

Men-at-Arms

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The French Indochina War 1946–54



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Author's note

For simplicity, 'Viet Minh' (VM) is used throughout this text to mean both the political organisation and the People's Army of Vietnam (Quan Doi Nhan Dan).

Consistent and correct typography – e.g. the use of capitals, italics, and accents – is practically impossible in an English text quoting many French and Vietnamese terms. We have generally used English capitalisation for French and Vietnamese proper names and unit titles (e.g. 5e Régiment de Cuirassiers, Dai Doi 52); italics only to emphasise some technical or slang terms in both languages (e.g. *tieu doan*, *crachin*); and have omitted all hyphens from Vietnamese, since its other typographical conventions are impractical here.

For the key to the abbreviations in this text see page 47.

Artist's note

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FRENCH INDOCHINA IN 1946-54

The states of Indochina – north Vietnam (Bac Bo, or Tonkin), central Vietnam (Trung Bo, or Annam), south Vietnam (Nam Bo, or Cochinchina), Cambodia and Laos – had been French colonies or protectorates since the 19th century. In the 1930s Communist-led risings in Tonkin and Annam had been bloodily suppressed, many insurgent leaders fleeing into China; in 1940 they returned to north-east Tonkin, and began to build up their armed strength from almost nothing. They made a late and insignificant show of resistance to the Japanese, which nevertheless established their credentials with the American OSS and earned them some US arms and training.

Under the Vichy regime the French garrison had to tolerate the installation of Japanese bases. In March 1945 the Japanese interned all French troops and officials, butchering those who resisted; the survivors fought their way out into Nationalist China, and the Japanese turned over civil government to local elements, including the figurehead emperor of Annam, Bao Dai. The Japanese surrender in August 1945 was taken by Nationalist Chinese troops in the north and a British/Indian division in the south; neither was able to interfere with a Communist programme of taking over 'grass roots' power – and Japanese weapons. It would be October 1945 before French troops returned to Saigon, and March 1946 before the first reached Hanoi. This priceless power vacuum allowed the Comintern veteran Ho Chi Minh to establish a strong revolutionary organisation at first in Tonkin, and later throughout Vietnam.

They presented themselves as democrats seeking a peaceful end to colonial rule; and in Hanoi in September 1945 Ho declared the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Communists initially formed a common front (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, roughly 'League for Vietnamese Independence') with other nationalist groups. This gradually collapsed during 1945-47. The French persuaded some of the non-Communist elements – e.g. the Cao Dai sect based around Thai Ninh – to come to terms; and though the Communists kept the title Viet Minh they ruthlessly eliminated all challengers for leadership. In parallel to their energetic political programme the VM, under the military leadership of Vo Nguyen Giap, rapidly built up large (if sketchily trained) forces equipped with Japanese and French weapons.

Though the French reassumed power in the south after brief fighting, their return to Tonkin was delayed by a slow Chinese withdrawal until Ho's government was a *fait accompli*. At American prompting the French were reluctantly forced to negotiate but, still stinging from the humiliations of World War II, they were in no mood for compromise. Incidents between French and VM troops were inevitable, finally escalating into heavy fighting



Southern Annam, 1946: 2e REI légionnaires pose for a snapshot outside their post – an old pagoda reinforced with logs. Uniforms and equipment are mostly British surplus: note No.4 rifles, Brens and a Sten. Foreign clothing widely seen in the early years included World War II British and Commonwealth (e.g. Indian, New Zealand, etc.) khaki drill and jungle green; and US olive drab, khaki, and herringbone twill items. (Courtesy Charles Milassin)

in Hanoi on 19 December. The negotiations collapsed, and the French opted for a military solution. With hindsight it is easy to criticise their failure to appreciate that they faced a new form of revolutionary warfare, not merely a rising by colonial malcontents and opportunistic bandits; but before Mao Tse Tung's stunning victory in China in 1949 no Western army recognised this phenomenon.

By April 1947 the French had regained apparent control over the main towns and highways and parts of the coastal and delta ricelands. The VM, completely outgunned, had nevertheless succeeded in withdrawing their main force (the Chuc Luc) deep into the refuge offered by the jungled hills of north-east Tonkin. This 'Free Zone of the Viet Bac' (the provinces of Bac Kan, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang and Thai Nguyen)

would be their heartland, protected by its rugged terrain and close to the Chinese frontier; here they set up their camps, depots, hospitals and factories. During the monsoon rains of spring/summer 1947 both sides paused to regroup.

THE BATTLEFIELD

French soldier leading a patrol of local 'commandos' (note black berets) in thick jungle; about 60% of Vietnam is covered by steep hills and forest, some almost impenetrable. Many irregular commandos and auxiliary companies (CSMs) were raised, including veterans of the old *Tirailleurs Indochinois*, *montagnards*, mercenaries and half-tamed bandits of various ethnic groups, and quite large numbers of 'turned' Viet Minh. Some were allowed free rein to counter local VM activity, with few questions asked; others were attached to line units as scouts. (SPI)



Tonkin had rich, densely populated rice-growing lowlands forming a triangle around the delta of the Clear, Red and Black Rivers. This French heartland of about 7,500 square miles held the capital Hanoi, the main port of Haiphong, and some eight million people (about half the total population of Vietnam). Outside 'the Delta' lay the wild hills of the Viet Bac to the north, and to the west the Thai Highlands – both heavily forested, hardly explored, and penetrated by only a few bad roads.

Cochinchina had the only other heavily cultivated and populated region, comprising the wetlands around the Mekong Delta. Annam is the narrow waist connecting the two; from Tonkin to southern Annam the heavily wooded mountains of the Annamite Chain form the spine of the country. These lie mostly along the Laotian border, but swell out to form the 'high plateaux' of the Central Highlands in southern Annam and northern Cochinchina. All the highland regions were sparsely scattered with *montagnard* tribal villages; these robust 'mountaineers' had good reason for their historical hostility to all lowland Vietnamese, and

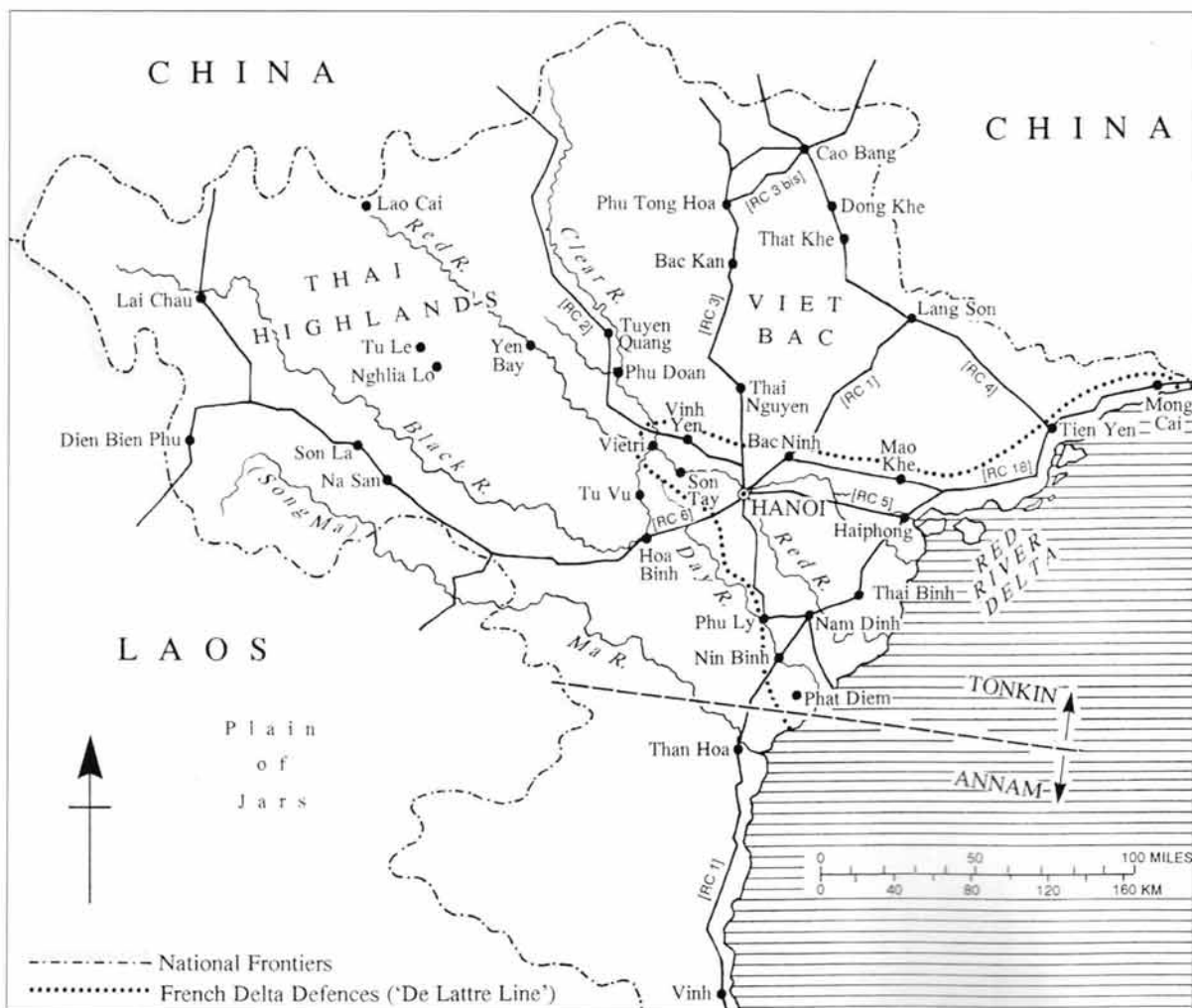
many fought alongside the French. In the hills roads navigable by motor vehicles were few, mechanised movement away from them impossible, and overhead cover limitless; in the rainy season many dirt roads become impassable for months at a time. The lowland swamp-jungle and reed-covered plains are cut into a maze by innumerable streams. Vietnam is, in short, guerrilla heaven.

The climate is exhaustingly hot and humid for much of the year, though the Tonkinese winter is miserably cold. The south-west monsoon rains last from May to October; the north-east monsoon, from September to December, is typically very foggy (though morning fog can also shroud the hills at

other seasons). This *crachin* (French slang, 'spittle') severely hampered air operations; as the French relied heavily upon air transport for strategic mobility, and upon tactical air support for isolated units, the VM soon learned to exploit the weather.

Outside major towns the French had never 'occupied' Vietnam in any meaningful sense. Metaphorically their garrisons were small islands – and in the high country, remote islands in an uncharted ocean. Even in the crowded and relatively well guarded deltas the peaceful farmer could transform himself into an active guerrilla whenever he was not actually under the eyes and guns of French troops; and for most of the war about 80% of the country hardly ever saw a Frenchman. In one vital sense the battlefield extended beyond Vietnam's borders. Giap's greatest assets were his sanctuaries inside China's Kwangsi province just over the Tonkin frontier, and the supplies and instructors provided there by Mao's regime after 1949. The co-operation enjoyed by the VM from small local Communist groups in sleepy Laos and Cambodia was militarily negligible; but Giap's ability to manoeuvre inside Laos gave him a strategic advantage in forcing the French to divide still further their over-stretched reserves.

Sketch map of Tonkin, showing only major roads and towns mentioned in the text. To indicate physical details would make this map needlessly complex; outside the Delta and a coastal strip virtually the whole area was hill country.



THE STRATEGIC BALANCE

Given the huge area they nominally occupied, the difficulties of terrain and climate, and their shortage of manpower and equipment, French commanders of 1946–49 had few strategic options. Some of them persisted in regarding the rebellion merely as a particularly virulent and widespread outbreak of traditional local banditry, born of post-war chaos and exploited by Communist firebrands. Others were more far-sighted, but were unable to exploit local success for lack of resources. The rapid turn-over of French commanders did not help: within eight years there were seven military C-in-Cs and six political governors, not always working in harmony, while the enemy enjoyed continuity under Ho and Giap.

The French military instinct was always to seek a decisive battle where their conventional superiority would count; Giap's, to avoid one. During 1946–49 the Viet Minh concentrated on survival. Following the classic Maoist doctrine, they worked to establish safe bases, command structures and reliable logistics, to improve their political and intelligence networks, and to build up their Regular units. They avoided all confrontations with superior forces while pursuing a relentless, nationwide guerrilla campaign by Regional units. This caused a constant haemorrhage of French casualties, many of them to mines and booby-traps; honed the skills of local units for eventual promotion to Regular status; and provoked harsh French treatment of the population during the frustrating succession of security sweeps which inevitably became the pattern of the war over much of Vietnam. The main VM-dominated areas were (from north to south) the northern highlands of Tonkin; the south-central Delta; the Than Hoa area; the upper 'waist' of Annam, apart from enclaves around Tourane and Hue; the Plain of Reeds west of Saigon; Thu Dau Mot province between Saigon and the Cambodian border; Baria province on the south-east coast; and the Trans-Bassac – the south-west tip of Vietnam. Throughout Vietnam, however, relatively low-level VM activity could prevent the French from achieving local security outside the major centres.

Tens of thousands of men – many of them lightly armed and poorly motivated militia, dispersed in handfuls, and made doubly nervous by the presence of their families – were tied down in hundreds of tiny watchtowers and blockhouses strung along the roads, tracks and rivers. These

Sketch map of Annam and Cochinchina, showing only major roads and towns mentioned in the text.





The most characteristic terrain feature of North Vietnam, both in the hills and the lowlands, are these 'calçaires' – limestone crags or buttes thrusting abruptly upwards. Usually covered with heavy scrub and trees, and often riddled with caves, they offered the VM excellent observation and ambush positions. (USIA)

were militarily futile, while providing the VM with targets of opportunity for capturing a few rifles or a precious radio.

Outside the Delta even larger posts, such as those facing the Chinese frontier, were usually more of a liability than an asset. Typically held by a company or two of bored, jungle-happy European or North African infantry with one or two mortars or old artillery pieces, they were usually able to defend themselves against all but the most determined assaults; but their control of the surrounding countryside was illusory. The enemy could infiltrate through the wilderness between them without difficulty; and it took a major effort simply to keep open the roads upon which they depended for supplies.

