



Dien-Bien-Phû, the implacable weight of the principles of war 2/2

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Colonel Thierry DURAND

Published on 24/05/2020

Histoire & stratégie

A battle fought but not really fought

At the end of December, it appears that it is no longer possible to avoid the battle against the entire VM battle corps at Dien Bien Phû, now surrounded and besieged. Nevertheless, victory remains entirely conceivable, as long as the main effort of the expeditionary corps is resolutely placed on the Upper Region. In January, General Navarre confirmed the strategic priority given to Operation ATLANTE.

As the reinforcement of the garrison was still dependent on the air supply capabilities, the key to success remained an additional operation on the rear VMs, allied to a vigorous defence of the entrenched camp (there is no example in history of a place isolated and besieged and not rescued from the outside that has not fallen). We have seen that it could be envisaged from the delta, with several mobile groupings (MGs) and an airborne grouping (by making available certain MGs from Tonkin by a relief on zone by "southern" MGs planned for ATLANTE, but considered of lower quality than those from Tonkin). Another possibility could have been an intervention from Laos, in the style of Operation CONDOR, which was envisaged too late: 2.2. The necessary air effort was antagonistic to the support and backing of Dien Bien Phû, but it would have been conceivable at the end of the "Battle of the Five Hills" (second phase of the battle, from 30 March to 9 April), when the enemy battle corps was "sounded" after colossal losses (19.000 killed and wounded), and that it will have to replenish and reorganize itself.

Above all, while the battle is engaged, it can be considered that it will be followed and maintained as well as possible, but not really conducted. The symptoms are numerous, and heavy with consequences:

- division and insufficient commitment of command...6] A growing animosity between Navarre, commander-in-chief, and Cogny, commander of the North Vietnamese ground forces, and the concern to blame each other for a badly committed affair did not facilitate the convergence of efforts and was going to generate a very harmful initial inertia: after the loss of the two centers of resistance "Beatrice" and "Gabrielle" (March 13 and 14), the role of the command should have been to "shake up energies" on the spot and to give a new impetus to the defense; however, neither Navarre nor Cogny will consider it useful to go to Dien Bien Phû (daytime "posers" will remain possible until 17 March, when access to the runway becomes very risky at night, then definitively compromised from 25 March). In any case, the disaggregation of the two assumptions on which the resistance of the air-land base was based (air refuelling and efficiency of the airfield) will be a major obstacle to the development of the airfield. efficiency of the French counter-battery, quickly silencing the VM artillery) would have required a recovery and a reorientation of the battle at the highest level on the French side.
- poor economy of means in the maintenance of defence capabilitiesThe command will not give itself the means to influence the battle and, in fact, will limit itself to make up for some of the losses, without the possibility of marking an effort. Thus, the parachuted reinforcements will be literally distilled throughout the battle (the commander of the TAP, Colonel Sauvagnac fighting foot to foot not to "consume" all his beautiful battalions). But what would have happened if, after the shock of the loss of the three northern resistance centers, and while the DZ of Isabelle was still fully accessible, 3 to 4 battalions had been parachuted en masse, giving the garrison the means to restart its action? In any case, from 20 AprilThe retraction of the perimeter no longer allows for efficient drops in terms of both personnel and logistical freight: the culmination of the defense is reached...It would then take a miracle to save Dien Bien Phû (such as a massive bombing operation of a hundred American B29s from the Philippines, envisaged and even subject to aerial reconnaissance, but finally rejected by the US government).
- aerial battle on enemy rear insufficiently supported: the bombing operations only take place during the day, and at night, tens of thousands of coolies requisitioned by the VM restore the routes; the enemy logistic base of Tuan-Giao is regularly bombed, but the basin is very vast and it would take huge quantities of napalm to achieve a lasting result: the diagnosis here is nuanced: lack of crews, lack of napalm bombs (which should have been urgently requested from the Americans), but also, perhaps, in front of these two "hard points", lack of anticipation.

Faced with a fiercely determined opponent committed to a remarkably coherent global action

There is no need to dwell on the unity of action, the clarity of war aims, the uncompromising faith that characterizes VM executives, led by a management team that has remained unchanged since 1945, all of which are not the least of the success factors.

For the VM, Dien Bien Phû represented, from the end of November 1953, a tempting prey and a major stake in a period of negotiations, satisfying the idea of maneuver which was to train the Franco-Vietnamese to fight far from their bases. However, this challenge was accompanied by a major risk that had to be controlled, based on the one hand on an impressive "popular" mobilization and, on the other hand, on a sudden acceleration of Chinese material aid.

