skills they want emphasized. Proper military teaching at the senior level stresses coaching over directing. Through teaching, general officers take action to insure that their commands are better prepared to fight.¹⁸

Persuasion is the senior leader's ability to overcome organizational resistance. This resistance may result from either internal or external influences. Persuasion skills are applied to varying degrees, depending on the situation. FM 22-103 states that combat requires a direct approach as does dealing with incompetence or immoral behavior. This skill is a crucial attribute of generalship, particularly when dealing with higher authority.¹⁹

Thesis Limitations and Delimitations

The language problem of dealing with a battle between the French and Vietnamese has been overcome largely since the first-hand accounts of Generals Navarre and Vo Nguyen Giap are available translated into English. This study focuses on comparing the actions of General Henri Navarre to the standards of generalship defined above. Because the evaluation criteria are from United States Army doctrine, this thesis has a predominantly American perspective. The dates of the battle were 12 March through 7 May 1954.

Significance of the Study

Dien Bien Phu is a battle that decided a war for France and that profoundly influenced a war fought by the United States. This thesis seeks to contribute to the historical body of knowledge by applying the framework of the U.S. Army's senior leadership doctrine to a man, not previously studied using this criteria, General Henri Navarre. By examining the actions of General Navarre during the battle of Dien Bien Phu, this thesis provides examples of the application of professional military skills at the senior level. There are numerous lessons available in studying the behavior and decisions of General Navarre and why he acted as he did. Students of military history can gain new insights into generalship by examining the role General Henri Navarre played in determining the outcome of events during the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

Research Design and Method

The historical research guidance in the U.S. Army Center for Military History A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History written by Maurice Matloff stands as the primary methodology. In Matloff's words, two elements are required to complete this thesis: "a body of more or less reliable

materials and a critical method to deal with them."²⁰ The materials used are primary source documents from the University of California's Indochina Archive collection, the writings of Generals Navarre and Giap, and the leading secondary accounts and analysis of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The most extensive secondary works on the battle are by the authors Bernard Fall and Jules Roy. Additionally, the writings of Lieutenant General Phillip Davidson provide the perspective of a senior American general officer of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The critical method is the application of the described standards of generalship to General Navarre. Conclusions may thus be drawn regarding the overall demonstrated professional skills of the French Commander-in-Chief, and his influence on the course of events during the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

Thesis Structure

The study is organized as follows:

Chapter One. The thesis statement, the methodology, the definitions, and the description of the model of generalship are contained in chapter one.

Chapter Two. This section begins with a character sketch of General Navarre. The national-strategic considerations for General Navarre and the French military in Indochina along with General Navarre's plans and objectives are examined. Military events leading up to the battle are also described in this section.

Chapter Three. The historical context of Dien Bien Phu is examined in chapter three. Descriptions of the battlefield location and the opposing forces are included. The operational setting of the battle of Dien Bien Phu is described. (The U.S. Army defines the operational level of war as "the vital link between national and theater-strategic aims and the tactical employment

of forces on the battlefield.")²¹ The effects of logistical considerations on the battle are studied. Descriptions of the French command structure and key leaders are offered. Finally, the French tactical plans and the impact terrain and weather had at Dien Bien Phu are examined.

Chapter Four. This chapter contains the analysis of General Navarre using the objective standards of professional skills from Field Manual 22-103.

Chapter Five. Conclusions are drawn and suggestions for further study are made in chapter five.

Bibliography.

Endnotes

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⁷Ibid. , p. 30.

⁸Ibid. , p. 31.

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¹²FM 100-5, p. 2-2.

¹³FM 22-103. , p. 33.

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¹⁶Ibid. , p. 36.

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²⁰ John E. Jessup, Jr. and Robert W. Coakley, A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History, Center of Military History, United States Army, (Washington, D. C. : U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 8.

²¹FM 100-5, p. 6-2.

CHAPTER TWO

GENERAL NAVARRE AND THE ROAD TO DIEN BIEN PHU

The Man

General Henri Navarre spent his entire life preparing for high level military command. The son of a college professor, Navarre displayed a love of all things military throughout his childhood. He graduated from the French military academy Saint-Cyr in 1918. Navarre served in World War One, beginning his career as a 19-year old cadet on the German front. He fought with U.S. troops at Chateau-Thierry. Navarre is often described as having possessed the aura and tastes of royalty. In an account from the 28 September, 1953 issue of TIME magazine (General Navarre's assumption of command was the cover story), he is described as a man known for his "icy reserve."

Henri Navarre is an individualist, but a cold and aloof one whose quota of wit, urbanity and charm shows itself only at small, usually intimate gatherings . . . attractive to women, a man of taste . . . and a fancier of cats (because of their independence and aloofness), he was once described by a friend: There is an 18th century fragrance about him. He is a portrait on a cameo from the time of Louis XV. One almost expects ruffles and a powdered wig . . . he is the hardest general I know, clever and ruthless. He believes in nothing but the army.¹

This cool distance Navarre maintained may well have been a factor in his later discussed problems in communicating with others.

Navarre displayed his noble aspirations by choosing the branch of service that most closely resembled the knights of old, the cavalry. He was also one of the leading French advocates of armored warfare between the wars.

When the great war ended, Navarre continued fighting. He went immediately to Syria where he spent two years fighting Arabs and learning first hand the ways of guerrilla warfare.² Between 1930 and 1934 Navarre fought in the French campaigns in Morocco. Although he liked to call himself an "old tank officer," Navarre spent much of his career in staff assignments, particularly in intelligence work. Navarre spoke excellent German and from 1937 to 1940 he was the chief of the German section of French Army Intelligence.³ Based upon the overwhelming surprise achieved by the German blitzkrieg of 1940, it seems that Navarre was not entirely successful in that posting.

Navarre fled Paris in 1940 just barely ahead of the Gestapo and made his way to North Africa. He signed on with the Vichy army and took advantage of his position to aid the allies at every possible juncture. Some of his exploits included regularly radioing German sea movements to the British. In one notable case from the same TIME article:

R.A.F. squadrons sped west from Malta and in minutes destroyed two-thirds of the 15th Panzer Division, destined for Rommel's Afrika Korps. Admiral Darlan got wind of this feat and sent Navarre to Vichy where he was kept under surveillance . . . and later became one of the top agents in the Resistance ⁴

Bernard Fall noted that the TIME cover story "provided American readers with the kind of quotable gems about him which are the trademark of that publication when it decides to give a favorable build-up to a 'good guy'."⁵ The American perception of Navarre was important. The United States was beginning to funnel massive amounts of military aid to support the French war effort in Indochina in the early 1950's. This story is also insightful because it is typical of those told of Navarre. His was a career highlighted more by examples of individual courage and cleverness than by leadership of large military units in combat. Navarre continued his career after the allies

liberated Paris by commanding the 5th French Armored Division in occupied Germany. He subsequently assumed the position of NATO Central Forces Chief of Staff.

Why would such a man be selected to command the French army in Indochina? The answer lies with the Prime Minister of France, Rene Mayer, who had known Navarre in Algeria and occupied Germany. According to LTG Phillip Davidson, "Mayer knew and trusted Navarre. To Mayer, Navarre's lack of bravado and his cold intelligence were the very qualities required for the task Mayer had in mind."⁶ Fall stated that the French political leadership believed that Navarre was "by all standards of military judgment . . . exceptionally well qualified."⁷ Although he had never been to Indochina, Navarre had gained experience in counter-guerrilla operations in France's colonial wars in Syria and Morocco. His "absence of prejudice toward operations in Indochina was considered, in fact, an asset."⁸ With no experience in Indochina, nor burning desire to serve there, Henri Navarre, at age fifty five, was promoted to four-star general rank, and ordered from his position at NATO to become the Commander-in-Chief of all French forces in Indochina.



Figure 1. General Henri E. Navarre. Source: Joel D. Meyerson, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Images of a Lengthy War (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986).

Navarre's Mission

General Navarre found himself in an extremely difficult political and strategic situation. France had been stubbornly clinging to her colonial possessions of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, despite an increasingly bloody guerrilla war after 1945. Between 1946 and 1952, France had already suffered more than ninety thousand dead, wounded, or missing in Indochina.⁹ Still, Navarre had assumed command of a large and potent fighting force. A Central Intelligence Agency report written in April of 1954 listed the combined French military forces in Indochina as over 402,000 regulars, organized in 89 battalions of the French Expeditionary Forces and 188 battalions from the countries of Indochina that comprised what was called the French Union.¹⁰ With Navarre's assumption of command in May of 1953, there was loud and growing opposition to the war in Indochina in both the French National Assembly and the country at large. Prime Minister Mayer had already decided to negotiate with the communists when he sent General Navarre to Vietnam. According to Jules Roy, Navarre was told by the Prime Minister "to find an honorable way out which would allow the government to negotiate and bring about the end of the war."¹¹ Davidson confirms this; he asserted that General Navarre's only strategic guidance was to "create the military conditions in Vietnam leading to a politically honorable solution."¹² One of the key strategic problems which confronted General Navarre is still the subject of much historical debate; the defense of the kingdom of Laos.

The colonial possession of French Indochina included Laos, Cambodia, and what is today called Vietnam. Vietnam was then known as three separate regions, named Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. In 1953 the Viet Minh began to range increasingly further afield of their traditional bastions

in Vietnam, threatening the kingdom of Laos. General Navarre consistently claimed that, absent any orders to the contrary, it was his obligation as the Commander-in-Chief of all Indochina to defend Laos against these Viet Minh incursions. The strategic position of Dien Bien Phu was key to the movement of troops and supplies between Vietnam and Laos. Dien Bien Phu is astride the major invasion route followed for centuries by armies seeking to gain the upper Mekong River valley. The Mekong River dominates almost all of Vietnam. In seeking to develop and execute theater-level military plans, the mission to defend Laos had a tremendous influence on General Navarre's operational concept. Because it was destined to become the scene of a major battle for control of all Indochina, the selection of Dien Bien Phu as the location for that defense had great operational significance as well.

Navarre blames the French government for much of the defeat at Dien Bien Phu, maintaining that he occupied Dien Bien Phu only because a large part of his mission was to defend Laos. He believed that the French government was willing to abandon the defense of Laos, but failed to relieve him of the mission. General Navarre wrote that "the defense of Laos has always been one of the permanent obligations of the Commander-in-Chief in Indochina."¹³ Navarre, in spite of this clear conviction, was suspicious of this obligation. He repeatedly questioned his superiors on the defense of Laos. He recalled that the answers clearly indicated that Laos was not to be given away to the communists:

Consulted by me in the first days of November, the Commissioner-General informed me that there was no question of not defending Laos. Mr. Marc Jacquet, Secretary of State for the Associated States, who arrived in Indochina in mid-November, expressed the same opinion to me, adding straight out that, if the Vietminh succeeded in . . . reaching the Mekong, the shock suffered by French public opinion would be such that continuation of the Indochina War would no longer be possible.¹⁴

The Mr. Jacquet whom General Navarre refers to was his civilian superior and the highest ranking French government official in Indochina. If there were lingering doubts in Navarre's mind over his government's support of the defense of Laos, his duty still remained clear. As he saw it, "the 'mission' although not expressly renewed, remains."¹⁵ Navarre attempted to establish his exact mission in Indochina by traveling to Paris and discussing the situation with the political leadership. The politicians and their field commander seemed unable to communicate with one another. This was a time of extreme instability in French political leadership, what historians call the "revolving door" governments of the Fourth Republic. Karnow detailed how Navarre's mentor, Prime Minister Mayer, had already been replaced in July of 1953:

Navarre flew to Paris in July to present his plan to the French government, whose prime minister, Joseph Laniel, had just been revolved into office by the Fourth Republic turnstile. Predictably, there was something of a mix-up. Navarre arrived with a formula for victory, but Laniel never explained plainly that he merely wanted to stabilize the situation in Vietnam, so that peace talks could begin, as they had in Korea. Nor did he make it clear to Navarre that Laos could be abandoned if the price of its defense was too high. Thus Navarre returned to the field convinced he had been directed to prevent Giap from invading Laos. His conviction was further reinforced in October 1953, when France implied in a treaty its readiness to protect Laos as a member of the French union.¹⁶

On his trip to Paris in July of 1953, General Navarre briefed both the French Chiefs of Staff, and the National Defense Committee, the French equivalent of the National Security Council, on his ideas. Bernard Fall wrote:

That meeting was crucial in deciding the fate of northern Indochina in general, and Dien Bien Phu in particular. Navarre insisted later that "after long and confusing discussions, no firm decision was taken on any of the questions raised. . . ." General Georges Catroux, who headed the French government's 1955 commission investigating the Dien Bien Phu disaster (the report is still a state secret), and whose own writings are from tender towards Gen. Navarre, tends to side with the commander-in-chief on this point.¹⁷

Navarre's contention that the French government was less than forthcoming with him is sustainable. The Prime Minister of France wrote that his government "could not say and even less write that we would not defend Laos."¹⁸ General Navarre probably could have ceded Laos to the Viet Minh and concentrated his efforts in a theater of his own choosing. However, the guidance he received did not indicate such was the case. Navarre's expressed doubts weighed heavily in his mind. Those doubts may well have been reflected in his hesitancy to commit sufficient forces to a mission he suspected was not a definitive one.

The Navarre Plan

Navarre's formula for victory bears his name. The Navarre plan was a highly touted operational campaign plan designed to seize the initiative and ultimately secure a French victory in Indochina. When Navarre first took command, he traveled widely, often at great personal risk, evaluating the situation and talking to a host of military and civilian officials. The situation was grim in 1953 and Navarre openly admitted that the Viet Minh had the operational initiative.¹⁹ The Navarre plan was an ambitious step-by-step campaign that realistically assessed the military situation in Indochina and systematically focused French assets to gain a decisive military advantage. The United States Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, declared upon American review of the Navarre Plan that it would surely "break the organized body of Communist aggression by the end of the 1955 fighting season."²⁰ Perhaps the most ringing endorsement of the Navarre plan came from General Giap. He called it nothing less than "diabolical" and a "relatively perfect strategic plan."²¹ The overall design of the Navarre plan was as follows:

1. Divide Indochina into two separate theaters, one northern, one southern, along parallel (for reference, the later boundary between North and South Vietnam was the 17th parallel). The northern theater included northern Vietnam and Laos.

2. Assume the strategic defensive in the north, where the Viet Minh had superior forces, during the 1953-1954 season.

3. Increase French troop strength in Indochina by adding twelve infantry battalions, three artillery battalions, and one engineer battalion from the French army in Europe. This would bring total French forces in Indochina to roughly five division equivalents.

4. Launch a series of spoiling attacks in the northern theater while on the strategic defensive. This would disrupt the Viet Minh's anticipated offensives there.

5. Launch a major pacification program to secure the Tonkin Delta. (The French were the first to use the term pacification in Vietnam. Years later, the American program of the same name would have similar objectives).

6. Launch offensive actions in the southern theater during the 1953-1954 season. Here the French forces were superior. The main actions would be in the province of Annam and in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

7. Accelerate the forming and training of the Vietnamese National Army.

8. Form six or seven mobile divisions by the fall of 1954. This would give the French a force equal to, or slightly larger than, the Viet Minh.

9. Seek a major battle with General Giap's Viet Minh during the 1954-1955 campaign season. This would result in at worst a stalemate, and at best a decisive victory. Either result would achieve the political objective of allowing France to negotiate an honorable settlement of the war.²²

The Navarre plan was widely heralded by almost everyone. Davidson stated that "Navarre's plan - even viewed in the afterlight of what happened - was sound."²³ Some of the strongest support for General Navarre came from France's most important backer, the United States. Already providing most of the materials of war used by the French forces in Indochina by this time, the American presence and influence over General Navarre was substantial. One American general in particular, Lieutenant General John W. "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, Commander of U.S. Army Forces in the Pacific, had a significant influence on the increasingly positive American impression of General Navarre, and his plan.

LTG O'Daniel had been a highly decorated and successful division commander in World War II. He was dispatched by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to assess the situation in Indochina and report back to Washington on the French efforts there. Arriving in Indochina on 20 June 1953, he toured the country widely, and met with General Navarre on numerous occasions. The report LTG O'Daniel submitted to the JCS in July was filled with praise for General Navarre and his military plans for Indochina. O'Daniel told the American leadership that "I feel confident that the anti-communist military forces now in Indochina, with competent *leadership* [italics added, LTG O'Daniel added the word, by hand, on the typed document] and effective reorganization . . . are capable of achieving military victory."²⁴

O'Daniel also realized the political constraints General Navarre was operating under:

Though the new French High Command is prepared to take certain essential and highly desirable steps in the right direction, they will not, and perhaps cannot in view of political considerations, consider undertaking military campaigns designed to achieve total victory with the forces now available. Consequently, complete military victory waits the further development of the military forces of the Associated States or the addition of French divisions from outside Indochina.²⁵

In fact, the development of indigenous forces and French reinforcement were both key tenants of the Navarre plan. Years later, commenting on the President Nixon's call for "Vietnamization" of the American war in Viet Nam, General Navarre told a United Press International reporter: "Vietnamization is an old idea. It was the basis of my own plan when I was first sent to Indochina."²⁶

LTG General O'Daniel took up Navarre's call for reinforcements from Europe as well. Allowing that he "readily understood SHAPE's [Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe] concern" over losing forces to Indochina, O'Daniel said that this was only temporary and would soon be "followed by the dividend of thousands of additional battle-hardened and victorious French military veterans" returning to NATO.²⁷ O'Daniel found the French receptive to new ideas and open to American advice. He was invited to return to Indochina at a later date; an invitation he accepted that provided him with a first-hand look at the battlefield of Dien Bien Phu. LTG O'Daniel concluded his report to the JCS with the sentence, "As a closing thought I propose that henceforth we think in terms of the 'Navarre concept' in association with the war in Indochina."²⁸

On 28 August 1953, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense with the understanding it would be

forwarded to the Secretary of State as well. In this document General Arthur Radford stated that:

The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe, as do I, that the necessary support should be provided to permit full and vigorous implementation of the Navarre concept: conditioned upon continued implementation of French support, demonstration of French intent by actual performance in Indochina, and continued French willingness to receive and act upon U.S. military advice. Further, the French should be urged at all levels to support and vigorously prosecute the Navarre concept to the maximum extent of their capabilities.²⁹

There was no doubt in Washington that General Navarre's operational campaign plan for prosecuting the war in Indochina was a good one. The above cited JCS memorandum seemed to solicit American political pressure on the French government to support their own field commander as much as it advocated further U.S. military aid. General Navarre had devised an operational plan that supported French strategic objectives in Indochina. The execution of that plan was another matter.

Strategic considerations

France had several strategic disadvantages in her war in Indochina. Distance and the extended lines of communication between France and Indochina were significant handicaps General Navarre had to contend with. The French also relied extensively on the United States for war material and financial and political support. To the Americans Indochina was another example, like Korea, of monolithic communist expansionism. Support for France would continue, albeit at times at far too slow a pace to suit General Navarre. French troops might also be viewed at first glance as foreign soldiers on unfamiliar soil. Yet, in the final analysis, none of these obstacles was insurmountable. Decades of French colonial domination of Indochina had led to the establishment of a large and efficient French infrastructure there. Hanoi was known as the Paris of the Far East, boasting beautifully designed

European architecture and broad tree-lined boulevards. Saigon and other large cities were similar. An effective civil service supported military operations and the cities boomed. The barracks of the Foreign Legion were handsome buildings with arcaded verandas that stood on expansive parade grounds. The French forces in Indochina were, often as not, experienced, tough fighters who knew the ways of jungle warfare very well. Duty in Indochina was highly sought after. One of the leading historians of the Foreign Legion, Douglas Porch, states that the soldiers in Indochina tended to stay there by choice. Legionnaires were described as men who were paid "six times what they received in North Africa" while "junior Lieutenants, who could barely make ends meet in France, were able to keep three servants in Tonkin . . . most legionnaires counted over ten years service."³⁰ The French Army that Navarre commanded was an experienced and motivated professional force well versed in the rigors of combat in Indochina.

