



Battle of Dien Bien Phu Shaped Southeast Asia

by George Espar, AP
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Forty years ago, men fought, bled and died here in an epic battle that changed the course of recent world history. Over the years the trenches and bomb craters have given way to the gentleness of the land, save for some battle sites with small decaying stone memorials that hint at the events that took place.

Here was where the French stronghold of Dien Bien Phu fell to a peasant Vietnamese army of nationalists and communists, ending French colonial rule, setting the stage for the involvement of the United States in Vietnam, and ending Western--and white--domination of much of Southeast Asia. New generations of farmers now roam the peaceful valley with water buffalo, tending to their crops. Life is simple and uncomplicated. Children play in ponds. Old men and women ride their bicycles. White clouds frame the ring of mountains from which Vietnamese troops laid siege to the French forces for 56 days.

"I can no longer communicate with you," crackled the last chilling message from the French fortress to headquarters in Hanoi, nearly 200 miles away. Dien Bien Phu fell on May 7, 1954. The victorious Vietnamese raised a banner over the bunker command post of French Gen. Christian de Castries proclaiming, "Determination to Fight, Determination to Win."

With that, France waned as a colonial power. A new player would emerge as a bulwark against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

Dien Bien Phu propelled America into a full-scale war a decade later, boasting that its military and economic might would crush the poorly armed communists and maintain a balance of power in the Free World. It didn't, and history wrote its own script. French President Francois Mitterrand acknowledged as much after a visit to Dien Bien Phu a little over a year ago. "French colonialism had to understand the necessity of turning the page . . . ," he said.

Over the years, with their own hands, the peasants and soldiers themselves filled the bomb craters and trenches and flattened the battlefield of Dien Bien Phu on which thousands of Vietnamese and French died. They and the generations that followed gave birth to a new valley of lush green pastures of rice and maize and fruit gardens sustaining a population that has grown more than tenfold, to 125,000 people. Many of the veterans of the battle are still alive, as the ballad of Dien Bien Phu, written by Huy Can, proclaims:

“The soldiers of Dien Bien Phu, my comrades,
Wish you forever be in this life.
So that thousands of centuries,
Will listen to your words.”

The veterans are paraded out for special occasions such as the 40th anniversary. At the front is their leader, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, (82 years old at the time), the legendary warrior who defeated the French and later held off more than a half-million American troops. He wields little power today in a newly emerging Vietnam that years ago made its peace with France and is now edging closer to America. Dien Bien Phu represents the glory of the old soldiers, an occasion to put on their tattered, mismatched uniforms with medals as they retrace the battlefield and pose for photos for reporters and tourists.

Giap himself and senior officers who fought alongside him took a patrol into the past on a pre-anniversary visit to Dien Bien Phu in early April. Giap stood in

front of the command post of de Castries, transfixing villagers with riveting accounts of how he defeated the French general.

While Giap had been to Dien Bien Phu several times in past years, he returned to his old headquarters in Muong Phang, 10 miles away, for the first time since his victory. He received a hero's welcome.

About 4,000 of Giap's troops lie in four tree-shaded cemeteries in Dien Bien Phu. There is none for the French. Their dead are symbolized by two rebuilt grave sites, where returning French veterans pay their respects. Hundreds of Vietnamese and French troops were buried in the earth of Dien Bien Phu at the positions where they fell, or were swallowed up by monsoon waters.

Many of the Vietnamese veterans of Dien Bien Phu also fought against the Americans. One of the four cemeteries comforts the fallen Vietnamese of that war. Those Vietnamese soldiers lionized in the ballad of Dien Bien Phu who survived have grown old now. Many are retired and tending their gardens. But they can still feel the weight of the heavy artillery they pulled by hand and the 50 pounds of rice each carried for miles through the mountain passes, often under attack by French bombers. They can still see the French bodies in the trenches and feel their hatred that inspired them to victory. They can still feel the sting of the hot shrapnel making contact with their own bodies and the excruciating pain of bullets being removed with no anesthesia.

"So many people were killed, both Vietnamese and French," said veteran Nong Van Khau, now 63. "They all laid down in the trenches and died." The French lost 2,200 troops out of more than 16,000 in the garrison. Waving white flags, up to 10,000 others surrendered, many of them seriously wounded. Many of them succumbed on a 500-mile death march to POW camps.

Western historians estimate that between 8,000 and 10,000 Vietnamese were killed, up to one-fourth of their forces at Dien Bien Phu. Khau was among the thousands of wounded who survived to fight in the war against the Americans. He wears a chest full of medals. He still carries scars on his right knee and a piece of a bullet in his lung. Surgeons ripped his back open with a pair of scissors to pull out the shrapnel with no anesthesia. Pain killer was for the more severe cases. The surgeons gave him the part of the bullet they removed as a souvenir. "I was very angry," Khau said. "I threw the bullet away because I considered it as my enemy."

There are other expressions of anger and hatred. A statue depicts a mother clutching her dead baby and old women and children running in panic through balls of fire. Soldiers said it is both a memorial to 403 men, women and children killed in an air strike and an expression of the villagers' hatred of the French.

