Dien Bien Phu: A Battle Assessment

by David Pennington

Jules Roy described Dien Bien Phu as the “setting in which the West had suffered one of the greatest disasters in its history.”[1] An assessment of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu reveals that the French had no clear objective, ignored conventional theories of warfare, over relied on air power, and underestimated the abilities of their adversary. An objective investigation of the events at Dien Bien Phu from November 1953 to May 1954 reveals that for as much as the French did wrong, the Vietminh did right.

When French Premier Rene Mayer selected General Henri Navarre to become the commander in chief of French forces in Indochina, he instructed him to create a military scenario in Indochina that would bring about a satisfactory political conclusion to hostilities there.[2] Navarre surveyed the situation in Indochina and concluded the greatest threat to achieving his given objective was in Tonkin; the Navarre Plan was the result. Navarre wanted to bring the “life and vigor” back to the French Expeditionary Corps while at the same time assuming an offensive posture to disrupt Vietminh forces and prevent their consolidation for a collective offensive.[3] For his center of operations in the north, Navarre chose Dien Bien Phu. Navarre designed Dien Bien Phu as a “mooring point” for French offensive operations to engage Vietminh units and “bar the road to Laos”.[4] Logistics became the focus of Navarre’s ambitions for Dien Bien Phu against the Vietminh. The French wanted to deny guerilla fighters necessary supplies, particularly rice. Also, Navarre believed a garrison stationed at Dien Bien Phu would disrupt the flow of supplies by Vietminh General Vo Nguyen Giap south through the neighboring country of Laos. [5] Opium production and trafficking, centered at Dien Bien Phu, provided the Vietminh with revenue to purchase weapons. Navarre planned to disrupt the opium trade to diminish the Vietminh’s ability to sustain military action in the region.[6] By design, this strategy was constructed in order to draw the Vietminh out of hiding, forcing them to engage the French in a traditional confrontation.[7]

Geographically, it was believed that Dien Bien Phu was a key point in linking the offensive capabilities of the French base Sam Neua in Laos and the garrison at Lai Chau in Northern Vietnam.[8] Neglecting traditional conventions regarding the tactical benefits of high ground, the French chose the low ground of Dien Bien Phu for its convenience to resupply vehicles and believed it would provide ample security against human wave attacks.[9] The valley itself runs roughly 17 kilometers long from north to south and between 5 and 7 kilometers from east to west. Bordering the valley to the east and northeast is a series of small hills that transition into forested, mountainous peaks.[10] From November to April the winter season brought drizzling rain and cooler temperatures and from April to November the weather was hot and torrential rain was not uncommon.[11] The valley, which French troops were to later identify as “wet hell”, suffered from slow drainage, and the resultant mud inhibited the mobility ambitions of Navarre while trench and bunker flooding turned the garrison into a “quagmire”.[12] The roads entering the valley, which included state road Route 41, were constricted and vulnerable to enemy fire rendering them unfavorable as resupply routes.[13] Because of the unreliability of the roads and the relative distance from the French military in Hanoi, Dien Bien Phu became a land-air base. But this strategy was not without its complications.

When French troops parachuted into Dien Bien Phu as part of Operation Condor on the twentieth and twenty-first of November, 1953 and engaged the 149th Vietminh Regiment, it was under moderate weather conditions.[14] They would quickly learn how inhospitable the weather and terrain was for air, armor, and logistical operations as well as the tactical disadvantages of basing the French garrison in the valley, where Vietminh artillery rained down fire from the protection of concealed, naturally fortified positions in the mountains. Unfavorable weather conditions kept aircraft from landing, hindered accurate supply drops by parachute, and damaged the integrity of the landing strip. Navarre, the old cavalry officer, chose the terrain of Dien Bien Phu because he believed it to be suitable to armor.[15] When ten M24 Chaffee tanks were flown in by transport planes in late December 1953 and early January 1954, it became apparent the terrain was quite inhospitable to tanks.[16] The thick brush of the valley immobilized the tanks and when the monsoon weather hit the base in April the tanks quickly became bogged down.[17]