American support was required by Navarre, but the Viet Minh relied on external supplies as well. Without Chinese and Russian aid, General Giap could not sustain his forces either. In the end, the only strategic disadvantage the French could not compensate for was the lack of strong political support for the war effort at home.

The Viet Minh did have one key strategic advantage that was both political and psychological. They consistently displayed a single-minded sense of purpose that the French simply could never match. This sense of purpose manifested itself in actions, such as the readiness of the sappers to willingly strap satchel charges on their backs and fall on French barbed wire at Dien Bien Phu. For the Viet Minh, the military and political goal was always the same: rid their country of foreign domination. The Viet Minh dedication to

driving the foreigners completely from Indochina contrasted starkly with the French desire to create the conditions for favorable negotiation.

Previous Battle

There were numerous military operations preceding the occupation of Dien Bien Phu. The most significant of these in understanding Navarre's thinking was the battle of Na San, which had been fought some seventy-five miles southeast of Dien Bien Phu in November of 1953. At Na San, a fortified base camp established by the French, they decisively defeated the Viet Minh. General Navarre visited the base camp, accompanied by a reporter who described the event, in somewhat dramatic fashion, for TIME magazine:

The big French airfield at Na San, between the Red River delta and Laos, lay all but deserted within its ring of trenches and barbed wire Under the broiling sun, the Colonel in command looked up when he heard the sound of aircraft engines. Within seconds a C-47 airplane, its wings and tail riddled with Red ack-ack fire, rolled onto the runway The pilot braked to a stop and his passenger . . . wearing the four stars of a full general, climbed out. The astonished Colonel clicked to attention, saluted, and said "I was not expecting you, general." The man with the four stars and unsmiling face was Henri Eugene Navarre, a quiet but steely, cultured but tough general of the French army Turning his back on the plane, Navarre asked the Colonel: "What information do you have?" The Colonel answered "The government in France has fallen, I just heard it on the radio." "Well, that's better for them than for me" said Navarre disinterestedly, "But what information do you have of the Viet Minh?"³¹

The Colonel in command at Na San was Colonel Louis Berteil. Subsequent to his defense of the air base at Na San, Navarre made Berteil his Operations Officer. At Na San, the French army had established what they saw as a new tactic in the war with the Viet Minh: the *Base Aero-Terrestre*, or "air-land base." The idea of a heavily fortified defensive position was, of course, as old as warfare itself. The application of this technique in Indochina was, however, an innovation. At least the French viewed it as such.

At Na San, the Viet Minh, under the direct command of General Giap, surrounded and then attacked an isolated base camp that could only be supplied and reinforced by air. The French defenses were strong and skillfully prepared. Giap's intelligence had failed him in the unfriendly T'ai country where he had no sympathetic native inhabitants. Giap believed that the French had only 2,000 men in five battalions at Na San. In fact, ten dug-in infantry battalions plus artillery and close air support were there.³² The purpose of the French forces at Na San was described by Bernard Fall in 1966:

What made the air-land base so attractive was that it seemed to provide a solution to one of the key problems which faced the French commanders, one which still faces the South Vietnamese and their American allies ten years later: how to spread a sufficient degree of insecurity into the enemy's own rear areas so as to compel him to disperse his troops into protecting those areas. Since successful infiltration of communist-held areas could be attempted only with hand-picked French and Vietnamese special forces units, conventional military means had to be found for something more massive than infiltration. This turned out to be strongly held hedgehog positions resupplied by transport aircraft ³³

Giap attacked Na San with the 308th Viet Minh Division. After several bloody attacks, Giap, originally confident of victory, "reeled back from Na San" with two regiments "smashed . . . losing a total of 7,000 men."³⁴ French casualties are not recorded, but were presumably much less as Na San was perceived by the French as a major victory. Shortly after his visit, General Navarre decided to abandon Na San. The base had inflicted serious losses on the enemy and seemed to have served its purpose of diverting Giap from attacking at will to having to protect his rear areas. Giap had paid a heavy price in lives for his attack. The French had also expended much in material terms. At the time, Bernard Fall stated that Na San had "tied down more troops and air transport than it was worth . . . everyone agreed sealed off 'hedgehog' positions were hardly worth the cost of maintaining them."³⁵

General Giap also down-played his losses at Na San, making it sound like an afterthought in his campaign:

Later on, when the enemy concentrated his troops in the Na San fortified camp, after some engagements during which we destroyed part of his forces but also suffered losses we decided not to attack Na San immediately.³⁶

Giap belittled the significance of this "new" French tactic. Giap correctly viewed what where known as "hedgehogs" as a Western relic of a previous war, a tactic that had been employed by the losing side:

The formula of fortified camp was not an initiative of the French colonialists' aggressive army. In World War II the German fascists had utilized this defensive form, setting "hedgehogs," hoping to check the powerful offensives of the Red Army against Berlin. The French and American generals only applied the German fascists' experience to the Indo-china war theatre, hoping to check the progress of our army.³⁷

Yet the fact remained that Na San was a French victory. Na San was seen to validate the fortified air-base concept as an effective tactic in a war that had produced few satisfactory solutions. Jules Roy explained the decision to abandon Na San. He wrote that the French were "triumphant, but this tactical success had nothing definitive about it. Part of the French Air Force had been devoted to supplying and supporting the fortified camp, which would be exposed, if it was maintained much longer, to the dangers of a new offensive."³⁸ When Navarre visited the garrison, he had already decided to abandon it; nevertheless, "although he remained determined to have done with Na San, Navarre had been impressed by the appearance of the entrenched camp where Giap's battalions had bitten the dust, with its atmosphere of strength, morale, and serenity."³⁹

General Navarre was seemingly impressed by, but not completely enamored with, the fortified base concept. The tactic seemed to work, but it was not the exact technique Navarre wanted. Navarre sought to reconcile a

more offensive attitude with the *base aero-terrestre* tactic. Navarre called hedgehogs "a mediocre solution, but one which, on examination, appeared to be the only one possible."⁴⁰ General Navarre still considered himself to be what TIME magazine called, "an old cavalryman with the cavalryman's inbred dislike for positional warfare."⁴¹ Fall's assessment of French thinking at the time was that:

Dien Bien Phu was picked precisely because the valley (the largest in all of Indochina's northern mountain areas) was far too large to become a hedgehog position in which French troops could be sealed off. Here there was space for maneuvering. Tanks could be employed if they could be brought in by air, as indeed they were, later.

Na San profoundly influenced General Navarre. In 1953, one fact was certain, the Na San tactic, while not perfect, had worked. One can conclude that in the mind of the self-declared "old tank officer," the hedgehog, modified to allow greater mobility, might work even better.

As discussed earlier, the valley of Dien Bien Phu, located just a few miles from Laos, had held military significance throughout the region's history. In keeping with the Navarre plan, spoiling attacks were to be launched in northern Indochina during 1953 and 1954. However, much of northern Indochina was remote and isolated. The war may be planned in Hanoi or Saigon, but it could not be fought from there. A forward base from which to operate was highly desirable. Dien Bien Phu seemed the perfect place from which to both defend Laos and to launch spoiling attacks into the vulnerable Viet Minh rear areas.

Endnotes

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- ²Bernard Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place. The Siege of Dien Bien Phu, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1966), p. 28.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴"Battle of Indochina," p. 21.
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- ⁷Fall, p. 29.
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- ⁹Stanley Karnow, Vietnam. A History, (New York: Viking Press, 1983), p. 188.
- ¹⁰National Intelligence Estimate, dated 28 April 1954, "Consequences Within Indochina of the Fall of Dien Bien Phu," Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 124), p. 404.
- ¹¹Jules Roy, The Battle of Dienbienphu, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. , 1965) , p. 6.
- ¹²Davidson, p. 149.
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- ¹⁴Ibid. , p. 303.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Karnow, p. 190.
- ¹⁷Fall, p. 33.
- ¹⁸Roy, p. 18.
- ¹⁹Navarre, pp. 430-432.

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²³Davidson, p. 149.

²⁴Lieutenant General John W. O'Daniel, Report to Joint Chiefs of Staff, "U.S. Joint Military Mission to Indochina," (14 July 1953), Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 117), p. 74.

²⁵Ibid. , p. 75.

²⁶Kalb, p. 74.

²⁷O'Daniel, p. 76.

²⁸Ibid. , p. 96.

²⁹General Arthur Radford, Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, "The Navarre Concept for Operations in Indochina," (28 August 1953), Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 121), pp. 138-139.

³⁰Douglas Porch, The French Foreign Legion, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991) , p. 507.

³¹"Battle of Indochina," p. 19.

³²Davidson, p. 132.

³³Fall, pp. 30-31.

³⁴Davidson, p. 132.

³⁵Fall, p. 18.

³⁶Giap, p. 83.

³⁷Ibid. , p. 82.

³⁸Roy, p. 10.

³⁹Ibid. , p. 11.

⁴⁰Navarre, p. 306.

⁴¹"Battle of Indochina," p. 19.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BATTLE OF DIEN BIEN PHU

The Setting

Dien Bien Phu is the administrative title for an open valley in northwest Vietnam, centered on the village of Muong Thanh and located six miles from the Laotian border. Muong Thanh is in the part of Indochina that is home to the tribal people known as the T'ai. Translated into English, Dien Bien Phu means "seat of the border county prefecture."¹ For centuries the region surrounding Dien Bien Phu had been a center for the opium trade. During the early years of French colonialism, the opium trade was a state controlled monopoly, and thus the village had attracted the colonial government's attention as a source of revenue. During World War II, Dien Bien Phu's remote location and working airstrip made it the center of French resistance to Japanese occupation of Indochina. The allies also used Dien Bien Phu to fly downed airmen out of the area and as an occasional supply point. When the Viet Minh began their armed struggle against the reimposition of French colonial rule after the war, control of the highly lucrative opium trade became a crucial means by which General Giap's new army financed the purchase of weapons and supplies. The local inhabitants preferred French taxation to the confiscation of their profits by the Viet Minh. T'ai riflemen thus became the natural allies of the French army in this part of Vietnam.

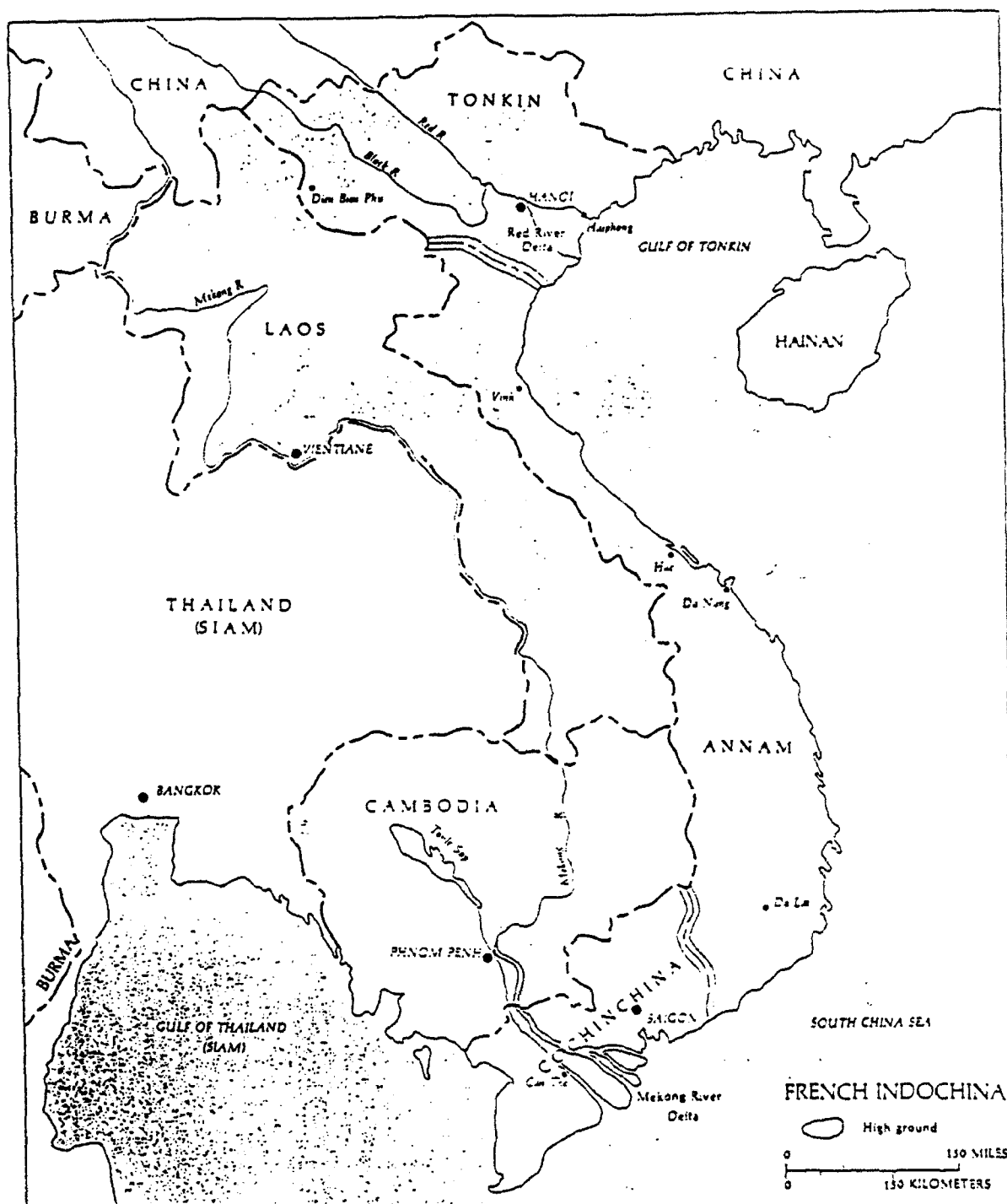


Figure 2. French Indochina. Source: Joel D. Meyerson, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Images of a Lengthy War (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986).

The valley of Dien Bien Phu is the largest open area in northwest Vietnam. It is an expansive plateau that measures nine kilometers wide by sixteen kilometers long. It is surrounded by mountains as much as several thousand feet higher than the valley floor. The peaks are between ten and twelve kilometers from the center of the valley. The mountains are covered by thickly forested jungle, while the valley is slightly rolling, open terrain. The weather at Dien Bien Phu is changeable and difficult to predict. A thick fog frequently blankets the valley. The monsoon season lasts from March through August, and torrential downpours are common. Dien Bien Phu receives fifty percent more rainfall than any other valley in Indochina with an average of five feet of rain falling every summer.²

In June of 1953, French aerial reconnaissance described Dien Bien Phu as:

. . . an idyllic village, with almost all of its 112 houses neatly laid out in the midst of large plots or along the two main roads passing through it. A little river, the Nam Yum, could be seen meandering by the town on its way to the Mekong River.³

Into this setting at 10:30 in the morning of 20 November 1953, Major Marcel Bigeard led his 6th French Colonial Parachute Battalion in a parachute assault to seize and establish a base camp deep in the remote T'ai region of northwest Vietnam. The tactical mission assigned the French paratroopers who first jumped into Dien Bien Phu was to secure the airstrip and surrounding valley, then begin offensive patrols into the surrounding T'ai countryside.⁴

The Combatants

By March of 1954 when the fighting began in earnest, the French forces at Dien Bien Phu had grown to include 10,814 troops. An additional 4,291 were added as reinforcements until the garrison's collapse on the 7th of May. The total strength of the French forces at Dien Bien Phu numbered 15,105 during the course of the battle.⁵ They were a mixed assembly of battalions made up of soldiers of different ethnic compositions from throughout France's colonial possessions. The heart and soul of the garrison were the four Foreign Legion, three Parachute Assault, and two Foreign Legion Parachute battalions. These elite troops constituted the very finest French soldiers in all of Indochina. Additional units included tough colonial troops from North Africa. Three Algerian battalions and one Moroccan rifle battalion were at Dien Bien Phu throughout the fighting. Considered less reliable were the 2,500 T'ai soldiers and 1,000 troops from the fledgling Vietnamese army.⁶ Supporting this force was the artillery of Colonel Charles Piroth. Piroth had twenty-five 105 mm guns organized in six batteries. He also had one battery of 155 mm howitzers for counter-battery fires and three companies of heavy mortars under his control. Ten American-made M24 Chaffee tanks rounded out the combat forces at Dien Bien Phu. The rest of the garrison was comprised of combat support soldiers of engineer, supply, signal, and hospital units. The entire force was commanded by Colonel Christian de Castries, a cavalry officer hand-picked by General Navarre for the command at Dien Bien Phu.

Against the French at Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh ultimately massed a formidable force of five combat divisions. Lieutenant Colonel James R. McLean, an instructor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College's Combat Studies Institute, stated in a letter for the journal Military Review that:

By Nov 53, Giap commanded a multi-divisioned force throughout Indochina. By Jan 54, he had massed four infantry and one soviet-styled heavy division in the hills around Dien Bien Phu, outnumbering his French opponents 5:1 in combat troops alone. This was no mere "guerrilla force". Rather it was a corps-sized combined arms formation, inspired and led by an increasingly professional officer corps.⁷

While exact numbers vary, by March of 1954, General Giap probably had around 50,000 combat soldiers, supported by 10,000 to 15,000 logistics troops, massed at Dien Bien Phu.⁸ This was in addition to a vast civilian labor force described later in this thesis. The Viet Minh divisions were typically organized with three regiments each and usually numbered around ten thousand men. The Viet Minh divisions at Dien Bien Phu were the 304th, 308th, 312th, and 316th Infantry Divisions, plus the 148th Independent Infantry Regiment. The heavy division McLean described was the 351st Heavy Division (Reinforced). This was an adaptation of a World War II Soviet organization and was comprised of one engineer, one heavy mortar, two artillery, one anti-aircraft artillery, and one Katyusha rocket regiments.⁹ The Viet Minh were armed and equipped by the Chinese, and many training and supply bases were established along the common border between China and Vietnam. Peter Macdonald in his 1993 biography of General Giap, agreed with LTC McLean's assessment. Macdonald wrote:

During 1951 the Chinese gave Giap four thousand tons of weapons, including 75 mm cannons of Russian and Chinese make, hundreds of Skoda rifles and several German made guns Now, he was a military leader in the true sense, and not a guerrilla leader In 1952 they sent another forty thousand rifles, four thousand machine guns, some 120 mm recoilless rifles, thirty five field guns, four hundred fifty mortars, and, with a consequence no one could have foreseen at the time, fifty light anti-aircraft guns Interoperability of calibers was good because the French used American lend-lease weapons, the Viet Minh had some American OSS-given weapons, and the Chinese and Vietnamese made copies of them.¹⁰

As the Chinese-and-Russian-equipped Viet Minh moved into the hills around the largely American-equipped French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, the stage was set for the decisive battle of the first Indochina war.

