COMBAT

North Vietnam 1948–52

French Foreign Légionnaire

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Illustrated by Johnny Shumate

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Introduction

The Communist insurgency of 1946–54 against the government of French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) was unique among the wars fought between nationalist rebels and European colonial powers in the aftermath of World War II. Thanks to the support, from late 1949, of Communist China on the other side of a long and porous frontier in forested mountain terrain, the cockpit of the war in Tonkin (North Vietnam) saw the gradual development of localized guerrilla forces into a conventional army. By 1952–53 this could field several light-infantry divisions, with some artillery support, which proved capable of mobile campaigns over long distances. No other insurgent movement achieved such a transformation.

The tactical engagements that punctuated the war were confrontations between very different types of soldier. Despite its large numbers of Vietnamese and African troops, the core of the French Far East Expeditionary Corps (CEFEO) – of which the Foreign Legion provided some 35 per cent of European personnel, and the majority of the white infantry – was essentially a European professional army based on the pre-World War II model, tempered by recent experience of fighting the German Wehrmacht. It depended for its effectiveness upon formal discipline, leadership and training, and upon natural unit loyalties for its cohesion. Though sorely under-equipped before at least 1951, its regimental officers and soldiers made the best of what they had, and focused on specific operations. They fulfilled their orders as far as their resources and circumstances allowed, and hoped to survive with honour until the end of their tour of operations. Few rankers were politically motivated – particularly among the foreign *légionnaires*, whose loyalty was explicitly to the Legion rather than to France.

Their opponents followed the politicized pattern of Mao Zedong's Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Essentially guerrillas for the first half of the war, their relative lack of resources obliged them to exploit to the utmost local knowledge and support, patience and ingenuity. They were the

A photo dramatizing one basic contrast between the Foreign Legion and the Viet Minh, taken during the Franco-VM talks at Trung Gia after the ceasefire in 1954. The average height of a Vietnamese man was 1.57m (5ft 2in), with a slight build. Note that this *bo doi* has a captured M1 carbine, the same weapon as the French military policeman. The latter wears the ubiquitous bush hat, sand-khaki shirt and shorts, and 'Far East'-type canvas and rubber boots. The VM soldier has received, since the battle of Dien Bien Phu earlier in the year, a new Chinese-supplied grey-green uniform. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

sons of an Asian 'shame' culture, in which the approval of others was of great psychological importance, and they were subject to political indoctrination and supervision. They were motivated essentially by patriotism – by a powerful appeal to individual effort and sacrifice for the future good of their people. Their training before 1950 was superficial, and even by 1954 their battle tactics were less sophisticated than those of the Western Front in 1918; but they were politically engaged in the cause of national liberation and, fighting against foreigners in their own country, they enjoyed the support of many among the local population. Individually, they were recruited for the duration of the war; collectively, their commitment was open-ended.

The struggles in the widely differing environments of North, Central and South Vietnam were to a certain extent separate wars; this book concentrates on the North, where the transformation of the Viet Minh (VM) from a

The historical context

Before gaining the support of Communist China in late 1949, the greatest advantage enjoyed by Ho Chi Minh's government-in-waiting, and the Vietnamese People's Army (*Quan Doi Nhan Dan*) led by Vo Nguyen Giap, was the power-vacuum left by two events in 1945. The first was the imprisonment of the Vichy French garrison and administration by the occupying Japanese in March, and the second, Japan's surrender to the (distant) Allies in August.

During 1941–44 Giap had created an intelligence organization and guerrilla bases in the inaccessible jungle hills of northern Tonkin. In 1945 the Viet Minh moved with remarkable speed to exploit their opportunities; they seized large arsenals of French and Japanese weapons, and extended their political control by every means. On 28 August 1945 Giap's best 'regular' troops entered the Tonkinese capital, Hanoi, where, on 2 September, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The Allied powers gave the tasks of disarming Japanese forces, releasing prisoners and restoring public order to the Chinese Nationalists (Kuomintang) in North Vietnam, and to the British Fourteenth Army in the South. Despite American hostility to colonialism, the French were determined to re-establish their rule over the whole country, and landed troops in Saigon in October 1945 to begin pacification of Cochinchina (South Vietnam). In the North, the Viet Minh reached an accommodation with the corrupt Chinese, who turned a blind eye to their activities and sold them weapons. Ho Chi Minh entered negotiations with a French government that was impatient to land troops in Haiphong, Tonkin's main port, but that was frustrated by the refusal of the Kuomintang to withdraw until after the lucrative opium harvest.

French forces arrived in Haiphong and Hanoi in February–March 1946, marking the start of eight months of mutually suspicious co-existence with VM units in the French colonial heartland of the Red River Delta. During that period Ho's government negotiated with Paris over the terms of a political settlement that could never happen, since their goals were mutually exclusive. Meanwhile, Giap strengthened the Viet Minh's existing *Viet Bac* home region in mountainous terrain east of the Red River (the provinces of Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Thai Nguyen, Bac Kan, Lang Son and Cao Bang), and established a second 'South Delta Base' (the provinces of Than Hoa, Nghe An and Ha Tien). Here, among a loyal or at least obedient civilian population, Giap installed headquarters, base camps, training facilities, hospitals, stores, arsenals, workshops and arms factories. When the Chinese Nationalists began withdrawing in May 1946, French troops from the south advanced northwards through Annam (Central Vietnam), but in the rainy season the Viet Minh won the race to reach and establish their authority over many towns, ruthlessly eliminating all non-Communist elements of the provisional administration. Giap was then appointed as the new government's minister of defence.

After several violations of the ceasefire during 1946, the French Indochina War proper broke out in Haiphong on 23–28 November 1946, spreading to Hanoi on 19–21 December. Supported by naval gunfire and air strikes, French forces took over the Delta cities. Giap ordered his 20,000-odd regular troops back up into the hills, to rejoin their 10,000 comrades in the base areas; meanwhile, in the regions reoccupied by the French, the VM's political and administrative machine simply went underground.

The VM 'regular' army, popularly called the *Chu Luc*, was Giap's main force intended for mobile operations, while supported by weaker 'regional' units that operated only on their home ground. French control was secure only in major towns and on main roads during daylight, so the VM regionals launched guerrilla attacks in many areas during 1947, while the main force consolidated in the base areas.

In October–December 1947 the French Gen Valluy carried out Operations *Lea* and *Ceinture*, combining road columns, river convoys and paratroop drops in attempts to surround and eliminate the Viet Bac. Paratroopers only narrowly failed to trap the VM leadership, and the French inflicted serious casualties and logistic losses; but Valluy had too few troops, moving too slowly over too difficult country, to do any lasting damage, and the far more agile Chu Luc withdrew and regrouped successfully.

What Operation *Lea* did achieve was the return of French troops to a wishbone-shaped area of north-east Tonkin: north-west along Route Coloniale 4 (RC 4) running in parallel with the Chinese border between Lang Son and Cao Bang, and south-west along RC 3 and RC 3bis linking Cao Bang with Bac Kan. Chains of small posts were built along these narrow dirt roads running through thickly wooded highlands, but while the French might shade in areas of unit responsibility on their maps, any real control was illusory. The Viet Minh were preparing for a long, patient 'battle of the roads' to restore unhindered access between the Viet Bac and the Chinese frontier.

Prominent among the units tasked with defending these roads and posts in early 1948 were the three battalions of the Foreign Legion's 3rd Foreign Infantry Regiment (3 REI).

guerrilla force into an army took place, and on the VM 'main force' rather than the clandestine insurgency inside the Red River Delta. The author regrets that, for lack of space, the connecting events between the three actions selected for description must be so briefly summarized.


Bao Lac
Soc Giang
Tra Linh
Ban Cra
CAO BANG
Quang Uyen
Nguyen Binh
RC 3
RC 3bis
Bang Giang
Phuc Hoa
Cho Ra
Ngan Son
Dong Khe
Po Ma
That Khe
Bi Nhi
Ky Cong
Bac Kan
VIET BAC
Lung Vai
CHINA
Na Cham
Dong Dang
Cho Moi
LANG SON
Loc Binh
Thai Moi
RC 1
RC 4
Thai Nguyen
Dinh Lap
Nha Nam
Binh Lieu
Moncay
Chu
Luc Nam
Tien Yen
RC 2
Phu Lang Thuong
Bac Ninh
Red River
Sept Pagodes
Dong Trieu
HANOI
Gia Lam
Nguyen Binh
Khuoi Sao
Bang Giang
Hill 650
Na Nam
Coc Long
CAO BANG
Vo Chang
RC 3
RC 4
Belair
Ban Cao
Ngan Son
RC 3bis
Na Fac
Phu Tong Hoa
BAC KAN
N
0 5 miles
0 5km
Posts held by I/3 REI on RC 3bis, July 1948
A. Bn HQ & 1st Co, I/3 REI; platoon, 2nd Co, I/3 REI; 5th Sqn (-), RICM; section, RACM
B. 2nd Co (-), I/3 REI; section, 9th Bty, 69 RA
C. 3rd Co, I/3 REI; gun, 9th Bty, 69 RA; 73rd Ptn, 2 RG
D. Platoon, 4th Co, I/3 REI
E. Co HQ & platoon, 4th Co, I/3 REI
F. Platoon, 4th Co, I/3 REI
G. Platoon, 4th Co, 23 BTA
H. Regt HQ, 3 REI; Bn HQ, 2nd and 3rd Cos, 23 BTA; 5th Sqn (-), RICM
N
0 20 miles
0 20km
NORTH-EAST VIETNAM (TONKIN), 1948

The Opposing Sides

ORIGINS AND COMBAT ROLES

Foreign Legion

During 1945–49 the French Foreign Legion was reorganized into seven infantry and two light-cavalry regiments, plus two parachute battalions. With most of the French Army committed to NATO in Germany, and (after 1947) a legal bar on most French conscripts being deployed to the colonies, the volunteers of the Legion and the Colonial and North African units bore the main burden of the war. Most of the Legion's units arrived in Vietnam between February 1946 and November 1949, and many independent technical companies were also formed in-country; this war would see the Legion grow to its greatest size, of some 30,000 men. However, an Expeditionary Corps that at its peak in late 1951 approached 200,000 strong was hamstrung from the outset by a French failure either to recognize the type of enemy they faced, or to formulate a coherent plan for defeating them – a failure that dictated the combat role of Legion units before 1951.

In 1947–50 most Legion battalions were widely dispersed in small posts to provide local security as anti-guerrilla 'sector units', with few available for a mobile 'intervention' role. Vietnam had only rudimentary networks of dirt roads through its forested hills and swampy plains, and was subject to extremes of weather including a six-month rainy season. In all seasons French movements were constantly hampered by the Viet Minh's nightly sabotage of roads. In the heavily populated Delta lowlands most counter-insurgency operations were frustrated by the guerrillas' skill at concealment and the support they received from the ever-watchful civilian population. In the sparsely inhabited hills the garrisons' role was unavoidably reactive – units spent most of their time trying to ensure the security of isolated posts and of the roads on which they depended. The terrain off-road was very difficult to

penetrate, and attempts to locate VM bases or to intercept guerrillas on the move rarely succeeded.

The combat role of the Legion units changed markedly after the loss of the whole Chinese border region in October 1950 (see pp. 61–62). An energetic new C-in-C, Gen de Lattre – provided with reinforcements and unprecedented freedom of action – rebalanced the CEFEO during 1951–52. He oversaw the construction of a chain of concrete posts around the Delta, and garrisoned them with the least valuable troops. He also increased the enlistment of locals, for what would in time become the Vietnamese National Army. These steps allowed De Lattre to assemble the strategic reserve that the CEFEO had always lacked, using units freed from 'sector' duties to form three-battalion Mobile Groups (GMs) with integral artillery, armour, engineer and signals support.

The other and most essential key to progress was a vastly increased flow of financial and material aid from the United States, which was sufficiently startled by China's intervention in Korea in November 1950 to recognize France's war as a parallel campaign against a coordinated Communist threat. Consequently, the CEFEO at last got new trucks, armoured vehicles, radios, weapons and aircraft.

The GMs in the Delta smashed a premature offensive launched by Giap in January-June 1951, and, although they were still roadbound, they brought a more aggressively 'proactive' approach to the battles of 1951–53. Legion battalions were incorporated into the GMs, and proved themselves in the 'heavy infantry' role that suited them best. Finally, in 1952–53, the latest French operational concept of the 'air-ground base' (*base aéroterrestre*) saw Legion battalions airlifted into remote locations to construct and hold strongly defended positions against Giap's now widely manoeuvring divisions.

ABOVE LEFT
This unidentified légionnaire of 3 REI, posing in cold-season parade dress, is clearly of an age to be a World War II veteran. In 1953 approximate CEFEO regular troop strengths were: 53,000 Vietnamese, 52,000 French, 30,000 North African, 19,000 Foreign Legion and 18,000 West African. Additional to this total of *c.*172,000, approximately 55,400 Indochinese irregulars were serving under French leadership. (Carl Mydans/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT
The Legion's traditional smartness on parade, symbolic of strong *esprit de corps*, is demonstrated by the colour party of 3 REI in Hanoi. The regimental flag bears the many decorations awarded to 3 REI's lineal predecessor, the Foreign Legion Marching Regiment (RMLE) in both World Wars. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

COMBAT

Légionnaire, III/5 REI

This légionnaire of 11th Co, III/5 REI is responding to the alarm in strongpoint PA 8 in the inner perimeter of the Na San 'air-ground base' on the evening of 23 November 1952. Two platoons from Viet Minh Bn 322/Regt 88 have employed a ruse to break in, and any second now the légionnaire will join in trench combat with point-blank automatic fire and grenades (an LMG gunner named Skinder distinguished himself during this fight). He has been in Tonkin for 18 months, and has been hardened by the tense and frustrating counter-insurgency war in the Delta – a pitched battle against visible opponents may be almost a relief to him.

PA 8, Na San, 23/24 November 1952

Weapons, dress and equipment

His weapon is the old but reliable French 7.5mm *fusil-mitrailleur modèle* 1924/29 (**1**); it weighs just over 11kg (24.5lb), so is supported on its sling for firing from the hip. Fed by 25-round magazines, it has two triggers – the front trigger for single shots, the rear for bursts. He has snatched up a US-surplus '30-round magazine carrier' (**2**) – his 'No. 2' may not be able to reload instantly in close-quarter combat in the confined trench. For self-defence, on his US-surplus M1936 pistol belt he also carries a French M1950 web holster holding a 7.65mm M1935 semi-automatic pistol (**3**) with an eight-round magazine, at right front a French skeleton carrier with a US Mk IIA1 fragmentation grenade (**4**), and at left front a US-supplied M3 knife (**5**).

He wears the olive-coloured French M1947 *treillis toutes armes* field fatigues which became common in 1952, here with a 'lightened' two-pocket shirt (**6**) rather than the four-pocket field jacket; the trousers (**7**) have large cargo pockets on the thighs. Shirt and trousers were often of different shades, and his uniform shows evidence of the three weeks he has spent digging and building fortifications since being flown in from the Delta. No insignia were worn in the field. His locally made 'Far East' boots are of canvas and rubber (**8**), and he chooses to confine his trousers with home-made leather anklets cut from old US 'double-buckle' boots.

Even at this date, photos suggest that no two men wore exactly the same combination of personal equipment. The British 44 Pattern water canteen and cup in its capacious 'jungle-green' web carrier (**9**) was popular, and British 'universal' pouches (**10**) were still often used by LMG crews to carry tools and accessories. He also has the cleaning rod for the FM24/29 LMG in a tubular carrier (**11**). Although he would dump it when in the strongpoint, we also show the M1924 haversack for eight LMG magazines (**12**), with a tent-cloth roll attached for marching order.

The US-supplied M1 steel helmet (**13**) was by now general issue, here complete with small-mesh camouflage net and elasticated band. Small items such as US 'Carlisle' first-aid kit tins and bottles of Halozone water-purification tablets might be slipped under the band.

Viet Minh

At the base of the Viet Minh's pyramidal structure were the 'popular forces' (*Tu Ve*), comprising both the *Dan Quan*, a general revolutionary organization of the civilian population, and the *Du Kich* part-time village militia. The Dan Quan provided look-outs, guides, messengers, and above all the porters upon which the VM's logistics relied. With rudimentary armament, the Du Kich was limited to low-level sabotage, but promising men were then recruited into the next level up. These full-time regional troops (*Bo Dai Dia Phuong*) formed district companies that waged local guerrilla warfare from hidden camps; each province also had a regional 'mobile battalion' for more ambitious operations. Regionals were subordinated to the needs of the top layer of the structure – independent battalions of regular troops posted into (or passing through) their regions. At every level, all activities were tightly coordinated by an integrated chain of political and military command.

For instance, in June 1948 regional Regt 11 (Lang Son province) was renamed regional Regt 28, commanded by Dang Van Viet and headquartered at Bin Ghia. This 'regiment' had only one active battalion, newly redesignated Bn 249, with reconnaissance, communications and other support provided by assembled district companies. The unit's role was to carry out ambushes along RC 4. In August 1949, a new independent regular Regt 174 (*Trung Doan Doc Lap 174*) was created under Dang Van Viet's command, incorporating the men of regional Regts 28, 72 (Bac Kan province) and 74 (Cao Bang province). It took some time before a new regular regiment could actually field three battalions with common

VM parade in Hanoi, April 1946, smartly uniformed and drilled to reflect their status as regular soldiers of Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam. They seem to wear dark-blue sidecaps with small VM badges, and French khaki M1935 *tenue d'exercise d'été* with M1916 leather belt equipment. The rifles are French 8mm M1902 *fusils de Trailleur Indochinois*, but the two LMGs in the second rank are Brens, rather than the Japanese Type 36s that one might expect. The officers (right) have tunics of a darker shade, with rank patches on the turn-down collars in the form of yellow bars on red. Though illustrated in a French manual of 1949, the system of VM rank insignia was rarely seen, and seems to have disappeared after 1950. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

organization and levels of equipment. On paper, Regt 174 had three 'shock battalions' numbered 249, 251 and 23 (the last of these was already a regular unit, originally from Dong Trieu). In 1949, such battalions had only about 350 armed men; by January 1950 strengths had grown to 400–500, and by that autumn to 700-plus. Regt 174's combat role in 1949 was to step up its interdiction of French traffic on RC 4, but in 1950 it was committed to attacks on the French post of Dong Khe, eventually succeeding but only at very heavy cost.

Giap's success on RC 4 in October 1950 coincided with the start of the Chinese-aided expansion of his main force into three-regiment, nine-battalion divisions (sing., *Dai Doan*). This was achieved by a general mobilization of conscripted manpower, while transforming some 25,000 regionals into regulars. The first division, Div 308, returned from Chinese training to bases around Thai Nguyen from August 1950, when its units were Regts 36, 88 and 102. Between January 1950 and March 1951 four more infantry divisions (304, 312, 320 and 325) and one of artillery and engineers (351) were created; and finally, on 1 May 1951, the formation of the 'highland' Div 316 was announced, with Dang Van Viet's rebuilt Regt 174 joining Regt 176 from Lang Son province, and Regt 98 from the far north-east.

The very different silhouette of the divisional *bo doi* of 1951–54: woven rattan helmet with cloth cover and string netting, Chinese-made uniform in some pale-drab shade, minimal canvas personal equipment, and the Chinese Type 50 (to the Viet Minh, K50) copy of the Soviet PPSh41 SMG, with 35-round 'banana' magazine. By early 1954 the standard VM rifle-battalion establishment had dropped to 635 all ranks, and by then as many as one man in every three-man fire team may have carried an SMG. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

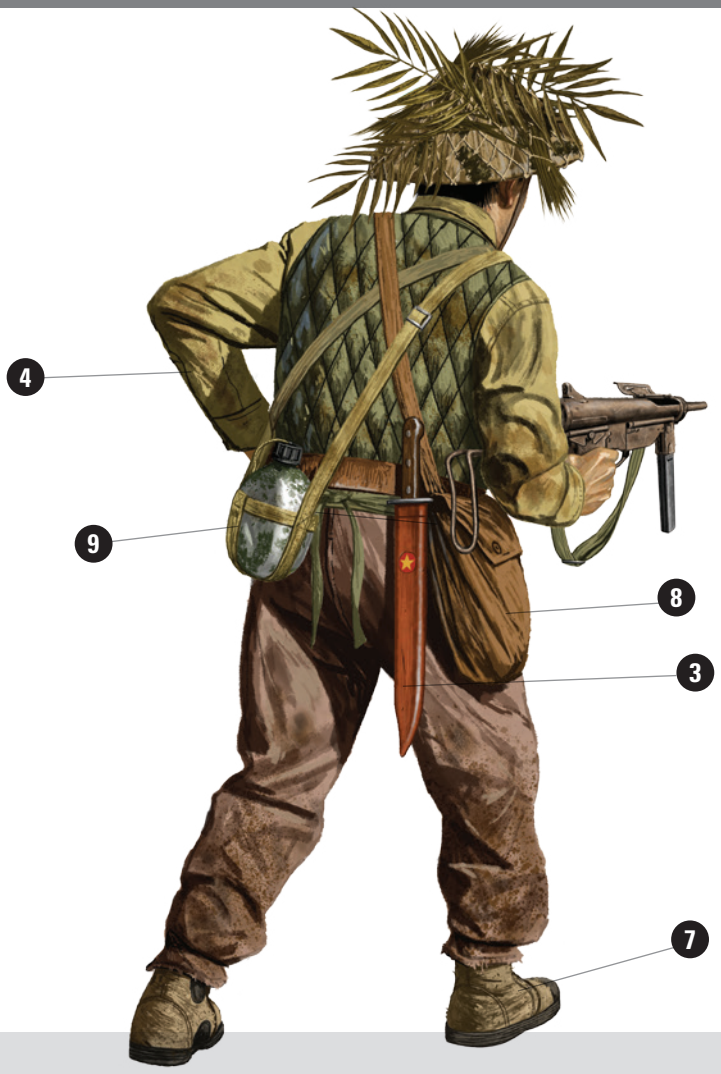
On paper, therefore, by May 1951 Giap had six infantry divisions, but turning them into formations worthy of that term 'on the ground' would take time. This effort suffered an immediate setback when Giap threw away at least one-third of his new army, and much of the prestige won in 1950, in a premature offensive against the Delta. Giap states that at the turn of 1950/51 he had about 60,000 main-force troops in Tonkin. French sources plausibly estimate that the battles of Vinh Yen in January–February 1951, Mao Khe/Dong Trieu in March–April, and the Day River in May–June cost Giap perhaps 17,000 men killed or captured.

It was at Mao Khe that Regt 174 experienced for the first time conventional, mobile operations in open country – on foot, facing a motorized enemy which was able at last to manoeuvre against its attackers' flanks supported by tanks, massed artillery barrages, and aircraft dropping bombs and napalm. For the rest of the war Regt 174 would continue to be sent hundreds of kilometres from its home hills, and to be committed to sacrificial frontal assaults in positional battles, culminating at Dien Bien Phu in spring 1954.

