



The night of Thai Binh (December 3, 1953)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

As soon as he took effective command in Indochina on 16 May 1953, General Navarre embarked on a vast tour of inspection of his territories and units. The report of this inspection, which was submitted to the government authorities for approval, was known to posterity as the "Navarre Plan" [1]. 1] Based on a wait-and-see attitude aimed at containing the Viet Nam Battle Group during the 1953-1954 campaign, corresponding to the dry season, this plan was aimed at Tonkin, at to protect the Delta and protect it from further "rotting" by opposing any action in force by the Vietminh. It was not until the next campaign, 1954-1955, that the Commander-in-Chief planned to take the offensive aimed at destroying the enemy's battle corps.

1] For an exhaustive knowledge of this plan, the reader may refer to Georgette Elgey, in La République des contradictions Fayard 1968, pages 551 and following, where she published in the appendix the interim report on the plan. the report of the commission of inquiry into the defeat of Dien Bien Phu, chaired by General Catroux, which begins with a close exegesis of the "Navarre plan".

In order to be able to oppose a Vietminh force intrusion into the Delta, the French command had to achieve a balance of forces, if not a favourable one, at least a balanced one. However, since 1950, the "maneuver pawn" had remained unchanged; it was the mobile group[1], a group comprising a staff and a light signals company, three infantry battalions, an artillery group and a mortar company[2]. 2] The threat posed by the Viet Nam Battle Group was measured in 1953 on the scale of the engagement of one or more divisions. It was therefore imperative for General Navarre to re-articulate his own battle corps by constituting, from the resources of the expeditionary force, one or more of these levels of combat. This is what the general staff in Saigon set out to do. By the autumn of 1953, two "divisional echelons" were already operational in Tonkin [3]: they regrouped four mobile groups operated by a strong command echelon formed around a staff [4], a divisional artillery command, a headquarters company and a heavy signals company. The first two designated commanders of these "divisional echelons" were colonels de Castries and Vanuxem [5].

At the end of August, beginning of September 1953, the enemy's position, until then widely distributed between the Thai country, the Middle and the High Region, was gradually tightened by Giap around the Delta in two main masses: one exerting its pressure from the northern face and the other from the south-eastern face. In the Delta itself, the enemy infiltrated several regular regiments on either side of the Red River east of Hanoi. There was no doubt in the mind of Cogny's 2nd office, commanding the North Vietnamese ground forces, that Giap's intention was to isolate Hanoi from Haiphong, which constituted a mortal danger to the maintenance of communications of the expeditionary force in Tonkin. To counter this offensive, Cogny's intention was to destroy the bases[6] of this enemy maneuvering mass as a preventive operation. This was the genesis of Operation "Seagull" which was going to implement the two divisional echelons (eight G.M.), two armoured groups, two amphibious groups and important means of the General Reserves. Air support was provided from assets deployed on the bases of Gia Lam and Bach Mai, a quarter of an hour's flight from their area of intervention.

Launched on 15 October the same day - the French command was assured - the Viet offensive was to lead, the French operation totally surprised the Vietminh command, whose reactions were disjointed. General Gilles commanding the affair [7] manoeuvred with method and precision: emerging from the Cho Ganh gap and quickly controlling the RP 59 at Lai Cac 25 km away, he launched in the following weeks the Castries and Vanuxem divisions in several raids in the jungle to destroy the viets depots. Wanting to avoid surprise and ambushes in this terrain favorable to this enemy mode of action, he scrupulously made sure never to engage his infantry or armored formations beyond the effective range of its artillery and aviation fire which, remarkably coordinated, systematically bludgeoned the enemy positions as and when they are revealed. The success of this method crowned this method: the 320 Vietminh division alone lost 1081 killed, 182 prisoners and nearly 3,000 wounded.

General Navarre's goal was achieved: Divisions 320 and 304 could not make deep infiltration into the Delta and, moreover, were almost out of action for two months. On 6 and 7 November, Operation Seagull was suspended, the units left the area and withdrew. General Gilles quickly returned to Hanoi to take command of the airborne group in charge of Operation Castor [8]. The units were, for some re-articulated, and, the divisional staffs, placed at rest after some detailed operations at the fringes of the Delta.

It is then that, in the absence of effective protection, or even in the absence of any protection, the CP of the division of Castries suffered what in military language is modestly called a "glitch". Placed at rest in the region of Thai Binh, near Nam Dinh, deprived of his chief and his immediate entourage, and having left to relieve Gilles at the command of Dien Bien Phu on December 1, he was temporarily placed under the command of his deputy fire chief, Colonel Piroth [9]. Installed in the infrastructures of the city, mixing bazaars, restaurants, bistros, grocery stores and shady hotels, the various services of the staff and support units [10] and headquarters knew the rest of the warrior of the end of operations and the delights of Capua.