Meanwhile Giap built up his main force in the Viet Bac; in his secondary base area south of the Delta (Than Hoa, Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces); and, from 1949, inside China. Time was always on his side; he denied the French any opportunity to meet his main force face to face – and it was repeatedly demonstrated that they lacked the resources to hunt it down and destroy it in its sanctuaries. This period represented both the

'guerrilla' and 'protracted' phases of Mao's revolutionary timetable.

Mao Tse Tung's establishment in October 1949 of the People's Republic of China completely transformed the war. In November Ho Chi Minh announced general mobilisation of the population of VM-controlled areas, and in January-February 1950 his government was recognised by Red China, the USSR and the other Communist states.

Moving to the 'mobile warfare' phase, Giap finally unleashed his main force in October 1950, winning a stunning victory on Route Coloniale 4. This gained him the whole of Tonkin east of the Red River, enough booty to equip a division, huge prestige and the priceless advantage of unhindered movement across the Chinese border thereafter.

The loss of north-east Tonkin briefly paralysed the French command, but morale was improved by the arrival of Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny as C-in-C and political governor. De Lattre sought to create a 'secure base of fire' by fortifying the Delta, carrying out major security operations within its defences, and building up the Armée Nationale Vietnamienne – initially to take over security within the Delta and later, ideally, to provide all static garrisons (neither objective was achieved). Most French units were thus to be freed for a strong airborne and motorised reserve to carry the battle to the enemy.

Overconfident after his victory, Giap prematurely launched the first of three major assaults on the Delta defences in January 1951, with the slogan

'Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi for Tet' – the Chinese New Year in mid-February. He was bloodily defeated at Vinh Yen, Mao Khe and the Day River, largely by De Lattre's energetic deployment of his new Mobile Groups and tactical air power. The events of spring 1951 seemed to promise the dawn of the sort of war the French could win.

However, the shaken Giap abandoned his premature 'general offensive' for a war of concealed movement and stealthy concentration of major units against selected targets. When in November 1951 De Lattre threw a major force west out of the Delta along RC.6 and the Black River to reoccupy Hoa Binh, he was simply offering Giap a chance to repeat October 1950: an isolated position at the end of long, vulnerable lines of communication. Initial French success soon turned into a battle of attrition, which proved that outside the Delta prolonged operations dependent upon road and river communications could not be sustained. De Lattre, dying of cancer, was replaced in December by Gen. Raoul Salan, who withdrew from Hoa Binh in February 1952. While so many units had been committed there enemy activity elsewhere had escalated alarmingly.

In October 1952 Giap moved decisively to the 'mobile' warfare phase with thrusts south-eastwards into the Thai Highlands and Laos. In the Maoist handbook this phase calls for manoeuvre in divisional strength, diverting government forces over long distances, writing down their assets and dissipating their reserves, while rehearsing the revolutionary formations for the final offensive. In spring 1953 Giap again divided the overstretched French forces by committing even larger assets to this new front. French attempts to divert him by launching painfully assembled and necessarily brief ground and airborne task forces against his base areas achieved only temporary results. The strength and confidence of the Chuc Luc grew steadily, while the diversion of French units to Laos allowed VM activity to increase throughout Vietnam – including inside the Delta itself. The map was relentlessly turning red.

One encouraging episode was the establishment by airlift of a strong garrison at Na San in the Thai Highlands; this fought off major attacks in November 1952, and was resupplied, reinforced, and eventually evacuated by air. To some this success seemed to offer a way to lure Giap between the anvil of a strongly fortified 'airhead' far from his secure bases, and the hammer of French artillery, armour and air power.

This concept, and the wish to counter the continuing threat to Laos, led Salan's replacement Gen. Henri Navarre to garrison the distant valley of Dien Bien Phu in winter 1953–54 with what amounted to a weakly supported infantry division, wholly dependent on a 200-mile air

Légionnaires of III/5e REI riding M24 Chaffee tanks of 1er RCC, GB 2, during Op. 'Tulipe', 1951; note also the M5A1 Stuart at left. The terrain is typical of the 'high country' – a dirt road only just wide enough for two vehicles, flanked by scrub, and overlooked by wooded *calçaires*. No matter what their armoured firepower the French motorised columns were often forced to fight VM ambushes and roadblocks on, essentially, a one-vehicle front, and sometimes had great difficulty bringing their towed artillery into action. (ECPA)





Tonkin 1950: Algerian Tirailleur leading a pack mule over a roughly repaired bridge – sabotaged or washed-out bridges over Indochina's thousands of waterways constantly hampered military movements. Both sides used pack mules and highland ponies to carry support weapons, ammunition and food during cross-country marches. (ECPA)

bridge to the Delta airfields. The 10,000-man garrison was doomed by the choice of battlefield; by French weakness in airlift capacity and logistics; and by the VM's unsuspected skill in the concealed use of their field and anti-aircraft artillery. Fundamentally, however, the fatal mistake was the French high command's stubborn underestimation of Giap's ability not just to assemble and manoeuvre a 50,000-man field army; but to keep it supplied throughout weeks of positional fighting, over 500 miles of rudimentary roads, despite French command of the sky. It was this astonishing logistic effort which tipped the balance.

The desperate fighting in the monsoon rains of March-May 1954 took on the character of a World War I battle of attrition; but from the day that Giap's guns closed Dien Bien Phu's airstrip on 27 March the outcome was inevitable. The shock of the camp's fall on 7 May, with the loss of many of the CEFEO's finest units, was rapidly followed by major Viet Minh successes in the Delta and the Central Highlands. In Paris, the Mendez-France government took power with a mandate to negotiate a quick ceasefire at almost any cost. The Viet Minh leaders, conscious of their huge casualties at Dien Bien Phu (perhaps 8,000 dead and 12,000 wounded), and apprehensive of direct US intervention, were willing to compromise. A ceasefire, and partition of Vietnam at the 17th Parallel, were agreed in Geneva on 21 July 1954.

FRENCH UNION FORCES

Resources

The French Far East Expeditionary Corps (CEFEO) had a strength of about 115,000 in 1947. From 1951 to 1954 it was roughly constant as follows: land forces, 175,000 (54,000 French, 18,000 West Africans, 30,000 North Africans, 20,000 Foreign Legion, 53,000 Vietnamese under French command); naval, 5,000; air force, 10,000; local auxiliaries, about 55,000. By spring 1953 the Vietnamese National Army (ANV) claimed an additional 150,000-plus men, giving France a theoretical total strength of some 445,000; but this force was almost entirely static and defensive. Only a quarter had tactical mobility, and a tenth strategic mobility. In 1953 the available manoeuvre forces amounted to seven brigade-sized Groupes Mobiles, eight airborne battalions, and some riverine units.

Of the daunting difficulties faced by the CEFEO, the worst was an overall lack of the political will and military resources necessary to prosecute the war successfully.

France in 1945 was a traumatised nation. Since 1940 she had been defeated, divided, occupied, pillaged, fought over and finally liberated by foreign armies; much of her economy and administration were in tatters. Frenchmen were divided by bitter enmities, and liberation had been followed by a bloody settling of accounts. Competing interests, including a strong Communist party, were squabbling over the shape of her post-war political institutions; not surprisingly, the Fourth Republic born of their quarrels was a sickly child. General de Gaulle, leader of the wartime Free French Forces, withdrew in disgust from public life in 1946; and during the course of the Indochina War France would have no fewer than 19 governments, none with a clear mandate to fight it aggressively.

During part of the war the Communists were partners in coalition government. Their hostility to it was expressed both in parliamentary obstruction of the means to fight it, and even – through the trades unions – by encouraging the widespread sabotage of equipment destined for the Far East. But the unpopularity of this ‘dirty’ colonial war spread beyond the Communists. France as a whole was so ambiguous about its morality and utility that at various times, for instance, citations for medals awarded for gallantry in Indochina were ordered omitted from the official gazette; and it was felt necessary to announce that blood donations solicited from the public would not be used for transfusion of Indochina casualties...The effect on military morale can be imagined.

The shortage of manpower was also serious. The reduced post-war army was committed primarily to the French zone of occupied Germany, facing the Soviets. The CEFEO was a mixture of French and foreign troops from widely different backgrounds: some were ex-Gaullist Free French, some colonial troops who had joined the Allies only in 1943, some former Resistance fighters, some young men recruited for the 1944–45 campaigns, some former Axis and other nationals serving in the Foreign Legion, and many were native troops from France’s colonies. Some proved to be magnificent combat soldiers, with a high *esprit de corps* and energetic leaders; others were less impressive.

Hostility to the war was reflected in a legal prohibition on sending French conscripts to the Far East, which aggravated the manpower problem, and this pressure led in turn to the inadequate training of



Typical light kit for local operations worn by a French soldier cautiously searching a village – the sudden disappearance of the villagers was a warning of imminent attack on the local post. The handy US .30cal M1 carbine was popular throughout the CEFEO despite its lack of stopping power. Comfortable canvas and rubber boots – *pataugas* or ‘splashers’ – were very widely used, in both issue and commercial patterns. (SPI)



Tonkin 1953: paratroops board a C-47 before dawn for an early morning jump. The paras suffered most from the lack of any means of extraction. The Ju52s and C-47s could drop them anywhere in enemy territory; but withdrawal meant long, exhausting marches through difficult terrain, often under repeated attack. Only a transport helicopter fleet could have saved them from these costly and demoralising retreats – but for that the survivors would have to wait for their next war. (ECPA)

replacement drafts. The only nominally all-French units in Indochina were made up of career volunteers, and from about 1949 even these were forced to recruit locally to keep up their strength. The large number of African and Asian units requiring French cadres put a constant strain on the already inadequate supply of able junior officers and NCOs – among whom, by the very nature of the fighting, casualties were consistently high.

Native troops required a particularly mature, paternalistic type of leadership. Sometimes they got it – the records are full of remarkable feats

performed by Frenchmen commanding isolated one-company posts, or leading 'commandos' of *montagnard* auxiliaries; but the potential of other units was wasted by neglect and crude racism, particularly at junior NCO level. Many non-European troops were poorly trained; French defeats sapped their morale – as, inevitably, did the fact that the enemy were fellow non-Europeans defying the French. To these generalisations there were many impressive exceptions, but the overall problems were real.

To the manpower shortage was added a chronic lack of every kind of equipment. In the early years the CEFEO presented a motley spectacle, clothed, equipped and armed with every kind of US, British, French, even captured Japanese matériel. Infantry support weapons were in dangerously short supply; and small arms in many different calibres (e.g. 7.5mm, 7.62mm, 7.65mm, 8mm, .30 and .45 US, 9mm and .303 British) made logistics a nightmare. A single telling anecdote illustrates this:

A former sergeant in the 1st Foreign Parachute Battalion – a crack intervention unit which might expect a high priority – recalled that in March 1949 his ten-man section relied on their 7.5mm FM.24/29 light machine gun; they had only one nearly useless 7.65mm MAS.38 machine pistol, four others having broken down in recent weeks – as had all four of the folding-butt 7.5mm MAS.36/CR.39 rifles issued. The rest of the section had been given Berthier M1907/15 rifles in 8mm, but without even their three-round ammo clips, so that only single cartridges could be loaded. In 1950 his section received excellent German MP.40 SMGs, but with British 9mm ammunition – an unreliable combination resulting in jams and accidental discharges. Their support weapons were 7.62mm Reibel M1931A fortress machine guns, stripped out of Maginot Line casemates and rigged on tripods, which were poorly adapted for infantry use.

One difficulty was the USA's hostility to this colonial war before 1949, when the French faced US sanctions if, for instance, they proposed sending to Vietnam US-supplied aircraft. The flow of aid increased dramatically after Mao's victory in China in 1949 and the Communist invasion of South Korea in 1950, to the point where the USA was bearing a significant part of

the total cost of the war; but the relationship remained tense. America's price was serious progress towards Vietnamese independence and a viable Vietnamese National Army, for which many US weapons were explicitly intended. The French were ambiguous about this programme; given the doubtful combat value of ANV units, they were often issued obsolete equipment while the new US supplies were diverted to French units.

MAIN FRENCH COMBAT UNITS

Space prevents a comprehensive list; unit evolution was complex. In particular, we omit combat units which were active only pre-December 1946 or post-May 1954, and all service units.

Before 1951 **artillery**, from both Metropolitan and Colonial regiments, was almost entirely static; in that year batteries and three-battery groups began to be attached to Mobile Groups. For most of the war the static artillery totalled between 250 and 300 guns of assorted types, and the towed mobile artillery about the same number of US 105mm HM2 howitzers.

The normal tour in Indochina lasted about two years. Within the **infantry** that uniquely French institution, the *bataillon de marche* (BM), allowed the creation of sometimes short-lived task groups assembled from elements of one or more parent units. From 1951 De Lattre's energetic programme saw much local recruitment into nominally French units; typically this involved Vietnamese forming at least one battalion of multi-battalion regiments, and at least one company within nominally French battalions. Even after the complete battalions were transferred to the Vietnamese National Army in 1952-53 the locally recruited element within nominally French units would remain important, sometimes exceeding 50 per cent.

Most infantry battalions of all categories had three rifle companies and a single headquarters and support company; in most cases the fire support

elements were weak, usually with only pairs of .30cal MGs, 81mm and/or 60mm mortars, and RCLs (57mm or 75mm recoilless rifles). Independent mortar companies, including some with heavy 120mm tubes, were formed from 1950 to improve fire support assets.

Where a whole regiment is listed here this usually indicates three battalions – e.g. below, 21e RIC signifies I, II & III/21e RIC; these were disbanded in October-December 1952 with transfer of local elements to ANV units, the remainder forming a single Bataillon de Marche, BM/21e RIC.

The CEFEQ was always short of skilled specialists. Apart from its line battalions the Foreign Legion provided many service units, like the 2nd Medium Repair Co., whose badge is displayed on this Mack wrecker truck. (ECPA)



Metropolitan Infantry French volunteers. Main units: 1er Bataillon d'Infanterie Légère d'Afrique (1er BILA), 3e BILA; BM/35e Régiment d'Infanterie; BM/43e RI; BM/49e RI; BM/110e RI; BM/151e RI.

Colonial Infantry These formed the bulk of the infantry, mainly dispersed in static posts. Mixed composition: largely French, some African volunteers, later heavy local recruitment. Main units: BM/1er Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale; 1er BM/2e RIC; 5e RIC, BM/5e RIC; 6e RIC; 1er & 2e BM/11e RIC; 21e RIC, BM/21e RIC; 23e RIC, BM/23e RIC; 43e RIC, BM/43e RIC; 110e RIC; I & II/Rgt. de Corée.

