DIEN BIEN PHU

By Pierre Langlais

“Translated at no cost by Al Gaudet a QOG member”
Forward

On November 21st 1953, at around 0800H, I was suspended under my parachute and looking at the still happy valley of Dien Bien Phu coming up under my feet. This valley was the objective of Operation “Castors” (Beavers) started the night before; it fielded 6 para Battalions in two groups with Général Gilles as OC and I lead one of these groups. The ground and a hard rice paddy, were coming up fast. I let go of my rucksack, pulled the risers and got up after a fairly rough landing and I noticed that my left ankle was sore. I was evacuated the next day, and cursing my bad luck, I said what I thought would be my last good by to Dien Bien Phu.

“Castors” went on without me. The valley was occupied by elements of the 312th Vietminh Division that had not gotten wind of the operation and was therefore caught totally by surprise. The first paras that jumped in on the 20th fell upon two enemy Companies on exercise; these were decimated after a hard battle. On the night of the first day, all objectives were attained and the mission accomplished. It was a complete success with no “hiccups”, a perfect showcase of airborne troop efficiency in the Fareast and a superb demonstration of the technical capabilities of Aerial Delivery Companies.

In three successive waves per day and for 3 days, 5,100 men and 240 tons of materiel were airdropped with no serious incident. However, to the joy of all, the Bulldozer shared my fate, the dozer blade with its streaming parachute thundered in and buried itself in a rice paddy and the dozer was accidentally parachuted too early and it disappeared over the horizon and into inextricable jungle.

So…. the paras rolled up their sleeves and started using their pickaxes and machetes to build what was to become the entrenched camp of Dien Bien Phu.

With no bulldozer, the airstrip was rebuilt in record time. In the first week aircraft were landing and an unending stream of visitors, tourists and habitués of “Grand Openings” came in. Meanwhile, I was fretting in Hanoi. One morning, in the staircase of the “Métropole” I came upon Colonel Christian de Castries, he and I were long time acquaintances. He said to me “Good evening. I have just left Nam Dinh and I’m leaving for Dien Bien Phu to take over from Général Gilles. He has tasked you to get back to Commanding your group. I’m bringing you with me.” I showed my ankle that was still in a cast to Colonel de Castries. “Ok Colonel, can you make do with a lame as the OC commanding your paras? I don’t think I’ll walk properly for at least a month.” “Bah” said de Castries “we’ll find a horse for you” And this is how that on December 12th, after having waited for the aircraft to land and stop, that I arrived a second time at Dien Bien Phu. I do not have the intention to talk about the details of events that preceded the battle in this forward; I talk enough about this in the book. This notwithstanding, I think it useful to give a helicopter view of what the day to day events of the months of December, January and February were like on the enemy’s side and ours. The definite establishment of the entrenched camp of Dien Bien Phu was decided at the end of November.

Located 300 km in a straight line from Hanoi, it was isolated in a jungle totally controlled by the enemy it was like an island in the middle of the Ocean. Right from its early beginnings, it was obvious that it depended on an air bridge requiring mastery of the air or absence of or at least neutralized enemy AAA and an airstrip out of range of field artillery.

Its goal was threefold:

- Bring in the Lai Chau garrison, that was being evacuated, and to serve as a new forward operating base in Thai country.
- Cover and control in situ the trails that threatened Laos:
- Force the enemy into a set piece battle on, so-called, very favourable terrain
Means at hand were set up progressively during December and January. All the paras with the exception of the 2 Battalions of my group were relieved by airborne infantry units from the Delta.

On January 25th the final set-up was in place and works underway, but far from finished, some positions were still at the blueprint stage on the ground.

This period was literally harassing for the Battalions. The men would only lay down their tools to go on murderous operations in the mountainous jungle surrounding the basin and Search and Destroy operations or go on peripheral Firebases clearing operations against a fanatical enemy that got stronger by the day. At first surprised, the Vietminh reacted quickly and vigorously. Its 312th Division was already deployed in Thai country and was converging on Dien Bien Phu from late November onwards, cutting the Pavie trail and all links with Lai Chau. The only ones who made it out were the airborne elements. At the beginning of December, the 308th Division left the “Mesopotamia” of Phu To and forced marched to Dien Bien Phu followed closely by the 304th, 316th and the Heavy Division. Only the 320th Division was not engaged in Thai country out of the whole Vietminh Order of Battle and it seems that the decision to have this as the main engagement was made in January. Once they decided upon going to the Geneva conference, the Vietminh wanted an ace in their deck of cards for the talks, this would be the taking with a high hand of the entrenched camp! These day by day movements were well known by the Hanoi HQ, thanks to excellent long range intelligence gathering. It was the same with the volume of Chinese aid, be it trucks, fuel, artillery and heavy AAA who were well stocked with shells. As for Infantry Divisions, they were the elite of the Vietminh Army veterans of 7 years of combat under their Commander Vo Nguyen Giap.

On January 26th, both enemies were facing each other in Dien Bien Phu as well as Hanoi, the start of the attack seemed imminent when, for reasons that are still unknown, could it have been because of the lack of trails networks to manoeuvre artillery, the enemy then put everything on hold. The 308th Infantry Division pulls out of the siege and rushes on to Luang Prabang. It takes and destroys Muong Khoua and Nam Bac and in so doing decimates 2 Battalions and arrives in front of the Jungle Outpost of Muong-Sai 120 Kilometres from the Laotian capital. Then, after having caused a panic in that peaceful country; it thus creates confusion at HQ and wastage of precious aerial assets to the detriment of the entrenched camp where a withdrawal was envisaged or at least a considerable lightening up. Then the 308th came back slowly in its place in the attack formation of Dien Bien Phu. As of February 20th, there are no doubts as to enemy intentions. Artillery and AAA appears on the scene. For the besieged, this was still nothing but a big show and a distraction. Sitting on top of bunkers, our troops were artillery spotting and watching the dive bombers execute strafing runs. Still things were not yet dangerous. The enemy was zeroing in his artillery target grid references and also taking extra precautions to camouflage his field pieces. Smoke bombs perfectly imitated outgoings and were lighting up on the ridges. Our own artillery fired for a long time on these traps before they were detected. In early March, the noose tightens around the entrenched camp. The Vietminh is solidly implanted and practically in direct contact with the 2 Firebases of North Gabrielle and Béatrice. The enemy intensifies simultaneously pressure on the vital Delta Hanoi- Haiphong axis and launches 2 commando raids of unheard of audacity on the Bach Mai and Cat Bi airfields.

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1 See the chart in annex
2 Firebase: fortified position protected by defences, that can resist on its own. The entrenched camp of Dien Bien Phu had 30 Firebases which had each the manpower of from a Company to a Battalion.
3 I think it is worth mentioning the importance put on intelligence by the Vietminh High Command. They had to this effect specialized Companies solely composed of selected cadres known for their intelligence, courage and who were hardcore Marxists. 9 of these Companies were engaged prior to and during the battle. They spied out, some times within the entrenched camp itself, with prisoners, press indiscretions and radio eavesdropping, the Vietminh High Command knew all of our means at hand, their location and even the existence of secret infrared devices.
Miraculously, damages are limited to a destroyed hangar and a few observation aircraft; thanks to the fast reaction of a para Battalion, some bombers and transports are untouched at the Cat Bi aircraft parking area. On March 11th around late afternoon, Vietminh artillery opens fire on the airstrip and at nightfall the flaming torch of a burning C-119 hit by the first salvo became the forerunner of the Vietminh rush on the entrenched camp of Dien Bien Phu⁴.

⁴ This was Giap’s goal. In his book People’s war, People’s Army edited in Hanoi, in 1961 he wrote: “During the same period (February 1954) allied forces of the Pathet Lao-Vietnam from Dien Bien Phu opened up an offensive on Upper Laos as a diversion and created favorable conditions for the massing up of forces to attack the entrenched camp....this, to fool the adversary, weaken him and force him to spread out his forces.”
Chapter 1

17:15 on March 13th - Direct hit - The war takes a turn for the worse - Loss of Beatrice - Combat jump of the 5ème B.P.V.N. - Gabrielle and Anne-Marie are overrun - The Thai desertion - Causes of the first setback. A useless airstrip and night landings – Arrival of Geniève – Air transport during the battle - Two logistical systems – jungle warfare.

« Gentlemen, it’s for tomorrow March 13, at 1700 Hours » It’s with this phrase that Colonel de Castries, Commander of the camp and groupement opérationnel du Nord-Ouest (North-western operational group) ended his daily briefing where was also gathered HQ officers, all sub-sector and rapid reaction units Commanders.

The next day at 17:15 H on the 13th, the hour had gone by. I was taking my shower behind a weaved rush mat held up by four bamboos, when distant thunder immediately followed by deafening explosions of 105 mm, those excellent US artillery shells that were here by way of Tchang Kai Chek, Mao Tse-Tung and Giap, and that made me dive in my shelter, like a rat in its hole.

This unsafe shelter was my CP. As I was getting dressed, Lieutenants Legrand and Roy and Captain de Verdelhan came running in. While it rained earth on my shoulders, I listened to the continuous din of “incomings”. It had been nine long years that I had heard such a deafening concert during the last victorious battles of my battalion in the Black Forest. I thought that this was for almost all of the Dien Bien Phu garrison, their fear filled initiation to artillery fire.

I went towards my field phones. The two lines to the forward positions were dead. No doubt the unburied wires had been shredded to bits. My third field phone linked me to the group’s CP. I immediately got an HQ Officer.

He told me that my deputy Commandant (Major) de Pazzis was temporarily at the disposal of Colonel de Castries and that the Béatrice outpost that was held by a battalion of the Foreign Legion, had already been whittled down by violent attacks of the enemy. Its C.O. Commandant (Major) Pegot had just gotten killed in his CP by a direct artillery hit and his radio had gone dead.

I heard people crashing down the staircase, it was my two radio operators. On the radios and on station I heard the « loud and clear » of my two battalion commanders, Guiraud of the 1er B.E.P. and Tourret of the 8ème Choc. These two units of the entrenched camp, were the only reserves but by a strange tactical disposition, they also held two fronts of the main resistance centre. Whatever the case, they were not in the thick of it yet. Guiraud and Tourret were at their posts, the men under cover, and for now, I didn’t ask for anything else. We waited but not for long. At 17:30 H, all hell broke loose with a direct hit on the roof of my shelter. We were thrown to the ground under an avalanche.
of earth and beams. I got back up, I was still alive, and meanwhile Lieutenant Legrand was also among the living, he then lit up a storm lamp. The smoke and dust was slowly clearing away. I had barely noticed that the eight occupants were all unhurt and that at the same time could be heard the whistling incoming sound that filled the area and grew louder and louder. There was a deafening choc. In the total silence that followed, I heard a voice say: “Look Colonel, we’re lucky” and I then stared in dismay at the unexploded artillery shell stuck in the earthen inner wall right above the shoulder of Lieutenant Roy sitting right in front of me.

I can say that the extraordinary luck that I had in the first hours of the battle was the reason for that tenacious hope that never left me until May 7th, fifty-six days later.

The phone rings, I recognized the voice of Colonel de Castries.

“Is that you Langlais? Gaucher just got killed with all his HQ staff in his shelter, except for Vadot. You take over his job as Commander of Sub-central sector. Vadot will fill you in, Pazzis takes over your job at G.A.P. 1.” (Groupe Aéroporté 1: Airborne Group 1)

I went out at the beginning of nightfall. Never in the battles that I had participated in on the battlefields of Europe over the last 10 years, had I witnessed such a hallucinating spectacle.

3 km to the Northeast, 6 enemy battalions supported by important fire support assets, were assaulting Béatrice, but the support base was hidden by Dominique 1’s hill outlined by a bloody horizon. Interdiction and harassing fire on the central position intensified. Mixed in with the thunderous « incomings » was the outgoing sound of our 28 guns, at the same time, the quadruple .50 cal’s flanking the position, were firing sprays of tracers alternately in the somber skies.

A phosphorus shell landed in the fighter aircraft fuel depot. A tall flame sprang skywards as it blew up in the middle of a geyser of sparks and white curls.

It was war, and nothing else. We were going to win the Indochina war in Dien Bien Phu, and I was sure of this.
I went in the communications trench and got to the CP of Gaucher, he was setting up a new CP in a nearby shelter. Commandant Vadot, even if wounded, informed me of sub-sector missions.

Commandant Michel Vadot, I remember you on that specific night, with your tussled hair, bloodied and bare chest riddled with shrapnel. For the last 3 months we didn’t know each other but we are side by side in Dien Bien Phu; this united us and grew into manly friendship during battle, this has remained deeply ingrained in me, in circumstances which eliminate without remission, the incompetent and the cowards.

As of 18:00 H on Béatrice, defence had been disorganized by the death of the Battalion Commander Commandant Pegot and Capitaine Pardi his deputy, both were killed in the CP. The Vietminh attacks intensified and the 2 fire bases to the Northeast and Northwest fall one after the other. At 23:00 H, the attack starts once again on the central fire base, it is overrun and also falls at midnight. The Vietminh controls the entirety of the centre of resistance, but its losses due to artillery or defensive fire is extremely heavy.

The speed of the fall and the lack of intelligence on the probable interception measures taken by the enemy; forbade any counter-attack by the two reserve Battalions of the G.A.P. 2° and would have been, in any event, insufficient.

The next day, a wounded officer was sent back by the enemy who granted a cease fire of 2 hours to evacuate the wounded. The cease fire was accepted and Medical Commandant Le Damany, accompanied by a Padré, went to Béatrice at around 13:00 H, they brought back with them 12 survivors.

In the afternoon, the 5ème B.P.V.N. (Bataillon Parachutiste Vietnamien) of Commandant (Major) Bottela is parachuted in as reinforcement. Nevertheless, during the night of the 14th to the 15th, as the day before and in the same way as Béatrice, Gabrielle is attacked by 6 battalions.

After an enemy artillery prep that kicked off during the night, the first attack starts at around 20:00 H. It’s stopped in its tracks by our artillery fire, as well as, our perfectly coordinated defensive fire. But, reforming a coherent defensive perimeter forces Commandant de Meknem to engage his reserves. The attack resumes at 03:00 H and the enemy, at enormous cost, gains a foothold on the North-eastern side of the fire base. The Battalion Commander needs to gradually retract his defensive perimeter. His CP is overrun at around 04:00 H and he is wounded and captured.

At dawn, a counter-attack by 2 Companies of the 1st B.E.P and two platoons of Chaffee tanks is launched and led by Commandant de Seguin-Pazzis, it reaches the Southern slopes of « Gabrielle » where
the last defenders are still holding out, but with the violent reaction of the Vietminh’s artillery and mortars, it must satisfy itself with only picking up the remnants of the garrison.

The rest of the day was calm on the front but not at the camp’s HQ, where there was manifested, to say it mildly, some wavering. In the corridor of the shelter’s long superstructure, where its services operated, erred the helmeted right down to the chin, scarred grey faces of distraught men. These were the unfortunate tourists of March 13th, whose shelters had collapsed due to shelling and whose job, be they important or not in peacetime, disappeared when faced with the realities and requirements of battle.

The enemy shrewdly maintained this obsessive fear of defeat by broadcasts one could easily hear in French such as that of a Vietminh Colonel who shouted out

« Give me a group and I’ll overrun Anne-Marie with ease. All the Thais are ready to desert. The battle of annihilation starts. It will end with a complete slaughter. »

Evidently, this had a chilling effect. An Officer committed suicide. Some were sent back to Hanoi. Colonel de Castries had the unpleasant task of choosing these and I can remember a tall Captain that had been forgotten who cried out: «But Colonel, I want to see my wife and kids»

These departures were painful scenes. In the middle of the night and under threat of shelling, the seriously wounded and the able bodied were gathered together at the embarkation area. In spite of all the controls, for thirty or so seats available, a small crowd was squeezing up to get in. When the aircraft would start rolling forwards amid exploding Vietminh artillery shells, the poor souls that put their last hope of staying alive on leaving, desperately clung on to the aircraft and were dragged, and at times knocked unconscious by the tailplane.

All this wasn’t a pleasant affair and was rapidly brought under control. If I mention this, it is because I had sworn to myself to give a clear picture in this story of the atmosphere in Dien Bien Phu as I had experienced, this without hiding weaknesses and shortcomings. Essentially, these were human weaknesses and inadequacies that can be explained, if not forgivable. An army is not solely composed of heroes, or plain courageous men and like in all great battles, Dien Bien Phu, was where one had to search deep in his soul to find reasons to fight; it had had its normal share of heroes and cowards.

How could we not to understand, under these conditions, the desertions suffered by some units. The Thais were the first to succumb. On the 16th and 17th, the 3 companies that were in position on Anne-Marie 1 and 2 demobilized and went home by passing through Vietminh lines. Their French Cadres were happy enough to have reached our lines; their weapons, munitions and supplies having fallen in enemy hands.

Poor Thais, could we blame them? They had been tough guerrilla fighters, but in this decisive confrontation, why should they die? It’s madness to put them in trenches and bunkers. The real culprits of the fall of Anne-Marie weren’t the Thais but those that had put them where they never should have been in the first place.

On March 16th the 6ème B.P.C. (6ème Bataillon de Parachutiste Coloniaux 6th Colonial Para Battalion) of Commandant Bigeard, does a combat jump close to Isabelle. Their post-jump regrouping is done under mortar fire. Nevertheless, the Battalion reaches the main centre of resistance without fighting. It shares the
Éliane 4 peak with the B.P.V.N. This position is the second line, covered by Dominique 2, Éliane I and 2, but it’s totally disorganized. The 2 Battalions will have the arduous task of digging in under fire; this will be remarkably done in record time.

Even if these two units didn’t numerically compensate for losses, it’s nevertheless certain that the positive psychological impact created by their arrival was considerable. In all of Indochina, the 6ème B.P.C. and its Commander had a solid reputation of invincibility and luck. Its presence at Dien Bien Phu appeared as an act of faith in the future and a guarantee of success.

On the other hand, on March 18th, on the fifth day battle, in the Northern sector of Dien Bien Phu the firebases Béatrice, Gabrielle and Anne-Marie were overrun. In view of the situation, Colonel de Castries confirmed the mission I received on the first night and now put all the airborne units under my command. From one night to another I passed from commanding 2 to now 3 battalions, all the while still commanding the main resistance centres, meaning all the firebases minus Isabelle.

One can ask, why all our peripheral positions fell so quickly? Béatrice and Gabrielle fell after 6 and 12 hours of combat, yet they were enveloped by a large array of defensive weaponry and were well protected from point blank fire, these units were manned by battle-seasoned troops and officers.

One must be reminded of the reduced manpower, the insufficient number of cadres, exhausted Battalions who did 3 months of gruelling labour and deadly operations. The faulty layout of encircled and dominated positions and who were within assault range because of thick jungle.

Also, the enemy applied rigorously codified tactics and fought tooth and nail, he was determined to win in one night.

I have read the Vietminh’s 1953 field manual called: « Battalion and Company assaults on fortified positions». This 80 page document is the sum total of one year’s experience, where not a month passed by without a jungle outpost being overrun, and was endorsed during the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The best way to explain it is, to compare it to a «hollow charge »: the concentrated assault by the assault/breaching unit on a narrow frontage who then fans outwards from within the breached position.

Assaults are done only at night5 and manpower is 3 to 6 times that of the besieged garrison (6 Battalions against one on Béatrice and Gabrielle). The « Breaching Battalion » is concentrated in a rectangle of 200 by 400 metres from the assault jump-off point. This jump-off rectangle is set-up the preceding night with firing and communication trenches that will give shelter from direct fire weapons and guide the assaulting troops on a pitch black night to their targets.

They had 3 concentric fire support belts: Battalion mortars and recoilless guns, Regimental mortars and howitzers and Divisional artillery, they must have a firepower that is at least six times superior to that of the attacked position.

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5 During the 56 days of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, this principal was rigorously applied. With the notable exceptions of our counter-attacks, all battles took place at night. The use of airdropped “flares”, thankfully countered the overwhelming superiority of the enemy in that kind of scenario.
Questions arise and reproaches are levelled against the defenders as to why they did not attempt to recapture lost emplacements? Well, simply because, we didn’t have the necessary troops. The 2 airdropped reinforcement para battalions that were engaged simultaneously; could have recovered one of the firebases but with such loses that their relief would have been necessary on the same day.

Relief by whom you ask?

By the reserves of the entrenched camp? there weren’t any. The 2 battalions of my airborne group who were theoretically in reserve, in fact, held 2 sides of the central firebase and this, everyone knew in Hanoi.

The Vietminh’s encirclement tactics, in fact, stopped any daily re-supply of our positions at short distances from the drop zones. Heavy combat was necessary to simply keep the lines of communications open to Huguette 6 was soon to prove this to be true.

Nonetheless, losing these firebases was to have an extremely serious consequence. Their mission was to protect the airstrip, meaning, protecting aircraft during their final approach. Their loss not only enabled the artillery and AAA to leap forwards but also to bring the airstrip under direct Vietminh infantry fire.

Aircraft still attempted to land by day. On the 15th and 16th 3 Dakotas dodging in and out of AAA flack and machine gun fire succeeded in landing and evacuated the wounded, but a Morane observation aircraft was destroyed while taxiing. It was madness to have the crews run such risks during daylight and night landings were therefore attempted.

These « landings » were a little known episode of the Dien Bien Phu battle. All the same, the story of courage and skill of the C-47 crews who succeeded in these perilous aerobatics deserves to be told.

In the early days of the siege, meaning right up to March 12th, on each night, there was heavy air traffic. At sunset, the runway lights were switched on. Those, who in those days, came back with me from night operations, must well remember, the coming into view through the jungle, and on the last crests, of this large scintillating avenue, which for all was « the harbor ». On March 13th, all the runway lights were
switched off, and when the landings were authorized, after a
gaping black hole, only a small light marked out the beginning
of the airstrip.

The first attempt took place on the 19th at around
23:00H. Sheltered as best they could in a trench, the wounded
were brought in with ambulances, trucks and jeeps that
waited on the parking area with the camp’s garrison, standing
on top of bunkers, anxiously peering through the night.
Myself, I was in the flight path of the airstrip, and I can still
vividly remember, the flames of the Dakota’s exhaust
reflecting on the aircraft’s cabin, when it passed barely 50
meters from me.

I could guess by the engine noise its landing, its arrival
at the parking, and after endless minutes and fearing the first
Vietminh artillery salvos, once again the full throttle roar of
engines that took away its precious cargo.

From the 19th to the 27th of March, on each night attempts were again made. Boarding methods
improved. Ambulances moved from the camp when aircraft were in the last phase of their landing pattern.
They rolled side by side on the airstrip; when the aircraft stopped, turned around on the spot, engines
idling with its door open, the vehicles would be to its side. They loaded in the wounded, then when the
pilot thought that artillery shells were landing too close, a bell would ring indicating that take off was in 5
seconds, it then took off from North to South, the same way it had landed.

8 successful attempts were made and 240 wounded were medevaced. But some ended in tragic
incidents: one emergency take-off that left a radio operator and navigator on the airstrip when they were
bringing in stretcher cases; this aircraft flew off half loaded due to a mortar attack, it landed again and the
cockpit was shot up by submachine gun fire. Its wounded crew abandoned the aircraft all night, the pilot
was given first aid and bandaged, the next morning, in broad daylight and right under the noses of the
Vietminh it takes off; another took off under fire and its wings were showered with earth by the nearby
explosions, a stretcher perilously hung sideways in the doorway where a medical escort and navigator are
hanging on for dear life. Because the loads were badly distributed in the aircraft, it barely made it over our
bunkers.

The last flight landed at around midnight on the 29th. It succeeded in embarking its load of wounded, but
when taxiing the flight mechanic noticed that there was no oil pressure in the engines. The reservoir had
burst upon landing. The hapless wounded were brought back to the bunkers and at dawn, when repairs
where almost done, the grounded aircraft was destroyed by Vietminh artillery fire.

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6 According to Marie-Thérèse Palu in her book Convoyeuse de l’Air, where she wrote an entire chapter to Dien Bien Phu missions. The medical escort teams who took so many risks for our wounded were Mme Cozanet, Lesueur, Calvel, de Galard, de Lestrade, Bernard, de Kergolait Gras. But we only knew of Geneviève de Galard.
The pilot was Commandant Blanchet, the medical escort was Geneviève de Galard. The previous night, she had done a mission on Dien Bien Phu, but her aircraft could not land, she had volunteered for this mission. This is how fate brought her among us to the bitter end.

The C-47’s were not the only ones doing medevacs during this period, Sirkosky’s from Muong Sai in Laos also did and they landed on Isabelle, taking the same risks with like abnegation. One crew died in its burning chopper on Isabelle’s L.Z., another crashed close to Muong Sai during an attempted night flight in the Dien Bien Phu basin.

In those days, airdrops at normal altitude during daylight were possible with little risk. In fact from the 15th to the 30th of March, 2 Battalions and lots of cargo was airdropped. It seems that the airstrip interdiction could be countered by the use of massive airdrops. However, the necessary maximum tonnage airdropped via cargo aircraft rapidly limited its efficiency.

Why all this? To have personnel, food, materiel, munitions, in a war of attrition led by 12,000 men, 9 artillery Batteries and a Squadron of medium tanks to say it in another way, daily deliveries of 150 tons of material and 100 or so men. The means to deliver this tonnage were C-47’s that had an airdrop payload of 2.5 tons or 25 men, Combat logistics required 64 daily missions.
In March 1954, the transport fleet of the G.M.M.T.A. (Groupement des moyens militaires de transport aérien...military air transport group) in the Far East, was made up of 4 Groups: Anjou, Franche-Comté, Béarn, Sénégal, in total 100 aircraft. 60 were available daily, who, of course, could not be used exclusively for Dien Bien Phu. In fact, it was roughly 30 C-47 of the 2 Hanoi airfields of Gialam and Bach-Mai who were tasked with the air bridge with a 90 minute one way flight to the besieged camp. These aircraft delivered half of our needs.

The deficit was partially filled up by the use of C-119 Boxcars of the US Civil Air Transport of Chennault’s « Flying-tigers ». Based at Haiphong-Cat Bi, the C-119’s had a payload and speeds double that of the C-47’s, they were under French Command with Franco-US crews. At times they were thoughtful enough towards us, like for example airdropping us some whisky in a bag of rice with these words: « For Colonel de Castries and boys of Dien Bien Phu, from the aircraft’s crew. » Be they assured of the deep gratitude and friendship that we have for them and that we will not forget the sacrifice of the 2 crews that were shot down by Vietminh anti-aircraft fire.

All means at hand succeeded in bringing in 100 men a day, but only 120 tons of materiel, of which, starting on April 20th, 1/3 fell in enemy hands due to imprecise high altitude airdrops who tried to avoid AAA (Anti Aircraft Artillery) and a very small DZ. If the battle lasted until May 7th, it’s because we used all the reserves of the entrenched camp that were put in place during the months of siege and this represented 9 days of rations and 5 to 8 units of fire.

With regards to logistics, aircraft payloads were not the only issue. Problems with parachutes came to a head in late March; stocks in Indochina were completely gone. US assistance came in the form of a Globe Master air bridge that brought from Japan, and even straight from the US, 62,000 parachutes that were used once and lost at Dien Bien Phu.

When on May 7th, the besieged camp fell; soldiers were completely exhausted, but also had no more rations and ammunition, that air transport crews, in spite of their courage and abnegation, could not have delivered for lack of adequate means.

The air transport mission was in several distinct phases, not only with regards to use and efficiency.

On March 13th, we received totally unexpected gunfire on the airstrip. A C-119 Boxcar, a civilian Curtis and 2 fighters were destroyed because they didn’t take-off in time. The aircraft crews that arrived at around 17:00H are astonished at this unexpected carnage, but since AAA (Anti-aircraft artillery) doesn’t yet target them, they continue to orbit above the basin all the while asking for instructions from Torri Rouge (name of the Air C.P. of the entrenched camp). A C-47, stubbornly wanted to deliver its cargo and was guided in to the emergency airstrip close to Isabelle, and in so doing ploughed into a rice paddy. It landed safely, but barely had it stopped that, well-aimed mortar fire turned it into a ball of flames. Then, the problems of the unharmed aircrew started. The pilot walked through the minefield of Isabelle and barely

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7 To my knowledge, Air transport losses were of 6 aircraft. 1 C-119, 1 C-47, 1 Curtiss destroyed on the ground by artillery fire, 1 C-47 had an engine failure and had to crash near the camp, the crew was rescued; 1 C-119 and 1 C-47 were shot down by AAA. Almost all aircraft who parachuted supplies at 400 metres were riddled with impacts.
made it out alive, he thereafter had a beer at Lalande’s C.P., and after that, he took a ride in a Dodge to Dien Bien Phu with a legionnaire as escort, it then broke down. They continued on foot in a pitch black night under a pouring rain, got lost, erred in no man’s land, he then finished his night in a hole so as to avoid sentries and mines of the besieged camp. He was at last picked-up by Torri Rouge and took a flight out the next night.\(^8\)

The period of the 14\(^{\text{th}}\) to March 30\(^{\text{th}}\) started badly. On the 14\(^{\text{th}}\), the basin was inundated by torrential rains that prohibited air support, but the next day we had blue skies and truly an Indochina air show: C-47 and C-119 dispatchers from an altitude of 400 meters air dropped loads with multi-coloured parachutes; Hellcat and Corsair fighters dive-bombed their targets vertically. Lastly, from a high altitude and in heavy triangular formations B-26’s and Privateers flew slowly over the camp before dropping their bombs on the hostile jungle.

There was only one snag on this a day that our Air Force made such a demonstration of its presence and force.... Air Command sent a message, informing us that they authorized aircrews to take « exceptional risks » (sic). All who heard it were flabbergasted. Evidently, war entails exceptional risks, going as far as loss of life. We couldn’t understand; the need to give and make known such a strange authorisation. Did the army before an attack, give permission to its soldiers to get themselves killed?

Nevertheless, right up to March 30\(^{\text{th}}\), heavy AAA are still too far away from the DZ to hit any aircraft, and transport aircraft still airdrop at the normal altitude of 400 metres.

On March 30\(^{\text{th}}\) AAA is within range. Far East Air Command forbade C-47’s from flying over the basin at anything less than 3,000 metres. The reason for this interdiction was justified by the low speed of these aircraft and that parachuting their 2.5 tons of cargo required dozens of passes over the danger zone. It only affected daylight flights. By night, the C-47’s continued their airdrops at a normal altitude, with no radar, Vietminh AAA was blind. As for the C-119’s nothing changed in their employment, they were less vulnerable since they flew at twice the speed and their cargo doors enabled airdrop of their entire cargo in a single pass.

From April 20\(^{\text{th}}\), correlativey, a new leap forwards, the airdrop area shrinks even more. The C-119’s are forced to fly higher for safety. This is where the delayed airdrop method was developed.

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\(^8\) That story was told to me in Dakar, 8 years after the battle by Capitaine Maurel the pilot of the aircraft.
From a technical standpoint, dropping a bundle from 3,000 meters is just as easy as from 400 meters. In these conditions with a descent speed of 8 m. per second, it takes 6 minutes to hit the ground, six minutes during which it is subjected to winds that can take it far from its target.

Delayed opening airdrop overcame the problem. The bundles freefalled roughly 40 seconds (2,500 meters). A pyrotechnical device then set off the combustion of a delayed action fuse; that at a set time opened the chutes at a normal airdrop altitude.