By committing its almost entire battle corps (with the exception of the 320 division, carried at "Mouette" and the 325, assigned to the Annam Centre) in a battle of very little success.s high intensity battle, nearly 400 km from his bases, Giap broke with the VM military principle of engaging a strong party only with (almost) sure success.

*The first challenge, logistical, will be to develop (and then systematically re-establish every night) 500 km of tracks and build 80 km of road by mobilizing 75,000 coolies. On these routes will circulate an uninterrupted noria of 500 Molotova trucks and 30,000 bicycles loaded to 200 kg. Thanks to the Chinese deliveries, 20 days of combat are thus stored in Tuan-Giao (including artillery).

*The second challenge was that of the artillery, posed in fact in successive problems: its constitution and its transport are regulated by Chinese aid (Molotova trucks, 105 and flak guns); Giap will thus have 24 105 guns, 16 120 guns, 18 75 and 80 37mm guns[2]. 2] Its placement beyond the counter-slopes, to fire on the trough, will give rise to a legendary effort, the guns being fired "with the hand of man" on the jungle-covered slopes, then placed in deep galleries dug through the hills. Its invulnerability to the counter-battery will be guaranteed by these deep, camouflaged, widely spaced cells, completed by 4 to 5 false positions per piece.

The last "ingredient" necessary for victory is an almost fanatical infantry in overwhelming numbers, all carried by an immense, unquestionable popular mobilization and enthusiasm...These men know that they will surely die, but they are sure of their victory.

At the same time, all the regional units in Tonkin were to deploy a very strong offensive activity, and the 325 division and the reThe 325 division and the southern regions would successively lead an offensive cutting through Middle Laos, then an offensive on the Annam highlands, in order to set the maximum potential French reserves (a total of 80 in all).000 additional men who will put pressure on the Franco-Vietnamese positions). We have here the illustration of an absolute concentration of efforts towards a single objective, in a choice of economy of means entirely directed towards success in the future. Dien Bien Phû, by benefiting from the freedom of action offered by the now undisputed control of the region joining the border of China and Laos by the RP 41.To this can be added an optimal analysis of French vulnerabilities, one of the main ones being the overcrowding of the wounded (Giap deliberately chose to hit all the EVASANS, counting on the weight that thousands of wounded would represent, added to the psychological "wound" of this daily reality for the garrison) [3].

At the tactical level, an initial scramble due to a questionable economy of means and an unpreparedness for the unexpected.

As is well known, the battle got off to a bad start with the fall of the 3 resistance centers covering the airfield between March 13 and 17. "Béatrice" and "Gabrielle", in particular, were very exposed because they were quite isolated from the rest of the force. According to veterans of the battle, it seems that the positions were organized "a bit like we landed during Operation CASTOR". Consequently, without really questioning the existing system, the system lacks coherence and possibilities of mutual support and flanking.

The case of "Isabelle" is a good illustration of this. this ill-adapted economy of means: located 8 km to the south and intended to house an artillery group (to disperse the means of support), this centre of resistance will be cut off from the rest of the garrison on 28 March, and its DZ was unusable; from that moment on, "Isabelle" would play no more role other than the fixation of a few VM units. Moreover, the installation is less solid than at Na

San and the shelters and battle stations are not designed to resist 105. The need was estimated at 36,000 tons of wood, whereas only 6,000 tons will be available, and the limits of the airlift do not allow to bring the necessary concrete. In the opinion of the Engineers themselves, the entrenched camp, therefore, presented insufficient guarantees for intense defensive combat.

Poor economy of means also characterises the management of the first counter-attacks. No counter-attack was decided to retake "Béatrice" (which the VM units, while waiting, evacuated in the morning), on the contrary the local command accepted a truce to recover the wounded, thus allowing the enemy to settle down solidly. The attack on "Gabrielle", a remarkably organized position which was to resist fiercely, was to give rise to a counter-attack. But the units dedicated in theory to this mission were given a defense slot on the central position (8th Shock and 1st BEP); moreover, they are "beautiful units", and we don't want to "spoil" them, in the idea of conserving resources for the future. The counter-attack will therefore be entrusted to the 5th BPVN [4], which had jumped the day before, does not know the terrain, and will have to, at night and in the rain, cover 8 km in rough terrain before reaching its starting bases. Caught then under an intense artillery barrage, this battalion is easily forgiven for not having been able to break through. Finally, a scramble in the orders of conduct led to a radio broadcast about the garrison of "Gabrielle" (5/7th RTA [5], an extremely solid battalion) which, while still holding the southern third of the piton on the 15th at the end of the morning, was going to evacuate it.