Bo doi, VM regular Regt 88

This young Chinese-trained *bo doi* serves with a unit of Div 308 – Gen Vo Nguyen Giap's most trusted formation. He leads a three-man fire team in a platoon which has just broken into the entrenched French strongpoint PA 8 in a surprise evening attack. He is reaching for a grenade, which he will follow up with bursts from his SMG as he fights his way along a deep trench in close-range combat. A survivor of many actions during three hard years, he has just marched hundreds of kilometres during an exhausting three-month campaign in forested hills, among a resentful population, and he has been on short rations for weeks.

PA 8, Na San, 23/24 November 1952



Weapons, dress and equipment

As a fire-team leader he is armed with an SMG and grenades. This Chinese-made Type 36 copy of the US .45-calibre M3A1 'grease gun' (**1**) is one of several different types of SMG recovered at Na San; note its unusual browned metal finish, contrasting with the black 30-round magazine. Weighing about 4kg (8.8lb) empty, it fired fully automatic only; for safety, the dust cover over the ejection port had to be opened manually to release the locked bolt. The other essential VM assault weapon was the grenade; he has a couple of Chinese stick-grenades (**2**), crude copies of the Soviet RGD 33, tied into an open carrier slung to his hip. To use them, the metal safety cap was unscrewed to release a ceramic bead on a cord; a tug on this ignited a friction time-fuze. Smooth-cased 'concussion' grenades with little fragmentation effect, they were useful in close-up assaults. The machete (**3**) – again, copied from a recovered example – carried on his old French M1916 leather belt is as much a sidearm as a tool; face-to-face combat was not unusual.

Impressions of VM uniform based on photos taken after the 1954 ceasefire are misleading; earlier photos show much variation in shades even after Chinese resupply, since PLA-made uniforms varied between dark green, lighter yellowish-green, or even *cu nau* brown due to dispersed manufacture. This shirt (**4**) is of military cut, its breast pockets hidden here by the quilted vest (**5**). These were worn for warmth in the Tonkin highlands well before Chinese supplies became available, and varied in colour and design (a long-sleeved quilted jacket with a turn-down collar was also used during the Dien Bien Phu campaign). The trousers (**6**), here of a type gathered by loops and buttons on the seams, are an old spare pair in *cu nau* brown; Regt 88 had been on the march for a good three months, and standing orders called for clothing to be changed regularly. His boots (**7**) are French battlefield finds, showing hard wear.

In combat he carries minimal personal equipment: an old French-style *musette* (**8**) as a general-purpose and ammunition haversack, and a Chinese PLA canteen (**9**). His helmet (**10**), of woven rattan (plant fibres), is covered with hessian, and string netting garnished with rags, rice straw and leaves for camouflage. It protects him from nothing but the weather.

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Foreign Legion

Any man could apply to enlist for five years in the Legion by simply walking into any Gendarmerie station in France, and in the aftermath of World War II there was no shortage of displaced Europeans, of some 40 nationalities, with no skills to sell except military experience. Policy was to limit Frenchmen in the ranks to about 10 per cent, but many enlisted as Belgians or Swiss. After 1950 most of the original Wehrmacht veterans had served out their contracts; thereafter the Legion in Indochina was still, at a guess, about 50 per cent German, but most were too young to have seen war service. However, a proportion of the wartime veterans had re-enlisted, and now provided the backbone of the NCO corps alongside the traditional Bretons, Alsatians and Lorrainers, Corsicans, and Europeans from Algeria.

In 1949 the British ex-officer 'Colin John' reckoned that a high proportion of his fellow recruits had previous military experience. Simply as one example, we may cite Cpl Chief Pierre Polain, killed at Phu Tong Hoa in July 1948. The son of a Belgian diplomat, he had joined the Legion in the 1930s, and won the Croix de Guerre in 1943 at Pont du Fahs in Tunisia. When his time expired he joined the Independent Belgian Squadron of the British Army's SAS Brigade and fought in North West Europe in 1944, before re-enlisting in the Legion after VE Day. (Incidentally, there were very few légionnaires from English-speaking countries; Eric Morgan, a Welsh veteran of 2 REI, told the present author that he never met another during his Indochina tour in 1951–53.)

In the field, légionnaires presented a purely practical appearance. This squad photographed in 1946 wear Indian-made World War II-surplus British tropical uniforms in 'jungle green' mixed with 'khaki drill', with British web equipment and weapons. Many photos suggest that the nationality of foreign clothing and web equipment issued to battalions often matched that of the weapons they were issued, though French M1916 leather belt kit was also widespread. (Rikli/Roger Viollet/Getty Images)

Recruit training at Sidi-bel-Abbès or Saida in Algeria lasted six weeks. Recruits had to learn basic French quickly, though instruction was also given in German. Divided into 15-man squads each under a sergeant and three corporals (thus guaranteeing individual attention), they were taught by demonstration, imitation and repetition. The emphasis was on physical fitness, drill and small-arms handling. During long route-marches with full packs the recruits were taught songs to build *esprit de corps*. A very demanding obstacle course included cliff-climbing and water-crossing. Discipline was harsh, with any misdemeanour bringing collective punishments. The Legion's tactical mantra might be summed up most simply as: 'any contact must initiate immediate aggression; we fight to the last man; and if we have to retreat, nobody is left behind'.

A French peculiarity was to select potential corporals immediately from basic training, for a four-month advanced course in map-reading and the handling of French, US and British weapons. The best were awarded their green chevrons after passing two competitive exams, and then acted as instructors until the next four-month sergeants' course opened. Passing for sergeant depended not only on marks in exams but also on character, assessed by veterans from the ranks. The new NCO might spend his whole enlistment as an instructor in North Africa, but most would apply for a well-paid combat posting in Indochina.

Any more relevant training had to be acquired 'on the job' after a légionnaire reached his unit in-country, and naturally suffered from the wide dispersal of companies in the 'sector troops' role. In many cases it was only from about 1951, when infantry battalions could be assembled for collective training under supervision by all their officers and NCOs, that a consistently better standard was attained.

Viet Minh

The basic machinery of recruitment through three levels has been described above. Among the rural peasantry and the urban poor alike, Communist Party cadres patiently preached an appeal to patriotism, to resentment of the colonialists who had 'stolen' the 1945 Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and to hatred of the corrupt native 'puppets' of the French who crushed the hopes of the poor for social justice. This basic sermon was adjusted for particular audiences. The specifically Communist aspects of the revolution were presented in digestible forms, promising mutual respect and eventual rewards, but first demanding hard work, sacrifice and dedication.

Beyond the first – and sometimes only – step of joining the clandestine village guerrillas while continuing with their daily lives, the idea of taking to the hills to join the 'regionals' was daunting for Delta lowlanders, despite the historical folklore which romanticized some bandit gangs as 'Robin Hood' leaders of resistance against the Chinese Empire. The sturdier Tho and Nung *montagnard* tribesmen made more immediately effective soldiers; they needed a lot more persuasion by the smooth-tongued Delta intellectuals before they would commit to giving up their traditional neutrality, but those who did so were valued for their familiarity with the terrain and fearless hunting culture. Regional companies were taught the fundamentals of French and Japanese

From 1951, when this column carrying ammunition boxes was photographed, conscripted *Dan Cong* porters were central to Vo Nguyen Giap's ability to begin his progression from guerrilla to mobile warfare. They not only had to accompany the VM divisions on campaign in their tens of thousands, but also to cut tracks in advance, and install caches of food and ammunition along the planned routes of march. Usually these men and women were called up in relays along the line of march for a period that did not take them away from their equally vital agricultural work for more than two weeks, allowing time to travel from and back to their villages. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

weapons by veterans of the pre-war French Colonial native regiments or armed gendarmerie, or by some of the 3,000-odd Japanese deserters who had joined the Viet Minh rather than surrender (though in 1946–50 there was too little ammunition for serious target practice).

Guerrilla war in dense terrain classically involves careful reconnaissance before stealthily approaching a locally weaker group of enemies, killing them, and taking their weapons and ammunition. Its skills, however well developed, have obvious limitations when attacking heavily armed soldiers in prepared positions. Unless new capabilities and attitudes can be acquired, a guerrilla force cannot progress to the mobile and positional warfare upon which final victory depends. In May 1950, the Party announced that all males between the ages of 16 and 55 in Tonkin were henceforth liable for conscription to serve the cause, including compulsory enlistment in the Vietnamese People's Army.

It was April 1950 when the regional officer Dang Van Viet recorded a general pause in guerrilla operations to undertake systematic instruction. At Cao Binh his Regt 174 was trained in individual combat, the use of explosives for breaching, leadership in assaults on fortified places, the coordination of attacks on posts with road ambushes (Giap's long-favoured method), and even cooperation between infantry and artillery. Giap himself wrote of this period (surely not literally) that it was the 'first time shock units had been trained with anything better than spears and machetes!' Even by the end of that year of victories he would record that Divs 308 and 304, although trained in China in assault tactics, were not yet ready for attacks 'against solid defences'.

MORALE AND LOGISTICS

Foreign Legion

The Legion had long excelled in dissolving mutual national resentments by the inculcation of *esprit de corps*, and the légionnaires' shared isolation and danger in an alien environment provided natural 'glue'. Most légionnaires were reasonably mature, in their mid- to late twenties and with NCOs in their thirties. As always, the soldier's morale was governed by his immediate relationships within the platoon and company, especially by his degree of trust in his NCOs and officers. On active service the pettier aspects of the Legion's rigid discipline were relaxed.

The annihilation of Legion units on RC 4 in October 1950 was a severe blow, provoking one combat officer to dismiss the previous high command as a 'gang of sinister imbeciles'. However, within six months Gen de Lattre's firm hand on the tiller, his attractive command style, and his victories in the Delta battles of spring 1951 restored the CEFEO's spirits. Professional standards and morale both improved when the previously dispersed 'sector' battalions were reassembled from 1951 onwards. Though pay for ranks below sergeant was niggardly, the Legion's ethos of unit pride, self-sufficiency and dedication to the mission still set the men in the *képi blanc* apart, in their own and the world's eyes.

In 'sector' posts légionnaires planted vegetables and bought chickens and pigs in local villages, but Eric Morgan of 2 REI recalled that while on long jungle operations they 'lived on rubbish – fish-heads and rice. We were parachuted in some food once … the tins had been overpainted … I scraped off this painted layer, and [underneath] it said in French "For Arab Troops – 1928"'. During tours of at least two years and often 30 months, some men inevitably found it hard to adapt to the punishing tropical climate. Medical

BELOW LEFT
Vehicle movements on dirt roads such as RC 3bis and RC 4 were difficult and risky all year round, but became almost impossible in the rainy season that lasted from May to October. Here, in October 1950, what looks like an entire French squad struggle to free a 2½-ton truck that has lost traction on a churned-up slope of mud. (ullstein-bild via Getty Images)

BELOW RIGHT
French units employed interned military prisoners (PIMs) as labourers and porters, including for carrying heavy equipment and ammunition on active service. While they were worked hard, their treatment was supervised by the International Red Cross, and some became so loyal to 'their' unit that they even changed sides to join its attached 'partisans'. (Howard Sochurek/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)

problems ranged from simple heat-exhaustion to dangerous diseases such as malaria, bush typhus and dengue fever. The chafing of equipment straps on damp clothing caused ulcerating skin disorders, while cuts and insect bites refused to heal. Despite constant warnings, the drinking of untreated water accounted for 40 per cent of all medical cases. A much heavier burden on morale during operations up-country was the sheer impossibility of carrying serious casualties for many days through almost trackless hills. Routinely, unfortunates who suffered serious head or belly wounds were given a merciful overdose of morphine, rather than being abandoned alive to the soldier-ants and jungle rats.

The infantryman's load was as light as possible when on patrol – rations, water, arms, ammunition, a poncho, and on overnight missions a blanket and sometimes a mosquito net – but weighed about 15kg for longer cross-country marches. While mules or ponies might sometimes be available to carry heavy weapons, their ammunition, and radios, every unit made use of interned military prisoners (PIMs) as porters.

As for logistics: in 1946–51 the CEFEO looked as if it had been fitted out from an international 'lucky dip' of old World War II (and earlier) equipment. Units received a variety of British 'khaki drill' and 'jungle green', US 'olive drab', and locally made clothing. Worse, France's NATO army in Germany had first choice of everything, and before 1951 the United States forbade France to ship out to the CEFEO anything it supplied for the NATO contingent. Apart from weapons (described below), the most damaging shortages were those of serviceable vehicles, radios and aircraft. However, greatly increased US aid from 1951 eased many of these problems.

Viet Minh

In contrast to the well-travelled and cynical légionnaires, their opponents were mostly illiterate 18–20-year-olds whose mental world was limited to village life among the rice-paddies. They felt a natural awe for the educated cadres, whom they called 'older brothers', and were receptive to the repeated lectures urging obedience, patience, and sacrifices for the cause. Down to company level, political commissars provided indoctrination – interpreting events according to the 'Party line', inspiring, and when necessary rebuking. The regime was certainly ruthless, regarding the individual simply as cannon fodder, but discipline was enforced more by exhortation than brutality – an approach that suited an Asian 'shame' culture. Soldiers who were Communist Party members both encouraged and monitored their comrades.

From 1950 onwards, French propaganda tried to explain away their opponents' stunning courage in battle by calling them brainwashed slaves – but slave-soldiers will not keep charging into machine-gun fire day after day. The *bo doi* was a simple man who wanted his country back, and who was motivated day-to-day by soldierly comradeship. In battle he was as frightened of death and maiming as anyone would be, and as shocked and disheartened by the loss of friends; nevertheless, he ran forward.

For homesick lowlanders, adapting to life in the hills was hard, and they suffered as badly as the Europeans from diseases and the harsh extremes of climate. They might march hundreds of kilometres at 30km a day for three or four days at a time, carrying heavy packs and sleeping in the open. Their medical care was extremely limited, and while they were ordered to boil drinking water, change their clothing and bathe their feet regularly this was often impossible in practice.

Neither regional nor regular soldiers received any pay, but they were fed and clothed, being provisioned by networks of local villages when settled in the hills. When on the march their cloth rice-rolls carried from four to ten days' rations, at a scale of 680g daily; by 1952 this had increased to 800g, plus 400g of vegetables, dried fish, or very occasionally meat. However, during mobile campaigns a man was often lucky to have fish sauce to flavour his rice, and sometimes only salt and chance-gathered leaves. The thin blue or brown peasant clothing was often inadequate in the early years, without enough quilted vests in winter; the far-ranging December 1949 campaign against the Chinese Nationalists reduced uniforms and shoes to rags. From 1950 China provided uniforms and personal equipment, gradually 'turning the Viet Minh green' by mid-1952.

The vital backbone of the logistic system was provided by civilians who were called up periodically to support local military operations. These men and women 'prepared the battlefield' by clearing tracks, carried burdens for the soldiers, and removed the dead after battle. Above all, they had to provide the *Dan Cong* porters who actually accompanied VM forces on operations. Giap's thrust at Mao Khe and Dong Trieu in March 1951 involved 26,000 main-force troops each carrying a 30kg pack, plus 30,000 porters with even heavier loads. In the Hoa Binh campaign of 1951/52, Divs 304, 308 and 312 needed 150,000 porters to sustain them for three months. (This does not mean that there were five porters per soldier at any one time: groups were mobilized in relays, to work for 7–10 days each.)

ABOVE LEFT
Villagers preparing rice for the Viet Minh. When Regt 174 left its Binh Gia base for an operation, the local leader of the Women's Union (part of the *Dan Quan* system) organized deliveries from dispersed villages. An order for 1,000 sticky-rice balls, or 1,000 'boxes' (the recycled condensed-milk cans used as measures of volume) could be delivered in 24 hours, the rice perhaps enlivened with sesame seeds or grilled salted peanuts. However, the Viet Bac had little cultivable land and a sparse population, and in 1949–50 it was badly starved by a French blockade preventing food coming up from the Delta. In September 1949 Dang Van Viet mentions having to 'persuade' villagers to give up their precious seed rice to feed his unit. (SeM/UIG via Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT
When the VM divisions began large-scale campaigns of manoeuvre in the hills far from their base areas, complete with light artillery, they transported heavy weapons on mules or Thai ponies whenever these were available. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

ARMAMENT AND TACTICS

Foreign Legion

Before about 1951, Legion units were issued a variety of small arms due to shortages of the French 7.5mm MAS36 rifle (though less, apparently, of the 7.5mm FM24/29 LMG). Battalions achieved some but not complete commonality: for instance, those of 2 REI and 3 REI received British .303in Lee-Enfield rifles and Bren LMGs with 9mm Sten SMGs, while 13 DBLE had US .30-calibre M1903 Springfield rifles and .45-calibre Thompson M1A1 SMGs – but also Brens (the American BAR was not then available in any numbers). In fact Thompsons might be seen in any unit, and this variety of at least three calibres within a battalion naturally caused logistic difficulties.

While squad LMGs seem to have been fairly plentiful, heavier crew-served weapons were not. An infantry battalion might have ten machine guns – two in the HQ Co and two in each of the four rifle company HQs – but there was always a shortage of the effective Browning .30-calibre M1919A4. Infantry were routinely issued with 7.5mm M1931A Reibel machine guns stripped from casemates in the Maginot Line or from old tank hulls, fed by drum magazines and mounted on a copy of the Browning tripod. Of a battalion's 10–12 mortars, similarly distributed, up to eight might be light 60mm tubes, and only four at most the 81mm.

From 1951 onwards the French began to standardize on the MAS36 rifle and FM24/29 LMG, and would receive increasing numbers of the 9mm MAT49 SMG. The US provided .30-calibre M1 carbines and M1919A4 and A6 machine guns in quantity, and in addition to their 'organic' machine guns, mortars and (latterly) 57mm M18 'recoilless rifles', units holding defensive positions often received a couple of .50-calibre M2 HMGs. The older foreign weapons were then turned over to 'partisan' companies and allied irregulars.

During the first years in Tonkin, 'tactics' simply meant trying to keep the roads secure along the chains of company posts. Writing of an ambush on RC 4 in February 1948, Dang Van Viet describes a French convoy being headed by an infantry squad in a halftrack, who dismounted to clear both flanks with 'reconnaissance by fire' – occasional Thompson SMG bursts into the bush to provoke a response. When the trucks halted for sappers to use mine-detectors, the VM opened fire; the 'légionnaires' (to Dang, all French troops were 'légionnaires') charged up the slopes, firing, but in close cover the ambushers had the advantage. As always, Dang exaggerates the results, boasting of 'wiping out' the convoy and capturing six prisoners, 60mm mortars, plus a rare .50-calibre HMG and a radio.

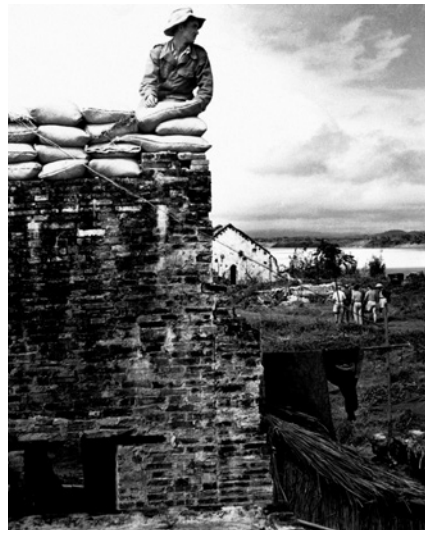
The French side of this story is more interesting. There were actually two ambushes on RC 4 on 5 February 1948. First, road-openers from 8th Co, II/3 REI moving south from Dong Khe were indeed 'partly overrun' in an hour-long fight before the VM withdrew after artillery fire was called down. Meanwhile, another patrol from 5th Co, coming north, was hit at Lung Phai Pass; this withdrew successfully, thanks to support by a mechanized platoon from 4th Sqn/RICM. No convoy was destroyed, since both actions were

Mid-war French infantry fighting in open paddy-fields, using classic fire-and-movement tactics – here the crew of a squad's FM24/29 LMG prepare to cover an advance by the *grenadier-voltigeurs*. (Keystone-France/ Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

triggered by the road-opening patrols – as intended. (Nevertheless, together that day's two actions cost 21 French killed or missing and 11 wounded.)

Typically, convoys travelling northward on RC 4 would spend the night at the halfway point, the valley-bottom post of That Khe. From the south end of Lung Phai Pass a reinforced company from a Legion or North African battalion's post garrisons would move out before dawn to picket the heights, and another from Dong Khe, usually supported by light armour, would come south to 'open the road'. When all was reported safe, the convoy would leave

Infantry dismounted from their trucks to fight among the paddy-dykes of the Delta. By 1952 the pioneer platoons of battalion HQ companies were receiving 57mm recoilless rifles (centre background), which were usually devolved down to the rifle companies to beef up their firepower. These soldiers appear to be Indochinese; in 1951–53 one of the four rifle companies in most French units, including those of the Legion, was locally recruited. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)



ABOVE LEFT
Truck-mounted 40mm Bofors guns were sometimes employed for road-opening and escorts on RC 4; this example seems to serve with III/RACM, whose 7th Battery had Bofors guns at Cao Bang and That Khe in early 1949. (ullstein-bild via Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT
Before the construction of the 'De Lattre Line' around the Red River Delta in 1951–52, concrete-built defensive posts capable of withstanding artillery fire were virtually unknown. However, the brick tower from which this légionnaire keeps watch at the riverside post of Tu Vu in November 1951 would at least give protection from the weapons then available to most VM regional units. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

That Khe; the classic spacing in 1949 was trucks at intervals of 300m, in groups of ten separated by 2km. A weakness was that AFV escorts, usually open-hulled, were placed at the head and tail, and could seldom manoeuvre on the narrow road when attacked. Preliminary shelling or aerial strafing of the thick cover in suspected ambush sites had limited results.

During the open-field fighting in the Delta as part of GMs, units employed conventional World War II fire-and-movement tactics which need no explanation here, but Sgt Chief John has some notes about movement on foot through dense country. This was only possible in single file along narrow buffalo tracks; visibility each side was limited to about 1m, and tracks meandered so freely that men separated by more than a 5m interval lost sight of one another. In these conditions numbers meant nothing, so a single-squad patrol with an automatic weapon and a few riflemen was just as effective as a platoon. Typically, one or two VM would booby-trap both edges of the path with grenades, hiding a few paces into the jungle while holding strings to the pins. They could not see the patrol, any more than they could be seen themselves, but when they heard movement they would fire a few shots to make the patrol take cover, then pull the strings to detonate the grenades. (Thankfully, their old No. 36 Mills bombs had often deteriorated through age and damp, reducing the blast radius.) The only counter that might occasionally work was for every alternate légionnaire to face the jungle left and right the instant the first shot was fired, and charge ahead firing into the cover – this might achieve a lucky hit.

