



## The decisive role of logistics in Na San: the action of Colonel Gilles

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**Logistics played a major role at Na San because Colonel Gilles, commanding the Middle Black River Task Force (MNRFG), was able to set up an efficient support organisation capable of adapting to the changing operational situation. In this respect, this organisation and this action foreshadowed those of modern logistics as close to the forces as possible, as we know them today.**

In the autumn of 1952, when the military situation was delicate in Indochina and the Viet-Minh was preparing an offensive that was to be decisive in the north of Tonkin, General Salan, commander-in-chief of the French expeditionary force, decided to regroup the forces of the Black River and the Upper region. The orders he transmitted on October 17 to General de Linares, commander of the North Vietnamese land forces (FTNV), provided for the launch of a powerful counteroffensive on the Viet-Minh rear (Operation Lorraine) and the installation of the entrenched camp of Na San. The definition of the missions given to the Na San base in October 1952 had two major aspects: on the one hand, to constitute a defensive mole capable of stopping the regular units of General Giap; on the other hand, to allow the operational supply and the direct logistic support of all the units of the area.

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### The rise of the base

Hamlet of the black Thai country located at about 200 km from Hanoi, in a valley about 6 km long and 2 km wide, the site of Na San was chosen for three main reasons. First of all, its dirt runway is "dakotable" in all seasons. A vast natural platform extends it and can allow the parking of aircraft and their movements on the ground. Secondly, the site is

ideally located on the communication axes towards the north and Laos, as it is thirty kilometres from Son-La, in the immediate vicinity of the RP 41. Finally, the layout of the pitons surrounding the site as support points (APs) ensures the integrity of the runway as much as possible.

The Na San base has had its missions clarified and must now play a triple role in future operations. First, the APs surrounding the site must be used to break the Viet Minh offensive and General Giap must lose his best divisions there. Second, the establishment of large operational depots must promote close support to the battalions engaged. Thirdly, the presence of battalions (mobile reserve) on immediate alert to the CP must allow to launch counter-attacks and radiate around the site.

Logistics is thus at the heart of the fighting at Na San. On the one hand, in view of the French and Empire forces engaged, it becomes imperative to collect the units from the north of the Black River in the process of withdrawal, to supply on a daily basis and by all means the elements leading the delaying combat, to provide the 12.000 men of the resistance center the means to hold the IPs, then to directly support those who are resuming the offensive towards Son-La, Yen-Chau and Conoi. On the other hand, in order to oppose the Viet Minh units launched against the assault on the Thai country, the communication and supply lines must be disrupted and even prohibited. Removed from their bases and deprived of their own support, they will thus be forced to withdraw.

The development and build-up of the Na San base was completed in record time (20 October to 30 November) under the orders of Colonel Gilles. The logistics managers are directly installed at the operational headquarters and work in close and permanent liaison with the operation command and the Air Force.

"In this huge machine called an air-land operation, everyone has his place and his mission to fulfil. The success of such a programme can only be total if everyone complies with the rules of emergency laid down by the command, and if everyone agrees to take into account the technical constraints that condition the operation of the various weapons and services. This is exactly what happened at Na San. The admirable comradeship of combat that was created there, from the first day, around Colonel Gilles, was reflected in the field of air-to-air refueling,roterrestrial by an extraordinary teamwork which contributed more than anything to the success of such a program..." [1].

The totality of the supply, in all areas, comes by air. At peak periods, one aircraft lands every ten minutes, and traffic will reach up to 440 movements in 36 hours. Considering that a Dakota carries three tons of useful cargo and a Junker two tons, the volumes put in place at Na San are particularly impressive: for the period from 21 November to 11 December 1952 alone, 3.950 tonnes of equipment (PSP plates[2], barbed wire, etc.), ammunition (shells[3], mines, etc.) and weapons were airlifted. In addition to these materials, the most diverse loads had to be added: artillery pieces, dump trucks, bulldozers and concrete mixers, mules and pack animals. It is then necessary to use the large aircraft of the "Bristol" period, whose cabin opens at the front, allowing the loading of the heaviest or most voluminous loads.

### **Organisation and missions of logistics**

Despite its dependence on the air bridge, the logistics system of the Na San air-land base draws its strength both from its ability to respond to changes in the operational situation

and from the inviolability of its organisation.

While ensuring the base's development and the supply of the units present on the site, the services also support the most advanced elements of the French system: "... often the command requests that we push the supplies to the forward positions: each time it is necessary to set up these very risky convoys, more volunteers than necessary come forward..." [4].

The mission of logistics is permanently adapted to operational needs. It chronologically comprises four phases that respond to the imperative defined by General Salan: "Na San must be considered as an intangible operational base and as such defended at all costs". Until 19 October 1952, it was a matter of supporting the units of the north of the Black River which were in the process of withdrawing. From October 19 to November 23, 1952, it was necessary to supply permanently and by all means the elements engaged in delaying combat south of the Black River. From 23 November to mid-December, it was necessary to hold Na San in the face of Viet-Minh attacks and, in particular, to provide the support points with food, water and ammunition. From mid-December to the end of July 1953, the mission consisted of spreading out around the base and regaining the initiative after the fighting in late November/early December, thus supplying Son-La, Yen-Chau and Conoi.