These poorly thought-out decisions of conduct characterise, just like the poor anticipation of the **artillery battle, insufficient preparation of "cases of conduct" and other risks of manoeuvre**. It will be found at the beginning of the Battle of the Five Hills, with the order to evacuate hastily given to the battery of Lieutenant Brunbrouck, which, after the fall of the "Dominique", was the only rampart at the VM surging on the Nam Youm and the central position...whereas it was his refusal to obey and his exploit that saved Dien Bien Phû that night (30-31 March) [6].

The problem of battle conduct during these crucial first nights highlights a temporary collapse of command in the face of particularly "heavy" contingencies: atony of Colonel de Castries, total collapse of the Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Keller (brilliant "first in class" of the school of war, very contemptuous of all "It will be necessary to wait for the arrival of Bigeard, in fact, for the tonus, the bite, the confidence and the optimism to return. From then on, the entire battle would rest on the shoulders of two men, Langlais and Bigeard, a lieutenant-colonel and a battalion commander, for 12,000 men and three artillery groups! They will assume it remarkably, without any weakness or failure for 55 days.

The ultimate resource: the commitment of the men, beyond the limits of ethics.

If the conception and engagement of the battle was characterised by faults or failures, the defenders' action remains a concentrate of heroism, almost without equal.

Once the few hundred deserters ("the rats of Nam-Youm") were thrown back into the darkness of oblivion, one can only be struck, and strongly impressed, by the combativeness and the very high level of morale, almost until the last days, when the battle was going to take place, without interruption, night and day, under permanent artillery strikes, for 57 days, without any possible relief. Allow me a few evocations, which are reminiscent of Epinal's image, but are very real:

- the fights for Eliane 1 and 2, pitons on the ground crushed and reduced to mud or

pulverulent material, saturated with human debris, tirelessly taken and taken back;

- the decisive counter-attack on Eliane 1, in which the 1st BEP starts by singing, while at its side the 5th BPVN, not finding a sufficiently warlike song in its anthology, gives the assault by singing the Marseillaise;
- the wounded resumed fighting, as soon as they could make the necessary gestures in the service of heavy weapons; 2,500, then up to 4,500 wounded were piled up in the shelters and antennas, in appalling conditions;
- the sacrifice of the artillery, which, if it has failed in its counter-battery mission, will ensure, under the direct blows of the Giap guns, its direct support mission to the end, at the cost of more than 40% losses;
- the desperate counter-attacks, carried out with companies reduced to 35 men, in the week of May 1st to 7th;
- the determined action of the Air Force (and Naval Aviation), which will fulfil their contract to the end (the Air Force had guaranteed 70 tons/day, it will go up to 200 tons/day), at the cost of 56 planes lost and 186 planes affected[7]....

Finally, the commitment of the "volunteers of a jump" will give an exceptional ethical dimension to the battle. The whole Expeditionary Force is aware of the fantastic drama that is being played out in this lost valley of upper Tonkin, and thousands of men, soldiers and petty officers. Thousands of men, soldiers and petty officers, most of them non-paratroopers, often at the end of their stay and awaiting repatriation, volunteered, until the day before the fall of the entrenched camp, to jump on Dien Bien Phû. They do not harbour the slightest illusion about the fate of the garrison, but they choose to withdraw from the world of the living with the awareness that, as a French soldier, certain things must be done. One can retain 1,500 of them, well representative of the old colonial army which is delivering its battle of honor, all races neck and neck: 400 native French, 350 legionnaires, 350 North Africans, 250 Vietnamese, 150 Africans, which illustrates well the fundamental movement that shakes the Expeditionary Force at all levels. They are the supreme resource, the one that allows a badly fought battle to "die well".

The scope of a defeat: knowing how to discriminate between strategic and tactical effects

General Navarre will confirm that he has the makings of a commander-in-chief, maintaining absolute composure and analysing the consequences of Dien Bien Phû in the light of strategic and theatrical data.

First consideration: the North-West Task Force is lost, but the VM Battle Group is tactically destroyed (between 25 and 28,000 killed and wounded), in any case incapable of any major action for several months.

The threat to Laos and the risk of the Mekong River encroachment are temporarily averted.

Second consideration Actual: : the elite battalions of the strategic reserves have been destroyed, but the French-Vietnamese losses at Dien Bien Phû represent less than 5% of the Expeditionary Force. In addition, the French center of gravity in the theater remains the ability to defend the Tonkin delta (with, in the forefront, the seven Tonkin mobile groups, which are solid units).