Viet Minh

In 1945 the regulars had Japanese 6.5mm or 7.7mm rifles and LMGs, or elderly French 8mm small arms confiscated by the Japanese. The Nationalist Chinese sold them everything from Russian 7.62mm M1891 Mosin-Nagant rifles, through more modern Czech-designed but Chinese-made 7.92mm Mauser rifles and ZB26/30 LMGs, to US .30-calibre P17 rifles and .45-calibre

Thompson SMGs. This brought the total arsenal in 1946 up to some 60,000 rifles, 3,000 light and medium machine guns, 200 mortars, 40-plus light cannon and half a dozen artillery pieces. Funded partly by drug trafficking, they were also able to buy through Chinese intermediaries a wide variety of small arms and machine guns on the Asian 'black market', particularly in Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong and later Taiwan.

The regional units were much less well armed before 1951. In 1947–48 a regional 'battalion' might have only some 250 old carbines and rifles, and only a single LMG. In 1948 Dang Van Viet of regional Regt 28 lamented the

> dilapidated state and shortage of rifles; both they and our grenades were subject to misfires, but this was the common lot of our units since the beginning, and we did not complain … For now we were simply happy to have any firearms, even if they did date from World War I or earlier – the 'shorty carbine' [M1892/16] or long Russian rifle.

However, Dang later claimed that by mid-1950 repeated ambushes had captured useful numbers of Brens, Stens and Thompsons (so presumably Lee-Enfields as well), and Giap confirms that Dang's regiment retained some US and British weapons during their first campaign as regulars in 1950. During that year even most regional battalions were reported to have ten LMGs each.

As the regulars received newer Chinese weapons in 1950/51 – large further supplies of Chinese-made Mauser rifles and ZB26/30 LMGs, and Chinese copies of Soviet 'short' 7.62mm PPSh-41 and -43 and US .45-calibre M3 SMGs – their older French, Japanese and miscellaneous arms were steadily turned over to the regionals. A photo taken as late as October 1953, showing the results of a French sweep inside the Delta, reveals a mixture of Chinese-made Mausers, US P17s, old French M1902 'Tirailleur Tonkinois' rifles, Japanese Arisakas, Thompsons, Brens, BARs, 'Skoda' LMGs, and 60mm and 81mm mortars of uncertain parentage. The wide variety of small-arms calibres was always a handicap, and locally made munitions were very prone to duds and misfires.

Handguns were a status symbol for cadres; the most common were French pre-war revolvers, but more coveted were semi-automatic pistols such as the .45-calibre Colt M1911A1 and the 9mm Canadian-made Browning Hi-Power. Village militia and the less fortunate regionals had to make do with VM-made pieces, such as a crude copy of the Colt chambered for the French 7.65mm 'long' cartridge, but smooth-bored. However, the VM factories were also capable of turning out simple but practical mortars and SMGs, from 1947 'bazookas', and from 1950 heavier, smoothbore recoilless guns (the two latter both being confusingly termed 'SKZs' in VM sources), plus grenades, mines and 'bangalores' (bamboo tubes packed with explosive), although few bolt-action rifles.

The first Chinese arms deliveries agreed in April 1950 were reportedly some 40,000–50,000 rifles, 200 LMGs, 100 each MMGs and mortars, and a few Czech P27 'bazookas' and DKZ 'recoilless rifles'. In parallel, the Viet Minh continued to acquire weapons by means of overseas purchases, enemy captures and home production. The booty from Lang Son (see page 62) allowed some regular units to be fully equipped with French

A US .50-calibre M2 HMG, three Chinese-made 7.92mm Type 26 (Czech ZB26) 'Skoda' LMGs, a 60mm and three 81mm mortars take pride of place in this display of VM weapons captured during Operation *Lea* in October 1947. The rifles in the background are Chinese-made Mausers. Other weapons captured in this campaign included Hotchkiss machine guns; Japanese, Soviet and Lewis LMGs; a PIAT, and Japanese grenade-launchers. Among the 640 tons of munitions captured were 30,000 rounds of Soviet 7.62mm and 25,000 French 8mm; 7,500 grenades, 420 mortar bombs, 200 shells of various calibres, 250 aerial bombs (whose explosive the VM recycled into grenades and mines), and 34 tons of explosives. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

rifles and LMGs in 1951, and French captures continued to be significant throughout the war despite ever-increasing Chinese aid (which reached 450 tons per month by the time of Na San in late 1952). Giap's defeats on the borders of the Delta in January–June 1951 cost his main-force divisions thousands of weapons, but he states that the last, Div 325, was fully re-armed by May 1952. By the end of that year China had provided about another 58,000 rifles and 5,200 machine guns with 10 million rounds, 600-plus mortars, perhaps 170 Czech DKZ rifled recoilless weapons, and at least 35 75mm artillery pieces (some of them US pack howitzers) with 10,000 shells.

The first artillery unit formed in June 1946 had a few old 'French 75s' and more examples of Japanese 75mm mountain guns, backed by French 37mm trench guns and 25mm anti-tank cannon, plus a handful of Japanese 20mm automatic cannon. In 1950 some regular infantry regiments received a few guns for integral heavy-weapons companies, but the subsequent formation of Heavy Div 351 from spring 1951 saw the VM's artillery assets and trained personnel concentrated under General Staff control. This reduced infantry regimental heavy companies to smoothbore recoilless 'SKZs' of various calibres less than 75mm, and 81mm mortars.

As for tactics: in 1948 Dang Van Viet writes that 'the enemy are professionals, veterans of World War II. We have not had regular training, and they know it – the légionnaires despise our combat capacity. We are even short of rifles and grenades, let alone anything heavier. At the first shot they will counter-attack, trying to submerge us with firepower.'

Even the simplest road ambush had to be preceded by several days' careful reconnaissance and preparation. The classic method was to disable a leading vehicle so that it blocked the road, and then another near the tail of the convoy, thus trapping the remaining trucks and preventing the escorting AFVs from manoeuvring. After employing maximum firepower the main attackers would retreat along carefully planned routes, covered by a second force which engaged any dismounted infantry. Dang's most successful ambush, on a north-bound convoy of about 100 vehicles in Lung Phai Pass south of Dong Khe on 3 September 1949, was in four-battalion strength, so could employ more refined tactics.

The road was flanked by a ridge on the west, on the summits of which the French routinely placed pickets. On the east side a steep wooded ravine dropped down from the edge of the road, with another line of wooded heights rising beyond it. On this eastern ridge, Dang had concealed positions dug for his few 75mm and 37mm guns, but not occupied until the last night. Telephone cables were strung between the different battalion command posts; caltrops were spread on the road to burst tyres, and great care was taken to hide all signs of preparation. The troops then waited in camouflaged positions for no less than two days (an ordeal demanding great patience and discipline), including a battalion on the western slopes below the summits where the French pickets would be placed. When the ambush was sprung, the 75mm guns engaged the escorting AFVs by direct fire, cutting the convoy in two places; over their heads, the 37mm guns hit the pickets on the facing crests, who were then dispersed by an up-hill charge by the battalion hidden below them. A second battalion surged up out of the eastern ravine and overran the stalled convoy, while other units attacked from the head and tail. More than 50 of the central vehicles were looted and burned and about 100 soldiers killed (and many civilian travellers were also butchered).

ABOVE LEFT
During 1946–50 VM tactics were based mainly on ambushes. These employed the instinctive skills of boyhood games of 'hide-and-seek' or of animal-hunting, but raised to a lethal new level. Careful advance observation and patience in preparation were paramount, coupled with concealment both of positions and of movement. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

ABOVE RIGHT
During 1949–50 VM attacks on posts employed more heavy weapons, forcing garrisons to improvise defences. On 18/19 November 1949 this tree-trunk 'blockhouse' at KM 41 West on RC 4, held by a platoon of II/3 REI, would be levelled to waist height by direct fire from two Japanese 75mm guns. Even so, the légionnaires successfully fought off assaults in battalion strength. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

Meticulous preparations also preceded assaults when the VM graduated to attacking French posts. Ideally, time was taken to gather local intelligence, assassinate any likely informers, and enlist porters for the approach march and 'preparation of the battlefield'. Reconnaissance teams plotted the post's layout and watched comings and goings, exactly locating weapon strongpoints, command posts, radios and barracks. The attackers must preferably outnumber the defenders by a factor of up to 6 or 7 to 1. The roles of fire-support and assault parties (in VM terms, the 'face' and the 'point', each of which might deploy both primary and secondary teams) were clearly defined, and both were briefed with 'sand-table' models of the defences. When the mortars, RCLs (and guns, if available) blasted their assigned targets, the assault column hit a selected section of the wire, in the order: explosives group (satchel charges, bangalores); ladder group (ladders, mats, cutters and other tools); fire group (LMGs); assault group (SMGs leading riflemen, grenades); and reserve group. Once inside, they spread out to destroy designated objectives; and meanwhile, both up and down the road, ambush parties lay in wait for the expected relief columns, which were as important targets as the objective itself.

In the second half of the war, when former guerrillas were turned into infantrymen in PLA training camps in China, their tactics changed radically. Far from introducing any tactical sophistication, however, this training relied upon the concept of sacrificial mass assaults as employed by the Chinese in Korea. The following summary is partly drawn from a US analysis of the latter, combined with observed VM behaviour in 1951–54:

A battalion committed to a night attack would march at dusk to an assembly area (A) about 1–2km from the objective, rest, and eat, while the battalion CO briefed company commanders on their objectives, timings, and methods of attack – in inflexible detail. With a bazooka platoon attached, the companies then advanced in column to a still-sheltered position (B), where they deployed into line and dug foxholes over an area about 300m wide and 400m deep. After dark, the picked main assault company advanced, with the bazooka platoon roughly in the centre, while the flanking companies kept abreast out on either side, until all reached a line (C) some 500m short of the objective. There, each of the assault company's three platoons formed into a column; in parallel, these then advanced to the final jumping-off line (D), about 200m from the objective. Here they might halt for hours, while the bombardment softened up the previously observed 'blockhouses' and bunkers on the objective and the selected narrow section (perhaps only 100m) of the perimeter.

When the final order was given, the three platoons

In VM assaults on fixed positions from 1950 onwards, the attackers were led by sapper teams with bangalores and satchel charges to cut gaps in the barbed wire and set off anti-personnel mines, with close covering fire from submachine-gunners. Casualties were inevitably very heavy, and French accounts occasionally mention deliberate 'suicide-bombings'. This sapper was killed at Xam Pheo in January 1952; he appears to have been carrying a satchel charge mounted on a short bamboo pole, for placing rather than throwing. Detonation of satchel charges was often initiated by a stick grenade with its cap protruding from the wrapped charge. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

The sapper teams leading assaults were usually followed by LMG crews to exploit any initial break-in and try to silence the nearest French strongpoints, thus allowing the platoon columns flooding in behind them to spread out over the objective. The sappers leading attacks on PA 26 at Na San on 1/2 December 1952 were reportedly followed by two successive waves each with a battalion's total allocation of 20–30 LMGs, each followed by a distinct wave of ammunition-bearers. These regulars have a captured MAS36 rifle and an FM24/29 LMG, which after 1950 seem to be as common in photos as the Czech-designed small arms acquired from China. (SeM/UIG via Getty Images)

advanced in nine parallel squad columns made up of three-man fire teams, perhaps crawling until the last 50m. The 'bazookas' then fired on the defences, while sapper squads armed with satchel charges, bangalores, SMGs and grenades attempted to cut the wire and lead the break-in, followed closely by LMG teams. Shortly afterwards, the flanking companies curled in from left and right to divide the defenders' fire. Any company that penetrated the defences then spread out to silence the French positions one by one. Such tactics were always costly, and had to be repeated until the objective was taken.

However, a single night during the Hoa Binh campaign – 7/8 January 1952 – threw up two interesting examples of unorthodox conduct at unit level: one of cocky carelessness, and the other of unusual tactical initiative. In the first instance, when attacking the Legion's II/13 DBLE in the Pheo Hills, Regt 102 from Div 308 chose to avoid the burden of carrying enough spare ammunition, and suffered for it. In the second, Bn 84 of the same division's Regt 36 suggested a counter for the problem of French artillery posted well back from the front line being able to devastate assaults while remaining invulnerable. The unit's Co 41 formed a picked 'commando' with satchel charges, grenades and SMGs, which infiltrated Hoa Binh town to hit the French gun line. It successfully disabled four 105mm howitzers, just before the parent regiment launched several coordinated assaults.

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATIONS

Foreign Legion

The Legion's regimental and battalion commanders, and many captains, had seen World War II service in North Africa and Europe. They were

March 1952: a French officer and his radio operator with the standard American-supplied SCR-300, a 'tropicalized' backpack FM set with a range of up to 5km. Radios only became available to most company commanders from 1951. Only echelons above unit level had the SCR-694, a heavy AM set with ranges of 24 to 48km for voice and Morse code respectively. Many radios used by both sides were heavy, fragile, short-ranged, unreliable in mountainous terrain, and dependent on short-lived batteries or separate hand-cranked generators. Most were AM sets, requiring a jeep or at least two men to carry them, and needed long aerials to be strung up in particular directions. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

battle-hardened leaders whose performance in combat in Vietnam was impressive, even though their experience had not prepared them for this kind of war.

As for the lieutenants, the Legion had always been a sought-after posting, and apart from graduates of St Cyr it also benefited from the French Army's practice of promoting a proportion of junior officers from the NCO ranks. The corps favoured officers who aspired to regimental service rather than box-ticking careerists, and a reputation as a *baroudeur* ('brawler') was no handicap for a Legion officer. He was expected to lead in combat, and to exercise a paternal discipline over his 'hard cases' when they stepped out of line.

However, the CEFEO suffered from a chronic shortage of suitable battalion officers, which got worse as the war dragged on. Limited by the absence of those who saw their professional future in the modern world of NATO, the pool was further reduced by a steady drain of casualties with which the replacement system could never keep up. In the Expeditionary Corps as a whole, by 1953 a battalion often had little more than half its officer establishment (11 or 12, instead of 18), and many were old for their ranks (e.g. lieutenants averaging 33 and captains 38). After 1950 increasing numbers of non-infantry officers were 'converted' and posted to combat units with inadequate training, and Sgt Chief John writes that even in the Legion this became worrying.

A battalion should have had 60–80 sergeants and other senior NCOs, but this might fall as low as 40. Apart from battle casualties, many of this most essential category were always being creamed off for leadership roles

in specialist companies, or in Indochinese units created from 1951 under De Lattre's programme of expanding locally recruited forces. The original 'old sweats' might be creaking a bit as they neared the end of a second tour, after perhaps five years in-country. Younger men could rise quickly through the ranks, but the system of recruit training could be a drawback. If he had been plucked from the ranks for NCO courses immediately after basic training, a sergeant might come down the gangplank with good theoretical knowledge of his trade, but lacking the local or recent combat experience to give him confidence and authority.

Practical leadership above platoon level depends upon communications. Until the United States increased its support from 1951 onwards the American SCR-300 backpack FM radio was only available to isolated posts and down to battalion level, so communication with and between companies was normally reliant upon field telephones, the cables of which were easily cut (and carefully gathered up) by the VM. Even when more radios became available, local atmospheric conditions in the highlands made communication difficult; for instance, for a vital hour before sunset and after sunrise reception was notoriously bad. A 'wire net' using field telephones is slow to install and impossible to protect, but it is secure; radios are not. At higher command levels both sides gathered intelligence by radio interception, and Giap states that during the crisis of October 1950 much French traffic was sent in 'clear'. By 1952, at least, the VM could sometimes listen in to tactical traffic over French battalion and company radios.

Viet Minh

In a population that was 90 per cent illiterate, the original VM 'cadres' were inevitably drawn from former junior officials, academics and office clerks, leavened in the Vietnamese People's Army with former Colonial soldiers. Thereafter, potential leaders who proved themselves in the ranks were sent on short NCO and officer courses held in the Viet Bac. From 1950 regular officers were trained in China, and their instruction continued by means of refresher courses and postings to regional units to gain combat experience.

The talents required by a guerrilla leader were local knowledge, fieldcraft, shrewd judgement of character, personal charisma, and the tactical instincts to set an ambush, coordinate its execution and withdraw safely. The more complex tasks required of an officer in an organized army demanded obedience and patient application; some successful guerrillas failed to make the transition to a disciplined hierarchy, or to master the 'staff work' needed for coordinating the movements of a military force.

A more general problem was a basic lack of understanding of military culture or technology, so instruction had to be rigidly schematic, with every lesson copied down for rote-learning. This robbed junior officers of the initiative and mental courage to 'throw away the book' when things went wrong. Coupled with the Asian sensitivity about 'losing face', which discouraged accurate reports up the chain of command, this naturally led to failures to respond imaginatively to unexpected threats or opportunities. The Vietnamese People's Army was well aware of this problem: documents

VM cadres apparently posed for a propaganda photo to show them being briefed before the assault on Dong Khe in September 1950, using a 'sand-table' model of the terrain and defences. It is oriented with north to the right (see the map on page 51), so the east side of the Citadel hill is towards us with the dark line of RC 4 and the built-up Quartier Dubouchet behind it. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

captured in spring 1952 criticize junior officers for acting 'like machines stripped of all intelligence'.

It might be thought that the Communist system of unit command being shared with a political commissar must have had disastrous consequences, but that was certainly not always the case. These Communist Party appointees shared all the hardships and danger of life on campaign, and some forged good relationships with their co-commanders. When commanding Regt 174, Dang Van Viet consistently writes of his commissar Chu Huy Man as a trusted partner in battle (though admittedly the latter's background as field commander of a regional battalion may have set him apart from the usual run).

We may guess that apart from French (i.e. US) captures, the few radios available to the Viet Minh must have been older Japanese or Soviet types. The senior echelons had radio contact with regimental HQs, but below that level communication depended upon extensive use of field telephones (so at least tactical communications were usually secure from French interception; high-level traffic was not). Entrusting messages to runners or couriers on horseback was common; for example, the regimental commander Dang Van Viet recalls that in October 1950 he received by radio a high-command order to detach one of his battalions, but had to send a runner to the battalion commander. Even company HQs each had a squad of 12 runners.

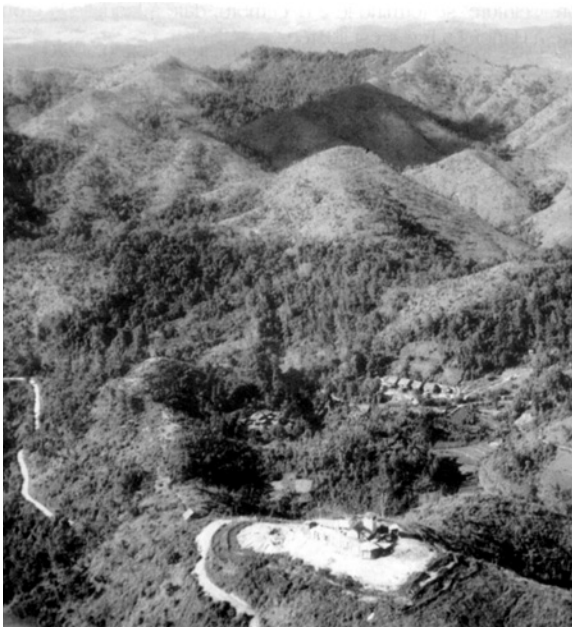
Phu Tong Hoa

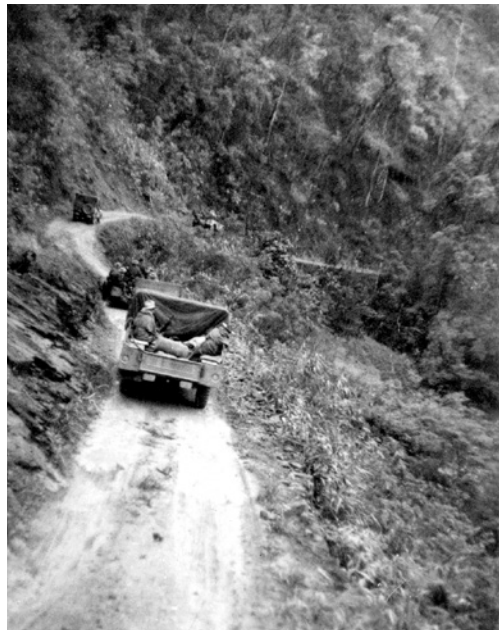
25–26 July 1948

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

From the CEFEO's first return to the frontier country, where the Viet Minh were secure in the Bac Son mountains, all movements between the isolated posts were vulnerable. In these thickly forested hills the narrow dirt roads wound around hairpins and climbed over switchbacks, only occasionally dropping into small, cultivated river valleys dominated by ramparts of *calcaires* – abrupt rocky outcrops, covered with thick brush and riddled with caves. Although this inhospitable terrain was much more sparsely populated than the Delta lowlands, French activity was so closely watched by VM agents that surprise was impossible. While most of the *montagnards* tried to avoid both armies of intruders, in the Cao Bang region one Tho chief had – unusually – sided some years previously with the Viet Minh, who carried out reprisals on any '*villages ralliés*' (villages friendly to the French).

The Viet Minh were relatively weak in numbers and equipment, but always enjoyed the initiative. They knew that any ambush or attack would provoke a French reaction, and since the possible routes for this were so few and predictable the reaction force could always be ambushed in its turn. Exploiting this advantage to both tie down and wear down the French became Vo Nguyen Giap's fundamental tactic before 1950. Such clashes might cost the French anything between half a dozen and 50 casualties, plus a few irreplaceable vehicles; during 1948 there were 28 major ambushes on RC 4 alone, inflicting a steady haemorrhage of losses. The few French mechanized units with light armour were confined to the road itself, and off-road infantry movement among the wooded ridges and crags – whether to picket the high ground along the roads, or to try to outflank an ambush – was slow and exhausting.





ABOVE LEFT
The chaotic terrain of north-east Tonkin; this aerial photo shows (foreground) the isolated post of Dong Dang, the nearest one to the Chinese border, which would be held in 1950 by troops from I/3 REI, and later occupied briefly by VM Regt 174. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

ABOVE RIGHT
French trucks spaced out as they negotiate a narrow stretch of RC 4 approaching Lung Phai Pass from the south; the road is a mere ledge between a cliff on the left and a ravine on the right. At such bottlenecks the Viet Minh habitually buried mines, cut or blocked the road, and mounted ambushes. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

Artillery was dispersed singly or in two-gun sections in some posts, but since maps and target observation were both inadequate effective supporting fires were difficult to achieve. Air support, based at Hanoi, consisted of a single squadron of Supermarine Spitfire IX fighters and two of Amiot AAC.1 Toucan (Junkers Ju 52/3m) trimotor transports, though Morane-Saulnier MS 500 Criquet (Fieseler Fi 156 Storch) spotter/liaison aircraft could use a few rudimentary local airstrips. There were, of course, no tactical helicopters at this date. Air operations were limited by the highland weather, characterized by thick low-lying fog in the morning hours, and the rainy season between May and October greatly hampered all activity (both by air and road). Forward air control was in any case rudimentary, and although the VM were always highly nervous of air attack their concealment in wooded terrain usually saved them.