The Choice of Dien Bien Phu

The first French paratroops seized Dien Bien Phu in late November of 1953. General Giap reacted swiftly to the growing French base he saw as a great opportunity to inflict a tremendous strategic level defeat on his enemy. Giap intended to make the battle for Dien Bien Phu the battle for Indochina. Giap wrote:

. . . while Navarre chose this base to give a decisive battle to our regular troops, we also chose it to do a *strategical decisive battle* against the enemy Navarre and the French and American generals spoke highly of Dien Bien Phu They concluded that our troops, who had been unable to wipe out Na San were naturally incapable of attacking Dien Bien Phu.¹¹

General Navarre has discussed the alternative locations to Dien Bien Phu and offers sound rationale why they were not selected. Navarre pointed out that the bulk of the Viet Minh traffic between Viet Nam and Laos went through the area. The interdiction of these lines of communication was a key French objective. The French had occupied the valley from time to time since 1945, and Navarre stated that when he assumed command his predecessor, General Salan had "advocated its reoccupation."¹² Navarre considered indigenous advice as well, pointing out that Laotian leaders also believed Dien Bien Phu was the most important point to a forward defense of their country. That forward defense was seen by Navarre as the only viable option. To do otherwise would cede the frontier to the enemy; in Navarre's words, it "would be like defending France at Paris and at Orleans."¹³ Navarre was quite convinced of this, concluding his assessment by stating that "the strategic value of the position of Dien Bien Phu has been known for some time The

importance of Dien Bien Phu is, in fact, indisputable."¹⁴ Navarre even justifies his decision by quoting General Giap, who had referred to Dien Bien Phu as "a very important strategic point."¹⁵

General Navarre wanted Dien Bien Phu to be both a base of operations for offensive ground interdiction missions, and a static defensive position to protect Laos. Navarre was not blind to the vulnerabilities of Dien Bien Phu. As the commander he chose to accept a certain amount of risk:

Dien Bien Phu . . . has a serious deficiency from an aerial point of view: its distance from the Delta country, where our aircraft are based. But this is a condition we must accept, in the absence of a solution to change it.¹⁶

The position of Dien Bien Phu in a valley surrounded by mountains has been widely criticized, in hind sight, as a military base location. It must be remembered, however, that this was the largest valley in all of north-west Viet Nam. The gently rolling, wide open terrain was seen as ideal ground for the American tanks that Navarre wished to employ. It was also assumed that superior French fire power from 105 mm and 155 mm artillery could also be brought to bear. The lack of any overhead concealment would make an attacking force vulnerable to the fighters and bombers of the French Air Force. The size of the valley would prevent the Viet Minh from sealing it off. Indeed, the terrain at Dien Bien Phu was far better suited for a fortified air-land base than that at Na San. Surveying the land with Major General Cogne, the commander of French ground forces in the northern theater, Colonel Castries, the commander at Dien Bien Phu, is said to have pointed to the distant mountains and remarked: "We'll demolish the Viets when they come down from the hills."¹⁷ The military writer Howard Simpson stated that "Castries had been a dashing tank officer in World War II, and Navarre promised to supply him with tanks with which he could sweep the enemy clear of the

valley."¹⁸ Navarre's assessment of the valley's strengths were balanced by his concern over how the enemy might employ artillery. Navarre's artillery commanders, including Cogny, were more confident. They convinced their Commander-in-Chief who later wrote:

The basin is the largest in all the highlands. The bottom is practically a plain, 16 by 9 kilometers, flat, clear, and under good conditions permitting the use of armor. The tall peaks overlooking it are at a distance of 10 to 12 kilometers This distance is greater than a useful range of a possible artillery attack. These would then have to be set up on the inward slopes of the basin. The same is true for any anti-aircraft battery According to all the artillery men . . . the batteries would be seen They would then be silenced by our counter-battery guns and our bombers.¹⁹

General O'Daniel toured Dien Bien Phu on February 2 and 3, 1954. He offered a qualified endorsement of the French position. O'Daniel also made several observations that concurred with Navarre's and later proved correct. In his official report to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, O'Daniel wrote:

The defenses are heavily wired-in with barbed wire, bunkers have been built and a good job of construction of fortifications is being done. Dugouts and bunkers are topped with timber and dirt. I had the impression that wet weather would cause much trouble through crumbling walls and leaking roofs. The defense area is twelve kilometers long and six kilometers wide. I feel that it can withstand any kind of attack the Viet Minh are capable of launching. However, a force with two or three battalions of medium artillery with air observation could make the area untenable I would have been tempted to have utilized the high ground surrounding the area, rather than the low ground, and when I asked about this, the commander said that the fields of fire were better where they were.²⁰

Navarre finally admitted that while the position was "in a hollow, it couldn't be otherwise, for no one has yet found a way to build an airfield on the peaks."²¹ The high ground, by default, was given to the Viet Minh. They took full advantage of it.



Figure 3. The Dien Bien Phu Valley. Source: Jules Roy, The Battle of Dienbienphu (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. 1965).

One of the greatest surprises for the French forces at Dien Bien Phu occurred when General Giap's hidden artillery opened up on the valley in the opening days of the battle. The French had studied the area in May of 1953 and concluded that "the roads leading to this frontier are non-existent or destroyed . . . the Vietminh would not be able to bring heavy weapons to bear, there, because of the transportation difficulties."²² The Viet Minh proved the French intelligence assessment wrong by an incredible feat of military transportation. The following archival account, written in 1984, comes from the Vietnamese magazine Vietnam Courier:

The river was cut by rapids with ominous names; Grinder, also known as The Fury, roared all year round, seized any boats that ventured on it, twisted them around and tried to wreck them. Tiger-Jaw had jagged rocky fangs that made it look like the mouth of a wild beast ready to swallow boats and men. 105mm howitzers had to be transported over 90 km of this waterway. The only way to do it was to use bamboo rafts, but with their limited capacity and the furious waters...the guns had to be taken apart. Could a howitzer still fire accurately once reassembled? Our men had to train very hard, taking a howitzer apart, studying the pieces, reassembling them, testing the gun-then doing it again.²³

LTG O'Daniel's prophecy of a few battalions of artillery rendering the position of Dien Bien Phu untenable came to fruition. At the time, however, no one anticipated the lengths to which the Viet Minh would go to overwhelm the French base. A partial explanation for that lies in the fact that Navarre never intended Dien Bien Phu to be the centerpiece of his strategy for Indochina. According to his own plan, Navarre would not seek decisive battle at the operational level until 1954-1955. His goal was to defend Laos and contest control of northern Indochina, thus harassing the enemy's rear areas. Offensive action was to occur in the south. Dien Bien Phu offered a chance to accomplish the first two objectives with a tactic that had been proven to work in Indochinese combat. This was a strong argument for the establishment of the base at Dien Bien Phu. Dien Bien Phu was to be a strong fort, backed by

armor, artillery, and close air support. Navarre envisioned a base from which the French forces would, in the words of the day, "radiate out" into the surrounding jungles, raising havoc with the Viet Minh. Neither Navarre nor his staff imagined the Viet Minh ever assembling a corps-sized force around Dien Bien Phu. There were consistent intelligence reports that stated the Viet Minh were incapable of assembling or sustaining a large army at Dien Bien Phu. In the end, General Navarre offered the following justification: "These were the reasons why it was decided to occupy (Dien Bien Phu) and face the enemy there. The solution was perhaps uninspired, but very acceptable against the enemy that it was then reasonable to expect."²⁴ The consequence of this perception was that while the base was strong, it was never built to withstand a major siege on the scale planned by the Viet Minh.

Navarre's controversial army forces commander was Major General Rene Cogny. After Dien Bien Phu, Navarre and Cogny had a severe falling out, each blaming the other in the French press and in other public forums for the defeat. Cogny suggested reoccupation of Dien Bien Phu to Navarre as early as June of 1953 at a Saigon commander's conference, although he later stated he did not intend that the base become a fortified strong point capable of withstanding a major attack. Cogny said he intended Dien Bien Phu to be only a "mooring point," a resupply point for tribal guerrillas hostile to the Viet Minh to use when raiding Giap's rear areas. He described his forces as "radiating out" from Dien Bien Phu into the countryside.²⁵ Ronald Spector, one of the foremost experts on the origins of America's involvement in Vietnam, points out that the "precise reasons behind the French decision to occupy and hold Dien Bien Phu remain obscure."²⁶ This obscurity may stem from the cross purposes of the key French commanders. However, for General

Navarre, looking through the prism of Na San, in the overall context of his plan, the decision to seize the base camp at Dien Bien Phu made sense.

The perspectives of the Vietnamese in assessing the French decision to occupy Dien Bien Phu are worthy of note. In an article written for the thirtieth anniversary of the battle in 1984, Senior General Hoang Van Thai of the current Vietnamese Army wrote that he saw the French action as more of a reaction to Viet Minh operations. The General also saw Dien Bien Phu as growing out of the overall French strategy; he supported the notion of the Na San precedent as playing a key role:

Dien Bien Phu was not included in the initial operations plan of the enemy but, as a result of the activities of our forces, it gradually became the center of the Navarre plan . . . he subsequently decided to...build a strong base complex . . . a "super Na San" in an attempt to wipe out our main force troops on a battlefield that the French had selected and prepared.²⁷

Senior General Van Thai further stated that the opposing forces were more equally arrayed than is commonly portrayed, writing that "during the entire campaign, our ground forces only outnumbered those of the enemy by a ratio of 1.8 to 1."²⁸ This assertion seems to be supported by a national intelligence estimate prepared by the American Central Intelligence Agency on 28 April, 1954. At the height of the battle the CIA report stated that the French had sixteen battalions at Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh, thirty.²⁹ Numbers like these are deceptive and likely caused undue optimism at the time. An American policy maker reading the CIA report would come to the conclusion that the French forces at Dien Bien Phu were out-numbered by two to one. American intelligence, like Navarre's, apparently also failed to detect the true strength of the Viet Minh. Misleading assessments such as these could have led Navarre to think Dien Bien Phu was strong enough to withstand Giap's onslaught, what he called "the enemy it was reasonable to expect." In

fact, the combat ratios were much different than the Americans believed and the Viet Minh may later have claimed. Fall's numbers are generally accepted. He was the first historian granted access to the French military archives after the battle, and his research is exhaustive. Fall wrote that:

When the battle began on March 13 enemy combatant strength in the Dien Bien Phu area was estimated at 49,500 men, with 31,500 logistical support personnel. Another 23,000 Communist support troops and personnel were strung out along logistics lines. On the French side, there was a total of 13,200 men in the valley, of whom about 6,600 to 7,000 could be counted as front-line combatants, and of unequal quality, at that General Giap's forces enjoyed a superiority in manpower of five to one.³⁰

Both American and French intelligence had committed a cardinal military sin. They had greatly underestimated the enemy. The enemy Navarre called "reasonable to expect" was not the enemy he would face.

The Air Battle and Navarre's Logistics

In the battle of Dien Bien Phu, French air and logistical efforts were intricately woven together. The ability to understand and employ logistics has been a crucial skill practiced by general officers in almost every military force ever assembled. Perhaps no where is this more evident than with the logistical battle at Dien Bien Phu. Generals Navarre and Giap have both stated that logistics was the crucial factor in determining victory. Davidson stated that:

Both Giap and Navarre grasped the fundamental point that whoever won the logistic battle at Dien Bien Phu would win the tactical battle. Both understood that the logistic battle had two separate parts. First, the opponents had to supply their own forces, and second, each had to try and keep his enemy from receiving adequate supplies.³¹

General Navarre saw Dien Bien Phu as difficult for both sides to support. Navarre wrote that "while distance is to our disadvantage from the air aspect, it should also work against the Viet Minh, logistically, Dien Bien Phu is 200 kilometers from the Delta, and more than 300 kilometers from the

Chinese frontier."³² To win his logistical battle, Henri Navarre turned to one modern technological advantage he clearly had, the French Air Force in Indochina.

The Commander of the Air Force in the northern theater, Brigadier General Jean Dechaux, was patently unenthusiastic at the prospects of successfully supporting Dien Bien Phu by air. Jules Roy wrote that:

Dechaux pointed out that the maintenance of this new base would put a serious strain on French air transport, that on account of the distance the fighter aircraft would wear themselves out without being very effective, and that the weather conditions . . . would present problems that might compromise supplying the new base . . . General Navarre listened politely . . . His last question was: "Is it possible?"³³

Navarre overruled Dechaux's objections. He later denied they had ever been raised, writing that "no military chief ever took a position, in any form whatever, against the Dien Bien Phu operation . . . until after the fact."³⁴ It is reasonable to surmise that Navarre did not expect the Viet Minh to be able to challenge French air supremacy. Nevertheless, Navarre undertook the Dien Bien Phu campaign fully cognizant of the fact that his Air Force would be severely taxed. He maintained that Dien Bien Phu had priority for air support, but not it seems, exclusive right to it. Navarre was a strategic-theater level Commander-in-Chief. He noted he had other worries beside Dien Bien Phu:

From the beginning of November 1953 air action was undertaken in view of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. It lasted, intensifying constantly, until the fall of the fortress At the same time it was fighting the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the Air Force had to participate in the fighting taking place on other fronts: the Delta, Upper, Central, and Lower Laos; the highland plateaus and the "Atlante" zone; [Atlante was a code name for part of Navarre's planned offensive operations], South Vietnam and Cambodia. However from November to May, Dien Bien Phu always maintained number 1 air priority.³⁵

Navarre's solution to Dechaux's problem was to assign the southern air force command in Indochina a reinforcing mission to the northern

theater. The French air efforts were tremendous; but, by Navarre's own admission, they were "not able to play a decisive role in any phase of the battle."³⁶

There were three inter-related reasons why the French Air Force was ineffective: First was the distance from the air bases to Dien Bien Phu. Second was the weather. Last, was the unexpected increase in the anti-aircraft capability of the Viet Minh.

The French air bases which supported operations throughout the Indochina theater were located in the Delta region, some 350 kilometers from Dien Bien Phu. There, Navarre had at his disposal about 100 C-47 "Dakota" transports and 16 C-119 transports piloted by the famous American "Flying Tigers" under a civilian contract. His combat aircraft consisted of 48 B-26 bombers; 8 "Privateer" bombers; 112 Hellcat, Bearcat and Corsair fighter-bombers; and some carrier-based from the French Navy.³⁷ Much of his combat force was thus comprised of the smaller fighter-bombers. These aircraft operated at the extreme limits of their ranges when attacking Dien Bien Phu. Dechaux had also warned Navarre about the unusual weather conditions that were known to occur in the Dien Bien Phu valley. Not only was this the single wettest place in all of Northern Indochina, but a thick and constant fog frequently enveloped the valley. Visibility's were often down to near zero, making flying all but impossible. Navarre wrote that:

Weather was often unfavorable. At certain times Delta drizzle made departures and returns difficult. Dangerous cloud formations were frequently encountered . . . dry fog sometimes held sway in the basin The main problem, was distance . . . 350 kilometers was perfectly acceptable for the short battle we were going to fight, against an enemy deprived of modern AA defense. But, it became too great for prolonged battle, and against targets defended by a very effective AA system.³⁸

At the time the decision to occupy Dien Bien Phu was made, the Viet Minh's possession of new Russian-made 37mm anti-aircraft guns was

unknown to the French. Giap cleverly withheld most of the fires from these guns until the French were firmly ensconced at Dien Bien Phu. Once it became too late to evacuate Dien Bien Phu by air, Giap allowed the true extent of his air defenses to become known. Navarre described anti-aircraft fire "of a density comparable to those which protected certain key points of the European theater at the end of the 1939-1945 war."³⁹ Previously, Viet Minh anti-aircraft weaponry had always been rudimentary. At Dien Bien Phu a new expression of Chinese largesse was introduced, 37mm AA guns. With a maximum range of 8,000 meters and firing rate of 180 rounds per minute, the authoritative Jane's Weapons Systems calls these guns a "mobile weapon with highly respectable performance."⁴⁰ The number of guns said to have been there varies. Navarre says there were 80, Bernard Fall only 20 and the US JCS estimated there were 36.⁴¹ Regardless, there were enough to make flying over the valley dangerous to an extreme. Once the Viet Minh anti-aircraft guns came to bear over the battlefield, the French daily supply tonnage decreased dramatically, down to an estimated 100 tons of supply per day. One-hundred tons of supply was not nearly enough to maintain the base at Dien Bien Phu. General Davidson cited American logisticians who calculated that the French garrison required a minimum of twice that amount every day to survive.⁴² Additionally, the large amount of antiaircraft fire the Viet Minh had around Dien Bien Phu forced the French to drop their supplies from increasingly higher altitudes. This further degraded their effectiveness and actually aided Giap's troops who captured much of what was dropped.

To General Navarre's way of thinking, while it was true the base at Dien Bien Phu was remote, that was exactly why he chose it; he controlled the cities already. Navarre wanted to take the battle to the enemy and force Giap to protect his rear areas, thus dispersing his forces.⁴³ Navarre said there

were no objections to occupying Dien Bien Phu, inspite of evidence to the contrary. He must have initially seen the mission of supporting Dien Bien Phu by air as difficult, but not out of the question, or so it seemed.

French interdiction of Viet Minh logistical Lines of Communication by air power proved largely unsuccessful. Navarre did not originally plan on his air force being forced to execute all of this mission; offensive ground attacks from Dien Bien Phu were to have interdicted Viet Minh supply lines. That was supposed to be much of the garrison's purpose.

The French efforts at aerial interdiction were countered by the Viet Minh's use of massive amounts of man power. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese coolie laborers worked incessantly at supplying the forces at Dien Bien Phu. It was not uncommon for long stretches of jungle canopy to be laced together, camouflaging road networks from French aerial reconnaissance.

General Giap described the Viet Minh efforts this way:

Sappers and shock youths from the lowlands and the highlands courageously built or repaired roads and neutralized time bombs. The enemy destroyed the roads, we mended them . . . Even at the extremely difficult sections, bombed and strafed day and night by enemy aircraft, our transportation was only a little disturbed . . . Hundreds of men and women . . . enthusiastically served the front and contributed over three million work-days.⁴⁴

"Hundreds" is a tremendous understatement. General Giap lacked anything more sophisticated than trucks and massive manpower to supply his forces. Yet, his assets were well suited to the task at hand. Giap used a combination of captured American and Soviet/Chinese supplied trucks, porters on foot and on bicycles, pack animals, and boats, and a force of between 40,000 and 50,000 logistic troops, to supply the Corps-sized force he assembled at Dien Bien Phu.⁴⁵ Efforts such as the previously described rafting of disassembled artillery through treacherous rapids typified the Viet Minh logistical campaign. Giap astounded the French who had repeatedly predicted he could

never assemble, much less sustain, a force of any size at Dien Bien Phu. For the Viet Minh, the supplies got through, but it was no easy task. Colonel Nguyen Duc Toai described what the French air campaign looked like from the Vietnamese perspective:

They bombed and strafed our rear areas, dropped supplies and reinforcements . . . each day they undertook about 100 sorties carrying 300 - 400 tonnes of supplies, operating from dawn to dusk.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, the daily airlift of 300 to 400 tons of supply was something that the French could not maintain. As aircraft losses mounted and poor weather played an increasing role, Navarre responded by soliciting his government's help in procuring outside reinforcements. In early January of 1954, General Navarre wrote his government of the massive Viet Minh logistics buildup. He knew that this potential capability had fundamentally altered the equation at Dien Bien Phu. He later described his efforts to garner more aircraft, efforts that were rebuffed and even belittled by leading members of the French government. Navarre sought a large increase in American supplied transport aircraft. These were assets he could only get with the help of his senior government officials in Paris. At the height of the battle, Navarre wrote his political leaders that Dien Bien Phu was:

above all an air battle . . . if the air battle is lost . . . I cannot guarantee success . . . and our air power is very weak, given the enormous task it must assume. Consequently, I address an urgent request for air reinforcements No answer was ever received to this letter. Mr. Marc Jacquet, Secretary of State for the Associated States, indicated to me only verbally during a later trip to Indochina that it had been judged "very pessimistic" by the Government, which was still in a state of euphoria over the success of the summer operations, and that one of the most important members had even described it as a "sob story." My second-in-command, General Bodet, whom I had sent to Paris to explain the situation to the High Command, did obtain an understanding in principle for some additional air equipment, but their delivery, complicated by negotiations with the Americans, who were to supply them, was so slow that they got there only in the full of the battle, much too late to do any good.⁴⁷

General Navarre had accepted the battle at Dien Bien Phu with the air assets he knew were on hand. That was exactly how he was going to have to fight it.