These systems worked perfectly. Nevertheless, starting April 20th, loses were up to 30% of airdropped tonnage. This came about because of the difficulty for an aircraft at 3,000 meters and at an airspeed of 400 Km/h, to correctly gauge the exact vertical of the intended drop zone.

From April 20th to May 7th, air transport worked in these conditions. The last paratroopers to jump in were during the night of May 5th and 6th, and equipment drops were done right up to the last hour. The last thing I remember of the battle was, at nightfall on May 7th, on the trail to captivity, a C-47 was flying over the chaos we were abandoning, and the descending parachutes in a clear blue sky.

Just as our logistics was faulty, that of the enemy was admirably organized. I feel it is important to have an overview of it.

The totality of the personnel involved in the battle on their side was of 100,000 troops: 80,000, of which 30,000 coolies or laborers, 20,000 of which on the FEBA (Forward Echelon of the Battle Area) and 20,000 for the rear area. They had to have the logistics for 100,000 men, in a country with no resources from bases as far as 500 Km, from the gateway of China of Phy To and Than Hoa.

The only access routes was that of the Road of China via Thai N’Guyen, Tuyen Quang and Yen Bay and Thar’ Hoa road via Hoa Binh, these linked up to one itinerary at the crossroads of Conoi, close to Na San. This itinerary to the R.P. 41 (Route provinciale : provincial road) right up to Tuan Giao, then on to the R.P. 41 bis from Tuan Giao to Dien Bien Phu.

When General Giap decided to bring his battle group in Thai country, the access roads right up to Tuan Giao, were not made for vehicles. This is where he will realize the extraordinary feat of building, in two and a half months (from December 15th to March 1st), a road through the jungle.

On January 16th a first stretch was finished and vehicles around Ban Mone now reached the outskirts of the basin. Then the Herculean task begins, under constant threat of air strikes and the camp’s artillery, the roads required to bring in 80 artillery pieces were built. It was a mountainous jungle that reached up to 2,000 meters, where moving forwards can only be accomplished with the help of machetes, 50 km of trails are cut open in 45 days. A side road starts down to the south from Ban Mon, and will be used to set-up 105’s and AAA on the Eastern slope of the basin, within range of Isabelle; an other side road stretches out towards the North, and climbs up the 1,970 meters of the Pha Tung, also reaches the Pavie trail, it then comes down the Northwest side of the basin. This is where are located most of the AAA and guns that will destroy peripheral positions.

9 See sketch
On March 1st, 10 days before the battle starts the roads are finished and artillery pieces are now in place. One must mention that their emplacements were the results of massive earthworks since they were dug-in mountain sides and impervious to aerial bombardment.

The logistical transport that will supply the enemy comes from Chinese assistance with an 800 Molotova truck park; each truck has a capacity of 2.5 tons. This and all the heavy weapons is vital Chinese support and exclude personnel.

Route security is insured by 0.50 cals MGs in anti-aircraft mode, and regional troops protecting it against raids. Its maintenance is ensured by 15,000 laborers spread out in strategic sectors. These roads are strategic areas where fords replace bridges and where a bomb crater is immediately bypassed. Our air power was powerless in its efforts to interrupt this vital axis but for a few hours.

I saw with my own eyes, while riding to captivity in a Molotova, the efficiency of the system. During a night bombing that the convoy had barely escaped from; the bombing had cut the trail in a very special area, the Meo pass between Tuan Giao and Son La. The political commissar and OC the escort had all the prisoners taken out of the vehicles. The bald and rounded out summits of mountains shined in the moonlight. We distinguished the twisting roads climbing up the pass and the enormous bomb craters. Then, a hive of human activity carrying shovels and baskets came out of their holes and there began an immediate and unrelenting road repair. Meanwhile, the political commissar complacently arranged the assembled troops vaunting the efficiency and courage of the labouring masses. This efficiency was certain for those who knew the Tonkin delta and its giant dikes, the mechanical marvel of another era, as for being courageous: one had to be when working under threat of delayed action bombs dropped during each attack.

Two hours later, the road was repaired, and a little before dawn trucks were once again underway and moved along the trail. A trackless detour led us in a jungle tunnel. Here was the stop over: the truck parks, water, rice silos, multiple hearths to disperse telltale smoke. The only protection of these lodges was their invisibility.
One will be surprised to know that the enemy could have done such a Herculean task of building 100 kilometres of roads and of all things in the jungle and in only 2 months; and all this next to the entrenched camp with 12 battalions. Well! These battalions were doing the same Herculean tasks in the camp but without 30,000 coolies.

To hinder and interrupt these works, one would have had to break the encirclement of the basin, and safe as well as well-trained indigenous troops with a strong cadre of Europeans who had a long physical, technical and moral training equivalent to what the British taught during the war in their camps in Sri Lanka. This also meant operating in a country with a friendly population, who could guide and provide intelligence.

Dien Bien Phu was definitely not that scenario. The Thai region around the basin was unknown to all, guides were not available, the populace was reticent at first, then frankly hostile (all escaped prisoners who entrusted themselves to the Thai villages after May 7th were handed over to the Vietminh).

In other areas, our special operations units last year, had done excellent work by concentrating on the western sector of the basin. But after 6 months of effort the resistance groups had broken up and their cadre had fallen back on Lai Chau.

With regards to units able to wage jungle warfare, by this I mean, engaging the Vietminh’s regular units on that terrain, there were none in the entire expeditionary corps. The best battalions barely managed this, this was completely out of proportion with results obtained and for the other units it was complete annihilation. These trail battles were slow forward movements in a tunnel strewn with death-traps where an invisible and invulnerable enemy killed at close range.

There were, of course, Thai partisans, but these were nothing but hordes of militarily untrained farmers. Their hapless Europeans cadres were destined for certain slaughter.
One can object and rationalize, but I’m talking about what I have seen, and here’s what I saw from December 1953 to January 1954 on search and destroy or search and clear operations done around the basin with battalions of my Airborne Group.

On December 14th the 1st B.E.P. and 5th B.P.V.N. Para Battalions were in a tough spot 15 Kms close to the village of Mouong Pn North of the Camp. Attacked with incredible determination by units of the Vietminh’s 312th Division, they were withdrawing slowly through a flaming jungle, with extremely heavy loses. I was sent to rescue Colonel de Castries with a 3rd Battalion and 2 batteries of 105mm.

At around 16:00 H my guns are in firing position and protected by an infantry square, I start moving my Battalion forwards to the plateau, half way up the mountain top, where the battle was taking place. After an hour of hard climbing, where machetes replaced the hammer-axe and liana and the repel rope, the lead Company with whom I walked reached a second plateau where a trail snaked through high grasses, before it disappeared in a new jungle tunnel. Night was approaching and from the North we heard the deafening noise of battle. The expression «a dangerous back-alley» came to my mind when I beheld a surprising spectacle. Thirty or so men rushed out of the jungle. They were dressed in black, with their brand new reddish brown leather webbing, armed with antiquated rifles. Some had on their shoulders a badly tied jute bag with paddy and mortar bombs. These Thai guerrillas were led by a young Lieutenant who came to me and said:

«Colonel, I’m at your disposal, but I must admit, I’m very happy that you’ve arrived.»

Ah! Did I ever understand how he felt, all the while knowing that his courage was not at fault. What could this small group do when 2,000 men of the best battalions of Indochina were in dire straights? I had this group that was a caricature of soldiers, go down and guard the gun batteries, they weren’t sent out again. Later on, we tried to have them hold defensive positions; they got up and left for home.

With the Thai guerrilla problem solved, that was, gladly enough, the end of my intelligence gathering mission, we then withdrew the 2 decimated and battle strained battalions at night. Where the Vietminh had decided to stop them, they didn’t move forwards an inch farther.

So as to destroy the myth that we were encircled Hanoi HQ decided, in the last 2 weeks of December, to have battalions of my group liaise with troops in Laos.

In theory, it was easy. On the map, there was a large red line representing an excellent trail that was imposed on me as an itinerary, it linked “in the old days” Cao Bang to Lang Son and led directly to the objective, the Laotian village. Now, I knew that trail perfectly, for having taken it 3 years ago. I knew it snaked along several kilometers in a basin walled in by calcareous peaks that would be the graveyard of my 2 battalions; I had made up my mind to take another route to accomplish my mission. Luckily, Colonel de Castries gave me carte blanche and HQ searched for guides. That’s when problems started. In that region, there had been a jungle outpost for over 50 years and from which guerrilla fighters had operated 6 months earlier. For a route that meant no more than 2 days of marching, we couldn’t find any guides. At last, on the eve of our departure, they present me to a hesitant Thai, I still remember how bewildered and angry I was, when at our dawn halt, after 12 hours of an extenuating march, I saw through the fog of the valley, the entrenched camp 15 or so kilometres away. As “all roads lead to Rome”, the trail of our makeshift guide
still managed to get us to Sop Nao. Upon arriving, I symbolically shook hands with the O.C. of the Laotian detachment, we had a toast with miniature Rum ration bottles and we parted ways, happy to have made it.

We came back with no problems, but by a different and even more arduous trail. Our numbers had increased by 2 additional personnel. A young female paratrooper from the press information service; that had left the train at the Sop Map train station in Laos so as to take mine “the Dien Bien Phu connection”. We also had American photographer who arrived at the village of Floué Iloun by helicopter. He was dressed in suit and tie and flat shoes. He had in bandolier a huge shoulder bag filled with his gear; these 10 hours of marching were for him a long tale of suffering. The sticky, muddy and unending trail climbed and then leaped down the steep riversides of the Nam Youn and our newfound friend was walking like a sailboat, he did twice the distance and was as angry as a badger. During the climbs, the lianas he hung on to broke regularly and he ended up at the bottom of the hill, sitting on his shoulder bag; as for the down hills he slid down these on his behind.

At the stopover, he said to me, while taking out a bottle of « Bourbon » from his big shoulder bag: « The longest walk in my life »; and this was on December the 24th. In spite of the tough times, Christmas evening was spent by the fireside of a clay fireplace of a Laotian lodge and the bottle of « Bourbon », the only improvement to our rations, was emptied to the last drop, with the worthwhile goal of reducing the weight of the bag of its owner.

The stopover of the next day brought us back to the entrenched camp, via hilltop trails with no vegetation other than high grass that swallowed up entire Companies in suffocating humidity. The only incident we had was when we got close to the entrenched camp; we went through an abandoned Vietminh unit camp site, they were caught by surprise and they all disappeared in the bush.

Nevertheless, for mission success carrying supplies was out of the question, we had to play a game of hide and seek with the enemy, through incredibly tough trails, in no way did this experience permit us to envisage the possibility of a withdrawal from the entrenched camp through this trail.

A few days later, these “leisurely walks” ended, because the encirclement of the basin was now air tight and each contact led to more and more brutal fire fights: on the 29th the battles of Ban Lin Lam and Ban Cang, on the 30th the battles of Ban Huoi Phuc and Ban Tau, on January 12th, and the 31st; on the 6th and 16th of February the battles of hill 781 and 561... All were bloody defeats.

Vietminh infantry showed its battle proven qualities and fights with incredible fierceness. Its positions are well camouflaged in the jungle and its fire discipline is perfect. The enemy always has the initiative of opening fire from invisible earthen works at short ranges; we are never forewarned when and where bullets will fly from and where grenades will be thrown from narrow barely above ground loopholes. Hand to hand combat is engaged immediately, making any artillery or air support impossible. If an objective is taken, it is impossible to hold on to it, most of the time units engaged are totally annihilated because of counter-attacks, the enemy stopped all our attacks when the position that he wanted to have is completely cleared.

Here’s solid evidence that any withdrawal via land from Dien Bien Phu, by the garrison, was strictly impossible as of January 1st

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10 Dixie Reed.
CHAPITRE II

From March 15th to the 30th. The basin is surrounded. — Giap read Vauban. — Isabelle. — The Medical Corps. —
The temporary morgue. — My beavers and P.I.M. — Our “Press and Information Service” — The subway — The stopover at the “Arc of Triumph”.


This phase of the battle kicks off with new methodical tactics of Giap: the step by step forward movement as codified by Vauban, it seems that we had forgotten that Giap had read his works.

Let us read about Vauban as Camille Rougeron\(^\text{11}\) wrote about him:

> « The siege begins by surrounding the garrison with trenches in concentric circles prohibiting any rescue or exits of the garrison. The trenches are then opened in a selected area roughly 600 metres from the defensive works. The “straight trenches” are intersected by parallels ones in the direction of the defensive works. First trenches are dug in sections of great length that are dug simultaneously by workers sheltered behind a line of gabions; then the trenches are dug by a cuirassed and helmeted worker who pushes forwards his “stuffed gabion” on which the defenders fiercely fire upon”

With the exception of the encirclement, the Vietminh infantryman applied to the letter the principles of Vauban. The enemy knew that no rescuers would come to Dien Bien Phu. In 50 days, they dug 400 km of trenches in the soft rice paddy soil. “Our High Command discovered that a shovel and pickaxe are just as powerful weapons as tanks and aircraft”

Can the reader please refer to the rough sketch (annex D) drawn in accordance to aerial photos of May 7th and enemy earth works around positions. No need for long speeches anymore, this says it all. On the Eastern and Western sides of the entrenched camp, work progresses rapidly, daily aerial photographs shows the tentacles’ creeping progress. These go around Dominique by the West, come close to Eliane by the South, they then appear on the Western side of Claudine, and to the North 50 meters from the barbwire of Huguette that they reach on the next day.

Front line units reacted vigorously; tunnels discovered were plugged-up and mined. But, the enemy tirelessly pursued his work, and soon, operations had to be mounted to clear the most threatened firebases. The hardest and most fruitful operation was led by Bigeard with his 8th Choc Battalion on March 28, on the edge of Banban, 500 meters from Claudine. As a result, an entire Vietminh Battalion was annihilated and 17 AAA batteries were recuperated.

Here’s the story that the surviving Company Commander Lieutenant Lepage told me: “The day was dawning. We were slowly moving southwards, the cover we were using became thicker and thicker and we began to see the

\(^\text{11}\) « Première réflexions sur Dien Bien Phu », article in Défense nationale magazine July 1954.
parapet of the first forward trench. A dozen or so men appeared and raised their arms. We hesitated for a second, a few NCO’s surged forwards, that’s when a furious firefight started.

The sharp rattling sound, of light automatic weapons, to our near left, is rapidly intertwined with the thunderous noise of heavy AA machine guns; it’s the latter that we must capture.

The lead squad, led by Le Vigouroux and Hérraud, jumped forwards in one bound. Hérraud covers the North, while Le Vigouroux jumps in the trench, hand to hand combat immediately ensues.

Leading his group, Sergeant Rinasson is the first to reach the machine guns, all the gun crew is killed at their station. On the radio I clearly hear Le Vigouroux yelling “On the objective!” then I hear a shot.

Hit on the forehead, he’s killed instantly; I lose a brother in arms, the only officer of my Company, for the last 2 years we had been side by side in all our battles.

“Objective reached, but must now get out, the Vietminh is out for revenge, he is infiltrating through the covered and rough terrain that separates us from our start line”. I ask for Company size reinforcements. Commander Thomas sends me the 6° C.I.P.12, I am relieved to see my friend Francis Dewilde. He jumps and lands on the ground beside me, he raises his arm to show me an area and once again the heavy machine guns thunder, evidently, there are still some left; Trapp and Tourret are taking care of them, but the hand of Dewilde is a bloody stump. Jacob, his deputy, takes over the C.I.P. in a support role; my Company regroups in the trench, now we are ready for the counter-attack. The first wounded are evacuated, I’m in the thick of the battle lead by Trapp and the 2nd Company; it is given support by a platoon of tanks and to the North by the Tourret lead 8th Choc. All 3 machine gun nest crews and weapons are destroyed. I’ll learn during the night that the final tally is 12-.50cals and 5-20mm guns.

“I no longer have any notion of time; it must be 12:00 or 13:00H. All our objectives have been reached and the enemy is not reacting. Thunder is suddenly unleashed. 3rd Platoon disappears in geysers of earth and smoke from exploding 120mm mortar bombs, the platoon and squad leaders are all killed, murderous fire then falls on the C.I.P., Jacob is killed with the first salvoes, the Vietnamese of the Company break up and run, moreover the Vietminh counter-attack falls upon the totally isolated 2nd Company.

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12 C.I.P. : Compagnie Indochinoise de Parachutistes. All French Para battalions had a Vietnamese Para Company within its ranks. The reason for the umbrella as its symbol is because an umbrella in French slang is called “Pépin” and that French paras designate “Pépin” as a parachute
“I wonder, if I will get out of this one alive, but Commandant Thomas sends me the last reserve Company. Le Boudec makes his way to us little by little, gradually our situation stabilizes. The Vietminh dove in their holes, like rats. Dusk is not far, our artillery and mortars keep a steady and rolling fire, under the protection of this barrage, we slowly withdraw, platoon by platoon. I’m the last to leave this, by now, famous trench, scene of a victorious battle but also where my comrades fell. We are back in the besieged camp by nightfall. A low flying C-47 slowly circles and drops its precious cargo. The sacrifice of our dead will not have been in vain. But, as if Lady Luck wanted to contradict my thoughts, an explosion afar off brings my eyes back to the aircraft. It crashed in flames on the same spot where its parachutes had landed.

“Yes, we still have plenty to do but will we have the strength and time to it?”

During the period of the 15th to 20th of March, we could liaise with ease with the Northern firebase since Vietminh earth works were only around the periphery of the camp. It wasn’t the same story for Isabelle. This firebase had been set up 6 kilometers South of the main resistance centre.

It was basically an artillery platform for other fire support elements. Lieutenant-Colonel Lalande, a Legionnaire, and old Bir Hakeim hand was its Commander. 2 Infantry Battalions garrisoned it, the 2/1 R.T.A and the 3/3 R.E.I., 2 gun Batteries of 105 HM2 of the 3/10ème R.A.C. Jeancennelle and Grand’Eson commanded the battalions, Libier the batteries. I didn’t know these officers during the battle, but the hard trial that followed did.

While I was dying Grand’Eson gave me his last quinine pills and as for Jeancennelle he watched over me with the kind solicitude of a friend.

From March 15 onwards, it appears that the enemy wants to cut off the firebase. Trenches are being dug and interdict communication trails. Simultaneously, harassing artillery fire intensifies on battery positions and the helicopter medevac L.Z. that ferried evacuees towards Muong Sai in Laos.

On the 21st, on take-off a helicopter is hit by a salvo, it crashes and catches fire, the crew and the wounded are killed.

Nevertheless, a unit opens a trail to Isabelle, on several occasions this liaison will necessitate the engagement of a Battalion.

On the 22nd the 1st BEP reinforced by a Platoon of Chaffee tanks found the road barred by 2 trenches. These were overrun after a violent battle that annihilated 2 Vietminh Companies. Lieutenants Lecoq, Bertrand and Reynaud were KIA (Killed In Action) on that day.

A short ceremony at the military cemetery of Dien Bien Phu took place at night, I said a few words; it was to be the last time that honors were given to our dead. After this, there was only the common grave.
Isabelle is totally isolated, from March 31st onwards; she fights a tough battle alone. Lalande maintained his position as is until April 28th. Beyond that date, the Eastern firebase is heavily attacked; it will be overrun on May 2nd and retaken at night with a violent counter-attack.

The final assault will take place on May 2nd. The firebase holds on until dusk, a breakout attempt falls on enemy positions on the Nam Noua, all detachments are successively either captured or destroyed.

Combat doesn’t stop the defensive earth works from being methodically built up.

Needed communication trenches were dug to link the different firebases, phone lines buried, minefields feverishly set in place.

Our 2 Combat Engineers Companies accomplished a phenomenal job. Mines were airdropped by the thousands. I well remember the works done on Mont Chauve (Mount Bald) an unoccupied hill that stretched from and dominated Eliane2. Under bombardment and in contact with the enemy, it was peppered with mines in record time by Commandant Sudrat’s sappers. Work aimed at improving and consolidating bunkers roofs which had tons of earth laid atop them was done.

However, it’s in the medical area that we were unprepared; what with months of siege this had tragic results. Each firebase had a qualified Doctor and Combat Nurse for first aid and medevacs, Doctor Lieutenant Gindrey lead our only surgical team. Partially sheltered installations were set up for emergencies and air medevacs. During the very first days, there was a disaster, the open aired triage and X-ray rooms got several direct hits and buried several patients under the rubble. In spite of their expertise and devotion, the medical team was immediately overwhelmed and in dire need of medication. Once again the Paras asked for help and it came with A.C.P.3 of Docteur Lieutenant Rézillor and the A.C.P.6 of Docteur Lieutenant Vidal (surgical team) who parachuted in on the 14th and 15th. They landed right in the middle of the camp in an inextricable jumble network of trenches, however, the 16 men team made it in without a scratch. The A.C.P. 3 team that was destined for Isabelle which was completely devoid of surgical means; was sent to Lalande immediately, as for Vidal he set up shop in an abandoned C.P. on the Eastern side of the river.

I will only say that our medical services during the battle be they Doctors, Surgeons or Combat Nurses worked under horrendous conditions, their abnegation and competence made it such that they were admired by all. Their leader was an Army Reserve Commander that was due to be repatriated at the beginning of the battle; it was also his 3rd tour of duty in the Far East. He wrote a poignant book about his experience called “J’étais médecin à Dien Bien Phu” (I was a doctor at Dien Bien Phu). From day one of the battle, due to the lack of proper sanitary installations, we gave up our meagre underground comforts for the wounded.
Rooms and messes had been evacuated and camp beds dragged into the C.P. My trusty aides: the DZ Pathfinders Jarasse, Poirier and Capdebosq, the logisticians Robert, Selam, Cassou the clerk-typist, Le Gouellec, Aimo-Boot and Millars, built me with their own hands a “made to measure” underground bunker. I think that Verdelhan was its architect. One night I was given the keys, I went down the staircase into the darkness under watchful eyes, when I walked into the bunker I recoiled backwards and was aback. It was brilliantly lit and the decorator had used blue, white and red parachutes as wall covering. It was a very comfortable temporary morgue, matting stretched out on the floor, a camp bed with in a corner, a bedside table and two chairs. The walls had some small recesses to stow effects, it was wallpapered with shreds of multicolored parachutes. I thought of Napoleon sleeping wrapped up in a flag the day before the Battle of Marengo, so I decided to move in when a cracking sound made me raise my head, it augured badly. I heard the screams of my “beavers” outside. I barely made it out by bounding the staircase 4 steps at a time; that my temporary morgue and its flags were buried under tons of earth. The team that lived beside me, was before March 13th, the personnel of the small HQ of my airborne group. All without exception, no matter their job or past occupation, for example 2 or 3 had arrived straight from Hanoi for disciplinary reasons. “You are going to Dien Bien Phu, that will teach you a lesson” they were told - they, during the battle, all behaved with quiet and smiling heroism.

Lieutenant Legrand’s communications team went out on the artillery bombarded lines every night. The signalers left their safe bunkers under the worst shelling for the open air trenches so as to have better communications. We’d bring them back in, they’d go out again, I’d tell them “So, you want to get yourself killed?” they’d reply “Colonel, I have to, if you want to hear Eliane, the signal doesn’t reach inside your bunker”

The secretaries no longer had dossiers, the parachute packers no more parachutes to fold and had become supply personnel, radio technicians or bodyguards. Every night, Robert, our chief accountant would drive around in a truck and pick up parachuted equipment at fixed unit regrouping areas and supply the firebases on the front lines. I remember his fierce rivalry with the Legion’s Sergeant Major Rapp as to who would deliver the most tonnage each night.

Others accompanied me on my visits to firebases. I never asked anyone to come with me, but the minute I left the bunker, there was always a friendly armed and helmeted shadow behind me. Lastly, there was Cassou, I think he was one of those that had been “kicked out of Hanoi”. He did absolutely anything and everything... and even cooked! During “night landings”, he volunteered to drive the vehicles for the wounded, it was really dangerous on that airstrip...then he was a signaler, a logistician and cook, and what a cook! When I’d awaken in the morning, I’d see Cassou’s face appear between hanging parachutes: “Good morning Colonel, have you slept well, what would you like for breakfast, tea or coffee? There was a good delivery last night.” On top of a bunker there was a cabin for the cook that he used as a kitchen, it was made of bamboo matting. It was so exposed to artillery fire, everything around it was riddled with shrapnel, but the cabin and cook right up to the last day were miraculously spared and Cassou, for all his troubles, after Dien Bien Phu was decorated with a well-deserved Médaille Militaire (highest decoration an enlisted man can be awarded for bravery in combat)! Between the mole tunnels of our bunkers and the Nam Youm River, there was a terreplein that had been used as a helicopter LZ and volley ball court; it had been mysteriously spared from artillery strikes. Meanwhile, a ceasefire of sorts was in effect early mornings. We had noticed that, just like prisoners who have their leisure walks, we got out of our holes every morning for a breath of fresh air and enjoyed the exceptionally good Spring weather of early April in the High Tonkin region. We had gotten
used to washing up in the open air. We’d shave in front of a mirror, showered with water of the nearby river that was brought to us strung on bamboos by the P.I.M (Prisonniers Internés Militaires = POW’s), in those days, it did not have too many dead bodies in it.

At around 0900H, we got our first warning shot. Like ants, we’d all head for our holes in single file, and subterranean life would begin anew until the next day. These recess periods lasted until the end of April. One morning, I was shaving when a shot drew my attention. I thought it was a stray friendly bullet, I kept on shaving, when I heard this time a second shot and a very near miss at that. We understood that this time, they meant business and we collectively jumped into the trenches, meanwhile, the Vietminh sharpshooter saw in his scope, his prize target disappear. The open air bathroom was definitely from here on declared “out of bounds”.

“P.I.M” was a strange term that I used to theoretically designate “interned military prisoners”. In fact, these men were not captured with weapons in hand, they were caught destroying trails, or erred in forbidden areas or were suspects.

Generally they were used as unit coolies, they quickly mixed-in with them and at times they would join their ranks. In short, they followed the same “career path” as the enemy that went from farmer to militiamen, regional force battalion soldier or soldier (Chu Luc) in a main force unit. These P.I.M’s were called Organic P.I.M’s of this or that battalion. I remember, that on a “down” day of General de Castries said to me: “You see, if our business goes south, you and I will find ourselves as organic P.I.M.’s of the 308 Vietminh Division !”

At Dien Bien Phu, the organic P.I.M of my HQ was treated exactly like our very own men, they were totally devoted. When our dark days arrived, which for them were lucky days, they didn’t forget…I was told by a comrade, that on the trails to captivity, he had been bumped into by one of his former P.I.M.’s. Shortly thereafter he reached into one of his pockets and found a pack of cigarettes, that; at great risk, had been slipped in it.

We, at Dien Bien Phu had a team of newsmen whose job it was to “cover” the battle. One was Lebon, he arrived on the 18th in that Piper that was destroyed on the ground; he had lost a leg because of that. He was hopelessly fretting in the camp’s hospital. As to the 3 others, the writer Peraud, Schoendoerffer the filmmaker and Camus the photographer, they were snooping around all over the place for a juicy story. All three were friends, young and dynamic, as well as courageous. Their camera in hand they were right up front with the infantry, they were always looking for a spectacular explosion, a murderous assault; the lull in March weighed heavily on them. One day, Peraud asked me to pose for a picture. He asked that I put aside my red beret and to put on a helmet, I’d look more like a “warrior”. I put on this old British para helmet that I had for jumps and he asked that I pose in a half destroyed communications trench.

Peraud tells me “A bit more to the side, raise your chin, look up” and in fact I was watching with expectation a bundle coming down at the end of a parachute, it contained wine which we desperately lacked.

A month later my picture appeared in a full page of Point de Vue and it read “A firebase just got overrun” Castries turns to Langlais and says “Send in the paras”.

Taking enormous risks, our 3 reporters, during the battles, accumulated a gold mine in films.

To save this treasure, on a night in May around Co Noi, 2 of them jumped out of the Molotovas’
that were bringing them into captivity. Schoendoerffer was captured immediately and brutally clubbed, but the voice reporter Peraud forever disappeared. Fifteen days later Camus, tried to escape with Sergeant Sieurs. They were recaptured the next day.

Within a radius of 100 metres around the shack’s superstructure that housed the entire C.P. of the Western Group sector, with its 2 secondary C.P.’s (G.A.P.2 and G.M.9) the Artillery C.P., the Air C.P. and hospital, an incoming round always found a juicy target. The grounds were a real molehill, a labyrinth (often underground) of communication trenches where often erred for a long time the newly parachuted in troops. We took what we called “the subway” to go to the General’s HQ that was called the Arc of Triumph. My own bunker had 2 entrances. One gave out on the road; the other, was only an air vent which led to an underground communications tunnel that brought you to the General’s bunker.

Each night, Bigeard and I would knock on his door. The General would say “Good night my little lambs” we’d say in unison “Good night Christian”. We’d both sit on a corner of the bed. The General would then give us the confidential information received from Hanoi, evolution of moral and enemy losses, the possible US Air Force intervention from aircraft carriers in the South China Sea and airfields in Manila. We spoke about the extraordinary sympathy of the rear echelon folks towards us: the men of the Expeditionary Corps who volunteered to jump in just to be with us; the superhuman task of the air re-supply units: rigger-loadmasters, the Air Delivery Units and the extenuated woman parachute riggers suffocating in their hangars. The rear echelon was so close, yet H.Q. was so far. We, those on the front lines, never understood why when aircraft were still able to land, that arrival of reinforcements was always pushed back to a later date and also why decisions in Hanoi could not be taken urgently. The rear echelon was much too far while the fate of the war in Indochina was being played out at Dien Bien Phu and also too that of honor and liberty, in addition to the lives of 15,000 men.

As we’d get up, I’d say “Bruno, it’s time to leave”
And Bruno would answer back “Ok we’re off”
The General would say “My little lambs, you are leaving?”
And nobody would move.

With a smile on his face, he’d head for a “safe” area of his bunker; he’d lift a small board and pull out of his cellar a bottle of Whisky and sat down
“At times, is not a bit of alcohol good and heartwarming!”
When leaving the General, we’d again take “the subway” that went through the old G.M. 9 C.P. now the Defense C.P. That’s where I’d be at night with my maps, phones and radios in the company of Vadot, de Lemeunier, and a trusted team of Légionnaires- I forget their names, but not their faces.

That’s also where I’d have supper while listing to “Radio- Hirondelles” (Radio Swallow) from Hanoi. April’s programs included episodes of the novel “Les Mystères the Paris” (The Mysteries of Paris). I can remember the complaint that announced the program: “Listen, all you who are in bunkers, to the somber history of the mysteries of Paris”. One could not have said it better, in our bunker; we lived quite a somber story.

Outside the Defence C.P. the tunnel would branch off, one would lead to the Air C.P. the other to the Artillery Support C.P.
The bunker was long and narrow. At the end, a tent canvas hid the bunk beds where one rested. In the entrance we had all the radio and telephone gear, maps and artillery rulers.
This was Chef d’escadron (Squadron Leader) Ailloux’s’ lair with his glasses on his nose and nose stuck on the map.