During winter 1947/48 the north-western loop of RC 3 between Cao Bang and Na Fac was abandoned in favour of the more direct RC 3bis to the south of it. Responsibility for this road between Cao Bang and Bac Kan lay with I/3 REI, and the southernmost of its posts between the two, held by 2nd Co, was Phu Tong Hoa. As the crow flies (but not on the ever-twisting road) it lay about 12km south of Na Fac post, held by 3rd Co plus a single 105mm howitzer, and some 20km north of Bac Kan. The latter was a symbolic objective for the Viet Minh, since it had housed Ho Chi Minh's headquarters before he was driven out by Operation *Lea*. Bac Kan was held by I/3 REI's HQ Co and 1st Co, with two 105s, and part of 5th Sqn of the mechanized Morocco Colonial Infantry Regiment (RICM).

Since early April 1948 movements on RC 3bis had been harassed increasingly. On 12 July Capt Cardinal's 2nd Co at Phu Tong Hoa lost five killed and 17 wounded to an ambush south of the post. On 16 July, French intelligence reported a major concentration in that area by VM regional Regt 72 and 'Brigade Thu Do' (later identified as Regts 74 and 121),

M3 White scout car of the Morocco Colonial Infantry Regiment (RICM); note the anchor badge of the Colonial '*marsouins*' ('porpoises') on the hull side. The RICM's 2nd, 4th and later 5th Sqns provided post garrisons on RC 3bis and RC 4 with mechanized support at various times in 1948–49, each squadron having an HQ and three large subunits termed *pelotons*. Each of these comprised: a reconnaissance troop, with four armed jeeps, four scout cars, one M3 halftrack and an M8 75mm HMC; and a motorized infantry troop with 2½-ton trucks. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

supposedly under the direction of Giap in person. In fact he had dispersed about 1,000 men along the road all the way from Ban Cao down to Bac Kan, in order to isolate Phu Tong Hoa for an assault by probably twice that number from the best elements of the three units. (In VM sources pre-1950 at least, and French reports quoting them, mention of 'regiments' cannot be taken at face value as formations fielding three infantry battalions. The force assembled for the actual assault on Phu Tong Hoa is variously estimated at two or three battalions.)

Distant but rare photo of the post at Phu Tong Hoa, looking northwards from the native village south of the fort. Under magnification, the outer bamboo barricade can be seen just above the Dodge ambulance and below the white blemish on the photo (left); a pale earth track leads up the hillock to the gate in the south wall (centre left); and immediately above the trucks (right) is the wrecked house marked on our map as 'N' (see page 37). Above it, reflections highlight some of the oblique timber props bracing the fort's plank-and-earth rampart. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

Phu Tong Hoa, 25 July 1948

MAP KEY

Two conflicting versions of a sketch-map have been published: one prepared for LtCol Simon's after-action report, and the other (unattributed) in *Képi Blanc*, Nos 734 & 735; neither includes an exact scale line. For the fort plan we have mainly followed the former, and for the course of the action the latter.

1 **1930hrs:** Two 75mm shells destroy the main gate.

2 ***c.*2000hrs:** A shellburst kills Légs Hergessel, Mahaut and Veran and wounds Capt Cardinal; wounded a second time by a grenade thrown into the radio room, Cardinal will bleed to death in the early hours of 26 July. At perhaps 2015hrs Lt Charlotton will also be killed by a shellburst.

3 **1930–*c.*2045hrs:** Continuing bombardment falls mainly on the central range of buildings, the armoury and stores by the north wall, and the west wall, creating a 15m breach in the latter. Blockhaus I is also damaged.

4 ***c.*2045hrs:** VM assault columns reach the outer defences, and begin to breach them.

5 ***c.*2115hrs (?):** VM assault troops penetrate the west and north walls.

6 ***c.*2200hrs:** VM assault troops have now occupied almost half of the post.

7 ***c.*2200–2230hrs:** QM Sgt Guillemaud leads counter-attacks to clear the north wall, later recapturing Blockhaus III. Sgts Andry and Fissler lead a counter-attack on the partly occupied eastern barrack, before linking up with S/Lt Bevalot's party in the south courtyard.

8 ***c.*2300–2330hrs:** Cpl Camilleri and Sgts Andry and Fissler lead counter-attacks on the main buildings and the breach in the west wall, covered by fire from Cpl Chief Jaeckel on the mound of Blockhaus IV.

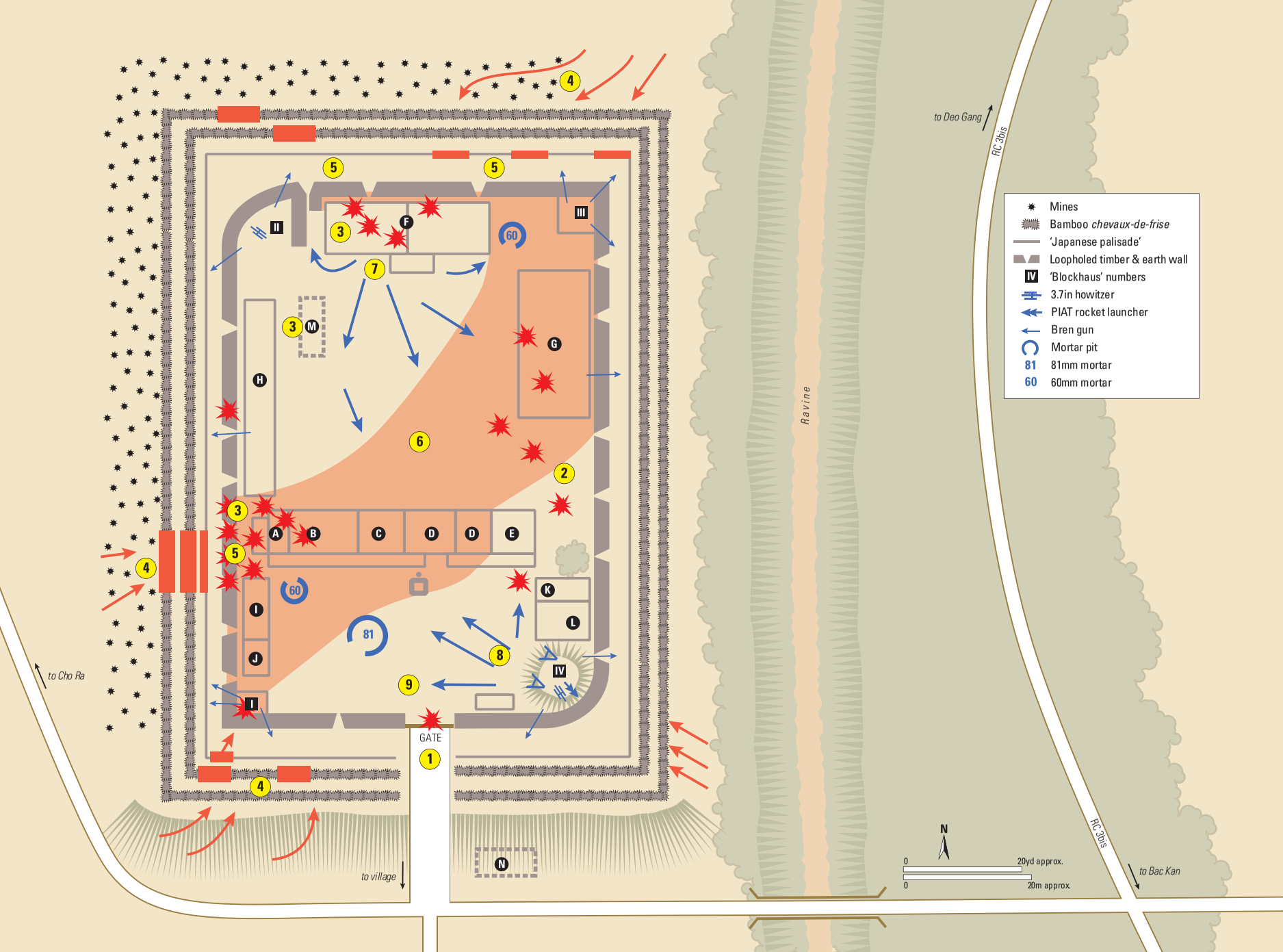
9 ***c.*2330hrs (?):** S/Lt Bevalot leads a counter-attack to recapture Blockhaus I.

Battlefield environment

The post at Phu Tong Hoa was situated on a hillock on the west side of the road, divided from it by a wooded ravine. It had already been almost overrun once by elements of regional VM Regts 72 and 74 when it was held by a company of Colonial Infantry in early December 1947, and had been rebuilt when taken over by I/3 REI in January 1948. Engineer materials were in as short supply as everything else, and consequently the post's defences were fairly primitive. Enclosing a rectangle about 90m north-to-south by some 60m across, the 3m-high walls had a double skin of long, heavy planks infilled with earth, supported by timber uprights and props. Parapets were allegedly loopholed for rifles and some of the garrison's 14 Bren LMGs, although photos do not show this. At each corner was a numbered bastion (the Legion used the German term *Blockhaus*); Nos **I** and **III**, at the south-western and north-eastern corners respectively, were enclosed and mounted LMGs, while Nos **II** and **IV** (north-west and south-east corners) were open, each housing a British 3.7in mountain howitzer.

Inside, the area was divided into two courtyards by a west-to-east central range of mud-brick buildings housing the cookhouse (**A**), mess room (**B**), NCOs' quarters (**C**), orderly room and officers' quarters (**D**) and radio room (**E**). Along but slightly separated from the north wall of the northern yard, on slightly raised ground, was a brick building housing the stores and armoury (**F**). Timber barracks stood against the east (**G**; 1st and 2nd platoons) and west (**H**; 3rd and 4th platoons) side walls of both courtyards, the south-western barrack housing the company office (**I**) and senior NCOs (**J**), and the south-eastern barrack incorporating both the gunners' quarters (**K**) and a small sickbay (**L**). In the north-western part of the northern yard stood an open-sided thatched shelter (**M**) for *al fresco* eating, and in its north-eastern corner was a 60mm mortar position. In the north-western part of the southern yard were a second 60mm and an 81mm (3in) mortar; the latter, at least, had a substantial brick parapet.

The exterior defences included sparse fields of anti-personnel mines and tripwire flares outside the west and north walls, and, for lack of enough barbed wire, triple bamboo barricades. The inner layer is described as a 'Japanese palisade', while the two outer layers were thick *chevaux-de-frise* of X-shapes of sharpened stakes – the traditional local form of anti-personnel defence, strong and flexible, so still effective unless attackers had serious artillery support. The fort's gate was in the south wall, and beyond it was a small native village, of which one ruined house (**N**) stood close to the barricades. The post was overlooked by wooded hills to the west, north and east.


Mines
Bamboo chevaux-de-frise
'Japanese palisade'
Loopholed timber & earth wall
'Blockhaus' numbers
3.7in howitzer
PIAT rocket launcher
Bren gun
Mortar pit
81 81mm mortar
60 60mm mortar
to Deo Gang
RC 3bis
Ravine
to Cho Ra
to village
to Bac Kan
GATE
N
0 20yd approx.
0 20m approx.

INTO COMBAT

The behaviour of civilians at Phu Tong Hoa suggested to Capt Cardinal that an attack might be imminent, so by night, to avoid prying eyes, his second-in-command Lt Fernand Charlotton had the ammunition reserve moved out of the easily identifiable armoury and into a cellar beneath the main building. On 18 July a third officer, S/Lt Jacques Bevalot, arrived with eight other equally green replacements for the recent ambush casualties, 'straight off the boat'. On 21/22 July, 4th Co from Ngan Son to the north was sucked into an action against VM Bn 61/Regt 74; a medevac party to Cao Bang was then ambushed south of Belair, and a relief from Cao Bang was halted by road sabotage. On 23 July Cardinal received an order to evacuate his post on the 25th, but this was cancelled the following day. Instead, for the night of 24/25 July the CO of I/3 REI, Maj Sourlier, planned sorties in strength up the road from Bac Kan and down from Phu Tong Hoa, but heavy rain and fog forced their postponement. None of this can have increased Cardinal's faith in I Bn HQ.

On Sunday 25 July, 2nd Co was missing one of its three platoons, detached for security duty with Bn HQ at Bac Kan; the post was held by three officers and 97 men, plus four North African gunners from 69 RA. It was still raining, and after early-evening parade most were resting indoors when, at about 1930hrs, two 75mm shells landed without warning, destroying the main gate.

The garrison began to return fire with LMGs and mortars, more or less blind, on the surrounding high ground; at first they expected only a brief harassing bombardment, and husbanded their ammunition. Shells continued to fall at a rate of at least one every 2 minutes, apparently from two guns: a Japanese 75mm mountain gun to the south-west, and a French 37mm M1916 infantry gun from the north. The British 3.7in mountain howitzer in Blockhaus IV began searching for the former while the 81mm mortar traded fire with the latter, and the 60mm tubes lobbed bombs onto obvious assembly areas. The accurate VM fire was clearly based on long observation; most of it fell on the main building, the stores and the corner bastions. Early in the action three men were killed and Capt Cardinal was seriously wounded by a shellburst; he was carried into the radio room, and got a message through to Bn HQ at Bac Kan before enemy fire destroyed the aerials. The barrage continued for perhaps 75–90 minutes, and one account also mentions heavy mortar fire and 'rockets'; Blockhaus I was silenced, and a 15m stretch of the west wall beside the main building was breached. Only about 15 minutes after taking over command Lt Charlotton was also mortally wounded, leaving the inexperienced S/Lt Bevalot to lead the defence from about 2030hrs.

Apart from fires started in the main building the misty night was pitch-black, and rain was still falling at about 2045hrs when movements were heard outside. After a last flurry of shellfire, the defenders heard trumpet calls rousing two VM 'shock' battalions from trenches about 800m to the west and north (later to be reinforced by a second wave), and three assault columns reached the defences. Most of the mines had already been set off by shellfire, but the bamboo entanglements had to be breached under fire by pioneers using machetes. This delayed the assaults, but nevertheless the Viet

Looking roughly south over the native village from Phu Tong Hoa's south-eastern bastion. This open-topped 'Blockhaus IV' enclosed a high earth mound; in addition to the visible British 3.7in mountain howitzer, it was also armed with a PIAT rocket-projector. The successful defence of this bastion provided a base of fire for the counter-attacks in the southern courtyard on the night of 25 July 1948. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

Minh got footholds inside both the west and north walls by perhaps 2115hrs (sources differ). Both the north-eastern and south-western blockhouses were lost, and soon afterwards the majority of the central building, virtually cutting the post in half and separating the defenders. Dispersed groups of légionnaires defended themselves at point-blank range, and the condition of corpses later proved that it had sometimes come down to hand-to-hand blade fighting (as well as machetes, some of the attackers carried pikes and bills).

By 2200hrs it seemed that the légionnaires were about to be overwhelmed, but NCOs seized the initiative wherever they could, greatly aided by the fact that at about that time the rain stopped, the sky cleared, and moonlight helped men to get their bearings. Their stories are inevitably confused, but it seems that three main hubs of resistance emerged.

The smallest was the radio room, where two wounded légionnaires were still holding out with the CO; Capt Cardinal would be wounded there a second time, and would later bleed to death. In the north courtyard, QM Sgt Guillemaud led a party from the armoury with grenades and a Bren gun to clear the enemy who had penetrated behind it, and to save the 60mm mortar; they would later retake Blockhaus III. Sergeants Andry and Fissler led three other men against infiltrators in the east wall barracks, later moving into the southern yard to join a counter-charge led by Cpl Camilleri towards the western breach from Blockhaus IV. That was the other main base of resistance, under S/Lt Bevalot, who also successfully defended the sickbay. From this south-eastern bastion Cpl Chief Jaeckel concentrated fire on the captured Blockhaus I, while the two mortars – which had been taken from their pits and manhandled up the mound – fired almost vertically to drop bombs among the VM reinforcements in the breach. After the


SHUMATE
2018

Counter-attack in Phu Tong Hoa

This recreates a moment some time around 2300hrs on the night of 25 July, in the south courtyard of the post; the rain has stopped and the moon has come out. We are looking from roughly south-east to north-west, at the 81mm mortar position and along the south face of the central range of brick buildings, at this stage mostly occupied by the Viet Minh. Inspired by veteran NCOs, an ad hoc squad of légionnaires are charging with rifles, an LMG and grenades to engage both those inside the building and, ahead of them, enemy reinforcements still coming in over the large breach in the western wall. 'Behind us', S/Lt Bevalot and Cpl Chief Jaeckel's party on the mound of the south-eastern bastion – Blockhaus IV – are firing overhead in support of this counter-attack, including dropping mortar bombs vertically on the breach.

At this period I/3 REI were wearing British Army-surplus tropical shirts and BD trousers in 'khaki drill' and/or 'jungle green', some with locally tailored 'bush jackets'. Standard headgear was the French stitched-fabric bush hat, but note at right a sergeant wearing the red-topped green *calot* of the Legion with the gold diagonal *galon* of his rank on the left front. Weapons were British .303in No. 4 Mk 1 rifles, Sten SMGs and Bren LMGs. Photos show French M1916 leather equipment, though British 37 Pattern webbing items were also used, particularly to hold Bren magazines; issued US web leggings were seldom worn in the field.

Photos of early VM troops show a mixture of clothing apparently in khaki, dark blue, grey or brown; this included 'sidecaps' worn square on the head, *blouson* jackets, shirts, and wide three-quarter-length trousers, often worn rolled up above sandals. The cloth roll for carrying rice rations was already common, and many cartridge pouches (probably both Japanese and French) were found on casualties at Phu Tong Hoa. Some officers wore captured French items such as the M1931 sun helmet (with the VM badge of a yellow star on a red disc), and a revolver belt. A large VM banner and three company flags were recovered.

Weapons recovered at Phu Tong Hoa were a Czech-designed ZB26 LMG (Chinese Type 26, called by the French the 'Skoda'); 13 Russian M1891 Mosin-Nagant rifles (with bayonets 'wired on'), and four old French *mousquetons* (M1892 or M1916 carbines); a Thompson and a Sten SMGs; two 'grenade launchers' (unspecified – probably Japanese 50mm Type 89); and 12 long bamboo lances, with notched or billhook blades. Munitions recovered included 280 hand grenades, five rifle grenades, three bazooka rounds, three rounds for a 'rocket gun' (unspecified), and 1,500 rounds for small arms – the variety of weapons suggesting that five different calibres had to be provided.

courtyard was cleared and S/Lt Bevalot led the recapture of Blockhaus I, Cpl Camilleri's team finished clearing the central range of buildings, and S/Lt Bevalot and Sgt Andry led men to relieve those still holding out in the east barracks.

Metre by metre, the close-quarter counter-attacks recaptured the lost ground over about an hour and a half, and at around 2330–2345hrs VM trumpets were heard sounding the retreat. The garrison harassed their departure with LMGs and mortars, and by midnight the enemy seemed to have withdrawn from the whole perimeter (though taking with them five captured Bren guns).

S/Lt Bevalot re-established radio contact with Bn HQ at Bac Kan at daybreak on 26 July, reporting that in addition to Capt Cardinal and Lt Charlotton 21 others of the garrison had been killed and 33 wounded (more than 50 per cent casualties). The Viet Minh left 40 dead inside the fort and another 22 in the nearest defences, with perhaps 100 visible further off. During 26–27 July the garrison remained on high alert while carrying out the most urgently necessary tasks. On the 27th two Spitfires flew over, shortly followed by an AAC.1 airdrop of ammunition and medical supplies; the same day an MS 500 managed to land and take out a couple of the most gravely wounded. Bevalot also had one of his légionnaires blow a bugle found among the enemy dead, and a VM unit coming south down RC 3bis showed

Poor-quality VM photo of an unidentified unit in the late 1940s, apparently being addressed by Gen Giap (far left). French intelligence reported that Giap personally supervised the concentration of units to attack Phu Tong Hoa, but whether or not the photo is associated with that operation this group probably reflect more or less the appearance of the attackers of Capt Cardinal's post. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

themselves before being quickly dispersed with a howitzer shell and LMG fire. Sporadic shell and mortar fire that night caused no casualties. However, it was not until the evening of 28 July – three full days and nights after the first report of the attack – that a relief column arrived, led by the regimental commander LtCol Simon from Cao Bang. He was impressed to be greeted by Sgt Jean Andry's honour guard turned out in white képis, but the significant point was the long delay in his arrival.

The first report on the evening of 25 July was heard by all posts on the battalion radio net, but the mounting of relief attempts was hampered by

Photographed after the long-awaited arrival of the relief column at Phu Tong Hoa, S/Lt Bevalot (left foreground, head turned away) reports to LtCol Simon (facing camera). Around them, the légionnaires of 2nd Co sport the white-covered képis and regimental lanyards in which a sergeant's guard turned out to salute the regimental commander. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

diversionary firing on Ban Cao, Ngan Son, Na Fac and Bac Kan. Major Sourlier's column from Bac Kan on the night of 25/26 July ran into resistance after 5km, and was forced to turn back after firing some 105mm rounds into the hills around Phu Tong Hoa. At dawn on the 26th, Lt Faulques led a platoon south from Na Fac, but was stopped half way by Viet Minh who had been dug in for 48 hours on the crest of the Deo Gang pass. That morning Capt Grand D'Esnon led another attempt up from Bac Kan, but was turned back with 19 casualties after a two-hour fight. Alerted by I Bn HQ, LtCol Simon at Cao Bang – some 87km by road from Phu Tong Hoa – led out a truck column of Legion and Algerian infantry, RICM light armour and Engineers on the morning of 26 July. It was seriously delayed by mines and 114 cuts across the road, and by having to fight through two ambushes – the first as far north as Vo Chang, in testament to the extent of Giap's cordon.

The aftermath

In October 1948 the French abandoned RC 3bis, ceding control of almost the whole pre-1947 Viet Bac region to the Viet Minh. Giap's home bases would never again be seriously threatened.

The 3 REI was then transferred to posts along RC 4, sharing security duty with one Algerian and four Moroccan battalions. During 1949 the VM regional Regts 28 and 74 carried out increasingly frequent and damaging ambushes, and also sometimes destroyed small outposts held by French-led local auxiliaries of the Light Military Auxiliary Companies (CLSMs). From October 1949 onwards, RC 4 north of Na Cham was effectively a permanent combat zone; this reduced French prestige, and thus support, among the population.