The Viet Minh logistic forces were more modern in many ways than the French believed. While the greatest Viet Minh advantage was man power, the Vietnamese Brigadier General Le Quang Dao wrote in 1984 that the trucks were the real back bone of the Viet Minh heavy supply efforts:

In order to solve the very large supply problems, we concentrated a fairly large number of autos to guarantee transportation. This armed force was an important factor in the victory. This was also an indication of the level of maturity our army had reached. Without such a force of technical weapons, it would have been difficult to attack a stronghold such as Dien Bien Phu . . . and supply such a large quantity of food and ammunition to a battlefield so many hundreds of kilometers from the rear areas.⁴⁸

The existence of these modern Viet Minh transportation assets was either missed or disregarded by Navarre and his staff. General Giap had only two key supplies he had to deliver to the front on a consistent basis and in substantial quantities: food and ammunition. General Navarre and his staff were convinced that the Viet Minh coolie logistical troops would consume four-fifths of what they could carry in rice to Dien Bien Phu. The amount of ammunition individual soldiers could carry, particularly heavy ammunition, was limited. At Dien Bien Phu, the sheer scale of the labor intensive logistical support for Giap's army became famous. However, it was the over looked trucks, also disassembled along with the howitzers and floated down river, that carried most of the ammunition for Giap's artillery.⁴⁹ General Navarre has described how in December of 1953, his intelligence began to detect hints of the massive scope of Giap's logistical efforts. Navarre felt he had to choose between fortifying Dien Bien Phu against what now was beginning to look

like a major attack, or attacking Giap on the ground. He claimed there were not enough forces to do both:

From the fortifications at Dien Bien Phu, General Cogy hopes to be able to lead powerful offensive actions designed to delay the enemy's setting up. In effect, these actions were limited to patrols and reconnaissance to short distances. In fact, any more serious or deeper actions become evidently incompatible because of the number of men they require, considering the number of men required to make the camp ready to repulse an enemy attack which could come at any time.⁵⁰

Confronted with a choice of attacking Giap or defending against him, Navarre chose to dig in. French ground attacks did not radiate out from Dien Bien Phu to disrupt Giap's supply lines. Nor could the limited capabilities of Navarre's air assets curtail the flow of Viet Minh supplies to the Dien Bien Phu front. Giap's logistical system worked, and Navarre failed to stop it.

The Viet Minh attempts to interdict French supply lines by ground attacks were limited but certainly daring. One significant attack occurred on the night of 6-7 March 1954. At two French air bases in the Tonkin Delta - Gia Lam and Cat Bi, saboteurs infiltrated the perimeter and "destroyed or damaged a total of seventy-eight aircraft, mostly transports."⁵¹ The saboteurs ignored other aircraft to get at the supply planes. The Vietnamese Army's Colonel Nguyen Duc Toai described the raid on Gia Lam for the magazine Vietnam Courier thirty years later:

In ice-cold weather they had to cross a large pond as searchlights swept the area. Before they reached the parking ground they spent two hours (23:30 hours to 1:30 hours) crossing a minefield, crawling on their bellies and defusing the mines. Only when they had got quite close to the planes were they spotted by the guards. But the latter were so stunned they were quickly overpowered. Working in small groups they destroyed the planes with hand grenades and satchel charges . . . they managed to withdraw while the enemy was in complete disarray.⁵²

The raid on Gia Lam obviously supported Giap's operations, although Viet Minh accounts do not attribute the attack to him. Instead a local commander probably planned and executed the raid. However, while Giap may

not have directly decided to attack Gia Lam, he must be given credit for cratering the Dien Bien Phu airstrip with artillery fire as his opening gambit in the siege itself. The opening salvos of Viet Minh heavy artillery were the greatest tactical surprise of the battle. Giap used American-made 105 mm guns captured by the Chinese in Korea then transferred to the Viet Minh. His daring river transportation system had proved false the assumption that he had no means of transporting such heavy weapons to the remote valley of Dien Bien Phu. With a badly damaged airstrip, General Navarre was forced to use parachute resupply, the most inefficient method of all. Many of the 105 mm shells parachuted to the defenders actually fell into Viet Minh hands. They were promptly fired back on the French. By March of 1954, the Viet Minh would have the equivalent of four divisions plus a division of artillery surrounding the French base that had been established to interdict their supply lines.

Navarre's Command Organization

With regards to the French organizational command organization, personalities rather than structure dominated. At the top was the Commander-in-Chief of all French forces in Indochina, General Henri Navarre. General Navarre's headquarters was in Saigon. Navarre's Deputy Commander was General Pierre Bodet, an Air Force officer. For the battle of Dien Bien Phu, Navarre's Operations Officer was Colonel Louis Berteil, who had commanded at Na San.

General Navarre executed operational command at Dien Bien Phu through his two primary service component commanders: Major General Rene Cogny, Commander of French Ground Forces in Tonkin and Brigadier

General Jean Dechaux, Commander of the French Air Forces in Northern Indochina.

Major General Cogny is a particularly important figure in attempting to understand Navarre's actions. Cogny was an experienced leader in Indochina. Like Colonel Berteil, he was personally selected by Navarre for his position. Cogny is described by Jules Roy as "loathed by his superiors for questioning orders, and liked by his subordinates . . . a single word could hurt Cogny deeply . . . he would rush, head down at the man he felt responsible for his wound and try to trample him underfoot."⁵³ Cogny and Navarre had never worked together before. Navarre seems to have selected Cogny to compensate for his own lack of experience in Indochina. Fall remarks that from his research, Roy's perception of Cogny's volatile personality "seems fairly well documented."⁵⁴ Cogny commanded from his headquarters in Hanoi.

By his own admission, General Navarre seems to have established an unorthodox joint command organization for conducting operations at Dien Bien Phu. Navarre wrote of this structure, pointing out General Cogny's dominant role and highlighting his own rational:

The battle which was to take place at Dien Bien Phu was on a scale with the overall theater of operations for Indochina, since its purpose was to defend Laos . . . It therefore could have, theoretically been assigned to one command organization, under the Commander-in-Chief. But actually everything counter-indicated that The enemy's lines of communication used this territory from one end to the other. As for air operations and logistics, the battle depended on the Delta, where the bases were able to support it. Only the Air and Land Headquarters at Hanoi were able to direct it, for they had the material means and the knowledge of the terrain and the enemy. Therefore, it was to the "tandem" made up of General Cogny, Commander of the Land Forces in North Vietnam, and General Dechaux, Commander of the North Tactical Air Group, that the responsibility for the battle was assigned. In fact, in the Cogny-Dechaux tandem, the former had the preponderant part. He had complete responsibility for the land battle, and that of coordinating with aviation to carry out their missions accounted for almost all air activity.⁵⁵

General Navarre moved his Deputy Commander, Lieutenant General Pierre Bodet, from Saigon to Hanoi to "avoid any possible differences in viewpoints between the land and air commanders." Bodet was given full authority to act in behalf of Navarre, although his influence appears to have been slight. Bodet is seldom mentioned in accounts of the events. Navarre himself seems to have been the key decision maker at the theater/operational level. His assertion that, "I made several trips to Hanoi before and during the battle, and I was right there especially during critical moments," supports this view.⁵⁶

The distinction between operational and tactical level decision making blurs in a situation where one battle has strategic implications. General Navarre also takes issue with critics who find fault with an organization of three different headquarters, located in three separate locations: Hanoi, Saigon, and Dien Bien Phu. General Navarre stated that:

The decisions concerning the battle were generally made by General Cogy, either alone, or - when they concerned an Air-Land matter - in accord with General Dechaux. When these were at the level of the Commander-in-Chief, they were made by General Bodet - or by myself, when I was present, - on the recommendations of General Cogy and of General Dechaux. So there never was, as the press has claimed, a lack of liaison or harmony between the actions of Headquarters at Saigon, and Hanoi.⁵⁷

Working directly under Cogy was the man chosen to command the actual garrison at Dien Bien Phu, Colonel Christian de Castries. Castries was a cavalryman who had served two previous tours in Vietnam where he had "shown himself to be a talented and aggressive commander of light armor."⁵⁸ Especially selected by Navarre, Castries was an old acquaintance. Navarre wrote that Castries was chosen because "neither General Cogy, nor myself was rifle oriented, he seemed to both of us to be the best man for the task that we expected from the defender of Dien Bien Phu."⁵⁹ Castries had the benefit

of several very capable battalion level commanders working for him at Dien Bien Phu. One in particular, Lieutenant Colonel Pierre Langlais, became the de facto garrison commander during the later stages of the battle when Castries seems to have cracked under the strain. When the battle began to plainly turn against the French, Castries was said to have acted as "if a spring had broken inside him." Langlais later described Castries' role in the battle as "he transmitted our messages to Hanoi."⁶⁰ Castries commanded from a reinforced bunker at Dien Bien Phu "in which he dined on a spotless linen tablecloth set with gleaming silver," even at the height of the battle.⁶¹ The garrison artillery was under the command of Colonel Charles Piroth. Colonel Piroth became one of the battle's earliest casualties. He would commit suicide on 15 March 1954, when his optimistic appraisals of French artillery prowess proved groundless.

The French command structure stood in sharp contrast with that of the Viet Minh. In December of 1953, General Giap moved his headquarters to a cave about thirty miles from Dien Bien Phu. From there, Giap executed direct command over his front line divisions.⁶² There was no ambiguity in the Viet Minh organizational structure.

Most accounts of the battle have divided it into distinct periods of combat. General Navarre describes the battle in terms of five phases. For the purposes of this thesis, Navarre's phasing is used to describe the action. They were:

Phase I. 13-15 March. Enemy attacks on the "isolated centers of resistance in the North and Northeast." (The Dien Bien Phu position was actually an interlocking series of several strong points).

Phase II. 16-30 March. Both sides reinforce and reorganize.

Phase III. 30 March-5 April. This was Navarre's "key phase of the battle" which he characterized as "furious combat."

Phase IV. 5 April-1 May. Navarre described his Phase IV as a "heightening of enemy pressure" and a "progressive suffocation of the fortress by the AA batteries."

Phase V. 1 May to 7 May. Navarre called this "the general attack on all sides of the position and the fall of the fortress."⁶³

Before the Battle

Initially the French paratroopers ranged out from Dien Bien Phu as planned. From November through December of 1953, the French soldiers linked up with T'ai partisan units and conducted week-long patrols into the surrounding countryside. At first, they encountered little resistance. By the end of December, the situation began to change. French intelligence detected large-scale Viet Minh troop movements around Dien Bien Phu. Navarre wrote that he ordered spoiling attacks launched to frustrate the designs of the Viet Minh, "major establishments of artillery, munitions, and infantry were made, . . . these were challenged by our intervention, artillery, and by our planes."⁶⁴ In his 1957 memoirs, Navarre noted that his enemy was strong, but elusive.

The Vietminh, in turn, had occupied the entire area around Dien Bien Phu, and had made an almost continuous circle of siege around the fortified camp without, however, seeking close contact with our units.⁶⁵

Lieutenant Colonel Langlais led a battalion-sized patrol into the jungle surrounding Dien Bien Phu around Christmas. For days the battalion was stalked and ambushed in unseasonably wet weather by a Viet Minh regiment. Fall described the French patrol's venture from Dien Bien Phu:

Finally on the morning of 26 December, a cry went up from the lead elements of the column: "Dien Bien Phu!" The valley had finally been reached. But the Viet Minh gave the returning force a last reminder of how closely it had been shadowed. As the French crossed the last hill in

full view of the fixed positions in the valley, an isolated rifle shot was heard and one of the paratroopers crumpled in a heap.⁶⁶

Throughout January and February of 1954, the French maintained at least some degree of mobility. Navarre ordered efforts to shift from offensive interdiction to fortification, however, as a major attack appeared imminent. No doubt the memory of Na San was still fresh in his mind. Giap did not avoid Navarre's forces for long.

Navarre stated that by late February:

Colonel de Castries carried out strong offensive reconnaissance's around Dien Bien Phu. Everywhere they came up against solid and well defended positions. It appears that the circle of siege around the fortified camp . . . remains unbroken.⁶⁷

General Navarre, along with Major General Cogny, had been a frequent visitor to Dien Bien Phu before the battle actually began. There seems to be a strong pattern at Dien Bien Phu of General Navarre taking bad advice from his subordinates, frequently against his better judgment. Among Navarre's many expressed concerns were the several battalions of allied troops he considered unreliable. In particular, General Navarre worried about the indigenous T'ai battalions. While this region was the T'ai home land and they were openly hostile to the rival Viet Minh, the T'ais were partisan, not regular troops. Navarre referred to the T'ai battalions at Dien Bien Phu as "mediocre units" that were "to be replaced before the battle."⁶⁸ This never happened. General Cogny convinced Navarre otherwise and Navarre did not insist.⁶⁹

General Navarre knew in March of 1954 that the situation at Dien Bien Phu was taking a turn for the worse. Colonel Castries' battalion-sized patrols into the surrounding hills had been repulsed since the previous December. These actions clearly were major engagements. On 4 March Castries had sent two battalions out to dislodge an enemy force that was digging in only one kilometer from the garrison perimeter. "The French

force was almost immediately caught in a cross fire of well camouflaged enemy weapons and had to withdraw with heavy losses."⁷⁰ Something ominous was clearly occurring in the surrounding mountains. Also on 4 March, General Navarre and Major General Cogny were jointly inspecting the defenses at Dien Bien Phu. It was on this trip that Navarre failed to communicate clearly with his most important subordinates. The results were tragic for the garrison's defenders.

After hearing a briefing on recent events from Castries' staff, Navarre, Cogny, and Colonel Castries left the command post in a jeep with Castries at the wheel. General Navarre wanted to speak freely with his two key commanders. Voicing his concerns, Navarre raised the idea of further reinforcing Dien Bien Phu. General Cogny and Colonel Castries convinced him otherwise. Still clinging to the idea that Dien Bien Phu was to be a battle fought with mobile offensive tactics, Cogny declared that the garrison was too crowded already (there were 10,814 troops there in March).⁷¹ Cogny pointed out that there was already so many barbed wire obstacles and fortifications that soldiers were tripping all over each other. Expansion of the perimeter was out of the question with the forces on hand as had been demonstrated by the action only that morning. Additionally he argued that resupply of an even larger force would be beyond French logistical capabilities. Cogny assured Navarre that the forces on hand would be more than enough to "win a great defensive victory."⁷² These remarks, which Cogny later claimed were intended only to bolster Castries' morale, became the center piece of the later dispute between Navarre and Cogny over their respective shares of the blame for the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Jules Roy points out that if Cogny did not really hold such views, he had a long plane ride back to Hanoi alone with General

Navarre to tell him what he really thought. General Davidson's summary of these events is a harsh indictment of General Cogy:

Cogy's conduct in this matter must be severely condemned. When he made that statement he was not talking to an assemblage of enlisted men and junior officers, where Patton-like bravado can be justified as a means of raising the morale of the troops. Cogy was speaking only to his direct superior and to a key subordinate, both senior professionals. Both Navarre and Castries had every right to expect Cogy's statement to be his honest appraisal of the situation. There is an old adage in the American army to the effect that "senior leaders have no morale," and it is largely true They want, and expect that when they are alone with their senior colleagues, each officer will give his true views of the situation, regardless of how forlorn those views might be. Cogy's conduct on 4 March was at best unprofessional, and at worst dishonorable.⁷³

Jules Roy accurately points out that there was ample time on the return flight to Hanoi for Cogy to give Navarre his true assessments.⁷⁴ One concludes that there was a distinct inability between the two men to communicate with one another. Roy argues that the poor personal relationship between the two generals was behind their lack of communication. In his words, "they no longer communicated with each other except in letters and dispatches scrupulously respecting the hierarchical formulas of military correspondence."⁷⁵ Bernard Fall confirms this, quoting a statement Cogy made about Navarre ten years after Dien Bien Phu:

That "air-conditioned" General froze me As for his way of thinking, it disconcerted me like an electronic computer which I do not succeed in feeding the necessary basic data, and which, unperturbed, bases its reasoning on I-don't-know-what ⁷⁶

With such bad feelings, one wonders why Navarre failed to relieve Cogy. Navarre was clearly within his rights to do so. It is entirely possible that Navarre felt he needed Cogy's Indochina experience and winning record to prevail in the coming battle. Cogy had gained an excellent reputation with many French military leaders and soldiers during his service in Indochina. Navarre may also have sensed disaster and was not about to shoulder the

burdens of such a defeat alone. Whatever may be inferred from the accounts of the meeting on the 4th of March, one thing is certain; General Navarre missed his final opportunity to dramatically reinforce the defenses at Dien Bien Phu. By this point Navarre was aware of the enemy forces around Dien Bien Phu. He had accepted a major defensive engagement there. Navarre himself had already characterized the situation as a "siege," but it was a siege he had not prepared his forces to withstand. Cogny may well have offered bad advice, but it was General Navarre's place to weigh those opinions, then make the decisions.

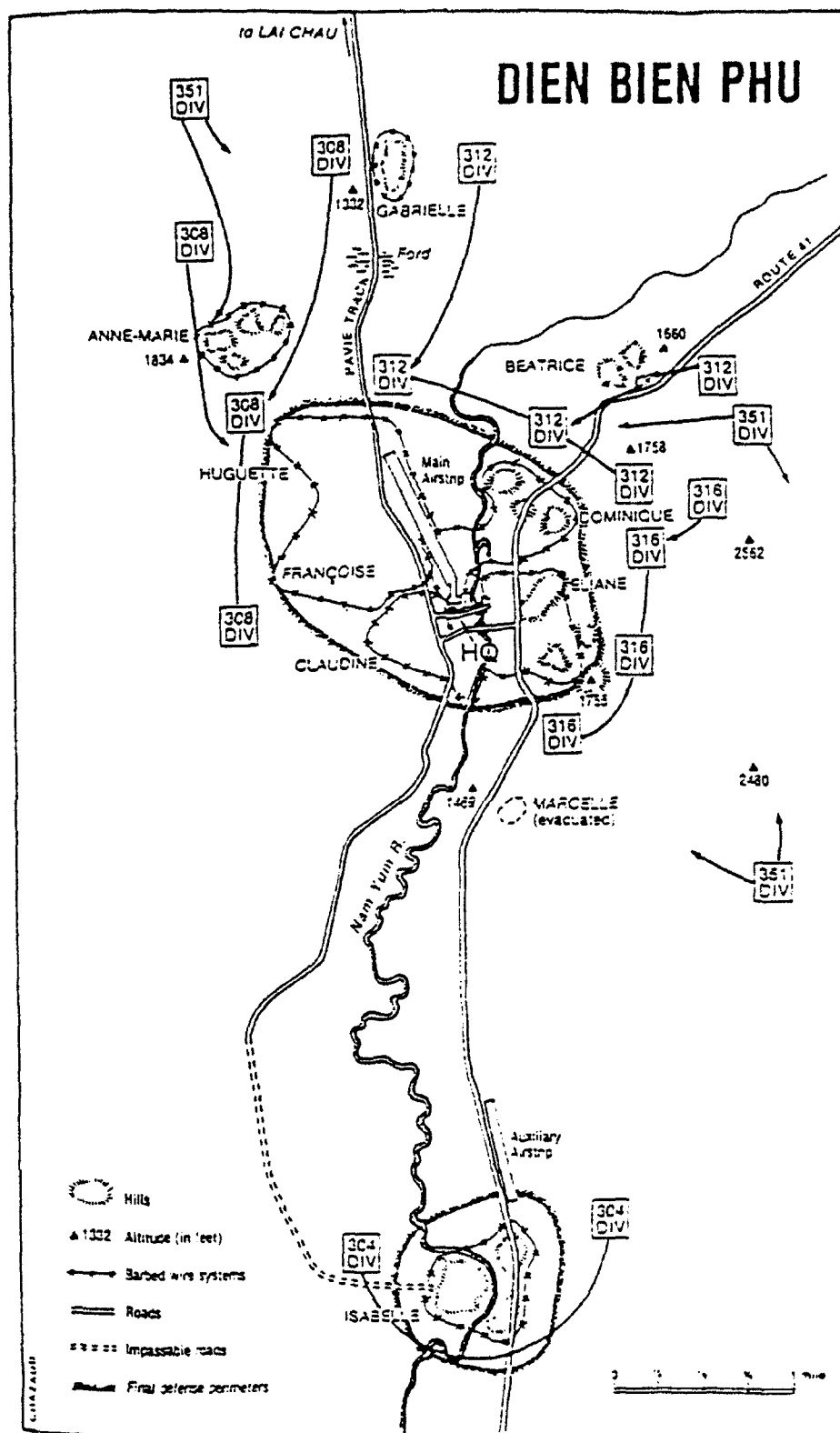


Figure 4. Battle Positions at Dien Bien Phu. Source: Peter Macdonald, Giap, The Victor in Vietnam (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993).