13 G.M. 9 : Groupe mobile n° 9 mostly manned by foreign battalions.
“Direct fire Huguette 4? Yes Colonel. One Battery of Isabelle, a Battery of mortars, shot out.”
“The sprout on “Mont Chauve”? 2 Batteries of Isabelle, shot out.”
Around him there was a team of passionate and friendly young officers.
“Sir Eliane 2 and Eliane 4 ask for immediate defensive fire, to whom do we give priority?”
Ailloux looked at me questioningly.
“You can send it to both at the same time?”
“Yes”
“Do it”
“One Battery of Eliane 2, mortars of Eliane 4, shot out.”
Vadot appeared in the doorway:
“Colonel, Huguette 6 urgently requests flares\textsuperscript{14}, but there’s paras jumping in”
Use of flares was impossible during a jump, the jump aircraft could be immediately shot down.
I answered:
“Tell Huguette to wait for 30 minutes. They’ll get their flares when the jump is over. Warn the C-47 above that the flares will light up at 00:30H automatically without orders.”
Lemeunier on the phone.
“Eliane 4 needs 81mm mortar bombs, there’s none at the depot.”
“Take the 500 at Claudine, they don’t need it as much. Warn Robert, I think we still have a truck working.”
The phone rings again, a Lieutenant takes the call.
“Sir, it’s Knecht. Direct hit on 4\textsuperscript{th} Battery, 2 teams of weapon crews KIA.”
“Spotting equipment non-serviceable. They can’t fire for Eliane 4.”
“Replace them by 2 sections of 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battery.”
This night, and all the other 56 nights were like this. Ailloux, Knecht and Libier had fired 50,000 rounds of 105mm and 30,000 of 120mm mortar bombs. They too, were exhausted.

Yes, our gunners worked hard during the battle. Colonel Piroth was killed on the very first days and was replaced by Lieutenant Vaillant. But what can a gunner do without an observation post or spotter aircraft?

His last options were defensive and harassing fire.

I had spent several days with Ailloux, studying his defensive fire. They had been set-up and well rationed again. Up to the very last day, they were precise and rapid, but the Vauban style tactics of the Vietminh neutralized its efficiency.

The part-African gun crews of the Batteries of our R.A.C\textsuperscript{15}, had a hard and just as risky a job as the infantry. The tubes were in gun pits and counter-battery fire fired from their mountain balconies was precise and fearsome. The first salvoes were dead on, and the gun crews barely had the time to jump into the spider holes dug in the walls of the gun pits. From late April onwards, we couldn’t fire the guns during the day.

Vietminh guns batteries, mortars or AAA escaped all our counter-battery fire during the entire battle, never mind the aerial bombardment, that was also impossible.

The lessons of the Korean War should have opened our eyes.

Field of fire, ease of command and 105mm gun mobility ruthlessly sacrificed to protection. Vietminh guns where hidden in the mountain sides, AAA dispersed, and their location constantly changed in the jungle, aircraft would

\textsuperscript{14} “Flares” air dropped hanging from a parachute. They gave out 4 minutes of “Moon light”. During the entire 56 days of the battle, 2 C-47’s were permanently over the basin and dropped flares on demand over besieged firebases.

\textsuperscript{15} Régiment d'artillerie coloniale.
search in vain for that “big fat enemy target” in their open gun pits like ours were. The Vietminh had understood how best to avoid counter-battery fire, it was to be invisible to it.

This eerie calm kept going on and on. We didn’t have the faintest idea what were the enemy’s and even our side’s intentions.

There were 3 options:

- Breakout towards Laos and leave our wounded and materiel behind
- Attack the Vietminh’s rear area in the Yen Bai region with the Delta as jump off point.
- Lastly, a fight to the finish, with aerial re-supply

The first option would have spared all the parachuted in reinforcements but as a consequence very few of the garrison would have survived. The experience of Sam Neua and 6th B.P.C. who was far better trained and who barely made it out of there. In so doing, it lost ¼ of its personnel to the Vietminh horde chasing them from Thu Le to Sonia aptly proves this.

The second solution, for lack of air and land assets, could not be seriously envisaged.

Operation Atlante in Annan, was sucking up everything that we could have used. As for forces in the Tonkin Delta, they concentrated entirely on the essential Haiphong- Hanoi axis. Had we had forces to operate in the Vietminh’s rear, past experience had rightly proven the vanity of our trying to do so. It was virtually impossible to have lines of communication open in the jungle. Outside the Delta, where artillery and airpower could be used to its fullest, and gave us our only advantage, any operation was bound to fail or end in sheer disaster. The tragic lessons of the Lang Son- Cao Bang road had been long forgotten, not to mention the total annihilation of its 7 Battalions.

At Dien Bien Phu, the only possible solution was a fight to the finish in situ and this with all the means at hand of the expeditionary corps. That was the opinion of all Battalion Commanders, and I had it in my good mind to go and say so to Hanoi, it was unbelievable, nobody came to us to provide essential guidance. I

000 wanted to take a night flight and the next day to be parachuted back here. Colonel de Castries Okayed it, and he asked Hanoi. Permission came in one morning. To impress “the rear area” I went to see La Damany and came out of his infirmary with an eye patch... a nice black square over my eye. Friends asked when they saw me “You’re wounded Colonel?”

-Yes a 105mm right in the eye, but I can still see clearly”

It ended up I never left for Hanoi, the aircraft that I was supposed to take was the last to land, and was destroyed by Vietminh artillery on the ground.

The last days of March came, accompanied by Lemeunier, I did my last inspections. Our 2 quadruple .50’s at the end of the runway were now useless. I tried to find a new emplacement for them near firebase Junon. From there, and up to 1,000 meters these 8 fearsome guns flanked the southern sector of Eliane 2. Their fire was spotted. The hill was surrounded with 8 shining tracer geysers. They seemed

4X .50 cals mount
to me to be impassable. I still had not learned from Vauban.

I climbed up to Dominique 2 the highest and most important of the hills, it was a strategic emplacement that covered the Eastern side of the entrenched camp.

Situated on the left side of the river and 1,800 meters from the main C.P., it overlooked Route 41 that passed below it and the entire Southern side of the airstrip.

It is the only position, after Béatrice and Gabrielle with the manpower of a Battalion.

After having walked through winding trenches, I made it to the bunker C.P. of the Battalion Commander. It was an obscure hole where its occupant was fumigating himself by the light of an oil lamp. When I got in, he took his red nose out of the pot and said: “Excuse me Colonel; I’ve got a head cold”

- I see, I said, but apart from that cold, how’s it going on Dominique 2?
- Colonel, everything is ok but the barbed wire network is insufficient.
- Ok, I’ll send laborers; you got all your people here?
- No Colonel, only 3 Companies, I’ve got an entire sector covered by Partisans.
- Partisans, my blood boiled over, what do you mean Partisans? Hopefully not Thais?
- Yes Colonel, Thais.
- Where’s your 4th Company?
- On Dominique 1, on the position 500 meters to the Northwest, on the opposite side of the road. One facing the firebase held by Thais! In other words a gigantic open breach, ready to fall on the first assault.
- “I don’t want to see a single Partisan on positions” I said. “I’m giving you back your 4th Company right now, to have these relieved”

It was done so immediately, A Company of the 5th B.P.V.N. relieved the Tirailleurs (Native Infantry) on D.1. Poor Company, involuntarily and without knowing it, I made it the “uninvited guest” ...

Eliane 2 worried me, it was another East facing position, much lower than D.2 it was barely 500 meters from the centre of the Camp. It was held by 2 Companies of the 1st Battalion 4th R.T.M (Régiment de Tirailleurs Marocain)

4th R.T.M

Commandant Nicolas had his C.P. there. With his accord, I decided to have his troops relieved by 2 Companies of the B.E.P. on the night of the 30/31. Eliane 1 was defended with a Company of the R.T.M. and to me it appeared solid. With Lemeunier, I estimated the balance of power at 13 Battalions against 27. If the proportion of loses of 1 against 2 allowed in attacks of fortified position was the norm, we could make it, but on the last day of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, few were left here.
Dien Bien Phu, a village hidden in the jungle of the Thai country had a legendary past under the Laotian name of Muong Then. It is here, that at the dawn of history that Praya the King of Heaven, had his son Khun Borom come down to earth. The land was then a desert linked to heaven with a liana, the foliage of an enormous fig tree obscured the region, and many colossal squashes were suspended to its branches.

On Khun Borom’s request divinities came down to cut the tree and the liana after having pierced the squashes where men, animals and vegetal seeds came out. This is how according to legend the clear complexion and short haired Thais populated the earth. But men became so numerous that the opening done with a red hot iron was no longer sufficient, Khun therefore took scissors and made new openings. Then appeared the dark skinned and bun haired Akhas, such is the origin of the peoples of Laos. The Khun brought two wives to earth and had 7 sons of them. He assigned to each one the 7 following nations: The country of the million elephants, the Tra Ninh, Ho country, the Black River Valley, the Chien Mai and Lower Burma. Muong Then. Dien Bien Phu according to Laotian legend is the centre from which fanned out the various branches of the Thai family. This legend applies for Mekong Laotians and those of the Tra Ninh, Tonkin and Thais of North Vietnam. A close look at a map effectively shows that Dien Bien Phu controls the descent to Luang Pra Bang and the Mekong by the rivers Nam Ngua and Nam Ou, and towards the Tonkin and North Vietnam by the Song Ma, the Black River and its tributaries. It’s what Deo Van Tri explained in early1890 to Auguste Pavie in whose journal one reads: “23rd of April, at last together at Theng. Thanks to the presence of Deo-Van-Tri our 3rd trek was instructive. He knew the entire region from the delta up to Yunnan-Fu and Luang Pra Bang well. He kept repeating what I had heard all over Laos and knew by experience, that the Black River, the mountain road to Lai Chau up to Theng, the Nam Ngoua torrent, that the Nam Hou water way was the best road from Hanoi to the Mekong. It is therefore by chance, if after having experienced Chinese gangs, having been also occupied by the Siamese and ravaged by the Meos in 1832, that Muong Theng -Dien Bien Phu during the events of 1887, to which Auguste Pavie was not only a witness but an actor of, that it changed hands twice and was occupied successively by the Thais of Deo Van Tri, during their devastating march on Luang Pra Bang, and lastly by the French troops of Colonel Pernot. It’s there, that the Siamese General Phya Surisak in December 1888 gave to Auguste Pavie,
by order of the Bangkok Court, the administration of the now French Thai cantons. It’s also not by a fluke of luck; that this legendary site in 1954 linked heaven and earth by an air bridge where men originating from miraculous squashes parachuted down to the Southern valleys and in addition wrote in fiery red letters and blood the golden book of our military history.\(^{16}\)

Without having the opportunity to present my homework to Khun Borom, I had in November 1950 discovered the picturesque Thai valley well before the battle. I then commanded the Northern Zone of Laos with its HQ at Vientian and I had been sent to inspect outposts along the Chinese border after the disastrous withdrawal of Cao Bang a month prior. I had landed on a grassy airstrip with a C-47, where sheep were grassing peacefully. A jeep had driven me to the old indigenous guard post on a hill that later became Eliane 2, and dominated the quiet village of Dien Bien Phu with its beautiful homes on stilts and gabled roofs adorned with its curious bracketed anti-spell crosses. On the neighbouring hill, that became Blanc 4, was the residence of the Tri Chau, the Thai Prefect of His Excellency Deo Van Long the Head of the Confederation, with Lai Chau as its Capital. Northern Laos was still peaceful. The Outpost was commanded by an NCO and a Platoon of Senegalese. The only danger was the local tiger; that sometimes would come at night to devour pigs. As usual, in these distant outposts, hospitality was heartfelt. After an excellent meal, I was treated to a Thai ballet spectacle. 8 young girls, with their buns low on the nape of their necks, wearing white leotards with large silver buttons that compressed their breasts and also a black sheath and a glistening belt, entered with a big hat in their hands. They smiled and bowed and the ballet began... War was then far far away. The next day, I awoke and rode a pony that brought me to Luang Prabang. I had an escort of 20 Laotian light infantrymen under the leadership of 2 Armored Corps officers, Lieutenants Macé de Gastines and Lieutenant X.. (I forgot his name).

Like their fathers in 1915, these cavalrymen had become excellent infantrymen. Their Corps made a considerable effort to give Cadres for the purpose of the Expeditionary Corps. Few went back to their Corps after the Indochina cease fire. A very small number abstained from participating in this “7 year war”.

On a previous tour of duty, I had known and appreciated these cavalry infantrymen and especially 3 young Lieutenants, the Geyer d’Orth brothers, whose father was a family friends and a retired Cavalry Colonel of my home town. I then commanded the Dong Hoi sector, I had inspected the Bong outpost escorted by the tank of Georges de Geyer of the R.E.C.\(^ {17}\), the outpost was commanded by Jean de Geyer, who had transferred to Colonial Infantry. 3 months later, Bernard de Geyer welcomed me in Northern Laos at the Sam Neua outpost. Fate spared the Geyer brothers in Indochina, but Georges was KIA in 1965 by Fellagha buckshot, in the Algiers region. My two Lieutenants were on the trail like their tireless light infantrymen and akin to them, survived on very little. They were young and friendly and we became the best of friends immediately. We said good-by to Dien Bien Phu, to its friendly outpost, and its winsome dancers on a beautiful November morning and made our way to the country of the Million of Elephants by way of the legendary road of the sons of Khun Borom. The trail unfurled under the hoofs of our ponies and insensibly rose above the valley. We took our noon break by a small spring where a rivulet of water was canalized by a bamboo and dripped on the ground. This is when the bloodsuckers attacked. We saw the small brown vermicelli’s progress windingly, then crawl on our shoes and pass through the eyelets. After a few minutes, filled with blood and as big as nuts, they didn’t want to drop off.

\(^{16}\) According to G. Coedes in Tropiques magazine. February 1955.

\(^{17}\) Régiment étranger de cavalerie.(French Foreign Legion Cavalry Regiment)
From the minuscule wounds blood wouldn’t coagulate and it dripped for a long time and left traces of the path of our small column. On the horizon, one could see the hilltops that marked out the border between the Tonkin and Laos but before reaching it our itinerary dove into an hallucinating funnel, a land like Along Bay whose enormous chalky stumps rose up like sugar loafs and emerged from an immobile jungle sea. Going through this nightmarish landscape with my 30 men, I couldn’t help but think of a descent to Hades and the murderous and hellish nightmare of ambushes...

We did get caught in one, but thank God, we got out of that trap. The trail snaked along a small valley going down to the Naim Noua River. Amplified by echoes, suddenly I heard the rolling thunder of machine gun bursts. Castine came forwards: “It’s nothing, wait here Colonel, we’ll take care of this in a jiffy”. I sat at the foot of a tree. A bullet whizzed by, a pony fell. I was on the point of disobeying my Lieutenant’s orders and go up front when all the firing stopped. The problem was effectively quickly and well solved.

After fording the river at Houei Houn, the trail started to climb. Nightfall was near. Leaving the Nam Noua valley close to the village of Sop Nao with its roof tiles that shinned by the moonlight, we arrived at the strange summit of Kako country, one level above that of Meo country, we were at 2,000 meters altitude. The Kakos lived in minuscule huts and to move about on their dull mud covered and cloudy summits they used stilts like the shepherds of the Lande in France. The trail went down in the Nam Ou valley. Below, the river shinned and a beautiful mountainous jungle scenery was before us, everywhere springs abounded and spurred the growth of wild banana trees. At times, a strange alopecia, punctuated here and there with a rice loft in the forest: the fire deforested Ray, the gluey Montagnard rice fields that had been hand seeded that now grew without being planted or irrigated. We arrived at our first halt at Muong Khua on the Nam Ou. The pony and the Colonel were warmly welcomed since these outposts were in the middle of nowhere, had rarely any visitors and were only re-supplied via parachute. This particular one was comfortable and picturesque but like similar ones in Northern Laos, it was in a narrow and deep valley. A legend explained this tactical heresy: built during the Meo revolt of 1914, it was adapted to the flint locks mussel loaders of the era. These weapons had the uncanny ability to fire below the horizon since the load would slip and fall on the ground. That’s the reason why these outposts were at valley bottoms! As a prelude to Dien Bien Phu, sadly enough Muong Khua was taken in 1953 with weapons situated on surrounding summits. The outpost was overrun and its garrison was exterminated after a month of heroic defense.

Today, I ask myself, if those who had chosen to establish an entrenched camp in the Dien Bien Phu basin were not in fact military know-it-alls who were out of touch with the realities of the field and who had mistakenly taken the Vietminh of 1954 for the Meos of 1914

We abandoned our ponies for dugout canoes and started going up the Nam Ou around Phong Saly

These dugouts moved rapidly with experienced pole-men who did a complete circuit on the flat side. Two walked to the rear while pushing on their poles, meanwhile two others went up front on the other side dragging their poles in the water

I spent my days reading Lettres du Tonkin (“Letters from the Tonkin”). “In a sampan, on the Song-Gam, January 10, 1896. “5 sampans, with 2 teams of rowers, we reach the halfway mark of Chiem-Hoa, we stop for the night on the safe side of shore and we bivouac onboard with a sentry to guard against pirates and a big fire to ward off tigers”.
Exquisite day navigating the river... One feels like an explorer on this deserted and wild river where for 12 hours we sail between two walls of virgin greenery, inextricably high bush with not a soul in sight. Everything is concentrated here on the sampan, dorm, kitchen, dining room and office. I was no longer me, but Lyautey tracking down the “Black Flag”. The night’s stop over was a charming Laotian village. One of these was Muong Xieng on a reach of the river between two scouring rapids. The top of the trees would reflect on the quiet waters and the high huts on their piles could be seen through the banana trees under the flamboyant crimson of exotic Asian trees. The villagers came forwards to greet us in their dugout canoes to meet the Big Chief and there was a regatta right up to the landing stage. Then the Big Chief passed under a series of bamboo Victory Arches, with children throwing grains or rice on his head. In front of his city dwelling the Tcho Quan awaited the official reception and there while the bronze gong marked out note, the traditional “Bassi” was taking place.

By the light of dozens of candles, the village’s nicest girls in lavish costumes, with dissymmetric buns pierced by long gold needles, with silk corsages, and golden lame dresses came and knelt in front of the host wishing him happiness in Laotian and tied to his wrists a cotton thread. One had to wear the thread until it wore out for fear that the wish would cease. On the 6th day, we crossed 14 springing and foaming rapids. I arrived at Hat Sa, the port of Phing Saly and HQ of the Bataillon de chasseurs laotiens. This is where my friend Commandant Cabestan reigned, I had known him 20 years earlier when I was a Meharist (camel corps) Lieutenant at Timbuktu. Those were the days when the first motorcars appeared in the Sahara. I can well remember at Araoun, the arrival of a car powered by, as a matter of fact, pulled by 15 dromedaries; those days are assuredly long gone. I stayed at Phong Saly, at the bottom of the Tonkin, and the world, for a week. With no airfield, they survived on parachute drops. Each morning, I rode my pony westwards. The scenery was phantasmagorical. Like a multitude of small islands, the rounded out and barren summits emerged out of the clouds who drowned the valley, this silent ocean furled and unfurled its curls towards the nearby Chinese province of Yunnan. Scanning the horizon, in the foggy distance, I imagined the Mandalay Kunming road that supplied Tchan Kai-Chek and beyond that the 3 gigantic parallel canyons of the Mekong, Salaouen and Iraouadi, the first foothills of the Himalayas “The top of the world”. I got back on the trail; Cabestan rode with me right up to the first in country cottage “La Sala Pavie”. The old guard cooked some rice, but all night the gargling of his water pipe prohibited me from sleeping. I said good-by to my horsemen bodyguards and changed escort. Their successor was a taciturn Breton and Colonial infantry Lieutenant. He offered me a ball of sticky rice as soup and said to me: “Colonel, tomorrow’s journey will be long and hard, we’ll have to leave at 0400H” I answered back “At your service Lieutenant”. I had my own idea. At 0400H, the Lieutenant took off like a race horse, but at birth my good fairy had given me sturdy legs and a strong dose of willpower. I was in the lead platoon when we stumbled on our first obstacle. A similar fire fight to the one we had when we left Dien Bien Phu; I must admit that it was as quickly over as with my cavalrymen. We moved forwards again.

The itinerary was strewn with obstacles. We passed and re-passed in a torrent twenty times, and my jungle boots were swishing full of water. On the fourth hour, I was walking behind the Lieutenant, on the sixth, I was ahead of him. With a reprobating look, my astonished pony was watching me burn up the trail. On the seventh hour, we had reached the stopover. I was miles ahead, dead tired but happy and said “Now, Lieutenant, manage as you can, but I want a terrific chow-down of chicken, pork, vegetable, bananas... and not one grain of rice! We are back on the trail at 1100 tomorrow... you’re dismissed”. We had become good friends. And this beautiful movie kept going on and on, on this big screen. We finally reached the Meo Mountains, riding on my sturdy pony that was as surefooted as a mule. From time to time, to relieve him I stood up over his wither and then fell back on my saddle. The trail climbed in the morning fog. At around 0700H, it frayed, I was stunned, I saw the most beautiful shot of my beautiful movie: all around me and for as far as the eye could see, the mountains were white and awash in the pale purple of
millions of poppies. These were opium vineyards. At midday, we were in the Meo village. They were harvesting, and as in all well-organized societies, women were working.

With babies on their backs, pure silver rings clicking around their necks, with skirts made up of 4 polychrome ruffles above the knee and leggings on their round calves, they smiled with their curious Mongol faces all the while skillfully slicing with a thin blade the calices of opium poppies with no petals. The next day, at dawn, the precious drops that had oozed out during the night were picked up, treated, loaded on ponies and brought down to Xien-Kouang where aircraft of the small, and in those days, numerous private civilian companies in Indochina took them god knows where. Opium! That magic word, I had tried, like everyone else in the Far East, to smoke it. My debut in Hanoi weren’t auspicious. I had a charming friend and an expert in that art, she invited me over to try it. I found myself stretched out on a thin mat, my head resting on fairly hard log as I looked at the long needle of brown and viscous paste as big as a pea, sizzling on the lamp. My hostess put the needle in the scabbard of a flat pipe that was pierced with a minuscule hole on the side of a kind of flute. She gave me the mouthpiece and said “inhale”. I was moved, and breathed in with all my strength... My initiator stopped me. She said “Wrong, you blew instead of inhaling. The pipe is put out.” While she was trying to light it up again, that sickening and a sickly sweet smell spread in the room, I cursed myself for having wanted to learn to smoke opium. I made myself look foolish in front of this kind woman I was courting...She presented a second pipe to me, I gathered myself and I breathed in. She said to me “Good, now we try again”

What me, try again! I took on the high waves of the Atlantic on my sailboat as unmovable as a rock, I was starting to be seasick with the damn flute. Vomiting in the living room, that wouldn’t be right! I stated that for now, I’d settle for two pipes. I tried yet again to smoke, but the guaranteed divine dreams of opium on the 5th pipe, were never more for me than bouts of awful nausea. And the movie rolled on. The trail went downwards to the Mekong and into the forest. It was a beautiful forest of tall and immense clusters of trees that burst forth vertically. A clear stream jumped from one basin to another, with bounding sheaves of iridescent droplets. There was nothing tropical in this scenery; it was European, French and the Gastines forest. Seeing a Meo lumberjack that was cutting out a trunk, I called to him and said to him:

Listen lumberjack; stop your arm for awhile
It isn’t the trees you are cutting down,
Don’t you see the dripping blood;
Of the Nymphs who lived below the hard bark
Then raising my voice I said:
Miller sacriige if we hang a thief,
For stealing such worthless loot
What irons, what fires, what deaths and what distresses
You deserve, evildoer, to kill our goddesses?
I then said to my translator: “Translate”
He then launched into a long discourse in Meo-Chinese to which the worried lumberjack answered quickly. The interpreter then turned towards me and said:

“This farmer thanks you for your kind words. He has the administrative permits to cut wood; he invites you for tea in his hut two hours from here on foot.”

I declined this courteous offer, mounted my pony and was once again on my way on the trail. The nice ride was coming to an end. I arrived at the jungle outpost of Ban Floe Sai on the Mekong. It had been 30 days that I had left
Dien Bien Phu. As usual, I got the warmest of welcomes from a young Lieutenant and compatriot. He told me with some nostalgia of his successes at Brittany's national sport of cycling, when he wasn't yet a Colonial Infantry Officer. We went right up to the top of the map of Indochina at the confluence of 4 nations that of Laos, Siam, Burma and China. There was there a Chum distillery, which is rice alcohol. The Chinese wine and cellar storehouse manager was an intelligence officer for all 4 nations; he honored me with his cellar. I tasted some different Chum vintages. It was Hennessy at Cognac. When I started to leave, he disappeared and came back with a teak box. Bowing respectfully, he then offered it to me. It was quite heavy, and wondering what it was, I opened it. The gift of this kind Chinese was a series of Burmese weights, twenty or so small pewter figurines of birds and dragons on minuscule lead plinths. It weights went from 1 to 500 grams and were used with a small beam balance. I thanked our host profusely for this unique and precious souvenir. I then climbed aboard our powered dugout canoe and went down the Mekong for a week through Parbeng, Luang Prabang and Pakkai where I saw His Majesty the King's herds of elephant sadly dragging logs of teak, I then reached my HQ at Vien Tian.
March 30th 1800 H — Loss of 3 firebases— Xuan Bo a look back. — The night of 30/3— Pierre and his beloved Eliane — The 5 counter-attacks—Eliane 2 the rock. — The Bison charge. — Daily O Groups. — Respectfully or sincerely yours? — Mail from the world. — The bridge game — Dialogue with a flare ship. — Good luck, Mrs.

On the night of the 29th, Vadot and I took advantage of the darkness and enjoyed the fresh air atop a bunker. We saw the watersheds that surrounded the basin on this star filled night. It reddened westward due to the napalm bomb fires, to the East it was a uniform dark mass where we were suddenly surprised to see luminous dots. These multiplied, looking more and more like a strange torchlight procession that climbed to the summits. We looked on astonished and Vadot said to me: “Look, they are getting out of here and we’ll not get our battle”. We never found out what this procession was all about and on the next day the 30th, the entrenched camp was drenched by torrential rains, so much so; that the horizon disappeared. Mud, our new enemy appeared, tenaciously glued in clumps to the soles of our boots that made walking very slippery and arduous. I got out of my hole at around 18:00H to take advantage of a break in the cloud cover, it was strangely calm. The sun was disappearing behind the sooty anvil of a cumulonimbus and darkness invaded the basin. On Eliane 2, the relief of the R.T.M. by the B.E.P Companies of Martin and Luciani started. I instinctively looked towards the Dominique 2 firebase when I heard the rolling thunder of outgoing artillery fire coming from Ban Hin Lam. In the crash of incomings the hill was plumed with geysers of red smoke and dust, I distinctly saw direct hits on a battery of 120mm mortars whose crews were slaughtered before they could find shelter. The Vietminh prep had begun... Vadot and I were now in the Defense HQ an artillery proof bunker. I was looking at all the positions map and artillery defensive plots, my telephone and radios were my weapons. My radio call sign was « le Gars Pierre » and to authenticate my messages I screamed this refrain: T’en fais pas la Marie t’es jolie T’en fais pas la Marie je reviendrai. The radio called immediately “Le gars Pierre from Dédé. Men of Eliane 1 are falling back on me”. Then a few seconds later “Le gars Pierre from Bruno. Part of Dominique 2’s garrison is falling back, I can see them running down the hill towards the Nam Youm” My God! This can’t be? I climbed on the bunker, night was falling but I clearly saw some men falling back in disarray. We had experienced this 4 years earlier in Central Annam.

2 Companies were also falling back. On the edges of the attacked village of Xuan Bo, a group of Vietminh appeared. They progressed rapidly with their clever use of terrain. The ebb reached my little group sheltered behind a small dike and overflowed it. My gunner and I were alone up front and Lieutenant Krantschenko and a journalist that had come to witness the battle was going to have all he had ever wished for. My weapon was safety and life... I looked at Krantschenko and we thought the same. I cocked my Colt, took a few steps and saw an abandoned sub machine gun. I lunged forward for the weapon. My gunner lying down beside me had the same reflex and had loaded it with a

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19 We, of common accord, had decided to abandon standard radio call signs like Papa Cola, Golf Whisky, and Tango Zoulou and to replace them by our nicknames. I was « le Gars Pierre », Bigeard « Bruno », Bréchignac « Brêche », Botella « Dédé », Tourret « Pierrot D ». We kept using standard radio procedures « Allo, Bigeard, this is Langlais” was said like this : « Bruno from Gars Pierre »
magazine. Ah! What a nice live fire exercise on real flesh and blood targets. Under our bursts, at less than 200 meters away, men were falling. We too were live targets. A bullet hit me, and hot blood spewed out of my shoulder.... Kratschenko took the automatic rifle. Behind us we heard orders. It was Ceccaldi, the Battalion commander, who had rallied his platoons and was coming to the rescue... We rushed forwards, and the second I bent down to take the weapon of the enemy that I had killed with my own hands, another bullet hit me along my thigh and I felt blood running down it. Towards My Trung at the bottom of the rice paddies, new companies were coming with Battalion Commander Le Morillon and Captain de Lagarde who were leading the assault. They reached the Xuan Bo Church and then the enemy disappeared in his underground tunnels. Night came and I was still conscious, I had the 80 wounded of this battle transported in the small Song Dai Giang pagoda. The fit to fight formed a square, and I sent to Saigon a “SOS para” message and after a shot of morphine I fainted...At 0800H the next day, a distant noise awoke me; it was the remote sound of alternating and throbbing engines. I painfully stood up with my back to the wall and looked wide-eyed at 12 C-47’s coming in from the South. They flew in threes in a triangular formation. Passing over the pagoda, 3 sticks jumped simultaneously and seventy five parachutes blossomed in the wake of the first aircraft. The translucent cupolas, skirted each other, spread apart all the while swinging men in their harnesses in the calm morning air. The second wave of C-47’s came in with the thunderous roar of their engines, then came a third. The first one’s to jump were already doing their PLF’s (Parachute Landing Falls) while their chutes deflating in the rice paddies. The skies were darkened by the moving shadows of 250 parachutes. Cabiro’s 1st BEP Company and that of Le Bot’s of the 3rd BPC had just jumped in. My eyes were full of this exhilarating and magnificent site, it reminded me of the quintessence of courage of the S.A.S.²⁰ paras coming from London and doing a night jump over occupied France. There is no comparison between confronting the enemy on the battlefield and the Gestapo, I thought of those I knew, Lesecq, Gael, Montguillan near Saint-Nazaire. I reminisced on our first Regiment on D-Day, of Bollardiére in the Belgian Ardennes and of Bourgoin in Brittany. I was reminded of our Battalions in Indochina; of our jungle outposts retaken from the enemy by combat jumps, Grall at Dong Ké; the rescued jungle outposts which had been a hairbreadth away from falling, Romain DesFossés at Ngia Do, the ultimate sacrifice of Secrétain and the 1st BEP of Cazaux, of the 3rd BPC on the RC4 between Cao Bang and Lang Son. Could I imagine, that one day my paras would be jumping to the rescue of

Lessep with Conan and Fossey François doing a combat jump on Port Said in Egypt. A man tall in stature was walking in the rice paddy, on his chest, a Padre’s cross. He saw the bloody and pale Colonel leaning on a wall. He gloomily offered his ministry. I smiled and stated that my wounds weren’t serious. Four years later, my friend Abbot Guyodo, had swapped his camouflaged jungle fatigues for a cassock and officiated at my wedding in Vannes. At dessert, we shared a bottle of Muscadet 1948 and our war stories of Xuan Bo.