Third consideration: Contrary to the complacent opinion spread since then, the Expeditionary Corps, even if worn out by eight years of war, is not "down" after Dien Bien

Phû. The "groundswell" effect caused by the awareness of the sacrifice of the garrison, will in fact give a moral boost in which the idea of the majority of the combatants remains "we'll show them...to the Viets, to the politicians, to all the others...".

As a result, while Giap "scraped the bottom of the drawer" and launched all the available units (division 320 and half a dozen regional regiments) onto the delta, General Cogne, who also kept his cool head, will show what could have been "the battle of the delta", by organizing and swinging successively two large masses of maneuver on either side of the Hanoi-Haiphong road. Between June and July, he blocked all attacks and led a counter-attack, before the ceasefire froze the situation.

It is therefore reasonable to think that it would have been highly desirable to keep General Navarre in his post, to consult him on the continuation of the operations, and not to prejudge the situation. It would have been highly desirable to keep General Navarre in his post, to consult him on further operations, and not to prepare for a brutal abandonment which would have turned into a strategic defeat what, if the government had so wished, would have been a tactical, serious but not decisive defeat. On the contrary, the government was definitively sunk in the place of the vanquished in Geneva and was going to further aggravate the situation by relieving Navarre by General Ely, who said to anyone who would listen that "it was the biggest tile of his career". Obsessed by the possibility of a "hard blow" in the theatre, he provoked several unjustified, even catastrophic retreats, as on the high plateaux of Annam, where, in order to avoid a very difficult situation, he was forced to withdraw from the theatre. To avoid a hypothetical "Dien Bien Phû" in An-Khé/Pleiku, he will undergo a very real "Cao-Bang" (the destruction of the GM 100 in a gigantic ambush of the 325 division), in a very difficult terrain...like on the RC4.

Dien Bien Phû, our last great battle, therefore deserves to remain a source of reflection and a reference value in many areas of the military state,...and then, Dien Bien Phû, finally, was yesterday: when I was a young battalion commander at EFAO, our dean of commanders (then 2nd^{class}) had been one of the last sticks of the 1st BPC dropped on the basin as "lost children" on May 4th, 1954. It is therefore a talking memory, concrete, still very perceptible, through the evocation of a missing army, but yet so close by its human side, and the resonance it left in the imagination of our regiments.

In any case, I hope that I have convinced you that the "operational command school" that is the MSSC can advantageously find there material to illustrate certain key factors in the planning and conduct of operations. More broadly, the battle of Dien Bien Phû must remain, for any French officer, and first of all for the younger ones (who have well recognized it by choosing recently in St Cyr Lieutenant Brunbrouck as godfather) exemplary in the construction and affirmation of his references as a soldier. It is to be hoped that, for a long time to come, our army will remember the "men of Dien Bien Phû"; those of the "Éliane" and the "Huguette", counter-attacks carried out with determination by skeleton companies, one against five; those of the batteries, crushed Those of the batteries, crushed by the axe blows of the enemy artillery, chasing against the whole gun service to support "the buddies"; those who, in a night punctuated by explosions and zebraised by "tracers", found themselves facing the door, for their first jump...

...all those men who went far beyond what could be asked of them, and by whom the French army will leave Tonkin, with rage in their stomachs and hearts in tatters, but with their heads held high, and with the conscience that it had, in spite of France, retained its Honour.

1] The potential of the maquis is not to be neglected. The 2,000 Meos in question were very well armed. Moreover, between 5 and 15 May, there was to be an offensive by the maquis, who retook Lai-Chau and Lao-Kay and surrounded and besieged Cao-Bang.

2] Opposite, the Franco-Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phu lined up 24 pieces of 105, 4 pieces of 155 and 18 pieces of 120.

3] Lieutenant-Colonel Langlais, himself, said "...between the parachuting of a reinforcement battalion and the evacuation of the wounded, I would have chosen the latter...".

[4] Vietnamese Airborne Battalion

5] 5th Battalion of the 7th Algerian Riflemen.

6] All night long, the battery will lightning strike the VM assault waves, "coming out at zero" in direct fire, at less than 200m, with the support of two 12.7 quadruple mounts.

7] Let's recall the existence of "forgotten heroes", the 14 American crews of the "Flying Tigers", piloting the C119 Packett (2 crews shot down, another seriously hit).

Title : le Colonel Thierry DURAND

Author (s) : le Colonel Thierry DURAND

Release date 20/05/2020