Phase I. Battles for the Northern Outposts

The tactical plan for the defense of Dien Bien Phu was devised by Colonel Castries and tacitly endorsed by both Cogy and Navarre, as both visited the garrison on numerous occasions. It consisted of a series of interlocking strong points, each one capable of supporting the other. Each position was assigned a name. From north to south they were: Gabrielle, Anne-Marie, Beatrice, Huguette, Dominique, Elaine, and Claudine. A final position, Isabelle, was located seven kilometers south of the main defense. Isabelle's purpose was to serve as a base from which to counter-attack and provide fire support for the other strong points.

General Giap's descriptions of the French positions show that he did not envision an easy victory. Giap stated that Dien Bien Phu:

. . . was defended by quite a strong force, and the eastern heights could not be attacked easily. Besides, the artillery and armoured forces of the enemy could intercept any of our approaches; across the flat plain; a system of fortifications, barbed wire and trenches would permit the enemy to wear out and repel any assault, a mobile force of battalions of paratroops was ready to co-ordinate its action with the resistance centres in order to counter-attack and break any offensive.⁷⁷

Giap's respect for the French position was well founded. While the outcome of the battle did ultimately favor the Viet Minh, the fight for Dien Bien Phu was a costly one.

General Giap selected the French battle position Beatrice to attack first. The battles for the northern outposts, began on the 13th of March. Giap planned to reduce each of the northern outposts in turn, working his way from east to west. His tactical plan worked almost exactly as Giap intended. Beatrice was held by one of the crack battalions of the Foreign Legion. Two regiments of the 312th Viet Minh division attacked in a three pronged assault. This resulted in each French company-sized defensive position facing two Viet

Minh battalions. After heavy artillery fire destroyed the command bunker on Beatrice, killing the commander and most of his staff officers, each of the defending companies was fighting its own separate battle. The fight for Beatrice was fierce, but did not last long:

At 2230 hours the 10th Company went under. At 2300 hours the 11th Company sent a radio message that it was fighting around its command bunker. At 0015 hours, 14 March, the 9th Company called for artillery fire on its own position and went off the air.⁷⁸

The next day, 14 March, was marked by the loss of the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu. Concentrated artillery fire from Giap's concealed howitzers destroyed the control tower and cratered the runway. The garrison's isolation was now complete; evacuation by air was impossible. This was to be a fight to the finish.

Giap turned his attention to Gabrielle. Throughout the night of 15 March, withering artillery fire accompanied by massive frontal assaults from the Viet Minh infantry forced the dazed French legionnaires to grudgingly give ground. General Navarre had foreseen this scenario. He had commented on how a Viet Minh capture of Beatrice, due to its commanding location on relatively high ground, would subject much of the garrison to potentially deadly artillery fire. Navarre had said as much to the French artillery commander, Colonel Piroth. Fall recounts that "a young reporter who stood with the official party atop the bunker," recalled Piroth's reply:

"Mon General, no Viet Minh canon will be able to fire three rounds before being destroyed by my artillery." Navarre looked at him, looked back at the vista of the valley beyond and then said quietly: "Maybe so, but this won't be like Na San."⁷⁹

The Viet Minh artillery pieces were hidden on the inward slopes of the surrounding mountains, firing in an observed fire mode. The gunners literally would push their howitzers into prepared positions hidden by the jungle, sight down the tubes, then fire. They then pulled the pieces back into

protected sites before the French could effectively employ counter-battery fires of their own. On the 15th of March, Colonel Piroth retired to his bunker. The Colonel was an old warrior and had only one arm to show for his past battles. He would thus be able to cock his pistol only with great difficulty. Instead, Colonel Piroth selected a hand grenade, pulled the pin out with his teeth, and held the weapon to his chest.⁸⁰ Piroth blamed himself for the shells falling on Dien Bien Phu, but the blame was not exclusively his. General Navarre did not act on his stated concern that the fall of Beatrice would place the garrison in grave danger, and General Cogy was also an artillery officer. LTG O'Daniel's observations that the position could easily be rendered untenable by even a small force of enemy artillery were proved true.

Colonel Castries, the garrison commander, and his subordinate, Lieutenant Colonel Langlais, who commanded the paratroop units, hesitated, then bungled French counterattacks. Castries had intended that his tanks constitute his main counterattack force. He had ten tanks in three platoons at Dien Bien Phu. Castries had dispersed them by sending one platoon to the isolated battle position, Isabelle. They were quickly cut off and never entered into the main battle. This left six tanks under Castries' command. By the end of the battle, Viet Minh bazookas had destroyed all but two. Castries and Langlais sent their inexperienced Vietnamese paratroop battalion, supported by one tank platoon, to relieve Gabrielle. The Viet Minh hit the counterattack force with massive artillery and the attack stalled. Gabrielle had been held by a respected Algerian battalion. The French tanks finally fought through and covered a difficult withdrawal by the Algerians back to the main defensive positions. The tanks were useful, but never decisive:

At 0830, the remnants of 2nd and 3rd Companies, 5th Battalion, 7th Algerian Rifles, joined the paratroopers and tanks at the foot of Gabrielle.

The latter were also pinned down by heavy enemy fire and were taking serious losses. One of the tanks had been hit by a Viet Minh bazooka, and Sgt. Guntz, commander of the 3rd Tank Platoon, was killed. The retreat from Gabrielle, in full daylight, under the direct observation from the enemy who now held Hill Gabrielle, was sheer agony In all the French probably lost close to 1,000 troops that night the Viet Minh had probably lost 1,000 dead and between 2,000 and 3,000 wounded.⁸¹

When the commander of the attacking Viet Minh 312th Division, General Le Trong Tan, proposed a truce to recover the dead and wounded, Castries only agreed after getting permission from General Cogy in Hanoi.⁸² At the tactical level, the French commanders were distinctly out fought in the battle's initial stages.

This was apparently clear to the defenders of the last French northern out post, Anne-Marie. Anne-Marie was defended by the 3rd T'ai Battalion; these were the soldiers General Navarre had failed to have replaced. They had witnessed the fighting and bloody conquests of Beatrice and Gabrielle close hand. It was obvious to the T'ais they were next. In a heavy fog on the night of 17 March, most of the defenders on Anne-Marie abandoned their position and either faded into the mountains or defected to the Viet Minh. Anne-Marie fell without firing a shot. The heavy fog was typical of the poor weather at the time. The French Air Force was unable to attack the Viet Minh on the captured out posts. The attacks on the main French position would occur next.

Phase II. Reinforcement and Reorganization

The period after the fall of the northern outposts was marked by an overall lull in the battle. Both sides consolidated their positions while General Giap introduced a new tactic to the battle, a re-application of World War I style trench warfare. This time was also marked by a crisis in the French command.

as Colonel Castries was, for all practical purposes, relieved by his subordinate officers.

The Viet Minh successfully captured Beatrice, Gabrielle, and Anne-Marie, but at an extremely high price. Exact figures are not available, but most estimates say that the Viet Minh had lost over 2,000 men killed and probably double that number wounded in the battles for Beatrice and Gabrielle; the French lost one-half that number.⁸³ In order to try and preclude further losses of this magnitude, General Giap ordered his troops to begin digging towards the remaining French positions. As aerial reconnaissance photographs began to indicate an increasingly vast and complex trench system growing around Dien Bien Phu, General Cogne ordered Colonel Castries to begin preparations for counter-trench warfare. Castries replied in a personal telegram that he had neither the personnel, nor the expertise for such operations.⁸⁴ Over the next few days, the French began connecting their battle positions with trenches of their own, but the extent of their efforts paled in comparison to those of the Viet Minh.

At this point it became obvious to both General Cogne in Hanoi, and to the battalion commanders at Dien Bien Phu, that Colonel Castries was not prepared for the style of warfare that was to be waged there. Fall, Davidson, and Roy all agree that Cogne agonized for days over the situation, and seriously considered parachuting in and taking personal command of the besieged garrison himself. His staff convinced him otherwise. Instead, the issue was settled at the scene. Lieutenant Colonel Pierre Langlais, a paratroop battalion commander:

Flanked by the fully armed commanders of the other paratroop battalions at Dien Bien Phu, entered de Castries' office and bluntly told him that henceforth the effective command of the fortress would be in his hands, but that as far as the outside world was concerned de Castries would retain the appearance of

command and would function as an intermediary between the paratroop commanders and Hanoi.⁸⁵

Surprisingly, Castries agreed to this arrangement, as did Cogy's Headquarters in Hanoi, where the benign mutiny was ignored and thus tacitly accepted. General Navarre does not mention it in his accounts. It is probable that Navarre was unaware of what happened. As the commander in chief, he should have been. Even in his memoirs written years after the battle ended, Navarre continued to defend Castries. He wrote that "whatever the case, I remain convinced that no one which I could have designated - whether General and Infantry - would have done better than Colonel de Castries."⁸⁶ Langlais himself later said that, "though I was only a simple paratroop lieutenant colonel at the beginning of the battle, I had directly under my orders 10,000 men; but nobody in Hanoi or elsewhere sought to deprive me of that handsome command."⁸⁷ Curiously, Langlais and Castries kept a friendly personal relationship. The two men often met in Castries' bunker at night for regular games of bridge. Langlais had a reputation as a tough and capable battalion commander; he now commanded a division-sized force which parachute reinforcements would ultimately bring to a strength of 15,000 men.

On 28 March, a five battalion assault force covered by close air support and tanks attacked out from Dien Bien Phu to silence Giap's anti-aircraft guns west of Claudine. The Viet Minh were stunned by this attack and suffered over 350 soldiers killed. The French forces succeeded in capturing seventeen antiaircraft machine guns.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, they were all 20mm cannon and smaller, none were the large and deadly 37mm type. While audacious, this attack had monopolized most of the combat power available at Dien Bien Phu. It was too little too late. This event marked the last time the

French forces were ever able to leave their fortified positions for any kind of offensive action at all.

Phase III. Furious Combat

Phase III was what General Navarre called "the key phase of the battle."⁸⁹ It was characterized by incredibly bloody Viet Minh attacks on the main defensive positions of Dominique, Huguette, and Elaine, a near mutiny by some of Giap's troops, and yet another break in the French command. This time, the bad relationship between Cogy and Navarre came to a head. The last event of this phase was the final isolation of Isabelle, the southern-most position.

General Giap began his assaults on the heavily fortified positions of Dominique and Elaine on the 30th of March. This time, the fighting was much tougher for the Viet Minh. The French forces, under the tactical command of Langlais, had placed renewed emphasis on aggressive counter attacks.⁹⁰ Still, Giap's men made early gains and casualties were heavy on both sides. The difference was Giap's casualties could be replaced more easily, and the advantage of numerical superiority was his. In Hanoi, plans were drawn up to parachute additional battalions in to reinforce Dien Bien Phu.⁹¹ Had Navarre previously reinforced Dien Bien Phu, this risky course of action would not have been necessary.

As the fighting intensified, the image of the First World War came to dominate the battlefield. General Davidson wrote that:

In effect, the battle of Dien Bien Phu became a military anachronism. It had reverted forty years to the trench warfare of the Western Front of World War I. The defense featured trenches, dugouts, mine fields, barbed wire, voluminous artillery and machine gun fire. The offense had evolved into sapping, tunneling, short artillery preparations and attacks by specially selected "storm troops." The tanks were used by the French only in an infantry support role, another World War I characteristic.

The casualties of Passchendale and Verdun were there too, only in miniature. Only gas warfare was missing.⁹²

The battle positions changed hands regularly, always at a heavy cost in blood. Close quarter combat became a common occurrence. On the morning of 5 April, the skies over Dien Bien Phu cleared and French fighter-bombers "appeared in the morning sky and began their deadly carousel over the enemy infantry, caught completely in the open and far away from the protective shelter of the jungle."⁹³ Unfortunately, this kind of close air support was temporary. General Navarre stated that the "reduction of the area of the fortress made short-range support more and more difficult."⁹⁴ In mid-April the monsoon rains began to fall in earnest, turning the battlefield into a slippery, muddy quagmire and again making effective aerial attacks difficult, and at times virtually impossible. General Navarre and his staff had been well aware of the weather conditions in the Dien Bien Phu valley. Often, soldiers were fighting hand to hand in waist deep water in the trenches. General Navarre had relied on the French tanks to spearhead his counterattacks. The monsoons prevented that from occurring. The tanks became barely mobile pillboxes as they sank deeply into the mud of Dien Bien Phu.⁹⁵ Again, LTG O'Daniel's observations proved prophetic as the defensive bunkers and fortifications collapsed in the mud.⁹⁶ General Navarre had not followed the advice offered by LTG O'Daniel. Navarre sent a secret letter to Major General Trapnell, Chief of the American Military Assistance Advisory Group in Indochina, in late 1953. In that correspondence he remarked that he was trying to respond to "the insistent suggestions on the part of General O'Daniel." However, Navarre was apparently annoyed with the American attitude. He also wrote that it was the French who had "several years of experience . . . in

the Indochina war."⁹⁷ This conviction may explain why O'Daniel's advice went unheeded.

It is a tribute to the French soldiers that, at the limits of human endurance, it was the Viet Minh who broke first. Giap's losses in April had reached staggering proportions, an estimated 6,000 killed and 8,000 to 10,000 seriously wounded (the Viet Minh had only one surgeon at Dien Bien Phu). There were over 2,500 captured prisoners.⁹⁸ The French began to intercept radio messages of units refusing to obey orders. General Giap admitted as much, although he cloaks the event in jingoistic metaphors:

It was precisely at that time a rightist and negative tendency appeared among our officers and men, under various forms: Fear of casualties, losses, fatigue, difficulty and hardships, underestimation of the enemy, subjectivism and self conceit A campaign of ideological education and struggle was launched from the Party committee to the cells, from officers to soldiers and in all combat units. This campaign was a great success of the political work at the Dien Bien Phu front and one of the greatest achievements of . . . our army.⁹⁹

General Giap paused and assessed his position, but there was never any doubt the campaign would continue. Captured Viet Minh soldiers said they were told they must advance at all costs, the weak hearted would be shot by follow-on officers. Giap reinforced his front line battalions and prepared to attack again.

Reading the dispatches of the intense battle, General Navarre decided to fly from Saigon to Cogy's headquarters on March 30th. The fighting was particularly desperate, and Navarre wanted to re-examine the situation first hand with Cogy. Arriving in the middle of the night, Navarre summoned Cogy. Cogy's aide told Navarre's aide that Cogy was exhausted and was not to be disturbed. Angrily, Navarre took over Cogy's headquarters, and stayed up all night working out detailed instructions with Cogy's staff for the struggling garrison at Dien Bien Phu. When Cogy finally showed up at

the headquarters, after Navarre's second summons around 0745, Navarre, asked him for a situation briefing. Cogy briefed the Commander in Chief the situation as he knew it to be, with information Navarre knew was twelve hours old. At that point, General Navarre later told Roy, "I exploded, I bawled him out. And he in return told me to my face all that he had been telling others for sometime."¹⁰⁰ Cogy was said to have even gone so far as to tell Navarre, "If you weren't a four star general, I'd slap you across the face."¹⁰¹ General Giap's front line soldiers were not the only ones feeling the strains of the fighting at Dien Bien Phu. General Navarre does not say why he did not relieve Cogy. General Davidson finds this question particularly intriguing and offers a compelling explanation. Davidson wrote that:

Navarre's action defies any rational explanation . . . very few officers of any rank in any army would have tolerated the series of calculated insults to which Cogy subjected Navarre The only possible explanation of his failure to act is that Navarre did not want Cogy free to assail his conduct of the Indochina campaign, and in particular, the upcoming debacle at Dien Bien Phu.¹⁰²

No one but Navarre could state with certainty why he retained Cogy in command. Regardless of the possible explanations, his actions were definitely not those of a strong general. Both men, as senior professionals, had to know the worst was yet to come. It is entirely possible that Cogy may have deliberately sought to be relieved. Navarre was well aware of what was happening at Dien Bien Phu. The ultimate responsibility rested with the Commander-in-Chief, and he did not intend on going down alone.

Finally, in this phase, the Viet Minh succeeded in totally isolating the most remote strong point, Isabelle. From the 4th of April on, no ground forces were able to move between Isabelle and the main camp without being attacked and beaten back with heavy losses. Until the end of the siege, Isabelle held on, suffering an exact version of the struggle further north, only on a

reduced scale. Colonel Castries had intended that Isabelle be the base from which his artillery and reserves would launch decisive counter attacks to support the northern positions; instead, it proved even more difficult to accurately parachute supplies on to this much smaller area.

Phase IV. Suffocation

Phase IV marked the beginning of the end. This was the preliminary maneuvering before the final assaults on the center of the fortress. According to General Navarre, the Viet Minh anti-aircraft batteries "come closer each day, rendering the parachute drops more and more dangerous" while the enemy artillery "fires in direct line of sight and at reduced range . . . harassment is now continuous Daily we engage in an unyielding fight for breathing space, but the enemy nibbles at our defensive system and forces us into a progressive tightening of our disposition."¹⁰³ The French defenders could hear the Viet Minh digging closer by the hour. The withering anti-aircraft fire had slowed French resupply efforts to a fraction of what was required, and no more parachute reinforcements would be committed to what everyone now admitted was a lost cause. While policy makers in Washington contemplated the use of American nuclear weapons to break the siege, an idea rejected by President Eisenhower, the embattled Foreign Legion and paratroopers hung on.¹⁰⁴ In an apparent gesture to boost morale, Colonel Castries was promoted to Brigadier General. Most of the other officers at Dien Bien Phu were also advanced a rank. Langlais became a full Colonel. Cogny "had his own brigadier's stars parachuted to de Castries along with a bottle of champagne. They fell outside the lines into Communist hands."¹⁰⁵

Phase V. General Attack. The Final Assault

The final assaults began on the night of 1 May. Hugette, Elaine, and Dominique were the scenes of some of the most intense fighting of the battle. General Giap sensed victory and was willing to pay any price for it. He sent what was left of his best units "over the top" in human wave frontal attacks. French artillery took a devastating toll; entire Viet Minh regiments disappeared in deadly volleys of massed and concentrated artillery fires. The rains had reduced the ground to almost liquid. Fighting was hand to hand. Dien Bien Phu was at the valley's low point and mud was everywhere, further weakening prepared defensive positions. A new Viet Minh weapon was introduced, Katyusha rockets, the infamous "Stalin's organs" of World War II, now added their blasts to the artillery fire raining down on attacker and defender alike. On Isabelle, the few remaining legionnaires began to plan a last attempt to break out.¹⁰⁶ On Elaine, the Viet Minh had one final surprise.

Using a tactic reminiscent of Grant's siege of Petersburg in the American Civil War, General Giap's men tunneled underneath Elaine and planted 3,000 pounds of TNT. At almost midnight on the 6th of May, the explosion was touched off. The entire battle position blew up. No more than half a dozen defenders survived, yet they continued to resist. Dien Bien Phu would fall at about 1740 hours on the 7th of May, but it would not surrender. All throughout the day, the valiant defenders spiked their guns and destroyed their equipment, while still holding off the enemy. The surviving tank crews drained the oil from their machines, then ran the engines full throttle until the motors seized. Even individual rifles were fired with their barrels in the mud, thus bursting them. The final conversation between Hanoi and Dien Bien Phu ended with Corgny instructing Castries to "not end by a white flag. What you have done is too fine for that." Castries replied: "The transmitter will be

destroyed at 1730. We shall fight to the end. Au revoir, General. Vive la France!" The last transmission heard from Dien Bien Phu came from not the command bunker, but from the combat engineers. At 1750 came a quiet voice that said simply, "We're blowing up everything. Adieu."¹⁰⁷

Bernard Fall describes how the battle ended for most of the soldiers. The French Major Jean Nichols later recalled a small white handkerchief waving on top of a rifle, only fifty feet from his final position. It was followed by a Viet Minh soldier who approached, then spoke in French: "You're not going to shoot anymore?" "No, I am not going to shoot anymore" said Nichols. "C'est fini?" said the Viet Minh. "Oui, c'est fini," said the French major.