The radio hailed me again: “Garc Bruno, the Vietminh occupy Eliane1 and Dominique 2”. Dominique 1, the third firebase to be attacked was silent, it had just been overrun. On Eliane 2, half the peak was in enemy hands. Submachine gun in hand, Commandant Nicolas was withdrawing his HQ on the rear of the firebase. It was 20:00H. in one hour, we could lose the battle of Dien Bien Phu. If it had not been lost on that night, it’s because the enemy was surprised by his initial successes, that was that night’s objective and he didn’t immediately push for the “coup de grace” towards the main HQ’s. Eliane1 covered Eliane2 and Eliane4 at close range. Domonique2 because of its size dominated all the entrenched camp and the airstrip which was less than 2 kilometres away. Eliane2 was 800 meters from the HQ’s. A night counter-attack on the lost positions was impossible. It could be done the following day, if there was a following day. I put Bigeard’s and

²⁰ S.A.S.: Special Air Service.
Touret’s Battalion in reserve for such a mission and to maintain at all cost what was still resisting. 5 Companies of the 1st BEP and of the 1/13th DBLE were taken from the quiet Western sector and made to successively climb up to Eliane2 to beef it up during that endless night. On that night, as soon as one company marched off, another stepped up to the jump off point at the foot of our beloved Eliane... they were decimated one after another. At dawn, the enemy had not gained an inch. They then decided to make a push towards the Nani Youn bridge using the already overrun positions. Their élan was broken on the battery square of the 1/4th RAC Commanded by Lieutenant Brunbrouk. The guns fired canister shells horizontally at close range making mincemeat of the Vietminh’s human wave attacks that then fell back on the Ban Hin Lam road, where there, a large and deep ditch that I had mined two days prior awaited them. More than 200 Vietminh died with their weapons and now laid there.

The day was dawning: I got on the radio: “T’en fait pas la Marie! Yvon du gars Pierre. On horseback on your Bison’s. Galop on the Ban Ham Lam Road. Charge, destroy what’s left of the bastards”. Hervouet in battle order charged with his Chaffee’s, Dien Bien Phu was saved for now. Yes, for now only, because last night’s battle cost us 1,500 men, roughly 2 Battalions. The same day’s reinforcements from Hanoi were vital. I immediately asked for the air drop of a GAP (Groupement AéroPorté: 2 Para Battalions) a planned daylight airdrop was still possible. I then gave counter-attack orders to the 2 Battalions on Dominique2 and Eliane1, and I was then dragged away by Pazzis, I fell asleep immediately on my camp bed dead tired and nervously exhausted.

Around noon artillery fire awoke me, everything was going wrong. The battle raged again on Eliane2. The counter-attacks had just started, they faced stiff resistance. Nevertheless, at 15:00H, the 6th BPC had reoccupied 3/4th of Eliane1 and Capitaine Pichelin was KIA leading a Company assault at the top of Dominique2.

In spite of tremendous losses, the enemy was reacting forcefully. The hoped for reinforcement weren’t in yet. After an extenuating battle that lasted well into the night, the 2 Battalions that had reoccupied the firebases couldn’t hold on to it any longer, I therefore gave the order to withdraw. At nightfall the battle started over on Eliane2, it was a seesaw of attacks and counter-attacks. It will go on like this all of April 1st and during the night the FEBA (Forward Echelon of the Battle Area) is outlined by the crest of the hill. We will witness during the following days the furious assaults of the enemy on the North-western sector of the entrenched camp. They took Huguette7 with a high hand but broke their backs on Huguette. Lastly, the morning of the 5th, was relatively calm at Dien Bien Phu, both adversaries were exhausted. The Bison Chaffee’s that has so gallantly charged on the 31st were wide tracked 18 ton tanks with 75mm guns and 2 machine guns; they were perfectly suited for our needs. Their

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See Chapter VI, the Battle of the 3 Huguette’s.
crews could be described in two words “the elite”, they participated in all the battles, climbed peaks, were airdropped on the landing strip, were shot at by bazookas on the Elianes’. They were still operational and when they were at the end of their rope in early May, they were definitely immobilized and then turned into bunkers; their guns were in use to the last day. Their CO was Capitaine Yves Hervouët, radio call sign Yvon. His 2IC (Second In Command) for the detached Platoon to Isabelle was Lieutenant Préau. Hervouët had volunteered for Dien Bien Phu on his arrival from Morocco where he had been the aide de camp of Marshall Juin. He joined the battle already wounded, with a cast that immobilized his fingers right up to his elbows; it didn’t diminish his drive in the least. We were both from Southern Brittany, we both loved sailing, and we had plans for a cruise in better days. Sadly enough, these plans never came to be, since he died of exhaustion on the jungle trails to captivity.

The lull continued.

Colonel de Castries repositioned battalions: The Claudine firebase previously held by the 1/13th DBLE was reorganized. What was left of the 1/4th RTM after the battles of March 30th to April 2nd held Claudine1 and 2 these then became Lili. The 1/13th DBLE kept the Claudine’s 3 and 4 and coverer this westward facing position, the Claudine5 firebase was created. Lastly, the 1st BEP whose 2 Companies occupied Eliane2 was tasked with the defense of the Southwester side of the entrenched camp and firebase Eliane3.

0000 The main resistance center was divided in 2 sectors (West and East) and was separated by the Nam Youn River, one under the command of Commandant Vadot and the other by Lieutenant Colonel Voineau

Lieutenant Colonel Lemeunier took over from Lieutenant Colonel Gaucher who became my defense 2IC. Lastly, Commandant Bigeard was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and gave up command of his battalion to Commandant Thomas and became my counter-attack 2IC. As a matter of fact, it is he with his legendary qualities who since March 28th led all counter-attacks. I gathered all my officers as well as my Para Battalion Commanders at a morning “O” group (Daily Standing Operational Orders). Now and then one of our friends Peraud, Camus or Schoendoefler took a picture. All ceremony was taken out of these “O” groups. We were in familiar terms with each other and I had decided to replace the standard “My respects” by “In friendship”. On this Mid-April morning, the events of the night were reviewed. The Battalion Commanders had sized up their manpower after the victorious but deadly counter-attack that had saved Huguette6. I commented “We lost 200 KIA’s, but the 4 enemy Battalions that had attacked us left 800 KIA’s on the ground” (KIA: Killed In Action).With Huguette’s WIA’s (Wounded In Action) evacuated it must have without a doubt decimated the 141st Regiment of the 312th Division who led the assault. One less to fight at least…. I have tried to gage enemy loses since March 13th. Huguette is the 10th firebase attacked. Of the 10 firebases, we have lost 8. 5 have fallen without loss to the enemy, because of garrison desertions, but 3 fought to the last bullet and the 2 who are still resisting probably cost them 3 times the manpower of the garrisons. When we take into account the reinforcements that we are regularly getting, I guess we have knocked out of the fight 3 Regiments of the 10 attacking us. I therefore think that the enemy will call a halt to his murderous assaults and recommence a siege. Look at the aerial reconnaissance pictures.” We bent over these documents that were parachuted to us on a daily basis and on which we could see the enemy’s trench works. Hanoi interpreted it well everyday; a quick glimpse showed us the progression of the last 24 hours. A new tentacle that lurched forwards from H 6 and H 1 attracted our attention. “Here’s the enemy’s intentions right there on paper. The next battle for Huguette will
be that of resupply. It will be on that trench not on the firebase.” I then changed subject: “Still difficulties with the rear echelon. They worry about the state of our LZ that they think to be on the trail and asks me to check if the metallic airfield plates upturned by the explosions aren’t an accident risk on landings. I ordered to put spare ones down. By the way, we await the 2nd BEP. In exchange, they proposed a few elements of the newly formed BPVN (Vietnamese Para Battalion) who are still not fully trained. We are of the same mind into not accepting anything else than European reinforcements, I answered back that if that Battalion came, it would be disarmed and transformed into coolies. I therefore believe that we will get the BEP, but when exactly? We won’t know until Monday, because this is the weekend.” We’d then call our Gunner Vaillant who would come in paper in hand: “Colonel, munitions are low, there’s only 300 rounds of 155mm, 7,000 rounds of 105mm and 1,500 rounds for our 120mm mortars. We have fired nearly 80% of our total allocation. In the battles of March we fired 10,000 rounds per night. We absolutely must reduce our consumption.” “From here on, we will ration our consumption in 24 hours slots. For tonight, 1,000 rounds on a priority basis for Huguette and Eliane. Same priority for flare ships… other fire mission will be subjected to my decision”.

Vaillant went back to his shelter and Capitaine Mehay our logistics officer came in. It was his business to take in requests for food for the following day, everything that was consumed in a day of battle and that only parachutes and their payload could bring in. Priorities had to be set with all our vital needs: munitions, mines, radio equipment, batteries, spare parts for tanks and artillery, medical material, ice, plasma and food, we needed to eat too and the 9 days of reserves were now down to 5. Assisted by Capitaine Leost, Mehay did this thankless job calmly, with a clear-mind and a lot of hard work. – He said to me “Colonel, there are difficulties on all sides”, while looking over the thick bundle of paper and telegrams. “I have a credit of 110 tons of parachute airdrops, but 200 tons on order. Epervier requests some beams to build its Opera, but Hanoi only sends in trifles and wants to impose some priorities. We got a carton of rules and regulations; today they are sending us gasmasks and geophones. They also want to put first priority on food instead of ammunition and it’s impossible to have them stop that C-47 that airdrops at 3,000 M AGL with 50% of its cargo ending up in Vietminh hands”. I fired back “Refuse the beams, categorically refuse the gasmask and geophones, what in heaven’s name is that for anyway? Concerning rations, we’ll eat all the dogs in camp and there’s plenty of those around absolute priority goes to artillery shells. As for the C-47, it’s no use, I myself tried unsuccessfully several times to scrub those missions. By the way, he’s not dropping ammo but food and medication. What lands on our side is that much more for us. The effect on the men’s moral when they see materiel going to the enemy is deplorable. Hanoi doesn’t want to understand.” Verdelham said “There’s a very simple way to prevent them from snatching our parcels and at the same time mess up their artillery. We should purposefully airdrop booby trapped 105 mm shells, it’s doable….” Nobody had thought of this yet. I immediately proposed it, but it was never taken into consideration. The “O Group” was almost over when the thunderous roar of very close incoming shells shook the bunker. Peraud stumbled down the staircase and appeared before us covered with earth and with a lightly wounded shoulder, but he had hung on to his camera. He shook himself up and said – “Colonel a picture ?... And this is how this picture of me surrounded by Pazzis, Bigeard, Botela, Tourret and Guiraud was taken and ended up in the press and weeklies. Each night, I’d go and report to Colonel de Castries on the “O Groups” that we had had. I’d sit down in his bunker with a cup of tea and

\[\text{From the first days of April, I had decided to blow up the centre of the entrenched camp. The landing strip was too dangerous, not because of accidents but because of landing in enemy lines. (See chapter V.)}\]

\[\text{I later found out that this answer by the European cadre became known by the BPVN and hurt them deeply. Their battle-worthiness was not a problem. I personally knew the Battalion Commander and I had for him nothing but praise and friendship. Facing the desertions we had had and the sad end of the Vietnamese who fought alongside us and unless proven wrong, our decision was perfectly justified.}\]

\[\text{They still sent us the geophones (see chapter VIII).}\]

\[\text{Mehay’s counterpart a logistics lieutenant-colonel at Hanoi HQ. One must be fair and admit that difficulties and worries weren’t spared him. Within the tonnage limits available which he could not change, we were nevertheless always well resupplied The difficulties arose from secondary orders, bad communications, or even errors on our part. I later learned that those rules and orders had indeed been ordered in... but without my knowledge.}\]
together we’d read the considerable amount of mail that had been parachuted to us, it came from all over the world. Some of these were deeply moving: One came from a friend in Vannes: “Our silence doesn’t mean that you are forgotten, as you know our customs are not very out-going. We are not forgetting you in our nightly family prayers. The people of Vannes do not forget their paras, the military parades on the Rabine, the parachutes in the forests of Meucon, gold colored now with Spring and they salute you respectfully.” “In today’s Figaro, I read with emotion of Pierre Langlais, my friend of days gone by, and say to him: I pray with all my soul for him and his comrades, for their families and wish that such an example of heroism and grandeur not be lost”. “I hope that my 3 sons will be worthy enough of those of Dien Bien Phu”. Hélène G… The Consul of France in Spain who on behalf of all the French of his town wrote “Colonel, I was once a Second Lieutenant at Timbuktu, I’m now a retiree, a class of young boys of the Collège de Lyon; a convent of Dutch Sisters, the former students of the High School of my native town, friends I had not seen for 20 years. All these spoke admiringly, of their hopes and prayers for you”. Then, there were always the funny one: A water diviner asked for a lock of my hair and a map, with it he claimed he would give us all the enemy gun emplacements. It was from America that we got the most mail. I remember this telegram of Americans of French descent living in Louisiana and of this specific letter by a man in excellent French and in English on the other side by his non-French speaking wife. Other messages were more “commercial” in nature like the laconic telegram Geneviève got from a big American agency: “$1,000 for 2 pages of text on Dien Bien Phu (9).

These testimonies touched me even deeper seeing as my older sister had become an American by marriage 20 years earlier and that during this month of April my mother was with her in South Bend, Indiana. I decided, with the approval of the General, to send her a letter by way of the US Consul in Hanoi, where I asked her to express on the Radio our heartfelt gratitude.

And this is how the message was aired:

« American consul at Hanoi Vietnam has transmitted following message to you from your brother Colonel Langlais commanding second airborne group in command all paratroops at Diên Bien Phu quote we are receiving at Diên Bien Phu many messages of sympathy from U.S. especially from Americans of French origin in Louisiana. Would it be possible for you to talk over the radio to your compatriots and to tell that you are the sister of the paratroop colonel of Diên Bien Phu and to say that he and his chief Colonel de Castries are deeply touched by these messages all is well. Love to mother and yourself. Signed Langlais unquote. »

Would you have any objection if Department of State makes this message public?

John L. Stegmaier, officer in charge of public affairs Department of State.

Mrs. Jim Corbett, my sister, gave the following short speech on “The Voice of America” “Colonel Langlais, my brother, Paratroop Commander at Dien Bien Bien Phu and his Commanding Officer General de Castries have sent us a telegram
expressing their thanks for the numerous letters of sympathy that they have received from the United States. This message was immediately relayed by the press and American radio. The warmth with which it was received says volumes on the sentiments of Americans towards those who are on the front lines against Communist Imperialism. This fraternal and simple exchange of messages from a nation’s people and a group of soldiers in harm’s way brings out a clear and comforting clarity. In the US, they know very well that the defense of Dien Bien Phu is a far reaching event with worldwide repercussions and the entire world owes a grateful tribute to those who are stopping on that threshold, at the cost of such suffering, the advance of Communist Imperialism. Before I finish, I would like to express to my brother, Colonel Langlais, on behalf of his mother and all of us, and to all those with him who are fighting at Dien Bien Phu, our deepest affection, admiration and our wish for victory.”

Then came night, unendingly waiting for the first often calm few hours. We played Bridge, my usual partners were the General, Commandant Vadot, Lieutenant-Colonel Lemeunier and myself and the joy of a prayed for Grand Slam made us forget our worries. The games were sometimes disturbed by particularly violent harassing fire during airdrops. The bunkers were solid and we didn’t fear their destruction, but the incoming fire was quite unsettling for the concentration of us Bridge players. One night, we were discussing the General and I on the opportunity open to a 2 of clover, the concussion of an artillery shell hitting the entrance trench of our bunker threw us all down in a cloud of smoke and dust… we simply got back up to play!

“And I tell you, you are wrong to have played that 2 of clover” kept repeating the General.

-“With all due respects General, I was right to have played that 2 of clover”

All of a sudden we felt a deafening thump on the roof. “Ah, that one didn’t explode” said Vadot.

Indeed, that one had not exploded and luckily for him, since a few seconds later, “it” entered the bunker in the shape of a giant Legionnaire who had landed on our roof and was totally astonished to find in the hell that was Dien Bien Phu a card playing General who offered him a mug of “Vinogel26”.

3,000 meters above us, the flare ship turned endlessly ever ready to drop “its moonlight” on attacked positions. I got in contact with it. I recognized the voice of the airborne Officer/dispatcher of Hanoi, a veteran of my Vannes Brigade. I gave him a message for my family: “Say to them that you heard my voice, that all is well and that we shall win”. One day a Vietminh who was ease dropping on our radio conversation butted in and stupefied I heard him with his Annam French accent say “All is well? Just you wait and see…”

Sometimes, the aircrew was less understanding, I remember an unknown voice who said to me: “To Gars Pierre from Dakota flare ship, private conversations are forbidden, use only proper call signals” I fired back: “This is Colonel Langlais, CO of the paras in Dien Bien Phu, go to H…”

Another conversation was more gracious. I was talking to the Colonel and CO of Airborne troops in Hanoi, I couldn’t hear him well, so a young woman operator was relaying. Hearing the voice of a woman, young and probably beautiful, made me happy. Our official conversation was almost over and my correspondent of the moment concluded it kindly: “Colonel, we all think of you, be courageous”. I answered her “Thank you, we here have more than enough courage, but it is the courage of those in the rear echelon that I’m worried about.”

26 Vinogel : wine concentrate in a box. Drinkable only in exceptional circumstances.
Chapter V

The first night combat jumps - Decision to airdrop on the camp. – Technical considerations - Landings. - 3 cheers for the one jump volunteers. – Combat jump of the 2nd R.C.P. – The Battalion pennant – Arrival of the Second Lieutenant – Clandestine parawings – The earth trembles – The river in flames and overflows. – Aircraft crashes – Arrival of a sailor – He’ll be executed. – Easter mass. – Combat jump of the 2nd B.E.P. – Eliane 1 is retaken.

The main goal of the sudden attacks on peripheral positions was to set up within range of the D.Z. 30 AAA 37mm guns (AAA: Anti-Aircraft Artillery). From March 15 to the 30th, the enemy had pushed his earthworks forwards, it is also because of his maneuvering of his artillery that his AAA had almost died down. On the 31st, it reappears close up and deadly. All daylight C-47 airdrops become impossible. The extraordinary epic of night combat jumps, right in the thick of the Battle of the entrenched camp of Dien Bien Phu is about to begin. There were 2 types of Paras. The qualified that jumped as members of a unit or individuals who did so to maintain their jump pay. Then, there were “The one jump volunteers”. These jumped in to beef-up non Para units that saw their personnel melt away without replacements. I had taken the liberty to ask Hanoi about this as early as March 20th and thousands volunteered. Through the non-official channels we got this message from a Foreign Legion Battalion in the Delta. “My non-para Battalion has volunteered as one man to do a combat jump on Dien Bien Phu…. Stop. Chef de Bataillon Cabaribère over and out”. Unfortunately, 3 days later this same Battalion was decimated to a man on the RC5 at Ban Yen Nam between Haiphong and Hanoi. Its Commander, who had fallen in that battle, had just accomplished the extraordinary feat of evading from his captors in Northern Laos. It is then, that I had unexpected difficulties with narrow-minded technocrats who insisted on para training these volunteers and this would only begin in early May. At last, the decision to have these untrained volunteers was granted but only after 10 long days of exhaustingly arduous discussions over the radio. The first DZ was the airstrip between the Huguette and Epervier firebases that were still in our hands. The 1,000 by 400 meters were technically acceptable, but jumps were done in ½ sticks (in two passes). DZ markers were regulation night light signals.

27 In reality, the succession of the hasty attacks on the peripheral resistance centers and the methodical attack of main positions is not a change in the tactics of the besieger; the beginning of the siege, the human wave attacks on the outer rim positions are the only time when the sacrifices required were acceptable and this was so as to avoid greater ones later on. By starting off his methodical siege in front of these centers, General Giap erred by doing the same error done by the Franco-British Command of Sebastopol in 1854 that is to open too widely the trenches, the price was 11 months of bunker by bunker battles that the defenders lost and no sooner had rebuilt in the interval.


28 There were some volunteers in France: Among them Para Lieutenant-Colonel Grall, who a few years earlier had reconnoitred the Northern zone of Dien Bien Phu and the Pop Den Dinh trail towards Phong Saly.
On April 1st, the DZ markers team commanded by Capitaine de Verdelhan is in place, but at the same time the Huguette firebase to the North of the DZ is attacked. The team had to rush to shelter in the firebase.

The jump aircraft arrive. The “Leader” by radio says to me that he can’t see the signal flares and requests instructions.

That’s when I decided to have them jump right in the middle of the entrenched camp, in spite of the uneven terrain. I was confident in the particularly favorable conditions for a night drop and preferring an accident on the ground than to have them land behind enemy lines. In the riverbed of the Nam Youm, I had them set ablaze a fuel drum this was a ground signal that warned the leading aircraft. He confirms my messages, and says, that the combat jump is about to begin. I get out of my bunker on this clear night and on its roof my eyes scan intently in the direction where the C-47’s are in a holding pattern. 500 meters South the torch of burning fuel mirrors on the river and illuminates the D.Z.\(^{29}\).

The dark silhouette of the first aircraft with its halo created by the engine exhausts passes at low altitude over us. In spite of the roar of the engines, I distinctly hear the cracking noise of opening parachute cupolas and see 12 shadows dangling under the risers who come out of the night to join our ranks. Reinforcements are on target, I mean by this, within the entrenched camp area. They also land on the bunkers, in the trenches, in the minefields and also in the concertina wire where they could only come out of them during the day and this thanks to the help of the EOD team (Explosive Ordinance Disposal). They also land in the river and even within our POW camp, where one Para thought for a few minutes that he had landed behind enemy lines.

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\(^{29}\) D.Z.: Drop Zone. For an aircraft flying at 250 km/h and at an altitude of 400 m, 40 paratroopers can jump out of 2 doors. A regulation size DZ is 1,000 by 400 meters. On a combat jump, altitude is brought down to 200 m. Dispersion on landing is less and descent time is shorter (30 seconds instead of 70). In case of an accident, a paratrooper no longer has the time to open his reserve chute.
I would like the reader of this combat diary to imagine if only for a second of the incredible ambiance of this very first jump, to top it off at night and in the thick of battle.

Two hours earlier, a Parachute Jump Instructor had helped the “combat jump volunteer” suit up with his 2 parachutes. He says “The first one opens by itself, you count to three, if you are still falling pull the reserve handle on the right. It’s simple, do you understand?” A ninety minute flight, ninety excruciatingly long minutes. The night glow from the battle indicates the nearness of the valley. The aircraft descends, the engines throttle down. The combat jump volunteer stands up. He hooks up his parachute snap link to the static line cable. No 1 of the stick, with his hands on the frames of the door he looks out at this scene wide-eyed. He sees a dark abyss dotted with fires and crisscrossed by flashes of lightning. The approach begins. On the ground incoming artillery is everywhere. The enemy has heard the aircraft engines and now saturates the DZ with incoming fire. The aircraft misses its approach. The aircraft gains altitude and circles over again and gets back in line with the DZ. Our “Combat Jump Volunteer” is still at the door. He looks down at the hell that awaits him, and from where a string of red tracers climbs towards him. “Go”, the fall begins, then the shock. He didn’t have time to count to three, what’s the use anyway, what with a combat jump altitude of 150 meters, he couldn’t have pulled his reserve anyhow. He floats down; then there is a light thump on landing, at night you go down slower. He undoes his parachute harness, looks around and sees what he saw in the aircraft but the sound of battle has replaced that of the airplane’s engines. The blast of an “incoming” 105 throws him to the ground. Flat on his face, he tries to orient himself. No sign of life, not a single human being on this strange planet. Dien Bien Phu is no longer on earth. What can you do and where do you go? He takes his compass, ... North? South? but to go somewhere you need to know where you are first... He haphazardly starts off southwards...Here’s a maze of abandoned trenches that leads to a sea of barbed wire... is it mined? He skirts around it and sees an underground tunnel that goes across it, he jumps in it. At last, up ahead a dim light, it’s the entrance to a bunker and it’s hidden by a heavy tent tarp, exhausted men sleep there. “Where do you come from? You’ve just jumped in? Do you know where to go? And the volunteer jumper answers back: “They told me to regroup at Epervier”. “Epervier? It’s your lucky day, that’s our Battalion HQ, we’ll bring you there. Nice to have you here with us; what are they saying about us in Hanoi?” And the volunteer paratrooper that had left a cushy desk job on the same day he ends up a soldier in the trenches of Dien Bien Phu, with the 8th Bataillon Parachutiste de Choc. The number of combat jump accidents didn’t even go over the normal peacetime statistics on a normal DZ. These statistics stunned the experts. As for me, I am more than convinced that engaging an Airborne unit: of Company, Battalion or Group size, where men jump with their full combat gear, regroup on the group and...
immediately start fighting requires long and thorough training. I think that anyone, so long has he has the willpower and his weapon and has a unit waiting for him (the case of individual reinforcements in Dien Bien Phu) can without having seen a parachute in his life, effectively “jump from an airworthy aircraft” without being hurt. The worse thing to do would be to have these volunteers go through the regular airborne course and 6 qualifying jumps, which in the end, would eliminate a hefty number of men through accidents or disgust after experiencing a jump. Air drop errors, in spite of the men’s will power and training were as small as accidents on the ground. To my knowledge, there were only two. One was due to a sudden gust of wind that occurred on the “Go”, the stick was carried by a westerly wind and passed only a few meters from the crest of Eliane and disappeared in the “No man’s land” of the rice paddies. The other was due to errors in signals. A fire lit by the Vietminh fooled the aircraft commander and the stick was airdropped in enemy territory and its lone survivor was shot by a sentinel of the firebase he had tried to reach. From April 1st to May 5th, during 38 consecutive nights, 3,000 men of which 700 were not para-trained, of all ranks, and of all services, combat jumped under these conditions, they brought needed assistance and hope to the combatants of Dien Bien Phu for a cause, that Hanoi, considered lost in advance. They beyond any doubt were true heroes and of the highest order in our Military History, they are the pride of our Army and Nation. On April 1st the men of the 2nd Battalion 1st RCP combat jumped at night over the entrenched camp as reinforcements. I see Commandant Bréchignac go through my bunker. He still had a smile on his face, even if he had a hard landing in the sea of barbed wire, out of which he came out in shreds. I then remembered an entire football team of the heroic episode of the Brigade coloniale in Vannes, Quimper and other places.... And the story of the Battalion pennant comes back to mind. In those days, there was the “Two Patron Saints of Paras War” be they Metropolitan (Regular Army) Blue Berets and Colonial Paras (Marine Infantry Paras). The first, being the Archangel Saint Michael, the Saint of all Saints. The second, being an obscure hermit of Brittany, by the name of Tugdual. In their mind’s eye, he was the Conqueror of the Dragon and the insignia of their Brigade. Tugdual had a solid track record as a paratrooper. He arrived from Ireland to Armorica on a rock, as the first invading commando, he, furthermore, had the privilege to forgo the effects of the law of gravity. Legend had it, that he had fallen from a scaffold and had landed on earth as gently as a father. Whatever the case may be, Mont-Saint Michel was a stone’s throw away from the Brigade and the goal of all hikers. On September 29th, the Archangel’s day was celebrated by pilgrims and the inquisitive. Magnanimous, the red berets participated. I therefore went to Mont-Saint-Michel on September 29th. A stick was to jump on the shores. A delegation of the Battalion leaving for Indochina was present so has to have its pennant blessed. Delayed by the

\[50\] In that number, are not included those who executed daylight combat jumps from March 15th to the 30th. The total number of combat jumps during the battle is of 4,277 men.
crowd in the alleyways, I was late for mass. My Aide de Camp, a Lieutenant, was by my side. The crowd prohibited me from entering the Church. A Priest said “General you should be in the choir.” What a wave of the hand the old Canons were displaced and I found myself in the front row with my Aide de Camp. At the reading of the Epistle I was submerged with worry, I touched his elbow and said: “Do you have the pennant?”, “What pennant Colonel?” “The battalion pennant of course, the one the Bishop must bless”? “Calamity of calamities, he had forgotten the pennant in Vannes, and I had had a premonition about it. Ah, but a Para Lieutenant is not taken short. He left the choir on tip toes and made a dash for a neighboring village where he snitched the pennant of a sport association. An hour later, while the aircraft was sowing its parachutes in front of the magnificent esplanade of the Basilica, the Battalion’s pennant was blessed. Meanwhile, the stick was landing on the shores in violent gusts of wind. Barely had the 16 parachute cupolas reached the ground that they were as straight as spinnakers and sliding on the sand as fast as the wind. The men didn’t have the time to unhook, entwined in their risers, dragged by their parachutes; they crossed “in platoon formation” the muddy creek and headed towards the salty flats. The crowd of pilgrims was yelling out its enthusiasm and applauding the circus act graciously given by the Demi-brigade coloniale de commandos parachutistes. Saint-Michel’s day was all but forgotten and atop the basilica’s steeple the unfortunate dragon was dying of laughter under the feet of the Archangel. Indeed, these were happy memories of days long gone. It wasn’t the shores of Mont-Saint-Michel that welcomed the paras of the 2/1st RCP but the trenches of Dien Bien Phu. One day, at around midnight, I was bent over some maps in my bunker when I heard steps coming from the air vent, a silhouette stood in it and entered. I had in front of me a “first jump” second Lieutenant that had been erring in the trenches. My simplified field dress didn’t indicate my rank so I presented myself and he did the same and let down his Bergen with a smile. “What a coincidence Colonel, I have something for you”. He gave me a bundle of letters and a bottle of Muscadet sent by my friends in Hanoi. He was a “Coet” (nickname given to officers who have graduated from the French equivalent of West Point or Royal Roads military academies) who had recently arrived in the Far East. He had sneaked on a stick, hoping to earn by so doing, his paratrooper wings. This young Frenchman was tall and thin with clear blue eyes and brush cut blond hair, his Para uniform was fresh out of the QM and his boots were so new they cracked. He probably was looking confidently, and I think with admiration, at a Colonel for the first time, his sunken cheeks, his brush cut hair, his bare chest running down with sweat. I immediately pinned my own paratrooper wings on the second Lieutenant and indicated to him the way to the unit he was assigned to. Later on, I gave my wings ten or twenty times, these I borrowed from friends. This small metallic insignia with its dagger sharp wings, are wings of willpower and courage and for these “combat jump volunteer” worth more than any medal.
But I was overstepping myself. 5 months later, the survivors came back to France and its validity was contested. It was decreed that these “clandestine wings” were worthless and that they couldn’t be worn unless the 6 regulation qualifying jumps at the flat DZ of the Airborne School at Pau had been done. We were already well into the night, and from then on no sizeable enemy operation was to be feared. My watch was over. I left the bunker and started down the trench that led to my underground quarters. In a firmament filled with stars, a parachute flare was slowly drifting down, giving off its eerie light. It wasn’t night yet, nor was it still day and the slow swinging of this enormous candle tossed about the eerie silhouettes, parapets and trenches. Silhouettes came towards me, they carried a stretcher and as I moved aside to give them way, I recognized the beautiful face of the second Lieutenant frozen in death.

I opened the parachute curtain and walked into my room. It was almost festive with the gleaming multicoloured cars. I sat and unconsciously cut open the string around the bundle of letters, and opened one. It was my dearly loved sister “I’m writing to you from our already beautiful garden. Here, the children attack the entrenched camp and I pray God that He gives me the courage of the defenders of Dien Bien Phu.” Well, when I read that, at least one defender of Dien Bien Phu lacked courage and tears came to his eyes. One afternoon at around 16:00H Bigeard and I were talking, when we heard a strange underground gong sound, the bunker shook, the pillars that propped up the roof oscillated... an earthquake! No, a delayed fuse bomb had just blown up close by.