Foreign Legion Infantry Foreign volunteers, later with local recruitment. Main units: 2e Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie, 3e REI, 5e REI, 13e Demi-Brigade (13e DBLE).

Airborne Troops French and foreign volunteers with local recruitment. The paras made their reputation in Indochina; as crack troops with aggressively-minded officers, and virtually the only units which could achieve strategic surprise, they were committed to an exhausting pace of operations. They took part in both major offensive drops, and in near-suicide missions to rescue isolated units; and they fought as élite infantry in every kind of offensive and defensive operation. They achieved many local successes, but suffered very high casualties; more than one battalion was completely wiped out, reformed, and annihilated a second time before the ceasefire.

The typical parachute infantry battalion in 1952-54 consisted of an HQ & support company and four rifle companies, of which at first one and later two were Vietnamese; the final establishment was 446 Europeans and 406 Vietnamese. The HQ & support company had pairs of 81mm mortars, .30cal.MGs and 57mm RCLs, replaced in some units after 1951 by 75mm RCLs; company HQ sections had two 60mm mortars, or one plus one .30cal machine gun. Battalions served in Indochina under a complex series of designations and redesignations; essentially they were either Metropolitan, Colonial, or Foreign Legion. Main units:

Metropolitan 1er Bataillon Parachutiste de Choc (1er BPC), 1947-48; I/1er Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes, 1947-49; II/1er RCP, 1953-54; III/1er RCP, 1947-48; 10e Bataillon Parachutiste de Chasseurs à Pied (10e BPCP), 1950-52.

Colonial 1948, Demi-Brigade Parachutiste SAS redesignated 2e DBCCP (Demi-Brigade Coloniale de Commandos Parachutistes). On formation, 1947-51, successor battalions were designated 1er, 2e, 3e, 5e, 6e, 7e & 8e Bataillons Coloniaux de Commandos Parachutistes (BCCP); and from



Hanoi, July 1950: Algerian Tirailleurs of 4e BM/7e RTA parade in tropical full dress - turban with pinned-on unit badge, khaki drill shirt and slacks, red sash, sleeve patch and ranking, citation lanyard and decorations. The NCOs still carry MAS.38 machine pistols. North African units served both in the static sector defences and in several of the Groupes Mobiles. (ECPA)

March 1951 redesignated Bataillons de Parachutistes Coloniaux (BPC). In 1953 the 8e BPC was retitled 'de Choc'.

Foreign Legion 1er Bataillon Étranger de Parachutistes (BEP), 2e BEP, 1949–1954.

Non-European Infantry:

Algerian & Tunisian Rifles North African volunteers. Main units: 1er, 2e, 3e BM/1er Régiment de Tirailleurs Algériens; 1er, 2e, 3e BM/2e RTA; 1er, 2e, 3e BM/3e RTA; BM/6e RTA; BM, 4e, 5e BM/7e RTA; 21e, 23e, 25e, 27e BTA; 1er, 2e, 3e BM/4e RTT.

Moroccan Rifles North African volunteers. Main units: 1er, 2e, 3e BM/1er Régiment de Tirailleurs Marocains; 1er, 3e, 4e BM/2e RTM; BM, I, II/3e RTM; 1er, 2e, 3e BM/4e RTM; I, II, III, IV/ & BM/ 5e RTM; II, III, & BM/6e RTM; BM/7e RTM; BM/8e RTM; 10e BTM.

Moroccan Goumiers North African volunteer irregulars, often with local auxiliaries attached for recce tasks; Tabors (battalions) each of three Goums (companies) plus HQ. E.g., during January 1951–November 1952 Groupe Mobile 2 in Tonkin included 17e Tabor (14e, 18e & 22e Goums) with attached local 51e & 282e CSMs, & Laotian 65e CLSM. Main units: 1er, 2e, 3e, 5e, 8e, 9e, 10e, 11e, 17e Tabors.

Senegalese & African Rifles West & Central African volunteers with large French cadre. Main units: 24e Régiment de Marche de Tirailleurs Sénégalais (two bns.); 13e, & 26e–32e BMTS incl.; 1er & 3e BM d'Afrique Occidentale Française; 2e BM d'A Centrale F.

Armoured Cavalry French volunteers with local recruitment. Units were deployed in widely dispersed squadrons for route security, convoy escort, etc.; no rigid organisation was possible, and most incorporated large Vietnamese motorised infantry elements.

In 1951 De Lattre organised the first two *Sous-groupements Blindées* (SGB), each with one tank squadron of four platoons, each of three tanks (M5A1 Stuarts, later M24 Chaffees) and two halftracks, plus one or two halftrack and lorried infantry companies. *Groupes d'Escadrons de Reconnaissance* (GER) had one tank squadron, one recce squadron of three platoons each of five M8 armoured cars, and one platoon of three M8 HMC 75mm SP howitzers, plus local infantry. Main units:

1er Rgt. de Chasseurs à Cheval – formed SGB 2, a GER, 6e *Groupe d'Escadrons Amphibies* (GEA) – Tonkin.

4e Rgt. de Dragons Portés – Cochinchina, Annam.

5e Rgt. de Cuirassiers 'Royal-Pologne' – Cochinchina, Annam.

Rgt. d'Infanterie Coloniale de Maroc – despite title, an armoured unit; by

October 1952, near Tu Le, Tonkin: Cdt. Bigeard – in red beret – led his 6e BPC on their sacrificial jump into the Thai Highlands in the path of Giap's 312 Division. The stretcher-bearers may be Thai partisans, or possibly PIMs picked up on the march from local posts – these interned 'VM suspects' often accompanied French units as porters and labourers. (SPI)



Gen. René Cogne, C-in-C Ground Forces Tonkin, inspects Moroccan Tirailleurs of the 3e BM/4e RTM after an action at Gia Loc in the northern Delta, late 1953; characteristically, the Tirailleurs' turban is worn wrapped tightly, Indian-style. The Viet Minh naturally targeted North African troops for revolutionary propaganda, and singled them out for special attention in prison camps. (ECPA)



Tonkin, 1953: M24 Chaffee tanks of 1er RCC. In the late 1940s the armoured cavalry had only assorted light AFVs – Panhard, Humber, Coventry, Daimler and White armoured and scout cars and Bren carriers; some units even fought as infantry. Later M8 armoured cars, M3 halftracks, and M5A1 Stuart tanks arrived; after 1951 most had Chaffees, with halftracks for the Vietnamese infantry who were integrated down to squadron level. (SPI)

1952–53 it had two M24 tank and three recon squadrons, and five infantry companies; formed GB 3 & GER 2 – Tonkin & Annam.

1er Rgt. Étranger de Cavalerie – fought as infantry in Cochinchina and Annam 1947, then with mixture of armoured cars, trucks, jeeps, M5A1 tanks; 1948, pioneered use of M29C 'Crab' & LVT 'Alligator' in amphibious combat role; by 1953 had 18 squadrons, including five two-squadron GEAs at Tourane and Haiphong.

2e, 5e & 6e Rgts. de Spahis Marocains, 8e Rgt. de Spahis Algériens – mixed equipment and employment. E.g. 6e RSM fought as infantry 1949–52, later with one M24 and four halftrack squadrons, formed GB 4 – Annam; 8e RSA fought as infantry 1949–51, then formed GB 1 – Tonkin.

Rgt. Blindé Colonial d'Extrême Orient – formed 1950 with M4 Shermans and M36B2 tank destroyers; based Tonkin to counter any direct Red Chinese incursion.

Groupes Mobiles Self-sufficient motorised brigades formed from winter 1950–51 on the model of World War II US 'combat commands', these



Each LVT-4 could carry half a platoon of locally recruited infantry; although the amphibious vehicles were fitted with machine guns and some with 57mm RCLs for fire support, their primary mission was to carry troops into terrain which only they could traverse. They played a major part in many combined operations, typically providing a river or coastal 'pincer' in co-ordination with motorised and air-dropped units. (ECPA)

major ambushes. Representative composition:

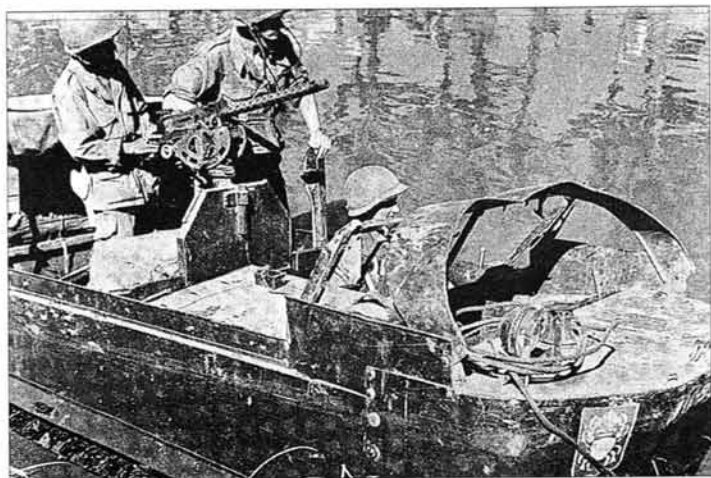
Groupe Mobile 2 Tonkin, January 1951–July 1952; Col. Clément, later Col. de Castries. HQ element from 5e REI; 27e BTA; 1er BM/1er RTM; II/13e DBLE; IV Gp/Regt d'Artillerie Coloniale de Maroc (three blys. of 4 x105mm); 11e & 17e Tabors Marocains; armoured car platoon, tank platoon; local auxiliaries. In February 1952 the Legion battalion was replaced by both the 2e BM/1er RTM and 28e BMTS; IV/RACM was replaced by I/RACM.

Groupe Mobile 100 Central Highlands, December 1953–July 1954; Col. Barrou. HQ Co.100; I & II/Rgt. de Corée; BM/43e RIC; IV/10e RAC; III Esc/5e Rgt. Cuirassiers.

Amphibious Units Formed for operations in swamps and waterways, e.g. the million-acre Plain of Reeds west of Saigon, the Tonkin Delta, and coastal Annam. By 1954 two Groupements Amphibies, mostly from the Legion's 1er REC, each had three squadrons of M29C, three of LVT-4, plus six LVT-A4 with 75mm howitzer turrets.

Local Irregulars Throughout the war French units formed their own irregular 'commandos' for counter-guerrilla work. In 1951–54 a belated but successful programme – the Mixed Airborne Commando Group (GCMA) – disrupted VM operations in the hills of Tonkin. These behind-the-lines guerrillas played the VM at their own game; they established safe areas from which to raid, sabotage and ambush the enemy, hit his supply lines, act as 'trip wires' and scouts for isolated French units, and generally hamper the VM effort. Eventually totalling some 20,000, under the overall direction of Cdt. Trinquier, most were recruited from various *montagnard* tribes, lightly armed, and led by handfuls of very courageous and resourceful French junior ranks. Living for many months far beyond reach of any help, young NCOs led bands of up to battalion strength with great success. Tragically, the speed of the French collapse in 1954 stranded many of these heroic soldiers and *maquisards* so deep in enemy territory that they had no hope of reaching safety. There were heartbreaking reports of their being mercilessly hunted down by the Viet Minh for many months after the ceasefire.

typically consisted of three lorried infantry battalions with elements of towed artillery, light armour and/or tanks, engineer, signals and medical troops totalling 3,000–3,500 men. In 1953 seven GMs were available, but at various dates a total of 17 were raised from French, Foreign Legion, African, Vietnamese and *montagnard* units (GMs 1–11 incl., 14, 21, 42, 51, 100). Valuable for rapid reinforcement of threatened sectors in the Delta; in the hills and swamps narrow roads and sabotaged bridges slowed them down and left them vulnerable to



ABOVE LEFT The basic amphibious unit was the Groupe d'Escadrons Amphibies, comprising one squadron with 33 of these M29C Weasels (to the French, 'Crabs') and one with eleven troop-carrying LVT-4 'Alligators'; three pairs of squadrons made up a Groupement Autonome, later retitled Groupement Amphibie. Note the 1er GA insignia combining a crab with the Legion grenade; the added .30cal MG; and the bow plate, characteristically swung back and then hammered down in the middle – the reason is unclear.

ABOVE RIGHT Thai soldiers from the garrison of Lai Chau, abandoned in December 1953; their appearance is typical of local troops – French fatigues, bushhats, jungle boots, and a mixture of webbing and old leather equipment. Efforts to form *montagnards* into regular line units had mixed success. Col. Vanuxem swore by his Muong battalions; but though brave and resourceful in their own mountains, most tribal highlanders were naturally unfitted for holding foxholes under artillery fire – these Thais slipped away through the wire of strongpoint 'Anne-Marie' early in the siege of Dien Bien Phu. (ECPA)

Armée Nationale Vietnamienne (ANV) Following Gen. De Lattre's invigorating arrival in 1951 some effort was made to extract military advantage from the political fiction of the 'French Union' – an association embracing France and the ostensibly self-governing Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Generally, formed units of Cambodian and Laotian troops were not highly regarded due to their national culture of pacifist Buddhism (though many individuals were enlisted, and proved anything but pacifists).

A national army for the sovereign republic of Vietnam had been languidly discussed in the late 1940s. Now conscription was introduced to build up the ANV, and local recruitment to e.g. Colonial and Legion infantry was also formalised. Conscription broadened the educational base; US weapons were provided (and occasionally reached the troops); training schools and officers' academies were set up; and in 1952 Gen. Nguyen Van Hinh, a distinguished French air force veteran of World War II, was named chief-of-staff.

In winter 1952–53 Vietnamese battalions previously attached for 'on the job training' to Colonial and Legion regiments formed the nuclei of new ANV battalions – e.g., Tieu Doan 62, 63, 64 & 65 were formed from, respectively, 1er & 2e BM/11e RIC, I & II/22e RIC; and TD 68, 75 & 76 were formed from IV/13e DBLE, IV/5e REI, and V/3e REI. These, and the Vietnamese paras, were the best ANV troops, often with battle-hardened Vietnamese, ethnic Cambodian or tribal NCOs. The airborne battalions (1er, 3e, 5e & 7e BPVN – popularly, '*bawouans*') earned a good reputation fighting alongside the French para units which formed them between July 1951 and late 1953.