And all around them, as on some gruesome Judgment Day, mud covered soldiers, French and enemy alike, began to crawl out of their trenches and stand erect as the firing ceased everywhere. The silence was deafening.¹⁰⁸

After the Battle

Battle position Isabelle lasted twenty-four hours longer than the main base, the planned break out never occurred. Exact numbers vary, but French dead, wounded, and missing probably numbered around 8,200. Most accounts agree that over 9,500 men were captured when Dien Bien Phu fell. The Viet Minh were exceptionally callous and brutal in their treatment of captured prisoners of war. The long trek to prisoner of war camps became a death march for most. Only 3,000 French soldiers ever returned.¹⁰⁹

General Giap's divisions paid a tremendous price for their victory at Dien Bien Phu. The Viet Minh casualties are generally estimated at 7,900 men killed and 15,000 wounded. Some estimates are double that number.¹¹⁰ It was a price General Giap was willing to pay, the first Indochina war was over.

Their flag, dyed red with the blood of heroes, enshrines the spirit
While their song thrums to the bark of guns detonating near and around
Mowing down all opposition and ever extending the liberated zones
Make haste to the battlefield! Forward! Let's shout over and over again:
The ambition of every single one of us is to die a glorious death on the
field of battle face to the enemy!¹¹¹

National Anthem of Viet Nam

Endnotes

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⁴⁹"Vietnamese Artillery in Dien Bien Phu" Vietnam Courier, (April 1984), Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 131-132) , p. 11.

⁵⁰Navarre, p. 327.

⁵¹Davidson, p. 196.

⁵²Colonel Nguyen Duc Toai, "The Raid on Gia Lam Airfield," Vietnam Courier, (April 1984), Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 131-132), p. 27.

⁵³Roy, p. 8.

⁵⁴Fall, p. 30.

⁵⁵Navarre, p. 325.

⁵⁶Ibid. , p. 326.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Davidson, p. 179.

⁵⁹Navarre, p. 328.

⁶⁰Fall, pp. 176-177.

- ⁶¹Davidson, p. 211.
- ⁶²Ibid.
- ⁶³Navarre, pp. 355-363.
- ⁶⁴Ibid. , p. 336.
- ⁶⁵Ibid.
- ⁶⁶Fall, p. 75.
- ⁶⁷Navarre, p. 338.
- ⁶⁸Ibid. , p. 403.
- ⁶⁹Roy, pp. 151-152.
- ⁷⁰Fall, p. 85.
- ⁷¹Roy, p. 479.
- ⁷²Ibid. , pp. 151-154.
- ⁷³Davidson, p. 210.
- ⁷⁴Roy, p. 153.
- ⁷⁵Ibid. , p. 154.
- ⁷⁶Fall, p. 27.
- ⁷⁷Giap, p. 79.
- ⁷⁸Davidson, p. 212.
- ⁷⁹Fall, p. 102.
- ⁸⁰Ibid. , p. 156.
- ⁸¹Ibid. , p. 154.
- ⁸²Davidson, p. 213.
- ⁸³Ibid. , p. 221.
- ⁸⁴Fall, p. 175.
- ⁸⁵Ibid. , p. 177.
- ⁸⁶Navarre, p. 326.

- ⁸⁷Fall, p. 177.
- ⁸⁸Ibid. , p. 186.
- ⁸⁹Navarre, p. 360.
- ⁹⁰Roy, p. 231.
- ⁹¹Ibid. p. 238.
- ⁹²Davidson, p. 230.
- ⁹³Fall, p. 221.
- ⁹⁴Navarre, p. 372.
- ⁹⁵John Pimlott, Vietnam. The Decisive Battles, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), p. 17.
- ⁹⁶Fall, p. 368.
- ⁹⁷Letter number 405 from General Navarre to MG Trapnell, Chief, U.S. MAAG, Indochina, dated 24 October, 1953. Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 101).
- ⁹⁸Fall. , p. 231.
- ⁹⁹Giap, p. 132.
- ¹⁰⁰Fall, p. 203.
- ¹⁰¹Davidson, p. 225.
- ¹⁰²Ibid. , pp. 226-227.
- ¹⁰³Navarre, p. 362.
- ¹⁰⁴John Prados, The Sky Would Fall, (New York: The Dial Press), 1983, p. 156.
- ¹⁰⁵Fall, p. 257.
- ¹⁰⁶Navarre, p. 389.
- ¹⁰⁷Fall, pp. 407-408.
- ¹⁰⁸Ibid. , p. 411.
- ¹⁰⁹Ibid. , p. 438.

¹¹⁰J.J. Zasloff, Memorandum RM-4618-PR, May 1967, "The Role of the Sanctuary in Insurgency," The Rand Corporation, Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 87) Fiche 87.

¹¹¹National Anthem of Vietnam, Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 91).

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF THE GENERALSHIP OF HENRI NAVARRE

The purpose of this chapter is to use the previously described model of generalship to compare the events that took place during the battle of Dien Bien Phu with the actions of General Navarre, and then to draw conclusions concerning Navarre's capacity as a senior military leader. The model is drawn from the United States Army's doctrine for generalship, Field Manual 22-103, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels. FM 22-103 identifies three categories of professional skills that are the "yardstick by which senior professionals are judged."¹ These three categories are Conceptual Skills, Competency Skills, and Communications Skills. Each of these categories has certain traits associated with it. Taken from FM 22-103, and described in Chapter One, the doctrinal aspects of senior level leadership and command are the professional skills as follows:

<u>Conceptual</u>	<u>Competency</u>	<u>Communications</u>
Decision making	Perspective	Interpersonal
Forecasting	Endurance	Listening
Creativity	Risk taking	Language
Intuition	Coordination	Teaching
	Assessment	Persuasion

No one single factor caused the French defeat. Rather, several events combined to cause the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Chapters two and three recounted the major events leading up to and during the battle. Many key issues relating to Navarre's generalship emerged. These issues will be analyzed by examining them within the contexts of the professional skills to which they most closely

apply. In so doing, conclusions will be drawn as to general Navarre's effectiveness in applying the professional skills American doctrine attributes to successful generalship. The major issues and the headings under which they will be addressed are:

Conceptual Skills

1. The failure of the Navarre plan.
2. General Navarre's suspicion of his mission to defend Laos.
3. The consistent failures of Navarre's intelligence process and his consequent underestimation of the Viet Minh.
4. The influence of the battle of Na San on General Navarre.
5. The effects of weather as a planning factor.

Competency Skills

1. The relative success of the Viet Minh logistical efforts compared to the logistical efforts of the French.
2. Navarre's clear and total advantage in airpower was never a decisive factor in the battle.
3. The failure of Dien Bien Phu as a base for ground offensive operations.
4. The Viet Minh's success in the artillery battle.
5. Navarre's failure to abandon the Dien Bien Phu valley when his forces were clearly threatened with defeat.

Communications Skills

1. General Navarre's failure to relieve General Cogy despite their bad personal relationship and clear justification to do so.
2. General Cogy's failure to execute Navarre's instructions on several occasions.

3. General Navarre's consistent tendency to ignore the sound advice he received.
4. The incapacity of the tactical commander at Dien Bien Phu, Colonel Castries, for the type of battle fought there.

Conceptual Skills

Sound conceptual skills are essential for successful generalship. Forecasting, decision making, creativity and intuition together comprise the generalship category of conceptual skill. According to FM 22-103, well developed conceptual skills give generals a "first line of defense when dealing with complexity, allowing them to shape the future, be good planners and generate the timely capability to outthink the enemy."² General Navarre's capacity for conception is assessed below.

Forecasting

Forecasting is a general's projection of what needs to be accomplished over time to achieve the desired result; it is his vision of the future. At each progressively higher level of command, the length of time involved in forecasting typically increases. More senior commanders must see farther into the future than their subordinates. In terms of his capacity to forecast, Navarre's plan was well conceived and might well have accomplished the French government's strategic objectives in Indochina. It was in execution that Navarre failed.

General Navarre's accurate appraisal of the military situation in Indochina formed the underpinnings of his plan. He recognized that General Giap held the overall initiative and operational advantage. Only in the southern theater was the French position dominant. The plan called for a strategic defensive in the north and an offensive in the south. This was

supported by a substantial increase in pacification and the establishment of strong native forces, what the Americans would later call "Vietnamization." Navarre recognized and forecasted that this would take time; he outlined his campaigns in seasons and planned one to two years ahead. Navarre's plan, on the surface, appeared to have adequately translated his government's political objectives into military goals. The endorsement Navarre received from LTG O'Daniel helped insure continued American material support. O'Daniel tempered his opinion by listing several serious concerns over the tactical situation at Dien Bien Phu. He commented on the vulnerabilities of the base to artillery and adverse weather. Navarre ignored O'Daniel's practical suggestions to improve his defensive posture. He then strongly implied in his letter to the U.S. Military Advisory Group that the Americans lacked the experience in Indochina to advise the French how to fight the Viet Minh. Still, after assessing French military plans in Indochina, LTG O'Daniel's wrote to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he was confident that General Navarre had a sound concept for operations there.³ This led directly to the Chairman of the JCS, General Arthur Radford, writing the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, that the "French should be urged at all possible levels to support and vigorously prosecute the Navarre concept."⁴ Navarre apparently tolerated the American advisors only because he had to. He was fully aware of the fact that his logistical lifeline originated in Washington, not Paris. General Navarre convinced the Americans, whose support he relied upon, to believe in his plan. He then paid lip service to their advice, and subsequently disregarded it.

FM 22-103 also states that another element of forecasting is the effective use of staff planners. Measuring the degree to which a staff influences a commander's planning is often difficult. However, it is the commander alone who must shoulder the burdens that his decisions impose.

In the case of Navarre and Dien Bien Phu, a consistent pattern of intelligence failures emerges as a key planning factor that plagued the French throughout the campaign. Particularly significant among these was Navarre's failure to appreciate the tremendous impact weather could have on military operations in the Dien Bien Phu valley. General Dechaux had explicitly told Navarre that weather conditions alone could compromise his air force's ability to maintain the garrison at Dien Bien Phu. Dechaux made that statement before he had even considered Viet Minh air defenses or the possibility that Dien Bien Phu might require massive amounts of close air support. Navarre had also planned on using tanks at Dien Bien Phu to spearhead his counterattacks. Monsoon rains and the constant movements of ten thousand men turned the entire valley into mud, rendering the tanks all but useless. Weather patterns are not military secrets. French pilots and intelligence officers had long known that the Dien Bien Phu valley typically received over five feet of rain during the monsoon season. Navarre must have known this as well. He was a senior intelligence officer. It is difficult to imagine him over-looking or disregarding so basic a factor in intelligence analysis as the weather, but that is exactly what he did. Navarre wrote that the weather was often unfavorable for air operations. He failed to mention that he was told in advance such would be the case.

General Navarre was a senior military professional who had skillfully linked political goals with military objectives, but he made a significant mistake in translating those objectives into a sound operational plan. Navarre was capable of forecasting strategies and sequencing events to achieve his operational objectives. He was far less adept at accepting the visions of others.

Decision Making

General Navarre's decision making skill is analyzed in terms of his decision to defend Laos at Dien Bien Phu. The historians Fall, Roy, Davidson and Karnow all devoted a great deal of attention to proving that Navarre was deceived by the French government into believing that the defense of Laos was a significant part of his overall mission. They have all stated that the French government was willing to abandon the defense of Laos, but could not say so, even privately, to their Commander-in-Chief. Navarre addressed this issue at length in his memoirs. He wrote that he tried repeatedly to ascertain the real extent of his obligation to defend Laos. Navarre claimed that were it not for the duty to defend Laos, there were few compelling reasons for occupying Dien Bien Phu. In every case, Navarre said that he was either told directly to defend Laos, or at least left convinced that he had been so instructed. In his words, "the 'mission' although not expressly renewed, remains."⁵ Conventional historical wisdom that Navarre was effectively deceived is probably correct. Positioned right on the major historical invasion route, Dien Bien Phu was the natural place to execute that defense. However, it is Navarre's constant questioning of his duty in this regard that is most important in assessing his generalship.

The Commander-in-Chief was obviously very suspicious of the intentions of his political leaders in France. The revolving door governments of the Fourth Republic could only have added to his misgivings. Navarre was not convinced that his government was committed to defending Laos, even though his stated mission remained. This explains why he might have hesitated to send more substantial forces to the garrison at Dien Bien Phu. The 15,000 combined soldiers from France and her Indochinese allies Navarre allocated were clearly less than adequate. This is particularly true when one

considers that the available combined French Union forces in Indochina numbered over 400,000 men, a quarter of which were the first rate legionnaires and paratroopers of the French Expeditionary Force.⁶ There were other military operations on-going in Indochina at the time of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, Navarre mentioned them when he spoke of the many missions his air force had to perform. None were more important. Navarre never intended for this to be the case. Navarre knew at the time that Dien Bien Phu was "a battle on a scale with the overall theater of operations for Indochina."⁷ This was an accurate assessment, yet he failed to send enough forces there to back up his appraisal. General Giap reached the same conclusions Navarre had. He decided to send the majority of his army to Dien Bien Phu.

General Navarre's decision making skills were lacking because he failed to adequately support his decision to defend Laos with sufficient force to accomplish the mission. It is apparent that Navarre reluctantly decided to defend Laos only because he was ordered to do so. Once he accepted a major theater-level engagement at Dien Bien Phu, Navarre failed to allocate sufficient forces to accomplish the mission he selected. Navarre abandoned his role as the key decision maker, and the men at Dien Bien Phu, to fate. To defend an entire country, even in a broader strategic context, is clearly a major undertaking. General Navarre might well have been successful at Dien Bien Phu had he backed his decision with enough resources to achieve his stated objectives.

Creativity

FM 22-103 warns that in decision making, senior leaders must guard against "preconceived opinions and mind-sets that can interfere with the analysis process."⁸ In describing Creativity, FM 22-103 notes that:

Creativity refers to the ability to find workable, original, and novel solutions to problems All exceptional leaders and commanders have a large measure of creative skills. When faced with seemingly impossible problems, they developed solutions which not only worked but turned the situation in their favor.⁹

In assessing General Navarre's creativity, the assertion is that having decided to occupy Dien Bien Phu, Navarre reacted to Giap's growing encirclement by recalling an earlier, similar situation, Na San. The Na San solution was anything but a creative one.

Na San left an indelible mark on Navarre and the entire French high command. The notion of the fortified base camp, the fortress-like "hedgehog," can be found in all the sources and permeates the entire story of Dien Bien Phu. Only seventy five miles from Dien Bien Phu, Na San was in operation for over six months, during which time the French inflicted heavy casualties on the Viet Minh. The fact that the French had defeated the Viet Minh in a defensive engagement behind strongly prepared fortifications was deceptive. Superficially, this resembled Dien Bien Phu, but the French had fought only one Viet Minh division with ten of their own battalions at Na San. Here was a battle on nearly equal terms. The force Giap assembled at Dien Bien Phu was many times that size.

Reacting to General Giap's encirclement of Dien Bien Phu, General Navarre applied a solution from the past, which was neither original nor novel. Navarre apparently did not consider that the Viet Minh might also adapt their tactics based on the experience of Na San. The offensive operations Navarre had intended for Dien Bien Phu were a development of the tactics of

Na San, and could be considered original. However, Navarre had stopped such forays in December in favor of digging in to defend against Giap. He said he did so because there were not enough forces to accomplish both missions. In retrospect, this proved to be a grave error. Thus the bastion hedgehog concept became the essence of Dien Bien Phu. Navarre did not effectively demonstrate creativity when he settled on an already well used tactic from World War II; a tactic that his adversary was familiar with. Rather, by employing the techniques of trench warfare, and turning the battlefield into what Davidson called "a military anachronism," it was General Giap who demonstrated creativity with his surprising re-application of the tactics of World War One.¹⁰

Intuition

The final conceptual skill, intuition, is the most subjective, and hence difficult to judge. FM 22-103 states that for a general officer, the essence of intuition is the capacity to rapidly assess a situation and rule out that which is not possible. In so doing the senior leader increases his chances for making decisions that will work. Intuition is a trait that generals acquire through study and experience. FM 22-103 states that "quick and ready insights which come from being prepared, from study, and from concentration on critical issues" are indicative of intuition.¹¹ Intuitive skills are a critical aid to decision making, they can greatly speed up the process. General Navarre's experience and background provide useful insights into his capacity for intuition.

General Navarre was first and foremost an accomplished intelligence officer. Although commissioned into the cavalry, Navarre's biography indicates that he made his reputation and earned his promotions

primarily as an intelligence and high level staff officer. Given his background, it is all the more difficult to understand the consistent pattern of intelligence failures attributable to General Navarre and his command during the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

In addition to the previously discussed issue of the weather, there were two further major intelligence failures. These were the beliefs that the Viet Minh could never assemble or sustain a large force at Dien Bien Phu, and that they lacked any significant artillery or air defense weaponry. Both of these factors contributed to the defeat of General Navarre at Dien Bien Phu.

The French intelligence staff repeatedly stated that the Viet Minh could never assemble a force of any significant size at Dien Bien Phu. General Navarre accepted this flawed prediction and selected Dien Bien Phu as a site for his base camp. Giap's army had evolved from a formidable, but elusive, guerrilla militia into a conventional army capable of massing a corps-sized formation. Navarre was aware of rapidly expanding Chinese aid of the Viet Minh, but failed to accurately assess the effect of that support at the time. After the fact, Navarre admitted that, "the increase, sudden and massive, in Chinese aid is the . . . cause of the fall of Dien Bien Phu."¹² It must be remembered that Navarre intended that Dien Bien Phu be the center piece of French offensive operations in northern Indochina. These operations were to be spoiling attacks against Giap's vulnerable logistical lines of communication. Navarre deemed Giap's logistics as important enough to attack, yet, at the same time he disregarded the implications those same logistics structures held for the Viet Minh army. Intelligence is not simply information about one's opponent. It is the analysis of what that information means that yields useful intelligence. General Navarre failed to analyze the meaning of the

information he had at his disposal until it was too late for the defenders at Dien Bien Phu.

Navarre further dismissed the Viet Minh's ability to bring artillery pieces to Dien Bien Phu in any significant numbers. When pressed on the possibility that any Viet Minh artillery might be brought to bear, tactical level commanders, Colonel Piroth in particular, confidently predicted its quick destruction by French counter-battery fires. Instead, the French cannon could not find the Viet Minh guns, which emerged to fire one or two rounds, then disappeared back into the dense jungles around Dien Bien Phu. French artillery also relied upon aerial observation to direct its fires. Giap's anti-aircraft weapons destroyed the spotter planes, further blinding Navarre's artillery.

General Navarre stated that any artillery or anti-aircraft guns "would have to be set up on the inward slopes of the basin . . . the batteries would be seen . . . then silenced . . ." ¹³ Setting up on the inward slopes, where they could literally sight down the tubes, was exactly what the Viet Minh did. Navarre later described the results of his mistakes:

The sudden revelation of the destructive power of the artillery and heavy mortars shocked the combatants . . . just as in 1940, when our units had been pinned to the ground by the attacks of the Stukas Our artillery, deprived by the AA defense of their means of observation, disoriented by a use of enemy artillery for which it had not prepared, suddenly realized its impotence, had no longer been for us the element of superiority it had always been in Indochina. ¹⁴

General Navarre severely underestimated his enemy, a cardinal military sin. Intuition is a learned trait based upon experience and training. One concludes that flawed operational intelligence, and the tactical application of that intelligence, played a great role in the defeat of General Navarre, the intelligence officer.

General Navarre's conceptual skills were clearly inadequate. Only in designing the well conceived Navarre plan did the Commander in Chief achieve some measure of success. He then failed to execute his own designs with adequate force. Navarre was willing to take American material, but not the advice that came with it. When confronted with the decision of whether to attack or defend from a base that he originally intended to be offensive in nature, Navarre recalled Na San and dug-in. Navarre's lack of enthusiasm for the defense of Laos may well have resulted in his garrisoning Dien Bien Phu vastly under strength for the mission he gave it. Navarre disregarded the most basic of planning factors when he failed to consider the great influence that weather would have on his operation; despite the warnings of his most senior air force commander. Finally, Navarre grossly underestimated the Viet Minh through failed intelligence processes. Given General Navarre's background, this poor intuition was unforgivable.