Cao Xuan Du, 65, dug trenches with hand tools, so determined was he to defeat the French. "We had been dominated by the French for over 80 years and that caused our hatred," he said. "We were just determined to win." The Vietnamese surrounded Dien Bien Phu with a network of trenches stretching hundreds of miles from the high mountains to the plains, cutting French supply lines and gradually tightening the noose around their camp. From their fortified trenches, barefoot Vietnamese shock troops assaulted French strongholds day and night, even under French bombardment. They secured their artillery in emplacements in the surrounding mountains and built roads for trucks to carry shells to each gun position. As thousands of soldiers and civilians hauled rice and ammunition through the jungle and high mountain passes, the Vietnamese battle cry became, "Everything for the Frontline, Everything for Victory."

"The greatest surprise we had in store for the enemy was our refusal to engage in all-out lightning clashes with the elite entire strength of the (French)

Expeditionary Corps, firmly dug in their solidly built forts," Giap wrote in one account of the battle, "Dien Bien Phu: The Most Difficult Decision." "We decided to destroy pockets of resistance one by one," Giap wrote, "and gradually, in our own way, at a time and place of our own choosing, launch attacks with overwhelming superiority in each battle and at the same time consolidate our bunker system and cut the enemy's supply line until the base camp was strangled."

President Dwight D. Eisenhower was ready to order U.S. air strikes against Vietnamese positions at Dien Bien Phu in support of the French because he believed Indochina was vital to American interests. But he was unable to get approval from U.S. allies.

The defeat of the French brought to a close the first Indochina War. The Geneva Agreement of 1954 that followed divided Vietnam along the 17th Parallel into North and South. The communist victors at Dien Bien Phu held the North with Hanoi as the capital. A U.S.-backed non-communist regime controlled the South with the seat of power in Saigon.

Both the United States and France sought political influence in the new government in Saigon in the year after the Geneva Agreement. But the United States emerged as the new Western power when Ngo Dinh Diem, an anti-communist leader, ousted French-backed Emperor Bao Dai. Diem became president of the newly formed Republic of Vietnam in the South. France had withdrawn all of its troops from South Vietnam by 1956. The United States remained the only foreign power supporting Diem. But in 1956, both the United States and South Vietnam refused to honor a key provision in the Geneva Agreement that called for national elections to be held that year to reunify the country. They feared the communists would win and gain control of South Vietnam, upsetting the balance of power with China and Russia.

That refusal marked the beginning of the second Indochina War. Giap would repeat his Dien Bien Phu strategy against the United States, locking it into its most divisive war that took a toll of nearly 60,000 Americans and as many as 2 million Vietnamese. The first American military advisers arrived in Saigon in July, 1950. The first U.S. combat forces arrived in South Vietnam in March 1965. Over the next three years, American forces grew to more than half a million.

For many, Dien Bien Phu stirs memories of an old American battlefield, Khe Sanh, near the Laotian border just below the old Demilitarized Zone that divided the warring Vietnams. For 77 days in 1968, Giap's North Vietnamese forces laid siege to the American fortress, hammering it daily with cannon fire from mountain positions surrounding it. But Khe Sanh held with the support of massive U.S. air strikes that unleashed nearly 100,000 tons of explosives against North Vietnamese positions, one-sixth of the total tonnage dropped by U.S. planes during the entire three years of the Korean War. A relief column of 12,000 American and South Vietnamese soldiers reached the battered base on April 5. The North Vietnamese had withdrawn into the jungles.

What had been billed as the showdown battle of the war never came off, but the cost of holding the base had been high, with more than 200 U.S. Marines killed and 1,600 wounded.

The late historian Bernard B. Fall said in his book about the first Indochina War, "The Siege of Dien Bien Phu," that a major American air effort there in support of the French would have achieved desirable military and political results. Fall wrote that the communist Vietnamese army was getting stronger by the day and it became imperative for the French to destroy at least a large part of the main battle force as quickly as possible.

"This was feasible only if the French could induce the enemy to face up to them in a set-piece battle, by offering the Viet Minh a target sufficiently tempting to pounce at, but sufficiently strong to resist the onslaught once it came," Fall wrote. "It was an incredible gamble, for upon its success hinged not only the fate of the French forces in Indochina and France's political role in Southeast Asia, but the survival of Vietnam as a non-communist state. . . ."

Like Dien Bien Phu, Khe Sanh became synonymous with failed French and American military strategy. It was a consideration that eventually led the United States to withdraw its military forces in 1973 under terms of the Paris Peace Agreement. The war between North and South ended on April 30, 1975, with a communist victory. In the cemeteries of Dien Bien Phu, wives and daughters and sons come to light joss sticks and pray for the fallen. Tran Thi Yen came here for the first time on this 40th anniversary to search for the grave of her father. She was only 2 years old when he was killed. The earth of Dien Bien Phu also embraces the remains of American airmen, missing in the second Indochina War during missions over the valley. They lie far from family and home, missed and mourned by their loved ones.

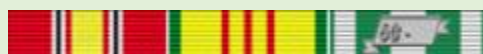
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