By spring 1954 the ANV claimed a 'paper' strength of 145 battalion-size units in service or under training; but their actual contribution never approached what that figure suggests. Of the nominal total 45 were new 'light battalions' (Tieu Doan Kinh Quan), with a high scale of Thompson SMGs in place of rifles, and 60mm mortars instead of 81mm. Much was expected of the TDKQs, which were unwisely publicised in advance as 'commando'-standard units for harrying the VM in the countryside. The quality of their personnel, equipment and training fell far short of this claim; and VM Regulars made a particular point of smashing them as soon as the first were committed to combat.

Howard R. Simpson, whose duties with the US Embassy in Saigon in 1953–54 included evaluating ANV units in the field, recalls that quality varied widely, reflecting battalion leadership: one which fought at Na San (TD 56) had a very competent Nung commander – others had political appointees who left all the work to their French advisers. The wealthier class often bribed their way out of serving, and the ranks included too many press-ganged villagers given only slipshod training. Static garrisons kept their families with them; and even units serving with Mobile Groups tended to acquire a domestic ‘tail’ if they stayed in one place for long.

Intelligence operations Many French intelligence agencies and local interest groups simultaneously pursued their own expedient agendas, sometimes co-operating, sometimes conflicting. This shadow world owed as much to straightforward gangsterism, profiteering, currency rackets, drug smuggling and local political and ethnic ‘turf wars’ as it did to military intelligence. A lot of people made a lot of money; a lot of people were murdered – and a lot of arms and supplies found their way to the Viet Minh. However, the more straightforward military intelligence tasks – e.g. aerial photo analysis and radio intercepts – did achieve some solid successes.

Naval Forces

The Marine Nationale’s small forces earned an excellent reputation – both the *Aéronavale* Hellcat, Dauntless, Helldiver and (briefly) Corsair crews flying off the carriers *Dixmude*, *Arromanches* and *La Fayette* (and briefly, in May 1954, *Bois-Belleau*); and the coastal and riverine units (Dinassauts – Divisions Navales d’Assaut). These were formed in 1947–52 with ex-US landing craft, at first simply for riverine security and resupply, and insertion of embarked local infantry (Commandos, later Light Assault Companies – CLAs) during river and coastal operations. Some craft were soon armoured and fitted with cannon turrets for direct fire support; and the DNAs played a valuable part in many combined-arms operations.

Dinassauts 1, 3, 5, and later 12 operated in Tonkin; 2, 4, 6, and later 8 and 10 in Cochinchina and Annam. Typical composition of a DNA was one LST, LCT or LSSL command and fire support ship; six to ten LCMs, some being armoured ‘monitors’ with gun turrets, some with 81mm mortars; three LCVPs; and three to five LCAs.

Air Forces

Given their great reliance on air transport and tactical support, the French were always short of pilots and

The Vietnamese airborne battalions were the best ANV units; here paras of 3e BPVN parade in Hanoi, 1954, wearing M1947/52 camouflaged jump uniforms. The unit was raised in October 1952 on a nucleus of local personnel from 10e BPCP when that battalion was shipped home (see commentary Plate D2). The *bawouans* had a strong French cadre: on formation 3e BPVN had 12 French officers and 22 Vietnamese, 58 and 51 NCOs, and 67 and 818 enlisted men. (ECPA)



aircraft. Aircrew were thinly stretched, often flying an exhausting programme of missions over terrain from which they could not hope for rescue if they survived a crash-landing or parachute jump. From 1951 VM anti-aircraft fire became increasingly common and accurate.

Many types succeeded one another during the war; initially Axis wartime designs included Junkers Ju52 transports, Fieseler Fi156 Storch spotter/ liaison planes, and even a few Japanese Ki43 'Oscar' fighters. Later Armée de l'Air equipment included Spitfire IXs, P-63 Kingcobras, Grumman Hellcats and Bearcats. The A-26 Invader was the main bomber type, and increased numbers of

the C-47 Dakota the main transport from 1951. By 1953-54 the fleet included: 75 x C47s (1954, x 100); 16 x C-119 Packets (US volunteer crews); a few Beaver and Bristol Freighter transports; 48 x A26 Invaders; 8 x PB4Y Privateer four-engine bombers; and 112 fighter-bombers.

Helicopters So few were available that they were limited to the most urgent medical evacuations. Even by March 1954 the available fleet totalled just 32, divided between Saigon and Hanoi. (See commentary Plate H1.)



Tonkin 1953: a Hiller helicopter evacuates two stretcher cases from a para unit. The first two Hiller 360s (UH-12As) were acquired – by public subscription, rather than military procurement – in 1950. Between 1952 and 1954 there followed six each Hiller H-23As and H-23Bs, eight Westland-built Sikorski S-51s, and 12 Sikorski H-19Bs; several were lost, but 32 were available in 1954. These few machines evacuated 10,820 casualties during 1951-54, and 6,499 in 1954 alone. See commentary Plate H1. (ECPA)

THE VIET MINH

Recruitment and organisation

The essential strength of the Viet Minh was its widespread support among the civilian population, and its agents' penetration of the colonial bureaucracy at many levels. The VM infrastructure, much of it in place before 1947, provided taxes, rations, extra crops for sale, intelligence information, porters for the ever-growing logistic network, and recruits.

Although the subsistence farmers who made up most of the population no doubt prayed to be left in peace by both sides, Vietnam had a thousand-year tradition of resistance to invaders. The Communists were never squeamish in their methods of enforcing collaboration among the reluctant (particularly in the south, where the VM chief Nguyen Binh used outright terror tactics). The French managed to persuade some nationalist groups to make a separate peace – e.g. the 'Catholic' Cao Dai militia, the Hoa-Hao sect, and the Binh Xuyen (a former bandit gang who ended up policing Saigon-Cholon). Nevertheless, Mao's lessons on the vital importance of cultivating real popular support were well learned.

The VM targeted the moneylenders and landlords who made the peasants' life wretched; in the villages indoctrination was accompanied by help in the fields, and a popular literacy programme; requisitions were not

too burdensome, and women were not abused. The sufferings caused by corrupt Vietnamese officials and by heavy-handed French military operations, together with the increasing prestige and power of the Viet Minh, ensured a continuous flow of genuine volunteers for Giap's forces.

For many Vietnamese service as porters was all that was required – though this meant sharing all the hardships and dangers of long marches over rough terrain, under constant threat of air attack. When a VM manoeuvre unit was passing through their territory the local organisers ensured that enough coolies turned out to carry the supplies and heavy equipment for about a week – on their backs, or wheeling strengthened bicycles – before turning over their loads to the next relay. It is estimated that a Regular division needed about 50,000 porters to maintain it away from its base area; the total number of men and women who died in this service – from sickness, accident, and enemy action – can never be known.

The basic Popular forces were raised in each village, in two categories. The Dan Quan organised non-military helpers of both sexes and all ages, to carry messages, act as porters, and provide eyes and ears. The Dan Quan Du Kich were part-time guerrillas, men aged from 18 to 45 years who, although very weakly armed, could slip out of their villages by night to carry out local road sabotage, and even occasional attacks on very soft targets. Popular forces carefully gathered anything the French left lying around – e.g. unexploded shells and bombs were salvaged and planted as landmines. Men who proved their worth were selected for the next level up, the Regional forces.

Regional units were typically based, part time, in hide-outs in difficult terrain, and most of the attacks on posts and convoys during the 'guerrilla' phase of the war fell to them. Their activities were co-ordinated from above, however, and they might also be thrown into all-out battle to support or mask the operations of main force units nearby. In the early years these second line troops were scattered in local sections (*trung doi*), platoons (*phan doi*), companies (*dai doi*) or commandos (*bo doi*) of varying military value. Titles were confusing and transient, and allegiance to larger Regional regiments (*chi doi*) was administrative rather than tactical. The command network was based on the Integrated Zones (*lien khu*) into which the country was divided from 1948.

For instance, in Cochinchina in 1946–47 one band active around Go Dau Ha and Trang Bang north-west of Saigon was variously termed Dai

Ambush...After nightfall no pretence was made of controlling the roads anywhere outside the cities; each morning 'road-opening' patrols had to search their sections for mines and sabotage (classically, by 'piano key' ditches dug from alternate sides of the road). By day all traffic outside the cities moved in escorted convoys; and in the forested hill country narrow, switchback roads made these chronically vulnerable to ambush. The VM were skilled at choosing which vehicles to knock out first, trapping the rest for destruction at leisure. (SPI)



Doi 52 ('Co.No.52'), subordinate to Chi Doi 57 ('Rgt. No.57'); or Bo Doi Luu Dong 1 ('Mobile Commando No.1') – but in fact it was more widely known as Bo Doi Hoang Tho ('Commando Hoang Tho') after its charismatic leader. In December 1946 it was listed as having three sections, three LMGs, four SMGs and 25 rifles.

In 1948–49 many smaller units were amalgamated into tactical battalions (*tieu doan*), usually fairly well armed and trained; and these into nominal regiments (*trung doan*), though often of single battalion strength. Selected men were sent on leadership courses; officers from the Chuc Luc were sent south to see some action with the more frequently engaged Regional units; and the best units were in time redesignated, in place, as full-time Regulars (*chu luc*). A scattering of Independent Regular regiments and battalions thus steadily appeared in VM-dominated areas around the country.

For instance, in Cochinchina in December 1949 'Bo Doi 303' represented the fighting strength of 'Regular Mobile Rgt. Zone 7', and comprised Cos.2719 (the old Commando Hoang Tho), 2720, 2721 and 2723; after shake-down training north of Cape St Jacques it became active around Binh My, north of Tan Uyen. In August 1950 Nguyen Binh, the VM commander in South Vietnam, reorganised his forces into four Regular and Regional regiments. One was based in Zone 7: *Trung Doan Chu Luc Dong Nai* ('Regular Rgt. Dong Nai'), consisting of Bns.301 (heavy weapons); 302, 303 (as above) and 304 (infantry); and 305 (HQ & services). By this time, incidentally, Hoang Tho himself had been transferred and punished for a drunken rampage – the dashing guerrilla leader had been unable to adapt to a staff post in this new Regular army.

These photos were taken for the US Information Agency as the Viet Minh 308 Div. entered Hanoi in October 1954. 308 Div. *bo doi*, Hanoi, October 1954; note (centre) French leather belt pouch, Mauser rifle and Chinese canteen. See Plate G3. (Courtesy Howard R. Simpson)



Main Force formations

Most Regular main force units were formed in the Viet Bac and, after 1949, in Chinese camps at Wenshan, Long Zhou, Jing Xi and Szu Mao. They received the best available equipment, their supply lines into Tonkin being serviced by a truck fleet which rose to approximately 600 by late 1953. They were thoroughly trained by experienced Chinese instructors, 400 of whom also crossed into Tonkin in July 1950. Courageous and well led, they formed the army of manoeuvre under the direct authority of Giap and his lieutenants.

The first formation was 'Regimental Group 308' in August 1949, consisting of Rgts.308, 92 & 102. By the end of the year 308 'Capital' Div., plus Rgts.174 and 209, had been equipped and trained in China. The Regular divisions had an establishment of three infantry regiments and one artillery battalion; the regiments, of four infantry battalions and one heavy weapons element (typically, 4 x 75mm guns, 4 x 120mm mortars). The support elements grew slowly, as most guns and heavy mortars were held back for the parallel formation of a 'heavy' (artillery) division numbered 351. Divisional strength began at around 12,000 men, and later set-



ted at around 10,000. The 800-strong battalions had 20 machine guns, 8 x 82mm mortars, 3 x 75mm RCLs and a number of bazookas in addition to small arms. Divisions formed by the end of 1951 were:

304 Div. (Rgts.9, 57, 66, plus 345 Arty.Bn.); *308 Div.* (Rgts.36, 88, 102); *312 Div.* (Rgts.141, 165, 209, plus 154 Arty.Bn.); *316 Div.* (Rgts.98, 174, 176, plus 812 Hvy.Wpns.Co.); and *320 Div.* (Rgts.48, 52, 64). Late that year a *325 Div.* was formed – administratively at least – from Rgts.18, 95 and 101 in the Thua Thien area of Annam.

Additional Independent Rgts. in Tonkin were: 148 (Highlands), 42, 46 & 50 (Delta), 238 & 246 (defence of Viet Bac); in Annam, 96, 108 & 803; and in Cochinchina, Rgt. Dong Nai (Bns.301 to 304); Rgt. Dong Thap Muoi (Bns.307, 309 & 311, in the Plain of Reeds); Rgt. 300 (Phu My area); Rgt. 950 (for operations against Saigon); Rgt. Cuu Long (Bns.308, 310 & 312, Tra Vinh area); and Rgt. Tay Do (Bns.402, 404, 406).

By 1953 the units of *351 Heavy Div.* included 151 Eng.Rgt., 237 Heavy Wpns.Rgt. (82mm mortars), 45 Arty.Rgt. (105mm howitzers), 675 Arty.Rgt. (75mm pack howitzers & 120mm mortars), and 367 AA Rgt. (37mm AA guns, .50cal machine guns).

Sources differ over VM strengths, but at the beginning of 1947 they totalled about 50,000 Regulars and 30,000 to 50,000 Regional and Popular forces. In summer 1950 some 25,000 Regionals were up-graded to Regulars, giving Giap about 60 Regular battalions for their first campaign. Later estimates quoted are: (end 1951) 110,000 Regulars, plus 200,000 to 250,000 Regional and Popular forces; (summer 1952) 110,000 Regulars, 75,000 Regional and 120,000 Popular forces; (spring 1953) 125,000 Regulars, 75,000 Regional and 250,000 Popular forces.

For this historic occasion Giap clearly had his élite 'old guard' division issued with new uniforms and equipment. This group of singing soldiers without field equipment show the cut of the lightweight uniform, of khaki or pale grey/green drill. The bamboo-and-fibre helmet is covered with cloth and netting and bears a metal badge (a yellow star on a red disc); the soldier second from right wears instead a pith helmet with the same covering. (Courtesy Howard R. Simpson)



308 Div. soldiers in Hanoi with Chinese cloth knapsacks complete with folded blankets and rolled groundsheets; some white enamel mugs were decorated with flags and slogans. Both US and Chinese canteens are worn, and Chinese cloth carriers for stick grenades. Weapons in this photo series are mostly Mauser rifles, MAT.49s and Czech Z.27 LMGs. (Courtesy Howard R. Simpson)

Weapons

In 1945 about 30,000 Japanese rifles and 2,000 LMGs went mostly to the Regional and Popular forces; the Regulars received French weapons formerly seized by the Japanese. More Japanese weapons were later supplied by the Red Chinese and the USSR (the latter, from stocks captured in Manchuria). By the end of 1945 the total VM arsenal was about 60,000 rifles, 3,000 LMGs, a few French and Japanese mortars, and perhaps half a dozen field guns; they also had large quantities of grenades (which were issued more freely than rifles to the Popular militia).