General Navarre clearly displayed inadequate conceptual skills for a senior general. His capacity for forecasting did not acknowledge the abilities of others to also envision the future. His decision making skills were undermined by his suspicions of his mission to defend Laos. Navarre consistently displayed a lack of intuition and creativity. The results of his conceptual shortcomings were disastrous for the soldiers at Dien Bien Phu.

Competency Skills

The actions of General Navarre in conducting the battle are examined using the doctrinal professional competency skills. FM 22-103 describes competency skills as the essential ingredients of battlefield success:

Competency skills provide senior leaders with the confidence to be flexible, the courage to face change, and the willingness to apply their conceptual skills fully Moreover, the competency of senior leaders influences their judgment and the stature of their

actions. The very survival of their units and their soldiers depends on their competency skills. Soldiers have a right to expect their leaders to know what they are doing.¹⁵

FM 22-103 emphasizes a general officer's personal responsibility for his own competency. Even though there may be circumstances beyond his control, American doctrine still places the responsibility to insure that the right conditions to engender battlefield success with the senior leader. General Navarre's competency skills are analyzed in terms of the traits of perspective, endurance, risk taking, coordination and assessment.

Perspective

FM 22-103 states that perspective skills "are specific to senior professionals."¹⁶ The essence of perspective is the ability to view events in their proper and overall contexts. General Navarre demonstrated weak perspective skills by failing to initially perceive his occupation of Dien Bien Phu as having the significance that it did. Then, once the implications of this became clear, Navarre did not take appropriate action to avoid a tragic defeat.

Given the Navarre plan, with its emphasis on the strategic defense in the north and offense in the south, General Navarre apparently intended that the garrison at Dien Bien Phu conduct a theater-level economy of force mission. As previously mentioned, Dien Bien Phu was to be a base for spoiling attacks on Giap's rear areas, not the center piece of Navarre's planned operations. Navarre's stated main effort was in the south, and there were on-going operations beside Dien Bien Phu. However, the bulk of Giap's army was not in the southern theater, it was surrounding Colonel Castries. Navarre was slow to recognize and accept this fact. General Giap had changed the equation by attacking Navarre's strategy. Giap knew that Dien Bien Phu, not the southern theater, had become France's center of gravity in Indochina.

Navarre was fatally slower to recognize the new situation his occupation of Dien Bien Phu had created.

Gradually Navarre did come to see the significance Dien Bien Phu held to the Viet Minh. What is difficult to understand is, why, once he did finally recognize the garrison's significance as a magnet for the Viet Minh, did Navarre not abandon it? Castries' battalions were confronting a substantial enemy force as early as December of 1953. One of the lessons of Na San was that fortified air-land bases could be evacuated if it became necessary or expedient to do so. While there is no direct evidence, most likely Navarre remembered Na San and felt that he could still win at Dien Bien Phu. The French stayed put. Navarre's sense of perspective was misplaced. He was concerned with the whole of Indochina when he should have focused more closely on Dien Bien Phu. When the opening salvos from the Viet Minh artillery on March 12th 1954, told Navarre he had made a great mistake, it was already too late.

Endurance

FM 22-103 states that "endurance is the ability to be present at critical places and times."¹⁷ It requires both mental and physical stamina. The responsibilities of high command and the pressures that derive from those burdens can be tremendous. FM 22-103 asserts that "senior leaders who have good endurance are energetic and involved, worthy of emulation, and clear and fresh in thought and action."¹⁸ The battle of Dien Bien Phu tested the endurance of both General Navarre and his key subordinates.

As Commander in Chief in Indochina, it was not Navarre's place to be on the ground at Dien Bien Phu any more than General Westmoreland should have been at Khe Sahn or Eisenhower at Normandy. The Commander in Chief

belongs at his appropriate headquarters, where ever he can most influence the larger action. It can be risky to do otherwise, and here lies another facet of the personal endurance demanded of senior officers. It is frequently difficult for a senior leader to reconcile where he should be with where he might wish to be. Personal loyalties to units and soldiers combine with the warrior ethic to make such rational and detached decisions extremely difficult for the men who must make them. MacArthur had to be ordered from Corregidor by President Roosevelt. Cogy agonized over his decision not to jump into Dien Bien Phu and personally take command.¹⁹ Navarre was cold, rational and analytical, it was in character for him to command in a detached fashion from his headquarters. Clearly he felt Saigon was the appropriate place for him to be when he answered his critics by saying, "there never was, as the press has claimed, a lack of liaison between the actions of Headquarters at Saigon or Hanoi."²⁰ Eventually, Navarre did dispatch his deputy commander, General Bodet, to Cogy's headquarters in Hanoi to act in his stead. For the most part, Navarre stayed in Saigon. It was to Cogy that Navarre had charged the conduct of the battle. He wrote that, Cogy "had complete responsibility for the land battle . . . and almost all air activity."²¹

Navarre's endurance and ability to be at the critical place and time suffers mostly when contrasted with General Giap. Giap's advantage over the French in this regard was an important organizational one. It offers a valuable available lesson for leaders of large-scale, modern, and western-styled armies. The critical place was not Saigon or Hanoi, but Dien Bien Phu. Navarre was a strategic level commander, he belonged at his headquarters in Saigon. Cogy was the operational commander, his place was in Hanoi. Castries had the tactical responsibilities at Dien Bien Phu. General Giap performed all three of these roles himself. Just as it was in character for

Navarre to command from afar, so was it like Giap to execute close personal command. His simple organizational structure afforded him the ability to do just that. When Giap moved his command to a cave near Dien Bien Phu, he clearly was at the critical place and time. From there Giap could directly control strategy, operations and tactics; all at a time and place of his choosing. This gave a significant advantage to the Viet Minh.

General Navarre could also tire and show signs of fatigue. An example of this occurred during Navarre's visit to Hanoi when he stayed up all night actively monitoring the situation at Dien Bien Phu while Cogny was away. By asking Cogny to brief him on a situation he had slept through, and that had changed dramatically over night, Navarre intentionally set General Cogny up for his wrath. General Navarre's detailing of how "I exploded . . . I bawled him out, and he in return told me to my face all that he had been telling others for some time," is indicative of two men who had both reached the limits of their endurance.²² While the extent to which personal stamina affected Navarre's actions is debatable, the strain he and the other French officers were under was enormous. On the actual battlefield at Dien Bien Phu, Colonel Castries was described as behaving "as if a spring had broken inside him."²³

General Navarre's organizational structure was not unusual. Through no real fault of Navarre's, however, his command organization compromised his ability to directly influence events when compared with General Giap's. The incident between Navarre and Cogny was indicative of an even greater personal dislike between the two men that is examined in detail later. The battle for Indochina was the battle for Dien Bien Phu, and at that particular place, the endurance of the French senior leaders compared badly with that of General Giap and the Viet Minh.

Risk Taking and Coordination

Risk taking is decision making in varying degrees of uncertainty. If a commander accepts risk, he can be wrong and not suffer the total loss of his forces. A commander gambles when he stakes the well being of his entire army on uncertainty. There is a balance senior leaders must strike between prudence and timidity in caution, and boldness and recklessness in audacity. FM 22-103 states that:

How and when one risks is a matter of professional choice. It depends on weighing the potential cost against the desired payoff. But the use of risk taking skills assumes that the senior leaders have the technical and tactical competency to take the risk in the first place. Competent risk takers know what risks they are taking What may appear as boldness to one may appear as rashness to another.²⁴

Coordination skills, according to FM 22-103, "include activities designed to enhance the ability of elements of the organization to work together."²⁵ The two aspects of the logistic battle, the ability to supply one's own forces, and the ability to effectively prevent one's opponent from doing the same, were crucial areas where General Navarre accepted what he saw as risks. For both of these aspects Navarre relied exclusively on air power. For this reason General Navarre's ability to coordinate the capabilities of his air force is examined concurrently with his risk taking skill. Navarre appears to have placed an unrealistic and nearly impossible burden on his air forces. This factor was so important to the outcome of the battle that Navarre, in fact, gambled. In so doing he lost the cream of his army.

General Dechaux, Navarre's Air Component Commander in the theater, objected to the Dien Bien Phu operation from the out set. Dechaux had pointed out to Navarre that the distance from the French air bases to Dien Bien Phu placed French fighter-bombers at the extreme limits of their range, reducing loiter and attack times to the bare minimum. Navarre's flawed

intelligence analysis had convinced him that he would not require a great deal of close air support at Dien Bien Phu. Navarre admitted this was true only after the fact when he commented that, "350 kilometers was perfectly acceptable for the . . . battle we were going to fight."²⁶ Navarre did station a small contingent of Bearcats at Dien Bien Phu initially, but this option evaporated when Giap's artillery destroyed the airstrip on the second day of the battle.²⁷ The brave French fighter pilots did their best to support the troops on the ground during the battle, when they could. One intelligence failure multiplied the effects of another. The predictable torrential rains of the monsoons grounded the planes throughout most of the fighting. Roy stated that only when pushed by the Commander-in-Chief did Dechaux reluctantly concede the luke warm endorsement that the mission "was possible."²⁸ When Dechaux made that statement he and Navarre were both unaware of Giap's newly enhanced anti-aircraft capabilities. The Chinese supplied anti-aircraft artillery guns were a major tactical surprise in the battle. Giap withheld the fires of these formidable new weapons until a French withdrawal by land was all but impossible. The last major French ground attack out of the besieged garrison on March 28th was intended to try and destroy some of the Viet Minh anti-aircraft guns. The raid so surprised the Viet Minh that it achieved modest success, but the guns they destroyed were only smaller caliber weapons, not the formidable Chinese 37mm cannons. After this attack, Giap tightened his noose around Dien Bien Phu even more. By the end of March it had taken five battalions and most of the combat power at Dien Bien Phu to mount even this attack with its limited objectives.²⁹ Navarre's troops were never able to venture out again. The net result was that the valley of Dien Bien Phu became a "flak alley" forcing the

French air force to drop supplies from increasingly higher altitudes; less and less got through to the embattled garrison.

Damage inflicted on the seventy-eight aircraft of the transport fleet during the raid on the Gia Lam airfield by Viet Minh commandos compounded Navarre's transport problem.³⁰ General Navarre described a painfully slow aircraft replacement process from the Americans, saying that "their delivery . . . was so slow that they got there . . . much too late to do any good."³¹ He discussed in detail how he tried to get more aircraft to support the battle at Dien Bien Phu. He seems to offer the lack of adequate support in aircraft as a partial explanation for the French defeat there. This avoids the fact that Navarre accepted, even forced, the operation with only the assets he knew he had on hand. There is no mention in the evidence of a planned increase in French aircraft in Indochina. Navarre's decision to launch and then support, the occupation of Dien Bien Phu over the expressed reservations of his senior air commander was an enormous risk that had the greatest of consequences.

The second aspect of risk taking was Navarre's attempts to interdict the Viet Minh supply lines with air power. One of the initial purposes of the base at Dien Bien Phu was to interdict Viet Minh logistical lines of communication with ground attacks. Navarre stated that he felt compelled by the size of the French forces at Dien Bien Phu to cease his offensive patrols in favor of fortification; his only remaining alternative at that point to interdict Giap's logistics became airpower. Navarre's miscalculations resulted in the imposition of a massive new tasking on his already severely stretched air forces. The result was a largely ineffective bombing campaign against the Viet Minh logistical supply lines. Giap's troops overcame these attacks with the scope of their efforts. Floating disassembled trucks and howitzers down rampaging rivers and lacing together entire tracts of jungle canopy for

concealment are indicative of the Viet Minh's determination and planning capabilities.

Navarre was also aware of the large-scale supply bases just across the Chinese border, but only comprehended their implications when it was too late. He could not stop the supply efforts mounted from them. Additionally, Navarre chose to risk his own logistical efforts entirely on air transportation. Navarre's capacity for risk taking was neutralized both by his own negligence in considering weather and terrain, and by the actions of his enemy. Giap's supplies got through, Navarre's were constricted. In the logistical battle, Giap had won. Navarre gambled and lost.

In finally assessing Navarre's coordination skill it is significant that he largely delegated this function to his subordinates. The result was Navarre abdicated his responsibility for the control of events. In characterizing Dien Bien Phu as primarily an air battle, General Navarre acknowledged that he and his command would have to orchestrate the efforts of all the joint elements of the French military in Indochina. The ability to maximize the combat potential of a military organization by the skillful application of joint operations was as necessary at Dien Bien Phu as it is today. In assigning Cogny "complete responsibility for the land battle, and that of coordinating with aviation to carry out their missions," Navarre admitted that he had created an unorthodox arrangement, stating that the defense of Dien Bien Phu was "on a scale with the overall theater of operations . . . and therefore could have been assigned to one command organization under the Commander-in-Chief."³² Navarre said that he felt Cogny was closer and more familiar with the area and the enemy. Navarre held Cogny accountable for the air and land battles, even though it was he, not Cogny, who ignored Dechaux's objections.

Navarre's risk taking and coordination skills were inadequate during the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Navarre gambled when he decided to occupy Dien Bien Phu against the advice of his air component commander. His failure to aggressively execute his planned ground offensive operations then resulted in an impossible burden being placed on his air force. His attempts to shift responsibility on to Cohny after he had already set the terms of the battle are not convincing. Responsibility for the failed logistical efforts and air campaign are Navarre's alone.

Assessment Skills

FM 22-103 asserts that "assessment skills are important to senior professionals because they provide the capability to determine the conditions of organizations and then develop strategies to respond to identified strengths and shortcomings."³³ Navarre's strategic assessments were basically correct; however, Navarre's evident penchant for accepting bad advice thwarted his plans operationally.

The Navarre plan was based upon an apparently accurate evaluation of the situation in Indochina. The previously cited statements of O'Daniel, Radford and Dulles indicate that the Americans in particular believed in Navarre's plan. As this thesis examines Navarre from an American perspective, the views of these men are particularly applicable. The strategy was good, General Navarre settled upon the right plan. Even Giap conceded that point.³⁴ Taking decisive operational action to execute that plan was the next step. Occupying Dien Bien Phu was seen as but one important aspect of the over all action. It was in assessing the early results of that occupation that Navarre failed his command.

The doctrine contained in FM 22-103 states that assessment is based upon personal direct observation, as well as the observations of others. General Navarre toured the base camp at Dien Bien Phu on several occasions. By the eve of the battle in early March, Navarre had become increasingly concerned that the situation had taken a turn for the worse. With Castries' large scale patrols no longer able to venture beyond the garrison perimeter, there was certainly strong reason for concern. Jules Roy in particular described the many tactical conditions at Dien Bien Phu that troubled the Commander in Chief.³⁵ The potential enemy use of artillery on the forward slopes of the surrounding mountains was paramount among these. The less than reliable status of some of the coalition allies from the French Union also bothered Navarre. Navarre considered the assessments of others, but he went too far, apparently allowing his own judgments to be subordinated by those of Cogne, Castries and Piroth. Cogne said that "this fight offers the prospect for a great defensive victory. It would be a catastrophe from the point of view of morale if the Viets failed to attack."³⁶ Piroth boasted of the sure destruction of any conceivable enemy artillery. Castries planned mobile cavalry warfare. When indicators of Viet Minh superiority around Dien Bien Phu were present everywhere, none of the senior leaders seemed willing to either believe or admit it. Navarre's personal assessments probably told him as much. Still he did not alter his plans. General Navarre's ability to accurately employ his own observations and assessment skills at strategic levels was appropriate for a senior general officer. He seemed less able to weigh the opinions of others. General Navarre accepted bad advice against his own better judgment on the ground at Dien Bien Phu. From then on he no longer held the initiative in executing his plans.

General Navarre fails to measure up to the FM 22-103 doctrinal yardstick in terms of his competency skills. His perspective was misplaced when he failed to realize that the battle for Dien Bien Phu had become the battle for all of Indochina until it was too late. Navarre could not compete with the superior endurance capabilities General Giap's simple organization afforded the Viet Minh. His senior leaders clearly displayed the effects of the strains of battle. Navarre gambled that he could both resupply his own troops, and interdict the Viet Minh supply lines with airpower alone. As a result he doomed the garrison at Dien Bien Phu from the out set. Having gambled, Navarre then passed off to General Cogny the unenviable task of trying to make it all work. Finally, Navarre allowed himself and his senior commanders to delude themselves into believing that all was well at Dien Bien Phu when strong indications existed that just the opposite was true. FM 22-103 states that soldiers have a right to expect their senior leaders to be competent. General Navarre failed in this regard at Dien Bien Phu.

Communications Skills

The FM 22-103 definition of communications provides the means for examining the relationships between the French commanders, and their organizations. In so doing a consistent pattern of communications breakdowns between the French military commanders at Dien Bien Phu becomes apparent. These problems were a significant factor in the final French defeat. General Navarre's communications skills are analyzed using the subordinate skills of interpersonal skill, listening, language, teaching and persuasion.

Interpersonal Skill

Interpersonal skills are defined by FM 22-103 as the foundation of trust and confidence senior leaders and their subordinates share. They also

provide a way for senior leaders to recognize their own biases and prevent clouded judgment.³⁷ The poor relationship between General Navarre and his most important subordinate, Major General Cogny, provides an example of the negative effect inadequate interpersonal skills can have on an organization. Two key issues emerge: the inability of the two men to discuss their true assessments, and the question of why Navarre failed to relieve Cogny when he consistently defied and confounded his superior.

General Navarre's capacity to select appropriate subordinates was weak. General Cogny's influence runs throughout the story of Dien Bien Phu. Fall, Roy and Davidson all have differing opinions of Cogny. Roy admires him, describing him as a general "who succeeded in everything he attempted," and contrasting "the bull Cogny" with the "cat like Navarre."³⁸ Davidson offers harsher indictments on several occasions. He calls Cogny "at best unprofessional, and at worst, dishonorable."³⁹ Davidson further states that "Roy has always been an apologist for Cogny."⁴⁰ Fall is the most even handed in his judgments.⁴¹ The sources do agree that Cogny was difficult to work with. He was a man with a reputation for defying his superiors.⁴² Navarre had never known Cogny and probably selected him because he wanted a man with experience in Indochina. Cogny was also recommended to Navarre by his predecessor, General Salan. Salan told Navarre there was no one else qualified for the position.⁴³ Unfortunately, the relationship between Navarre and Cogny soon deteriorated.

Navarre's most important failing was the inspection tour on March 4th when Cogny convinced Navarre not to send more troops to Dien Bien Phu with his previously cited assurances of a "great defensive victory." Cogny later said that he only intended to bolster Castries' morale, the statement that attracted Davidson's criticism above. The two generals then shared an

extended flight back to Hanoi, ample opportunity for Cogy to offer his true assessments. This leads to one of two possible conclusions. Either Cogy really believed in the defensive victory theory, or he felt Navarre would not listen had he suggested otherwise. Cogy has denied the former, Navarre the latter. The only sure resolution of this question is that the two men failed to communicate on an issue of utmost importance. Ultimately the men defending Dien Bien Phu paid the price for it.

In his memoirs Navarre does not say why he failed to relieve Cogy, even after a pattern of highly insubordinate behavior. As the only major source author who was also a senior military general officer, Davidson finds this issue most compelling, and he offers the best analysis of possible motivation. By the time of their infamous argument in Cogy's headquarters, the situation at Dien Bien Phu had become exceedingly grim. Navarre and Cogy both must have recognized this. Davidson's assertion that Navarre "did not want Cogy free to assail his conduct of the Indochina campaign, and in particular, the upcoming debacle at Dien Bien Phu," has some merit.⁴⁴ The poor interpersonal relationship and level of distrust between these two senior leaders had reached a point so low that both were already seeking to fix blame on the other. Cogy may even have been deliberately provoking Navarre, finding relief preferable to defeat. As Davidson points out, "if this was Navarre's reason for not relieving Cogy, he paid a heavy price in self respect."⁴⁵ As a senior leader, Navarre knew very well that his was the ultimate responsibility for failure in Indochina. However, he may have already decided to not go down alone. FM 22-103 states that "senior leaders weigh every interpersonal contact and reaction for its meaning."⁴⁶ In the case of Navarre and Cogy, the contacts had become fraught with hidden meaning. Each man seemed to seek to establish the other's share of culpability

in a failing military venture. For that they both deserve condemnation. As the more senior commander, the responsibility for the failure rests primarily with Navarre. The fact that both generals displayed poor interpersonal skills does not relieve Navarre of his share of the blame.

