

French Expulsion from Indo-China

The Siege of Dien Bien Phu

by

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Through the many different periods of history, new technology has played an important role in deciding the outcome of the many battles that were fought during those eras. Furthermore, the tactics, techniques and procedures used in conjunction with this new technology have played an even more important role in deciding battles and wars. Many individuals have been able to look back at certain events in history and use it to change or mould tactics and techniques to better defeat the enemy. This has not changed when looking at the doctrine of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery. The doctrine used by the regiment came from an evolution of practices over many years based off of many other wars and conflicts such as The Battle of the Somme, Vimy Ridge, the Third Battle of Ypres and Dien Bien Phu to produce today's current tactics and techniques. This piece will endeavour to prove that not only Canadians, but many other countries, have examined the siege of Dien Bien Phu and used lessons learned from that battle to alter the tactics and techniques of their respective artillery to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. In order to do this, a brief summary of the events leading up to Dien Bien Phu as well as a summary of the battle itself must be examined.

Over the years leading up to the epic battle at Dien Bien Phu, the conflict that was the first Indo-China war was going poorly for the French. There had been numerous command changes of the French commander for the forces in Indo-China as the French government attempted to halt the advance of the Viet Minh into the northern part of Vietnam and the French ally of Laos. By 1953, the Viet Minh had control over a massive amount of Laos so the French government appointed Henri Navarre as commander in chief of the forces in Indo-China with a goal of creating certain conditions to bring about a

peaceful settlement of the conflict there. Along with the new general, the French had begun to build up certain areas in northern Vietnam to provide the forces a staging ground to conduct operations that would halt the Viet Minh advance. The French had strengthened their defences at the Hanoi delta region as well as setting up outposts at Lai Chau near the Chinese border to the north, Na San to the west of Hanoi, and the Plain of Jars in northern Laos. Once in command of all the French forces from Hanoi, Navarre took to devising a plan to eliminate the threat the Viet Minh posed towards Laos. It was at this time that Navarre's chief planner Colonel Louis Berteil formulated a new strategy to combat the enemy which was termed the "hedgehog" concept.¹ Simply put, the French forces would airlift their forces to an important Viet Minh supply line and create a form of blockade so that the enemy in Laos would have to withdraw. This concept was proven to work during the battle of Na San near the end of 1952 where the French outpost of Na San which was supplied only by air drop was repeatedly attacked by Võ Nguyên Giáp's forces which were beaten back numerous times.

With this in mind, Navarre had the impression that, should the concept be used on a grander scale, they could make Giáp bring the bulk of his forces to a decisive engagement where the better equipped French forces would win the day. Later, it was proposed by one of his subordinate officers that they use Dien Bien Phu as an anchoring point to launch raids on the Viet Minh; however, Navarre misinterpreted this to mean they should use it as a full base capable of withstanding a prolonged siege. After the success at

¹ Fall, Bernard B, "Battle of Dien Bien Phu," Vietnam Magazine April 2004, 19 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-dien-bien-phu.htm>> 5.

Na San, Navarre was fairly certain that the concept would work however there were some very key differences between the two battles. First, French forces were in control of the high ground at Na San using their artillery to extreme effect while in Dien Bien Phu, they would be in the bottom of a giant bowl where it was very likely that the enemy controlled the ridges surrounding the outpost. Second, Giáp made no preparations for the attacks at Na San and simply threw his forces in waves at the defenders while at Dien Bien Phu, he made certain to prepare numerous stockpiles of ammunition, heavy artillery and anti-aircraft positions, having dummy positions setup as well as having spies inform him of the exact locations and dispositions of the French artillery. Finally, the French always maintained their aerial supply lines at Na San. At Dien Bien Phu, those supply lines were cut by massed amounts of anti-aircraft battery fire which almost made it impossible for the French to reinforce their position.² Now, Navarre could not have known that Giáp would change his tactics this drastically from Na San but, he could not just assume that it would be exactly the same as before. Not to mention that all of his senior staff were against the idea of using Dien Bien Phu as a base rather than the original idea of a mooring point for raids.