Apart from Japanese and French weapons there was a wide range of others from various sources. American and Czech rifles and LMGs were sold by the Chinese Nationalists or handed over later by Red China, as was US equipment captured in Korea (including bazookas, and larger numbers of 75mm RCLs than the CEFFO had). The first returning French units mostly had US and British World War II types, which later found their way to local auxiliaries, and hence into the hands of the Viet Minh – who also benefited at second hand from the US aid programme to France from 1950 onwards. They also purchased and smuggled in arms through Thailand and the Philippines, partly funded by the sale of rice and opium smuggled out of VM-held areas.

The victory on RC.4 and abandonment of Lang Son in autumn 1950 brought them about 8,000 French rifles, 1,200 SMGs, 950 MGs, 125 mortars, and 13 guns. During 1951 the Chinese provided some 18,000 rifles, 1,200 MGs, 150-200 mortars, and 50 Czech RCLs; during 1952, another 40,000 rifles, 4,000 SMGs, 450 mortars, 120 RCLs, and the first major deliveries of AA and field guns. Main force Regulars are said to have received enough SMGs to equip one infantryman in three; non-French types included the Soviet PPSH41/ Chinese Type 50, the PPSH43, Thompson and Sten. Light machine guns (French FM.24/29s, Czech Z.27s, Russian DPs, and a few US BARs and British Brens) were also plentiful, perhaps on a scale of one per ten-man section.

TACTICAL EFFECTIVENESS

Viet Minh Regulars, and many Regional units, were first class; it is clear that they had successfully made the mental transition from guerrillas to soldiers. Neutral journalists who managed to spend time with Regionals were impressed by their discipline and preparedness. Throughout the VM



1: Sergent, 5e RIC; Saigon, 1945

2: Adjudant, 1er Bn de Choc; Op. 'Lea', Oct 1947

3: Légionnaire, 3e REI; northern Tonkin, 1948-49



- 1: Tirailleur, 2e BM/1er RTA; Phuc Yen, 1951
2: Tirailleur, II/3e RTM; De Lattre Line, 1953
3: Mokadem, Goumiers Marocains; Tonkin, winter 1949-50



1



2



3

1: Caporal-chef, Infanterie Coloniale, 1950-54
2: Commandant, Tabor Marocain; Tonkin, 1950-51
3: Soldat, Rgt. de Corée; south Vietnam, December 1953



1: Sous-lieutenant,
5e Cuirassiers; south Vietnam,
1950-54
2: Soldat, 10e BPCP; Vinh Yen,
January 1951
3: Soldat, 2e BPC; Hoa Binh,
November 1951



1: Soldat, 6e BPC; Tu Le,
October 1952

2: Radio operator, II/1er RCP;
Op. 'Camargue', Aug 1953

3: French NCO, 5e BPVN;
Dien Bien Phu, April 1954



1: Sgt porte-fanion, 1er Bn Muong; Tonkin, spring 1952
2: Nung irregular, Phung To, August 1953
3: Viet Minh guerrilla, Cochinchina, late 1940s



1: Officer, VM Independent Regulars; Cochinchina, 1949–50
2: VM Regular, assault equipment, Tonkin 1951–54
3: VM Regular, 308 Division; Hanoi, October 1954



- 1: Médecin-capitaine Valérie André;
parade dress, 1951
- 2: QM 1ere cl., DNA 3; walking-out dress,
1953
- 3: Lt.Col., Foreign Legion infantry;
walking-out dress, 1948

attention to tactical detail was excellent, both in camp and on the march – great emphasis was laid on camouflage, night movement, dispersal and reassembly in face of the enemy, and endurance with the simplest rations and minimal medical care and comforts.

The VM were skilled at concealed cross-country movement in the worst terrain, carrying all essentials with them. This gave them a significant advantage over motorised French troops, whose more complex logistic needs kept them tied to the inadequate and vulnerable road network. Generally, only the best French paratroop units could match their cross-country speed in the jungle hills, and that for only limited periods. It was rare for French aircraft to inflict much loss on Regular units on the march, though their supply lines suffered much worse (e.g. in 1954, during the huge effort to supply the Dien Bien Phu siege army 500 miles from the Viet Bac bases).

French officers remarked on the VM's excellent fieldcraft. They were masters of the ambush, on any scale. Their heavy weapons and artillery were dug in and camouflaged so well – often in the caves which honeycombed the crags of the high country – that they could be served without revealing themselves to aircraft or counter-fire. Regional forces, obliged to remain more static in nominally French-occupied areas, were brilliant at evasion and concealment, digging complex underground hideouts and stores.

Attacks on French posts were thoroughly prepared after careful reconnaissance, often using ground plan models. French units were identified before objectives were selected, and the VM were uncannily good at feeling out weak points. Diversionary attacks were often launched – typically by Regional units – to confuse any supporting effort by nearby French artillery; and ambushes were set along approach roads to block relief columns. They brought their mortars, RCLs and guns into action fast and accurately, against well-chosen and plotted targets – e.g. command and radio bunkers and heavy weapon positions.

French soldiers found it unnerving that these conventional military skills were combined with a willingness to take horrific casualties in 'human wave' assaults. Once infantry were committed to an attack their courage was sacrificial. Assaults, led by volunteers carrying satchel charges and bangalore torpedoes, were pressed home again and again over the corpse-choked wire.

Although incessant political indoctrination was couched in turgid Communist jargon, memoirs make clear that unit and personal loyalties carried more real weight for individuals. The commissars preached the inevitability of victory; yet Giap – far more than the French high command – stressed the stupidity of underestimating the enemy.

The *bo doi* was only human, and morale must have suffered badly in the face of the huge casualties – from support weapons, artillery, and air-dropped napalm – suffered during the positional battles of 1951–54; yet although there was a steady trickle of defections (even including some field officers and commissars) there were few known instances of Regular commanders or units collapsing. (During the worst weeks at Dien Bien Phu VM reports did mention 'subjective tendencies' – commissar-speak for hesitancy among units already shattered in murderous fighting.)

Viet Minh commanders followed one doctrine which Frenchmen found almost shocking: reinforcements were never risked to rescue hard-pressed units, which were routinely abandoned to their fate. This icy insistence that each unit 'do or die' often foiled French efforts to divert VM advances. This was in direct contrast to the European attitude: French units were



French and Vietnamese paras of 6e BPC force-marching from Tu Le to the Black River, October 1952; by this date 6e BPC had two Vietnamese companies out of four (6e & 26e CIP) – see commentary Plate E1. During their desperate fighting retreat through the hills the unit covered 40 miles in under two days, but suffered 60% casualties. The Viet Minh left the 6e BPC's wounded to die where they lay, of exposure, thirst, and the attentions of ants, rats and carrion birds; and of the 110 prisoners taken from the field after this action only four survived to be repatriated in 1954. In fairness it should be added that French and ANV treatment of Viet Minh prisoners and suspects was often harsh. (SPI)

operations were signalled in advance by the assembly at Hanoi/Gia Lam, Hanoi/ Bach Mai or Saigon/Tan Son Nhut of the overstretched transport fleet. Another give-away was the pressing into service of, and subsequent formation practice by, civilian DC-3s.

The VM's treatment of French casualties was more often utterly callous than sadistic. Some were even repatriated at times, to make a propaganda point – although others were executed, for the same reason. Wounded were usually either shot out of hand as they were stripped of anything useful, or simply left to die horribly where they lay. (French soldiers forced to abandon their seriously wounded by the impossibility of carrying stretchers far through the jungle hills routinely gave morphine overdoses.)

There were occasional instances of the French being told to collect a few of their wounded from pre-arranged places. The reason was presumably psychological: the VM were showing themselves confident enough to be merciful – and when collection took place on the battlefield amid the unburied French dead, the effect on morale was depressing.

If 'walking wounded' prisoners were taken from the field they usually died from complete neglect of their wounds; and an average of about 60% of all CEFEQ prisoners died during prolonged marches and years in prison camps (90% of Vietnamese personnel). The VM followed a vigorous programme of 'brain-washing' their prisoners, a man's rations depending on his co-operation; some photos of prisoners exchanged in summer 1954 recall those of Belsen survivors.

repeatedly cut up in ambushes laid along the few and predictable roads, or sacrificed in desperate jungle air-drops, while trying to rescue comrades in peril.

Viet Minh intelligence was nearly always excellent. The French employed local personnel in many capacities, and their thorough infiltration by the VM made day-to-day secrecy impossible. Agents reported any French troop movements; major operations were obvious well in advance from the assembly of vehicles and matériel. Even if exact drop-zones were not usually discovered, airborne

CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR OPERATIONS

1947

Oct Gen. Valluy launched Op. 'Lea' against the Viet Bac bases: ten bns. by road from Lang Son, four by river, and two para bns. dropped on Bac Kan. Giap was unprepared for airborne attack, and the paras only just missed

capturing Ho Chi Minh. But the VM quickly regrouped; the Lang Son column was held up by incessant ambushes; the rivers proved less navigable than believed, and the amphibious troops had to march further overland than planned. The French inflicted much greater losses than they suffered, but the VM disengaged successfully – as they would so often in the future.

Nov Op. 'Ceinture' attempted to trap VM withdrawing southwards in area between Tuyen Quang, Vietri, Thai Nguyen and Cho Chu (I/ & III/1er RCP, 1er Choc, DBSAS, 5e & 6e RTM, I/3e REI); the French claimed 793 VM killed, 168 captured, for 108 French dead and 277 wounded. The only indisputable success was the rout of VM units between the Red and Black Rivers by two French-led Thai *montagnard* battalions.

1948

Valluy was replaced by Gen. Blaizot. No major offensives were launched by either side. Guerrilla pressure continued to grow; the VM strengthened their infrastructure, communications, and central control of Regional units, and built up the Regulars.

July Successful defence of Phu Tong Hoa post on RC.3, Tonkin highlands, by two cos. of I/3e REI against unusually determined attack.

1949

Sept Gen. Carpentier replaced Blaizot, delegating operations in Tonkin to the locally experienced Gen. Alessandri. Alessandri concentrated on sweeps inside the Delta, to squeeze Giap's supply lines. The Chuc Luc's food situation became so serious that Giap even considered a (potentially disastrous) major offensive against the Delta to lift the threat of famine.

Oct Communist victory in China marked the turning-point of the war. By the end of 1949 Giap could begin to depend on supplies from China, which had trained and equipped the first one-and-a-half VM Regular divisions. The VM began probing the scattered French posts in the frontier region, where road movements were already under constant attack.

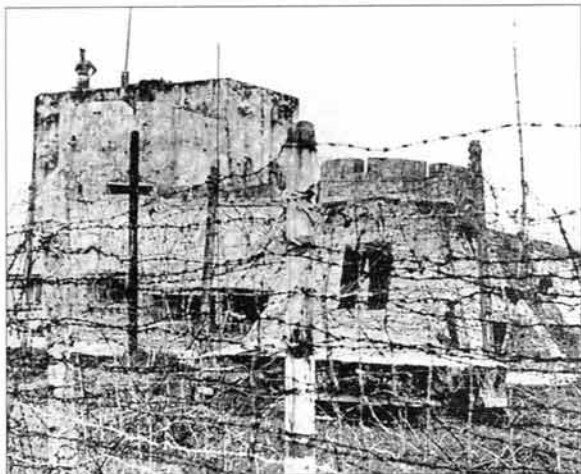
1950

Sept French plans to withdraw from Cao Bang and other isolated posts along RC.4 were forestalled (16th) when Giap threw five battalions with artillery against Dong Khe; this fell (18th) after desperate resistance by two cos. of II/3e REI. Lt.Col. Le Page moved up from Lang Son to That Khe with 3,500 men (1er & 11er TM, 1er BM/8e RTM, and parachuted 1er BEP).

Oct Ordered to retake Dong Khe (1st), Le Page's advance was blocked by strong VM forces; Lt.Col. Charton abandoned Cao Bang (3rd) and marched to meet him (1,500 men – III/3e REI, 3e TM, irregulars). Both columns were repeatedly blocked and ambushed, taking heavy casualties. They were forced to leave RC.4 for tracks through the wooded hills to the west, where between 15 and 30 VM battalions harried them almost to destruction; both commands had been terribly reduced before they linked late on the 7th. Half of 3e BCCP jumped into That Khe to hold it against their arrival (8th). Le Page and Charton dispersed their survivors in small parties to try to infiltrate back to That Khe. Some 300 reached the post (9th); Capt. Jeanpierre led in 29 survivors of 1er BEP (10th); and later that day That Khe was abandoned. The paras of 3e BCCP were wiped out during rearguard actions (10th–14th). Of some 6,000 casualties, 4,800 were listed



Sketch of a veteran French patrol leader in the Delta during the rainy season. (Courtesy Howard R. Simpson)



ABOVE A concrete blockhouse in the De Lattre Line. In 1951 the new C-in-C ordered the construction of (eventually) some 900 of these in a tight belt around the edges of the Red River Delta. Size and design varied, but all were supposed to be proof against mortar and RCL fire for long enough to summon help; some were fitted with obsolete tank turrets. The Delta defences would soon tie down some 82,000 troops, mostly non-European. (Courtesy Wayne Braby)

dead or missing. Lang Son was abandoned in panic (17th–18th), its large stores intact.

1951

Jan Giap mounted a premature assault (13th) by 308 & 312 Divs. on the Delta defences at Vinh Yen; the logistics required two million porter-days. Initial 'human wave' attacks were successful, but were checked when De Lattre took personal command. Quickly assembling reinforcements (GM 1, GM 2, GM 3), he unleashed constant air attacks, including the first use of napalm. Giap's casualties by the 17th were 6,000 killed, 500 prisoners and nearly 6,000 wounded.

March Major VM attacks were launched around Mao Khe by 308, 312 & 316 Divs., threatening

Haiphong port. After brief but desperate fighting these were repulsed, Mao Khe itself being held by Senegalese (30e BMTS), Tho partisans and RICM armoured cars, relieved by 6e BPC and DNA 1, with gunfire support from warships on the Da Bach River.