This development was in accordance with the "personal and secret instruction" of 19 October 1952 in which General de Linares asked Colonel Gilles "to organise the defence of the Black River by centring it on Na San, which would be the supply base for the area".

If the logistical missions at Na San evolved, its organization remained the same from November 1952 until the dismantling of the base in July 1953, as General Favreau demonstrated in his book "Na San, la victoire oubliée (1952-1953)". The site is organized both around a "resistance centre" responsible for guaranteeing the integrity of the stronghold for the operational part and a "base" within which the services for the logistical part work. Colonel Gilles, head of GOMRN and the resistance centre, coordinates operational actions and logistical support: "He decides on the location of services according to an overall plan. He ensures that they are perfectly protected and that they ensure their close defence by their own means" [5]. 5] Lieutenant Bertrand (<sup>2nd BEP</sup>) also underlines in his marching diary "the impetus given by Colonel GILLES. He is an "old infantryman" who was already commanding Hao Trach in RC 6 and here, his obsession is the organization of the terrain. (...) Eventually he harasses his whole world and forces everyone to work so hard that everyone is motivated and Na San becomes a very solid center of resistance..." [6].

All the components of support are represented in Na San.

At the end of its build-up, the Health Service, comprising a surgical antenna (mobile surgical antenna n° 901) and a medical maintenance unit, has on site the equipment and medicines necessary to support ten operational battalions for 30 days. An adapted medical supply depot ensures the supplies of the isolated battalions operating in the Thai country.

The 730th Fuel <sup>Refuelling</sup> Company, dedicated to the support of fuel, oils, ingredients and special products, supplies aircraft, helicopters and vehicles. Refueled in 200-litre drums,

the operational petrol depot has initial stocks allowing five days of autonomy, gradually increased to 12 days, i.e. more than 50,000 litres of ingredients and various fuels.

The Materiel Service (11th Medium Materiel Repair <sup>Company</sup> ) must in particular support an ageing fleet of more than 150 vehicles and manages an ammunition depot corresponding to 45 UF[7] for battalions and five UF for artillery.

At the same time, the operational group of the commissariat fitted out and equipped its underground depots: food stores, clothing stores, field bakeries, cold rooms, and commissaries. It has the necessary reserves to continue its work in the event of a break in the airlift.

Dependence on the airlift is undeniably the weak point of the Na San logistics base. Although air assets are limited in Indochina, exemplary joint cooperation has made it possible to plan supplies according to their urgency and operational priorities. In addition, the various services have been able to adapt to the difficulties that have affected the smooth functioning of logistics.

### Lessons from Na San

In the short term, Na San was a tactical success [8] from which the French did not learn the best lessons, which was not the case with General Giap.

In addition to the tactical errors that were the non-exploitation of the successes obtained at the height of the battle and the evacuation [9], the French general staff will commit the imprudence to lock itself in an "intellectual comfort" [10] by erecting the concept of air-land base as a true doctrine. In spite of its undeniable success, the model proposed at Na San was only a tactical solution to a particular situation. In March 1953, General Salan made the following remarks to Marshal Juin: "The need for air-land bases is indispensable, but it is out of the question for me to shut myself up in them and be destroyed. Na San was a moment of this war, it is not a question of renewing Na San... These bases are manoeuvring pawns... pawns that can be moved, that can be handled!" In spite of this warning, the High Command will want to apply strictly speaking the principles of this "happy roll of the dice" [11] to Dien Biên Phu without taking into account two constraints related to logistics. First of all, due to the closure of the Lai-Chau and Na San airfields, Dien Biên Phu could only rely on air transport to ensure its supplies. General Salan wrote about Dien Biên Phu in his memoirs: "this base is inconceivable since we are no longer at Na San and Lai-Chau and, since it is isolated, far from Hanoi for our planes, it becomes a possible prey for the Viet Minh maneuvering mass, freed from the burdens that the fixing of the two other posts represented for it. Laos can be defended with Na San, LAI-Chau, Dien Biên Phu. The three bases, which constitute the points of a triangle, are located about 100 km from each other and can support each other" [12]. While logistic support can be considered the centre of gravity of an air-land base, the ability to refuel is one of its basic needs. Because of this dependence on airlift and higher elongations [13], the runway is one of its critical vulnerabilities. At Dien Biên Phu, the organisation of the terrain combined with the use of artillery (burial of Viet Minh batteries, ineffectiveness of French counter-battery fire) did not make it possible to protect the runway and the resistance centre.