We thought the same: it’s a Chinese kamikaze aircraft. I grab the direct line phone to Air HQ. “Colonel, it’s friendly fire. A direct hit from one of ours, on the positions of the 8\textsuperscript{th} Choc. » My correspondent must have thought I was crazy when I answered him: “Thank God for that friendly bomb !“. By a stroke of luck, it had caused very little damage. A group of men that had been buried in their bunker was taken out in time. We didn’t hold it against our Air Force comrades or even our gunners when one of their rounds strayed and came too close to infantrymen. April’s soggy weather was the main cause of imprecise fire. Nobody had thought about the fact that the High Tonkin region disappeared in a hot Scotch mist where the horizon was drowned out and in which pilots had only a very narrow vertical field of vision just as if they were looking down a ship’s funnel. Naturally, every hour had its issues, but when they told me: “Colonel, the munitions depot is on fire” I said to myself, this time fate is really against us. I ran out of the bunker. Tall flames were rising from the depot. A trooper ran pass me on the airborne double and said “Colonel the river is on fire”. I now understood that there was no danger but that one of my ideas had backfired. After the destruction of our aircraft, there was still a huge amount of aviation fuel in the fuel tank park. In view of the fire hazard I had decided to dump the

![Insignia 8° Choc](image)

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\textsuperscript{31} Nevertheless two years later this iniquitous decision was overruled. All those that had jumped for the first time at Dien Bien Phu have today the right to wear the paratrooper wings.

\textsuperscript{32} In memory of Lieutenant Fragonard of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} B.E.P who after coming over to my bunker on April 10\textsuperscript{th}, died of wounds due to a mortar barrage on the Nam Youm bridge when he was about to join his unit.
barrels in the river. In case of need, with a firing system, they were positioned so as become a Greek fire that would interdict river crossings. An enemy shell detonated the Greek fire and for an hour the Nam Youm was a majestic river of flames. Torrential rain started falling on the camp in the nick of time and we were caught unprepared for this eventuality. The trenches had no wells or duckboards and became miry canals. Kilos of sticky mud stuck to the soles of our boots. Luckily enough, the river was extinguished and started to swell and overflow, part of the munitions depot was flooded as well as a gun emplacement and the roofs of bunkers started to slowly melt in small mud streams that made long streaks on parachutes we used as curtains. During sunny spells the besieged, tired of their mole life would grab some fresh air atop bunkers. They looked skywards at the ballet of the aircraft, but the circus at times turned to tragedy: We watched a C-119 that came from Hanoi with a full load of ammunition effect a turn over the western hills of the basin and we watched hopelessly as its 5 tons of grenades and artillery shells that had been badly rigged accidentally airdropped too early and fall right in the lap of the enemy. At another time, it was a B-26 that got hit by flak after a bombing mission at sunset, a bright flash suddenly appeared under its left wing. It then transformed itself in a long trail of flames while 5 parachutes opened and disappeared behind the enemy hilltops that closed our horizon. At one time C-47 of Gatac Nord (Groupe Aérien Tactique Nord) who had been hit during an airdrop mission, it crashed in a ball of flames on the outer perimeter of Firebase Claudine.

On an other occasion, a navy fighter pilot, that everyone admired for pulling up so low after his strafing runs got hit after pulling up from a vertical dive in front of Eliane 2. The pilot bailed out above “no man’s land” and it became a tragic race. While the enemy opened fire on him during his descent, two groups were in a race in the rice paddies, one of Légionnaires of Eliane 2 and the other of Vietminh’s who started off from their trenches. The Légionnaires were happy enough to have won the race and a few minutes later, I saw Lieutenant de Vaisseau (Navy Lieutenant) Klotz entering my bunker with his arm in a sling and a smile on his face, he then immediately asked me how a navy pilot without an aircraft could participate in our battle.

Easter was upon us. Easter Mass was this Sunday celebrated in our HQ Bunker with unaccustomed affluence and many were those who accomplished their Christian Duty that had gone by the wayside for a long time. Bigeard was in the staircase chaffing at the bit. We had unduly taken over his “shop”
in which so much had to be done. Yet, I was certain that he didn’t neglect the comfort of prayer but he said to me, “I don’t need an intermediary for that”. One must also admit that Padre Heinrich preached resignation instead of hope. While mass was being celebrated, I thought of other Easters like the one of 1952, an Easter of peace in France, in 1951 a Laotian Easter in Vientiane, in 1950 an Easter at war in Dong Hoi in Annam. No sooner had Mass been celebrated in Vauban’s citadel, that I was off liaising between the jungle outpost of Hoa Lut Ham in the Let Huy. In days gone by, my little convoy had been rolling on the Mandarin road that linked Saigon to Hanoi.

A Dodge in front and one at the back, and in the middle my command car with at the wheel, my friend and 2IC Commandant Le Morillon “You see” he says to me “I love to drive anything, a truck, a car or a Rolls. When I’ll retire I can well see myself as a chauffeur”. BOOM…! My elite driver had just rolled on a mine with his rear wheel. The 120 liters of gas in the tank caught fire instantaneously and we were enveloped by a curtain of fire. I jumped through it, all the while trying to protect my eyes, I rolled in the ditch and my friend also jumped through it and landed on my back. The Dodges had stopped and as well trained troopers, the men had jumped into the rice paddy, but the sound of an ambush did not materialize and we got away with the mine only. The twisted carcass of our command car was a high flaming white torch in the din of exploding ammo and grenades. Lying low in the ditch, without moving an inch, I noticed the cut grass and saw a fresh mutt of grass. I had just discovered the second land mine laid there to trap the survivors of the first mine, I wasted no time and tip toed out of the area. La Morillon had put his heels in my footprints to get out of there too. Once on the road, he took a mirror and moaned: “Do you see what I look like, what do you think?”

“As far as I’m concerned, when I’ll retire in my castle, you’ll not be my driver; you should have spotted that mine? Seeing the strange looks of my friend, I tried to keep a straight face looking at his red nose, his burned to a crisp eyelashes and his hair that was coming off in patches…

He kept on complaining about his hair, “this will never grow in 8 days and I’m on R&R in Dalat. What will my wife say?” 3 years before that adventure, in the Tonkin, I had lived through a funny Easter at war.

In those days, I was the C.O. of the 9ème Bataillon de Marche (Light Infantry Battalion) of the 9ème Division d’Infanterie Coloniale, the B.M. 9. It was composed of 3 well led Companies made up only of French veterans of the France and Germany Campaigns. They had been selected in the 3 Regiments of the Division the 6th, 21st and 23rd R.I.C (Régiment d’Infanterie Coloniale). With my Battalion we secured a sector of the Haiphong- Hanoi road, we had re-opened it after the tragic events of December 19th. Easter was upon us and we had just liberated Ke Sat a village near the road that had the distinctive feature of having a gigantic Spanish style Church whose steeple dominated all the rice paddies for nearly 10 kilometers around.
It was an ideal spot for Easter Mass, I therefore decided that the entire Battalion would turn out for Church parade in their walking out uniform with lanyard and tie. The night before, happily enough, I had a prudent reflex, I called in Capitaine Tesnière, one of my Company Commanders, and said to him: “Have your Company in battle gear, check the Church for booby traps, grenades and that sort of thing, put a Platoon at each end of the village so we can have a peaceful Mass”. At 0900H on Sunday, after having veered of the R.C.5, the entire Battalion walked in single file on the destroyed metallic girders over the Son Thai Bin River. I was going through this balancing act myself, when a deafening explosion caught my attention. Then bursts of submachine guns fire and light smoke rose from the Church. My Battalion in walking out uniform was motionless and waiting. I crossed the bridge rapidly. Total silence had fallen over the village in the hot and heavy sunlight. Suddenly Tesnière came out of an alley with a carbine in hand. Good old Tesnière, who a month later would be killed in hard combat in Kienan, I remember his tall stature and his ever smiling face. He yelled out “You can go in, the bastards where in the Church. We chased them in the nave, they then climbed up to the gallery; and they then got up into the steeple, and we locked the door. There are two armed guards in front of it, all ok for Mass.” “That’s ok but our Padre disagrees” he said to me “It’s not exactly proper to fight in a Church at Easter, I can’t celebrate Mass in this mayhem. Let’s go back, I’ll celebrate Mass tonight at Ban Nyen Nam.”

I cursed myself for my idea, what was I going to do now, when the answer to my question came from heaven. A first powerful heavy toll of the bell rang out, and then a second in a different tone, followed by a third, then a whole chime that our Vietminh hanging on the ropes rang in a volley to celebrate their triumph. The bronze chime echoed all over the village, spreading over the rice paddies. The men in the jungle outposts thought to themselves: “The bells are coming back from Rome. What a beautiful Easter Mass.”

I call my 2IC, Capitaine Brion: “Send the Battalion back, and tell Poyen to get the 75’s. We’ll have to destroy this Church today and it isn’t a joke”. Two guns arrived and were set up. The first shots rang out; gaping holes appeared in the tower that plumed with dust and smoke. The chime weakened due to the din of the explosions, it then became a knell; that gradually died. The steeple was still up. A small commando started off from the tribune and climbed straight up the somber chimney littered with boards and debris. On a narrow platform ten or so meters away, they found 6 mutilated bodies. The climb continued on to the upper terrace when a grenade blew up. The team was immobilized, balancing on beams 15 meters above ground with 2 seriously wounded and above a lone survivor, sheltering on the terrace and pulling the pins of his last grenades. A well placed 75 round finished him off...The sun was setting on the rice paddies when the wounded were brought down with ropes from their dangerous perch. The 6 Vietminh dead were there too, side by side and dressed in the brown garb of Delta farmers, all they had were grenades. I ordered that a pit be dug in the rice paddy and one of our Platoons before they left the village of Kesat, gave military honours to the Vietminh soldiers from atop the steeple. And in Dien Bien Phu Easter services were just about over. Our enemies in the last 7 years had exchanged farmer’s rags for combat dress, and their handmade grenades for Russian or Czechoslovakian ones that were comparable to our US weapons. Moralists were offended. This Chinese aid is scandalous! It would have been great to keep on fighting farmers armed with sticks. I got quite a kick out of this, what is more natural than to get aid from an ally. If we are to be honest with ourselves, Chinese aid was only a drop in the bucket compared to the flood of US materiel on our side. From April 8th and for 4 consecutive nights the 2nd B.E.P. of Commandant Lisenfeld combat jumped over our position. The arrival of
these important reinforcements enables us to realise an important and carefully planned offensive, to retake Eliane. In spite of exhaustion and lack of personnel, with Battalions of less than 300 men, in spite of the increasing number of wounded we cannot Medevac (Medical Evacuation), and deserts that reduced at less than 4,000 the real number of fit to fight, hope tenaciously remained in everyone’s heart. Bigeard’s Battalion was designated to lead the assault on Eliane. At dawn on the 10th an unusual thunder wakened the camp. Friendly position proximity had me wave close air support, but our artillery with all its still available and considerable power of 4x 155MM’s, 24x 105 HM2’s and 16x 120mm mortars were crushing the objective. The summit was reached after fierce hand to hand combat. The enemies that had survived tenaciously hung on in their bunkers and were killed at their combat position. At 1500H, my headset crackled, I recognized Bigeard’s voice: “Le garcs Pierre this is Bruno, mission accomplished”. Eliane was taken; the 6th BPC was immediately relieved on the position by 2 Companies of the 2/1st RCP. Without contradiction, this successful battle, when one takes into account the few fit to fight was the best feat of arms of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Having learned from enemy tactics, we in turn had opened the trench in the attacked sector and Bigeard had managed his battle with few personnel who were constantly renewed with a minimum of replacement personnel, all the while under enemy fire. Fire support had been measured out, flame-throwers were in the lead elements, infantry fire support on the balcony of Eliane 4, tanks in direct fire support on marked out bunkers, artillery and mortars in immediate proximity and arriving on call, ammunition logistics carried grenades by the thousands and were always ready to move forwards with their cases. Leading the orchestra like a Maestro; Bruno Bigeard was playing in front of the microphones the infantry symphony, of the artillery, mortars and tanks and they took with 160 men and a high hand, a fortified position held by a Battalion. Here’s the story of the battle as he experienced it, the heroic Company Commander who was in the thick of it, Lieutenant René Le Page: “We are in the cave and HQ of Bruno (Bigeard) on the night of the 9th of April. The Colonel commanding defence operations, his gunner, and Commanders of support units have just walked out. Orders are given out for tomorrow’s battle. I stay for Bigeard’s “O group” with my 3 comrades Company Commander Hervé Trapp; Perret and Datin: “Hervé you attack first, your entire unit must be at the jump off point before dawn. As soon as covering fire lifts, try to overwhelm them, don’t bring the 60’s with you, leave them here, we’ll put them to good use.” “Allaire be ready with your tubes to support 2. Lepage, be prepared to help Hervé, if things get too hot. Doc, put your first aid post in the basin at the foot of Eliane 4, where we had the 155’s. Any questions?” Not a word, we don’t ask questions anymore. The Commanders “O group” is short and to the point, night envelops the entrenched camp and is illuminated by fireworks of tracers and the flares from flare ships up above. “We are up at dawn; our hearts beat fast while we await the storm. Eliane, all our eyes are upon her like a coveted beautiful girl with her silhouette streamlined against the rising sun”. “0600H, the lightning bolts of outgoings from our 40 guns lights up the horizon behind us … then the thunderous roar of incomings lasts for 10 minutes; a smoke shell indicates cessation of suppressive fire. At the same time our hearts are pounding in

33 The enemy was astonished by the scope of our success. He had thought that Éliane 1 was impregnable, one of the Vietminh unit Commander was demoted from Command. Later, in captivity, Bigeard was interrogated at length and even congratulated by the adversary who couldn’t believe the number of personnel engaged.
our chests, the first assault waves of Trapp’s Company lead the way under a sky filled steel coming from the infantry firebase. “Covered by the angry bursts of PM (Pistolet Mitrailleur = French sub machine guns) and exploding grenades, the light infantry climbs up the slopes of Eliane 1.” “2 Platoons are now hanging on to the western slope and by the same token “cleaning-up” the first trenches and bunkers. Nevertheless, Vietminh resistance is organized and the defensive works crowning the summit of the firebase is bitterly fought over. Our losses are becoming serious. Vietminh artillery, which has us zeroed in, annihilates the Platoons under murderous 105 and 120 fire and isolates the 2 Eliane’s with an impressive barrage.” “I immediately understand that Trapp by himself could not subdue such a target and my Platoon leaders await the order to get into the fight. “Lepage from Bruno”, “Yes”, “It’s your turn; find yourself a flame-thrower team at the foot of the peak. “I call my Platoon leaders ... “Le Page to all, how do you read me ?” “Loud and clear” “Lepage to Hérraud, take point, bring the flame-thrower with you, Bessonneau, follow him as soon as Hérraud goes down the slope; Welch, you’ll move only when told”. “I move up in Herraud’s tracks, Combaneyre my

2IC is by my side, behind me there’s a FM team (light squad machinegun) of 4 men. We go down a trench that is partially destroyed and that offers very little in way of protection, enemy artillery probably saw our movement and zeroes in on us. Thunderous incoming 120, real close, throws me on the ground, Combaneyre has a head wound, I try to furrow in the ground for protection. Now, a tornado of steel and fire is on me. My team has vanished, only the muzzle of a FM protrudes out of the jumble of debris that has become the grave of its 4 man team. Hérraud can’t move any further, he’s stopped atop the western ridge where the enemy hangs on tenaciously, I order the flamethrower team forwards.” “What a sight it was, 2 Paras PM in hand (picture above of a MAT-49 called Pistolet Mitrailleur or PM) were protecting the Legionnaire flame-thrower. The Légionnaire was moving forwards with an extraordinary calm with that heavy container on his back. I saw him aim and immediately flames reached the bunker that started dripping flames like water...one can’t resist that terrifying weapon. A few survivors fled, and what fell into our hands was a mass grave full of horribly burned bodies. “My 3rd Platoon has caught up with us... Allaire works wonders with his mortars and gives us really close support. Bruno encourages us and informs us that the Vietminh are falling back en masse and that our artillery is chasing them.” “In the last push forwards, my 3 Platoons are lined up side by side and take the peak with grenades.” “I see the hills that go down to the rice paddies we call “No man’s land”. These are laced with canalized trenches that protect the enemy’s backward ebb. Nevertheless, we conquered Eliane”. It’s 1400H, I grab the handset: “Bruno this is Lepage, objective taken.” “Lepage from Bruno, Miraud and Charles are coming to relieve you. It’s over for the Battalion” “Yes, it’s over for us, but it is our comrades of the 2/1 RCP who will have the thankless job of defending the churned up Firebase with no proper bunkers, no trenches, no barbed wire and with no mines. In my mind, I considered our counter-attack as a privilege.” “I now wait to be relieved, sheltered as best as possible in what’s left of trenches. Those deadly 120’s have done a lot of harm. Now that the Vietminh has withdrawn, he has no scruples in shelling his old positions.” “Minaud ducking one
explosion after another; arrives. A few quick orders, and each Platoon, one after another, runs down the slope of Eliane, stepping over heaps of cadavers.” “We started off 85. We’re now 40 after roll call” “How long will we be able to take such bloodlettings?” “Our comrades, how long will they be able to hold that bloody crest that is now a huge cemetery.” “We hope so, and it is our honor as soldiers, we trust our leaders and the morale of our men that will remain intact up to the last day of the battle” Lieutenant Le Page was concerned with the difficulties awaiting his comrades of the 2/1ier RCP on that hard won hill. From the night of the 10th to the 11th, the enemy launched furious counter-attacks. They are all repulsed, but on the next night, the enemy will almost succeed in pushing us out of the position. A massive engagement of reserve units will be necessary to retake one by one all the lost bunkers. The 1st Platoon of the 6ème CIP will be at the forefront of the battles, with Lieutenant De Fromont and Sergeant Sautereau. De Fromont will die leading his men on a re-conquered position. Then came 20 days of endless and ferocious artillery bombardments that will end on May 1st, when the enemy will take Eliane away from us for good.
CHAPITRE VI

The Battle of the 3 Hugettes’ — Gulliver at Lilliput — Wine and tobacco — The night of Huguette 6 — Choking off firebases— The catacombs. Evacuation of the wounded Vietminh — Problems with Special Operations — Geneviève’s Légion d’Honneur. — Camerone. — Visiting the front lines — Botella’s hole — First contact with Bigeard. — The head of a Para Commander— The atrocious Éliane L — The observers up front. — Two years later in Oran.

The Huguette firebase in the rice fields that covered the Northwestern perimeter of the entrenched camp and the landing strip had at first 5 Firebases. They were manned by the 1/2nd REI of Commandant Clémençon, with his HQ on Hugette3. After the desertion of the Thais on the 16th and 17th of March, the Battalion was reinforced by elements of the 5th BPVN of Capitaine Bizzard and by 2 Companies of the 1/13th DBLE of Capitaine Philippe who took command of Anne-Marrie3 and 4. These were re-occupied just in the nick of time and were renamed H6 and H7 and that’s where the battle started on March 27. Due to progress in approaching earthworks, a daylight clearing operation is undertaken by Commandant Pazzis with the 5th BPVN and 2 Platoons of Chaffee tanks. The position is cleared and 700 meters of trenches are plugged up. In the morning, I decided to go with my jeep and inspect it. Lieutenant-Colonel Voineau who had just arrived, was with me. We were going down the airstrip at full throttle and were a juicy mobile target for a Vietminh gunner. We were rapidly bracketed, so we quickly jumped into a trench. The entrance to the firebase was near and a Légionnaire was waving at us. The last 100 meters were run on the “airborne double” in record time and we found relative shelter in the position. Relative indeed, because Huguette6 had been built by the Thais, to their physical size before they deserted. It was a rat hole. For the giant Legionnaires at Guguette6, it was Gulliver at Lilliput, but a Gulliver that would not be freed. We followed our guide bent over and arrived at the HQ bunker, it was just as exiguous as everything else. A Lieutenant of the 1/2nd REI was sitting there with his knees to his chin. I inquired as to his needs: he was low in personnel, so I decided to send him a Platoon of the 5th BPVN of Bizzard, if I can remember right. I also took note, that he was also low in supplies. On the way out, the Lieutenant put his helmet over my red beret that one could see a mile away.

We found our jeep intact and came back to base with no problem. I immediately went to the group’s 4th Bureau (Logistics and Supply) and immediately signed a voucher for a case of vinogel and a bale of tobacco to a still fussy administrative clerk. I had everything sent to them and wrote them this: “For the Légionnaires of Huguette6 from the Colonel”…. And I did well to have done it in haste. The next day, when I awoke, I was surprised by a strange odor of smoke. “Again... another depot burning? It’s as if the camp was smoking an enormous pipe”. I wasn’t far from the truth, since the tobacco depot was in flames. On April 1st, the last Thais that still defended the Françoise firebase (a peripheral position) are in a headlong flight. This firebase covered the Huguettes’ westwards and it was lost without a fight. During the night of the 1st and 2nd, Huguette7 falls to the enemy. A counter-attack lead by Bizzard is unable to recover the firebase whose entire garrison commanded by Lieutenant Huguenin is decimated after a night of combat. From the 3rd to the 5th, it’s Huguette6’s turn to be assaulted. Each time the position is cleared by counter-attacks. From the 4th to the 5th, the offensive is led by 4 Vietminh Battalions of the 308th and 312th Division with 50 mortars and Howitzers.
On the night of the Huguette battle. I had just left the GM 9 bunker where I had supper each night with Lemeunier and Vadot, and I was coming back to my lair through the network of trenches and tunnels. I passed in front of a staircase and saw a radio operator sitting at the bottom of the steps. His radio was slowly murmuring. I asked him “Anything new?” “Yes Colonel, I’m on Huguette’s frequency, it’s getting bad over there”. I took the handset “This is le Gars Pierre, What’s going on?” “Clémenton here, Huguette is heavily shelled. This looks like an attack’s artillery prep. I’ve sent Viard’s Company as a reinforcement, but I don’t think this will be enough” “I’ll give a warning order to the reserve Company of Bréchignac, it will be with you in 10 minutes” I got in the bunker fast. Lieutenant Roy, the Watch Officer, was sitting down in front of a battery of telephones. I took the 4 phones successively: “Hello Brèche... The Clédic Company is at the disposal of Clémenton. It’s for Huguette.” “Hello Ailloux you aren’t sleeping? ... The group fires point blank on H6 ... it’s done? Ok then, no use telling you.” “Hello air support? ... The flare ship over Huguette is ready to drop. » « Hello Touret!... your Company ready? Ah that old SAS trooper!... nothing for now, but Clédic just left... I’m under the impression that the Vietminh will go all out on Huguette tonight.” I then turned towards Roy: “Come on! All HQ personnel on deck... Again a great night awaits us”. I get out of the bunker and climb the steps to get on the roof. An unending rumbling sound could be heard towards the North’s reddening skies. Deafened by distance, suddenly the first automatic weapon bursts rattled out. I recoiled at the thunder that was unleashed behind me. It was the broadside from our 12 X 105 mm guns firing at point blank range. Counter-battery fire came in fast. The Eastern summits in enemy hands lit up from the lightning bolts of outgoings. I glanced a last time at Huguette and jumped in the trench at the exact same time when the first incoming salvoes hit our gun batteries. My entire team was there: my three 2IC’s, the Chaffee Squadron Commander, the radio NCO team leaders, logistics, liaison and the DZ party. I looked at the familiar faces of these men, always ready to accomplish their nightly missions as if they had never done anything else all their lives. With all their willpower, courage and devotion I could say right then and there that I did not for one second doubt in a victorious ending. Cassou arrived last while in one hand holding his helmet and SMG (sub-machine gun) and in the other a boiler teapot. The mug quarts were filled; to be honest, we felt this beverage to
be bitter. Cognac or whisky would have been just as good, but our stocks had run out long ago and my personal relations with those in the rear echelon were so tense that nobody thought of a friendly gesture like putting a bottle in a parachute cargo load to be sent to us. At least for the time being, everything that could be done for Huguette was done. I sat in a corner and to kill time I started reading my bedside book: a story about a beautiful Brittany racing cruise and sailboat named Reder Nor. Reder Nor was my compatriot and the power the story conjured up was such that I was carried away on these shores that I knew so well and that were so dear to me: “The winds came from the South...I was always on the same side since we had left Sein. We were still with a wide West wind when we passed the “horrifying Pointe du Raz”... we were still wide in the Iroise sea at dusk. The sky was a roof shingle blue color, the sky seemed to exhale the sea. During the night, all was fine, but I was always on the same tack, in the scintillating darkness of stars and lights...” The phone rang, I was brought back to the reality of Dien Bien Phu. Verdelhan took the handset “Colonel it’s the Banjo’s, 12 aircraft will be over us in 8 minutes, the last Company of the 2/1st RCP is jumping in, do we give them the Go?” I hesitated, the battle on Huguette was far enough from the DZ to not be dangerous for the paras doing that combat jump, but the aircraft were going to pass right through the trajectory of our artillery fire. These were vital reinforcements for us. I decided: “Combat jump as planned, have the DZ team in place…” and I continued reading my book...

“There were lights all around us, red ones, white ones, very small green ones, some were stationary, others sparkled, big brushes that turned like a fan and in bursts, eyes bigger than planets...” The roar of a low flying aircraft shook the bunker. I got out... there were fires all around me but these were not in the Iroise a ways from Brittany’s shores. In a somber sky, the 12 translucent cupolas sowed by the aircraft started appearing. Pushed by gentle winds, they slowly drifted eastward. A second aircraft flew over in the thunderous roar of its engines, another stick jumped into the night. The first to jump in were already landing around me. All were qualified paras and it was confirmed by the perfect PLF (Parachute Landing Fall) of one of them. His PLF dragged him along without getting hurt, from the bunker’s roof to the parapet of the trench, and then, to its bottom, where he got stuck because of his reserve chute and rucksack All went well on that side, towards Huguette all our guns had stopped, but the infantry barrage was going on full tilt. Clédic was to get close to the firebase. I went to the radio operator on the steps and called “Clémonçon from Gars Pierre. SITREP on Huguette?” “Clémonçon here, Clédic barely made it through. He’s holding the Western side. Hard fighting, all of the Northern side of the position is lost and the Company that held the Firebase at the beginning of the attack is down to twenty or so men. It seems that things have died down a bit, but we can see movement to the South. The encirclement must be in progress” I looked at my watch it’s 01:00 H and there were still 5 hours of darkness, and I knew from experience of the previous nights of fighting, that these assaults stopped when the objective was taken or at dawn. “Hello Clémonçon, I’m sending in Bailly and the Company from the 8th Choc. They will move via the Eastern side of the trail and the drain, with the goal of maintaining contact at all cost with Huguette. It

34 The « mémoires d’un Yacht », of Jean Merrien. It’s the boat talking.
35 Code name for parachute operations
starts in 15 minutes; they’ll be on your Command frequency.” The phone rang it was Tourret: “Hello, I heard the transmission with Clémençon, Bailly is moving forwards. Could we have support from tanks?” I turned and looked at Yvon: “How many Bisons are still operational? 2! Ok they’ll go with the 8th Choc, the night is clear enough. I went to sit in my corner, I was worried. I had just engaged my last reserves. Obviously, I still had Bigeard and his Battalion, but we had agreed at the afternoon briefing, that I would only call on him only if in dire straights. Another tough one was planned in the near future. We simply could not afford to lose Huguette. The position covered the aircraft outbound path for our airdrops. After a bit of hesitation, I took the handset: “Hello Bruno! You aren’t sleeping of course. You’re aware of the battle on Huguette on the net. I’m going to call on you … be ready… thanks” That courageous Bigeard, always knew what was going on and was always ready. The deadly wait started anew. I was again aboard the Reder Mor: “The moon shined a bit on the high cliffs. Behind the light of Kermovan when it stopped, I saw a large rounded stretch, black on black. From the starboard stern, in the wind, the white silver light of the Grande Vinotière was shaken by hiccups every 10 seconds. The current led me to it at speed, and facing the wind, pushing me sideways against the wind, small waves were slapping sharply on my keel, overly excited by the Northern winds…. We were turning again and again from one side to the other...” 02:30H Bailly must be close to the FEBA (Forward Edge of the Battle Area), if it was still there. But then, we should have heard the sound of infantry combat. I called the radio operator: “Get on the Company net and listen in.” The noise of a cascade came out of the mike and filled the night. A few isolated shots were heard and a star shined in Orion’s sling. Maybe Huguette would make it out after all. I was about to get back on my ship when the first machine gun bursts mixed in with the deafening sound of grenade explosions were heard close by. I grabbed the handset “Bailly from le Gars Pierre?” “Bailly here, we are there. The encirclement is in place 200 meters South. It’s solid with maybe a Battalion in contact. To my right, on the other side of the airstrip, a machine gun nest fires and with its tracers you can see that it interdicts the airstrip from West to East. A tank just got hit by a bazooka round and is brewing up.” I then heard Huguette “They are coming again, with fresh troops this time. Move your Companies on Huguette3.” Selam, the driver, was already at the wheel, but Bigeard would take 10 minutes to get down from his perch, I had plenty of time to pass by my gunner. I found Ailloux in a neighboring Bunker; with a team I was also familiar with. In the deafening background noise of radio sets, I asked about the Batteries: “Few loses in the gun crews tonight, but a lot of damaged materiel” said Ailloux. 6 guns are unusable for at least 24 hours, but Huguette is within range of our 120’s, as for ammo, the mortar pits will be resupplied. In half an hour everything will be ready. One Battery is already working over the machine guns that are hampering Bailly. His gunner is on it.” I went back to my bunker, when Bigeard arrived with his small operations team in tow and Martial Chevalier, his secretary-typist and bodyguard, typewriter in hand. We jumped in the jeep that dropped us off at the entrance of a new tunnel at Firebase Huguette3 where Clémençon had his HQ. We found him in front of his maps, his eyes bright, his features drawn after endless nights on watch, his 2IC Capitaine Coledeboeuf was by his side. A Légionnaire served a boiling hot juice, Company Commanders arrived and Bigeard got in gear with the mastery and clarity that was so characteristic of him. Clear and simple orders were given out on the map and on the aerial pictures, then the radio nets, fire support, various resupplies carefully set in place. Lepage’s Company was the first to move forwards in leaps and bounds to its goal the drain trench this through the artillery barrage. We were able to liaise with Bailly who watched over his seriously wounded 2IC Defline; he’s only got a handful of men left. Huguette is now close and strangely quiet; it is then, that all the support elements are massively unleashed. The Company charges forwards and its forward elements reach the barbwire and the zigzags. Those that held the Firebase moved forwards. The enemy abandons the few positions it captured during the night. They are falling back “en masse” and being cut down
by our artillery and mortar fire, liaison is established with Clédic on the Northern side and the position is recaptured in its entirety. Astonishingly, young Vietminh soldiers come out of bunkers and surrender, such a thoroughness of slaughter had never yet been attained. Heaps of bodies with horrible wounds, the manpower of an entire Battalion lay there haphazardly. On our side, we also suffered heavy loses. The 1st Company of the ½ REI and garrison of the Firebase commanded by Lieutenant Cousin and François singlehandedly bore the brunt of the first assaults, and were down to 20 or so men. Of the 4 Companies engaged to reinforce 2 were decimated (200 Men KIA). The day was dawning; the jeep dropped me off at my HQ. On the table, my book was still open on the page I had left it at... “An all brilliant sun had appeared above the hills, under a pan of light clouds. We had left behind the blocks of rocks and islands of Portsall, we had crossed Cornhn Carhai and probably the Vicant-Hur since the sea was calm. On Portside, we had left a big boy and we saw another afar off to our side...” Like the dangerous stones of the Cheval du Four, the dangers of the night in Dien Bien Phu were ever present. My boat could go it alone for a few hours. I’d let go the helm, come down from the cockpit into the cabin and fall on my berth dead tired. The 5th was the end of the assaults. The Vietminh understood that they could not take the Firebase by force, now they will try to choke it. The position, 1,500 meters from the central fortification, necessitated daily resupplies that reached it by going along the trail from South to North, with a relay midway at Firebase Huguette1. As of April 8th, while Huguette6 is being harassed without cease and its garrison decimated, Lieutenant Rastouil is KIA and Lieutenant François is WIA, Huguette1 is overrun. It is retaken on the night of the 10th by Philippe’s Company. Lieutenant Spozio, a Platoon Commander, loses an eye to shrapnel, 3 wounds in 10 days of combat, his comrade Legros is killed.