Totally intertwined with the population, the latter was nevertheless the object of surveillance by the officers of the 2nd office, ^{since, on} December 3, some "local fishermen" whose behaviour had little to do with this kind of activity had been arrested and discreetly placed in the shade. Enemy observers or spies? But as long as the natives were going about their supposedly usual business, they were in no way worried!

On the 3rd around midnight, with the last bridge or poker players having emptied their pots, the attack began without the support of heavy weapons: Crossing the arroyo which throws itself into the Song Thai Binh (see sketch), neutralizing the few static sentries, a

Vietminh commando infiltrates the device, sets fire to the vehicles, approaches the tents where the executives and personnel sleep and takes them under heavy fire from automatic weapons. The surprise is total. Colonel Piroth can only jump out of his burning truck and finds himself unable to effectively coordinate any parade. The Viets seized personnel from the machine-gunned tents, shackled them and took them away. Uninjured personnel attempt to flee individually from the area hit by the Viets fire.

From the watchtower of what used to be a post, a machine gunner rifle enfilades the arroyo, attempting to hinder the retreat of the Viet Minh commando who were trying to reach their collection point on the dikes on the southern edge of the village. In half an hour, after an absolute disorder, the regroupings are carried out and emergency measures are taken. The sector immediately sent two companies supported by a few tanks to control the village, whose chief had obviously suddenly disappeared. The doctor [11] set up the first triage and began his interventions. The death toll was heavy: 20 killed, 15 shot, 5 stabbed, 50 wounded and 15 prisoners.

The CP let himself be totally surprised. However, it was made up of seasoned and toughened personnel who, moreover, had just carried out a whole series of successful and even victorious operations. This shows that no troop, whatever its value, is immune to this kind of "glitch".

A simple precaution, by lifting up the mining of the crossing points of the arroyo, all known, would have made it possible if not to avoid this incident, at least to benefit from delays of alert. As for the control of the population, unless it is systematized, as will be done later during the Algerian conflict, it always turns out to be random.

Moreover, it is significant to note that, fully informed, the Viet commando did not attack the watchtower, a simple construction made of bamboo, but protected at its base by a network of mined barbed wire. Thus, a simple physical aspect of protection was enough to dissuade the assailant from attacking it.

Finally, the deployment of staff services among the population was a questionable choice, as it constituted a major vulnerability: in full view of the local population, anyone could, with impunity, pass on first-hand target information to the local Viet Minh command.

The local Vietminh had made the case perfectly: by attacking a CP, which was essentially a weak CP with little combat capability, and which was resting after a series of operations, it knew that it was attacking a target of choice which was a weak link in the French system. It is always these weak links, PCs, logistics deployments, telecommunications facilities that must be the object of the maximum protection effort.

Finally, last but not least, even after successful operations, the command's attention must not slacken and if human bodies, both physical and mental, need decompression phases, these must not be equated with a generalised relaxation of any precautionary measure.

1) To know the genesis of the creation of these mobile groups, the reader may refer to Boyer de La Tour in *Le martyre de l'armée française, de l'Indochine à l'Algérie* Les Presses du Mail, 1962, page 173.

It was this general who set them up in November 1950 when he was in command of the Land Forces in North Vietnam for only a few months. (former operational area of Tonkin).

2) As for the armoured means, grouped in six regiments, they were never distributed within these mobile groups, but kept as General Reserves.

3] General Navarre: the agony of Indochina Plon 1956. Page 150.

4] Constituted by the "degreasing" of the general staffs of Saigon and Hanoi.

5] The choice of former colonels, certainly experienced, to command these real divisions - 12 battalions - illustrates well the dramatic shortage of general officers in the expeditionary corps.

6] These bases were made up of villages or groups of fortified villages within which were deployed large camouflaged depots of arms, ammunition and supplies of all kinds; In Navarre op cit. page 160.

7] A young brigadier thus commanded two divisions, several armoured groups and exercised operational control over three air squadrons, which still illustrates the chronic under-supervision of the expeditionary force.

8] The capture of the crossroads of Dien Bien Phu, a crossing point for a Vietminh attack towards Laos.

9] The future artilleryman of Dien Bien Phu with a tragic destiny.

10] Notably the surgical antenna of Major Grauwin whose memories published in I was a doctor at Dien Bien Phu France Empire 1954 pages 159 constitute the essential source of the account of the attack of the division CP. The title of this article was even borrowed from the title of a chapter of this book.

11] Grauwin, an "old soldier", managed to escape from his machine-gun cantonment thanks to the help of one of his auxiliary nurses.

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