Chapter Two

OPERATIONS IN NORTH VIET-NAM, 1950-1952

by Bernard B. Fall

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After receiving assistance from the Chinese Communists, the Viet-Minh forces began a counteroffensive in October 1950 which led to successive defeats of the Communists by the French under the inspired leadership of General de Lattre de Tassigny. Despite the futile attempt at Hoa Binh, the search for a similar "set-piece" battle with the Viet-Minh was to become the hallmark of French strategy throughout the remainder of the war.

From the Red River Delta to the Hoa-Binh Salient

The arrival of the Chinese Communists on the borders of North Viet-Nam in November 1949 closed the first chapter of the Indochina war and doomed all French chances of full victory. From then on, the Viet-Minh possessed, like the Reds in Korea, a "sanctuary" where they could refit and retrain their troops with full impunity in Chinese Communist training camps at Nanning and the artillery firing ranges of Ching-Hsi. Soon, Viet-Minh battalions began to appear in full field formations, equipped with heavy mortars and pack howitzers, followed shortly thereafter by complete artillery battalions using American-made recoilless rifles and 105mm howitzers. After nearly a year of relentless training, Vo Nguyen Giap, the Communist commander, felt that his newly forged tool was ready for the first direct showdown with the French.

Viet-Minh Clear Route Coloniale #4

Beginning on October 1, 1950, Giap attacked one by one the string of French forts along the Chinese border with fourteen battalions of regular infantry and three artillery battalions. Separated from the French main line of resistance by 300 miles of

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8Dr. Fall's title of this chapter in his book, Street Without Joy, is "Set-Piece Battle--L." The title of "Operations in North Viet-Nam, 1950-1952" and the brief summary under the by-line are additions made by Major J. W. Woodmansee, Jr. to make the format of this volume of the cadet text consistent with the other volumes of Revolutionary Warfare.

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Communist-held jungle, the dispersed French posts, though numbering close to 10,000 troops, never had a chance. By October 17, all the garrisons along the border, including three paratroop battalions dropped in during the battle in the forlorn hope of reopening the main road to the key fort of Lang-Son, had been completely destroyed. Lang-Son itself, which could perhaps have been defended for a certain time, was abandoned in an almost-panic with 1,300 tons of ammunition, food, equipment and artillery still intact.

When the smoke cleared, the French had suffered their greatest colonial defeat since Montcalm had died at Quebec. They had lost 6,000 troops, 13 artillery pieces and 125 mortars, 450 trucks and three armored platoons, 940 machine guns, 1200 sub-machine guns and more than 8,000 rifles. Their abandoned stocks alone sufficed for the equipment of a whole additional Viet-Minh division.

By January 1, 1951, the French had lost control of all of North Viet-Nam to the north of the Red River and were now desperately digging in to hold on to the key pawn of the whole Indochina war—the Red River delta. On the Communist side, General Giap pressed on. The guerrilla groups of 1946-1949 had transformed themselves into battalions, then into regiments, and now began to take their final shape as 10,000-man divisions. The first series of five divisions—the Divisions 304, 308, 312, 316, and 320—was created in 1950, soon to be followed by a so-called "351st Heavy Division" of the Soviet artillery division type and composed of two artillery regiments and one combat engineer regiment. The Viet-Minh felt ready to throw the French into the sea.

It was late in 1950 that Giap elaborated his final plan to defeat the French armies in Indochina. In a remarkable staff study presented by him before the political commissars of the 316th Infantry Division, Giap outlined the Indochina war as consisting of three stages. First was that of the initial retreat of the Viet-Minh forces until they had time to re-train and consolidate. The second phase would begin when the French, failing to destroy the Viet-Minh guerrilla forces, would allow them to re-equip themselves and with the help of the Chinese Communists, to eliminate slowly but surely most of the small French posts in the Viet-Minh base area. The third stage was to be the total destruction
of the French troops. In Giap's own words:

The enemy will pass slowly from the offensive to the defensive. The blitzkrieg will transform itself into a war of long duration. Thus, the enemy will be caught in a dilemma: he has to drag out the war in order to win it and does not possess, on the other hand, the psychological and political means to fight a long drawn-out war.

Giap was no fool. A French-trained history professor and a member of the Indochinese Communist Party since 1930, he probably was in a better position to evaluate his enemy's potential than anyone else. Being perfectly informed as to the situation of French morale at home and fully aware of American hesitation to commit United States troops in a "colonial" war, Giap felt it important to liquidate the French as a military threat before the arrival of massive American material aid. Giap stated further:

Our strategy early in the course of the third stage is that of a general counter-offensive. We shall attack without cease until final victory, until we have swept the enemy forces from Indochina. During the first and second stage, we have gnawed away at the enemy forces; now we must destroy them. All military activities of the third stage must tend to the same simple aim--the total destruction of French forces.

We shall go on to the general counter-offensive when the following conditions have been fulfilled: (1) superiority of our forces over those of the enemy; (2) the international situation is in our favor; (3) the military situation is in our favor. We will have to receive aid from abroad in order to be able to carry out the counter-offensive, but to count solely upon it without taking into account our own capabilities is to show proof of subjectivism and of lack of political conscience. But on the other hand we cannot deny the importance of such aid.

When we shall have reached the third stage, the following tactical principles will be applied: mobile warfare will become the principal activity, positional warfare and guerrilla warfare will become secondary.

By the 10th of January, 1951, the bulk of Giap's troops--81 battalions including 12 heavy weapons battalions and 8 engineer battalions--were ready for the general counter-offensive, the big push on to Hanoi itself. In fact, within Hanoi and the whole delta area, Communist propagandists had begun to post leaflets with the inscription "Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi for the Tet." (Tet is the Chinese lunar new year which usually falls in the middle of February.) French intelligence had identified the approximate whereabouts of the enemy's concentration and the enemy had given its target date and main target.
For the first time since the beginning of the Indochina war, the French were going to have the opportunity of fighting a set-piece battle.

Assault Against the de Lattre Line (Map #2)

On the French side, the arrival of Marshal de Lattre de Tassigny as the new Commander-in-Chief had given the sagging French morale a badly needed shot in the arm. De Lattre had assumed command of the Indochina theater on December 17, 1950 and had undertaken several measures which none of his predecessors had dared to undertake; he mobilized the French civilians living in Indochina for additional guard duties, thus liberating garrison troops for active combat; and sent back to France the ships which had arrived to evacuate the French women and children living in Indochina. As de Lattre said, "As long as the women and children are here, the men won't dare to let go."

From what was known of the enemy's intentions, the major thrust would come from the Tam-Dao Massif in direction of Vinh-Yen. On the French side, two mobile groups,² the North African Mobile Group under Colonel Edon and Mobile Group No. 3 under Colonel Vanuxem defended the approaches to Vinh-Yen, anchoring the resistance around a series of low hills emerging above the alluvial plains.

On January 13, the Communist attack began. As usual, the first movement of Giap consisted in attempting to divide the French forces by a diversionary attack which almost succeeded. A major portion of Communist Division 308 attacked Bao-Chuc, a small post held by about 50 Senegalese and Vietnamese who fought to the last man and succumbed after executing two bayonet counterattacks in the attempt to clear the defenses from their assailants. Colonel Vanuxem's whole mobile group barreled north to come to the help of the post and fell into an extensive ambush near Dao-Tu, losing in the process nearly a whole Senegalese battalion and a large part of the 8th Algerian Spahis. It was only through the providential help of Vinh-Yen's artillery and the presence of French fighter-bombers that the remainder of Vanuxem's mobile group fought its way back to Vinh-Yen. By January 14, the Viet-Minh had achieved its first objective. The French were now blocked with
their back against a marshy lake formed by a dead branch of the Red River, leaving the area east of Vinh-Yen with a gap of three miles which was practically undefended.

It looked as if Giap would be able to make good his promise. Morale was low in Hanoi, and the newspapers in Paris, always willing to play up the "uselessness" of the Indochina war, carried big headlines announcing the soon-to-be-expected fall of Hanoi.

It was then that de Lattre decided to take personal charge of the battle. On the 14th of January in the afternoon he personally flew into Vinh-Yen with his small liaison plane, and from Vinh-Yen he ordered the beginning of a thousand-kilometer airlift of reserve battalions from South Indochina into the North. At the same time he ordered Mobile Group No. 1, composed of three battalions of crack North African troops, to break through immediately in the direction of Vinh-Yen with reserve ammunition for battered Mobile Group No. 3. By the afternoon of the 15th of January, Mobile Group No. 1 took Hill 157 which overlooks the road to Vinh-Yen, thus carrying out the first part of its mission. Both mobile groups were instructed to reoccupy the hill line to the north of Vinh-Yen on the following day.

The Battle of Vinh-Yen

Once more, the bulk of the enemy forces seemed to have evaporated into thin air; at 1500 on January 16, Hills 101 and 210 were reoccupied by the French against light enemy opposition. But all of a sudden, at 1700, with the sun already setting behind the mountains, the French saw small groups of men emerging from the forest-covered hills of the Tam
Dao--the whole 308th Division had gone over to the attack and the battle for Hanoi had begun. Dragging with them their heavy mortars and heavy machine guns as a mobile base of fire, the Communists first attacked Hill 47, then Hill 101 and later again 47 and Hill 210. For the first time in the Indochina war, the French faced the unsettling experience of "human sea" attacks: waves upon waves of Viet-Minh infantry threw themselves against the hastily dug defenses of the hill line. De Lattre, who had returned for a second time to Vinh-Yen, recognized the gravity of the situation. All available fighter-bombers in Indochina and transport planes capable to dumping bomb canisters were marshaled into what became the most massive aerial bombardment of the Indochina war.

Waves of fighter-bombers threw up a curtain of roaring napalm between the attacking Communists and the exhausted French defenders, literally roasting thousands of the enemy, but to little avail. At 1400 on the 17th of January, after merciless hand-to-hand combat with hand grenades and tommyguns, the last survivors of Hill 101, having spent their ammunition, fell back into the plain. With 101 in Communist hands, Hill 47 became untenable and at 0400 Colonel Edon ordered its evacuation. Of the whole hill line to the north of Vinh-Yen, only its two anchors, Hill 210 in the north and 157 in the south, were still in French hands.