The operation to secure the landing zones into Dien Bien Phu, codenamed Castor began the morning of November 20th, 1953 where 9,000 soldiers were dropped or flown into three separate landing zones surrounding the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu. This operation took three days to complete and it was right afterwards that Giáp began his

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counter moves to push the French out of the region. He realized that if he put pressure on the French than they would move their garrison out of Lai Chau province and move into Dien Bien Phu to fight a decisive engagement. So, that is what he did, however while moving from Lai Chau to Dien Bien Phu, the garrison was ambushed by Giáp's forces and completely annihilated. Thus, Dien Bien Phu was completely open to attack by Giáp's forces and so 50,000 Viet Minh troops were able to secure the hills surrounding the valley in which the French had placed their fortress. Not only were French soldiers outnumbered five to one, their artillery was outnumbered four to one as well. Combat operations began soon afterwards with massive artillery bombardments that hit French forces with extreme precision as they had been practicing the assaults for weeks leading up to it. Within one night, the Viet Minh were able to completely overrun the northern defence section of Dien Bien Phu and the French observed in complete disbelief as the Viet Minh employed direct fire capabilities with their artillery from dug out positions that hid their guns extremely well.³ This prevented French artillery from providing any sort of effective counter battery fire ending with the French artillery commander walking into a bunker with a grenade to kill himself for the failure.⁴ The following day, the French lost another defensive area to the Viet Minh in the north with this one putting the airstrip out of commission as well. Now the French would have to bring in all supplies by parachute which was extremely difficult and highly inaccurate. Three days later the final defensive area to the north of the airstrip fell to the Viet Minh allowing them to completely encircle the rest of the French

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forces defending the airstrip and cutting off the 1,800 soldiers in the southern defensive area. Throughout the following week and a half, the Viet Minh were able to slowly grind down the French forces at severe cost to their own through the use of basic trench warfare tactics with massed artillery bombardments and wave assaults on the beleaguered French defenders.⁵

By May 6th, 1953 Giáp controlled more than 90% of the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu and ordered an all out assault on the final strongpoints in the French defence there. During this assault, the French were able to create a new artillery tactic with what they had left which was called Time on Target (TOT). This involved having multiple batteries from different positions able to concentrate their munitions to converge on a certain point at a certain time for devastating effect. This tactic was able to decimate the first assault by the Viet Minh but by nightfall, they tried a new tactic of blowing a mining shaft directly below the French defensive line which made it collapse very quickly. The southern defensive area was taken quickly afterwards despite trying to make a breakout towards Laos.⁶ Of the 16,000 defending the fortress, the Viet Minh captured 11,700 French soldiers. Although not epic struggle on the scale of battles like the Somme, Passchendaele, or Stalingrad, Dien Bien Phu was such a monumental failure for the French that it caused them to lose their holdings in Indo-China.⁷

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Now, how this all relates to doctrine is that battles like Dien Bien Phu teach many people there afterwards how the development of new tactics can change the face of any battle. For instance, how Giáp manoeuvred his artillery into covered dugouts to keep them hidden from the French so that proper counter battery fire could not be produced; the Canadian Artillery uses a similar method with the field artillery and air defence using camouflaged netting to cover the artillery pieces and vehicles. Or, how he used mock models of artillery pieces to throw the French off from where his real pieces were. The Royal Regiment teaches its soldiers that creating decoys of its equipment will throw the enemy off balance and keep them from targeting your position. Giáp also used artillery in the direct fire role, which relies much less on individuals with specialized skills like spotters and using the gun crews to win the day. Finally, understanding what you have and how your enemy will react will give you the advantage always, like understanding that the French needed control of the skies to keep them reinforced and properly supplied and taking that away from them is what really won the battle.⁸ Divining what the enemy's most crucial area and being able to strike that area hard keeps them reacting and leaves the initiative with you which is what almost always wins a battle. This is the same kind of material that is taught to the Royal Regiment and is a big part of the reason why it uses the tactics, techniques and procedures that it does.

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