Listening and Language skills

Communication is a two way activity and hence involves the complimentary skills of listening and language. FM 22-103 states that good listening skills are vital to the communication process. Less obvious is the aspects of listening defined by a senior leaders expertise in "picking the right people to listen to and to listen for the key messages."⁴⁷ Language is particularly critical for senior military leaders as it is "the principal means used to communicate orders and intent."⁴⁸ General Navarre had great difficulty both in listening to subordinates and in communicating his orders and intentions to them.

General Navarre selected and built the team of his choosing. He placed a great deal of responsibility in particular on what he called the "Cogny-Dechaux tandem."⁴⁹ Navarre implies he also gave them broad authority, describing how decisions were generally undertaken by, or on the advice of, Cogny and Dechaux.⁵⁰ Navarre presumably selected Cogny for the experience and winning record he brought to the command, but soon the two men were scarcely on speaking terms. Any positive contribution Cogny's abilities and experience might have made to Navarre's campaigns was compromised by the poor relationship between the two. Roy wrote that "it was not hatred that existed between Navarre and Cogny; it was something worse."⁵¹ The personal dislike between Navarre and Cogny is one thing, the fact that Navarre allowed it to compromise his military efforts is entirely another

matter. It is difficult to excuse such behavior when the lives of so many men were at stake in the valley of Dien Bien Phu.

General Navarre not only had problems choosing his key subordinates, he had difficulty in identifying good or bad advice from the men he did select. General Dechaux was entirely correct in objecting to the occupation of Dien Bien Phu. Navarre called Dien Bien Phu primarily an air battle but chose to disregard Dechaux's good advice. By contrast, Navarre did listen to the boisterous Colonel Piroth when he had promised "Mon General, no Viet Minh cannon will be able to fire three rounds before being destroyed by my artillery."⁵² Navarre had personally raised doubts as to the vulnerability of the garrison to potential artillery fires, yet he chose to accept Piroth's boastful overstatements.

Nowhere is there an indication Navarre knew that the tactical commander he was issuing orders to at Dien Bien Phu was Lieutenant Colonel Langlais, not his personal choice, Colonel Castries. While Navarre was isolated from the actual battlefield, he was also a general who was out of touch with events on the ground. If Cogny and his staff were aware of what had happened, and they probably were, then they failed to tell Navarre. This conspiracy of silence is a further indication of the barriers to communication that existed around General Navarre.

Another example of General Navarre's language skill deficiency is the confused relationship he had with Colonel Castries. The mission Navarre wanted Colonel Castries to perform at Dien Bien Phu shifted from offensive to defensive in nature as Navarre struggled to react to Giap's growing encirclement. Castries was unable to perform either function well. Both Navarre and Castries were bemused by their modest tank force, saying they would use them to "sweep the valley clear" of any attacking Viet Minh.⁵³ The

tanks would have been useless beyond the valley, they could neither climb the mountains nor force their way through the jungle. Still, Navarre and Castries used terms like "radiating out" with mobile armored warfare to describe their initial intent at Dien Bien Phu. The mud of the Dien Bien Phu valley ended this vision, but Castries could not adjust. Navarre had effectively put Castries on the tactical defensive when he ordered him to cease offensive patrolling in favor of constructing fortifications. Castries was ill suited for this role as his own protestations and requests for manuals on trench warfare indicated. Navarre first charged Castries to defend by launching spoiling attacks, then by digging in. Navarre wanted Castries to be offensive, expected him to be on the defense, and provided him adequate resources for neither.

General Navarre failed to clarify his intent at Dien Bien Phu because he himself was unsure what it was. Navarre was forced to react to the initiative of his enemy. This resulted in a confused and inadequate tactical plan. Additionally, Navarre listened to inadequate advice from his subordinates. He consistently disregarded sound advice. Both Navarre and Cogny also allowed their poor personal relationship to poison their professional one. Navarre's inability to communicate contributed directly to the garrison at Dien Bien Phu being unprepared for the Viet Minh siege.

Teaching

The skill of teaching also relates to what the French sought to accomplish at Dien Bien Phu. FM 22-103 states that teaching is how general's emphasize the skills and procedures they feel are most important. Teaching is also a moral responsibility. The greatest legacy of general officers,

. . . is their experience and knowledge, honed and sharpened over years of study and development. Failure to pass on the lessons learned to those who follow is equivalent to a violation of a senior

professional's ethical responsibility to take all measures necessary to ensure that soldiers and units are ready and able to fight.⁵⁴

Teaching is how a general officer communicates what he feels is most important. Generals stress those points that they wish to emphasize, in so doing they communicate intent and coach their subordinates to make correct decisions on their own. General Navarre only executed one-half of this function at Dien Bien Phu. Navarre failed to insist that his directives take place. His poor personal relationship with General Cogy provides the explanation for why this occurred.

Navarre stressed several concerns during his joint inspection of Dien Bien Phu with Cogy and Castries. Among these were the unreliability of the T'ai battalions. Navarre wanted them replaced with better troops. He also wanted to establish another strong point between the remote Isabelle and the main base, and to add more artillery. These measures would have greatly increased the garrison's ability to withstand Giap's onslaught. The reasons why no such actions were undertaken lie with General Cogy. Cogy also had conflicting desires for the garrison at Dien Bien Phu. It was Cogy who had originally suggested the seizure of Dien Bien Phu to Navarre. The concept of "radiating out" was also Cogy's.⁵⁵ Finally, Cogy was probably the first in the French High Command to grow disenchanted with the base, later claiming he had wanted to be done with the place early on. All these factors combined to make an understanding of common purpose between the French leadership next to impossible.

When Navarre raised the issue of reinforcing and replacing the T'ais, Cogy convinced Navarre that the garrison at Dien Bien Phu was too crowded already. Cogy remained satisfied that sweeping counter attacks would clear away any Viet Minh assaults, lending further credence to the

offensive concepts that Castries still clung to. And it was Major General Cogny, an artillery officer, whose opinions lent great weight to Colonel Piroth's boastful remarks before he committed suicide. One can reasonably conclude that to endorse a massive defensive build up at Dien Bien Phu would have been an admission of error on Cogny's part. Cogny's distinct lack of desire to vigorously pursue his commander's orders effectively served to undermine them. However, the ultimate failure was still Navarre's.

Navarre did not force the issue and insist on the timely and complete accomplishment of his directives. Typically, the only time Navarre did listen to Cogny was when he gave poor advice. As a teacher Navarre failed because the experience and knowledge he apparently possessed did not significantly affect the battle at the tactical level. Had Navarre made his orders stick, the battle might well have had a different result. The mutinies that occurred in the ranks of Giap's army indicated his troops were close to reaching their breaking point. A few more *French* battalions, supported by increased artillery, and arrayed in a more coherent defense, might well have made the difference between success and failure.

Persuasion

The final communications skill is that of persuasion. Persuasion is defined by doctrine as:

The most effective way to deal with internal and external resistance When persuading, senior professionals communicate the details of their reasoning . . . and the reasons for their intent Persuasion is a positive activity that engenders cooperation rather than hostility When using persuasion, senior leaders share responsibility for the projected activity.⁵⁶

General Navarre had to combat both internal and external resistance as Commander-in-Chief. He performed better externally than he did within his own command.

Internally, Navarre's stormy relations with General Cogy served to subvert many of his desires. Navarre and Cogy disagreed on both their reasons for establishing the base at Dien Bien Phu and their intentions for it once it was there. Their interactions were neither positive nor cooperative. The hostility they felt for one another was scarcely concealed. As for shared responsibility, the Commander-in-Chief and his most important ground commander were more concerned with fixing blame. It is hard to imagine a circumstance that engendered less in the way of cooperation and shared responsibility from the senior leaders involved than the defense of Dien Bien Phu.

Externally, the tepid support Navarre received from his political masters in Paris provided little to substantially assist his efforts in Indochina. This resistance was by and large unintentional. French governments were constantly changing, and disengagement from Indochina was a primary goal. It was politically improbable anyone in Paris could offer any substantial increase in support for the military in Indochina. As the strategic-level commander, Navarre must have known this when he took command. The French Prime Minister also later admitted that his government could not acknowledge, even privately, the acceptability of abandoning the defense of Laos. While his suspicions were confirmed, Navarre was correct, his mission did remain. Navarre never did manage to bridge this communications gap. To his credit however, Navarre was successful in persuading the American military and political leadership to support his efforts. The Americans were reasonably convinced that General Navarre was on the right track in Indochina, a conviction that they backed up with vast amounts of material aid. General O'Daniel's reports not only guaranteed Navarre's supplies, they

ultimately resulted in the U.S. Secretary of State urging the French government to offer more support for their Commander in Chief.

This analysis of General Navarre's persuasion skills leads to mixed conclusions. Externally, Navarre did succeed in persuading the Americans to continue active support of the French war effort. Internally, Navarre was unable to enlist the support of his most important subordinate commander in accomplishing his aims. Since Cogy's headquarters had been charged with fighting the battle of Dien Bien Phu and orchestrating all the functions that were attendant to that mission, this resistance had a great effect.

The overall assessment of General Navarre's communications skills indicates that they were lacking and formed a significant factor in the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The dominant theme in this analysis has been the harmful consequences of the bad relationship between Generals Navarre and Cogy. Cogy undermined the designs of his Commander-in-Chief on numerous occasions. As unprofessional as Cogy's conduct may have been, the failure rests mostly with Navarre. Navarre had every justification to relieve Cogy but failed to do so. Many French soldiers paid the price for the hidden machinations both Cogy and Navarre engaged in. In the middle of this hostility was Colonel Castries; the tactical commander whose confused plans and inadequate resources were destined to fail. It is difficult to assess the impact Lieutenant Colonel Langlais' de facto mutiny had on the battle's outcome. The fact that Navarre knew nothing about it does illustrate the inadequacy of his communications skills. Navarre also failed to listen to good advice when it was offered and to clearly communicate his intentions to his subordinates. While Navarre persuaded the Americans to back his plans, he failed in the end to achieve similar support within his own command.

Summation of the Analysis

The key factors and events that contributed to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu have been compared with General Navarre's actions during the battle and analyzed in terms of his conceptual, competency and communications professional skills from FM 22-103.

Under the heading of conceptual skill, the Navarre plan was examined as it applied to the trait of forecasting. The analysis indicated that General Navarre's forecasting skill was sound at the strategic level but poor at the operational and tactical levels. The primary reasons for this was Navarre's failure to consider the impact weather could have on his operations and his flawed intelligence assessments of his enemy. Navarre's decision making was greatly affected by his doubts as to the extent of his obligation to defend Laos. Once Navarre decided to defend Laos at Dien Bien Phu, he fell back upon the model of Na San as the means to use. This familiar tactic was not sufficiently creative to challenge the capabilities of the Viet Minh. They expected it. Navarre's intuitive skills were particularly bad as several significant intelligence failures caused him to make many errors in judgment. He based his entire operation on false premises. General Navarre's conceptual skills were poor and resulted in his accepting the major battle of the Indochina war under terms he had neither envisioned nor planned for. In so doing, General Navarre sowed the seeds of failure at Dien Bien Phu.

General Navarre's competency skills were also analyzed. His sense of perspective was found lacking because General Navarre was too slow to realize that Dien Bien Phu had become the center of gravity for all military operations in Indochina. General Giap's streamlined command organization combined with the volatile personalities of the French commanders to give the Viet Minh a key advantage in endurance. Navarre gambled when he believed

he was risk taking. He wagered the survival of his entire force at Dien Bien Phu on the ability to supply the isolated base camp exclusively by air. At the same time, Navarre's failure to provide sufficient forces for ground offensive operations from Dien Bien Phu demonstrated his poor coordination skills. Navarre was forced to task his air force to attempt to interdict the Viet Minh supply lines, an impossible additional burden. Finally, Navarre's assessment skills were compromised by his consistent tendency to accept poor advice, and his failure to comprehend early the significance of what was occurring in the mountains around Dien Bien Phu.

General Navarre's poor communications skills were reflected dramatically in the unprofessional relationship he had with General Cogy. Navarre's lack of interpersonal skills showed in his failure to relieve Cogy despite Cogy's insubordination and open contempt for Navarre. His listening and language skills were also found deficient. Navarre made a habit of ignoring good advice and accepting the bellicose statements of subordinates when the facts clearly indicated otherwise. He was a distant commander, unable to communicate clear intentions to his subordinates and out of touch with the tactical situation on the ground at Dien Bien Phu. His lack of teaching skill manifested itself in Navarre's failure to enforce his orders to strengthen the defense at Dien Bien Phu, a critical mistake. Finally, while Navarre demonstrated some capacity for persuasion when he convinced the Americans to support his war effort, he had placed General Cogy's headquarters in charge of fighting the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Navarre's bad relationship with Cogy meant that he confronted constant internal resistance. The result was that Navarre was not persuasive in extending his influence to his own subordinates and command.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The senior level leadership doctrine of the United States Army supports the judgment of history that General Navarre is largely at fault for the disaster the French army suffered at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Many factors combined to bring about the French defeat. Not the least of these was a capable and dedicated adversary in General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Viet Minh. The soldiers of the French Army at Dien Bien Phu were as fine as any. In the final analysis, it was a failure of senior level leadership that caused the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

This thesis has compared the actions and decisions of General Henri Navarre during the battle of Dien Bien Phu with a model of successful generalship derived from the senior level leadership doctrine of the United States Army. The model employed the senior level professional skills listed in FM 22-103, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels. The most significant events were grouped for analysis under the major headings of conceptual skills, competency skills, and communications skills. General Navarre was then studied by employing the subordinate traits from each category of professional skill to assess his actions. In virtually every case, General Navarre's professional skills were found to be inadequate.

Under the heading of conceptual skill, this thesis has concluded that General Navarre's poor conceptual skills set the stage for failure at Dien Bien Phu. Navarre was a senior intelligence officer, yet he made one significant error after another in gauging the capabilities and intentions of his enemy.

From failing to consider the impact even basic considerations such as the weather could have on his operations, to disregarding the implications of the massive amounts of Chinese aid his enemy was receiving, General Navarre demonstrated consistently poor conceptual skills. The result was that Navarre's plans were built upon a succession of inaccurate assessments and false premises.

Navarre decided he could defend Laos and raid the Viet Minh rear areas from Dien Bien Phu. He then provided insufficient forces to accomplish those tasks, even though he subsequently admitted that the mission of the Dien Bien Phu garrison was "on a scale with the overall theater of operations for Indochina."¹ The Commander in Chief had over 400,000 troops of various types and nationalities to draw from. During the entire course of the battle, Navarre only sent some 15,000 troops to fight at Dien Bien Phu.² Granted, he had other regions to concern himself with, but Dien Bien Phu was the battle for all of Indochina. Navarre never fought it on that scale, even after he recognized that the vast majority of Giap's army was engaged there. Navarre later explained why he acted as he did:

Sticking to the narrow viewpoint as Commander in Tonkin, General Cogne strongly insisted to me, however, that the operation be decided. He requested me to levy the necessary means throughout Indochina This levy would have led to a general disaster which I, with overall responsibility, could not risk.³

Navarre should have risked it. This statement indicates that even after his defeat, Navarre still failed to recognize the role Dien Bien Phu played in the French defeat in Indochina.

Navarre's employment of the hedgehog tactics of Na San arose by default because he had not sent enough forces to launch the spoiling attacks he had originally intended from Dien Bien Phu. When Castries' patrols could no longer venture out, Navarre retired back from the countryside, ordering

Castries to fortify instead of reinforcing. Unfortunately for the French, the Na San model may have worked once, but it was also exactly what the Viet Minh were expecting.

This thesis has also concluded that General Navarre displayed poor competency skills on numerous occasions. The most serious of Navarre's misjudgments was his gamble that his over-taxed air assets could both supply his forces and interdict his enemy's logistical lines. This was the proximate cause of the garrison's demise. Navarre had clearly imposed an impossible burden on his air forces. He later wrote that "the profound cause of the fall of Dien Bien Phu . . . is the insufficiency of our resources."⁴ This was true, but it was an insufficiency of Navarre's own design.

In analyzing General Navarre's communications skills, this thesis has concluded that the poor relationship between Generals Navarre and Cogy contributed greatly to the fall of Dien Bien Phu. The barriers to communication Navarre surrounded himself with prevented him from gaining a realistic assessment of the true situation. Navarre was a distant and aloof commander who failed to follow sound advice. Conversely, Navarre consistently accepted poor advice, even when it was offered by General Cogy who he personally disliked.

General Henri Eugene Navarre was an intelligent and personally courageous man who found himself in the most difficult of circumstances. Taking command in the waning years of a long, drawn out war, Navarre was supported by an indifferent government. Still, he conceived a plan that could achieve the ends the politicians desired. It was in executing that plan that he failed. Many factors conspired to ultimately defeat General Navarre at Dien Bien Phu. Most of them were his own doing. The United States Army doctrinal standards of generalship lead to one final conclusion. General Henri Eugene

Navarre tragically failed his command at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. It is said that after the battle, General Navarre received a "beautifully lacquered box with a loaded pistol inside-a clear reference to the tradition that a senior commander should not survive a major defeat."⁵ Questioned about this years later, Navarre replied:

I would not have done it in any case. Aside from any other consideration, to commit suicide would have meant absolving everybody else from any responsibility by recognizing myself guilty. *I have a very strong sense of responsibility for Dien Bien Phu. I have no feeling of guilt.* ⁶

Apparently at least some of Navarre's subordinate officers felt that any feelings of guilt he might have felt would be well placed. Despite his lack of guilt, General Navarre was demonstrably culpable for the French military failure at Dien Bien Phu.

This thesis has sought to prove the primary hypothesis advanced; that General Navarre bears responsibility for the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu because his capacity to employ the professional skills required of senior leaders was poor. Navarre failed to demonstrate appropriate mastery of conceptual skills by his repeated failures in assessing intelligence. His flawed competency skills led him to gamble his forces as he failed to realize that the battle for Dien Bien Phu had become the battle for all of Indochina. Only when it was too late did Navarre comprehend the debacle he had designed. By then there was little he could do to control events. His poor communications skills made Navarre a distant and remote commander who failed to apply the abilities of his most important subordinates. The model employed has supported the judgment of history. The defeat of the French forces at the battle of Dien Bien Phu was due to a failure of senior military professional skills by the Commander-in-Chief, General Henri E. Navarre.

Suggestions for Further Study

In the course of researching and writing this thesis, two men and one event emerged as worthy of potential further study. The men are Generals Giap and Cogy, the event is the battle of Na San.

General Giap was the clear victor at Dien Bien Phu. He was a former history teacher turned soldier who led the armies of his nation for over twenty-five years. Giap fought, and ultimately defeated, both France and the United States. His thoughts and actions have been recorded in many sources. Giap is a fascinating and successful general worthy of detailed research and analysis.

Less well known is General Cogy. This thesis has established the great influence Cogy had over events during the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Much of that influence was negative. However, Cogy was frequently correct in his assessments of the battle and of General Navarre. While Cogy's methods were highly questionable, his motive was the welfare of his troops. His story is worthy of investigation.

Finally, all of the sources used in this thesis, American, French and Vietnamese, discussed the battle of Na San as the precedent for the battle of Dien Bien Phu. No descriptive study of the battle of Na San has yet been written. Clearly a major engagement, there is probably much to be learned from researching and chronicling the battle of Na San.

Endnotes

¹General Henri Navarre, Agonie de L'Indochine, Translated work by William B. Cramer, Naval Intelligence Command, Reserve Translation Project, (Paris: Plon, 1958), p. 324.

²National Intelligence Estimate dated 28 April 1954, "Consequences Within Indochina of the Fall of Dien Bien Phu," Published Transcript, Douglas Pike, Indochina Archives, University of California, (Microfiche 124), p. 404.

³Navarre, p. 402.

⁴Ibid. , p. 405.

⁵Bernard Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place. The Siege of Dien Bien Phu, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1966), p. 28.

⁶Ibid.

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