Now, de Lattre threw in his last reserves, the newly-constituted Mobile Group No. 2 composed of two Moroccan battalions and one paratroop battalion. On the morning of the 17th, Mobile Group No. 2 was inserted in the front to the southwest of Vinh-Yen and in the early dawn of January 17th, Colonel Vanuxem's Mobile Group No. 3 attempted one last desperate counter-attack in order to re-establish contact with Hill 210. One of its battalions again got badly mauled by a suicide attack of Division 312, but once more, the napalm of the fighter-bombers did its deadly job and by noon of January 17, Giap's troops began to disappear in the woods of the Tam Dao. The French looked around themselves with disbelief: the enemy had been defeated and the French remained masters of the battlefield. The battle of Binh-Yen had cost the Communists 6,000 dead and 500 prisoners.
To the Viet-Minh, their defeat in the open field must have been cruelly frustrating. It was obvious that Giap's troops were not yet ready for the general counter-offensive. Disappointment found itself clearly expressed in the diary of a Viet-Minh officer, which contained the following revealing passage:

Our division has been on the attack ever since this morning. We are forming a group of about 10 elite battalions who should be able to take Viet-Tri before tomorrow.

The French troops react in terrible fashion. We're waiting here all morning. Here and there one can see the battle develop, but my company, unfortunately, has nothing to do. Yes, we would certainly like to participate in the battle which will decide the fate of Hanoi. It is already January 13th and Tet will be here in a few weeks, in a month and a half. We want to be in Hanoi for the Tet! To the south we can hear the guns rumble like drums. French shells are getting closer and closer and we already have seen some of our wounded leaving the line and coming back to where we are.

The platoon commanders come over to me bringing resolutions and petitions from their men. It is always a great comfort to me, before every assault or particularly dangerous action, to feel the unity of the men and the cadres, and with it, that of the whole People's Army.

I accept all the petitions. Each platoon requests the honor of being assigned the most difficult or the most dangerous mission.

All of a sudden a sound can be heard in the sky and strange birds appear, getting larger and larger. Airplanes. I order my men to take cover from the bombs and machine gun bullets. But the planes dived upon us without firing their guns. However, all of a sudden, hell opens in front of my eyes. Hell comes in the form of large, egg-shaped containers, dropping from the first plane, followed by other eggs from the second and third plane. Immense sheets of flames, extending over hundreds of meters, it seems, strike terror in the ranks of my soldiers. This is napalm, the fire which falls from the skies.

Another plane swoops down behind us and again drops a napalm bomb. The bomb falls closely behind us and I feel its fiery breath touching my whole body. The men are now fleeing in all directions and I cannot hold them back. There is no way of holding out under this torrent of fire which flows in all directions and burns everything on its passage. On all sides, flames surround us now. In addition, French artillery and mortars now have our range and transform into a fiery tomb what had been, ten minutes ago, a quiet part of the forest. We flee through the bamboo hedges towards the west and I cry, "Assemble in the woods behind the hill!" But who listens to me and who can hear me?

Behind us, French infantry now attacks; we can hear their screams. We are now passing through the platoon which had remained in reserve. I stop at the platoon commander.
"Try to delay the French as much as possible. I'll try to regroup my men behind the hill!"

His eyes were wide with terror. "What is this? The atomic bomb?"

"No, it is napalm."

The men continue to flee in all directions and I see a political commissar, pistol in hand, trying desperately to regroup them.

We can now hear clearly the yells of the enemy who is pursuing us ... 4

There was no doubt that Giap had suffered a severe defeat in the battle of Vinh-Yen and in a remarkable post-mortem of January 23, 1951, he openly admitted some of his errors. Of course he sought to spread the blame around, accusing some of his troops for their lack of aggressiveness, and even of "cowardice"—which was certainly not justified—for having lacked determination in pushing direct infantry attacks against the well-entrenched French artillery positions and armored combat teams. However, he paid a significant homage to the civilian porters, who had worked two million man-days and brought to the battle area 5,000 tons of rice, ammunition and weapons.

The hard fact remained, however, that the Communist troops were not yet ready for the general counter-offensive which was to sweep the French into the sea. On the other hand, the French lacked the necessary cross-country mobility and, for that matter, necessary manpower or airpower to exploit such an unexpected victory as that of Vinh-Yen. Even under the leadership of such an inspired commander as Marshal de Lattre, the French could do little else at the end of the battle of Vinh-Yen but to consolidate their position on the hill line and settle down to await the next Communist attack.

Undeterred by his unsuccessful attack against Vinh-Yen, Giap now shifted his battle force farther towards the hill range of the Dong Trieu. This was a particularly sensitive area to the French defense of the Red River delta, because it controlled not only the approaches to the important coal mines of North Viet-Nam, but also because a determined thrust of less than 20 kilometers could endanger the vital port of Haiphong, thus destroying all French hopes of holding out in North Viet-Nam. Leaving the 304th and 320th Infantry
Divisions on the northwestern edge of the delta to attract the French reserves into the opposite direction, Giap shifted the 308th, 312th and 316th Infantry Divisions in the direction of Mao Khe. The attack began in the night of March 23 to 24. By March 26th, the whole first line of posts had fallen into Communist hands, but the deep bay of the Da Bach River permitted the intervention of three French destroyers and two landing ships whose concentrated fire broke up the enemy's attempt at penetrating into Mao Khe itself.

As often in war, a small post finds itself unexpectedly in the center of a vast action. This was now the case of Mao Khe. Originally the post had been designed to cover the mine area and was composed of three positions: a small garrison at the mine itself composed of 95 guerrillas of the Tho tribe from Lang Son and three French noncommissioned officers under the command of a Vietnamese, Lieutenant Nghiem-Xuan-Toan. An armored car platoon of the Moroccan Colonial Infantry Regiment (RICM) defended the village of Mao Khe situated astride Road 18 about 1,000 meters to the south of the Mao Khe mine, while the Catholic church of Mao Khe, located about 100 meters to the east of the village and south of Road 18, was defended by a weak company of the 30th Composite Battalion of Senegalese infantry and Tho partisans. It was those 400 men who were to support the initial shock of a Communist attack by three divisions. At 0400 of March 27, Mao Khe mine was hit by a barrage of 75mm and 57mm shells. Within the first few
minutes of combat, the lieutenant commanding the post was wounded and two of the French NCO's were killed, but the first two mass attacks broke under the fire of the defenders. At 0515, a tremendous explosion shook the whole complex: Viet-Minh "Volunteers of Death" (the Communist version of the Japanese Kamikaze) had infiltrated the position and blown a breach into the outer wall through which now poured Viet-Minh infantry. In the early dawn, under the command of the last French NCO, himself seriously wounded, the Tho partisans repelled the Viet-Minh assault in hand-to-hand combat and again consolidated their position. When daylight broke the Communist pressure relented somewhat since French B-26's and Hellcats began to bomb the open plain around the post with napalm and fragmentation bombs.

At 1400, the 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion attempted to break through to Mao Khe mine from Road 18 but was bogged down by the concentrated enemy artillery and machine-gun fire, in spite of French artillery and air support. One Hellcat dive-bomber, caught in Communist antiaircraft fire, smashed into no-man's land. But even the painfully slow progress of the paratroopers gave the battered defenders of Mao Khe the last desperate chance to make a get-away. At 1900, Toan started the evacuation of the Mao Khe mine. Detouring the Communist position between Mao Khe mine and Mao Khe, the survivors of the previous night's battle made their way to Mao Khe village, taking with them all their wounded and a long column of the wives and children of the Tho partisans who had lived with their husbands in the post. Their break-out took the Communists completely by surprise and they reached Mao Khe village without being attacked.

This was but a meager respite, because the village, in turn, became the major target of the Communist attack. At 0200 of March 28, a Communist barrage was laid down on Mao Khe village and Mao Khe church. Screaming waves of Viet-Minh infantry slashed both into the village defenses and into the defenses of the church. Two of the bunkers of Mao Khe church, destroyed by shaped charges, fell into enemy hands, and in the village, two of the watch towers, severely hit by bazookas, crumbled, burying all their defenders and the machine guns. The three armored cars of the RICM were soon buried under the
collapsing houses of Mao Khe and their crews formed an infantry platoon in support of the 6th Paratrooper Battalion now fighting for every house in the fiercely burning village. As French artillery from Dong-Trieu began laying down pre-arranged fires almost on top of the position, and the Communists began firing into every house with bazooka shells or incendiary grenades, the whole village soon became one blazing inferno. But when the morning dawned, the paratroopers, Tho partisans, Senegalese, and Moroccan armored cavalry had held on to their position and 400 dead Communists were lying in and about the ruins of the village. On their side the French had lost more than 40 dead and 150 wounded. Once more Giap had failed to breach the French defensive front around the delta.

Giap was to try yet for a third time to smash the French delta position, this time from the south, in a classical maneuver which combined the frontal attack by his regular divisions with an attack from inside the delta directed against the front by two regular Viet-Minh infantry regiments which had been previously infiltrated into the delta.  

The 64th Infantry Regiment of the 320th Division was infiltrated 30 kilometers deep behind the French line near Thai Binh where it joined forces with Independent Infantry Regiment No. 42, a crack Viet-Minh outfit which was permanently stationed behind French lines and which survived all French efforts at annihilating it until the end of the war.

The terrain lent itself ideally to a surprise attack. The western bank of the Day River rose steeply over the French-held eastern bank, and the alluvial dish-pan flat plain of the Red River delta was studded in this area by steep limestone cliffs covered with dense vegetation and pierced by innumerable caves and holes which offered perfect bomb-proof concealment to enemy forces. The only advantage which played in favor of the French was that the river itself was navigable enough to permit the support of the French garrisons by one of the famous "Dinassaut," the Naval Assault Divisions, whose creation may well have been one of the few worthwhile contributions of the Indochina war to military knowledge. This concentration of mobile riverborne firepower permitted fairly effective attacks on the enemy's supply lines which, of necessity, had to cross the Day River.