Enemy pressure increases and its moles feverishly dig their galleries. The trench is doubled, then tripled, it stretches eastwards in all its width and reaches the drain. It controls, towards the South, 800 meters of flat open terrain where there emerges, like a mausoleum, the wreckage of a Curtiss Commando shot down by AAA. 800 meters under constant night and day artillery and machine gun fire, 800 meters of road too long and filled with the blood of the re-suppliers of Huguette6. We attempted to open the trench, but Thai and North-African personnel tasked with the job “don’t want to do it”. In spite of the valour and courage of their cadre, who sacrifice themselves uselessly; Lieutenant Jacqueline of the 3/3 RTA, will be killed like this. Forward progress of the trench is pitiful and the resupply battle is getting tougher and tougher. The operation requires the engagement of a Battalion, that of the 1st BEP, with the support of the Companies of Chounet and Viard of the 1/13 DBLA. 3 lines of trenches are taken after determined assaults, but it is only at the crack of dawn that the re-suppliers reach the position. The net closed in behind them. The Watch Company that held the door open in the enemy position system for the “flow “ action; was submerged by reinforcements flooding in through the access trench, fanatical reinforcements, just as tenacious, but also hanging on to their weapons and spider holes as cadavers in the night. A deadlier opening operation for the “ebb operation” (return) had to be done in broad daylight. At the afternoon briefing, as a result of the battle and after having weighed the repercussions, the evacuation of Huguette was planned for the next day. The pick-up operation was done by 4 Companies of the BEP and 6th BPC that started off at 20:00H. It succeeded in piercing through the first two lines but stalled, out of steam and out of men and ammunition on the last parapet. So close, but now, so far; the network of bunkers of Huguette were outlined in the first rays of dawn’s early light. The garrison was then ordered to break out. During this last battle, Lieutenants François and Donadieu “serving at Dien Bien Phu” both got battlefield promotions to Captain for “exceptional war service”, said the official telegram received the night before. They both fell mortally wounded leading their Légionnaires, of which only 1 in 3 reached our lines safely.
Coming from North to South towards the central position along the trail, the enemy effort throws all its weight on Huguette1 that is encircled by a maze of trenches.

On the 21st, the Firebase is totally isolated, without food, water or ammo, its men after superhuman efforts are totally exhausted and it’s overrun in the wee hours of the 23rd. The General decided to counter-attack, since this action would decimate our last reserves of the 2nd BEP, neither Bigeard nor I agreed ... once conquered what garrison would or could hold it? The problem remained the same from the beginning of the battle, airdrops never managed to cover loses. On average, on a daily basis, there were 100 men who combat jumped in with us, but each day we lost double that number. The General stood by his decision. For once, the necessary security precautions for the neighboring positions were respected. Air support was requested. At Noon, B-26’s, Privateers, Hellcats and Corsairs came in, it was quite a show. In spite of heavy AAA, for 30 minutes bombs crushed positions. Enemy radio intercepts that we regularly followed at HQ indicated that those that had survived were withdrawing. At H hour, what with its forward movement slowed down in the maze of trenches and intertwined barbed wire, the Companies of the BEP were not at the attack jump off point. When they moved forwards, 30 minutes later than planned, machine guns were again in battery and flanking the fearsome obstacle of the wide airstrip that the Companies had to cross. Platoons were once again mercilessly cut down; in the funnel of bombs, only one came close to the Curtiss, they advanced no further and the counter-attack of April 25th failed. The battle of the 3 Huguette’s, H7, H6, H1, kicked off on March 27th as a result the 3 positions were overrun. The enemy jumped forwards 800 meters in one bound, all the airstrip was now in his hands: but at a cost of 29 days of bitter combat for 3 regiments of the elite 308 and 312 Vietminh Division.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division 308</th>
<th>Division 312</th>
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<tr>
<td>Established : August 1949 as Regimental Group 308, reorganised in China July-August 1950</td>
<td>Established : 27 October 1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name(s) : &quot;Viet Bac&quot;, &quot;Capital&quot;</td>
<td>Name(s) : &quot;Ben Tre&quot;, &quot;Chien Tang&quot; (Victorious)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commander : Vuong Tua Vu (August 1949 - )</td>
<td>Commander : Le Trung Tan (October 1950 - 1953) Hoang Cam (1953 - )</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Officer : Song Hao (August 1949 - )</td>
<td>Political Officer : Tran Do (before 1954)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Base area : Thai Nguyen area, Viet Bac</td>
<td>Base area : Thai Nguyen area, Viet Bac</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organic units : as Regimental Group 308 : Infantry Regiment 92 Infantry Regiment 102 &quot;Ba Vi&quot; Infantry Regiment 308 one Artillery Battalion from mid-1950 : Infantry Regiment 36 (Infantry Battalions 80, 84, 89) Infantry Regiment 88 &quot;Tam Dao&quot; (Infantry Battalions 23, 29, 322)</td>
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Infantry Regiment 102 “Ba Vi”
(Infantry Battalions 18, 54, 79)
one Artillery Battalion

Notes:
First of the Viet Minh divisions, this unit was considered as an elite force throughout the period.

The chart above shows the general organisation of a Viet Minh infantry division from the summer 1950 reorganisation in China. For lack of anything better, the NATO mapping symbol has been used for Trinh Sat intelligence and reconnaissance units. Apparently, only Divisions 304 and 320 had an organic artillery battalion.

On our side, this steadfast resistance, often with successful counter-attacks remains gloriously unknown pages of written history of the 7 French Foreign Legion and Airborne Battalions engaged in these battles. The ranks of these Battalions were getting thinner and thinner by the day. There were more and more wounded in the “Catacombs” underground hospital of Commandant Grauwin. I tried to visit these as often as possible, since my HQ was near the hospital. In combat, men who are at the end of their rope wish for that wound that sends them back for a time in a rear echelon hospital. At Dien Bien Phu, be it a good or bad wound, it got you to the horrors of the Catacombs. If a wounded could trust the admirable devotion of our surgeons and our “only” nurse Genevière, there was no hope of being evacuated.

I can still see the long miry tunnel, lit up by a few candles where the sombre hole of bunkers and superimposed niches dug in the walls where the wounded were put away at times. There too, moral was good. I remember, one day, having discovered with my flashlight a Company Commander, at the very end of an unlit black gallery, Capitaine Minaud had been wounded a first time on H7, a second time on E1. He had kept his command. I thought he was still fit to fight, but I saw him on a stretcher with a crushed foot.

36 Giap acknowledged in his book that at critical junctures signs of flagging and tiredness began to appear. “After a series of magnificent victories, we appeared to underestimate the enemy…. We had to analyze and change this state of mind. Preparations were prolonged, notably after the second phase of the campaign when fierce positioning battles were underway; it caused rightist hesitations during a time that affected the execution of tasks”.

with the help of 50 or so mortars and howitzers. 28 days of combat, 3 Regiments and 50 guns to take out 3 laughable Firebases, 3 small squares of rice paddies whose individual garrisons never exceeded 100 men. The battle of the 3 Huguette’s was lost, but at such a wholesale slaughter, that the enemy could not call it a victory.
He simply said to me: “Please forgive me Colonel, I’ve just been hit a third time, I’m no longer fit to fight”. In those days, this business with the wounded made quite a commotion in France and around the world. There was a lot of talk about Vietminh barbarism and at Dien Bien Phu itself, General de Castries was asked several times by the High Command to get in contact with the enemy to arrange a ceasefire. On that subject, my point of view is crystal clear, Giap was at war; and in a war there is no room for sentiments. He knew, that the greatest handicap of the entrenched camp was its wounded. If I had been given to choose between the arrival of a Battalion of reinforcements or evacuations, I would without hesitating one second, have chosen evacuations. Therefore there could be no compromise; the responsibility for the martyrdom of the wounded is not the enemy’s fault. There was a ceasefire, but it was, to rid ourselves of wounded Vietminh prisoners in our care and in our infirmaries.

The radios of the two adversaries were the same and we were listening to each other without exchanging any messages, with the exception of the one that had wished me good luck, when I was talking to the C-47 flare ship. The enemy used a simple camouflage that we knew perfectly. We could follow progress, the assaults, but silence came quickly. A telephone wire was reeled up the approach trenches as soon as a position was overrun, and a secure phone line replaced the radio.

Evacuations, we decided to send out the following message: “To the Popular Liberation Army siege Commander… We are informing you, that 20 of your wounded will be carried out on stretchers to Ban Ban tonight at 22:00H. The stretcher bearers will not be armed; this will be a no fire zone until midnight.” In complete darkness at 20:00H our stretcher-bearers were led by a Sergent-chef Medic, a real hero whose name I can’t remember. We anxiously waited for 2 hours for the entire team to return. They met the Vietminh stretcher-bearers at the rendezvous point, and without a single word being exchanged, carried away their wounded. I wanted to do it again, Grauwin who had gotten 20 more bed spaces was on my heels to do so. The General had an ethical problem about it, to him, the idea that his men could abandon and let die other brothers in arms haunted him. There were no more wounded Vietminh evacuations. Grauwin desperately tried to expand his hospital. One day, while I was snooping around in a section of the organization that I didn’t know well, I stumbled across “special operations” personnel. There were there a dozen or so Europeans of which 2 Lieutenants and an entire barnyard of Thais and Meos. That service, had become completely useless, and squandered precious manpower for defense. However, they declined my offer for them to fight side by side with their brothers in arms. I was stunned to learn, that they had the exorbitant privilege, in a besieged camp, to communicate directly with Saigon and Hanoi without the permission of the General. I stormed into HQ, where the General told me he was powerless with regards to this situation. I had my revenge by moving out of there all these parasites with the help of a group of Légionnaires. I don’t know where they went and I didn’t care; meanwhile Grauwin took the bunker and put in fifty or so more beds. For
Genevière who slept amongst the wounded, I had them set up a special room for her, the room’s walls were covered with parachutes and with some furniture that we had scrounged at our old mess. We surprised her one night with her room, but we didn’t properly gauge the selflessness of this admirable girl. A few days later, she gave her room to some seriously wounded paratroopers and came back to sleep in the hospital’s main room. As the days went by, the more we all admired her. As far as courage, she had more than many men whom I saw collapse—her competence as a nurse and her untiring devotion earned the respect of all. In passing, nobody at Dien Bien Phu called her “The Angel”. I went to see the General about this, and said “General Sir, I want to have Geneviève receive an Army Commendation, could we not propose her for the Légion d’Honneur?” A telegram was sent to Hanoi immediately. The next day, the Croix de Guerre was also authorized. I started scrounging around for the medals. It wasn’t easy; nobody had their “fruits salads” in Dien Bien Phu. At last, in one of my barrack boxes I found an old Croix de Guerre, a Lieutenant loaned me his Légion d’Honneur. On that same night, we asked Genevière to come over to the HQ bunker. The General, Lieutenant-Colonel Lemeunier, Commandant Bigard, Vadot and I were in the bunker. Elegant in her tailored paratrooper uniform, her perfume was a hypochlorite antiseptic solution called Dakin, powdered with mercuriochrome and with her usual smile, suspecting nothing, she entered. We all rose and the General after reciting the standard words for the occasion, pinned the 2 crosses on her chest. During that time, the entire garrison was rewarded through its leaders. The General had been promoted on the 15th. One night, one of my radio operators who was listening to Europe said to me: “Colonel, I just heard that you and Colonel Lalande have been promoted to full Colonel and Commandant Bigeard to Lieutenant-Colonel.” The next day, a personal telegram from the Minister confirmed the news. The General gave me the stripes he no longer needed. They were gold Spahis stripes on a red background. I took 5 minutes to darken this with black ink. I was happy to get these stripes as a battlefield commission. As fate and luck in war would have it, I had had similar promotions since I had been a Captain. When April 30th came around, the Légion celebrated the Camerone. It was Lieutenant Colonel Lemeunier who presided over the ceremony. In early March, Lemeunier had a cushy desk job in Hanoi. When he learned of the death of Lieutenant-Colonel Gaucher, he went to see General Cogny. “General Sir, I’m the oldest Légionnaire in the Tonkin, I should replace Gaucher, I ask permission to combat jump in Dien Bien Phu” Lieutenant-Colonel Lemeunier was not para qualified. Liaisons via air were still possible during the day, he therefore landed via helicopter in Dien Bien Phu, but he too was one of these heroic one jump volunteers. On April 30th, he convened, at his HQ, the General, Bigeard, Geneviève and me. Here he was, in full uniform, creased and starched pants, spit shine shoes, the Képi on his head and with microphone in hand, he read the story of the Camerone. The General and I were promoted Honorary Corporals of the 13th Demi-Brigade de Légion Étrangère, Bigeard and Geneviève 1° class Légionnaires (a very rare and exceptional honor given to non-Légionnaires) and we drank the traditional red wine, to our godfathers in our serial numbered quarts. During the long days of April, I did all I could when I had the time, to go and meet in person Battalion and Firebase Commanders. Most of the time, I was accompanied by Bigeard who took the wheel of one of the last shrapnel riddled jeeps that still worked. I had suggested that the MP jeep “be liberated” by Cassou. The deed was done at night and the jeep brought to my own vehicle pit, the carcass of our jeep was put as a “replacement” in the MP’s vehicle pit. He did not want to do that, but when he saw the stern look on my face, he insisted no further. We both barreled down trails towards Battalion HQ’s at breakneck speeds for self-protection, once there; we headed down the communication trenches to the frontline trenches of Firebases. The frontline soldiers who were in the trenches were for the most part Légionnaires and young Frenchmen who had volunteered to serve in the Régiments de parachutistes coloniaux. They hung on tenaciously to their positions right up to the last day and fought to total exhaustion. All the same, these men knew they were not fighting for their village. The idea of a Bastion of Freedom or of a battle against communism; did not even enter their minds. They knew that the Radio broadcasts from an official station in Saigon called La voix du Vietnam (The Voice of Vietnam) and in newspaper articles who wrote of them saying that they were considered nothing more than canon fodder. They fought because they were sure of their leaders who shared their exhaustion and the same dangers. They fought “For glory and battle” a stunning demonstration of warrior virtues of our nation and of our army. The Légion never talks about the
nationality of its men “Legio Patria Nostra”. In any event, its strength and the pillar of its Battalions is the German warrior: French and Germans fought side by side, this brotherhood of arms has remained deeply ingrained in my memory as a symbol of reconciliation and at last, a permanent union between 2 great European states. To go to these Firebases in the hills, the “Elianê”e we took the “metro” the name we gave to the maze of underground communication tunnels.

One day, I took the “Metro” to see Botella at Eliane4, imperceptibly the tunnel climbed, I passed through Elianne11, a mid-way stage, up the hill. On my way up, men rose up and saluted my red beret that they knew well. Such exchange of salutes the likes of which I never saw again. Through their eyes looking straight into mine, I read, hope, confidence and devotion. Close to the summit, the hill was encircled by 2 Firebases. Their underground network was dug horizontally and went into its flanks. The Western side was held by the 6th BPC and the Southern and Eastern side by the 5th BPVN. The tunnel came out on a terrace, surrounded by numerous close-by enemy occupied hills. Below it, stretched out the stunningly calm Dien Bien Phu basin. The rice paddies were green and the meandering Nam Youn scintillated in the sun. I entered the HQ bunker of the 6th BPC, it’s a vast and solid cavern; its entrance is protected by a triple row of sandbags. There are several recesses dug into the wall and padded with parachutes, these made relatively comfortable berths. I shook hands with Commandant Thomas and all the officers around him, I then went through the communications tunnel that led me to Botella. This roughly horizontal tunnel went around the hill. This is where it got dangerous, in that it was facing and within short distance of enemy positions. A Vietminh marksman was constantly zeroed in onto Eliane2. That’s how, two days earlier, Lieutenant Bourgois who was looking through a slit, was killed with a bullet in the head. Bigeard, who was beside him, barely escaped the second bullet.

I arrived at the HQ of the 5th BPVN. It no longer was a cavern but an exposed hole; wide open to direct enemy fire right in front of them. I slid through a narrow opening where I entered Botella’s lair.

Commandant André Bottella, dear Dede… You represented the quintessence of this new and strange race of paratrooper officer, a grouser, grumbler, hard to command when things are quiet, but without equal in times of danger. I’m as stubborn and hard-headed as the granite of my native Brittany, we came to loggerheads 3 months earlier when you left the entrenched camp you and your Battalion. It was then that I had asked you “Are you happy Bottela?” and you fired back at me “Me happy Colonel?” the expression on your face said it all “of getting away from you, you pain in the ass yes”. Today, the battles had made us bosom brothers.

What I said about Bottela is, by the way, also true of all my other Para Commanders. I remember my first meeting with Bigeard. He had just parachuted in with his 6th BPC. I didn’t know him well and I had asked one of his Lieutenants to report back to me after having done a reconnaissance of Vietminh positions, instead, it was Bigeard who came, and he was furious. He came in limping, leaning not on a cane, but on a beam that was higher than he and that he had ripped off the roof of a bunker. Our discussion was a violent one. In the end, looking at the beam that upheld the roof, I said to him: “Let’s hit our heads on this, we’ll see who has the hardest head.” We then broke out laughing; this was the beginning of our close, friendly and fraternal alliance during the battle. Now, back to Botella’s lair: I shook hands with those who were with him, Armandi, Rouault, Bizzard. I then took out a wine flask of Cognac that I had in my pocket and let it go around...

Below, in the rice plains, the bombing that was intensifying brought me back to reality. A new assault on the Hugettes’ was in the works. I rose and said “See you soon, all the best to everyone” – they, in unison said “See you later Colonel, all the best”. I went back down to my telephones and radios. The next day, I went to liaise on Eliane1, this was during the counter-attack of the 6th BPC which had retaken the peak. I vividly remember this visit as being an atrocious one. The way to get there passed at the foot of Dominique2; that we had lost on April 30th. The bombing had been so intense that the communication trenches had literally disappeared as they had been hacked to pieces by shell holes. I
jumped from one shell hole to another, stepping over dead Vietminh and followed by my bodyguard a Légionnaire NCO. A dying looked straight at me, with a death rattle of bloody bubbles coming out of its throat. I started to climb the hill. Around me, laid there abandoned, an airdrop of one ton of 120mm mortar shells with their gigantic parachutes like sails intertwined in a web of risers, ripped, soiled and lost. My first reaction as a paratrooper that by instinct cares so much about that cloth bag and nylon to which he entrusts his life, makes me suffer about this abandonment much more so that the loss of shells. I got to the firebase, there was no trace of organization, it had become a round of gruyere of sorts, but a base gruyere of mire and debris. No sign of life, in the calm air, light smoke was rising from an infantry munitions depot that was slowly extinguishing itself. Now and then, a burst of machine gun fire spurted out. Since I hesitated on the way to go, to my right I heard voices coming out of the ground, so I crawled in that direction into what was the HQ of the 2 Company Commanders. I found Capitaine Minaud and Charles and a radio operator crouching there. They appeared stunned to see me, but they welcomed me warmly. I looked at them both, and I was ashamed of the comfort that I had in my bunker, of my hot meals and the risks I was under compared to them. What could I do for them, what could I tell them? I could say nothing, but to ask them how they were doing and to shake hands with them. To go to Giraud’s 1st BEP, wasn’t a long journey. His HQ was on the Eastern side of the Naim Youn, not far from Colonial infantry Captain Duluat’s (also known as “Tonton Carabine” “Uncle M-1 carbine”) Firebase Juno, that was held by White Thais; the only good Thais in my book, since they fought well. I found Giraud stretched out on his camp bed and in a very bad mood. By his side Capitaine “Loulou” Martin Commanding the Firebase was trying to reason with him. The day prior he had been hit on the head by an airdropped bundle. He was still alive thanks to his helmet, he still had a stiff neck and he was still angry. We joked around a good while. Tourret and the 8th Choc still held Firebase Epervier, it was a stone’s throw away from my bunker. One night, at dusk, after having gone to see them, I decided to keep on going and go to Opéra Firebase, it was a Platoon position whose task it was to watch over the drain. This drain stretched out all along the airstrip and could give the enemy a protected jump off point to attack the Huguettes’. I was alone and going down the communication trench for 10 minutes or so when I arrived at the sentry position, a well, where a helmeted paratrooper kept watch with a light machine gun. He had his magazines in a niche beside him. With my eyes level with the parapet, I saw the empty and amazingly calm battlefield, the airstrip lined with destroyed aircraft and close by a mile away, the imposing molehill of Dominique2, carpeted with multicolored parachutes, some of which hid enemy observation posts and gun pits. I said to the soldier in the slit what a Colonel O.C. a Regiment probably would have said to him 38 years earlier in the trenches of Champagne. When I was about to leave him I asked his name and he simply said: “My name is L…, but how come you do not recognize me Colonel? A year ago at Meucon, I was para qualified and I was on your stick and jumped right behind you. » I’m sure he thought to himself “Yes Colonel, I jumped behind you. In spite of the 25 years difference and your gray hair, like me, you had the will to take that leap forward into empty space and on landing you took the same risks.” I left in a hurry to hide my emotion and maybe my tears; and I believe that never, like on that night of April at Dien Bien Phu, have I understood what the intensity, strength and bond that exists between paratroopers is. I do not know what happened to para L… Maybe he died in the battle, or in the Aures, in the Kabylia or the Ouasenis of Algeria. If he’s still alive and his eyes read these words, let it be known to him that his Colonel has not forgotten him, nor have I forgotten those paratroopers of those sticks of Meucon, alongside those brothers in arms of Dien Bien Phu. Yes that bond between paratroopers that are bewitched by their magic carpet and that jump into empty space that precedes their manoeuvres and their battles, this “bond” is no vain word.
Two years later, I was just out of the train in Oran. A stranger came to me and presented himself courteously: “I’m Charlie Machine gun. Please excuse me Colonel; my son is in the paras in Bayonne. He was born here and he wants to fight for Algeria. Since you are an Airborne Colonel, may I ask you if my son’s Regiment will come over?” I answered back to Mr. Machine gun that I no longer commanded a Regiment but was now in a HQ and came over to organize a Training Center. Two days later, I met him again but at the Sailing Club. We became friends immediately. He welcomed my wife and I in his beautiful home, “a farm”, with the warmest and friendliest of hospitalities. I left Oran and lost sight of my friend, but a year later, I came back in the area to take over Command of the border region. One morning, the phone in my office rang. I recognized the voice of Charlie Machine gun. His voice trembled: “Colonel, Guy, my only son died, he was a Master Corporal in the 8th BPC. He was killed in action in the Aures leading his stick... he will be buried in Oran in a few days. There will be no paratroopers there for him. Can you come over?” Deeply distressed, I said that I would come over no matter what. At Guy Machine gun’s funeral I said the following eulogy: “My dear friend, when we first met, a year ago, we didn’t know each other, you fully understood that I was not a stranger to you, because I wore a red beret, the same one as your son. One does not console a father of such a loss, and the word condolence means nothing to me. What I can tell you is that, it is the best that fall first and that the elite of a nation has too few of these. The 1 million 500 thousand that fell during our Great War weighed heavily on its destiny in 1940. I fear it will be the same in the near future for those of Indochina and Algeria...”
The Geneva Conference started on May 1st and Dien Bien Phu was still standing after 50 days of combat. Oh, how this Geneva myth could be so dangerous for us. I warned my Officers and men against hoping this would be the miracle solution after a few days of talks. I had well understood that for us, to win would be to HANG ON for yet another month or 20 days maybe. The enemy was resupplied right up to the first days of June, after that date it would be the Monsoon rains that would drown us and they also, and above all, it would turn the rice paddies and their makeshift trails into a quagmire where trucks and artillery would get bogged down. HANG ON ... for one more month. On May 1st...What was the situation of the entrenched camp after 50 days of combat? 13 Firebases had been overrun and the area occupied now was a square with a frontage of 1,500 meters per side. All the Para and Foreign Legion Battalions had been decimated, reorganizing units was a priority. We amalgamated all Legion units and its 2nd BEP. Commandant Guiraud took what was left on Hugette (2-3-4-5) and the bled white 1/2nd R.E.I. This Battalion occupied the relatively calm Claudine and the 1/13th D.B.L.E occupied from Claudine to Eliane2. Opéra Firebase was useless since the loss of the Huguettes, so it was pulled back. The 8th Choc that held Epervier (Northern side of the Camp) and all that was not covered by the Huguettes was now on the front lines. The unit was less burdened with tasks, so it could still be a small reserve. The 1/2nd R.C.P. was on the ropes after the Eliane1 battle, where since April 10th, its Companies had taken the brunt of repeated day and night enemy assaults. Lastly, the 6th BPC and 5th BPVN were solidly anchored on Eliane4. Nevertheless, a Company of the 6th was detached to Dominique3 to beef up the remnants of the RTA that held this position since the fall of Dominique2. Yes, these 7 Battalions were decimated, but they represented 2,000 fit to fight or more precisely, with the will to fight. Can one imagine for an instant, what it means for a human being to fight without cease for 50 days without letup or time out and with meagre resupplies that dwindle day by day? There were several deaths due to exhaustion through lack of food; this was caused by the extraordinary physical effort demanded and lack of sleep of soldiers. Of these 2,000 men, how many had been wounded once, twice and yes even three times? We should remember the anecdote of Grauwin in his book.... He is talking to his wounded: “I’ve just met Colonel Langlais and Bigeard. I heard that with the fit to fight of your Battalion we could reconstitute a small unit. Are there any volunteers willing to fight? Grauwin goes on to say; “In ten minutes, my intensive care unit was literally invaded by paratroopers. I see several one-legged leaning on their buddies who still had legs, my armless and my one-eyed insist that they can see perfectly, those in casts too....That’s when I got pissed off mad: No! not all of you!” They all said to me: “Our buddies are waiting for us. If they die, we want to die with them”.

And behind these fit to fight, what was left in Indochina? The 1st BPC, the last para Battalion, was to jump in on May1st. Lastly; arriving swiftly in Globemasters from France, the 7th BPC and from Algeria, the Légion was sending over the 3rd BEP. We simply had to hold on for one more month. There were still men at Dien Bien Phu, and resupply had reached its critical point. Battle had been given on March 13th with only 9 days of

37 “The more the campaign lasted, the closer we came to the Monsoon season, with all the disastrous consequences that it could bring forth for mountain and forest operations» -Giap : “People’s war, army of the people”.

Commandant Guiraud

1er Bataillon de Parachutiste Commando Coloniaux (1st BCCP then 1st BPC)
supplies. We were in early May and the only “reserves” we had had fallen to 2 days of “survival rations”. We had serious problems to cook rice and with water resupply. Artillery and mortar shells and grenades were now in short supply. Aerial resupply could not keep up with the pace of battle. High altitude airdrops on a day by day basis and a shrinking DZ had us lose 30% of our supplies to the enemy. 5,000 artillery shells literally fell in the enemy’s lap and were put to good use by Vietminh gunners. The high altitude airdrops were always a fascinating sight to behold for the troops. Aircraft flew in at 2,500 meters above the basin and were bracketed by black puffs of AAA that were barely out of range. Airdropped bundles; were like confetti’s freefalling for 30 seconds, then the parachutes opened with a cracking sound thanks to a pyrotechnic system, all these parachutes opening at short intervals sounded just like a burst of machine gun fire. The anxious wait started. An error of a few seconds when airdropped or a light wind sufficed to send the precious parcels in enemy hands. The problem of equipment pickup was just as arduous as precision. The parcels be they of food, munitions or medication landed all over camp. At first, each Firebase was individually tasked with equipment pickup, regrouping at a precise spot that was accessible to trucks. Sergent-Chef Robert must remember this well, at night the logistics people brought them back to the 4ème Bureau (Logistics) of HQ who then did the dispatching. In the beginning, the system worked well but as time went on, and due to shelling, our motor pool disappeared progressively and each Firebase then “served itself” individually on the spot, thereby causing enormous wastage. In the last days, the dead tired men didn’t even have the strength to pickup the parcels that fell at their feet. I myself; didn’t even have the strength to laugh when a geophone crate fell right at my feet. One more story, I promise… it will be the last: I saw this open crate with a pile of 2 liter cans Model 1914-1918 with two big lids. I first thought that somebody in the rear echelon wanted to replace the boxes of “Vinogel”. Alas no, these cans were empty and they had a strange mechanism. Each lid had a tube linked to a listening device. You couldn’t get it out. One flipped the crate and once emptied you then understood the purpose of these contraptions called “geophones”. There were 2 typed notices explaining how when the cans were put on the ground and by putting on the earphones on “the geophone operator” by solving a simple equation could determine the direction and distance of enemy sappers who according to intelligence would pop-up right in the center of our position. Luckily enough, Commandant Sudrat, my combat engineer, reassured me by saying that it would take around 3 months to dig such a tunnel from the nearest enemy position.

The hilarity caused by their dispatching this parcel compensated the waste it represented. Nonetheless, each day, the situation grew worse. All the vehicles had been destroyed and all daylight movements had become impossible. Coming out of a morning meeting an incoming shell landed on us. I was accompanying Tourret towards Epervier and Bigeard who had left us, was headed towards his old Battalion by passing on the Nam Youn bridge. The whistling sound of that incoming had us hit the deck and the explosion raised a cloud of dust and smoke where Bigeard had been a few seconds ago. I rushed over and found that we had both thought the same thing “that incoming got him”, we both fell in each other’s arms in a fraternal warrior- accolade. After
the incoming shell adventure of Bigeard, all meetings at my HQ had become too dangerous. It also became necessary to envisage a pullout towards Laos... I remembered Laos and its Crèvecoeur column. I had few illusions on our rescue possibilities via that path. I knew the jungle of Northern Laos well, for having been across it on my previous tour of duty, it is one of the hardest and most impenetrable there is. It is in that jungle that Laos Command, in Vientiane, had rashly sent out the Crèvecoeur column. The officer in charge of the column on the ground was a paratrooper Lieutenant-Colonel, he was a good planner and knew how to execute a mission well, if given the means to do so, but his means where North African and Laotian Battalions. The first, were completely untrained in jungle combat and the latter, were jungle savvy, but were untrained to fight the Vietminh. After that disastrous experience 2 years earlier with the 4th Lao Battalion who cut and run when faced with a lowly Vietminh Company and in so doing, abandoned their European cadres to their fate. After the retreat of Samneua and the Nam Ou battle, we simply couldn’t depend on them for any help whatsoever. What was feasible, was a pickup by Meo guerillas. The rescue of the column leader of Samneua by helicopter was still fresh in all our minds, but this guerilla group no longer existed in the withdrawal zone to be used. On his own initiative Lieutenant-Colonel Trinquier in mid-April with a war chest of silver bars, called up all the Meos of the Tra Ninh and started off from the Plaine des Jarres in the direction of the chalky Muong Son region 8 days away on foot to the South of Dien Bien Phu. He wasn’t even half way to us, when the entrenched camp fell. On the other hand, the possibilities of reaching the Muong Son safe haven were carefully studied. The encirclement had to be broken, then we had to secure a path and evade the horde of pursuers during days and nights of forced marching in the jungle. We decided on forming 3 columns:

- Paras under my and Bigeard’s command.
- Légionnaires and North Africans under the command of Lemeunier and Vadot
- Elements of Isabelle under the command of Lalande.