From November 1949 the North-East Frontier Zone (ZFNE) came under LtCol Constans, the new CO of 3 REI, now headquartered down at Lang Son. ZFNE's assets were 11 battalions (four Legion, four Moroccan, two Colonial Infantry and one Algerian) plus four mechanized squadrons and about ten local CLSMs. Most were thinly strung out in multiple small posts, and even those units nominally tasked with 'intervention' were widely dispersed between Cao Bang and well south-east of Lang Son; the only true strategic reserves were three paratroop battalions based at Delta airfields. It was the Delta that mostly occupied the attention of the new commander of the whole Tonkin Operational Zone (ZOT), Gen Alessandri, who that winter had considerable success in cutting the supply of rice into the Viet Bac, where its price increased fivefold that year.

In China, meanwhile, the PLA's final victorious campaign in June–December 1949 initially led to both French and VM frontier units being completely distracted in December by the retreat into Tonkin of some 35,000 Chinese Nationalist troops. In January 1950 both Mao Zedong's new Communist government and that of the Soviet Union recognized that of Ho Chi Minh, and Mao agreed to provide supplies, weapons and training for the Viet Minh; a 280-strong Chinese military mission would later arrive in Tonkin headed by Gen Wei Guoqing.

This marked the first great turning-point in the war, and would eventually prove decisive. During spring 1950 training camps and arsenals

were opened across the borders in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces, to begin forming and equipping three divisions organized on the Chinese PLA model. The first four regiments (from Divs 308 and 312, plus an HQ defence unit) were re-armed during the early spring, and by June more than 3,000 VM infantry, artillery and signals officers had already been trained in China. When these men returned they had to pass on what they had learned to their men, but between October 1951 and December 1952 some 10,000 more cadres and 40,000 rankers would be trained in China.

On paper, the first 'Regimental Group' (Div) 308 was created as early as August 1949; commanded by the veteran Vuong Thua Vu, it was first blooded in the upper Red River valley against modest French 'sector' forces. By August 1950 it had been trained in China, and in time it would grow to about 9,600 all ranks of whom 7,200 were actual riflemen. By September 1950 it could field three infantry regiments, a small artillery unit and an anti-aircraft battalion.

The 3 REI's brothers-in-arms in the battles on RC 4 in 1949–50 were a battalion of the 8e Régiment de Tirailleurs Marocains – literally 'Moroccan Skirmishers', usually translated as 'Rifles' – and the light-infantry *goumiers* of the 3e, 8e, 10e and 11e Tabors Marocains. Here, Tirailleurs are crammed into an AAC.1 Toucan (Ju 52/3m) – the only transport aircraft available in that period. Note their British Lee-Enfield SMLE rifles, older than the No. 4 Mk 1s issued to some Legion units. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

Dong Khe

16–18 September 1950

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

Since November 1949 it had been clear that the garrison at Cao Bang – soon to be dependent solely on an 'air bridge' of AAC.1 trimotor transports – was no longer sustainable. However, disagreements between Paris, Saigon and Hanoi prevented any decision before the spring 1950 monsoon rains. In the meantime Dang Van Viet, whose new regular Regt 174 was resting north-west of Cao Bang, sought General Staff approval for an attempt to take Dong Khe. This important post on RC 4 guarded a road junction and an airstrip in a narrow valley about one-third of the way down from Cao Bang to Lang Son. (Dang's memoir claims that he received permission via Phan Phac, the VM deputy chief-of-staff; Giap's account condemns the attack as 'outside the auspices of the High Command'.)

After a long, difficult cross-country march in torrential rain, Dang established his observation post on heights east of Dong Khe. The fort, which had two howitzers, was held by two companies of the 8e Tirailleurs Marocains (BM/8 RTM) and a local CLSM. At its heart was a 'Citadel' of substantial colonial brick buildings on a north–south hog's-back hill, above the east side of a small town, the Quartier Dubouchet. An outlying post, 'Montmartre', was planted on Cam Phay hill (see map on page 51) north of but separate from the Citadel, and the airstrip lay about 1km to the west.

Dang had 75mm guns emplaced on surrounding heights (he mentions two at Yen Ngua; the French would report five or six within 2km, plus eight 81mm mortars), and these opened up at 0645hrs (French time) on 25 May 1950. Space prevents a detailed account of the action; briefly, the inexperienced gunners fired short, soon expending half their ammunition with little visible result, and the infantry were unable to reach the wire.

Clearly, Dang's successes in ambush warfare had led him to underestimate the difficulty of assaults on defended positions. Badly shaken, his infantry had to take cover from bombing and strafing by Bell P-63 Kingcobras, but by that evening the garrison's two howitzers had been virtually silenced and buildings were on fire. Under cover of darkness 'Montmartre' was finally taken, but Dang had to wait until the next night before launching the final assault. We should recall that all previous VM attacks on posts had been deliberately planned to take only a single night, so this failure, and being forced to wait out a day on the battlefield under a hostile sky, was a real psychological setback.

After the ordeal of further air attacks on the afternoon of 26 May, on the night of the 26th/27th assault waves hit the north and north-east faces of the Citadel and the positions on the flats, preventing any mutual support. The northern part of the Citadel fell; at about 0200hrs the survivors tried to break out to the south, but only some 50 would reach That Khe. (Remarkably, about the same number from a far southern position managed to hide in woodland until relief arrived.) Giap's memoir states that the taking of Dong Khe without any possibility of holding it simply encouraged the French to concentrate in fewer, stronger posts along RC 4.

The valley of Dong Khe, looking south and west, with the surrounding *calcaires* in the background. The Citadel is on the left, on the hog's-back hill overlooking the shady streets of the Quartier Dubouchet, with the airstrip on the right; the large black overprinted rectangle indicates the drop zone for parachuted reinforcements or resupply. Below the white overprinting in the left foreground is the overgrown crest of Cam Phay hill, so this shows the field of fire enjoyed by the VM once they had taken that feature. This photo is dated 18 September 1949, well before the attack of May 1950 devastated the town. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

BELOW LEFT
In mid-August 1950 a historic meeting took place between (left to right) Gen Giap, Ho Chi Minh and Chen Geng, the representative of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party – an old friend of Ho's from their days at the Whampoa Military Academy in the 1920s, who was sent to advise him (July–November 1950) at Ho's direct request. Chen was renowned for his straight talking and his bantering manner; in July 1950 he inspected Div 308 under training at Yanshan, and his frank advice was crucial to Ho and Giap during the planning of the autumn 1950 'border campaign'. During the actual formation of VM divisions in 1950–51 Chinese advisors were attached down to company level, but later only to higher echelons. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

BELOW RIGHT
This VM propaganda photo reportedly shows the colour party and assembled troops of Dang Van Viet's Regt 174 in 1950, around the time of its capture of Dong Khe; see page 58 for note on uniforms. The colour guard carry Thompson SMGs. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

An advance relief force from 10 TM had set off from That Khe at 1900hrs on 25 May, moving along the crests east of RC 4 (where they had to fight two encounter actions), while a larger truck-borne force of 8 TM was assembled at far-off Lang Son. All but a few VM looters had already left the ruined town by 1730hrs on 27 May, when the paratroopers of 3 BCCP were dropped there and quickly reoccupied it. The advance party of LtCol Le Page's *goumiers* did not arrive until 1300hrs on 30 May – having taken 4½ days to cover a crow's-flight distance of about 20km – and the main force did not appear until the afternoon of the 31st.

'Second Dong Khe'

With about 54,000 regulars and 30 battalions now at their disposal in Tonkin, facing 124 French battalions of which only 12 were even nominally mobile, the VM General Staff discussed at length plans for a *Bien Gioi* ('border front') campaign in autumn–winter 1950 to free up access to and from China.

The first target considered was Lao Cai on the north-western border with Yunnan province, but this was rejected in favour of Cao Bang. In August, Giap took a group of officers to reconnoitre Cao Bang in person, but concluded that it was too strong for a direct assault. (This campaign would see the first real test of the new Chinese-trained and -equipped Div 308, and for reasons of morale it was absolutely imperative that it achieve a significant victory.) On 16 August, at the suggestion of the war-hardened Chinese envoy Chen Geng, it was decided to attack – and this time, hold – Dong Khe. A weaker position than Cao Bang, it was 'the throat through which Cao Bang was fed'. If it fell, the French would be forced to react: either by trying to retake it, or by abandoning the then-cut-off Cao Bang. Either way, their major road movements could be attacked in great strength, exposing them to their heaviest casualties yet. The General Staff committed five main-force regiments plus three main-force battalions, supported by regional units.

The most dangerous task – the assault itself – would be entrusted to nine battalions of the reinforced independent regular Regts 174 (CO, Dang Van Viet) and 209 (Le Trong Tan). Meanwhile, Div 308's Regt 36

Another aerial photo of Dong Khe, this one looking north and east, showing the airstrip in the left foreground and the partly wooded Cam Phay hill left of the pale bulk of the Citadel ridge. This view dates from autumn 1950, after the town had been badly shelled in May and all the trees had been cut down to make fortifications. For the September 1950 battle of 'Second Dong Khe' the VM artillery was placed on heights at the top and right of the picture. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

(Hung Son – with one artillery and three infantry battalions), Regt 88 (Thai Dung – one artillery and two infantry battalions) and Regt 102 (Vu Yen – one artillery and two infantry battalions) would await the French reaction immediately south of Dong Khe, and regional Bn 246 further south below That Khe.

(On 2 September, in great secrecy, the C-in-C Gen Carpentier decided to abandon Cao Bang and the upper RC 4, concentrating troops to the west later that month to retake Thai Nguyen as the western anchor of a new west–east defensive front to be constructed north of the Delta. Colonel Constans at ZFNE would be left ignorant of this decision for more than two weeks.)

The 3 REI's 2ic LtCol Charton commanded an 'independent subsector' from Cao Bang, the garrison of which was built around III/3 REI; II/3 REI was then complete at That Khe, and I/3 REI scattered among posts between there and the Chinese border at Dong Dang. At first Dong Khe was defended by the whole 8 TM, but when that time-expired unit was pulled out on 7–8 September only two companies of II/3 REI replaced it: 5th and 6th, commanded by Capt Allioux with half of HQ Co – a total garrison of 301, comprising 257 légionnaires, 39 Vietnamese *supplétifs* (auxiliaries) and five gunners.

On 16 September, Gen Carpentier issued an order for simultaneous operations to begin on 1 October at the anticipated end of the rains: one to occupy Thai Nguyen, and the other to withdraw from Cao Bang by a 'collapsing bag' retreat down RC 4. That same day, Giap would forestall Carpentier's plans by launching the second attack on Dong Khe.

Dong Khe, 16–18 September 1950

MAP KEY

Only two very rough sketch-maps have been found, one by Dang Van Viet (in Longeret, et al.) and the other in Bergot, so this attempt does not pretend to be more than an approximate synthesis of the two, collated with aerial photos in Longeret (see Bibliography). The account of the battle in Dang Van Viet's memoir, and his rudimentary sketch-map, are hard to reconcile with Bergot's account based on the later recollections of Lt Grue. We follow Dang Van Viet's and Giap's timings of most events. Dang's map uses abbreviations rather than battalion numbers (e.g. 'd9' for Bn 249). He shows the unsuccessful attempt from the north-west on the 'hospital bastion' on 16/17 September, and the successful attack on 17/18 September, as by Co 316/Bn 249, and the occupation of Phia Koa hill to the east as by Co 315/Bn 249. Failed attacks on the Citadel from the north-east on 16/17 September seem to be attributed to 'CCB/Regt 174' – the regimental HQ and Services Company – and to Co 671/Bn 251. The final assaults from the east on 17/18 September are credited to Cos 671, 673 and 674/Bn 251 plus one company from 'd5' – Bn 250? The attacks from the north and finally down the west side of the Citadel on 17/18 September show otherwise unidentified Cos 924 and 925. The planned attack on the Citadel from the west by Regt 209 never took place. Just outside the top right corner of the sketch-map, oriented north-west–south-east, are the Thuong Phi heights, on which most of the VM artillery was emplaced; Dang Van Viet also indicates some guns on Phia Khoa hill after its capture. The airstrip is approximately 750m off the map to the west.

1 **0600hrs, 16 September:** The VM artillery is ordered to open fire.

2 **1000hrs, 16 September:** Outpost 'Nguyen' is taken.

3 **1800–1900hrs, 16 September:** Failed attacks on the Quartier Dubouchet (held by 5th Co, II/3 REI), and local counter-attacks.

4 ***c.*2200hrs (?), 16 September:** Failed attack on the 'hospital bastion'.

5 ***c.*2200–0400hrs, 16/17 September:** Repeated failed attacks on the Citadel, held by 6th Co, II/3 REI plus HQ Co (-), II/3 REI, and local counter-attacks.

6 ***c.*0400hrs, 17 September:** Outpost 'Montmartre' is taken.

7 ***c.*1600hrs, 17 September:** Regt 209 penetrates the Quartier Dubouchet.

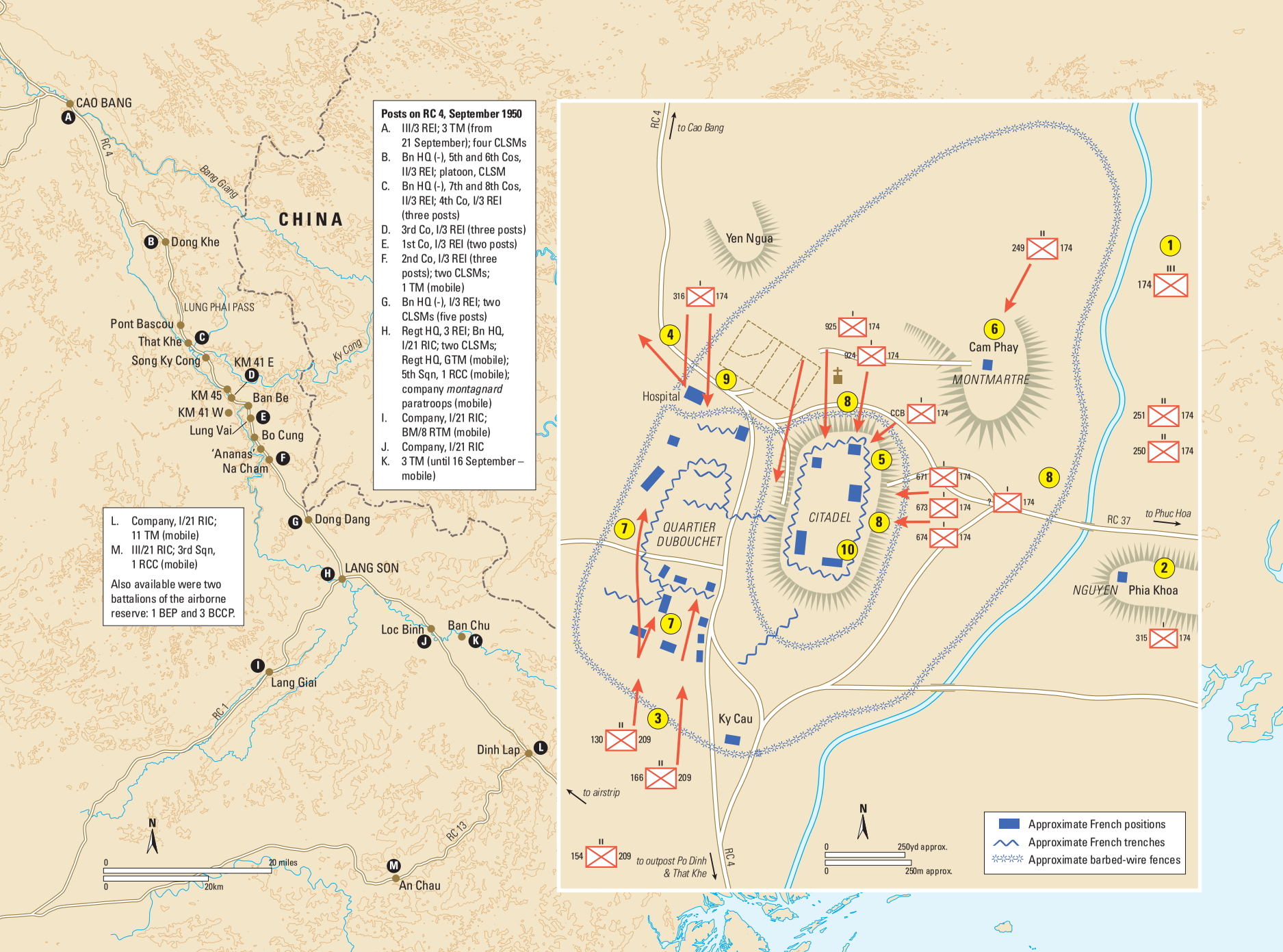
8 ***c.*2000–0430hrs, 17/18 September:** Repeated attacks on the Citadel from north-west, north and east.

9 ***c.*2030hrs, 17 September:** The 'hospital bastion' is taken.

10 ***c.*0430hrs, 18 September:** The Citadel command post is taken; sporadic fighting continues until *c.*1000hrs.

Battlefield environment

Since its fall in May 1950 efforts to refortify Dong Khe had been frustrated by the usual lack of concrete, but the Moroccans had dug and improvised tirelessly. In the Quartier Dubouchet fields of fire were cleared by felling trees; trenches were dug and ground-level bunkers constructed, using tree-trunks and the beams and rubble of shelled houses to protect dug-in 'blockhouses'. (When he later inspected the battlefield, Gen Giap was impressed by the 'grouped trench positions in mutual support – much better than linear positions, which always had weak points'.) This low-lying area was held by Capt Vollaire's 5th Co; a covered trench was constructed up the slope to link with the Citadel, which housed Capt Allioux's command post and Capt Jaugeon's 6th Company. Here the damaged brick buildings and cellars had also been refortified using rubble, timbers and logs. New trenches were dug in its southern sector, with bunkers and shelters in the western and southern slopes. A cleared glacis was created on the northern face, and the whole hilltop was surrounded by a deep, snaking perimeter trench studded with fortified fire positions. Apart from their company weapons the garrison had at least one PIAT and a .50-calibre HMG; there was a single 105mm howitzer in a gunpit on the Citadel, where – oddly – a US 57mm/6pdr anti-tank gun in a blockhouse also commanded the approaches (the poverty-stricken CEFEO had to make do with what it happened to have). Outposts were planted on 'Montmartre/Piton Nord' on Cam Phay hill, 'Piton Nguyen' on the Phia Khoa heights to the east, and at Cau Ang, the lonely 'Piton SW' far off at the southern end of the airstrip (not included on map). (Bergot does not state who held these, but presumably it was the local auxiliary platoon.)


CAO BANG
RC 4
Bang Giang
CHINA
Dong Khe
LUNG PHAI PASS
Pont Bascou
That Khe
Song Ky Cong
KM 41 E
Ky Cong
KM 45
Ban Be
KM 41 W
Lung Vai
Bo Cung
'Ananas'
Na Cham
Dong Dang
LANG SON
Loc Binh
Ban Chu
Lang Giai
RC 1
Dinh Lap
RC 13
An Chau
0
20 miles
0
20km
Posts on RC 4, September 1950
A. III/3 REI; 3 TM (from 21 September); four CLSMs
B. Bn HQ (-), 5th and 6th Cos, II/3 REI; platoon, CLSM
C. Bn HQ (-), 7th and 8th Cos, II/3 REI; 4th Co, I/3 REI (three posts)
D. 3rd Co, I/3 REI (three posts)
E. 1st Co, I/3 REI (two posts)
F. 2nd Co, I/3 REI (three posts); two CLSMs; 1 TM (mobile)
G. Bn HQ (-), I/3 REI; two CLSMs (five posts)
H. Regt HQ, 3 REI; Bn HQ, I/21 RIC; two CLSMs; Regt HQ, GTM (mobile); 5th Sqn, 1 RCC (mobile); company montagnard paratroops (mobile)
I. Company, I/21 RIC; BM/8 RTM (mobile)
J. Company, I/21 RIC
K. 3 TM (until 16 September – mobile)
L. Company, I/21 RIC; 11 TM (mobile)
M. III/21 RIC; 3rd Sqn, 1 RCC (mobile)
Also available were two battalions of the airborne reserve: 1 BEP and 3 BCCP.
RC 4
to Cao Bang
Yen Ngua
316 I 174
249 II 174
925 I 174
924 I 174
Cam Phay
MONTMARTRE
Hospital
CCB I 174
CITADEL
671 I 174
673 I 174
674 I 174
? I 174
RC 37
to Phuc Hoa
QUARTIER DUBOUCHET
Ky Cau
NGUYEN
Phia Khoa
III 174
II 251 174
II 250 174
315 I 174
130 II 209
166 II 209
to airstrip
154 II 209
to outpost Po Dinh & That Khe
RC 4
0
250yd approx.
0
250m approx.
N
Approximate French positions
Approximate French trenches
Approximate barbed-wire fences

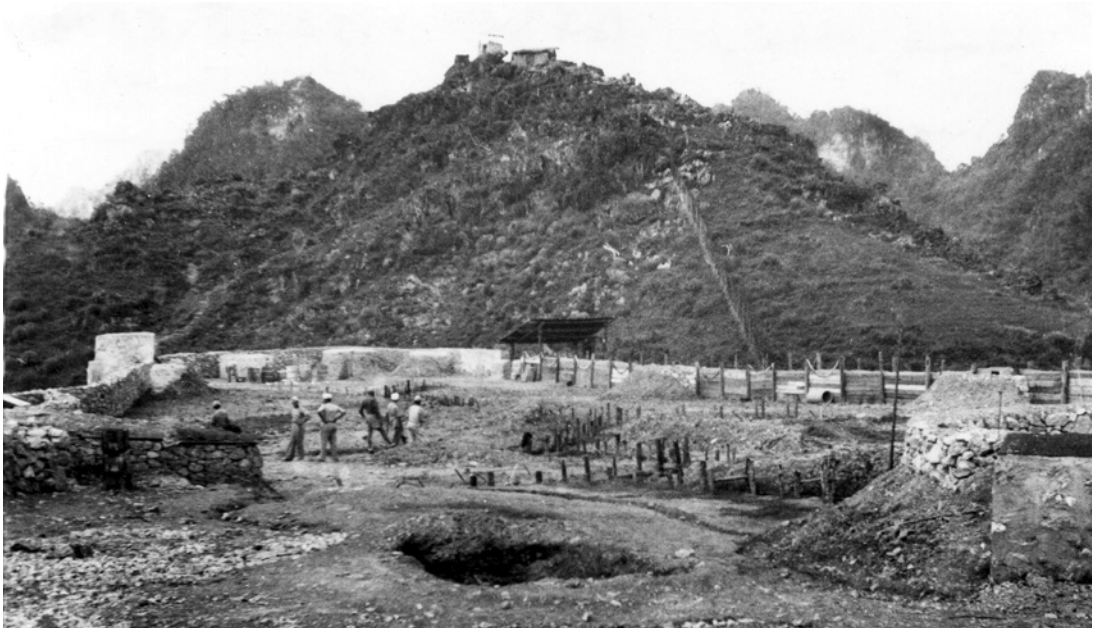
INTO COMBAT

On 10 September, Ho Chi Minh and Chen Geng had met at the HQ of the theatre commander, the VM chief-of-staff Gen Hoan Van Thai. Dang Van Viet states that the General Staff reinforced his Regt 174 with regular Independent Bn 426, and Bn 11 withdrawn from Div 308. He would attack from the north and north-east, supported by an artillery battalion with six 75mm guns, four 57mm DKZ recoilless rifles provided by Div 308, plus four 75mm guns emplaced to the east (it is unclear if the latter were still integral to his regiment, or attached – see page 78). From the south-west and south, Le Trong Tan's Regt 209 would attack with the support of the six-gun Artillery Bn 178. Total strength was about 10,000 men and 16–20 guns – the largest numbers yet committed to an attack during the war. Meanwhile Div 308, with nearly the same strength again, would remain further south to await any French response.