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The enemy's plan was quite simple. While concentrated attacks of Division 304 against Phu Ly and Division 308 against Ninh-Binh, the anchors of the French position, were to pin down French reserves, the 320th Division, by rapid thrusts to the east and south, would wipe out the line of weak French posts between Ninh-Binh and the sea and would reoccupy the Catholic bishopric of Phat-Diem, thus partially dismantling the French positions in the southern part of the Red River delta as well as dealing a severe psychological blow to the anti-Communist Vietnamese Catholics. At the same time, Regiments 42 and 64 attacked French concentrations and supply lines in the rear areas, isolating through their actions the whole battlefield and preventing French reinforcements and supplies from reaching the hard-pressed defenders of the Day River Line.
The initial Viet-Minh attack, which began on May 29, benefited, as was almost always the case, from the effect of total surprise. As dawn broke, the bulk of the 308th Infantry Division overran the French positions in and around Ninh-Binh, penetrating into the town and pinning down the remaining French survivors in the church. During that chaotic first night of the battle, a battalion of hastily-gathered Vietnamese reinforcements from nearby Nam-Dinh was thrown into the battle. One of its companies, headed by the French commander-in-chief's only child, Lieutenant Bernard de Lattre, was ordered to hold at all costs a French fort situated on a crag overlooking Ninh-Binh. In spite of intense mortar shelling, de Lattre's company held on, but when dawn came, young de Lattre and two of his senior NCO's lay dead on the crag. (Before the Indochina war was over, twenty more sons of French marshals and generals were to die in it as officers; another twenty-two died in Algeria later.) At the same time an ambush mounted with bazookas and recoilless cannon on both sides of the Day River severely disabled several of the unarmored craft of the Dinassaut which had steamed up the river to come to the help of Ninh-Binh; while a diversionary attack of the 308th to the south of Ninh-Binh succeeded in crossing the Day River and annihilating a string of small French posts. The French High Command reacted swiftly at the news. Within 48 hours three mobile groups, four artillery groups, one armored group and the 7th Colonial Paratroop Battalion were thrown into the battle. The climax of the battle was reached during the night of June 4-5 with the key post of Yen Cu Ha changing hands several times. But the bulk of the enemy troops, now hampered by the ravages of the French river craft and aircraft among the hundreds of small junks and sampans which constituted the enemy's supply line across the Day River, began to fall back to the limestone hills. On June 18, 1951, the third battle for the delta had ended.

All the battles had been less than conclusive victories for the French, but had given the Viet-Minh an ample opportunity to measure their own limitations and to find out the major weaknesses of the French. Vo Nguyen Giap was never again to forget the lessons for which his troops had paid so dearly.
While the last battles were raging around the Red River delta, the 312th Infantry Division of the Viet-Minh already had begun to wade across the upper Red River into the T'ai area. The first thrust, begun on April 2, ended around April 25 and was meant to be nothing else but a strong reconnaissance for further large-scale operations. The intervening rainy season which begins in northern Indochina around that date interrupted the Communist campaign which was resumed at the end of the rainy season on September 22, 1951. This time the whole 312th Division crossed the Red River valley at Yen-Bay in order to crack open the first French center in the T'ai territory, Nghia-Lo. The battle for the Indochinese highlands had begun in earnest.

Once more luck and great mobility played in the favor of the French. De Lattre committed three of his precious reserve of nine paratroop battalions in and around Nghia-Lo in a desperate effort to hold on to the northern mountain areas he felt were decisive if he wanted to cover northern Laos or keep the enemy from concentrating all his strength on the heavily-infiltrated Red River delta. On October 5, after repeated assaults against Nghia-Lo and other posts, the enemy was stopped once more--and for the last time--from penetrating into the T'ai country.

But de Lattre realized that this temporary retreat was nothing but a brief respite given him by Giap and his Chinese advisors before new tactics could be devised to cope with the new offensive spirit instilled into the French forces by de Lattre after the disastrous border campaign of 1950, and by the ever-mounting influx of American equipment. In order to take advantage of this temporary stalemate at this time, de Lattre decided to strike first in an unexpected direction: instead of aiming at the enemy's main centers of resistance in the northeast, he struck out across the bend of the Black River and captured the city of Hoa Binh.

What was to become the "meat-grinder" battle of Hoa Binh, lasting from November 14, 1951 to February 24, 1952, had at its outset several practical and political considerations: on the tactical side Hoa-Binh constituted the major road link between the northeastern Communist strongholds which received Communist aid and equipment, and the
central Vietnamese stronghold around Thanh-Hoa, where the 320th Communist Division had operated until now in almost total isolation. The road leading from the northeast to Thanh-Hoa via Hoa-Binh constituted a vital communications artery; to sever it certainly would not completely destroy the flow of Communist supplies to the rebel forces in central and southern Viet-Nam (since they were mostly not subject to road transport anyway) but it certainly might prevent or at least hamper for a certain length of time the influx of such enemy equipment as artillery, trucks, and machines used for the production of ammunition. Another important consideration was that of maintaining the allegiance of the Muong mountaineers whose members had so far remained fiercely loyal to the French. Two Muong battalions were fighting on the French side and thousands of Muong tribesmen had taken refuge in the delta. Hoa-Binh was the capital of the Muong tribe and thus constituted a psychological point of attraction of no mean importance.

Furthermore, the French National Assembly was about to debate the Indochina budget for 1952-53 and the French government was badly in need of a victory in order to pass that difficult internal hurdle. And finally, the French were in the process of asking a greatly increased American participation in sharing the cost of the Indochina war. Thus, a French victory in Indochina—contrasting with the completely stalemated situation in Korea—would make such an increased outlay of funds attractive to American Congressmen.

At dawn on November 14, 1951, three French paratroop battalions descended slowly upon Hoa Binh, occupying the city against almost no resistance. At the same time, a total of fifteen infantry battalions, seven artillery battalions, two armored groups, reinforced by two Dinassauts and adequate engineering forces to repair the sabotaged road and bridges; began to churn their way into the narrow Black River valley. The next afternoon, all major objectives were in French hands with a minimum of losses and almost no enemy resistance. Faithful to his own methods, Giap had refused combat as soon as he saw that his troops had neither the required numerical superiority nor an adequate route of withdrawal to justify such a stand. The French had stabbed with all their might—and had encountered empty space.
For General Giap, this French invasion of the wooded hill areas appeared as an excellent opportunity to repeat the successes obtained on Road No. 4 in 1950. With amazing rapidity (and this time without offering suitable targets to the French Air Force) Giap ordered nearly all his regulars to the battle for Binh Hoa: the 304th, 308th and 312th Infantry Divisions with artillery, anti-aircraft and engineering troops; and the Regional Troops (semi-regular forces) stationed to the west of the Red River delta. Finally, the 316th and 320th Infantry Divisions, the former being stationed on the northern flank of the delta and the latter being partially infiltrated along the Day River front, were given the order to penetrate deeply into the French lowland positions and to disorganize French supply lines feeding the Hoa-Binh pocket.

Two major avenues of approach were open to the French to maintain their "hedgehog" around Hoa-Binh. One was Road No. 6 leading via Xuan-Mai to Xom-Pheo to Hoa-Binh. Road No. 6 had been fully sabotaged by the Communists in 1946 and equally thoroughly plowed under by the French Air Force since, and not maintained in any state of repair since 1940. In other words, it was barely more than an unimproved path which French engineering troops and bulldozers were now preparing frantically to provide Hoa-Binh with an overland approach. However, French combat engineers, until almost the end of the war, never had the time to clear away the underbrush on both sides of the road which offered ideal hideouts to Viet-Minh commandos. Along most of its length, the road was further controlled by cliffs, hills, and mountains which the French could neither occupy nor control at all times. As it turned out, the battle for Hoa-Binh was to become first and foremost a battle for the communications leading to it.

Communications with Hoa-Binh via the Black River were almost three times as long as via Road No. 6, but the river offered the advantage of allowing heavy bulk transportation by landing craft and at most places provided wider fields of fire than the road. But here also, the fact remained that landing craft, with their thin, unarmored flat sides riding high in the water, offered excellent targets to Communist recoilless cannon and
The "Hell of Hoa Binh"

bazookas. Thus, in the case of the river route as well as that of Road No. 6, the French had developed a system of forts and strong points strung out on both sides of the communications artery which was costly both in manpower and equipment. And as the battle for Hoa-Binh wore on, the problem of re-supplying the string of posts covering the approaches became almost as difficult (sometimes even more so) as that of supplying the pocket of Hoa-Binh itself. To retain control of Tu Vu, Notre Dame Rock or Ap Da Chong--each of which became the subject of a costly battle in the attempt to maintain open the communications lines with Hoa-Binh--soon overshadowed the principal objective of the whole operation.

In fact, it can be said that soon enough both sides had lost sight of the reasons for which Hoa-Binh had become important in the scheme of things as the French High Command wrestled with the problem of how to extricate its troops from the whole operation without
losing too many of them, too much face, and all the political benefits it expected to reap from the situation. Yet, in the first days of heady optimism, the Western press had hailed the Hoa-Binh operation as "a pistol pointed at the heart of the enemy." But among the men in Indochina who had to face the battle and who survived to tell about it, it was better remembered as "the hell of Road No. 6" or "the hell of Hoa Binh."

By December 9, 1951, two regiments of the Viet-Minh 312th Division and one regiment of the 308th were in position to attack Tu-Vu, anchor of the Black River line. The French, sensing that such an operation was under preparation, sought to head off the attack by one of their own. At dawn [on] the 10th, three French infantry battalions supported by artillery, tanks and the French Air Force and led by the 1st Colonial Paratroop Battalion, made contact with about five enemy battalions, but could not prevent the major enemy movement against Tu-Vu which was attacked as of 2100 on the same day.

The attack on Tu-Vu was a portent of things to come in its intensity and brutality. Defended by two Moroccan rifle companies and a tank platoon and organized into two separate strongpoints, it could be expected to resist a reasonable amount of Communist pressure. It was furthermore covered by an outpost line which precluded a surprise general attack on the strongpoints themselves. The position, however, was endowed with two fatal weaknesses: it was cut in two in the middle by the Ngoi Lat, a small tributary of the Black River, which allowed communications between the two strongpoints only via a flimsy footbridge; and the position as a whole constituted a beachhead on the west bank of the Black River which meant that any help in case of a severe attack would have to involve a night-time river crossing operation under
enemy fire—a hazardous enterprise at best.