May–June While 312 Div. manoeuvred north of the Delta Giap sent in a third assault across the Day River north and south of Nam Dinh – rice-growing country which the VM needed, inhabited by independent Catholics whom they wished to dominate. Essentially diversionary attacks, in heavy monsoon rain, were mounted by 304 Div. towards Phu Ly and 308 Div. towards Nin Binh; the main thrust was by 320 Div. towards Phat Diem – one rgt. had infiltrated towards Thai Binh to co-operate with local Ind.Rgt. 42 in attacking the French rear. 304 & 308 Divs. achieved initial success, and on 30 May 320 Div. crossed the Day. De Lattre quickly assembled three Groupes Mobiles, four artillery groups, an armoured group and the paras of 7e BPC. The VM made only slow progress across the paddyfields, decimated by French aircraft and artillery, and Catholic militia proved a match for the two regiments behind French lines; Dinassauts cut Giap's lines across the Day, and by 6 June the French had the initiative.





Op. 'Sauterelles', Annam, August 1952: M3 halftrack and Foreign Legion infantry, from either II/5e REI or III/13e DBLE serving with Groupe Mobile 7, photographed during this relatively successful sweep of the enemy-infested coastal flats along RC.1 – nicknamed 'the joyless road' – near Quang Tri. This, with Op. 'Caiman' nearby the following month, claimed some 2,800 VM killed or captured. The VM dominated much of the 'waist' of Annam throughout the war, threatening French communications between the north and south. (ECPA)

LEFT French infantry take cover behind a dyke in the paddyfields; this picture was taken near Phat Diem during an operation in December 1953, but it is characteristic of the fighting in the rice-growing lowlands throughout 1947–54. Despite the best efforts of successive French commanders large VM units (e.g. Independent Reg.Rgts.42, 46 & 50, and infiltrating units of 320 Div.) remained active within the Red River Delta throughout much of the war. (SPI)

Between 10 and 18 June Giap was forced to withdraw, at a cost of 9,000 dead and 1,000 captured.

Sept–Oct Giap moved Rgts.141 & 209, 312 Div., against Nghia Lo, the main post in the Thai hills between the Red and Black Rivers – his stepping-stone for invading Laos. The Vietnamese garrison held out until reinforced by 8e BPC (3 Oct); when 2e BEP was also dropped (4 Oct) they mounted aggressive sorties with air support. This victory bred the dangerous illusion that if isolated garrisons could hold off initial assaults they could always be successfully reinforced by paratroops; and that the VM would not press home assaults in the face of heavy firepower.

Nov De Lattre moved to recapture Hoa Binh, capital of the loyal Muong tribes and an important

VM road junction 25 miles west of the Delta. An initial airdrop by 1er BEP (Op. 'Tulip', 15 Nov) seized the town without difficulty; six GMs pushed along RC.6 to link up, while riverine units from Vietri forced the loop of the Black River. Giap refused confrontation, falling back into the jungle hills and patiently preparing for a battle of attrition along both land and river links.

Dec French posts along the Black River – Ap Da Chong, Notre Dame Rock, Tu Vu – were heavily attacked by 312 Div.

1952

Jan Gen. Salan replaced the dying De Lattre, as Giap tightened the stranglehold of 304, 308 & 312 Divs.; meanwhile units of 316 & 320 infiltrated the Delta from north and south to disrupt French rear lines. The last Black River convoy was turned back with heavy loss on the 12th, and the west bank was abandoned. Relentless pressure now fell on RC.6, e.g. posts at Xom Pheo, Kem, Xuan Mai. Five battalions were surrounded at the end of a narrow corridor held – with great difficulty – by another four. A major push to re-open and clear the road took 12 battalions with heavy artillery and air support 12 full days (18–29 Jan). Salan ordered withdrawal.

Feb Leap-frogging units back down RC.6 to the Delta involved a costly running battle, 22–24 February. This campaign saw increasingly sophisticated VM infantry tactics, effective use of cleverly concealed artillery, and of AA artillery.

Oct Giap sent most of 308, 312 & 316 Divs. south-west into the Thai Highlands towards Laos. Nghia Lo quickly fell; other garrisons fell back towards the Black River line, and 6e BPC were dropped at Tu Le to buy them time, at great cost. Other isolated garrisons withdrew on Na San, where a fortified camp was established by airlift.

Nov For once Giap underestimated French strength; when 308 Div. began the assault on Na San (23rd) it was faced by 3e BPC, 1er & 2e BEP, III/3e & III/5e REI, two Tirailleur and two Vietnamese battalions, plus artillery, wired in behind 3,500 mines. Although strongpoints changed hands in heavy fighting until 2 Dec, Giap never looked like overrunning the camp, and suffered several thousand casualties in the attempt. (The garrison was gradually reduced, finally withdrawing in Aug 1953.)

Salan mounted Op. 'Lorraine', an ambitious thrust by 30,000 men up



RC.2 into the Viet Bac to destroy bases and lure Regular divisions back from the Thai Highlands. He committed four Groupes Mobiles, two Sous-Groupements Blindés, and a Dinassaut on the Clear River; and 2,350 paratroopers (3e BPC, 1er & 2e BEP) jumped successfully over Phu Doan (9 Nov). But Giap – confident that French logistics could not long sustain this 100-mile thrust up a narrow corridor – refused to fall back from the Laotian border, leaving just two Regular regiments and Regional units to harass ‘Lorraine’. The French destroyed 250 tons of munitions, 1,500 weapons and several trucks, but failed to reach the major depots, and even this loss was only ‘capital’ – Giap’s flow of ‘revenue’ from China would soon replace it. The French withdrawal took hard fighting; a major ambush by Rgt. 36 at Chan Muong pass (17 Nov) cost units of GMs 1 & 4 (BMI, II/2e REI, 4e BM/7e RTA, RICM tanks) heavy casualties.

1953

April Giap had kept 308, 312 & 316 Divs. in the Thai Highlands since they had outrun their supplies the previous November. He now invaded Laos; forced to use their entire air supply fleet, the French established large fortified centres on the Plain of Jars and at Luang Prabang. Having rehearsed his army in large scale mobile warfare, Giap withdrew all but a small force, keeping his options open.

BELOW French and Vietnamese paras, probably of 8e BPC, relax by a distance sign in the Lang Son area during Op. ‘Hirondelle’, the major attack on VM depots in July 1953. (SPI)



LEFT Often captioned as Dien Bien Phu, this photo in fact shows a counter-attack by French paras during the successful defence of the airhead at Na San in the Thai Highlands, November/December 1952. (ECPA)

Op. 'Castor', November 1953: 1er BEP jump into Dien Bien Phu. The French believed that since any VM artillery emplaced on the reverse slopes of the surrounding hills would be out of range of the entrenched camp, and the forward slopes could be dominated by French guns and aircraft, the valley bottom position was not as dangerous as it appeared. In fact the engineers and gunners of 351 Div. proved lethally brilliant at digging, concealing and serving gunpits on the forward slopes; when this became clear in mid-March 1954 the camp's artillery commander committed suicide. (SIHLE)

June Gen. Salan was replaced as C-in-C by Gen. Navarre.

July Op. 'Hirondelle', a major drop over VM depots around Lang Son, involved c.2,000 paras of 6e & 8e BPC, 2e BEP. Much matériel was destroyed; despite a sharp enemy response the paras withdrew successfully, marching 50 miles to link up with GM 5 pushing up RC.4 from Tien Yen.

On 28 July major forces were committed to Op. 'Camargue' on the Annam coast (Tourane-Hue-Quang Tri), to clear a stretch of RC.1 - 'la rue sans joie' - of the elusive VM Rgt. 95, long concealed in a chain of villages surrounded by lagoons and sand dunes. One land and two amphibious task forces included ten bns. of infantry (Naval Commandos, Legion, North Africans, Goumiers, Senegalese, ANV, Muong) and two of air-dropped paras (II/1er RCP, 3e BPVN); three Amphibious Groups; tanks from 1er REC, RICM and 6e RSM; and strong artillery, air, and naval gunfire support. Most of Rgt. 95 managed to disperse and escape.

Sept-Oct The three-phase Op. 'Brochet' sent 18 bns. (incl. 1er BEP, 1er BPC, 5e BPVN, II/ & III/13e DBLE, RICM) and DNA 3, 4 & 12 in a major sweep against VM Rgts. 42 & 50 in the Bamboo Canal sector of the northern Delta. Despite some success the VM continued to dominate perhaps 5,000 of the 7,000 villages inside the Delta.

Oct-Nov Op. 'Mouette', against 320 Div. on the southern Delta defences, occupied seven GMs, units incl. I/5e REI, I/ & II/13e DBLE, II/1er RCP, 8e BPC, RICM, DNA 3 & 12.

Nov-Dec Op. 'Castor': II/1er RCP, 1er, 6e & 8e BPC, 1er BEP, 5e BPVN jumped into Dien Bien Phu valley against light resistance (20-23 Nov). II/1er RCP, 1er & 6e BPC were withdrawn (11 Dec), followed by 5e BPVN (25 Jan); 1er BEP & 8e Choc remained while a massive airlift installed the rest of the garrison: I/2e & III/3e REI, I/ & III/13e DBLE, & three Legion mortar cos.; 2e BM/1er RTA, 3e BM/3e RTA, 5e BM/7e RTA; 1er BM/4e





Dien Bien Phu, December 1953: during the consolidation phase Howard Simpson (left), a US embassy information officer and later a distinguished writer on Vietnam, lunches with NCOs of Bigeard's 6e BPC. Houses and trees would later be cleared for building materials; even so, few of the camp's dug-outs would be proof against 105mm shells – to fly in enough engineer stores would have taken more airlift capacity than was available in the whole country. Note the 6e BPC's camouflage cap, named after Bigeard, which became general issue to paras in Algeria as the 'M1959'. (Courtesy Howard R. Simpson)

CASUALTIES

One estimate states that the war had cost 20,685 Frenchmen, 11,620 légionnaires, 15,229 North African, 7,540 West African and 26,686 Indochinese troops killed or unaccounted for; totals for wounded were about three times higher. Of 36,979 members of the Expeditionary Force listed as missing or captured, some 4,700 were repatriated before and 10,754 after the ceasefire.

RTM; 2e & 3e BT; 24 x105mm guns of II/ & III/10e RAC, & 4 x155mm of 11e/IV/4e RAC; ten M24 tanks from 1er RCC. Early probes into the surrounding hills met surprisingly strong resistance; the VM began desultory shelling on 31 December; and French movement even inside the valley was soon greatly confined.

Between Nov 1953 and March 1954 Giap moved some 49,500 men of 304, 308, 312, 316 & 351 Divs. to the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu. They, and scores of thousands of coolies, also transported at least 200 x 75mm & 105mm guns plus many heavy mortars and RCLs, and perhaps 20 x 37mm AA guns. These were installed and camouflaged so skilfully that they proved almost immune to air and artillery attack. Vast quantities of ammunition and other matériel were carried in. The French were well informed of this huge operation, but were unable to halt it despite a major air effort.

1954

Jan–March A series of operations codenamed 'Atlante' in Annam tied down 25 bns., three artillery groups, two armoured sqns., Naval Cdos., and many ANV units. Results were disappointing; reserves were thereafter transferred north, leaving GM 100 and ANV units to hold the Central Highlands alone.

Jan–July Zig-zagging back and forth to meet orchestrated threats to Pleiku, Kontum, An Khe and Dak Doa, GM 100 was ground down in a series of catastrophic ambushes, particularly by Independent Regular Rgts.803 & 108; it was finally wiped out only days before the ceasefire.

13 March For the first time Dien Bien Phu was massively bombarded, with serious losses including commanders, and great damage to inadequately protected positions. That night the north-east strongpoint 'Beatrice' (III/13e DBLE) was overrun; the next night, the northern strongpoint 'Gabrielle' (5e BM/7e RTA). From now on VM artillery and AAA could be brought ever closer to the airstrip and the central camp, and VM sapping could begin to strangle individual perimeter strongpoints. Piecemeal parachuting of reinforcements (5e BPVN, 14th; 6e BPC, 16th) could not keep up with losses. The last C-47 managed to take off on 27 March; thereafter all men and matériel had to be parachuted, into a shrinking perimeter, under fierce AA fire. The monsoon rains began on 29 March.

April Massive attacks on the vital eastern hill strongpoints 'Eliane' & 'Dominique' (30 March–6 April) were only partly repulsed, with great loss to both sides. The tempo of attacks varied during the month; the pattern was heavy bombardment by day, and mass assaults after dark from ever-tightening rings of approach trenches. Strongpoints were lost, retaken, cut off, and lost again; though they fought heroically, the effective infantry – French and Vietnamese paras, légionnaires, and some North Africans – dwindled as casualties mounted and exhaustion worsened. Transport and tactical aircraft losses to AAA became serious; ammunition, food, drugs and all other necessities ran desperately short. II/1er RCP & 2e BEP parachuted in (1st–5th & 9th–10th), but could only delay the inevitable.

May Part of 1er BPC was parachuted (3rd–5th). The final VM assaults broke through (6th–7th); and on 7 May the camp surrendered. Apart from the most seriously wounded, the entire surviving garrison went into captivity, where most 'lightly' wounded died within four months.

THE PLATES

NOTE:

These plates owe much to research published in the outstanding French magazines *Militaria* and *Homme de Guerre*, published by Histoire & Collections of 5 rue de la République, 75011 Paris, France – see select bibliography on page 47.

'Composite' figures combine features from more than one photo of men of the same unit or type, to give the most visual information. The British term 'khaki drill' is used here for all sand-coloured lightweight clothing including US 'khaki' or 'suntan' and French *kaki claire*. 'Green drab' here means the olive of French M1947 fatigues – *treillis de combat*; 'jungle green' means British Commonwealth tropical issue in a bluer green. We use the form e.g. M1947 for all national pattern dates.

Before c.1949 the CEFEO wore a wide range of British, Commonwealth, US and French fatigue clothing and personal equipment, issued as available, many different patterns being seen side by side. All ranks made free use of local tailors, and personal preferences were tolerated. From c.1949/50 French green drab M1947 fatigues gradually replaced foreign items, though some were still to be seen in 1954. The French M1949 cotton bushhat and US M1 steel helmet were the most common field headgear; a range of coloured sidecaps (*calots*), berets, and other 'tribal' headgear were worn by various units when out of action.