Dang's scouts reported visible changes since May, including the felling of trees in the Quartier Dubouchet, the remodelling of the slope at the north of the Citadel, and a new and strongly wired outer perimeter. (Apparently, nobody took the time to gather details of the new bunkers on the flats by patient observation – normally VM standard procedure.) It is striking that Dang allocated widely separated objectives to his Bn 249 (CO, Le Hoan): Phia Khoa on the east; Cam Phay on the north, and then the northern face of the Citadel; Yen Ngua to the west of Cam Phay, and the 'hospital bastion' at the north-west corner of the defended flats. He entrusted the assault from the east to Bn 251 (Nguyen Huu An), and held Bn 250 (Khai Tam) in reserve, along with the attached Bn 11 and Bn 426 to guard against any interference from north of Dong Khe.

At 0600hrs on 16 September, Dang gave the order to open the artillery barrage. All morning the guns fired deliberate ranging shots at a rate of a couple of rounds per minute, but at noon the whole artillery opened up, joined by mortars. The impact was considerable; French casualties soon included the 105mm gun crew, and Capt Vollaire, who had to turn command of 5th Co over to Lt Héry. Captain Allioux naturally radioed Cao Bang when the attack began. Reports differ over whether the morning fog kept the P-63 Kingcobras from Hanoi away on the first day, but Maj Forget at Cao Bang wrote ten days later that fighters had rotated over the valley between 0930hrs and 1800hrs. If so, they did not much hamper the intense artillery and mortar barrage; this lasted for three hours, killing and wounding dozens of men, cutting field telephone cables and starting fires.

'French time' seems to have been an hour ahead of 'VM time', but the two sides' accounts still vary considerably over the timing of certain incidents. For instance, Dang claims that his troops took the eastern Phia Khoa outpost at 1000hrs on 16 September; Bergot quotes Lt Grue to the effect that its loss was not reported to Capt Allioux until 2200hrs that night. It is clear, however, that the outposts all came under serious pressure during the day; even if they had no communications, the Citadel garrison could see infantry massing around them. Those attacking Phia Khoa were engaged by Lt Grue with the .50-calibre HMG, and he later fired solid armour-piercing shot (all he had) from the 57mm anti-tank gun at those threatening 'Montmartre'.



Looking north and east at the dominating Cam Phay hill from the northern edge of the Quartier Dubouchet flats, where French troops are digging in and building defensive works using rubble from the shelled houses. The squared roof of the 'Montmartre' outpost can be seen on the centre skyline. Once the Viet Minh captured the outpost and installed heavy weapons, the flats below became more or less indefensible. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

Importantly, accounts also disagree as to when Bn 249 took 'Montmartre': Bergot says 2000hrs, with both 'Piton Nguyen' on Phia Khoa and 'Piton SW' beyond the airstrip falling silent at 2200hrs, but Dang writes (convincingly) that he did not take 'Montmartre' until 0400hrs on 17 September.

Nevertheless, we do know that on the main perimeters the légionnaires halted the VM night assaults, exacting a bloody price for their enemies' brave but unimaginative tactics. These were based on exploiting breaches made by the artillery in the outer defences; small parties armed with satchel charges and automatic weapons infiltrated, trying to silence individual 'blockhouses' and clear a path for massed charges. On the north face of the Citadel, Adj Chief Oelschlagel's platoon of 6th Co smashed repeated assaults up the cleared glacis. At about 2200hrs he reported infiltrations by small parties of Viet Minh, each with an LMG guarded by submachine-gunners. From the central sector Lt Grue took men up in support, and from the northern edge of the Quartier Dubouchet Lt Héry also brought mortar and PIAT fire down on the glacis.

After another hour of close fighting, Oelschlagel reported that he would have to fall back; showers of grenades and thrown charges had destroyed his men's overhead cover. He coordinated timing with Lt Grue; as soon as the latter saw about 15 légionnaires helping each other across the open ground towards him he opened fire on targets behind them with the 57mm anti-tank gun, and he kept firing as Oelschlagel's exhausted men found themselves loopholes in the central positions.

At about 0500hrs (French time) on 17 September the warrant officer reported that the attackers had halted, apparently content to hold their captured ground and throw grenades. Oelschlagel then led his men (who had been fighting non-stop for nine hours) in a counter-charge. This recaptured their lost trenches, and brought in an LMG, half a dozen SMGs, 20 rifles – and Légionnaire Gondry, who had hidden when the northern defences were

abandoned. Dang states that after three failed and very costly assaults on the Citadel his regiment could make no further progress: 'our second wave of attacks ended with the capture of Cam Phay ['Montmartre'] at 0400 on 17 September'.

Meanwhile, on the southern perimeter the planned attack by Regt 209, intended to divide the defenders' fire, had failed. One of its battalions had got lost and failed to reach the jumping-off line, delaying the attack until 1800hrs – far too late to benefit from the artillery barrage. During the following hour it did occupy an outlying objective at Po Dinh, but its attempts to penetrate the Quartier Dubouchet were then fiercely resisted. According to Dang, the new dug-in positions were only detected when they opened mutually supporting fire, and mortaring on pre-registered approaches caused many VM casualties. Some of 5th Co then left their trenches to mount counter-charges which threw the attackers back.

During the night the theatre commander gave stern orders to Dang Van Viet and Le Trong Tan that they must dig in and hold the positions they had taken, preparing to resume their assaults, at whatever cost, on the night of 17/18 September.

At Cao Bang, 30km to the north (but 45km by road), III/3 REI had been listening to the gunfire all day. Although II/3 REI to the south then had 7th Co, 8th Co and the other half of HQ Co in garrison at That Khe, there was (once again) no hope of a timely relief column; the theoretically available 'intervention' units were strung out over 60km. ZOT at Hanoi gave the order to assemble LtCol Le Page's regiment-size Group of Moroccan Tabors (GTM) down at Lang Son, but heavy road sabotage over continuous stretches of 3–4km was reported from as far south as Na Cham. A token gesture saw three platoons of Tho and Nung *montagnard* paratroopers dropped at That Khe that afternoon. Major Forget at Cao Bang would write that it was on the morning of 17 September that a Morane-Saulnier spotter aircraft picked up a faint, garbled message from Capt Allioux that included the phrase '40 killed, 80 wounded' – i.e., 40 per cent casualties suffered already.

A log-protected improvised 'blockhouse' on the Citadel, photographed after the capture of Dong Khe. The apparently dead man leant against the barricade of ammunition crates (centre) gives scale. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

The artillery fire resumed at 1000hrs on 17 September. While Regt 174 prepared for the coming night's effort, and traded fire from 'Montmartre' with the Citadel's heavy weapons, it seems that Regt 209 resumed its attempts in the Quartier Dubouchet by daylight. Giap states that it reached the central Phu Thien and Nha Cu area by 1600hrs, before being stopped by mortar fire. It was decided that Lt Héry's 5th Co would join 6th Co on the Citadel, via the covered trench, but this was done in stages. P-63 Kingcobras appeared in late morning as soon

This fuzzy but interesting snapshot shows Dang Van Viet (second from right), CO of Regt 174, posing with other cadres by the wreckage of the Bell P-63 Kingcobra shot down over Dong Khe on 17 September 1950 – at this date, an unusual event. The dark-complexioned Dang wears a small civilian-made pith helmet adorned with the VM badge, what seems to be a US M1943 field jacket over khakis, and French boots. Though not visible here, his personal weapon was a Canadian-made 9mm Browning pistol recovered from a French paratrooper in 1947. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

as the weather allowed; they forced the VM artillery to cease fire, hitting targets on Cam Phay and along the road from the north, but lost one aircraft to .50-calibre anti-aircraft fire. Three AAC.1s dropped supplies; although most were badly scattered in the soon-to-be abandoned Quartier Dubouchet, Sgt Mahric's volunteers managed to bring some in, including badly needed high-explosive rounds for the 57mm anti-tank gun.

When the remaining 60-odd men of 5th Co reached the Citadel, Capt Allioux had about 150 left on their feet; Lt Héry's légionnaires took over the northern defences from the remains of Adj Chief Oelschlagel's platoon. From about 1700hrs there was a lull in the firing, and thick mist rose to obscure the top of 'Montmartre', cloaking the VM's emplacement of heavy weapons. The theatre commander had approved a plan for Regt 209 to hit the Citadel from the west while Regt 174 repeated its efforts against the north and east faces. While the Citadel was the vital objective, one element from Regt 174 was still to push southward from Yen Ngua into the north of the Quartier Dubouchet, aiming to link up with Regt 209 for a final attack on the west of the Citadel. (Giap's memoir credits Regt 174 with taking the 'hospital bastion' at about 2030hrs, and then 'Blockhouse 7', where Dang reports a link-up with Regt 209. Neither source makes any mention of the fact that 5th Co had supposedly abandoned this sector before the night attacks began – which leaves us wondering who was actually resisting the VM on the flats that evening.)

The bombardment resumed at 1830hrs on 17 September, resulting in another 20-odd killed and 35 wounded before the infantry assaults began. At 2000hrs Lt Héry on the northern face reported VM units approaching from both north-west and north-east, and these struck the defences with sacrificial determination. The légionnaires were pinned down by supporting fires from 'Montmartre', while VM squads led by two men with explosives and one with an automatic weapon forced breaches for their comrades, who brought 60mm mortars into action at short range. The defenders were soon down to perhaps 50 effectives, and infantry weapons were now being fired directly into their strongpoints.

Last stand at Dong Khe

Viet Minh view: This imagined scene shows a final assault from the east by men from VM Bn 251/Regt 174 on an improvised 'blockhouse' somewhere within the Citadel, on the early morning of 18 September. The brick buildings had been hastily fortified with logs, beams and rubble from wrecked houses, earth-filled crates, etc. Although some VM mortars were still firing, careless of casualties to their own infantry, the buildings typically had to be stormed in the face of machine-gun fire. Assault parties were led by men with satchel charges, covered by those with automatic weapons; note the corporal (right) armed with a Thompson SMG. Regt 174 had not yet been re-equipped by the Chinese PLA; they wear woven helmets, pith helmets, or Japanese steel helmets, with a motley mixture of clothing. Personal kit is equally varied, and is mostly covered by net camouflage capes thickly woven with foliage or lengths cut from camouflaged parachute canopies. Their weapons include British and US small arms as well as ex-Chinese Nationalist 'Zhong Zheng' Mauser rifles and stick grenades.

French view: The 7.5mm M1931A Reibel machine gun accepted the 150-round drum magazine on either side, and was provided with a skeleton shoulder stock and a tripod mount; here it is propped on 105mm shell crates. In 1950 the légionnaires of 3 REI wore US M1942 HBT fatigues with British 37 Pattern web gear, plus some French items such as M35 canteens. The local *supplétifs* (auxiliaries) had M1931 sun helmets, sand-khaki shirts and shorts, and French M1916 leather equipment. The personal weapon was the 7.5mm MAS36 rifle. Ironwood logs gave good protection against small arms, but the overhead cover is vulnerable to mortars, and when an attacker gets close enough to throw a satchel charge into the embrasure the defenders are doomed. Any who are taken prisoner with significant wounds are unlikely to survive captivity, and few of the local auxiliaries – contemptuously termed 'puppets' by the VM – were ever taken alive.

VM propaganda poster showing Japanese 75mm M1908 (Meiji 41) mountain guns. The slogan reads: 'After Dong Khe, the artillery promises [to lay] new victories before the flag of honour.' (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

When Lt Héry was finally forced to pull back from the north face under cover of a shower of grenades, attackers from the east tried to cut him off, but were blown away by 57mm high-explosive shells at point-blank range. The wounded Héry and about 30 men joined Adj Chief Oelschlagel in the central redoubt. The enemy got close enough to fire into Lt Grue's blockhouse; soon he had only five men left, of whom two were constantly scuttling in and out of cover to bring up 57mm ammunition from a bunker 50m away. Grue recalled that VM heavy weapons were still firing on the summit, careless of causing 'own casualties'. When attackers reached his ammunition bunker he fired his last rounds into it, causing a heavy explosion. At 0430hrs (French time) on 18 September the attackers reached Capt Allioux's command post. Remarkably, Capt Jaugeon and 30 other survivors managed to make their way off the hill to the south, and evaded VM forces all the way to That Khe. At 1000hrs (VM time) Dang Van Viet could finally report that the whole of Dong Khe was in his hands.

This photo supposedly shows Ho Chi Minh inspecting victorious regional troops after the taking of Dong Khe in September 1950; note the typically dramatic backdrop of overgrown *calcaires*. While Ho no doubt congratulated them, his Chinese advisor Chen Geng was less impressed: 'Our [VM] army needs to improve its structures, its means of liaison and its discipline. As it currently stands, the Vietnamese army should avoid a direct confrontation with the French forces, contenting itself with attacking some small defensive positions in order to gain more experience of combat and to reinforce their confidence.' Within a month, Giap's battalions had achieved a stunning victory on RC 4, but in a context that did not expose the vulnerabilities Chen Geng had identified at Dong Khe. The real price for inexperience would be paid later, in the three battles on the borders of the Delta in January–June 1951. (AFP/ Getty Images)

Dang Van Viet

Born in 1920 in Nghe An province into a distinguished 'mandarin' family, Dang Van Viet was educated partly in France. He joined the Vietnamese People's Army in 1945, and soon saw action on RC 9 against French forces reoccupying Annam from Laos, and on RC 7 against Meo tribesmen. A General Staff officer by October 1947, he accompanied Gen Giap to the RC 4 front, where he was successively attached to regular Bn 23, and Bn 374 of regional Regt 11, subsequently becoming regimental commander of the latter. In June 1948 this became Regt 28, and in August 1949 it was upgraded to regular Regt 174, commanded by LtCol Dang Van Viet. He was successful in several important ambush battles along RC 4 during 1948–49. After capturing Dong Khe in September 1950, his regiment was the first into abandoned Lang Son in October. In 1951 Regt 174 was incorporated into Div 316, with which it saw action in the northern Delta (Mao Khe, March 1951), in the Hoa Binh campaign of winter 1951/52, and at Na San in December 1952.

In December 1953, Dang Van Viet's wealthy family fell victim to Communist Party zealots; his father was dismissed from a ministerial post, and he himself was demoted and relegated to training duties. Regaining his rank in 1958, after demobilization in 1960 he was given a civil government post. His political rehabilitation was confirmed in 1999, when Gen Giap provided a preface for his memoir. It is unlikely that he is still alive – at the time of writing he would be 98 years old.

Two days later Dang's troops would be congratulated by Ho Chi Minh, but the judgement of the Chinese veteran Chen Geng would be scathing:

> The battle was a victory in the sense that it threw the French into a panic, and they did not try to retake Dong Khe. But from a tactical viewpoint it was a disaster. The Viet Minh had 10,000 men ... against only 267 French soldiers [*sic*], but took two days and three nights to beat them [*sic* – this presumably includes the preparations on 14/15 September]. What's more, the Viet Minh lost 500 killed, and more than 20 French soldiers managed to escape …[1]

Chen Geng picked out for criticism the lack of coordination between Regts 174 and 209, a failure of nerve by certain unit commanders, poor liaison with higher command and inaccurate progress reports, and a failure to follow the plan for attacks on the Citadel from both flanks on the second night. Giap himself criticized the prior failure to spot the new bunkers, and bad coordination between the two regiments. He admits that casualties were 'heavier than expected'; we may estimate from Chen Geng's franker admission that total casualties may have been as high as 2,000. Dang Van Viet admits failures of coordination, including between artillery and infantry.

The aftermath

From 20 September, Giap was anticipating both a paratroop drop to retake Dong Khe, and a push up RC 4 by LtCol Le Page's Group 'Bayard', now at That Khe with three TMs and 1 BEP. When Le Page remained immobile for lack of orders, on 25 September Giap was forced to disperse his hungry Div 308 widely to the east to gather rice. On 30 September, Le Page was ordered to occupy the important points between That Khe and Dong Khe.

1 Quoted by Longeret from Xu Beilan & Zheng Peifei (1988), *Biography of General Chen Geng* (Beijing).

A photo used on a VM propaganda poster, of French prisoners taken during the 'disaster of RC 4' in October 1950; less than half would survive captivity. The abandonment of the whole Chinese frontier region shocked France and the CEFEO, but the new C-in-C Gen de Lattre had largely rebuilt morale by mid-1951. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

Late on 1 October, a shocked Gen Giap learned that 'Bayard' had reached the hills south of Dong Khe, so was already beyond Div 308's intended ambush sites. While Regt 209 held Dong Khe, Div 308's dispersed battalions were ordered to rush individual 'flying companies' back to RC 4.

On 2 October, Le Page's attempt to recapture Dong Khe failed. That afternoon he was told – *for the first time* – that his mission was to meet LtCol Charton's garrison withdrawing from Cao Bang. (This was typical of the late and unrealistic orders that doomed the whole operation.) Although ad hoc units from Div 308 were already attacking from the east, Le Page had to divide 'Bayard' and take two battalions north-west to rendezvous with Charton. Early on 3 October, Charton's three battalions left Cao Bang via RC 4; on the 4th, he was ordered to abandon the road and take to a vestigial track through the forested hills west of RC 4.

Thereafter Charton, Le Page and the Viet Minh struggled through virtually unmapped and trackless terrain, fighting a series of encounter actions in dense country. The VM units showed skill and determination – and not only when they had numbers on their side. Piecemeal, they located and tenaciously attacked both of the vulnerable, strung-out French columns, which only managed to make mutual radio contact on 5 October. The following day, at Coc Xa, three VM battalions (Bn 11/Regt 141, Bn 154/Regt 209, and Bn 89/Regt 36 from Div 308) inflicted heavy casualties on Le Page's force. By the time they finally linked up on 7 October at Hill 477, both columns had already been cut to pieces. Encircled by some 15 VM battalions, they fought desperate last stands before being ordered to abandon their wounded and try to evade in small parties.

'Partisans' in the Cao Bang area pose with their French NCO (right). Often recruited from *montagnards*, the CLSMs are usually unjustly ignored in French accounts. During the retreat from Cao Bang the very last French counter-attack at Hill 477 on 7 October was made by 136th CLSM from Capt Tissier's nominal 1st Bn/Indochinese Formations; this battalion was among those annihilated. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

From about 1,500 and 3,500 men in the Charton and Le Page

columns respectively, only some 660 ever reached That Khe; that post was abandoned on 10/11 October, and other garrisons also fled south if they got the chance. Of the rearguard provided by elements of 3 BCCP and 1 BEP, dropped at That Khe on 8 October, only 14 men out of 400 would reach safety. The total loss from 7,409 French troops engaged was 5,987 killed and missing. In addition to the half of II/3 REI lost at Dong Khe, two other Legion units were among the 8½ battalions wiped out: III/3 REI lost 603 from 635 men, and 1 BEP lost 614 from 646.

At Lang Son, Col Constans (ZFNE) had only one and two half-battalions plus two depleted squadrons remaining, and judged it impossible to hold the town without heavy reinforcement. His request to Gens Alessandri (ZOT, Hanoi) and Carpentier (C-in-C, Saigon) for permission to abandon Lang Son was approved on 11 October – all echelons of command greatly overestimated the VM's immediate ability to exploit their victory.[2] Giap writes that VM medics had treated 1,200 wounded, which implies that he had also lost about 400 killed, and the campaign had been costly in ammunition and food. This material investment would soon reap dividends, however.

Constans planned to abandon the town starting on 16 October, but from the 12th convoys and airlifts evacuated equipment, wounded and survivors of RC 4, rear personnel, and some 5,000 civilians. The timetable was far too rushed to carry off the major military stores, and Constans refused to allow demolitions in advance; engineers simply spread inflammable materials in the arsenals and warehouses, which were intended to be set ablaze by air strikes after the last troops had left. It is undeniable that during the hurried preparations a number of staff officers shamefully failed in their duty. During 18–20 October the last troops withdrew successfully, if in some disorder. Fighter-bomber sorties flown between 18 and 27 October achieved very little in the way of destruction. Including the stores abandoned at Lang Son, the CEFEO reckoned the weapons lost during the two-month 'battle of RC 4' at 8,222 rifles, 380 LMGs, 160 machine guns, 112 mortars, 13 artillery pieces and perhaps 1,300 tons of munitions; varied figures are quoted by other sources, but the recovered booty was clearly enough to arm an entire VM division. (Giap claims to have captured 1,500 tons of equipment and 2,000 tons of supplies, including 10,000 artillery shells and 150 tons of explosives.)

Since Dong Khe, Dang Van Viet's weakened Regt 174 had been ordered back and forth at short notice during Giap's day-by-day responses to events. Dang was at Dong Dang on the frontier on 17 October when he was ordered to force-march to Lang Son; his units outran their supply porters, but picked up abandoned rations on the road. Dang's was the first regiment into Lang Son, where the riches abandoned by the French prompted him to think back in astonishment to 'the days when we had to share out cartridges for our carbines and LMGs'.

2 The present author's copy of Dang Van Viet's memoir (see Bibliography) was previously owned by LtCol Roger David, who commanded a company of I/23 RIC at Lang Son, and later 1st Laotian Commando. His marginal annotations are robust (e.g., one officer mentioned is dismissed as a 'pusillanimous coward'). He calls Col Constans 'cowardly' and 'a pretentious incompetent', but in all justice the performance of the colonel's commanding generals must surely count in extenuation.