The attack came after an intensive preparation fired by the enemy’s heavy mortars. Since the mortars were firing from a defiladed position, they were, of course, impervious to the counter-battery fire of the French artillery and out of range of the French mortars on the other side of the river. After a preparation of about 40 minutes, enemy fire concentrated on the southern strongpoint and at about 2210, shrill screams of "Tien-len!" ("Forward!") were heard as enemy infantry threw itself across the barbed wire and the minefields without regard to losses, which, under the concentrated fire of the French automatic weapons, were murderous. One "human-wave" attack after another was smashed by French defensive fires, supplemented by the artillery batteries from the east bank of the river now firing directly into the barbed wire of the French positions. By 2340, it was obvious that the southern strongpoint could no longer be held; the barbed wire entanglements, now covered with a carpet of enemy bodies, had become totally useless as a hindrance; most of the emplacements for automatic weapons had been blasted to bits by enemy mortars and the surviving Moroccans were rapidly running out of ammunition. At 0115, the commander of Tu-Vu ordered the last survivors of the southern strongpoint to cross the bridge to the northern position.

But the northern strongpoint was to be given no respite. At 0300, five battalions threw themselves against the 200-odd men of Tu-Vu. The tanks of the armored platoon, guns depressed to minimum elevation, fired into the screaming human clusters crawling over the parapets into the position, their heavy treads crushing heads, limbs and chests by the dozens as they slowly moved like chained elephants in the little open space left in the post. But soon they, too, were submerged by the seemingly never-ending human wave, with scores of hands clawing at their turret hatches trying to pry them open; stuffing incendiary hand grenades into their cannon, firing Tommy gun bursts into their driving slits; finally destroying them with pointblank bazooka bursts which lit up their hulls with the sizzling of white-hot metal. The sweetish smell of searing flesh rose in the air. All the five tank crews died to the last man, roasted alive in their vehicles.
But time had also run out for the rest of the garrison of Tu-Vu. With their backs to
the Black River, many of the survivors rolled down the steep embankment into the water
and then waded or swam towards a small island in the river for a last stand. But the
Communists appeared satisfied with their victory. As the morning came, heavy silence
reigned over Tu-Vu, and Moroccan patrols slipped off the island back into the post. They
found it deserted of enemy fighters and stripped of all weapons. But the enemy also had
left behind more than 400 bodies.

The see-saw battle for the control of the Black River line was to continue throughout
the rest of the month of December, with varying degrees of success. The French now
threw into the battle Mobile Groups No. 1, 4, and 7 and the 1st Airborne Group, reinforced
by armor; but once more the enemy was to refuse combat on any terms but his own. He
vanished in caves of the limestone hills only to appear again at the beginning of January
around the pocket of Hoa-Binh. This time, the main action of his effort was the overland
route to the pocket. Along the Black River line, Giap's forces now reverted to the dreaded
pattern of pourrissement, of the slow but careful erosion of the French posts covering the
approaches to the river. To be sure, as at Tu-Vu, the French were always capable of
re-occupying the post that had just been submerged but there was a point of rapidly
diminishing returns in this sort of exercise, past which the French High Command had to
accept the total evacuation of the sector as preferable to the ever-rising blood-letting its
permanent occupation demanded; the occupation of Hoa-Binh was in fact rapidly becoming
an "Operation Meat Grinder" in reverse.

This situation led, between the 6th and 10th of January 1952, to the progressive
evacuation of the mountain massif around Mount Ba-Vi and the withdrawal of all posts on
the west bank of the Black River with the exception of one important bridgehead seated at
its point of confluence with the Red River. This gave the Viet-Minh one whole river bank
from which to prepare ambushes on the river convoys which now had to be escorted by
heavily armed improvised river warships. Made up of American landing craft of various
types equipped with tank turrets, twin-mounted or quadruple-mounted heavy machine guns
and floating mortar batteries, often carrying their own complement of shipborne Marine commandos and even a few light tanks or armored cars, the Dinassauts were to render invaluable services to the hard-pressed defenders of the Hoa-Binh pocket. Probably the bloodiest river battles since the American Civil War were fought out between the French and the Viet-Minh in the restricted confines of the Black River around Notre Dame Rock and later on the various tributaries of the Red River in the delta area, with ships being attacked and sunk by gunfire, mines, and even frogmen. The French Admiral in Far Eastern Waters was responsible for the tactical direction and administration of naval units from aircraft carriers and heavy cruisers to small self-contained "fleets" fighting on their own 250 miles inland on streams and rivers for which there did not even exist naval charts and for which their craft had never been designed. And neither, for the past 150 years, had the French Naval Academy taught any kind of tactics even remotely applicable to that situation.

Throughout the month of December, the little naval craft had maintained the Black River open as a communication line with Hoa-Binh, at the price of ever-increased shellings and losses. Then, on January 12th, the Viet-Minh ambushed one whole river convoy south of Notre Dame Rock. Undeterred by the murderously accurate fire, the little patrol boats did their best to cover the lumbering landing craft hauling the supplies. Heading straight for the enemy river bank, they sprayed the enemy gun positions with mortar and automatic gun fire, but to little avail. Most of the ships of the convoy were severely damaged and forced to turn back; and of the escorts, four patrol boats and one heavily armed LSSL were sunk in the river. The first jaw of the pincers around Hoa-Binh had closed. The French no longer attempted to push through river convoys to Hoa-Binh. The stage was now set for the battle of Road No. 6.

In fact, the battle for the road already had begun while the agony of the Black River line was still going on. The enemy had now occupied the commanding heights around Hoa-Binh itself and possessed an intermittent view of Hoa-Binh airfield which was now and then under enemy fire. Increasingly accurate Communist antiaircraft artillery, along
with the shelling of the airfield, already had cost the French a half dozen aircraft either destroyed on the strip itself or on the pre-set flight path approaching the airfield. Hoa-Binh itself was defended by five infantry battalions and one artillery battalion while Road No. 6 was held by ten strongpoints with a total of one infantry battalion, one artillery battalion, two armored battalions and an engineer group. Against this meager force, the Communists threw the whole 304th Division and Regiment 88 of the 308th Division, all now fully re-equipped with brand-new Red Chinese equipment and equally new American equipment captured by the Chinese Reds in Korea and transferred by them to the Indochinese theater. 9

The tactics used by Giap against the forts along Road No. 6 were monotonously identical to those used by him in 1950 against the French border positions, and in December 1951 against the Black River line. On January 8th, 1952, the whole 88th Viet-Minh Infantry Regiment attacked the vital hill position of Xom-Phéo, defended by the 2d Battalion of the Foreign Legion's crack 13th Half-Brigade.

*Failure at Xom-Phéo*

The hill was held by two of the 2d's four companies, with the remaining two companies holding positions directly astride Road No. 6. With the carefulness and deliberateness which is the trademark of the Foreign Legionnaire, the whole hill had been fortified with
deep trenches, earth bunkers, and well-prepared barbed wire and minefields. Atop the hill, the men had dug four-man bunkers, with one squad in each platoon constantly manning the parapets.

Active day-and-night patrolling had been routine procedure and early on January 8, an ice-cold night particularly well lit by the moon, two patrols of 5th Company had remained in ambush in the no-man's land more than one kilometer away from Xom-Pheo until 0100. At 0110, the first patrol carefully wound its way through the corridor in the minefield and the barbed wire entanglements back to home base, followed at a five-minute interval by the second patrol. In the course of their patrol, neither of the two squads had encountered any contact with the enemy. Now, with the second patrol hardly inside the forward trench, a series of shadows rose behind them. Without the slightest hesitation, Corporal Felipez, of 1st Platoon, raised his tommygun and began to fire. Almost simultaneously, the first salvo of enemy mortar shells slammed into 5th Company's position: the Viet-Minh had simply followed the patrols back to Xom-Pheo using them as guides through the minefield!

Within seconds, the carefully prepared positions of 1st and 2d Platoons were overrun, with the 1st Platoon being practically submerged in its own bunkers before it had a chance to react. At the same time well-prepared mortar fire pinned down 7th Company in its position, preventing it from using the communications trenches to 5th Company. A few seconds later, 4th Platoon was also attacked, thus leaving only 3d Platoon in position to act as a reserve. With incredible speed, indicating that the whole operation had been carefully rehearsed not only on the map and at the sand table but also through individual visual reconnaissance, Viet-Minh assault troops began to mop up the bunkers one by one with concentrated charges of TNT and bangalore torpedoes. By 0145, the positions of 1st and 2d Platoons had become untenable and the survivors had fallen back on 3d Platoon. Fourth Platoon was still holding out. By 0230, the Foreign Legionnaires of 5th Company began to hear extremely close blasts of recoilless rifles and mortars which could only have come from weapons which the Communist troops had dragged with them in the hope
of being able to use them immediately against 6th Company and 8th Company down on the road, a procedure that was as unorthodox as it was efficient.

But 5th Company, though badly mauled, refused to cave in. At 0400, with most of their officers and senior NCO's dead or wounded and half the position overrun, the Foreign Legionnaires counterattacked with fixed bayonets and hand grenades. In the savage hand-to-hand combat which ensued, no quarter was given and as dawn rose, the Viet-Minh who had penetrated into the position were being slowly hacked to pieces. They, too, were crack troops, and not a single Viet-Minh withdrew from the position. As one of the survivors of 3d Platoon was to say later on:

"Finally one last surviving Viet-Minh broke and ran. He jumped the barbed wire in one single leap, began to zig-zag down the ravine, hoping to get away. We literally cut him to shreds. It probably isn't a nice thing to say, but I think I must have emptied a whole clip into him. He had fallen down but he was still rolling down the ravine. Then Sgt. Thomas, one of the few survivors of the 1st Platoon, touched my shoulder and, motioning for me to cease firing, raised his carbine; a single shot rang out and the body now remained motionless. It was 1st Platoon's revenge."

Viet-Minh losses had been extremely heavy. On the following morning, 5th Company counted more than 700 dead around Xom-Pheo. Its own losses had also been severe; 1st Platoon had been nearly wiped out and 2d Platoon was in hardly better shape. To be sure, the enemy stab at Xom-Pheo had failed, but it in no way loosened the grip of the 304th Division on Road No. 6. In fact, on the following day, January 9, it occupied the hills overlooking Kem Pass and nearly destroyed the whole mobile battalion of the road's covering force which passed through, unaware that part of the road was under enemy control. The second jaw of the Communist pincers around Hoa-Binh had closed.