British M1937 webbing was widely used early on, as was some pre-war French leather equipment; and US webbing remained common throughout. The French M1950 airborne troops' (TAP) equipment was slow to arrive in quantity, but most paras had received it by the end of 1952. In the exhausting climate backpacks (various US, British, and French M1950) were often left at base or on vehicles, and when needed on the march were often carried slung on bamboo poles by Vietnamese prisoners (PIMs).

The MAS.36 and MAT.49 gradually became the standard small arms, though US .30cal carbines remained popular. Older rifles and automatics – Lebel's, Berthiers and MAS.38s, British SMLEs and No.4s, Brens and Stens, US M1903 Springfields and P17s, BARs and Thompsons – gradually passed to Vietnamese troops and irregulars. The FM.24/29 was the standard section LMG throughout the war.

A1 Sergent, 5e Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale; Saigon, October 1945 This returning unit was equipped by the British in Ceylon. Shirt and battledress trousers are Indian-made, in jungle green drill; so is the tropical version of the 'cap General Service', termed by the French the 'Gurkha beret' (pulled right here, British style). All web equipment is British M1937; photos show No.4 rifles and Stens. The only visible insignia is an early example of the French M1945 left sleeve *écusson* of branch and unit, worn only by NCOs in the photo and probably bazaar-made; the fouled anchor of Colonial troops is in gold, identifying an NCO, and red double piping edges the top of the midnight blue diamond.

A2 Adjudant, 1er Bataillon Parachutiste de Choc; Operation 'Lea', Bac Kan, October 1947 The 1er BPC jumped over VM base camps at Bac Kan on 7 October 1947. The 'M1949' bushhat was seen well before that date (along with the British World War II brown felt equivalent). This US Army HBT

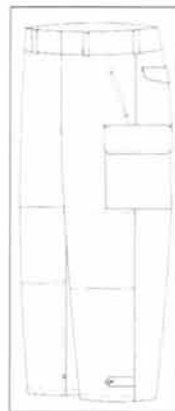
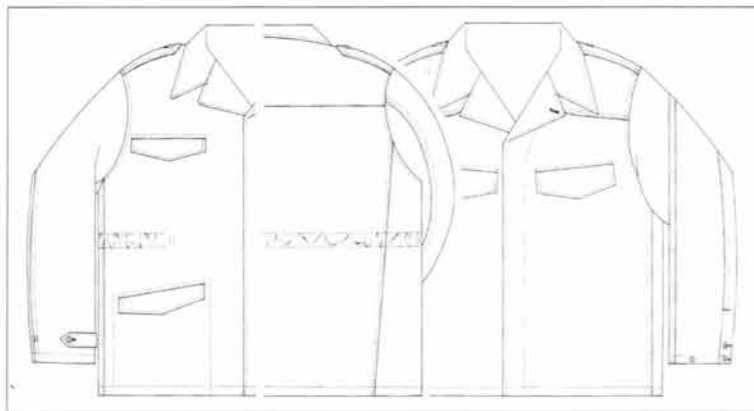


Oran, Algeria, February 1946: men of the Régiment de Marche de la Légion Étrangère/ Extrême Orient wait to ship out for Indochina – the RMLE/EO was retitled 2e REI while in transit. Apart from the M1930 white-covered *képi* and red-topped green Legion *calot* they are dressed and equipped from British Army surplus. (Courtesy Charles Milassin)

mechanic's overall is the so-called third pattern; US web equipment is worn, with a British M1944 canteen; there are no SMG pouches – magazines are carried in the pockets. So is this battalion's black beret, with a silver badge in the shape of France; other Metropolitan paras wore a dark blue beret at this date, with the TAP winged fist and dagger badge, and would adopt a lighter *bleu du roi* colour in May 1948. The boots are US Army M1943 'double-buckles'. The MAS.38 machine pistol, too light for battlefield work, was the only French-made SMG then available; Thompsons, Stens and some German MP.40s were also used. This warrant officer wears no insignia; a Colt M1911A1 is holstered on his hip, over the popular US M3 fighting knife – many other types were also seen, often cut down from bayonets. On his belt are French M1937 and US World War II issue fragmentation grenades.

A3 Légionnaire, 3e Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie; northern Tonkin, 1948–49 A composite from several photos of small post garrisons. For most work and operations the bushhat replaced the Legion's white-covered *képi* (here the M1930). The khaki drill shirt is worn with British jungle green battledress trousers, and US web leggings over leather boots. The leather belt, braces and pouches are of World War I vintage; a rolled poncho carries enough kit for a local patrol; the rifle is the British No.4 Mk.I.

B1 Tirailleur, 2e Bataillon de Marche/1er Régiment de Tirailleurs Algériens; Phuc Yen, 1951 The 1er RTA's second 'march battalion' landed in September 1949. They fought at Vinh Yen and Nin Binh in early 1951; at Cho Benh, on the Black River, and RC.6 during the Hoa Binh campaign 1951–52; and finally on strongpoint 'Isabelle' at Dien Bien Phu. The bushhat bears (unusually) the 1er RTA badge, its crescent enamelled red for the 2e BM, this colour repeated in a cloth backing. The standard French M1947 green drab fatigues with four-pocket jacket are worn with British web anklets and French M1917 boots, US webbing rifle belt, braces and canteen, and pre-World War II French buttoned-flap musette. He has no knapsack; his necessities are carried in a slung British M1937 small pack and a drab khaki tent section rolled and slung. His rifle is the standard 7.5mm MAS.36; and he holds a captured Viet Minh flag.



Schematic drawings of French M1947 green drab fatigues as illustrated in Plates B1, C1, F1: four-pocket jacket, two-pocket 'lightened' shirt/jacket, and trousers. (Drawings Christa Hook)

B2 Light machine-gunner, II/3e Régiment de Tirailleurs Marocains; De Lattre Line, 1953 The II/3e RTM moved from Cochinchina to Tonkin in January 1951, and fought at Vinh Yen. It became a 'sector battalion' that May, holding posts on the northern edge of the Delta until 1954. This section LMG No.1 carries an FM.24/29 – all in all, probably the infantry's best weapon. In wet weather the US M1943 enlisted men's raincoat was often issued to CEFEQ and ANV troops. This Tirailleur has arranged his *chèche* as a headscarf under his US helmet. His trousers are tucked into shortened US web leggings or the French M1951 equivalent, over M1917 boots. His British belt supports a single universal pouch – often retained for SMG and LMG magazines after other British webbing had been replaced – with the sheathed FM cleaning rod; the FM gunner's haversack is worn slung.

B3 Mokadem, Goumiers Marocains; northern Tonkin, winter 1949–50 This is a composite figure from several photos. Against the winter mists this veteran sergeant – note gold rank stripe buttoned to his chest – wears the traditional *djellaba* over M1947 fatigues with *patauga* boots; the flat appearance of the rolled turban is also characteristic of the Goumiers. Photos

show them with US webbing, or old French leather three-pouch belt and brace equipment. This NCO carries magazines for his M1A1 Thompson in one of many locally made leather pouches seen before the issue of M1950 webbing. Pre-World War II musettes and canteens were common among native troops.

C1 Caporal-chef, Infanterie Coloniale; hot weather local combat dress, 1950–54 'La Coloniale' provided the most battalions of any branch, so we have given this composite figure a hooked-on pocket rank and branch display with the Colonial anchor. In fact this is the generic hot season French infantryman of a post garrison on local patrol, the combination of bushhat, M1947 two-pocket 'lightened' fatigue shirt/jacket, khaki drill shorts and minimal equipment being wholly typical. This NCO has an M1 carbine with clip pouches, and a US compass pouch.

C2 Commandant, Tabor Marocain; northern Tonkin, 1950–51 A composite from photos of Cdt. Delcros of 11e and Saulay of 17e Tabors. That of Saulay shows khaki drill shirt and slacks, British web anklets, leather boots, and the *calot* of the Goumiers (dark blue with light blue top fold) worn with a *chèche*



Sketch of a Moroccan Goumier in northern Tonkin. From June 1949 three Tabors were usually serving there at any one time, administratively brigaded as the Groupement de Tabors Marocains d'Extrême Orient (GTMEO). During the disaster on RC.4 the 1er Tabor (58e, 59e & 60e Goums) and 11e Tabor (3e, 5e & 8e Goums) fought with the Le Page column. The 11e were finally overrun at Na Kheo; survivors totalled five officers (of 14), 20 NCOs (of 50), and 344 Goumiers (of 860). See commentary Plate B3; and note that the sleeve patch was officially worn on the left. (Courtesy Howard R. Simpson)



wrapped around head and neck. Cap and shoulder straps bear gold lace major's ranking – one plus three. The fob badge, a silver *koumia* dagger, was a general branch insignia; few individual Tabor or Goum badges have been identified. French officers often carried thick bamboo walking sticks.

C3 Soldat, Régiment de Corée; south Vietnam, December 1953 The French UN battalion in Korea distinguished itself under command of US 2nd Infantry Division. Transferred to Vietnam in November 1953, it was increased to two battalions by local recruitment, providing – with the battle-hardened mixed-race BM/43e RIC – the motorised infantry of Groupe Mobile 100. Photos show that US clothing supplied in Korea was replaced by French issue, though this off-duty soldier wears a US T-shirt under his two-pocket M1947 fatigues; but the battalion's black beret and badge, yellow and black 'Corée'

ABOVE French cavalry lieutenant-colonel and Vietnamese warrant officer wearing khaki drill, the former with a privately acquired bushhat in US camouflage material (as seen in a number of photos), the latter with the khaki drill beret widely worn by vehicle crews and ANV units. (ECPA)

RIGHT Paratroop company headquarters during an operation in the Delta, 1953; note US SCR.300 and SCR.536 radios, M1A1 carbine, and British windproof camouflage fatigues. See commentary Plate E2. (ECPA)



shoulder title, and 2nd Div. patch were all retained. This former para wears the UN and French campaign ribbons for Korea.

D1 Sous-lieutenant, 5e Régiment de Cuirassiers 'Royale Pologne'; south Vietnam, 1950–54 Arriving in February 1946, this regiment's dispersed squadrons fought all over southern Indochina; III/5e RC's Stuart tanks and halftracks fought with GM 100 in the Central Highlands during that brigade's long ordeal in spring 1954. This young second lieutenant wears the AFV crews' habitual hot weather dress: khaki drill shirt, shorts, and beret (usually unbadged, but here with one of several known 5e RC variations), *pataugas* and minimal equipment. A US Army belt supports pistol clip pouches and a holstered Walther P38, a popular item of World War II booty. He displays the regiment's enamelled breast badge; his shoulder strap rank lace is in cavalry silver.

D2 Soldat, 10e Bataillon Parachutiste de Chasseurs à Pied; Vinh Yen, January 1951 In Tonkin since September 1950, this unit recruited Muongs, Thais and Nungs into its 2nd Company. At Vinh Yen on 16 January 1951 it retook Hill 210 from 308 Div., and held it against fierce counter-attacks. US Marine (usually) and Army camouflage clothing of various types was widely issued to paras from 1950; this complete USMC second pattern suit – the so-called 'Raider' uniform – is worn with French M1950 brown jump boots. His US helmet is strapped to his US M1943 camouflaged jungle pack; his webbing comprises US pistol belt and braces, modified British M1937 universal pouches for his SMG clips, and British M1944 waterbottle. The excellent 9mm MAT.49 SMG was now becoming standard, the paras enjoying some priority of issue. (In 1946–52 10e BPCP wore a black beret with the silver TAP badge.)

D3 Soldat, 2e Bataillon de Parachutistes Coloniaux; Hoa Binh, November 1951 While waiting for French-made jump uniforms the CEFEO acquired in 1949–50 a locally made green drab *tenué de saut d'Extrême Orient*. It seems mostly to have been kept for use out of the line, though this para wears the trousers. His smock is from the French-made M1947 *tenué de*



Detail of typical camouflage pattern printed on French jump uniforms. The ground colour was drab khaki or light green; the primary pattern (dark tone) and secondary (mid-tone) were green and brown or vice versa, and many variations were seen.

RIGHT Rear view of *veste de saut camouflé* M1947/53. Differing from the /52 only in minor details, this model was rarely seen in Indochina before the ceasefire; but the photo allows a useful comparison with the camouflage pattern drawing. (Courtesy Wayne Braby)

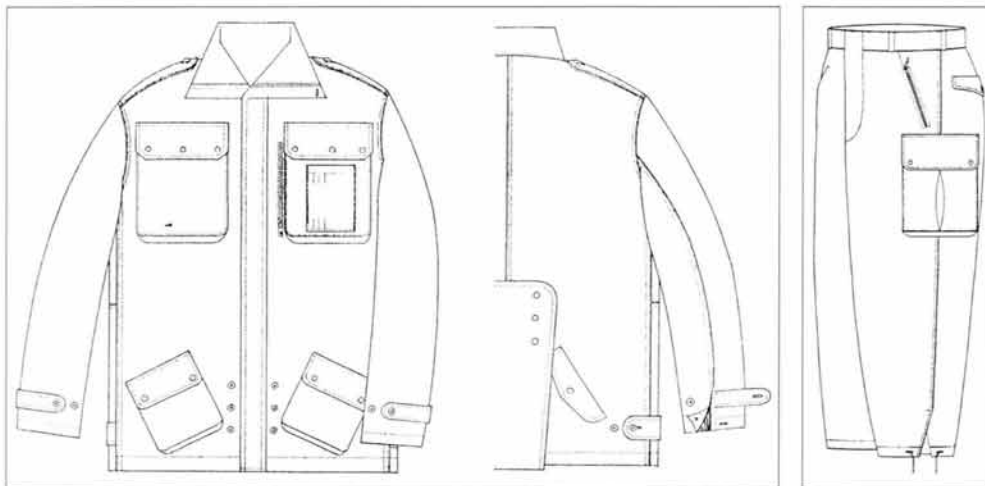


saut kaki foncé, which reached Indochina in early 1951; it had two slanted rear skirt pockets, a 'beaver tail', and a very broad collar. Short of US M1A1 paratrooper's helmets, the French modified M1 liners with this cloth chin harness. The M1A1 folding-stock carbine was preferred over the French CR.39 rifle.