The role of armor in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu was minimal. Immobility credited to poor weather transformed tanks into stationary artillery pieces. Garrison barbed wire defenses prevented tanks from providing support to two parachute regiments on March 14, 1954.[18] By the night of April 4, not halfway through the 55 day siege, only two tanks were in working order, making their impact on the final weeks of the siege negligible.[19]

It can be argued the most important factor in the outcome of the war was the role of artillery, most importantly, the Vietminh’s numeric advantage of artillery and ammunition, which nullified French air power and hindered French logistical operations. According to one estimate, the French artillery assets at Dien Bien Phu included 24 155mm and 4 155mm howitzers and 30 heavy mortars.[20] Giap’s Vietnamese porters defied French logic and situated 140 field howitzers, 50 heavy mortars, 70-80 recoilless guns, 36 anti-aircraft guns, and 12 Soviet made Katyusha rocket launchers and successfully concealed them from French reconnaissance and artillery spotters.[21] The
superior number of Vietminh artillery allowed Giap's plan of attack to come to fruition. A crucial point to Giap's plan was the obstruction of French "reinforcement and resupply" to the base by air.[22] On March 12, 1954, 105mm shells began coming down in the vicinity of the airstrip. By March 15, Vietminh artillery accuracy prevented the use of the airstrip for resupply.[23] Vietminh artillery continued to harass the French resupply vein. Vietminh anti-aircraft fire shot down and drove away French artillery spotter planes and pushed air drops from the preferred altitude of 2500 feet to as high as 8500 feet.[24] The combined Vietminh artillery effort cost the French air forces 56 planes destroyed (20 on the ground and 28 in the air), 2 helicopters destroyed, and 186 damaged.[25] This placed a strain on an already chaotic French logistical system.

French artillery never had much of a chance to counter the onslaught of Vietminh artillery. The artillery base at Beatrice was shattered in the initial moments of the Vietminh attack on March 13.[26] Two days later the artillery at Gabrielle was all but lost and the artillery stationed at Isabelle was too far isolated to adequately fill any gaps.

If Giap's artillery was excellent, his logistical planning was superb. Giap's experience at the Battle of Nan Sanh revealed to him that he could not successfully engage the French in traditional warfare without a sustainable supply route. Porters transported hundreds of pounds of supplies on reinforced bicycle frames and GMC and molotova trucks. When French planes attacked roads and supply lines, Giap's repair crews made them operational in a matter of hours.[27] Concealed by lush tropical cover, Giap's supply routes allowed five Vietminh divisions, the 316th, 308th, 351st, 312th, and 304th to converge on Dien Bien Phu from December 6, 1953 to January 24, 1954.[28] The exploitation of old roads and the development of new ones provided sustainable logistical support, which included Chinese aid. At one point the Vietminh had 100,000 artillery shells in reserve with more available from China.[29] Giap could sustain his five divisions and 50,000 support troops, defying the French contention that any such endeavor by the Vietminh was not practical.[30] The Vietminh could lay siege to Dien Bien Phu, forcing the French to rely on the already overstretched air force for logistical support.

Patrick Jennings called the struggle at Dien Bien Phu "not a battle of men and maneuver, but logistics."[31] Even prior to the siege of the garrison, it was apparent that French airpower was an inadequate source for logistical support. French engineers estimated that 36,000 tons of supplies were necessary for the adequate defense of the base. In total, the builders of the garrison only received 4,000 tons.[32] When French airpower was reduced to parachuting supplies into the post, high altitude drops meant the inefficient dispersion of supplies. A considerable amount of French supplies found their way into the opposition's hands. The number of French and borrowed American planes was also insufficient. During their encirclement the French never received more than 100 tons of supplies. The minimum suggested number for daily drops was 200 tons.[33]