A weak attempt at breaking through to Hoa-Binh made later by three infantry battalions and one artillery battalion, bogged down on the Viet-Minh blocking position at Kem Pass. The French, now re-examining the whole situation, resorted to a procedure which, though painfully slow, should perhaps have been employed at the outset. They began to use hundreds of men and locally-recruited laborers to clear away the underbrush from both sides of Road No. 6 in order to create clear fields of fire for the weapons of their
convoys and to eliminate further occurrences of "zero-distance" ambushes which already
had cost them close to one hundred vehicles along the twenty-five miles of road between
the Red River delta and Hoa-Binh.

Even so, and in spite of considerable reinforcements, the airborne task force under
Colonel (later General) Gilles made only painfully slow headway against ever-increasing
enemy resistance along Road No. 6. In fact, the whole twenty-five mile stretch had now
become one vast Calvary, finally absorbing twelve battalions of infantry and three artillery
groups (not to speak of hundreds of fighter-bomber and aerial supply missions) to resupply
five infantry battalions locked up in a pocket without the slightest offensive value.

It took the Gilles task force from January 18 to January 29--eleven full days! --to
cover the twenty-five miles between the Day River and Hoa-Binh, and each mile had been
dearly paid for in French lives. It had now become apparent that far from drawing the
enemy into a "meat grinder" operation, the French had been compelled to draw nearly
one-third of all their mobile forces available in the Red River delta into an area where
those forces became unable to contribute to the mopping up of enemy guerrillas now
infiltrating the vital Red River plain on an increasingly massive scale. While Marshal de
Lattre was dying in Paris from cancer in January 1952, the decision was made in Indochina
by his successor, General Salan, to evacuate the whole Hoa-Binh salient, thus making
available vitally needed troops for the forthcoming battle in the delta and the T'ai highlands.

But to execute now the withdrawal from Hoa-Binh in the face of direct pressure by
three Communist divisions proved to be a great deal more complicated than the initial
occupation of Hoa-Binh by surprise. As one senior French officer remarked wryly; "I
guess Marshal de Lattre died just in time in order not to be saddled with a retreat."

The evacuation of Hoa-Binh was given the code name of "Operation Amaranth" and
involved a three-leap withdrawal along Road No. 6 as well as a temporary re-opening of
the Black River all the way to Hoa Binh itself. The actual operation began on February
22, 1952 at 1900, with landing craft of all sorts ferrying across the Black River more
than 200 trucks loaded with ammunition, equipment and food; more than 600 porters
carrying supply loads for the combat troops; and close to a thousand Muong civilians. At 0600 on the following morning, the combat troops themselves began to cross the river and fall back to Xom-Pheo under a constant umbrella of artillery and fighter bombers. More than 30,000 shells were fired in support of the salient between February 22 and 24. Apparently, the enemy had been taken by surprise, for its first reaction occurred only at 0800. From then on the whole retreat became one continuous battle as French units held on to each post to the last minute to allow troops behind them to funnel through to the next post.

At the Black River, the battle had begun once more for the small ships fighting their way north and east out of the trap. Vietnamese, French, Moroccans, and Foreign Legionnaires fought with the strength of despair to break out of the encirclement. Finally, on February 24, 1952, the last elements of the 13th Foreign Legion Half-Brigade—which was to be totally destroyed two years later at Dien Bien Phu—crossed the fortified delta line at Xuan-Mai.

On a piece-meal basis—one company annihilated here, one battalion mauled there, a truck convoy lost in an ambush elsewhere—the battle of Hoa-Binh had been in fact almost as expensive for the French as the loss of the border forts in 1950 or the later siege of Dien Bien Phu. The enemy's losses certainly had been heavy. The repeated use of "human-wave" attacks no doubt had cost him an important measure of his immediate combat potential. Seen from a long-range viewpoint, however, the French once more had been the heavier losers, for while the Viet-Minh used the battle for the Black River salient as a sort of dress rehearsal for a future showdown battle, the French apparently failed to consider the operation as either a dress rehearsal or as a portent of things to come.

Ironically enough, the name "Hoa-Binh," in Vietnamese, means "Peace."
It should be remembered here that at the same time, exactly on October 24, 1950, the Chinese "People's Volunteers" made their appearance in North Korea and inflicted upon the American forces near the Yalu losses in men and equipment which made the subsequent retreat from North Korea the most expensive American defeat since Corregidor.

Mobile Groups (abbreviated G. M. in French) were composite units resembling the United States regimental combat team.

10 miles to the west of Vinh-Yen.


The author was able to visit the Vinh-Yen battlefield in what is now Communist North Viet-Nam in July 1962. The scars of war can still be seen on Hill 137, and small French and Viet-Minh war cemeteries dot the countryside. The French cemeteries, though showing lack of care, are undefaced. Viet-Tri, then a mound of ruins, is now a bustling industrial town.

... the Dinassaut were rivercraft units constituted by the French Navy for the specific purpose of supporting landborne units along the many Indochinese rivers. They were composed of locally-modified American landing craft of various types which had been provided with armor plates and with tank gun turrets as artillery. The average Dinassaut had about twelve ships, including an armored LSSL (Landing Ship Support, Large) as flagship, two LCM (Landing Craft, Material) or the armored "Monitor" version as fire base, and about six other LCM carrying 81mm mortar batteries, cargo and one or two company-size Marine commandos. Some Dinassauts (French abbreviation: DNA) such as DNA No. 3 in the Red River delta, would grow as large as twenty and more craft and would include their own reconnaissance aircraft and LCT (Landing Craft, Tank)-borne armored vehicles.

As I was to find out through subsequent research, Dinassaut No. 1 played an important role in the defense of Mao-Khe both through artillery support and through the successful beaching of the 6th Paratroop Battalion prior to the big Communist attack of March 28, 1951. DNA No. 3 played a decisive role in holding the Day River line. Its Marine Commando, 80 strong, held on throughout the night of May 28-29, 1951, inside Ninh Binh church, losing all but 19 men. On June 6, a second Dinassaut, hastily formed with some landing craft found in Haiphong and named Dinassaut "A", was thrown into the battle. It was the concentrated gunfire of its flagship, LSSL No. 6, which finally saved the key position of Yen Cu Ha.

Its French code name was "Lotus."

This was the last operation in which the French used tri-motor Junkers-52's for their parachute and resupply operations. After Hoa-Binh, massive arrivals of American C-47's permitted the elimination of those planes, whose prototypes were then about 25 years old. The C-47 prototype has, of course, now reached about the same age limit. Only in 1953 did the French receive some of the new S.O. "Bretagne" transports, twin-
engine planes with auxiliary wing-tip jet engines for short-terrain takeoffs; and American-made C-119 "Flying Boxcars."

9 This was to be the case throughout almost the whole latter part of the Indochina war. The Communists had standardized their equipment in Korea along Russian lines, while it was always easy for the Viet-Minh in Indochina to capture American ammunition or spare parts from the French to fit their own American-made equipment.

In fact, it happened quite often that the French would capture from the Communists American equipment produced in 1950 or 1951, while French equipment of similar American manufacture dated from the earlier parts of World War II. In 1952, for example, the Communists in Indochina had a decided superiority in heavy 75mm recoilless rifles captured from the Americans in Korea, while the French Army still had to make do with the underpowered 57's.
Chapter Three

VO NGUYEN GIAP: VICTORY FOR THE PEOPLE'S ARMY

edited by Major J.W. Woodmansee, Jr.

This chapter was compiled from a collection of General Giap's writings published under the title of *People's War, People's Army* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962) and an unpublished U.S. Air Force Academy pamphlet on Dien Bien Phu.
Giap tells of the inherent weaknesses of the "Navarre Plan" and of the success of his peripheral strategy. He discusses the decision to attack Dien Bien Phu and gives ultimate credit for the victory to the "People's Army and to the people."

THE MILITARY SITUATION IN 1953

On Our Side

Through eight years of fighting and training, our people's armed forces, the core of the Resistance, had grown up from their infancy to full maturity. The People's Army then comprised many regular divisions and regiments besides a great number of local regiments and battalions. Militia and guerrilla forces also developed quickly.

The coming into being and speedy growth of these three forces was the result of our Party's correct policy of mobilizing and arming the whole people and waging a people's war.

It was also the result of the correct tactics for a protracted revolutionary war: To wage guerrilla warfare, to advance from guerrilla warfare to regular warfare, to closely combine these two forms of war, and to develop from guerrilla to mobile and siege warfare.

As mentioned above, the situation from 1950 to 1953 was characterized by the fact that together with local offensives, mobile warfare had become the main form of war on the main battlefield--North Viet-Nam--where guerrilla warfare still played a very important role. Meanwhile, on other fronts, the main role was still played by guerrilla warfare.

Militia and guerrilla forces had by then reached their maturity. Their fighting spirit had been heightened through the struggle in defence of the countryside. They had accumulated a wealth of experiences and had equipped themselves with a lot of weapons and equipment captured from the enemy, thus constituting a big reserve for our regular army.
Local forces which came into being in 1948 by merging independent companies with
part of the militia and guerrilla forces, were now able to shoulder the combat missions in
their own localities, wipe out enemy troops, oppose enemy raids, defend their localities
and fight in good co-ordination with our regular forces, militia and guerrillas.

The most outstanding feature was the tremendous growth and high degree of mobility
of our regular troops. All our regular divisions and regiments had been organizationally
strengthened and re-equipped with new weapons partly taken from the enemy and partly
manufactured by ourselves in spite of great difficulties and the scarcity of necessary
means. [* After Korea, July 1953, the ChiComs provided massive support. ] The technical
and tactical level and fighting capacity of our men had visibly risen through successive
drives of training and through major campaigns. They were now quite familiar with mobile
and siege warfare and concentrated operations involving sizeable forces and a vast scope
of action, particularly in mountain regions, and could carry out annihilating attacks, make
deep thrusts, withdraw quickly and fight with initiative, mobility and flexibility.