They would try to reach Laos via 3 different itineraries, South East via Keolom and the Song Ma valleys, or Southwards by the Naim Nouan valley and the Western itinerary by the Naim Youm and Nam Ou.

The Southern route seemed to be the best, therefore, we cast lots for it. The Paras got the South Eastern route, the Légionnaires the Southern route and lastly Isabelle got the Western route. These projects were submitted to the General and approved by him. He would stay in Dien Bien Phu with the wounded and the elements of each Firebase under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Trancart who would cover the withdrawals. Battalion Commanders were informed, but a date was still not given. On the afternoon of May 1st, sentinels on Dominique3 alerted me. Preparations for an attack were detected. At dusk, heavy fighting starts anew at the Northwestern and Northeastern side of the entrenched camp. Simultaneous assaults are executed on Eliane1, Dominique3 and Huguette5. On the 10th of April, Eliane1 is retaken, it is the only offensive success on our scoreboard, but it was beyond our meager means. For the last 20 days we’ve had continuous hand to hand combat, and endless shelling on the summits that are by now transformed into an ignoble mix of mud and corpses where it was no longer possible to even build a bunker. The nights of the 1st and 2nd of May should put an end to these battles. At 01:00H the Firebase is back in enemy hands. With 2 Companies of the 2/1st RCP their leaders Lieutenant Périou and de Marsangny are KIA. At the same time, on Dominique3, in spite of reinforcements from Perret’s Company of the 6th BPC, it’s overrun and at the crack of dawn Huguette5 was also overrun. On the 3rd and 4th of May, fierce combat continues. The enemy is putting all its pressure on Huguette4, the twin sister of Huguette5 and she was overrun on the 5th at 04:00H. Our last
Huguettes! Rolin with Boisbouvier and Stabenrath commanded the ensemble. Luciani, who had been wounded 3 times and who was now one-eyed had joined them voluntarily. After 5 nights of tough combat, they were all killed in action with their Légionnaires. On the night of the 1st and 2nd of May, elements of the 1st BPC combat jumped in to be with us. I decided that they were to relieve the 1/13th DBLE. The officers of the unit came to my bunker before taking up their respective positions. I also meet Commandant Bazins. A few hours later, he suffered a crushed hip due to a shell fragment. I see a few of my car racers of the Vannes-Guingamp circuit during the days of the Demi-Brigade and many others... I see once again Company Commander Capitaine Trehiou, he had just had his ankle put in a cast. “That wasn’t your lucky night Trehiou. They really took care of you fast at the infirmary.” « Colonel, they didn’t put me in a cast here but in Hanoi. A reinforced cast with nails that held perfectly.” I was stunned and tried to understand: “Are you telling me that you did a night combat jump with a broken leg?” Tréhiou answered me naturally and point blank “Yes of course Colonel. I wasn’t going to see my Company and my buddies off without me.” On the 2nd, at around midnight, I was alone in the bunker, when I heard a thud in the airlock, a wall of earth had fallen. Like in “Passe-murail”of Marcel Aymé, a barrel-chested trooper tried to walk in and barely made it through. It was the former Commander of the Airborne School of the Demi-Brigade Coloniale de Commandos Parachutistes, that I commanded a year earlier. He had para qualified most of the Battalions that were fighting at Dien Bien Phu. In spite of our age and rank difference, we were good friends. It all started in the control tower during parachute drops over our DZ of the Grande Lande de Meudon that was so beautiful in Spring with its gold coloured Broom trees. The aircraft, an old Junker-Toucan, was dropping off its parachutes in the cloudy skies and Edme holding high a microphone, was screaming out commands: “No 4, come towards the tower, Number 6, keep your legs together.” Nobody was listening and No 4 had long ago forgotten his serial number. Only too happy to have made it out the door, he was watching the ground of sharp gorse and the cement of the airstrip rapidly coming towards him. Edme, was a former SAS para who had been trained in the UK and a veteran of the Liberation of France Campaign and also of the first parachute drops in Indochina. He always wore the same old worn out and seamless British beret, under that beret, I sometimes noticed, that there was a mule headed man.

One day, I mentioned to him the high gas consumption of his service. With a tight lip, chin out and a nasty look Edme answered me back “Yes Colonel, of course Colonel, I understand Colonel.” The next day, jumps were planned, so I came early to the boarding area. At attention, aligned smartly, 18 sticks of 16 men waited. I saluted, and went to my usual spot to suit up and was surprised to notice that there were no parachutes. “Well Edme, where are the chutes?” “they are coming Colonel, they are a bit late, since you are rationing gas, I therefore need to use hippo-mobile means” Stunned and furious, I indeed saw the parachutes arrive in a cart pulled by soldiers that morally objected to jumping. Moving by these memories, I looked at my cart driver of Meudon standing up in a Dien Bien Phu trench. He arrived in the nick

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38 Inapte moral: In the Brigade it designates those who refused to jump...they did all the menial tasks.
of time for the grand finale. His pregnant wife was a nurse in Hanoi, she had seen him off 2 hours earlier. I immediately wrote a message “Marcel arrived safely, in friendship – Langlais”. I then got Edme in the métro and headed towards Eliane2. On Eliane, the relief of the 1/13th DBLE Company had started on the 3rd. A Group leader of Edme’s Company said: « At around dusk we got our warning order: Relieve Eliane2. My Platoon was in the lead, to get to the position; you had to cross a big and wide open area. We did so in one leap, man per man, this would have taken a long time. Only 40 or so Légionnaires were left and they were really happy to see us relieve them.

The Captain that commanded them awaited us at the entrance of the position. He was killed instantly by a 105 mm shell that lopped off the parapet while he was giving his standing orders. The radio operator of Capitaine Edme was also killed. He was our first KIA on Eliane2. My group took up position in the belt trench and in front of the airstrip. These position bunkers that had been destroyed had above them a Chaffee tank. A bazooka round, during a counter-attack, had made it a scrapheap, from its mangled sheet metal a heavy machine gun stuck out. Its name “Bazeilles” was a bad omen indeed. The Légionnaires that I was relieving said to me that the Vietminh were digging a tunnel to blow up the position. I thought this to be a joke; surely this wasn’t a remake of 14-18! The relief had not gone unnoticed and we got our first artillery preparations. It lasted very long, but I can’t remember if we had suffered loses. The artillery barrage lasted until the middle of the night and we awaited the assault, but it never came. That’s when I heard the dull and regular digging noise of a tunnelling team. From time to time, a bigger shock would make a mud fragment fall at the bottom of the trench. Légionnaires didn’t muck about when “they” were digging, and it lasted all night. At dawn’s early light the noise stopped, I thought they were setting up explosive charges but the regular rhythm (like a cadence) of digging started anew. I was happy to hear digging again and that it was day. We were hit once again by an artillery barrage that caused many loses. Since we had to fill in the gaps; I left the area where “they” were digging. The 3rd Company took my position. Capitaine Pouget sent over a group to try and destroy the enemy sappers. Their sortie ended on the barbed wire, only Sgt Clinel came back to the trenches... where he died. There was a defensive gap to the right that had to be filled. I therefore came back to where I had been previously. The Vietminh dug all day. My group was spread out over 50 or so meters, there was still one solid bunker; we repaired it and I put my machine gun there. Hameg the machine gunner, was busy cleaning his weapon, he had stowed away the moving parts under his tent tarp as if for an inspection, when a 75 mm shell came in through the corner slit. While we were gathering the moving parts in the mud and rubble, the Vietminh continued shooting at us at regular intervals, they thank God, were hitting the roof only. We gathered the essentials and evacuated. A short time later, a better aimed shot blew up the bunker to

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39 I met up with Chabrier, seven years after the battle, we was then a Warrant Officer in a para regiment in Dakar. This is where he told me about his story. I have transcribed it word for word in all its moving simplicity.
smithereens. We set up shop in a new emplacement. Towards evening, the 3rd Company had some KIA’s and we stretched ourselves out towards the right. I left “Bazeilles” and the sap works of “Croix de bois” (Wooden crosses). The Platoon of Chef Salaun replaced me. The 4th Company did a night combat jump, the Vietminh came right up to and in the position, we showered them with grenades, they had a lot of dead, and we too. In the early morning, the communication trenches had multiplied and they were now within grenade range. On May 6th, our defensive perimeter prevented the enemy access to the river and at the center of the entrenched camp we had 4 Firebases. Up front and in the hills, there were the 2 Elianes and Eliane4 was manned by what was left of the 5th BPVN and 2/1st RCP and the Companies of Fesselet and Tréhiou of the 1st BPC. Eliane2 was held by Companies commanded by Edme and Pouget of the 1st BPC. Bréchignac commanded this group. The 2 lines ensuring a link to HQ Eliane10 were defended by remnants of the 6th BPC of Commandant Thomas and Eliane3 was manned by 30 men who were the survivors of a decimated Company of the 1/13th DBLE. In spite of the exhaustion of the “old troopers” who had gotten beefed-up by fresh Companies which had recently combat jumped in from Hanoi, the defensive perimeter was solid, coherent and direct liaison was ensured in addition to direct point blank artillery fire in position. However, on the afternoon of the 6th harassing fire continues and new weapons hit the battlefield; shape charges, Bangalore torpedoes and heavy caliber rockets to which no bunkers can survive. At dusk, an all out assault is launched on all our positions. What a night! I lived this out in the bunker, like I had on the first night, traces of the unexploded shell were still visible, Bigeard was beside me. With the radio, we experienced the terrible battles on the Elianes, our dear Elianes, our F...ing Elianes. Their loss meant the loss of Dien Bien Phu. Geneviève was with us, she was worn out by her work as a nurse; with her head resting on her bent elbow and in spite of the din of battle, she slept on a chair. I vividly remember stretching her out on a mattress of parachutes, under a table, we wanted to protect her if the bunker caved in ... All my loyal and faithful troopers were there Verdehlan, Roy, Legrand, Caillaud, Robert, Cassou and that Légion Sergent-chef a former Whermacht warrior, no matter his name, it wasn’t his real name. (for the reader... when you enter the Légion you are given a new name)
was hanging on, the Vietminh send a human wave attack that started off from Dominique3 (that had been overrun on May 1st). At around 21:00 H the Samalens Platoon that defends the Northern salient is overrun. Through this breach the enemy flows into the position where 3 totally isolated hideouts resist desperately: in the center Commandant Thomas with Lieutenants Elise and Le Boudec, to the East on the side of the road, Lepage and to the West close to Eliane12, Corbineau and Trapp. On the Western side, a human wave assault is mounted against Claudine5. All combat positions are destroyed by a massive artillery and mortar barrage. In spite of reinforcements of the Philippe Company and a counter-attack with the last reserves of the 1/2nd REI, the pioneers and the 155 mm gun crew, the Firebase is overrun. A few survivors still resist and are regrouped around a disabled tank whose machine gun is manned by a Légionnaire on its roof. It's midnight, only midnight. At HQ, Le Gars Pierre and Bruno are looking at each other. Yes to helping out, but these men and the ammo, where do we get it? 2 hours earlier, on the tarmac of Hanoi-Bach Mai, 5 C-47’s were lined up in single file with 5 sticks waiting to suit-up. Capitaine Faussurier’s 1st Company of the 1st BPC, the last para Company of Indochina prepares to leave for Dien Bien Phu. The men had waited for 4 days and saw their friends leave every night. All of Indochina knew that they were the last to combat jump. Volunteers still lined up, including one who had completed his tour of duty, he had left Saigon on the planned day for his embarkation home and the Company had open an small clandestine recruiting bureau. The boarding order had just come in on May 6th at 1900H and the trucks had just dropped off the paras at the boarding area.

As No 2 on the stick, Faussurrier was suiting up with some difficulty; that happens when a big man tries to harness-up, yet he was as slim as a dry twig. On that day, his two pants pockets had 2 bottles for me, and a parcel destined for Général de Castries was under his jump smock, this doubled his size and he was worried, saying to himself “Hopefully, I'll not hit the side of the door when exiting and that I don’t break the Colonel’s bottles when I land”

Inspection of the sticks ended under spotlights. Heavily, and looking more like salvage divers, the 80 men climbed the ladders and entered the aircraft cabins, the C-47’s took off at one minute intervals and headed for Dien Bien Phu. The sharp horn blast in the cargo hold resonated and the 22 drowsy men of the first stick awoke. They all reacted automatically by getting up and hooking up to the static line. The jumpmaster checked them out one last time with his flashlight and a great gust of wind rushed into the cargo hold as the door was opened. Standing in the darkness, with their left hand holding on to their static line snap link and their right hand on their reserve chutes, the stick was waiting all the while trying to see their strange DZ out the windows. But they could only see the bluish glow of the engine exhausts. The machine gunner, the No 1, with his leg-bag tied to his thigh, had between him and empty space the arm of the jumpmaster barring his way, he alone, could begin to distinguish the monstrous caldron of fire that was Dien Bien Phu. Still, the aircraft was very high up and seemed to make a big circle. Suddenly, from the right, a burst, rising like a luminous fountain, red beads of AAA tracer shells strangely climbed up like in slow motion, then another red bead right up front... minutes passed... the aircraft was still going around in circles...the door’s signal light remained red as red as the tracer shells and as red as the fires on the ground. In that deadly wait, men longed for the liberating green light that

40 These details were given to me by Capitaine Faussurier. Who would, if need be, deny this absurd and complacent legend that spread around at the time, to the effect that the paras of Dien Bien Phu like some poor scapegoats, were sent to slaughter, like “fresh meat under cellophane”

French paras in flight to Dien Bien Phu in a C-47
would have them hurtling through space\textsuperscript{41}.” On the ground Bigeard and I were mulling over what to do. Should the men jump?

The problem had arisen a month earlier, during the battle of Huguette\textsuperscript{6}, except that today the DZ was right in the middle of the battlefield. How would the pilot know the difference between the fireworks on the ground and the DZ markers? Yesterday, a disaster had occurred. A violent Westerly wind blew and the security margin so as to not fall in enemy hands was no more than 800 meters. Carried away by the winds, a stick had passed over our position. The men of the Firebase had seen lower down, no more than 20 meters away, the parachute cupolas slide like enormous medusas in an aquarium. They then disappeared behind enemy lines. The lone survivor, Le Scanf, a young Sergent-Chef, told me that he had landed in total darkness, and without knowing it, after taking a few steps had fallen in a trench. He then noticed a shadow with a sun helmet and its face masked with gauze, that then put its submachine gun on his chest, and miraculously spared him... Bigeard took the handset and called Battalion: “Lepage from Bruno. Our friends are above us. To have them jump in, we need to stop the flare ships. Can we do that?” Lepage answered back “Priority to flare ships” We then decided to cancel the drop, the formation headed back to Hanoi. Night combat jumps on Dien Bien Phu were over\textsuperscript{42}. I took the handset: “Hello Tourret? ...we just sent back the aircraft. What can you do for Thomas?... 2 Companies of 40 men... Jacquemet and Bailly...Ok, send them over to Eliane10. Hello Guiraud?... all quiet with you?... Send what you can over to Brèche...60 men with Brandon...Tell them to go now.” Jacquemet will start off first, but he will not get there (he will die in Vietminh captivity). Meanwhile, Bailley, the old SAS, will reach at 03:00H the remnants of the 6th BPC (20 paras) lead by Commandant Thomas. Bailley is immediately engaged and seriously wounded. All resistance on Eliane10 is centered on an old Battalion radio shack where Thomas moved when he withdrew. 3 islands of the first resistance had regrouped there. Datin with a handful of men and Lepage who was besieged, but who went missing after being wounded for the 5th time...!

“What a Bastille Day! said Lepage. The world’s costliest fireworks are nothing compared to what was offered to us. The sky, the earth, the Elianes everything was burning, everything scintillated, everything was aflame, while way up in the air, the flare ship continued circling, like a butterfly around a flame. How many were we in the shelter with the wounded and dead? Maybe twenty or thirty....the air was un-breathable with all the smoke and dust, and in the din of exploding charges of TNT that shook the death rattle of totally unconscious Caporal Duval spread out at my feet with his forehead open and bloodied face. It’s sunrise, new reinforcements arrive, that of 2 Platoons of the Légion led by Lieutenant Weinberger. We try to clear eastwards. New Vietminh Battalions are thrown into the caldron of battle. Standing beside me, Le Boudec is hit; he’s got a broken arm streaming with blood. Close-by, I hear a well-known language, the Vietminh are overrunning our position and are clearing the bunkers, submachine gun in hand. In a last survival reflex, I

\textsuperscript{41} « Go » the signal to jump is given by the aircraft pilot when he has identified the DZ, and when he goes over the DZ markers. When the horn blasts and the light turns green, after being red, (on the right side of the door), the No 1 in the door, jumps out closely followed by the whole stick. On operations, the pilot is responsible for that signal, which is an immediate and imperative jump order... no matter what it looks like on the ground. This is when the psychological factor comes into play, it happens that men cannot jump. This problem is called a “refusal to jump”. In training, the trooper is returned to his unit and it doesn’t have any serious consequences for the stick. It’s not the same on an operation, especially at Dien Bien Phu where hesitating a few seconds was enough to have the last para of a stick jump outside the DZ and into enemy hands.

\textsuperscript{42} A year later, Capitaine Faussurier on meeting his friend Lepage chewed him out in a friendly way, accusing him of not enabling him to participate in the battle.
jump into a supposedly empty hole, followed by 2 men. It’s broad daylight, and they still have not captured me." Around midnight, the 2 Companies of the BEP led by Capitaine Brandon and Lieutenant Lecour Grandmaison had been sent forwards as reinforcements to Eliane4. After a 3 hour battle, only 20 arrived at Bottela’s HQ. With what’s left of the 2nd Company of the 2/1st RCP, they again counter-attack at early dawn. Outnumbered 20 to 1, they push back the Vietminh and defend head to toe the newly re-conquered terrain.

Counter-attack of the French to retake a Firebase

Capitaine Guilement and Phan Van Phu and Sous-Lieutenant Lafanne are KIA. The surviving Officer of the Battalion, Sous-Lieutenant Mackoviak rallies 20 men still fit to fight and desperately defends the trenches on the Southeastern slopes. Resistance remains incredibly steadfast.

On Eliane2, Pouget had stopped enemy pressure on the Western and Northern sides. At around 16:00H he was able to contact Vadot via radio: “Things have quieted down for the last 2 hours. I think I can retake the entire Firebase, if you send me reinforcements, otherwise the end is near” Vadot could only reply: “I have no more men or shells. Hang on at least until dawn.”

At last here is dawn, the end of the story of Sergent Chabrier and the end of Eliane2: “Artillery was hitting us even harder, furthermore regular120 mm mortars salvoes and something new appeared, Katyusha rockets. I had positioned Gast in a forward OP on the Champs-Elysées that was the name of the terreplein that separated the belt trench from what was left of the barbed wire; I then linked up with Sergeants Cassiède and Midy. We were exchanging thoughts when a shadow came from above and jumped into the trench. It was a Vietminh soldier pointing his PPSH SMG at us. His voice was deformed by the gauze over his mouth, he yelled: “Give up! You’re lost”, stunned, we froze on the spot. At the slightest move we’d get a burst. Thank God, in every trench, we had an infantryman’s niche and, in one of those niches right behind Cassiède, there was one of ours. All he had to do was to slowly raise his MAT-49 to rid us with a short burst and in short order of this audacious.

Barely had we gotten over our emotions, that the second wall collapses, this time Gast falls back, he’s not happy. He says that the Vietminh aren’t very far and he wants artillery support...One hour has gone by and the sap works blew up. It made almost no noise, but the earth shook a lot and the trench collapsed. A huge geyser of earth went high up and fell back down vertically. I barely had the time to throw myself in Hameg’s bunker. Earth started falling back in huge compact blocks that shook the roof. I thought of Salami and Bruni and all those of the 2nd Platoon who replaced us on the sap work. There was then a clamour, and general crackling of automatic weapons punctuated by grenade explosions.

The human wave assault poured through the breach illuminated by the white light of flares. Artillery and 120’s were still firing. Hameg on his rampart was firing mags after mags in single bursts. The Vietminh did nothing to neutralize us. They passed in front of us at 30 meters, screaming and going through the breach, we...
also saw them wadding through and slipping in the torrent of mud that now flowed from what had been the emplacement of the 2nd Platoon. As Hameg said “We had a field day with our weapon eyepieces”. I do not know how long it lasted. We got a salvo of 120 that dislocated the bunker. We had to clear the rampart, when we were finished, there was nothing, the Vietminh were in the position and house clearing. I rapidly took stock: I had 5 men left of which 3 were wounded. In vain the 3rd Company counter-attacked, we brought back the wounded. I was bandaging Sergent Penot when I realised we were surrounded. Hameg tried to pierce through, but he got hit in the head and fell screaming.

There was a cascade of grenades and a lot of machine gun bursts sprayed at me and also a lot of mud. I got back up, but was cornered by 2 Vietminh soldiers; they were all over the trench. I then realised that the battle of Eliane2 was over. All you could hear was the calls of the Vietminh and the moaning of the wounded. I fell in the ranks of the column of prisoners between Lieutenant Nectoux and a Vietnamese Corporal. That’s when I heard a slow and precise burst of heavy machine gun fire. It was Bruni with Bana in the “Bazeilles” tank firing their last rounds. On this May 7th 1954, the sun was rising on “the last square” of a Dien Bien Phu that had been bled white, Eliane2 had been lost, Claudine and Eliane10 were in agony. Bréchignac and Botella’s fierce resistance still enabled a miracle. After the night’s staggering loses, would the enemy be able to take the last bastion of Eliane4 that prevented him from crossing the Nam Youn and invade the entrenched camp? Something had to be done on Eliane2, but with whom? The living or the dead?

It was broad daylight when I heard steps coming down in my bunker. Lemeunier entered with his usual calm, he advised that he had gathered a handful of Légionnaires for a counter-attack on the Western side. I interjected that all the fit to fight in Dien Bien Phu had to be on the assault of Eliane. The shelling started anew with an unequal and still unseen ferocity.

A new angry and high-pitched mewing sound dominated the now familiar 105mm symphony. Katyushas appeared on the last day for the coup de grace, this was our Requiem symphony. During the harmony of the Katyushas, three specters entered the bunker. Sticky with mud, haggard and exhausted living statues, yet hopelessly they staggered in and dropped themselves on the ground stupefied. Bigeard looks at them, leans over one of them, and takes his hand. I hear him whisper with a mournful softness “Lepage, my poor Lepage”. The destiny of Eliane10 was now sealed. Besieged in the last bunker by a pack of wolves that barked out: “Give up, we will spare your lives” the last survivors of the 6th BPVN, Lieutenant René Lepage and 2 infantrymen, fired off their last mags and threw their last grenades. The light machine gun bursts and grenade fragments lacerated the walls of the communication trench. They then cleared a passage through the roof, Lepage slid through and with a single bound, jumped over a trench filled with Vietminh. He saw weapons aimed at him and quickly fire, but they missed him. Quickly, he was followed by his 2 infantrymen, he managed to disappear in the maze of communication trenches and ended up with us totally exhausted lying on the ground. We were definitely cut off from the Elianes and their 75mm artillery support including the machine guns of the 2 buried Chaffees. These had now been turned into bunkers and with the quadruple 50’s were the only weapons which still had ammo. This small firebase had been installed on both sides of my bunker; it could fire directly at the slope of the Elianes. My ears were numb with its noise when the phone rang.
“Hello Colonel this is Grauwin. The medics are now on the front line.” “My dear Grauwin, we are now all on the front line”. “Yes Colonel, I know and Hantz, Vidal and Gindrey are still operating patients, soon, this will no longer be possible. There are now more and more wounded... in all the trenches that lead to us, they are cram full in an unending line that only ends when it comes in contact with the Vietminh. Some are dead and stuck in the mud, those that have come forwards by marching on them and they sink even deeper... Rivier the Médecin Chef of the 6th has just arrived. His Battalion has been decimated. His medic collapsed, he has not eaten for 2 days, and he is totally exhausted. Rouault, the Doctor of the 5th is also here, he has a broken arm and also here is Capitaine Le Boudec of the 6th with a broken arm, it’s his 4th wound at Dien Bien Phu. All my old patients I sent back 15 days ago with orders to RTU (Return To Unit) are back. They are completely naked under a cake of mud. Some lack a leg, some an arm, and here a one-eyed that I operated last night. The Vietminh pushed them out of the bunkers where they were mixed in with the dead and they were told: “Go back to the medical center and tell your Doctor that we are coming...”

Yes they are coming, an immense clamor made up of hundreds of triumphant screams are unleashed from the hills. From captured positions that dominate and encircle Eliane4, screaming human waves descend. They slowly and inexorably advance, weapon in hand without firing. They step over piles of dead bodies, jump over trenches that are muddy cesspools, walk through chopped up barbed wire and neutralized minefields, sweep down hills and bunkers that are the last standing rocks in the storm. Our artillery has no more shells and doesn’t thunder any longer, the same for the weapons on Eliande4.

There’s one radio call from Bréchignac: “Bruno from Bréche. It’s the end, don’t clobber us, there are too many wounded” and a few seconds later from Botella: “Bruno from Dédé. It’s over they are in the HQ farewell, tell Gars Pierre that we loved him a lot”... Then, the voice of Lieutenant Armandy “I’m blowing my position, Hip, hip, hip...” then total silence. I come out of the bunker and watch wide-eyed. The torrential rains of the last few weeks have now stopped and the sun is shining in a wide blue sky. Way up in the heavens a C-47 that couldn’t care less, is still airdropping ... one parcel for us .. one parcel for the enemy, one parcel for us... one for the enemy.

In front of me, 50 meters away on the left shore of the river, those of the “dross of battle” were still there. The bank they are on forms an escarpment pierced with alveolus, like a huge beehive. That’s where battle deserters, by the hundreds, took refuge. We had no time to care for that miserable trash. They were hiding in the lair like so many land crabs that one finds on tropical shores, coming out with their pincers reaching out for a pitance and going to ground at the slightest sound. Our crabs also came out of their holes at night to steal parachuted rations that they accumulated in their lairs. When the camp was starving, they organized a profitable traffic, a food black market, I was also told that papers were stolen, signatures counterfeited, citations were sold... all battlefields have their dregs and we were no exception. Our 3 Diana’s, the rice paddy and its 2 hills were there up close, but they had changed lover. Under a shiny crust of mud, we couldn’t distinguish any trace of organization, only a uniform upheaval, and an accumulation of monstrous debris. No noise, no movement, no life. Is it possible to imagine that close-by, on the other side of this river, an insignificant obstacle, thousands of men were ready to mount their last assault? Suddenly the air is filled with the roar of engines. Fighter bombers dive vertically from above like eagles and disappear behind the hills and spring up at maximum speed accompanied by the booming and smoke of explosions. This is the gallant last

44 According to Doctor Grauwin : I was a Doctor at Dien Bien Phu
fight of our airmen who are now dots on the horizon disappearing Southwards towards Hanoi, that is free and alive. Cassou comes in with a warm soup. We eat it rapidly, without thinking that this is our last meal before knowing the day to day pangs of hunger. Calm is prolonged, it’s 13:00H. What should we do? Attempt a breakout towards the South where battle had never been engaged, a few days earlier patrols had swept the area without finding any enemy.

Bigeard and I were bent over studying aerial photos. The passage along the river; that was wide open 3 days earlier was now blocked by 3 thin white lines; these 3 trenches had to be crossed before our flight through the jungle and our attempt to evade the howling hordes that would be running after us. We called Lemeunier, Vadot and the surviving 3 Battalion Commanders, Tourret, Guiraud and Clémençon. All they can say is that it is impossible to attempt this with their exhausted men; Bigeard and I think the same as they. Accompanied by Lemeunier and Vadot we go and see the General. He’s in the bunker alone, by his side there’s the hertzian telephone linking him to Hanoi. I tell him that it is impossible to attempt a breakout, then, my comrades leave. It’s 16:00H, the General calls up Hanoi and hands me the earpiece. General Cogny is there.

« General, the enemy is along the Nam Youn. A breakout is bound to fail. A new night battle would entail the slaughter of thousands of wounded that are amassed in the bunkers. We need to call an end to the fight”. The voice of General Cogny, that I hear, is close and broken by emotion, he says “Au revoir, my dear friend” “Au revoir Général”. Stories abound about my relationship with General de Castries during the battle. All I will say is; that it was 2 soldiers that gave each other the accolade before leaving each other on that night. There were some “Kind Souls” that were astonished to the effect that the defenders or at least the leaders of the entrenched camp did not fight to the last man like a Captain of a ship “that goes down with it”. There is nothing glorious about being a prisoner and I am not one to become a prisoner without giving anyone a fight for their money. One is not unworthy or to be ashamed when one has used up all the means at his disposal to fight, the expression “the honors of war” is quite fitting for the survivor of a lost battle. We thought we deserved “the honors of war”. The beautiful Vietminh army’s infantryman that had beaten us suffered 22,000 KIA’s in our barbed wire, they could have given it to us, but their Communist leaders did not want it to be so, those words meant nothing to them, if after our surrender few of us were mistreated, we felt their implacable ascendency. They worked incessantly at breaking anything that would help us hang on to hope and life. Right from day one, rank, hierarchy, the bond between men and their leaders was cut off. Misery and hunger were the basic conditions immediately imposed on us for Communist indoctrination. Maybe they could have built that Bridge over the River Kwaï with slaves but not by a Regiment commanded by its Leader. The Bridge over the River Kwaï ! Colonel Nicholson! A lot of ink was wasted on that fiction. How easy it is to dream of the destruction of a bridge by those who built it, before that train passes over it. Then the symbol of that construction, gave to 1,000 men a sense of discipline, honor and the strength to live takes on a real meaning ...

But the Japanese were not the Communists. I go back to my bunker. Geneviève comes to say goodbye to me.

Prisonners of Éliane 4 told us later that they barely escaped being slaughtered by the murderous bombing. A Vietminh column was moving up to the front got surprised in the open and got hacked to bits.

With the exception or flyers and officers who worked in or anything having to do with intelligence these were separated from everyone and sent to punishment camps.
I take her two hands: “My dear Geneviève, our adversaries fought as good soldiers and hopefully after this, I hope they will behave as soldiers. You could be liberated soon, when you see my mother tell her that I end this battle at peace with my conscience as an officer and as a Christian” We hug each other ... with emotion. Rapidly, I select what I need to burn. Cassou has lighted a bonfire. Above it, there is an epitaph emerging from the debris, on a board, barbed wire is drawn around these words: “They awoke each morning, astonished to still be alive”. I read that phrase every morning. In better days it hung above our bar, it was taken from a daily newspaper that appeared in February, it made us smile. I burn my letters and documents, my combat diary that I wrote every night and that I read the next day to my comrades, this story that has resurrected and that is astonishingly precise in my memory and that my surviving comrades I hope will hopefully recognize.