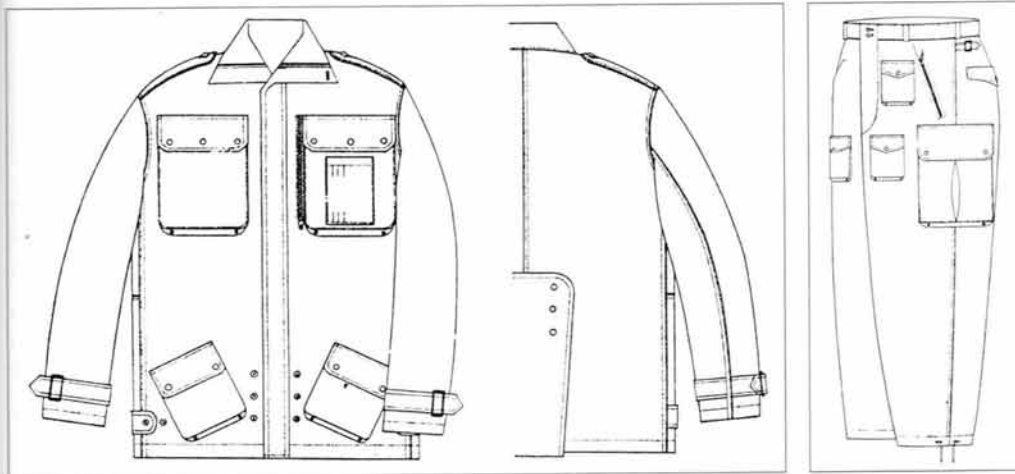
E1 Soldat, 6e Bataillon de Parachutistes Coloniaux; Tu Le, October 1952 In 1950–53 this combination of USMC and British M1942 ('windproof') camouflage was the most common para combat dress. This young Cambodian – to judge by his dark complexion – proudly wears his red beret, ordered into use by all Colonial and Metropolitan paras in March 1951; his helmet is slung on his rucksack. The

M1950 TAP webbing was still seen mixed with US items – here, French braces and doubled rifle pouches with US pistol belt and canteen. The shortened, folding-butt CR.39 version of the MAS.36 rifle – inaccurate and hard to maintain – was still standard issue for paratroopers.

E2 Radio operator, II/1er Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes; Operation 'Camargue', Annam, August 1953 The US SCR.300 manpack radio was standard issue at company level. Various field headgear was worn by paras; some units made bulk purchases, like this 'fisherman's hat' made from US camouflage cloth for II/1er RCP. The complete suit of British M1942 camouflage was sometimes seen, modified or unmodified. This belt order includes the M1950 TAP belt,



Schematic drawings of paratrooper's green drab M1947 *tenue de saut kaki foncé*, of which Plate D3 wears the smock. (Drawings Christa Hook)



Schematic drawings, M1947/52 tenue de saut camouflé as worn by Plate E3. (Drawings Christa Hook)

M1951 canteen, M1950 'commando' first aid pouch, and early pattern M1950 pistol holster.

E3 French NCO, 1er Compagnie, 5e Bataillon Parachutiste Vietnamien; Dien Bien Phu, April 1954 On 18 April Capt. Bizard led survivors of 1st Co., 5e BPVN and of 1/2e REI in a desperate breakout down the airstrip from 'Huguette 6', using mostly grenades as they leapt over the surrounding VM trenches. Witnesses described them wearing pairs of part-filled sandbags slung as improvised splinter armour. By late 1953 most para units were receiving the new French camouflaged jump uniforms (here *tenue de saut* M1947/52) and M1950 TAP webbing; note the five-pocket pouch for MAT.49 magazines. US camouflaged parachute material was popular for scarves.

F1 Sergent porte-fanion, 1er Bataillon Muong; Tonkin, spring 1952 Raised by 6e RTM in March 1950, these tough Montagnards fought in Lt.Col. Vanuxem's GM 3; in March 1952 their defeat of two VM battalions at Bich Du in the Delta (Op. 'Mercure') brought a second Army citation and the *fourragère* in the colours of the Croix de Guerre TOE. The unit *fanion* includes both the anchor of the Colonial troops to which they were attached, and the silver open star ('Solomon's seal') of the Moroccan Tirailleurs who raised them – also worn on a beret in the Muongs' green national colour. A photo shows this sleeve *écusson*; others, the use of British M1937 webbing and French weapons. The boots are commercial versions of issue *pataugas*.

F2 Nung irregular, Phung To, August 1953 Composite from photo of the *maquis* led by Sergent-chef Chatel of the GCMA against VM Rgt. 88, 316 Div. in the Ma River valley, Thai Highlands. The cultures and costumes of the dozens of 'Moi' (*montagnard*) tribes of Thai, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Malayo-Polynesian language groups would fill an entire book. Their appearance in French service ranged from naked apart from a loincloth and a bamboo quiver for crossbow darts, through traditional dress with dazzlingly colourful woven decoration and massive silver jewellery, to standard French fatigues. The Nungs wore black or white headcloths wrapped in the Dyak style, and black cross-over jackets with tape binding and silver buttons set in cord loops (the colours here

are guesswork). British SMLE rifles were often issued to irregulars; and for support fire, this French M1937 50mm grenade launcher.

F3 Viet Minh guerrilla, Cochinchina, late 1940s Typical of either a well-armed Popular force militiaman, or a member of a small, early Regional unit on a brief local operation – the distinction was notional in 1947–48. The peasant blouse (*cao ao*) and trousers (*cai quan*) varied in small details – plain black is typical of the south, as is the checkered cloth used here as a scarf; silver buttons were favoured in the north, sometimes on a cross-over blouse; and dark brown clothing was common in the Tonkin Delta. His sandals are cut from old motor tyres; and he carries a Japanese Type 99 rifle.

G1 Officer, Viet Minh Independent Regular unit; Cochinchina, 1949–50 Composite largely from photos of 'Bo Doi 303' – a Regional battalion raised to Regular status in spring 1949 and based near Binh My north of Tan Uyen. Led by Nguyen Van Quang (appointed to replace the brave but undisciplined Hoang Tho on whose guerrilla band it was based), it had several disappointing clashes that winter with 2e BM/3e RTA. Group photos show a mix of khaki drill, peasant black, and other nondescript drab shades; long hooded raincoats; many French bushhats, several of these civilian fedoras, some light drill cloth *calots*, and the very occasional US or Japanese helmet; and mixed French, Japanese and Allied small arms – this officer's status is immediately marked by his revolver (French M1892 in British holster) and MAS.38 machine pistol. Note the typical cloth 'sausage' holding his rice rations for several days.

G2 Viet Minh Regular, assault equipment, Tonkin 1951–54 Photos show the *bo doi* (the term used for both the individual soldier and a unit) wearing a wide mix of French, Chinese and locally made clothing in various shades of khaki and green drab; there are even reports of French airborne camouflage uniforms from misdirected air drops. This volunteer is about to lead an assault with a satchel charge – note the stick grenade igniter set in the top central edge; some reports speak of distinct platoons of 'death volunteers' in each Regular battalion. The characteristic flat bamboo and fibre woven helmet of the Chuc Luc is covered with hessian sewn with scraps of scrim.



Dien Bien Phu, 29 November 1953; after an award parade two paras are photographed wearing popular types of non-regulation field headgear – a baseball-style cap and a beret, both of US camouflage material. The warrant officer (right) displays chest ranking and his new Croix de Guerre TOE, on an M1947/52 camouflaged jump smock as newly issued for Op. 'Castor'. (ECPA)

Reports speak of Regulars carrying a wire mesh panel on their backs when on the march; at each halt the soldier changed the foliage camouflage of the man in front to match the locality exactly. There seem to have been two sorts of Chinese-style quilted cold weather jacket, one a sleeveless, collarless vest; this other type with a quilted torso, deep fall collar, and lined, unquilted sleeves is seen in photos from Dien Bien Phu. He carries Chinese stick grenades in a fabric pouch set, and the Chinese Type 50 sub-machine gun.

G3 Viet Minh Regular, 308 Division: Hanoi, October 1954

Photos, some reproduced in this book, show men of Giap's original division notably smart and well-equipped for the handover of the capital after the ceasefire. Nearly all wear the woven helmet with cloth and net covers and pinned-on VM badge. Uniforms are usually described as khaki drill, but at least some seem to have been a very pale grey-green. Note the French belt pouches, Chinese canteen and Mauser rifle; and the fully stowed knapsack, probably Chinese – photos show these both worn, and carried on bamboo poles between two men, as were ammo boxes and other heavy items.

H1 Médecin-capitaine Valérie André, Armée de l'Air; parade dress, Saigon, 1951

Capt. André was, with Capt. Santini of the Army, one of the privately-trained pilots for the only two helicopters then in Indochina – Hiller 360s purchased for the public health department. A qualified physician, surgeon, and (since the age of 16) pilot, she often flew in conditions for which the Hiller was very underpowered, to evacuate serious casualties – or to parachute to their aid if evacuation was impractical. A typical mission (from her total of 496) was to Tu Vu on the Black River on 11 December 1951. The only serviceable machine was far south in Cochinchina; it was partly dismantled, stowed in a Bristol Freighter, flown to Hanoi, and

re-assembled. Capt. André flew into Tu Vu in thick mist and under fire; triaged the casualties; operated on some, and dressed others; then made several round trips to Hanoi carrying the most urgent litter cases two by two.

French female personnel enjoyed considerable freedom in dress; here Capt. André parades to receive the Croix de Guerre TOE, wearing the red beret presented to her in gratitude by Colonial paratroopers. Jump-qualified, she wears on her blouse pocket her para wings and – presumably for lack of any more appropriate insignia – the badge of the Convoyeuses de l'Air or aircrew nurses, for which she was rather over-qualified. Gold rank *galons* are worn on the shoulder straps (in 1976 she would become France's first woman general officer). A left sleeve *écusson* of raspberry-coloured velvet, without edging for non-combatant branches, bore a gold caduceus centred between upright, in-curving laurel and oak branches.

H2 Quartier maitre de 1ere classe, Division Navale d'Assaut 3, Marine Nationale; walking-out dress, Nam Dinh, 1953

Dinassaut 3 was heavily engaged throughout the war in Tonkin; e.g., in the Day River fighting of May 1951 its Commando 63 suffered 75% casualties while holding Nin Binh church. This leading seaman wears French khaki drill M1949 shirt and M1948 slacks, his 'bach' cap bearing the tally 'Flotille Amphibie'. Three red stripes on the shoulder straps mark his rank; a non-regulation red-on-blue title 'Extreme-Orient', and the crossed anchors patch of fleet personnel, are worn on the left sleeve only; the green-flecked yellow *fourragère* marking DNA 3's fourth citation in April 1952 has a pinned-on enamelled badge of Red River forces. Photos of embarked Vietnamese commandos show mixed French and British small arms, black local costume and green drab fatigues; black berets were common – that of Cdo.63 (from August 1953, 3e CLA) sometimes bore a silver copy of the French Naval Commandos' shield-over-scroll badge.

H3 Lieutenant-colonel, Foreign Legion infantry; daytime walking-out dress, 1948

A composite figure, partly after Lt.Col. Alain de Sairigné of 13e DBLE (k.i.a.1948), partly after an officer of 3e REI. Officers who had served with the British in World War II or who stopped over in Ceylon en route to Indochina often favoured British styles, like this four-pocket khaki drill bush jacket worn with shorts, long socks and low shoes. Legion buttons in infantry gold have been added; a regimental badge is fobbed to the right pocket; and the left sleeve *écusson* – as often in this period, in all branches – resembles an officer's pre-war collar patch, with double gold piping to the upper edges only, and the Legion's gold grenade. Regimental numbers were often embroidered in the grenade's open 'bomb', here and on the *képi*. The latter has five rank *galons*, in the infantry sequence gold/ silver/ gold/ silver/ gold (reversed for cavalry units); the knot on the top surface and the vertical quarter-pipings are of triple gold lace. On his left shoulder is the commemorative 'Rhin et Danube' patch marking a veteran of the 1st French Army in the 1944–45 European campaign.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS TEXT

- ANV Vietnamese National Army
- BCC Colonial Commando Parachute Battalion
- BPCP Parachute Light Infantry Battalion
- BEP Foreign (Legion) Parachute Battalion
- BILA African Light Infantry Battalion (penal)
- BM March Battalion; or, Muong Battalion
- BMI Indochinese March Battalion
- BPC Colonial Parachute Battalion; or, Parachute Assault Battalion
- BPVN Vietnamese Parachute Battalion
- BT Thai Battalion
- CEFEO French Far East Expeditionary Corps
- CIP Indochinese Parachute Company
- CSM Military Auxiliary Company
- DNA Naval Assault Division
- FM light machine gun
- GB, SGB Armoured Group, Sub-Group
- GEA Amphibious Group
- GER Reconnaissance Group
- GM Mobile Group
- RA Artillery Regiment
- RAC Colonial Artillery Regiment
- RBCEO Far East Armoured Regiment
- RC Cuirassier Regiment; or, Route Coloniale
- RCC Light Cavalry Regiment
- RCL (Fr.CSR), 'recoilless rifle' – light infantry gun
- RCP Parachute Light Infantry Regiment
- REC Foreign (Legion) Cavalry Regiment
- REI Foreign (Legion) Infantry Regiment
- RI Metropolitan Infantry Regiment
- RIC Colonial Infantry Regiment
- RICM Moroccan Colonial Infantry Regiment (armoured)
- RSA Algerian Cavalry Regiment
- RSM Moroccan Cavalry Regiment
- RTA, BTA Algerian Rifles Regiment, Battalion
- RTM, BTM Moroccan Rifles Regiment, Battalion
- RTS, BTS Senegalese Rifles Regiment, Battalion
- RTT Tunisian Rifles Regiment
- SMG sub-machine gun
- TAP Airborne Troops
- TM Moroccan Tabor (bn. of Goumiers)
- TD Battalion (Vietnamese)
- VM Viet Minh

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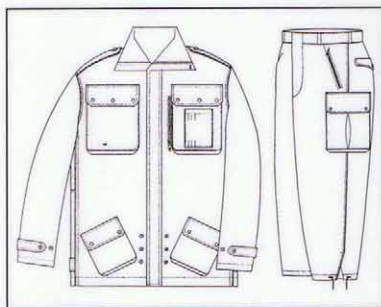
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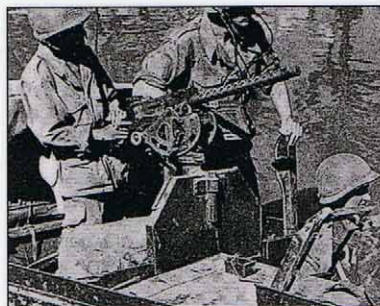
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