Our people's armed forces, especially our regular forces, owed their visible and
rapid progress to the fact that our Party had paid due attention to strengthening its leader-
ship as regards the army, promoting political education and ideological guidance, and had
continuously heightened the revolutionary and class character of our army men. As a
result of political remoulding classes, our army men had a clearer view of the goal of
their fight, their hatred for the enemy, and their fighting spirit had heightened. The ideo-
logical remoulding campaign in summer 1953 especially reserved for the army was carried
on while our Party was implementing the policy of Thorough Reduction of Land Rent and
Agrarian Reform. The class consciousness and revolutionary strength of our army men
was thus further enhanced. Internal unity, unity between the army and people, international
unity to disintegrate the enemy, internal democracy combined with strict discipline, deter-
mination and courage in fighting, and dynamism and diligence in duty and production, had
become good habits and good tradition in our army's life.

Our people were unswervingly united as one man around the Party, Government and
* Editor’s note.

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President Ho Chi Minh. They were resolved to carry through the Resistance, and had an iron conviction in final victory.

The Party's Second Congress in 1950 tabled the line of National Democratic Revolution, re-affirmed the correctness of the policy of Protracted Resistance, and laid down the immediate tasks for the winning of final victory. The highly inspiring resolutions adopted by the Congress highlighted the way to be followed by the whole Party, Nation and army to win new successes.

In 1952-1953, our Party put into practice the policy of systematic Reduction of Land Rent and Agrarian Reform and the slogan "Land to the Tillers," thereby succeeded in bringing into full play the anti-colonialist and anti-feudal spirit, and in fostering the might of tens of millions of peasants who constituted the main forces of the revolution.

Thanks to the correct policies of our Party, the worker-peasant alliance was ceaselessly consolidated, the National United Front was broadened and became more solid with every passing day, the people's democratic power was improved and strengthened, the consolidation of the bases in the countryside gained new successes, and the Resistance made headway in other aspects.

Internationally, the just and heroic Resistance of our people against the French colonists and U.S. interventionists enjoyed ever-increasing sympathy and support from the peoples of the socialist countries and the French colonies, and from the peace-loving people of the whole world.

The great triumph of the Chinese revolution had a tremendous effect on the international situation. It tipped the balance of forces on the international arena in favour of the socialist camp and of the forces of democracy, national independence and peace. Concerning our people's War of Resistance, it had a still greater significance. After the birth of the People's Republic of China, we were no longer in an extremely difficult situation, namely, fighting within the enemy encirclement. We then had a common border with the great socialist brother countries, and our resistance bases were linked to the socialist camp.
In 1950, the socialist countries recognized the D.R.V.* This event further enhanced our international prestige and position, and strengthened our people's conviction in final victory.

On the Enemy's Side

While in summer 1953 our people's Resistance was full of bright prospects, the aggressors were facing great difficulties.

The enemy then had about 450,000 men for the whole of Indo-China, comprising 120,000 Europeans, Africans and legionaries, the rest were puppet troops.** Although those effectives showed a big increase in comparison with the enemy forces at the beginning of the war the balance of forces between the two sides already tipped visibly in our favour.

Right from the first days of the war of aggression in Vietnam the lack in manpower was constantly a grave danger for the enemy. That was because French imperialism had been weakened after World War II, its manpower and material resources were limited, and the colonial war was opposed by the French people at home. Hence the impossibility of mobilizing a colossal material strength against us. But the main cause lay in the very nature of the unjust and aggressive war. The ultimate goal of the French colonialists was to grab our land. Faced with our opposition, they had to scatter their forces and set up thousands of military posts, big and small, to protect what they had seized.

Thus, the war of aggression undertaken by the French Expeditionary Corps was a process of constant scattering of that army. And the more it was scattered the better conditions we had to destroy it part by part.

As was said above, the enemy's "lightning war" strategy met with complete failure. When compelled to carry out a protracted war, the French tried by all means to make full use of the puppet army and administration, pursuing their policy of "using war to feed war,

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**Most French accounts show the FEC Forces to be 220,000, plus some 230,000 indigenous troops.
Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese" which they regarded as important in helping them overcome the shortage of manpower. However, their efforts to expand the puppet army did not bring about the expected results because of our ever-growing strength; and the bigger the proportion of puppet troops, the lower the morale of the enemy.

1950 was the year the enemy extended to the maximum the areas under their occupation. Yet it was also the time when the enemy forces were most dangerously scattered. They had gradually moved into a passive defence, and could not muster a strategic mobile force strong enough to counter our attacks.

This weakness of the enemy was clearly revealed as soon as we had started local offensive campaigns. Not only were the enemy main forces wiped out part by part, but they had also to withdraw from part of the land they had previously occupied. The enemy, who took the initiative in every attack during the first period of the war, was now obviously in a defensive position in North Vietnam.

The enemy left no stone unturned to seek a way out from such an unfavorable situation and to pump more life into the puppet army, hoping to be able to have a massive concentration of mobile units. Unfortunately enough, the inherent contradictions of the war of aggression only led them deeper into the mire of defeat.

Politically, the unjust nature of the war of aggression aroused mounting opposition from the French people as well as from progressive opinion of the world's people. French and African mercenaries became more and more fed up with war. As a result of the successive defeats beginning with the Frontier campaign, the morale of the French army sank lower. The split among the French colonialists themselves became ever wider.

In order to save the worsening situation, the French colonialists depended more and more on U.S. aid and thus were bound more tightly to the U.S. U.S. aid accounted for 12 per cent of France's Indo-China war budget in 1951, and for 11 per cent in 1953. The more the U.S. increased their efforts in pouring aid to the French colonialists and in plotting to supplant the latter, the more acute the contradictions between them.

At this very stage, when the French colonialists were being bogged down in Indo-
China and when the Korean Armistice was realized, U.S. imperialism availed itself of the opportunity to speed up intervention in Indo-China, planning to establish direct contacts with the puppet administration and to pull the rug from under France. Navarre's plan was a new plot jointly elaborated by the French and U.S. imperialists, whose objective was to carry on and extend the war of aggression in our country.

The Enemy's New Scheme: The "Navarre Plan"

In mid-1953, with the consent of Washington, the French Government appointed General Navarre Commander-in-Chief of the French Expeditionary Corps in Indo-China. Navarre and the French and American generals estimated that the more and more critical situation of the French Expeditionary Corps was due to the extreme dispersal of French forces in thousands of posts and garrisons scattered on all fronts to cope with our guerrilla warfare; as a result, they lacked a strong mobile force to face the attacks of our main force. During that time, our forces were constantly growing, our mobile forces increased day by day, the scale of our campaigns became larger and larger.

Basing themselves upon this estimation, Navarre and the French and American generals mapped out a plan to save the day, hoping to reverse the situation and to win, in a short period of time, a decisive strategic success.

The "Navarre plan" envisaged the organisation of a very strong strategic mobile force, capable of breaking all our offensives and annihilating the main part of our forces later on. For this purpose, Navarre ordered the regroupment of his picked European and African units, which were to be withdrawn from a number of posts. At the same time, new units from France, West Germany, North Africa and Korea were rushed to the Indo-China front.

In the carrying out of this plan, the enemy met a great contradiction, a serious difficulty: if they kept their forces scattered in order to occupy territory, it would be impossible for them to organize a strong mobile force; but if they reduced their occupation forces to regroup them, our guerrillas would take advantage of the new weakness of their
position to increase their activity, their posts and garrisons would be threatened or annihilated, the local puppet authorities overthrown, and the occupied zones reduced. Navarre sought to get round the difficulty by developing the puppet forces on a large scale to replace European and African troops transferred towards the re-grouping points. In fact, this treacherous idea was nothing new, and had already been applied by Tassigny. Faced with the new dangerous situation Navarre and the French and American generals decided to organise 54 new battalions of puppet troops immediately and to double this number in the following year. Later on, the enemy had to acknowledge that this expedient did not help, because the increase in the puppet forces really only represented a quantitative increase at the expense of the quality of the units.

With their great mobile forces, the Franco-American imperialists conceived a rather audacious plan, aimed at annihilating our main force and ending the war within 18 months.

On the one hand, they decided to concentrate their forces in the Red River delta in autumn and winter 1953 to open barbarous mopping-up operations to destroy our guerrilla bases; on the other hand, they planned to launch attacks on our free zone in order to attract and exhaust our main forces. Simultaneously, they intended to create new battalions of puppet soldiers and re-group new units.

After winter, that is after the season of big operations in north Vietnam, at the beginning of 1954, availing themselves of the fact that our army could at this time be resting, they would transfer to the south the greater part of their mobile forces. At this period, the climatic conditions in the south were favourable to their activity. Their intention was to open big operations to occupy all our free zones, particularly the Fifth and Ninth zones. To occupy all these regions would be for them tantamount to removing the gravest threats faced by them. Due to the impetus provided by these victories, they would recruit new puppet units, while continuing the regrouping of their mobile forces to prepare a decisive offensive on the front in the north.
If the plan were working well, in autumn and winter 1954, they would bring back to north Vietnam their greatly increased forces, still under the influence of the enthusiasm created by their recent victories. In launching a major offensive against our bases, they would have occupied new territories, annihilated the bulk of our main forces to end the aggressive war and permanently transform the whole of Vietnam into a colony and a Franco American military base.

According to his plan, in summer 1953, the enemy concentrated their forces. At the beginning of autumn, enemy mobile forces reached a total of 84 battalions in the whole of Indo-China.

To carry out the first phase of the "Navarre Plan" the enemy concentrated in the Red River delta more than 50 percent of their mobile forces, and declared that they were passing over to the offensive in order to regain the initiative in the operations. Scores of battalions launched savage mopping-up operations in the delta in order to consolidate the rear. Units of paratroops attacked Lang Son and it was announced that we had suffered heavy losses, although in fact our losses were insignificant. They launched a great attack on Nho Quan and on the region bordering Ninh Binh and Thanh Hoa provinces, and declared that the occupation of these provinces was imminent. But their troops had to withdraw with heavy losses.

In the North-West, the enemy withdrew from Na San to the delta. Formerly, Na San had been considered by them as "the second Verdun," "blocking the road to the Southward advance of communism," but when they had to evacuate it in order to escape destruction, they declared that Na San had lost all military interest. Before the evacuation, they saw that their myrmidons organised gangs of bandits in rather extensive areas to the north of this locality.