I burn the leather picture frame and that dear picture, on my sailboat, of the woman that became my wife. I burn my red paratrooper beret. And Dien Bien Phu buried itself in the shroud of 60,000 parachutes that opened above her during the battle, and there wasn’t a single white flag raised on any positions. Radio intercept of the enemy warned us that the attack would come before dusk. At 17:00H orders were given to destroy everything that could be destroyed. The last infantry ammo was thrown away by the shovel full in the river. Radio sets were bashed in; troopers stuck the barrels of their weapons in the trench parapets and blasted away one last time. Gunners took phosphorous grenades out of their boxes and welded the gun breeches. The engine oil of the 2 Chaffees that were still operational was taken out and the engines rendered useless by revving them up to overheat.

I walked down the steps of my HQ for the last time, all my team was there, their watery eyes showed the hopelessness of such a ruthless and vain battle. In a rage, Robert finished destroying his typewriter. I sat dow at my usual place. I put on my old jungle hat and tied my belt. In front of me Bigeard finished rolling around his ankle a map of Upper Tonkin. I heard him murmur while putting his boot: “hide in a hole, under a bundle of parachutes and by night float down the river hanging on to a bamboo.”

The phone rang. A line linked us with the closest position to Eliane. I recognized Lieutenant Allaire’s voice: “They are coming ... without shooting.. » Then more waiting. We heard the flip flopping of sandals going at a mad gallop on the road. It grew louder, passed the bunker and reached that of the General.

I saw up the stairs, a square of bright sky. The silhouette of a Vietminh infantryman boxed it in with his camouflaged cork sun helmet. With his greenish uniform, bayonet on his rifle across his chest and with the eyes of victorious soldier he said: “Get out”

The Vietminh human wave submerged the last defenders of Dien Bien Phu, after 3 months of siege and 56 days of battle totally isolated...Followed by all the others, I climbed up the steps of our Golgotha.

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47 This message was transmitted word for word 4 months later to the French Consulate in Chicago.
CHAPTER VIII

After Battle reflections.- Effects of Vietminh artillery.- Dispatching and use of reserves.- Tactical air support.- Meeting with the military inquiry commission.- Nightmare and end.-Could we have continued fighting in Tonkin?- Performance of indigenous troops.- Mao Tse Tung and revolutionary war.- The Saint-Cyr “Ceux de Dien Bien Phu” (Those of Dien Bien Phu)

“Camerone, Sidi Brahim, Bazeilles, all our units, Légion, Chasseurs and Coloniale have glorious anniversaries every year. It is also true, that these epic battle anniversaries were all defeats of ours. “For us paras, we lack something like this” a friend said jokingly, this was before my 3rd departure for the Fareast in 1953.

Well, now it’s done. For us paras, we lack nothing, not even the bitter fame of a lost battle.

A battle lost, by whom? We do well not to answer this question and I think that this simple true-life story of battle cannot and will not lead to endless discussions. Those who were there made errors, and the word self-criticism, that has a bad ring to it in Western ears, does not scare me.

Nevertheless, I think that in France we have this bad habit, no matter the outcome of a battle, to congratulate the heroism of the combatants of all the units and the merit and knowledge of headquarters staff. On the scale of the Fareast, Dien Bien Phu was on the scale of Dunkerque or a Stalingrad and no exception to the rule. Meanwhile, it is not to downgrade the honor of a service, unit or a man nor is it to have a twisted mind to want to learn lessons from the errors made. That is why as a leader and major player that has lived through this ongoing battle, hour per hour, for 56 days; that I will try to analyze some of the reasons that led to failure and this, in the following order:

- Enemy artillery fire
- Defensive organization
- Dispatching and use of reserves
- Tactical air support

If we stick to the well-known pre-battle numbers, enemy artillery was composed of 24X 105mm M-2 Howitzers with 25,000 rounds, 20 X 120mm mortars and 15X 75mm guns. Taking into account the initial area of the entrenched camp that stretched out in a rectangle of 15 km by 2, at first glance, there was, nothing to worry about. In fact, this artillery was judiciously tasked: concentrations on only one attacked position, harassment of HQ’s, interdiction of relief and resupply axis’s and counter-battery fire. This gave the impression, to those subjected to it, to be crushed under overwhelming fire power.

Of course, this amount of shell fire is efficient only if it comes in at the right time and place. There too, Vietminh gunners showed themselves to be masters, thanks to their techniques and those excellent O.P balconies that dominated the basin at distances of no more than 5 kilometers. Concerning artillery resupply, it was a problem for them, sadly enough; from April 20th it was ensured by our own airdrops on a scale of roughly 30% of what should have been ours.

That notwithstanding, 105 or 120mm shells whose effects were well-known, should not have caused the disasters of the early days, 3 HQ’s pulverized and the hospital destroyed. We knew full well that a meter of earth and logs covering a hole of 2 meters in depth gave complete protection.
Now, nowhere had this been done. The fault rests squarely on the shoulders of Command and all the players who did not believe that the Vietminh had artillery, and if there is self-criticism, it is on that specific point that it must be borne in the first place.

On the subject of dispatching and the use of reserves which with fire flexibility and it’s use, constitutes the main concern of a leader in battle, I have already said that at first, units reserved for the entire entrenched camp were 2 Battalions of paratroopers on a total of 12. One of these Battalions, the 8th Choc held the Northern side of the camp at the end of the airstrip. The second, the 1st BEP, was a reserve on the Western side but it also had a defensive role. Originally, the use of reserves was wrong, and I can well remember hearing Gaucher who, before his death, was the OC of the main resistance center, telling me during fire support exercises for the peripheral Firebases: “But who will plug up the holes left wide open by your 2 Battalions?”

On March 7th, the Commander in Chief had proposed to Colonel de Castries that 3 additional Battalions be sent in. But de Casties refused, because he couldn’t do otherwise, where would we put them in our already overcrowded camp? in tents?

In fact, we didn’t need reinforcements so much as the relief of mediocre units. One can think that these Battalions could have been accepted as such. But, was it better that our 3 Battalions be broken up? Then the battle started, and after a short interlude of 10 days, all liaisons with the rear area were cut off, except for parachute drops. I think that this is what needs to be understood if one wants to understand the unfolding psychology of the Battle. That is the reason why it cannot be compared to any other battle in our history. During 14-18, the deluge or artillery fire was in no way similar to what we experienced at Dien Bien Phu, but even in the most terrible of battles, soldiers never stayed on the front lines for more than a week, and at times much less, a wound would send them to a rear area hospital. There was nothing of the kind at Dien Bien Phu. When I read written works entitled “combat jump” about airborne operations from 1941 to 1954 where it states that Dien Bien Phu was a “cake walk” compared to such great battles in our history, I would have loved to have had the author in the entrenched camp in April 1954 for that “cake walk” we would have a good belly laugh on that one. As I said in the first chapter of this story, the reserves couldn’t move after the loss of Béatrice. The next day, a unit combat jumped in, bringing the number of Battalions to 3. 2 of these battalions fought on the 15th but it was a stalemate for Gabrielle, then the garrison of the Anne-Marie Firebase broke up and a second Battalion, the 6th BPC jumped in. This was on March 17th on the 5th day of battle. I therefore had at that time the 2 initial Battalions with a defensive mission and 2 Battalions I could use as per immediate need. They set themselves up to dig themselves in under fire in a rear area that was as flat as a billiard table. I was happy with the means at my disposal. All the same, the inspection of Firebases before March 30th showed me some weaknesses; I filled in the gaps with 3 para Companies. Due to this situation, I asked Hanoi for the Groupement aéroporté and its 2 Battalions ready to go at a moment’s notice (when daylight combat jumps were still possible) and the principle was acknowledged. It’s during the night combat jumps of the 30th and 31st, that I was at that time led to bring in reserve units. It’s also on that night, that I understood that the paras couldn’t be everywhere and that I now took the habit of managing by taking organic or infantry Companies in quiet sectors. Of the 5 Companies that were successively sent out to beef-up Eliane2, only one was a para Company; the 4 others came from Battalions in the area (1/13th DBLE and 1/2nd REI) that had to be stripped off their lines. I kept in reserve my 2 para Battalions for the counter-attacks of the next day on the Eliane1 and Domonique2 Firebases and these were lost at 20:00H. In fact,
they reached the top of the positions the next day at around 16:00H but couldn’t hang on to it and on that
night I had 2 decimated Battalions, the 8th Choc and 6th BPC and 2 Battalions in positions on Firebases who were in
contact but exhausted, the 5th BPVN and the 1st BEP. It was urgent to rebuild reserves. But Hanoi did not agree to a
combat jump of the GAP, that’s when my problems started with the rear echelon, it’s a battle that lasted right up to
May 6 and that exhausted me more than fighting the enemy. The fate of Indochina rested in this battle which was a
secondary front for Saigon and Hanoi. In Général Castroux’s book “The two acts of the Indochinese drama” he
wrote: “In fact, it seems evident that Général Navarre did not understand that what was unfolding around Dien Bien
Phu was to become the main battle of the entire campaign. No doubt, he considered it a serious local problem and
that the measures he took could bring it under control. That should and would not detract him from his “Opération
Centre Vietnam” in his general plan. He was fully conscious of the risks Dien Bien Phu was facing, including the fall of
the fortress. All in all, he accepted the fact that the entrenched camp played the role that it was assigned, that of a
suction device, holding up the majority of organized enemy forces, far from the sector that he considers essential.
The dice had been cast; Général Navarre efficiently ensured the leadership of the battle. To this effect, on March
10th, he advised Général Cogny that operations in the Delta and those of Dien Bien Phu had to be lead by Général
Cogny alone... He reminded him that there must be constant and close liaison between him and GATAC Nord (Air
Force) during the battle. “These orders were in effect essential and indispensable but one is lead to believe that for
safety’s sake on the eve of the Northwestern battle Général Navarre should have come to Hanoi with a small
Command HQ and have the assistance of the Air Force Commander of Indochina Général Lauzin”. Hanoi had a
similar view. Dien Bien Phu was a distant and secondary front, all reinforcements to it were at the expense of the
Delta the main front. As early as April 10th the opinion openly expressed with regards to us for all intents and
purposes was: “they are doomed”. It is also true to say that Hanoi barely had the means to help us. Général Catroux
wrote this about it: “Général Cogny had received from the Commander in Chief orders “to lead the battle”, was he
able, and to what extent was he able to fulfill his mission? The answer can only be a negative one. Everyone knows
that once a battle is started, the leader in charge can intervene in 2 ways. He coordinates actions and uses his
reserves. In this specific case, of interest to us, Général Cogny could simply not act in that twin role... With regards to
land forces, he was totally unable to have any impact on the unfolding battle since he had no reserve units, this
because these units were directly under the command of the Commander in Chief. Taking into consideration air
assets, he was not as disadvantaged, but he had no freedom of action. GATAC Nord (i.e. the Air Force) was not
under his command but only open to his requests, he could only through Général Déchaux (Air Commander Tonkin)
coordinate air support with artillery”. Hanoi, for us; was only a rear echelon logistics area which had means at its
disposal to resupply us in the entrenched camp with munitions, food and materiel. One cannot be surprised that
under these conditions relations were tense during the entire battle between those on the ground leading the battle
and the rear area. Exchanges of telegrams were bitter indeed. For example, indigenous troops were deserting in
droves in Dien Bien Phu, could one accept that a Vietnamese Battalion that had only 3 months of training be sent in?
Could one not be annoyed and irritated by differed decisions because in Saigon or Da Lat, from where the battle was
managed, the reality of the situation was unknown and delays in transmission were much too long? In the final
analysis, the reinforcements sent in were always the result of endless discussions and these almost always arrived
too late. This is how the GAP that had been on alert since March 30th was reduced to the 2nd Battalion of the 1st
RCP and they combat jumped in with us on April 4th to the 6th. It was too late to attempt anything on Dominique2 a
key defensive position and the battle to clear Huguette6 was nearing its end. All in all, on April 7th, the total number
of reserve elements was still 12 Companies (3 Battalions), and I was still confident in our victory. I remember having
made a bet with Commandant Blanchet whose stake was a case of Muskadet (I still owe it to him) on the success of
3 projects: taking back Dominique2 and Eliane1 and reestablishing liaisons with Isabelle. These 3 projects were
carefully studied. In the end and in agreement with Bigeard, I decided upon retaking Eliane1 and for this purpose I
also got the approval of Colonel de Castries. I thought of taking 2 Battalions, one for the attack and the other to
relieve the conquered position. These units would probably be exhausted by nightfall. So, before making a final decision, a new Battalion was asked for and sent in. The 2nd BEP combat jumped in on the nights of the 8th to the 10th of April, it was the only unit that arrived without delays and on the 10th the Eliane1 business was a success, as we all know. The occupation and later on, the defense of the position absorbed the totality of the 2/1st RCP. This magnificent unit literally melted away in 20 days of unending combat. The combat jump of the 2nd BEP filled that void and on April 11th I could still see a positive outcome in the future. 12 days of ferocious combat followed and ended with the loss of Huguette6 and Huguette1. With 2 Companies garrisoning these Firebases a quick reaction force of Battalion strength disappeared and notably all the light infantry that could be provided by the 1/2nd REI and 1/13th DBLE. But the 2nd BEP was intact and I jealously watched over how it was employed when the Général decided to reoccupy Huguette1. I already mentioned that this was my only run-in with the OC and of course I obeyed. But the result was as I had predicted!. The total annihilation of the Battalion in 2 hours of combat and failure of the counter-attack. The two BEP’s were amalgamated and reconstituted in the semblance of a Battalion that occupied the last Huguettes and at the end of April I found myself with a reserve with a personnel strength of 3 Companies of the 6th BPC (for the first time I had to sort things out by implanting a 4th Company on the wavering position of a RTA) and 2 Companies of the 8th Choc. A new Battalion was requested and sent in. From May 1st to the 4th, the 1st BPC combat jumps in to the rescue but the battle took on such a rhythm that it was no longer possible to build up reserves. The Companies of the 1st BPC relieved exhausted combatants on their position and this while in direct and heavy contact with the enemy. On the last night, simultaneous attacks of all positions practically annihilated all coordination of reserves.

“This is the end of the exposé that could seem fastidious and that will be of interest only those who wish to learn lessons from this battle. Maybe it seems like a selfish plea, yet, I’m still of the opinion that reserves were used wisely but there were serious deficiencies in their positioning and dispatching. Generally, I feel I have proven null and void all the accusations that wanted me to “have been subject to the enemy’s will without having tried to impose our will on him”.

I will now cover the subject of Tactical Air Support (TAS) and rapidly cover 2 aspects of this TAS: transport and strategic fire support of which I have spoken at length previously. Air Transport accomplished its task as best it could and they did so heroically at that. In spite of the number of daily rotations, C-47 crews did, on average, one mission per day for 56 days; this average was insufficient in relations to air dropping the required tonnage to “feed” the battle. With regards to Strategic Aviation it was powerless when it came to cutting off communications of enemy logistics. Its bombs were of no effect on jungle trails and well camouflaged trucks and coolies with bicycles who were well versed in countering aerial bombardment. I would like to expound a bit on the use of TAS that worked directly in support of the camp, its aerial artillery of sorts. Tons of bombs and napalm canisters were dumped on enemy lines around the camp and to what effect? Direct TAS with the security limitations to friendly positions was always too far to enable use. Furthermore, this TAS could only be done by dive-bombing and AAA density generally interdicted this type of attack to fighter bombers. Only once was there direct TAS, in fact, it was on April 24th during the counter-attack on Huguette1. The results were remarkable on all
points. The Air Force literally gave us the position, it wasn’t retaken for lack of synchronization between the end of the bombing and H Hour, and Command on the ground was the one at fault. As to TAS results on enemy lines and gun batteries, it remained hypothetical since aircraft never saw anything and the enemy never made known its loses due to TAS. It seems evident that gun batteries never got hit, meanwhile, a lot of AAA was destroyed, bombs and napalm must certainly have caused loses in units going up to or those preparing to leave the FEBA (Forward Echelon of the Battle Area). All the same, results obtained were never up to the means and efforts used, be it on attack plans with regards to lines of communications and to that of TAS. The lessons learned from the second phase of the Korean operations gave us a glimpse of the upcoming failure: “In the summer of 1951, Operation Strangle’s aim was to disrupt Sino-Korean communications and it floundered terribly; this in spite of the thousands of daily sorties executed for months. With regards to massive bombardment of the enemy’s FEBA that alternated with long term operations on the rear areas, they both bore no fruits.

After having won a World War where during operations, its TAS played an essential role, the result for the West evolved in Asia to what one could call the phenomena of resistance to antiseptics and antibiotics, a race of combatants impervious to aircraft. Bombing targets were designated to the GATAC in Hanoi through TAS. I often gave my point of view on the selection of those areas, but that was all, and that is why I was stunned when a year after the battle, at the Military Commission of Inquiry to which I was summoned concerning the battle of Dien Bien Phu Général Valin asked me why I had diverted Air Force bombing missions.

Here’s my view on the incident:

I had appeared on October 17th, 1955 in front of the Commission held in Paris at the Ministry of National Defence after having made a report on “my activities on my successive roles during the battle”. Sitting alone at the end of a long table, I had in front of me, Général Catroux with 4 other generals, an Admiral and a Governor.

The conversation was taped. Général Catroux spoke to me on these terms: “Colonel, you have given us a report that is very interesting since it represents what you have lived through and it is evident that one of the difficulties this Commission has; is to get the feel of the battle. With this in mind, what you have written really gives us the true pulse of this battle. After having studied your report, we thought it would be good to see you, firstly, because we do not want you to get the feeling that we will not only listen to those giving the orders, but that the views of “the boots on the ground and up front” are very important. Secondly, because there are a few points that we need clarifications on”. I therefore answered the questions asked of me and I must admit that nobody was trying to pick a quarrel with me until Général Valin asked me why I had diverted his bombing missions and I was asked why I had used Air Force personnel (Capitaine Charnot) on infantry missions. I was so flabbergasted that I didn’t know what to answer him. How could it be possible to imagine that the OC of a bomber unit having received his mission from the GATAC in Hanoi could be diverted from it by a call from a Lieutenant Colonel on the ground that had no Command legitimacy in Dien Bien Phu? Gathering my thoughts, I affirmed to Général Valin that I spoke to in flight aircraft only to give news to my family. If I have ever intervened in target designation of bombing missions, it was to designate only, and this through the intermediary of TAS, the areas that needed to be “worked over” with bombs or napalm. I must add that Général Catroux seemed to not give weight to this charge against me since after 2 hours of deliberation he concluded with the following: “Well Colonel, if nobody has any further questions, I would like to thank you for having explained this to us, and above all, on behalf of the Commission, I want to congratulate you for having been a true Combat Leader in that very critical period. Not only have you never lost hope, but you have fought every day, plugged up the breaches to try to maintain a situation, and to last for as long as possible. Lady Luck wasn’t by your side, but you have the Honor of having done what you have done.”

48 Camille Rougeron, op. Cit.
Whatever the case may be, I can say that the weight of responsibilities I have assumed doesn’t weight too heavily on my broad shoulders. At the beginning of the battle, I was a simple Paratrooper Lieutenant Colonel with directly under my command 10,000 men, nobody in Hanoi or elsewhere ever wanted such a beautiful command. It was easy until March 29th to get to Dien Bien Phu with a parachute on your back to land here. I was in this damn basin up to my neck and I staid in it to the bitter end. If we, the boots on the ground, made errors, we paid a heavy price for them; it wasn’t the 56 days of combat of which we, I think, have all kept exalting memories of, but that of the nightmare that followed.

Here is an episode of this nightmare:

At the end of the month of June we are parked in the stables of a hut in Tho, not far from Chiem Hoa, we ate “to survive” a ball of boiled rice in a latanier tree leaf. An unexpected dessert was served, a spoonful of sugar cane molasses was quite an improvement on daily rations. This morning, for the first time, we each had, 2 tobacco leaves. Something was afoot. I took out of my pocket a stolen shred of paper of l’Humanité our “Brain cleaner” (Humanité is a French Communist newspaper) I rolled my tobacco leaf in it, borrowed a coal from the hearth of our Tho farmer host and thought of all that Manna of rations of logistics, I started smoking …my newspaper. The Political Commissar and Camp Commander with his hate-filled smile under his sun helmet appeared: “Get your shoes, we move out in 10 minutes, you’ll know in time where you are going” Shoes were taken off to prevent evasions. Everyone gathered a pair in the bundle that was watched over by an armed guard. The bambooos and loads of rice were distributed and two by two, bamboo on the shoulder and the load tied to the bamboo, we miserable coolies headed south where we had come from. A crazy thought invaded our minds, “we’re going south, towards the Red River, Hanoi… freedom….” There was scuttlebutt about a cease-fire! On the morning of the 3rd day we arrived by the shores of the Clear River around Na Don in a vast rice paddy where an immense crowd of shadows was gathered: 10,000 or 15,000 shadows all Dien Bien Phu prisoners and all prisoners of the Indochina war. In the middle of the rice paddy stood a scaffold. 3 Soviet movie producers went up and stood atop it. The shadows stood in ranks by threes; the Général was alone at the head of the column, then me, Bigeard, Lalande, then Pazzis, Vadot and then the rest. For 6 hours we passed in front of the cameras in a continuous circle. Since we are in the nightmare chapter, let me write about the end, the days that preceded our liberation in and around mid-September. The Party had decided to make a big do about it and went all out. In the huge camp with beautiful straw huts near Tuyen Quang, you couldn’t do 100 meters without passing under a Victory Arc decorated with banderols. “Have a safe trip home, long live peace and friendship between peoples”. There were unending feasts. All the ration boxes, leftover from airdrops and boxes from the Red Cross were spread over our tables, one had to have lived on boiled rice for months what am I saying .. for years.. to imagine the feast that a can of sardines represents when eaten by 2 guests. Then a delegation of elderly villagers solemnly gave us cakes and sweets, a delegation of schoolchildren also came to pin on our cast-offs the dove of Picasso; the USO group of the 308 Division gave, in our honour, a gala representation during which young girls who spoke perfect French sat beside us commenting on the scene. All this was a con game and propaganda jungle drums with no spontaneity and in spite of the years of captivity, could not have duped anyone. Yet….when we climbed in the trucks that led us to Viet Tri, an old Vietminh NCO that commanded a group of soldiers guarding us; gathered his men and solemnly saluted us.
No, I do not think that there is a specific Général that is responsible or this or that government also, or myself for that matter for having rerouted Air Force bombing missions, but the entire country for having abandoned its professional soldiers and massacred the elite of its Cadres in that distant foreign adventure and to conclude, I would like to express my thoughts on 3 specific points

-Possibilities of continuing the fight after Dien Bien Phu
-The use and performance of indigenous troops
-The revolutionary war theories of MaoTse Tung

It is often said that all was not lost in the Indochina war after Dien Bien Phu. I am not of that opinion and remain convinced that after the battle, there was no exit strategy to get out of the Tonkin. Maybe Haiphong with close air support from the Air Force and the fleet could have become another entrenched camp but Route Coloniale 5 could have been cut and Hanoi and the Delta would have been lost. In this dead-end situation the Mendès-France government did its best. The conditions of Geneva were almost the same as those of the Korean armistice that had been concluded a year earlier between powerful America and the no less powerful China. It is highly probable that our adversary was moved by pressure from the USSR. Couldn’t we have done any better than this split and to leave in the Free World from Hue southwards? And in Southern Indochina couldn’t our country still have influence? In this story, I talked about the numerous desertions in the entrenched camp. In fact on the 13 Firebases that were overrun, 8 had been so, due to entire garrisons deserting (3 Battalions) and that cost absolutely nothing to the enemy. A 4th Battalion (completely annihilated) stayed in the entrenched camp for the duration of the battle.

The truth hurts, that being said, these desertions cannot be swept under the rug and forgotten. It explains this crowd of prisoners that one too often shoves in the face of the defenders of Dien Bien Phu. Yes, some didn’t fight, but this was predictable. 20 years before the battle de Gaulle had written: “Of all war ordeals, the hardest seems to be the lot of the besieged. The thought of finding oneself in the eye of the firestorm and horribly isolated, to live amongst and with the wounded, the continuous whittling away of troops that are not renewed, lowers morale of troops….When such shocks come with the surprise of baptism of fire, to resist it, one needs exceptional cohesion.”

Indigenous troop Battalions had been given 60% of the Firebases and it was the behavior of these troops under fire that acutely came to the forefront during the battle. What was the strength and valour of our indigenous forces, Senegalese Tirailleurs (skirmishers), Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians troops… was their solid training ensured by long term service. It was their Colonial infantry cadre of North African Tirailleurs and their career service that made the difference. They knew their men, their country and spoke their dialect. Let us not kid ourselves; they were not fighting for a distant France they knew little of. Our Tirailleurs fought so courageously for their leaders that they knew and loved. It was only the Army with its own troops in our Departments, North African protectorates and Colonies that succeed in what we later called and for the good of the cause called “integration”. Our indigenous troops were perfectly able to bear the brunt of short duration direct combat. The battles of 1944-45; like Belvedère and Garigliano where our North African Tirailleurs and our Senegalese at Toulon are examples of where and how they won their laurels. Very rapidly, with these loses, maintenance difficulties, the indispensible cohesion between Cadre and troops came to a head and became unsolvable. What was the value of these same Regiments at Sienne or in the Doubs after months of deadly combat and where their numbers were constantly maintained? Mediocre at

49 Vers l’Armée de métier, Charles de Gaulle.
50 With the exception of the 5/7 R.T.A. who valiantly fought on Gabrielle with the same valour as the Légion on Béatrice.
Everyone, at the end of the Indochina war knew the situation to be similar. In the Expeditionary Corps where Europeans were side by side with Algerians, Moroccans, Africans Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians, the French represented the Cadre and services which were a minority of field troops. To fill up combat loses, mediocre mercenaries, auxiliaries, partisans, light Battalions, armed religious sects who deserted, betrayed, submitted and betrayed again and again, killed or gave the French Cadres over to Vietminh jailors and also gave away their weapons to the enemy. Years ago, in the not too distant past, in our country, rich families who didn’t want their sons drafted paid so somebody else took their place. Today, it is the entire country that pays for replacements so its sons avoid war, and mediocre replacements at that. Here again is the main cause of our defeats for the last 15 years. And I believe that if these 10,000 infantrymen of Dien Bien Phu would have fought like that handful of Frenchmen and Légionnaires who were there the battle in spite of being badly located, would not have been lost. Let’s stop having foreigners fight our battles. Our Colonial wars of years gone by were successes that had been fought and won by indigenous troops, but in those days our policy persuaded these local troops to fight for their own cause that was the same as ours. As a perfect demonstration of this, the behavior of the 2 million Vietnamese Catholics, it seemed obvious that they should have swelled our ranks.

Yet, as early as 1946, the Bishop and his parishioners of his vast Catholic Provinces of Paht Diem and Buui Chu, openly sided for the Democratic Republic Later when France at Pau without beating around the bush gave independence to Vietnam and started the setting up its own national army, never did Catholic participation go beyond the level of self-defense militias. That is the reason why, I feel, my nation should not have any form of remorse whatsoever in view of the final drama of these peoples. Theorists, writers and military thinkers who are more accustomed to speculations of the mind than those of the tough realities of the battlefield wanted to look elsewhere for the causes of our defeats. They dug into the lessons of the Campaign and neglected the purely military side of operations and discovered Mao Ste Tung and revolutionary warfare. Perfectly studied with the impeccable logic of learned men who are good writers and brilliant lecturers, these new ideas were by their originality truly captivating. Theories exposed in this fashion are known by all: capturing the body by implacable “parallel hierarchies, capturing the minds by moral techniques”, the 5 phases of battle everything was studied in minute detail. I fully agree that all this represents the Communist takeover process on Indochina. But the theorists went further, they affirmed that incomprehension, the lack of knowledge of revolutionary warfare by one-eyed warriors and that the “boots on the ground” that sowed disorder wherever they went were the deep rooted causes of our setbacks in Indochina. “They had not read Mao Tse Tung”. Well I did. I read this painstaking translation where one asks himself if it is still in Chinese or in French, other than knowing your adversary, I found no solution to the problems at hand, after the US-USSR victory of 1945, to the great colonial powers, England and India, the Netherlands and Indonesia and France and Indochina Mao Tse Tung’s book is nothing but a civil war manual. With regards to the military, his theories are applicable to national guerillas fighting for the independence of their country, not to regular armies wanting to reconquer it. How could a European from a temperate climate, an Arab from the Djebels, and an African from the savannas be “like a fish in water” in the jungle and rice paddies of Indochina? On the political side, I can’t see in Mao Tse Tung a recipe to convince a foreign people to our race, civilization and customs, that he is French and that he is to be governed by other Frenchmen. The words liberty and independence are no longer myths for him, I’m firmly convinced of this after 6 years of war in Indochina. The big error is to not having wanted to admit it in the first place and letting the USSR champion these ideas. Let us not confuse civil war, that is as old as the world, and that is rediscovered today under a new name, that of revolutionary war, where people of the same race battle it out on their own soil, with a plain and simple foreign war, even in its new format.

51 The author of these lines doesn’t fear to be refuted. He was a Capitaine commanding a Compaezny of the 7° R.A.T., in June 1944, at Sienne, and Capitaine Adjudant Major of a Battalion of the 6° R.T.S., in November of the same year in the Doubs at Vermondans.
52 Barely 15 % of the infantrymen in the trenches of Dien Bien Phu.
The Indochina war was a war of independence against France and if their tools for battle were forged via Marxist methods, it is also true that the Vietminh soldier assaulted Dien Bien Phu with exemplary courage, he was fighting to kick us out of his home where we were not at home.

To give battle, always in the final analysis, translates into putting one’s life ahead of his determination. To risk or deliberately sacrifice such a precious gift, there needs to be a reason and a faith.

But this so evident and simple faith of our adversaries, the faith of a master in his own home, is hard to get in our ranks.

We were not fighting for our homes, we were fighting not to boot out the foreigners from our homes, we weren’t even fighting to keep Indochina French. Then what for? The honor of the profession of arms, that’s all.

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On a July 1954 Sunday, took place the graduation of the Promotion (Class) “Union française”. On the Marchfeld of the École Spéciale Militaire de Saint Cyr-Coëtquidan (the French West Point) kneeling on the steps the Senior Cadet asked the traditional question:

“Général Sir, what name do you give to this Promotion?”

Général Fayard answered:

-“Ceux de Dien Bien Phu.” (Those of Dien Bien Phu)

-“Ceux de Dien Bien Phu.” was carried by that Promotion of Saint Cyr, a defeat of our arms. Some were surprised, others indignant.

I have often thought of this while writing my book, I think the goal will have been reached if, after having read it, young officers of this Promotion were proud to have, as an example, the soldiers of this gigantic battle, those of the rice paddies and hills, those of the Elianes and Huguettes, those of the combat jump reinforcement who jumped in by night in the thick of battle, those of the Légion and Paras who fought for 56 days for the sole honor of the Royal Road of those who have chosen the profession of arms:

« CEUX DE DIEN BIEN PHU ».
Marnia (Algeria), June 1959.
Dakar, January 1962.
End