



The French Legacy

Conflict in Indo-China dates back to 1887. France colonized the countries now known as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The French maintained control until World War II, sometimes with a iron hand. The Russian Revolution had impressed many Vietnamese intellectuals. Several groups combined to form the Indo-Chinese Communist Party in 1930. All attempts to build a nationwide movement were dealt with swiftly by French forces. French prisons and labor camps housed more than 10,000 political prisoners by 1932.

In the early part of World War II, the Japanese occupied Vietnam, even though the French Vichy government continued to administer the colony. By 1941, the Japanese had complete military control over Indo-China. The Vietnamese communist (known as Viet Minh) built its resistance movement throughout the countryside, waging a campaign of guerrilla warfare against the Japanese and their French (Vichy) collaborators. The US and its allies accepted the support of the Viet Minh and dropped some supplies to the guerrillas from the air. After the Japanese were defeated, Ho Chi Minh, the chief of the local Communist party, proclaimed the Vietnam Republic. He set up the government at former palace in Hanoi. A French expeditionary force was sent to Indo-China in 1946 causing Ho Chi Minh to flee.

A guerilla war took place between the French forces and the communist forces. The war went badly for the French. It was conducted by the Ministry of Colonies, rather than by the Ministry of Defense. Under the regulations of the French Constitution conscripts could not be sent outside of France. French officers directed foreign legionnaires, mercenaries, and the colonial armies against the Viet Minh resistance. By 1954, France had poured more than 400,000 men into Indo-China war with 92,000 fatalities and 114,000 wounded on the French side. The cost of the war was some seven billion dollars. Casualties among French officers became very high. The French became less and less willing to conduct the war.

Following a major defeat to the French at the [Battle of Dien Bien Phu](#), a Geneva conference proposed that Vietnam be divided between the French and the Viet Minh. Elections were proposed in the hope that it would hope would reunite the country. The elections never took place. The Geneva Agreement of 21 July 1954 partitioned Vietnam roughly along the 17th parallel, into North Vietnam, under Communist control, and South Vietnam under French control. South Vietnam was soon granted independence from France.

By the early 60's a strong communist following had developed in South Viet Nam known as the Viet Cong. The communist government in North Vietnam, Russia, and China were supporting the a guerrilla war against the South Vietnam government. At this point US aid started increasing followed by direct involvement of ground troops. Many of the larger American military bases were built over older French bases. Relics of the French war could be found all over South Vietnam including bunkers, air fields, and cemeteries.

At Da Nang AB Air Base, the Security Police were moved into a barracks area that had been built by the French. The barracks were simple huts with metal roofs but were far better than the tents they replaced. Simple revetments would be built around the huts. These were designed for protection from shrapnel during rocket or mortar attacks. In many areas sand bag bunkers or observation towers were built on top of old concrete bunkers. We went to Vietnam as teenagers. We fought a army that had known decades of war. Today we should no longer hold animosity towards the people of Vietnam (Except for their treatment for POIW's). But many of us will never forgive the American politicians. They sent us off to war, and then lost the will to win.

**Photos Below: Old French Bunker Located
at Bien Hoa Air Base**



Photo Above Courtesy of Phil Harrell



Photo Courtesy of Don Kankel



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