On November 20, 1953, the enemy dropped considerable paratroop forces into the valley of Dien Bien Phu. Their plan was to reinforce Dien Bien Phu, then go to Tuan Giao and Son La, re-occupy Na San and join it to Lai Chau. Thus Dien Bien Phu would become a strongpost threatening the flank of our North-West base. This new entrenched position
would force us to scatter our troops between the delta and the mountains, and would protect Upper Laos. It would constitute a spring-board for their next big offensive, one column pushing from the plain, the other from Dien Bien Phu to the delta. Thus, Dien Bien Phu became little by little a key position in the Navarre plan.

**Viet Minh Strategy**

As early as 1953, our Party Central Committee had analysed profoundly and scientifically the military situation on various fronts in Vietnam in particular, and throughout Indo-China in general.

The Central Committee assessed that due to the uneven development of our forces on various fronts in Bac Bo, Trung Bo and Nam Bo*, the bulk of the enemy main forces was gradually concentrated in Bac Bo, while on other fronts he was exposed on many sectors. In Bac Bo, his forces were regrouped in the delta whereas on mountain fronts, he was relatively weaker, and the topographic conditions there were favourable to us and unfavourable to the enemy.

Seasoned in great campaigns, our regular forces whose combativeness had been raised, acquired new abilities in mobile warfare as well as in siege warfare. However, as has been proved by the experiences drawn in the Midlands campaign, Road No. 18 campaign and Ha-Nam-Ninh campaign in 1951, on the delta front, with our armed forces mustered to a certain degree, we could gain the absolute superiority only in a short period of time. As soon as the enemy, taking advantage of his possibilities in rapid reinforcement, brought in more mobile forces, we then met with many difficulties in continuing the development of our offensive. On mountain fronts, it was clear that our troops had more favourable conditions to destroy the enemy, who was relatively scattered, and was handicapped in the use and development of the effectiveness of his artillery and air force, etc. His supply and reinforcement, only carried by air, were greatly limited. Our troops had

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*North Vietnam, Central Vietnam and South Vietnam, respectively. Editor's Note.
many possibilities to secure and maintain a military superiority throughout the offensive campaign or in given directions during the campaign, hence we could score great successes.

Once more the Party Central Committee re-affirmed the strategic direction of the resistance war in general and the direction of operations of our army in particular as follows. "The general guiding principle of our liberation war is to conduct a long resistance war by our own means, therefore we must not be subjective, underestimate the enemy, take hasty steps and indulge ourselves in recklessness. To strike surely and advance cautiously, strike to win, strike only when success is certain: If it is not, then don't strike." Only fighting with victory was allowed: Fighting without victory was not allowed.

Proceeding from the foregoing analysis and considering the destruction of enemy effectives as the main task, our Party Central Committee put forth a most correct strategic direction which consisted in concentrating our forces to launch offensives in strategically important directions where the enemy was relatively weak in order to wipe out part of his effectives, liberate territory, at the same time compelling him to scatter his forces to cope with us on the vital points which they could not abandon; moreover the scattering of his forces created new favourable conditions for us to put out of action more of his effectives. To speak more concretely, on the front of the Bac Bo delta, besides the main and immediate task which was to continue speeding up guerrilla warfare in the enemy rear, we could also use part of our regular forces in minor battles. As for major campaigns, they should be launched in other directions. By so doing we would gradually create conditions to proceed to the liberation of the delta.

Operational Plan for the North (Map #3)

The operational plan was in its broad lines:

a) To use part of our regular forces to launch an offensive in the north-western direction, destroy the enemy who was still occupying Lai Chau, thus liberating the whole North-West.
b) To propose the Pathet Lao Liberation troops to co-ordinate with the Vietnamese volunteers units in order to launch an offensive in the direction of Middle Laos, destroy the enemy effectives, and enlarge the liberated zone.

c) As the enemy's action was not yet clearly seen our immediate tactic was to post an important part of our regular forces at a certain point, completely conceal them, and keep ourselves ready for action. In face of our troops' offensive in the north-western direction, it was possible that the enemy would send his reinforcements there; in this circumstance, we would dispatch more regular troops in that direction to wipe out his effectives. The enemy might also attack deep in some direction of the Viet Bac base to cut our lines of communication and supply, destroy the lines of reinforcements of our forefronts, and cause losses to our free zones, at the same time compel our regular forces to withdraw from the North-West. In this case, we would seek ways and means to attract the enemy deep into our rear and then use part of our regular forces to put him out of action. [This, of course, is what eventually happened at Dien Bien Phu. Editor]

d) In the delta, we would speed up guerrilla warfare in the enemy's rear, consolidate and develop our guerrilla bases and guerrilla zones, undertake effective co-ordinated operations with the aforesaid offensives. If the enemy attacked our free zones, we would wear him out and try to destroy part of his effectives.

Above was the operational plan worked out for our army on the main battlefield—the Northern battlefield.

The Party Central Committee again based itself on the enemy situation and ours, and on the aforesaid strategic direction, to define the Winter-Spring operational plan for the Southern battlefield whose broad lines were as follows:

**Operational Plan for the South**

In the South, we had a large free area which was the Fifth Zone where our armed forces were relatively strong. At that time, we had received reliable information about the enemy preparations for an attack to occupy our free zones. In the Fifth Zone, we
faced a problem which was also as difficult to be solved as that in the North: the enemy was preparing to launch an offensive upon our free zones; should we use the bulk of our regular forces to cope with the enemy's scheme and defend our free zones or rush them to another direction in which we had many more favourable conditions to destroy the enemy effectiveness.

We reached a bold and precise resolution which was to concentrate the bulk of our regular forces in the Fifth Zone to launch an offensive upon the front of the Western High Plateaux in order to destroy part of the enemy effectiveness and liberate part of the territory. The people, the local armed forces, the people's militiamen and guerrillas, together with a small part of our regular forces, had the task of making active preparations to cope with the enemy's scheme of encroaching upon our free zones. We assessed that the enemy might attack and temporarily occupy part of our free zones, but if our offensive developed favourably on the Western High Plateaux front, he would finally be compelled to withdraw his troops from the area he had just occupied and perhaps even from many other localities.

With regard to the Nam Bo*front and that of the southernmost part of Trung Bo,**our task was to speed up guerrilla warfare, take advantage of the new favourable conditions created by the transfer of the bulk of the enemy's forces to other directions, to multiply small attacks in which we were certain of victory, wear out and destroy the enemy effectiveness part by part, intensify the political work among the puppet soldiers, and enlarge our guerrilla bases and zones. Our people and army in the free Ninth Zone also made active preparations to cope with an eventual enemy offensive.

Fundamental Principles of the Strategy

The aforesaid operational plan proceeded from the following fundamental principles on the strategic directions and direction of operations:

First, in the liberation war waged by our people, the most fundamental strategic principle was to destroy the enemy effectiveness and increase our forces, only by destroying the enemy effectiveness could we change the balance of forces between the enemy and us and

* Southern  ** Central Viet Nam
liberate territory.

Second, we had to strike to win, strike only when success is certain, strike to wipe out the enemy. We had to do it in such a way that after a combat, after a campaign, our troops grew stronger, and the enemy troops weaker.

Third, because we wanted to destroy the enemy effectives and to strike only to win and not to be defeated, because we had to realize these goals in conditions of the enemy being strong, and we militarily weak, our strategic direction could not allow us to choose other directions than those where the enemy was exposed, and relatively weak and where we had many favourable conditions in all aspects in order to concentrate our absolute superiority in matters of troops and firepower, for combats of wholesale destruction. Drawing experiences from the successes and failures in the first years of the resistance war, we realized all the clearer this important principle: to attack the sectors where the enemy was exposed or relatively weak.

Fourth, because our aim was to destroy the enemy effectives, attack the enemy where he was relatively weak, and create favourable conditions to destroy him, in the practical military conditions obtaining at that time, whose major feature was the concentration by the enemy of a fairly powerful mobile force in the Bac Bo delta, we should not launch large-scale offensives upon that powerful mobile mass but seek ways and means to compel him to scatter his forces, first of all in many directions, in this way he would be weaker in every direction, and we would have many more conditions to wipe him out; the best thing was to scatter him in the directions unfavourable to him in topographical conditions, in the use of weapons and techniques, in transport and supply, etc., and thus we would have many more conditions to destroy a greater part of his effectives.

After a careful study of the situation, the Party's Central Committee issued the following slogan to break the "Navarre Plan": "dynamism, initiative, mobility, and rapidity of decision in face of new situations." Keeping the initiative, we should concentrate our forces to attack strategic points which were relatively vulnerable. If we succeeded in keeping the initiative, we could achieve successes and compel the enemy to scatter their
forces, and finally, their plan to threaten our free zone could not be realised. On the other hand, if we were driven on to the defensive, not only could we not annihilate many enemy forces, but our own force could easily suffer losses, and, finally, it would be difficult for us to break the enemy threat.

**Preparations for the Campaign**

To carry out these directions and plan, in the regions threatened by the enemy, we had scattered our stores, transferred our offices and schools deeper in our territory, made preparations to cope with every enemy offensive by our own means. In the enemy's rear, the people together with the armed forces and para-military troops were feverishly preparing to parry the enemy raids.

In October hundreds of thousands of dan cong* had been mobilized to prepare for various fronts; the communications lines which had been widened were repaired.

At this very period of time, the military situation underwent a new change.

The enemy detected the transfer of part of our regular forces in the North-Western direction. On November 20, 1953, part of his mobile forces was parachuted on Dien Bien Phu to occupy it. A new situation was thus created.

We timely assessed this new situation as follows:

About the enemy's landing of his troops on Dien Bien Phu, though we could not foresee its exact time and place, it happened within the limits of our prevision that if the North-West was threatened the enemy would send reinforcements in that direction. Thus, in face of the threat of our attack, the enemy losing his initiative, had to despatch part of his mobile forces to Dien Bien Phu in order to protect the North-West, cover Upper Laos, and smash our offensive plan.

However changeable the enemy situation might be the landing by the enemy of his airborne troops on Dien Bien Phu was advantageous to us. It laid bare the contradiction of

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*Civilian porters and laborers.*
the enemy between occupation of territory and concentration of forces, between the occupation of the mountain positions and that of the delta positions.