Conversely, General Giap was able to draw the best lessons from his failure at Na San. Logistically, he deduced that in order to besiege and reduce an airbase, he needed to have unfailing support to ensure the supply of food, ammunition and explosives. He will



put this into practice by constructing the road from China to Tuan Giao, 50 km from Den Biën Phu. As General Favreau explained, "this logistical support will give him the time to study and recognize his terrain before launching his attacks and conducting a long siege lasting several months" [14].

14] In the long term, however, the logistical support at Na San can be seen as prefiguring that of our current ground forces.

Firstly, the command organisation in which the logistics officers are located at the operational headquarters is not unlike that of Land Forces Command. Indeed, LFCOM has not only a logistics division within its staff, but also a Logistics Assistant General directly subordinate to it.

In addition, the presence of all the logistics components (parking support, maintenance, resupply, stewardship, health support, petroleum support) illustrates the similarity between the air base and the land base. *roterrestre de Na San* and the current logistics bases (BLT, BLD) as described in the various manuals for the Land Support Group [15] and the Divisional Support Group [16]. 16] These bases include different areas related to logistics: supply-transport, maintenance, combatant support, fuel, health.

Finally, in terms of mission accomplishment, certain aspects appear to be very topical. In the field of medical support, General Favreau's description of it includes the principle of support from the rear to the front as practiced by the health chain (relief, collection, sorting): "each support point has a first aid post which requests the evacuation of the wounded who are stretchered to a vehicle or removed by helicopter if possible and if the seriousness of their injuries so requires. At the triage centre, the doctor determines the degree of urgency of the evacuations and only operates on site for cases of extreme urgency which are immediately transported to Hanoi after resuscitation" [17]. In the area of stewardship, the principles of differentiated food rations adapted to cultural specificities (European, Annamite, Thai, Muslims...), "G" rations [18], fresh food, bread, are a reminder of the current management of operational food.

In short, the success achieved at Na San, in which logistics played a decisive role, was due to the combination of various factors highlighted by Battalion Commander Casso:

- "A leader, a brave man, as found in the Catalan Pyrenees;
- A happy combination of excellent troops, supported by services that knew what was at stake in a fight with their backs to the wall;
- A defensive organisation, moulded to the terrain and adapted to the means;
- An air bridge without failure, i.e. a logistic support that removes the insecurity of the runways;
- Finally, an operational concept that had inspired, a priori, the commanders with total confidence that its efficiency would later be worthy of their trust" [19].

19] Thus, the logistical effort made at Na San foreshadowed the growing importance of support in the current commitments of the land forces. "Stewardship will follow", Napoleon said. Having become logistical, it now accompanies the inter-service manoeuvre in which it is fully integrated from the phase of entry first until disengagement and may constitute the condition of victory.

# Pensées mili-terre

## Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement

1] "Le service de l'Intendance à Na San", Intendant militaire de 2e classe Bunel (head of the operational stewardship of Tonkin at the time), Revue de l'Intendance - N°27 - 1953.

2] More than 10,000 PSP plaques were needed to lay out and reinforce the 1,200 metres of runway.

3] To counter the Viet Minh offensives of 30 November and<sup>1</sup> December, the artillery fired between 12,000 and 15,000 shells; however 90 rounds of 105 shells with their packing alone weighed about 2.5 tons, or the load of a Dakota.

4] "L'Intendance militaire en opérations en Indochine", Intendant militaire de 1re classe Bunel, Revue Historique des Armées - N°4 - 1957.

5] Jacques Favreau, Nicolas Dufour, "[5] Jacques Favreau, Nicolas Dufour, "[6] Jacques Favreau, Nicolas Dufour. Na San, the forgotten victory (1952-1953)", Economica, 1999

6] Excerpts from the log book of Lieutenant Bertrand (<sup>2nd BEP</sup>) dated 24 November 1952.

[7] Fire units: ammunition holdings

[8] Marshal Juin will call Na San a "defensive masterpiece of art"

[9] Carried out in total joint coordination between the air and logistics forces, this delicate operation was carried out perfectly, in accordance with the general staff's plans.

[10] In the words of General Bart...

11] In the words of General Blanquefort.

[12] General Salan, "Memoirs - Volume II - The Viet Minh my opponent" Paris, Presses de la Cité, 1971.

13] Diên Biên Phu is 300 km from Hanoi.

[14] Jacques Favreau, Nicolas Dufour, "Na San, the forgotten victory (1952-1953)" Economica, 1999

15] LOG 31-911 - [Land Support Group Operating Manual](#). Approved on 22 July 2005 under n°565/DEF/CDEF/DEO/B.LOG - 2005 Edition.

16] LOG 32-911 - [Divisional Support Group Manual](#). Approved on 24 January 2005 under No. 66/DEF/CDEF/DEO/B.LOG - 2005 Edition.

[17] Jacques Favreau, Nicolas Dufour, "...Na San, the forgotten victory (1952-1953)" Economica, 1999

18] War Rations

19] Battalion Commander Casso, "Na San airfield entrenched", Revue du Génie militaire, Volume LXXXVI, May-June 1953.

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