Na San

23 November–2 December 1952

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

After Giap's sobering defeats at the hands of Gen de Lattre's GMs and air support in January–June 1951 (see page 13), the campaign season autumn 1951–spring 1952 saw the failure of both VM and French attempts to open new fronts that might favour their strengths. In early October 1951, Giap sent a division south-west into the hills between the Red and Black rivers, but his objective, Nghia Lo, was saved by French paratroopers, and his retreat was

The increasing provision by the United States of Douglas C-47 'Dakota' transports from 1950 enabled the CEFEO to respond to Giap's opening of new fronts in 1952–53 by installing 'air-ground bases' in his path, complete with artillery and vehicles. Starting on 11 October 1952, building the base at Na San in the Thai Highlands south-west of the Black River was a huge logistic task, but it was achieved, and the 'air bridge' was maintained successfully for ten months. This typical scene was in fact photographed at another '*base aéroterrestre*', Luang Prabang in Laos, in February 1954. (AFP/Getty Images)

Several of the units that would defend Na San had first to make an exhausting retreat there, pursued by the Viet Minh. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

harassed by the French Air Force's new 'B-26' (actually, Douglas A-26 Invader) bombers. For his part, Gen de Lattre, now dying of cancer, bequeathed to Gen Salan in Tonkin an ambitious operation to recapture Hoa Binh, about 40km south-west of the Delta defences. In mid-November paratroopers retook the town and a garrison was installed, linked to Hanoi by RC 6 and a loop of the Black River. This was a scenario that Giap understood; he patiently wove a

noose around Hoa Binh and virtually cut it off, while sending other troops to infiltrate the Delta. In February Salan was obliged to withdraw from Hoa Binh, in a lengthy running battle.

After the 1952 monsoon Giap looked further south-west, towards the Thai Highlands around the middle Black River, some 250km straight-line distance from the Viet Bac. There, small French posts were widely dispersed among a basically friendly Thai *montagnard* population. If the VM could march an army into these forested hills, which lacked usable roads for the French GMs, Giap could expand the VM's political network and regional troops, while also threatening the border with weakly defended Laos. (Intriguingly, Giap writes that he did not inform the Chinese advisory mission of this plan in advance, as 'they were not yet familiar with the Vietnamese battlefield, and might consider it an unwise manoeuvre'.)

In September 1952, by means of concealed movement supported by brilliant logistics, Giap concentrated more than 30,000 men (Divs 308, 312 & 316, plus elements from Div 351 with 75mm RCLs and his first 120mm heavy mortars) on the upper Red River around Yen Bai, and crossed without alerting the French to the scale of the threat. In mid-October he pushed three separate columns southwards; French posts were taken or abandoned, and the survivors and covering parachute and infantry units conducted an exhausting 65km fighting retreat through the hills to crossings on the Black River. Giap did not let himself be distracted by Salan's narrow and inevitably short-lived French thrust north-west out of the Delta to threaten his base areas (Operation *Lorraine*), but he was delayed by the difficulty of gathering rice and porters in the Thai Highlands. This gave the French just enough time to plant an airlifted defended camp in his path, at Na San.

The sites for the inner chain of strongpoints could be cleared of scrub and small trees fairly easily, but some of the outer hills were heavily wooded. The infantry themselves had to fell trees and clear fields of fire with hand tools before they could even dig in, since the Engineers were needed for specialist tasks around the airstrip. In all the strongpoints, however, there was too little time for thorough identification and plotting of the enemy's probable approach routes, which were hidden by trees, undergrowth and dead ground. By late November 1952 it was obvious that the Viet Minh had closed in around the location and were infiltrating reconnaissance patrols. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

The defence of PA 8, 23/24 November 1952

MAP KEY

1 ***c.*2015/2030hrs, 23 November:** The first VM attack, during which Lt Durand is killed; after penetrating both west and east trenches, the VM attackers are expelled with difficulty, and at a cost of at least 30 per cent French casualties, by *c.*2130 hrs. VM mortar fire on southern sector from *c.*2045hrs prompts Capt Letestu to request supporting fires, bur only mortars can respond. VM infiltration continues.

2 ***c.*2230hrs, 23 November:** Reinforcement by 5th Co/3 BPC, from dug-in position of paratroop reserves beside airstrip in centre of camp.

3 ***c.*2230hrs, 23 November:** A second VM attack penetrates the interior of the strongpoint, but is expelled by remaining légionnaires and Colonial paratroopers during perhaps an hour's fighting.

4 ***c.*0030hrs, 24 November:** The final VM attack, to cover removal of casualties and weapons, is not pressed home.

Battlefield environment

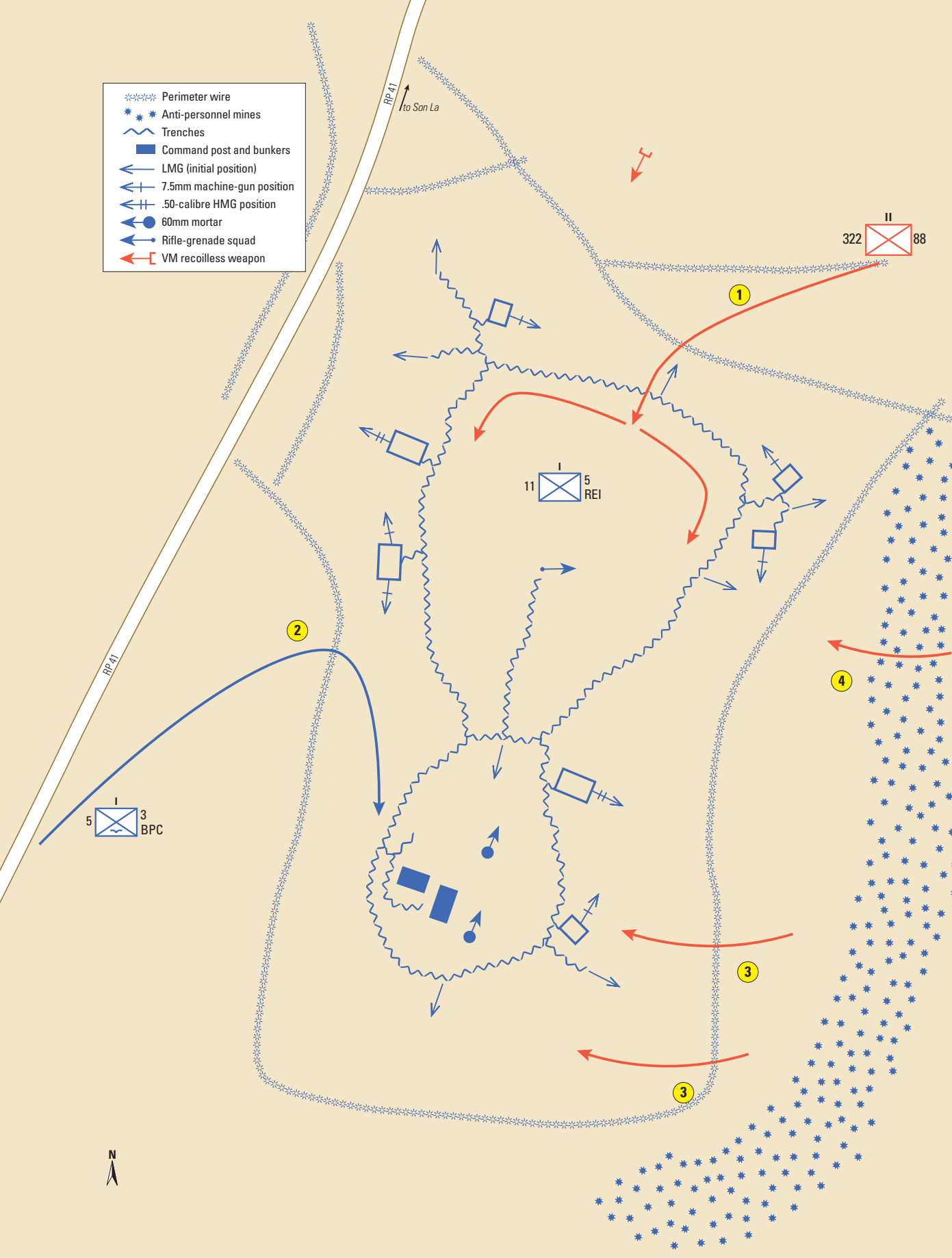
The concept of the *base aéroterrestre* ('air-ground base') owed something to Maj-Gen Orde Wingate's plan for his second Chindit operation in Burma in 1944. The idea was to exploit growing French strength in the air to fly troops, artillery, equipment and stores into a suitable location in the wilderness (*les grandes vides*, 'the big empties') in which Giap was now manoeuvring his divisions, and to construct a blocking position strong enough to win a defensive victory with the help of tactical air power. Na San offered a 'Dakotable' airstrip 40 minutes' flying time from Hanoi, in a valley surrounded by protective hill features. Designated 'Operational Group Middle Black River' (GOMRN), the force committed was commanded by Col Jean Gilles, a battle-wise paratrooper. It would eventually grow to 12 infantry battalions (three of Colonial and Legion paratroopers, three North African, three Thai (Vietnamese *montagnards*), two Legion infantry, one Vietnamese), plus three 105mm batteries, and a Legion mortar company (CMLE) with six 81mm and four 120mm tubes. Its installation from 11 October 1952, and its resupply up to the withdrawal of the attacking VM before 11 December, required the airlifting of 1,980 tons of engineer materials, Dodge trucks, jeeps, artillery, and stores of all kinds, plus most of the garrison and 500 PIM labourers, with a Douglas C-47 Dakota landing every 10 minutes (for at least six hours every day, after the morning fog lifted).

The plan was to construct a continuous inner perimeter astride a stretch of dirt road (RP 41), to surround and protect the 1,100m airstrip, HQ, artillery and mortar positions, stores, hospital, and positions from which a paratroop brigade could mount immediate counter-attacks. This inner perimeter, an oval roughly 1,500m east–west by 1,000m north–south, would consist of ten self-contained company strongpoints, all protected and linked by continuous barbed wire and minefields covered by interlocking machine-gun fire. Outside this perimeter, within 1–3km, a series of 16 other hilltop strongpoints were sited within range of the camp's howitzers and mortars, and capable of mutually supporting fire.

Major Dufour's III/5 REI, flown in from the Delta on 27–28 October, was entrusted with the north-eastern face of the inner perimeter, comprising strongpoints (PAs) 7, 8, 8bis and 9. Captain Letestu's 11th Co was assigned to PA 8, which he lost no time in constructing for defence. As usual he was short-handed, with only one lieutenant and 110 all ranks, but he gave them detailed orders and drove them hard over the next three weeks. Before World War II the young Marcel Letestu had qualified as a sergeant casemate-chief in 146 RIF, and there was nobody at Na San who could teach him anything about planning defensive firepower.

Company strongpoints were built for defence in depth, with generous allocations of machine guns dispersed around the perimeters, and the trenches, command posts and shelters dug in deeply so that grazing fire could safely sweep across almost the whole defended area in case the enemy broke in. In addition to 11th Co's nine 7.5mm LMGs and two 60mm mortars, Letestu had six 7.5mm Reibel machine guns plus two .50-calibre HMGs. He did not emplace any of his machine guns in the figure-of-eight perimeter trenches surrounding PA 8, but sited the Reibels (four of them in pairs) in five low, strongly sandbagged 'blockhouses' with thick overhead cover of logs and earth, advanced slightly outside the perimeter to sweep every angle of approach. The two heavy '*douze-septs*' each had their own bunker outside the east and west flanks, to interlock with the fire from the adjacent strongpoints. Each of these 'blockhouses' was linked to the perimeter trench by a short zigzag access trench, and in each of these a légionnaire with grenades would be posted to defend the rear entrance. The mortars were dug in close to the command post and other central bunkers, while the squad LMGs were spaced around the perimeter trenches, free to circulate as needed. Each of the machine guns needed a crew of three, reducing rifle strength in the trenches by 24 men. Even so, Letestu maintained two 12-strong reserve squads, one under his hand at the command post for counter-attacks, and the other in a central position, armed with rifle grenades to cover any 'dead angles'. Inspecting PA 8 on 24 November, Col Gilles would pronounce Letestu's defences to be 'masterly', and ordered other strongpoint commanders to study them.

By that time Letestu's preparations had been vindicated. The installation of the garrison was only partially complete (crucially, only one battery of 105s was yet present, and no artillery fire plans had been prepared) when, on the evening of 23 November, the first VM attack struck by surprise – at PA 8.


Perimeter wire
Anti-personnel mines
Trenches
Command post and bunkers
LMG (initial position)
7.5mm machine-gun position
.50-calibre HMG position
60mm mortar
Rifle-grenade squad
VM recoilless weapon
RP 41
to Son La
RP 41
II
322
88
1
I
11
5
REI
2
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3
BPC
4
3
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N

INTO COMBAT

During the afternoon of 23 November elements of the three Thai battalions began arriving at Na San, shaken and disorganized by their pursued retreat across country, and Letestu was informed that Maj Michelet's BT 3 would be assembled between PA 8 and PA 9. Letestu protested that this would interfere with the plotted fields of fire, but agreed with Michelet that if the Thais were attacked they could enter the perimeter and regroup behind PA 8.

In the darkness at some time between 2000hrs and 2030hrs Letestu heard sudden bursts of firing, and assumed that the Thais were indeed under attack – but only minutes afterwards one of his men shouted to him that 'the Viets are inside the trenches!'. He later found out that his only subaltern, Lt Durand, commanding in the northern half of the strongpoint, had been alerted by his men firing on what he thought was yet another straggling party of Thais approaching the northern central entrance. He went forward to check; the party's leader called out in French, asking to come in, and Durand ordered his men to cease fire. By the time the mistake was realized Durand and one of his légionnaires had been shot dead and the first VM infiltrators were bursting into the strongpoint, while others rose up outside and rushed the perimeter trench.

The practised fire-plan immediately kicked in, stopping the bulk of the attackers, but perhaps two platoons got inside and divided up, quickly penetrating about halfway down the northern loop of the '8' in both east and west trenches. Captain Letestu immediately ordered his reserves into action on both flanks, accompanying the left-hand squad himself. The savage close-

View from inside a log-protected bunker in one of the strongpoints at Na San, here mounting an FM24/29 LMG. Such field fortifications usually provided sufficient protection; during the assaults on PA 21bis on the night of 1/2 December 1952 one 'blockhouse' was later found to have survived eight direct hits by mortars and recoilless weapons. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

Marcel Letestu

Born in April 1918, Letestu enlisted in 1936, and by the outbreak of war was a very young senior NCO with III/160 RIF. On 8 September 1939 he was awarded his first Croix de Guerre citation (mention in despatches – of an eventual 13, eight of them in Army Orders) for aggressive patrolling. Captured on 27 June 1940, Letestu escaped in March 1941, and in 1942 joined 1er Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa. Commissioned in early 1944, he fought in North West Europe with 3e Régiment de Tirailleurs Algériens in 3rd Algerian Inf Div of Gen de Lattre's French First Army. He was that army's first platoon commander to enter Germany, at Scheibenhardt on 19 March 1945, and was gravely wounded shortly afterwards. In 1951 Capt Letestu joined the Legion's 5 REI, and served in the Delta before III/5 REI were flown into Na San in November 1952. Shortly after his successful defence of PA 8, Capt Letestu was wounded for a third time.

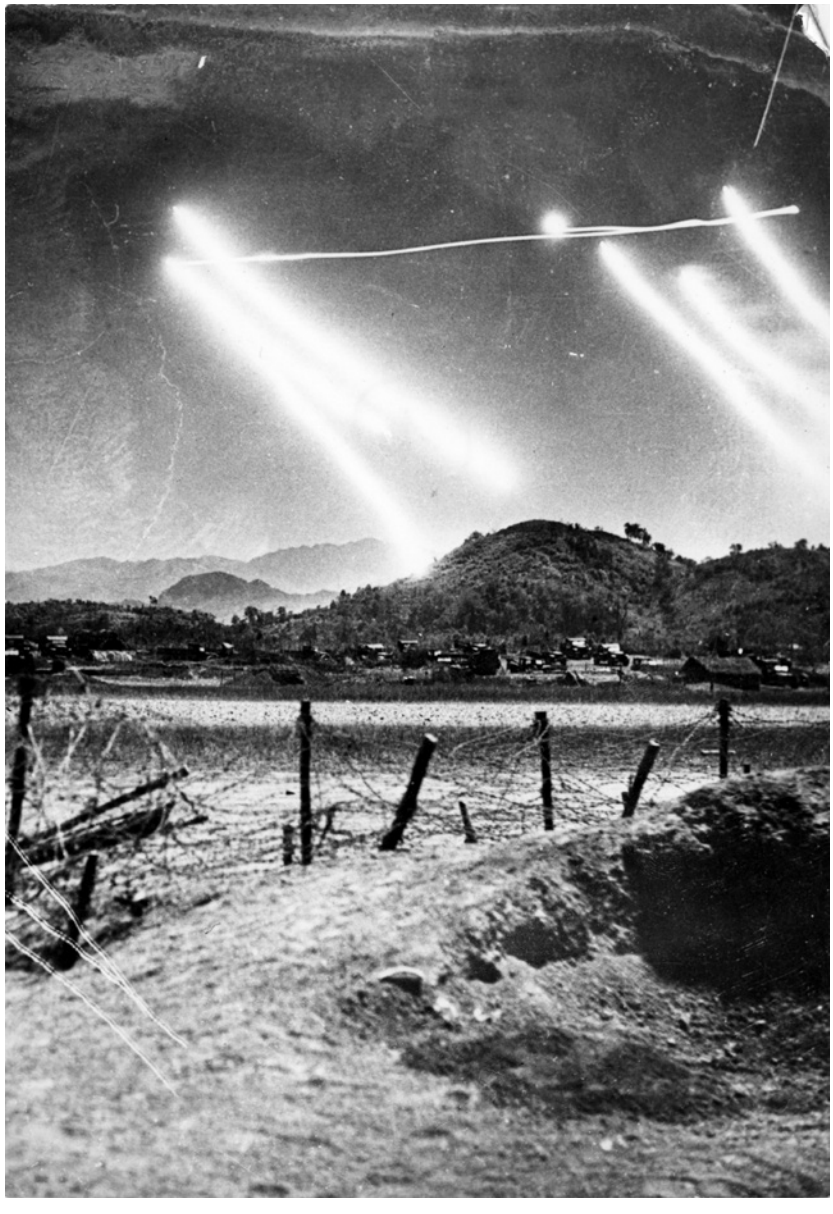
During the Algerian War (1954–62) he held various posts before, promoted major in 1958, he joined HQ 3 REI in South Oran. Thereafter he held progressively higher command and staff appointments before, in 1972, he was promoted brigadier-general as the first head of the newly instituted Foreign Legion Group (GLE). He retired in 1976. Despite his many decorations and having held the Legion's most senior command, he would probably have regarded the peak of his career to be his selection at the age of 80 to carry the Hand of Capt Danjou in the annual Camerone Day ceremony at Aubagne. General Letestu died in August 2006, aged 88.

quarter combat in the trenches saw automatic fire and grenades being traded at point-blank range, while the combatants stumbled among the dead and wounded. Hampered by the lack of a second officer, separate fights raged to drive the attackers back metre by metre.

While these struggles continued, at perhaps 2045hrs a flurry of VM mortar bombs began falling on the southern half of the strongpoint, certainly heralding a second attack, and Letestu radioed Bn HQ for supporting fire. He had no artillery forward observation officer (FOO) to direct fires, and without a fire plan the 105s obviously could not fire blind, so it was down to the CMLE's mortars beside the airstrip. In that company's HQ the sounds of battle only 750m away, and an influx of panicky Thais, were causing alarmed confusion and some loose small-arms fire, but despite the lack of plotted targets Lt Bart got his 120mm and 81mm mortars into action, dropping bombs close to PA 8's wire and along gullies which seemed the most obvious approach routes.

By 2130hrs Capt Letestu had recaptured his trenches, at a cost of 15 killed or missing and many more wounded. Knowing that further attacks would follow, he requested reinforcements and also the battalion medical officer. He was sent the first – Capt Guilleminot's 5th Co/3 BPC from the paratroop reserve beside the airstrip – but not the doctor. (The MO, Lt Thomas, and his Sgt Chief Rinaldi disobeyed orders and crawled out by themselves, slipping in through the southern wire to start treating the most gravely wounded.) By 2230hrs VM infiltrators from the eastern perimeter had got close enough to throw grenades at the command post, but were dealt with by Letestu's orderly and a few other Co HQ personnel; there were no other riflemen left in the southern trench. At some unrecorded time the PA also came under fire from a recoilless gun sited close to the northern perimeter.

The paratroop company arrived shortly after 2230hrs, slipping in from the south-west just in time to help drive back a second VM assault, which hit the south-east perimeter. In the darkness VM troops infiltrated much of the interior of the strongpoint, and the fighting to drive them out



Dramatized by this time exposure, one measure that greatly aided the strongpoint garrisons at Na San was the dropping of '*luciole*' parachute flares to light up the VM's night attacks. Each flare burned for 4 minutes, and an aircraft could carry up to 60 of them, giving it a long period of illumination over the target. (Private collection, courtesy Indo Éditions)

was chaotic. Letestu had needed the paratroopers' help, but he furiously made Capt Guilleminot correct his first radio report that he had 'retaken' 11th Co's strongpoint. A final attack at 0030hrs, no doubt to cover the VM withdrawal, was also driven off. (One of the Legion company's PIMs was discovered loading and firing a 60mm mortar by himself after its crew were wounded.) VM casualties were usually carried away, but here the attackers left 64 corpses and five wounded. The attacking unit was identified as Bn 322/Regt 88 from Div 308.

After this unexpected overture both sides spent the next week completing their preparations, and when the battle resumed on the night of 30 November/1 December it took a more familiar form. GOMRN had by then received all its artillery and its third paratroop battalion, and

Na San: a famous photo by Jean Péraud, who accompanied Lt Hovette's 23rd Indochinese Parachute Co of 3 BPC during that battalion's counter-attack to recapture PA 24 on 1 December 1952. It took 3 BPC and part of 1/3 RTM from dawn until 1600hrs to drive VM Regt 102/ Div 308 off the hill, but the counter-attack's success vindicated one of the tactical foundations of the 'air-ground base' concept. (ullstein-bild via Getty Images)

fire plans had been completed; local tree-trunks were used to improve the overhead cover of many positions, and all strongpoints were well supplied with ammunition. Giap's Div 308 was drawn in around the north-eastern face of the camp, Div 312 around the north-western, and the south-eastern was entrusted to Div 316. No doubt every effort was made to reconnoitre the defences, but the terrain denied Giap any useful vantage point until he could capture one of the outlying hills.