In consideration of the aforesaid assessment, the units of our regular forces which were marching to the North-West, were ordered immediately to attack and destroy the enemy at Lai Chau; at the same time, a wing of our forces advanced rapidly towards the north of Dien Bien Phu, cut the retreat of the enemy from Lai Chau to Dien Bien Phu, prevented him from marching from Dien Bien Phu to meet his forces coming from Lai Chau, at the same time we closed on the enemy at Dien Bien Phu, encircled him and prepared for the battle to come.

THE WINTER-SPRING CAMPAIGN BEGINS

Liberation of Lai Chau

On December 10, 1953, we opened fire on the Lai Chau front. Formerly, we had annihilated or forced to surrender thousands of bandits in the regions of Muong La and Chau Tuan. On that very night, we wiped out the outpost of Paham, about 30 kilometers from Lai Chau. Aware of the presence of our main forces, the enemy was very afraid and ordered the garrison to withdraw from Lai Chau and to rally to Dien Bien Phu by the mountain tracks.

Our troops were ordered to march on to liberate Lai Chau, while one column attacked westward, cutting off the enemy's retreat to encircle and annihilate him.

On December 12, Lai Chau was liberated.

On December 13, we annihilated the enemy in retreat at Muong Pon. After ten days and ten nights of fighting, pursuit and encirclement in a mountainous region, we liberated the remaining part of the zone occupied by the enemy in Lai Chau province. The enemy lost 24 companies.

It was the first great success of our Winter-Spring campaign. It strengthened the faith of our army and people. Moreover, it obliged the enemy to send reinforcements to Dien Bien Phu. It was the first miscarriage of Navarre's regrouping plan. Our troops
began to encircle the fortified entrenched camp of Dien Bien Phu.

**Liberation of Thakhek and Several Regions in Middle Laos**

Parallel with the preparations to attack Lai Chau orders were given to the Viet Nam People's volunteers to cooperate with the Pathet Lao troops to launch an offensive on the Middle Laos front, where the enemy was relatively vulnerable. At the beginning of December, the enemy became aware of our activity, and quickly rushed reinforcements to this sector. On December 22, the Vietnamese and Laotian units carried by storm the outpost of Banaphao, a strong entrenched position which controlled the frontier. Other units struck deep into the enemy's rear. After a series of victories, the Vietnamese and Laotian units made very quick progress towards Thakhek, at the same time pursuing the enemy in his flight along Road No. 9.

Bewildered, the enemy withdrew from Thakhek to Seno, a military base near Savannakhet, losing on the way three battalions of infantry and one artillery unit. On December 27, the Pathet Lao units of the Viet Nam People's volunteers entered Thakhek and reached the bank of the Mekong. The liberated zones were extended to Road No. 9.

This was the second important victory in the Winter-Spring campaign. To face our activity in time, the enemy had to withdraw mobile forces from the Red River delta and from the South, to send them to Seno. To impede the Vietnamese and Laotian units in an advance into Lower Laos, they strengthened this base. Navarre was obliged to scatter his forces over several points.

**Liberation of the Bolovens Highland and the Town of Attopeu**

Simultaneously with the attack on the Middle Laos front, one unit of the Laotian and Vietnamese forces crossed dangerous mountainous regions, and advanced into Lower Laos where it effected a junction with local armed forces.

On December 30 and 31, the Laotian and Vietnamese units defeated an enemy battalion in the region of Attopeu and liberated this town. Exploiting their victory, they
advanced toward Saravane, and liberated the whole Bolovens Highland to south of Road No. 9. The enemy had to send reinforcements to Pakse.

Liberation of Kontum and the North of the Western Highlands of Central Viet Nam

In spite of defeats at various points, the enemy remained subjective in making estimations. Due to the easy occupation of Dien Bien Phu, the enemy thought we were incapable of attacking it. According to them, the entrenched camp was too strong for our troops. Moreover they thought that the distance which separated it from our rear created insuperable obstacles for us in the supply of food. They thought we had passed to the attack at different points because we did not know how to deal with Dien Bien Phu; they thought that shortly we should be obliged to evacuate the North-West because of supply difficulties; then they would find the means to destroy a part of our main forces and would continue execution of their plan: the occupation of Tuan Giao and Son La and the return to Na San.

It was this same subjective estimation which made them launch the Atlanta operation against the south of Phu Yen in the Fifth zone. This well-prepared attack was the first step in the occupation of our whole free zone in the south of central Viet Nam, as foreseen by the "Navarre plan."

Our strategic principle was: "dynamism, initiative." Our troops in the Fifth zone received the order to leave behind only a small part of their forces to cope with the enemy, while the bulk would continue their regroupment and pass to the offensive in the north of the western Highlands. We opened the campaign on January 26. The following day, we took the Mandel sub-sector, the strongest sub-sector of the enemy. The post of Dakto was taken and we liberated the whole north of Kontum province. On February 17, we liberated the town of Kontum, wiped out the enemy in the whole north of the Western Highlands, and advanced as far as Road No. 19. Meanwhile, we attacked Pleiku. The enemy was at a loss, and had to stop the offensive in the coastal plains of the Fifth zone and withdraw many units from Middle Laos and the three Vietnamese provinces of Quang Binh, 83
Quang Tri and Thua Thien to reinforce the Western Highlands. [Bien-Tri-Thieu Provinces]

This was another victory for our forces in the Winter-Spring campaign. It proved once more the correctness of the guiding principle of the Central Committee. The enemy was more and more obviously driven on to the defensive. They had to mobilise forces from the Red River delta to reinforce Middle Laos, and afterwards from Middle Laos to reinforce the Western Highlands. They had concentrated forces to make a lightning offensive against our Fifth zone but had to stop their action in order to protect themselves against our blows.

Our offensive on the Western Highlands was victoriously carried on till June 1954, and scored many more successes, particularly the resounding victory at An Khe where we cut to pieces the mobile regiment No. 100 which had just returned from Korea, thus liberating An Khe. Our troops captured in this battle a large number of vehicles and a great quantity of ammunition.

Liberation of Phong Saly and the Nam Hu River Basin, the Push Forward Towards Luang Prabang

Dien Bien Phu was encircled after the defeat of Lai Chau. The French High Command tried to effect junction between the Dien Bien Phu entrenched camp and Upper Laos by increasing their occupation forces along the Nam Hu river basin as far as Muong Khoa, intending to establish liaison with Dien Bien Phu.

To put them on the wrong track, to annihilate more of their forces, to weaken them more, and oblige them to continue to scatter their troops in order to create favourable conditions for our preparations at Dien Bien Phu, orders were given to our units to combine with the Pathet Lao forces to launch an offensive in the Nam Hu river basin.

On January 26, the Vietnamese and Laotian forces attacked Muong Khoa where they destroyed one European regiment; then, exploiting this success, they wiped out the enemy in the Nam Hu river basin, and came within striking distance of Luang Prabang, while one column pushed northward and liberated Phong Saly.
Before our strong offensive, the enemy had to withdraw mobile units from the Red River delta to send them to Upper Laos. Thus, Navarre was obliged to scatter his forces still further.

Our Successes in the Enemy Rear in the Red River Delta, the Three Provinces of Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, and Nam Bo

While the enemy was in difficulties on all fronts, our local armed forces, people’s militia and guerrillas effectively exploited the situation in the enemy rear and strongly combined activity with the front.

In the Red River delta, a series of enemy fortified camps was destroyed; and Road No. 5 was seriously threatened, being sometimes cut for weeks together. In two great attacks at Cat Bi (March 7, 1954) and Gia Lam airfields (March 8, 1954) our armymen destroyed 78 enemy planes.

At Binh-Tri-Thien, and in the southernmost part of central Viet Nam, our army-men’s activity was intense; they expanded the guerrilla bases, increased propaganda work directed to the enemy and won many successes.

In Nam Bo, through the whole winter-spring period, our armymen pushed forward their combined action, and obtained very great successes: more than one hundred enemy posts and watch-towers were either destroyed or evacuated, many localities were liberated, and the number of soldiers crossing to our side amounted to several thousands.

The development of hostilities until March 1954 showed that to a great extent the "Navarre plan" had collapsed. The enemy’s plan to concentrate was essentially foiled. At this moment, enemy mobile forces were no longer concentrated in the Red River delta; they were scattered over several points: Luang Prabang and Muong Sai in Upper Laos, Seno in Middle Laos, the south of the Western Highlands in the Fifth zone, and large forces were pinned down at Dien Bien Phu. In the Red River delta, what was left of their mobile forces amounted to only 20 regiments, but a great part of these forces was no longer mobile and had to be scattered in order to protect the communication lines, particularly Road No. 5.
The situation of hostilities developed contrary to the enemy's will.

Navarre intended to concentrate his forces in the Red River delta with a view to recovering the initiative, but we obliged him to scatter his forces everywhere and passively take measures to protect himself.

He intended to annihilate a part of our main forces, but it was not our main forces but his that suffered heavy losses. He intended to attack our free zone, but instead his rear was severely attacked by us. Thus we threatened his whole system of disposition of forces.

However, the Franco-American generals did not want to recognise this disastrous truth. They still thought our activity in winter 1953-spring 1954 had reached its peak, that our withdrawal was beginning, that we lacked the strength to continue our activity, and that their favourable moment was approaching.

As a result, in order to get back the initiative, on March 12, the enemy resumed the Atlanta plan which had been interrupted, and opened an attack by landing at Qui Nhon.

Not for a moment did they believe that on the following day, March 13, 1954, we would launch a large-scale attack on the Dien Bien Phu entrenched camp. Thus, the historic Dien Bien Phu Campaign began.

THE HISTORIC DIEN BIEN PHU CAMPAIGN (Map #4)

Dien Bien Phu is a large plain 18 kilometres long and six to eight kilometres wide in the mountainous zone of the North-West. It is the biggest and richest of the four plains in this hilly region close to the Viet Nam-Laos border. It is situated at the junction of important roads, running to the North-East towards Lai Chau, to the East and South-East towards Tuan Giao, Son La, Na San; to the West towards Luang Prabang and to the South towards Sam Neua. In the theatre of operations of Bac Bo and Upper Laos, Dien Bien Phu is a strategic position of first importance, capable of becoming an infantry and air base of extreme efficiency.