The majority of tactical missteps credited to French military planners belong to Gen. Navarre. The number of battalions used at Dien Bien Phu, 13, was too few to defend the vast spaces of the valley. Bernard F. Fall suggests that 50 battalions were necessary for a proper defense.[34] Part of the blame goes to Operation Atlante, which used up all of Navarre's reserves.[35] Navarre's selection of Col. Castries was also a tactical miscue. Castries because of his background in armored cavalry, but Castries, who was initially reluctant to accept the post, was not suited to the static, World War I French-style warfare that played out during the siege. Navarre ignored French intelligence estimates. Without knowledge of several Vietminh divisions coming to bear on the garrison, the sense of urgency regarding the construction of adequate defensive measures was minimal. Among the cadre of Dien Bien Phu, the failure to entrench the artillery as well as secure more heavy guns dismantled the designed dual air artillery strategy for the base. Underestimating Giap and his military was perhaps the Achilles heel of Navarre and his command officers. While some concern was raised regarding intelligence and the capability of Giap's forces, the conventional assessment of the Vietminh was that their leadership was untrained in the art of war and their tactics were predictable. Navarre and his colleagues assumed the events of the Battle of Nan Sanh, with its human wave attacks, would repeat itself at Dien Bien Phu and Vietminh artillery would be negligible. Giap instead used tunnels and trenches, in conjunction with wave attacks, to sustain his superiority of numbers.

Political factors, as well as tactical blunders, were important to the outcome at Dien Bien Phu. The announcement of the meeting in Geneva to discuss the turmoil in Indochina was a motivator to Ho Chi Minh. He quickly surmised that the party with the greater military leverage in the region would in all likelihood receive the greater diplomatic concessions.[36] French strategy was less precise. Socialists and Communists in France were calling for an end to the war. The French government merely wanted a ceasefire.[37] In late 1953 it was already concluded that an incorporation of Vietnam into the French Union, if only symbolic, was acceptable.[38] By the end of April, with Giap's forces closing the circle around the garrison, the French were hoping to merely hold out until the convention at Geneva began to utilize whatever leverage they had left in order to secure a ceasefire.[39] In the end, however, it would be the military power of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China along with the diplomatic influence of Great Britain that would convince the Vietminh to accept the accords that provided for free elections in 1956 and the reunification of a divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel.[40]

Even though the Vietminh suffered 22,900 casualties compared to the French 7,693, the French lost the battle at Dien Bien Phu and subsequently lost the war.[41] Ho Chi Minh correctly predicted that the war in Indochina was a political fight. The war in France was unpopular. After the resolution of the Korean conflict in 1953, the popular notion was that a peaceful solution to the war in Indochina was equally attainable.[42] For the soldiers defending the garrison, the long siege created dissent among the multi-ethnic fighting force and hurt morale. The superior resources of the French, and the fact that 90 percent of French troops were experienced soldiers from World War II and guerrilla warfare could not deter the resolve of Vietminh soldiers and supporters of the nationalist movement.[43]

Dien Bien Phu became a model for the West. It showed that conventional wisdom should be respected and unconventional tactics should be acknowledged. It was left up to the West, whether or not to alter its approach in

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Seeing an opportunity at Dien Bien Phu, Giap moved approximately 50,000 men into the hills around the French position, as well as the bulk of his heavy artillery and anti-aircraft guns. The preponderance of Viet Minh guns came as a surprise to the French who did not believe that Giap possessed a large artillery arm. Though Viet Minh shells began falling on the French position on January 31, 1954, Giap did not open the battle in earnest until 5:00 PM on March 13. Battling Algerian troops, they fought through the night. Hoping to relieve the beleaguered garrison, de Castries launched a counterattack north, but with little success. By 8:00 AM on March 15, the Algerians were forced to retreat. Jules Roy described Dien Bien Phu as the “setting in which the West had suffered one of the greatest disasters in its history.”[1] An assessment of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu reveals that the French had no clear objective, ignored conventional theories of warfare, over relied on air power, and underestimated the abilities of their adversary. An objective investigation of the events at Dien Bien Phu from November 1953 to May 1954 reveals that for as much as the French did wrong, the Vietminh did right. When French Premier Rene Mayer selected General Henri Navarre to become the