Under a full moon on the night of 30 November/1 December, Bn 165/ Regt 141 from Div 312 struck PA 22bis about 1km out from the western end of the airstrip. It was held by a fragile Thai company from BT 2, and although supported by the CMLE mortars they only lasted about 20 minutes before abandoning the hill; they were brave forest fighters, but quite unsuited to holding trenches under bombardment. This was the first test of Gilles' defence plan: if the hill could not be retaken, the airfield would be vulnerable to Giap's recoilless weapons and mortars. Legion paratroopers from 2 BEP were readied close to PA 4, but first Gilles ordered the mortar company to saturate the lost strongpoint for a full 2½ hours. The 120mm rounds were more powerful than 105mm howitzer shells, and their devastating effect was revealed to the French by circling Douglas C-47 Dakotas dropping parachute flares to illuminate the scene. Starting at 0600hrs, Lt Bertrand's company of 2 BEP reoccupied PA 22bis without difficulty, despite receiving 81mm mortar fire on the approaches.

That same night another attack fell on PA 24, about 500m outside the north-eastern corner of the perimeter, which was held by 4th Co, II/6 RTM. They were bombarded with mortars and RCLs at close range, and after withstanding two mass assaults by Bn 79 from Regt 102/ Div 308 looping around both flanks, the strongpoint was overrun by a third charge at about 0300hrs. The counter-attack – by 3 BPC and two companies of I/3 RTM – went in at dawn, but met stubborn resistance; it

was 1600hrs, after several attempts with artillery and air support, before the paratroopers recaptured the hill. They suffered 70 casualties, but the outer perimeter was restored, and Giap was still denied overwatch of the central positions.

The Viet Minh kept up a harassing fire with their heavy mortars and RCLs all day on 1 December, and from 0100hrs on the 2nd major assaults struck both PA 21bis outside the south-western corner, and the long 'lizard-shaped' ridge of PA 26 a full 2km out to the east.

Strongpoint PA 21bis – where Lt Bonnet's 100 légionnaires of 10th Co, III/5 REI had only had since 21 November to clear a tall, wooded hill and dig in – was attacked by three battalions from Div 312, which made long approach marches down the west side of the outer ring (at least two battalions from Regt 209 and one from Regt 141). Despite shelling of their suspected avenue of approach, the VM worked their way close to the wire on two flanks, and at 0130hrs their mortars and RCLs began firing on the company's command and heavy-weapons bunkers. Suicidal sappers died to breach the wire; the first mass charge was thrown back only 20m from the command post, and Lt Bonnet was among those killed, trying to throw back a grenade. A machine-gun crew and a 57mm recoilless rifle crew both carried their weapons out into the open for better fields of fire; the fighting again came down to 30m range, and Lt Bachelier was also killed. Led by Lt Blanquefort, and with the planned support from the artillery and French Air Force, the company managed to hold out until 0400hrs; the VM then grudgingly fell back, though harassing fire continued. At around 0700hrs the battalion's 9th Co came up in support, followed by two paratroop companies which combed the surroundings. They found that – very unusually – the Viet Minh had left their casualties and weapons on the field: about 350 dead and 50 wounded, plus many rifles, 45 SMGs, 39 LMGs, eight machine guns and two mortars.

The 'lizard' of PA 26 was a razor-back ridge extending about 500m on a north-east/south-west axis, held by the whole III/3 REI (Maj Favreau – like Col Gilles, a veteran who had already lost an eye in battle). They had arrived exhausted from a long retreat, but the strength of this position raised morale at once; the bare ridgetop dominated steep, open slopes on all sides. The unit was soon solidly installed behind a continuous perimeter of wire and mines covered by oblique lanes of fire from machine-gun bunkers. Visible fake weapons positions were built and manned by daylight, to draw VM attention away from the real 'blockhouses' occupied at night. The entrenched company positions were held by 10th Co (Lt Tholozany) at the north-east, by 9th Co (Lt Cantin) and 11th Co (Lt Fournier) along the north and south flanks respectively, and by 12th Indochinese Co (Lt des Rieux de la Villoubert) at the south-west end. The centre accommodated the command post and other bunkers, the mortars, and a counter-attack reserve platoon.

Each company, led by one or two lieutenants and six sergeants, was divided into four small platoons of two squads each, and communications were ensured by burying all field telephone cables 80cm deep. They had to be proof against 105mm shells, because Favreau's fire plan included plots for fires virtually on top of his own positions. He had the barbed

Photographed about a year after the battle of Na San, this group are reportedly cadres of VM Regt 88 from Div 308 – the regiment that attacked Capt Letestu's company of III/5 REI in strongpoint PA 8 on the night of 23/24 November 1952 and PA 26 in the early hours of 2 December. Note that some still wear 'sidecaps' with their pale-drab Chinese-supplied uniforms. (SeM/UIG via Getty Images)

wire attached to branches in free-standing 50m lengths, so that if struck by mortar fire they would leap up and fall back in the same place. Finally, Favreau had microphones (which he had bought on his own initiative in Singapore, using regimental funds) placed outside the perimeter on the likely approach tracks.

The CO's preparations all played their parts on the early morning of 2 December, when the VM attacked with the usual heavy and repeated support from two companies of mortars and RCLs. On the northern quadrants, a battalion of Regt 88 from Div 308 hit 10th Co and 9th Co, and on the southern faces two battalions of Dang Van Viet's Regt 174 from Div 316 hit first 12th Co, and then the southern parts of 9th Co and 11th Co. (Frustratingly, Dang's memoir ceases after October 1950.) In all, four distinct waves of assault climbed the ridge: at 0120hrs, 0240hrs, 0320hrs and 0500hrs. The first three all achieved breaches in the wire before being broken up by the defenders' fire; air-dropped '*luciole*' parachute flares lit up the attackers, and the French artillery pounded their approaches and assembly areas. There was never any danger of a break-in, and Legion casualties amounted to no more than six killed and 20 wounded. Under cover of the thick morning fog the VM carried away most of their casualties; at least 260 killed, so perhaps up to 1,000 in all. Covered by their mortars and RCLs, over the next few days Giap's regular divisions withdrew: the battle of Na San was over. A VM mortar crew captured by a patrol on 4 December confirmed the army's hunger, and their great fear of the Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat fighter-bombers.

Analysis

PHU TONG HOA

The major lessons of this action were both tactical and operational. First, Legion infantry, who included many German and other World War II veterans, proved formidable in stubborn defence and instinctive counter-attack, despite the handicap of long isolation in a one-company post overlooked by higher ground. Second, despite an impressive concentration of force and wide-ranging preparations, VM regional infantry lacked both the skills and the heavy weapons to overcome légionnaires in pitched battle. The third lesson, however, was that the French had no answer to VM dominance of the road network in the Tonkinese highlands, so the quality of their soldiers in tactical encounters was largely irrelevant.

OPPOSITE
Despite the increasing availability of support weapons in 1951–54, the central characteristic of VM infantry tactics was a willingness to accept the high casualties that were inevitable in massed frontal attacks, which shocked French observers. The French also noted that VM units which got into difficulties in battle were abandoned to their fate without any attempt to relieve them. Such cold calculation gave the Viet Minh a definite advantage over Western troops. These late-war infantry, photographed in a muddy assembly trench, wear the typical cloth-covered woven-fibre helmets, which kept the sun or rain off but gave no ballistic protection at all. They appear to carry both Chinese Type 50 and captured French MAT49 SMGs, with French rifles. (SeM/UIG via Getty Images)

'SECOND DONG KHE'

This action demonstrated that the fighting quality and junior leadership of the Legion was still admirable, but that this still counted for little. In an operational context that still favoured them the Viet Minh had improved their capabilities, but the French had not. VM units were now stronger and better equipped than in the past, had received basic tactical training, and for the first time enjoyed effective artillery support. While still a regional regiment in all but name, Regt 174 showed courage and dogged aggression over two nights in the face of shocking casualties, and won a tactical victory (though it still took them too long and cost them too dearly, due to inexperienced leadership).

In the weeks that followed, Giap reacted to a confused situation much more effectively than the French senior commanders, and inflicted an

undeniable strategic defeat. Chinese advice was crucial to the planning of the 'border campaign', and Chinese weapons (though not, in that context, their tactical training) contributed to the effectiveness of the units of Div 308. Nevertheless, it was Giap and his colonels who had exploited unexpected opportunities following the slightly stumbling first move at Dong Khe; and it was his ordinary rank-and-file – the *bo doi*, now a soldier rather than a guerrilla – who had persevered despite exhaustion, hunger and constant uncertainty, while dispersed in harsh terrain and weather. Operating flexibly and aggressively, their units had finally destroyed major French forces. French unreadiness and panic, at levels far above a légionnaire's or a captain's pay grades, had then handed the VM the consequent prizes, which were enormous.

NA SAN

GOMRN's victory brought Col Gilles his general's stars, but he never doubted how risky his position had been. On 24 November he had congratulated Capt Letestu on having 'saved Na San', suggesting his awareness that his incomplete defensive preparations could have been dismantled if a corner had been knocked out of the perimeter. (He would later presciently warn the commander at Dien Bien Phu of exactly this danger.)

Giap makes no mention at all of the attack on PA 8, and glosses over the failure of the subsequent assaults by arguing that 'the troops were tired and units disorganized after the long pursuit [of the French down to the Black River] ... following glorious victories'. His divisions were certainly not at their best by late November. In the Thai Highlands their logistics were under strain; once up into the hill tracks beyond the Red River their supply lines became tenuous, and their ammunition stocks had already been depleted. The VM political machine's lack of control over the civil population in the 'High

Region' reduced not only the supply of rice and porters, but also of guides and local intelligence-gatherers.

Giap underestimated both GOMRN's numbers and its morale, assuming that all would be as tired as the units which he had pursued across country to the Black River. The French occupation of the hills around the airstrip also prevented his scouts from appreciating the depth of defence presented by the inner perimeter, and his FOOs from directing his artillery. This was anyway not strong; while capable of both direct (recoilless weapon) and indirect (120mm mortar) fire, both its ammunition and its professional skills were limited. Giap's anti-aircraft units were also too weak to seriously deter the A-26 Invaders and Hellcats, or to disrupt the daily airlifts upon which GOMRN depended.

The first attack on PA 8 on 23 November was launched without any preparatory fires and seems to have been entirely opportunistic – perhaps even ordered fairly low down the chain of command? If Regt 88's gamble had succeeded, *and* if there had been any comprehensive plan to exploit such success, the heart of the camp might have been penetrated before the defence was fully operational – but that second 'if' is a very big one.

Once the defences and artillery plots were complete, the defensive plan worked as intended – up to a point. The artillery, never seriously threatened itself, was effective (on the night of 1/2 December alone the batteries and CMLE expended 3,000 105mm shells, 600 120mm mortar bombs and 350 81mm rounds). The close-in paratroop reinforcement of PA 8 and the counter-attack on PA 22bis were quickly successful, and that on PA 24 eventually, although the ability to recapture lost strongpoints even further out was never tested. Tactically, when strongly armed and installed in well-planned defensive positions, the Legion infantry had covered themselves in glory. They had laid the ghosts of Dong Khe, and could apparently look forward with more confidence in their commanders.

General Giap had once again demonstrated his lack of tactical imagination, simply throwing his infantry into the meat-grinder – and they had demonstrated, once again, their heroic willingness to charge into it. The operational lessons for Giap included the fact that sustaining several divisions far from their base areas for months on end demanded a logistic effort on an entirely new scale. Crucially, he also needed more, heavier and better-served artillery, and could only deploy it effectively if his forward observers had uninterrupted views. Finally, in the face of the strengthened French Air Force, anti-aircraft units armed only with machine guns were now insufficient.

The French had been lucky in these handicaps faced by Giap, and above all in the lie of the land. Without the defence-in-depth provided by Na San's continuous inner perimeter, surrounded by defensible hills within fairly easy reach of a counter-attack reserve (and without uninterrupted airlifts), the 'air-ground base' would not have been sustainable. At Dien Bien Phu a year later Giap would prove that he had learned his lessons, and that the Communist Party, the General Staff and China had been willing and able to supply his needs. The French C-in-C in 1953–54, Gen Navarre, recognized the risks of Dien Bien Phu, but by the time he was fully informed of Giap's new resources and the VM's unprecedented logistic achievements he had already thrown the dice, and it was too late to withdraw.

OPPOSITE

French infantry and M24 Chaffee tanks during an operation in the lowlands in October 1953; the Legion battalions had opportunities to show themselves at their best during such World War II-style combined-arms operations. This photo does not in fact show elements of a *Groupe Mobile* (GM), which was an infantry brigade with integral artillery, armour and service units, but of a smaller *Groupement Blindé* or armoured battalion group. This comprised an HQ company, with an 81mm mortar platoon; a tank squadron (four troops each with four M24 Chaffees, plus one in the squadron HQ); two or three truck-borne infantry companies, each with four rifle platoons plus a support platoon with pairs of .30-calibre machine guns and 60mm mortars; and one mechanized infantry company in M3 halftracks. (ullstein-bild via Getty Images)

UNIT ORGANIZATIONS

Foreign Legion infantry units

The basic infantry formation was a regiment, theoretically of about 3,000 men – in British terms, a brigade. Its designation was, e.g., 3e Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie (3rd Foreign Infantry Regiment, abbreviated in this text as 3 REI). The standard organization was a large regimental HQ and services company (CCR), and three rifle battalions designated by Roman numerals, e.g. I/3 REI. Companies bore Arabic numerals in sequence throughout the regiment: I Bn = 1st–4th Cos, II Bn = 5th–8th Cos and III Bn = 9th–12th Cos.

The regiment was a lieutenant-colonel's command, and the CCR comprised administrative, logistic, transport, signals, intelligence and medical elements. The practical links between regiment and battalion might be quite tenuous. As 'sector troops' the battalions and their companies were dispersed over long distances, but the relationship remained intact through the regimental commander doubling as the sector commander. From 1951, battalions serving within GMs or other operational formations were dependent on the formation HQ in all day-to-day matters.

The battalion was the command of a major (*chef de bataillon*). Standard battalion organization was an HQ and services company (CCB) and four rifle companies; the official strength of a CEFEO infantry battalion was 820 all ranks, but in practice unreplaced casualties, sickness and drafts detached for various reasons might reduce actual ration strength on any given day to even as low as half that figure. The battalion CCB was a miniature version of the CCR, but also included a pioneer platoon and a mortar platoon (four 81mm tubes – though only two might be taken on mobile operations, to allow more ammunition to be carried). Latterly, the pioneers received four 57mm 'recoilless rifles', but both mortars and RCLs were often devolved to rifle companies. When motorized within a GM a battalion received an allocation of .50-calibre HMGs, which they naturally tried to hang onto when they were 'dismounted' (such opportunism was solidly within the Legion tradition).

A rifle company was normally about 120 strong but might be reduced to only 90 (at every level, sub-units often fell short of their establishments). Commanded

officially by a captain but often by a first lieutenant, it was equipped (from 1951) with a radio, and a jeep for the company commander. The support platoon had pairs of rifle-calibre machine guns and 60mm mortars; as was the case at Na San (see above), in defensive positions these could be augmented with extra and sometimes heavier machine guns. There were supposed to be three officers per company, but often there were only two, so one of the three rifle platoons (*sections*) was routinely led by a warrant officer (*adjudant*) or senior NCO. The platoon might vary between 30 and 45 men, in a command element and three squads (*groupes*) supposedly of ten riflemen (*fusiliers-voltigeurs*) each plus an LMG team, led by a corporal armed with an SMG. In some cases (as in PA 26 at Na San) companies were organized in four platoons each of two squads, for the sake of tactical flexibility.

In 1951–53, Gen de Lattre's 'Vietnamization' programme saw CEFEO units form at least one *Compagnie Indochinoise* per battalion. In the Legion the local recruits were at times concentrated in complete battalions, e.g. IV/5 REI (later the Vietnamese National Army's *Tieu Doan 75*). However, at Na San in November–December 1952 both III/3 REI and III/5 REI had an integrated Vietnamese 12th Co, led by French officers and senior NCOs.

Viet Minh regular infantry units

In May 1950, French intelligence reported standard organization of a VM regiment (*Trung Doan*) as a command and services unit, three infantry battalions and an artillery 'battalion' (this was already overstating it; and from spring 1951 the regimental support element would be reduced to a company with a few 81mm mortars and 'SKZ' bazookas and recoilless guns). The typical battalion (*Tieu Doan*) then reportedly had 710 men, in an HQ Co (140 men), three rifle companies (sing., *Dai Doi* – each 170) and a support platoon (60 men).

By October 1950, battalion weapons additional to small arms were listed as 27 LMGs (one per rifle squad), plus in the support platoon six machine guns, eight 60mm and two or three 81mm mortars, and three 'bazookas'. At this transitional date, all this prompts the question: 'OK – but *which* battalion are we discussing?'

The exact strength and order-of-battle of Regt 174 at Dong Khe in September 1950 is unclear. Six weeks previously, on 30 July, French intelligence had reported that the 'elite' Bn 249 had 780 men, with 27 LMGs, six SMGs, plus eight machine guns, six 60mm and two 81mm mortars. The other two rifle battalions were identified on that date as '255' and 'ex-251'. The CO's account of the battle has his three battalions numbered 249, 250 and 251, but during the regiment's advance to Lang Son in October Dang Van Viet definitely mentions his Bns 249, 250, 251 *and* 255. Logically, we might suppose a reinforcement unit to make up for the heavy loss at Dong Khe, in the absence of individual replacements in the other battalions.

The numbering of both battalions within a regiment and companies within battalions might be at least partly sequential, but bore no relation to the number of the parent echelon. For instance, in mid-1950 Div 308 returned from China with Regts 36, 88 and 102; Regt 36 was composed of Bns 80, 84 and 89, and within Bn 84 the rifle companies were numbered 41, 42 and 43. Similarly, within the independent Regt 174, Bn 251 was composed of Cos 671, 673 and 674.

The French report of July 1950 had listed Regt 174's organic *Phao Binh* 'Artillery Bn' 253 – which would soon be stripped out to help form Heavy Div 351 – as having three 75mm guns, two 65mm (perhaps old French M1906 mountain guns), and three '30mm' (?). Its Anti-Aircraft Bn 680 was reportedly more impressive, with ten .303in Vickers MMGs and eight 12.7mm (.50-calibre) HMGs. That report estimated the regiment's total strength at 4,636 men, but its actual combatants at only 2,327, thus reflecting the importance of numerous service troops in units with few radios and no motor vehicles. Even allowing for the relatively fewer personnel in the artillery and anti-aircraft units, this estimate, if accurate, suggests that the other two rifle battalions may have been significantly weaker than Bn 249.

In September 1953 the 2e Bureau reported standard battalion strength prior to that date (it would soon fall again) as 826 all ranks. The 96-man HQ Co had ten-man staff and political sections, and signals (22 men), intelligence (ten) and engineer (40) platoons. The 160-man support company had two machine-gun platoons (two guns each), a mortar section (two 81mm) and a bazooka section (two 60mm). The three rifle companies (each 190 men) each had a 33-man command platoon including 12-man mortar (two 60mm) and runner sections; and three 52-strong rifle platoons, each with a four-man command section, a 12-man support squad (two LMGs) and three 12-man assault squads each with at least one SMG (probably more), broken down into four three-man fire teams.

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On a typically vulnerable narrow dyke across paddy-fields, a 75mm M8 HMC leads two M3 halftracks – the same heavy vehicles as used by the troop HQs of the RICM's reconnaissance troops on RC 4. The frontier highway was not completely devoid of 'soft going', since in some places (such as That Khe and Ban Nam) it traversed cultivated river valleys. (Howard Sochurek/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)

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Dedication

To the late Légionnaire Eric Morgan
2e REI, Indochine 1951–53

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Author's note

All translations from French-language works are the author's own.

Conversions from metric:

1cm = 0.39in
1m = 3.28ft/1.09yd
1km = 0.62 miles
100g = 3.5oz
1kg = 2.2lb

Abbreviations

Adj	adjudant (French warrant officer rank)
AFV	armoured fighting vehicle
BCCP	Bataillon Colonial de Commandos Parachutistes (Colonial Commando Parachute Battalion)
BEP	Bataillon Étranger de Parachutistes (Foreign (Legion) Parachute Battalion)
BM	Bataillon de Marche (task-organized battalion independent of its parent regiment)
Bn	battalion
BPC	Bataillon de Parachutistes Coloniaux (Colonial Parachute Battalion) (formerly BCCP)
BT	Bataillon Thai (Vietnamese *montagnards*)
BTA	Bataillon de Tirailleurs Algériens (Algerian Light Infantry Battalion)
CEFEO	Corps Expéditionnaire Français d'Extrême-Orient (French Far East Expeditionary Corps)
CLSM	Compagnie Légère de Supplétifs Militaires (Light Military Auxiliary Company) (Vietnamese)
CMLE	Compagnie de Mortiers de la Légion Étrangère (Foreign (Legion) Mortar Company)
CO	commanding officer
Co	company
DBLE	Demi-Brigade de Légion Étrangère (Foreign Legion Half-Brigade; a regiment-sized formation)
Div	division
DKZ	Czech-made rifled recoilless gun
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
GOMRN	Groupement Opérationnel de la Moyenne Rivière Noire (Operational Group Middle Black River)
GTM	Groupe de Tabors Marocains (regiment-sized formation)
HMC	howitzer motor carriage (self-propelled 75mm gun)
HMG	heavy machine gun (.50-calibre/12.7mm)
LMG	light machine gun
NCO	non-commissioned officer (sergeant and above)
PA	Point d'Appui (strongpoint)
PIAT	Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank
PIM	Interned Military Prisoner
PLA	Chinese People's Liberation Army
RA	Régiment d'Artillerie
RACM	Régiment d'Artillerie Coloniale du Maroc (Morocco Colonial Artillery Regiment)
RCC	Régiment de Chasseurs à Cheval (Light Cavalry Regiment)
REC	Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie (Foreign (Legion) Cavalry Regiment)
Regt	regiment
REI	Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie (Foreign (Legion) Infantry Regiment)
RG	Régiment du Génie (Engineers Regiment)
RIC	Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale (Colonial Infantry Regiment)
RICM	Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc (Morocco Colonial Infantry Regiment; mechanized)
RIF	Régiment d'Infanterie de Forteresse (Fortress Infantry Regiment; Maginot Line unit)
RMLE	Régiment de Marche de la Légion Étrangère (Foreign (Legion) Marching Regiment)
RTM	Régiment de Tirailleurs Marocains (Moroccan Light Infantry Regiment)
SKZ	VM-made smoothbore recoilless weapons, including 'bazookas'
SMG	submachine gun
TM	Tabor Marocain (Moroccan light-infantry battalion)
VM	Viet Minh (for simplicity, used here for both the Communist political movement and its army)
ZFNE	Zone Frontière Nord-Est (North-East Frontier Zone)
ZOT	Zone Opérationnel du Tonkin (Tonkin Operational Zone)