THE FIRST DOMINO

By John T. Correll

The French outpost at Dien Bien Phu fell in 1954, 10 years before the United States was drawn into Vietnam.

Soldiers watch as parachutes descend into Dien Bien Phu, South Vietnam, on Nov. 20, 1953, during Operation Castor. The French took the remote outpost from the Viet Minh, repaired the runway, and built fortifications. It wouldn't be enough.

AP photo

FOR 56 days in 1954, the eyes of the world were fixed on Dien Bien Phu, a remote mountain outpost in Vietnam where 11 French army battalions were pinned down by some 50,000 Vietnamese insurgents.

The rebels were led by Vo Nguyen Giap, a former history teacher and self-taught general. Giap's artillery, firing from the forward slopes of the hills, pounded the exposed encampment in the valley. At the cost of heavy losses in his own ranks, Giap rolled back the French perimeter with a series of human-wave ground attacks.

Airplanes could not land on the besieged airstrip. The only way in was by parachute. There was no way out.

It was the decisive battle in what began as an attempt by the French to re-establish their empire in Indochina after World War II. Before long, though, the conflict escalated to international significance, perceived as a critical step in the global march of communism.

Vietnam was regarded as a test of the "Domino Theory," which predicted that if one nation in Southeast Asia fell to communism, the others would follow like a row of toppling dominoes. For the United States, that conviction trumped its long-held principle of opposition to colonialism. US aid for the French war in Indochina started in 1950 and by 1954 was funding 75 percent of the costs.

It was not enough. Without direct US military intervention, Dien Bien Phu was doomed. In March and April 1954, ideas and proposals of all sorts were flying back and forth.

Among them was Operation Vulture, a plan—cooked up by French and American functionaries in Saigon—for US B-29s to bomb the enemy positions at Dien Bien Phu. According to the French foreign minister, the United States also opened the possibility of using nuclear weapons. US officials denied it.

In any case, the United States did not intervene. When Dien Bien Phu fell on May 7, it was the fatal blow for the French empire in Indochina. However, that did not end the entanglement of the United States which—still pursuing the Domino Theory—was drawn into its own war in Vietnam 10 years later.

Last Grasp for Empire

France's prewar standing among the nations of the world had not been restored by the ouster in 1944 of the collaborationist Vichy regime. The Free French provisional government continued to struggle for influence in international affairs.

If France could reclaim its colonial empire, it might be able to regain some of the prestige it had lost. "A consensus existed around the proposition that France's grandeur depended on the preservation of empire," said historian Fredrik Logevall.

French Indochina—consisting of what is now Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—remained loyal to Vichy during World War II, but the real power was the nominally allied Japanese occupation force. The most important part of Indochina was Vietnam, a French possession since 1887. The French army returned in 1945 to resume control but before it got there, Ho Chi Minh, leader of the communist Viet Minh, declared independence for all of Vietnam.

Attempts at negotiating with Ho came to nothing. Under pressure, the French offered "independence within the French Union," which meant that France would retain the sovereignty as well as all the important aspects of government, including military and foreign affairs.

The war began in December 1946, spreading from Tonkin in the north to Annam in central Vietnam and Cochin China in the south. The National Liberation Army, commanded by Giap, was essentially a guerrilla force with only a few pieces of modern military equipment.

The French held the towns and the main roads; the Viet Minh owned the villages and the trails. Outside of the towns, the French concentrated their troops into fortified posts called "hedgehogs." At night, the Viet Minh easily infiltrated the areas around them.

The French Expeditionary Force in Indochina consisted of professional soldiers, volunteers, and the scrapings of the empire: colonial regiments, the Foreign Legion, and local auxiliaries. They were supported by air force squadrons flying a handful of worn-out World War II airplanes. French draftees were expressly withheld from service in Indochina, assigned instead to the Metropolitan Army, which remained in Europe. After several years of no discernible progress, French public opinion began to tire of the war and begrudge the expense of it.

The End of Neutrality

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was doggedly opposed to colonialism. His successor, Harry Truman, took a more flexible position about the colonial empires of US allies and, until the late 1940s, followed a general policy of neutralism.

That changed with the eruption of communist challenges on multiple fronts, including the blockade of Berlin in 1948, the revolution in China, and the invasion of South Korea in 1950. Communist factions led the insurgencies against the colonial regimes in Malaya and Indochina.

The driving theme of US foreign policy was anti-communism. In 1949, the National Security Council recognized Southeast Asia as "the target for a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin," and in NSC 124/2 in 1952 said that "the loss of any single country would probably lead to relatively swift submission to or an alignment with communism by the remaining countries of this group."

By 1952, the United States had provided substantial financial assistance to the French as well as 229 aircraft and all sorts of other military equipment for use in Vietnam.

The Fourth Republic in France was notoriously unstable. When Prime Minister Joseph Laniel took office in 1953, it was the 19th French government formed over the previous seven years. Support for the effort in Indochina waxed and waned.

US determination to salvage Vietnam was more constant than that of the French themselves, but the motivation was different. The United States wanted France to agree to full independence as part of the strategy to defeat the communist challenge. This had no appeal for the French, whose reason for fighting was to preserve the empire.

"By the time I entered the Presidency, the French nation had become weary of war," President Dwight D. Eisenhower said. From 1953 on, the Eisenhower Administration continued the basic previous approach but increased the aid to the French.

At a press conference in April 1954, Eisenhower declared the "Falling Domino Principle," often remembered as the seminal US commitment to Indochina. "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly." His description was more graphic than Truman's NSC 124/2, but the meaning was exactly the same.

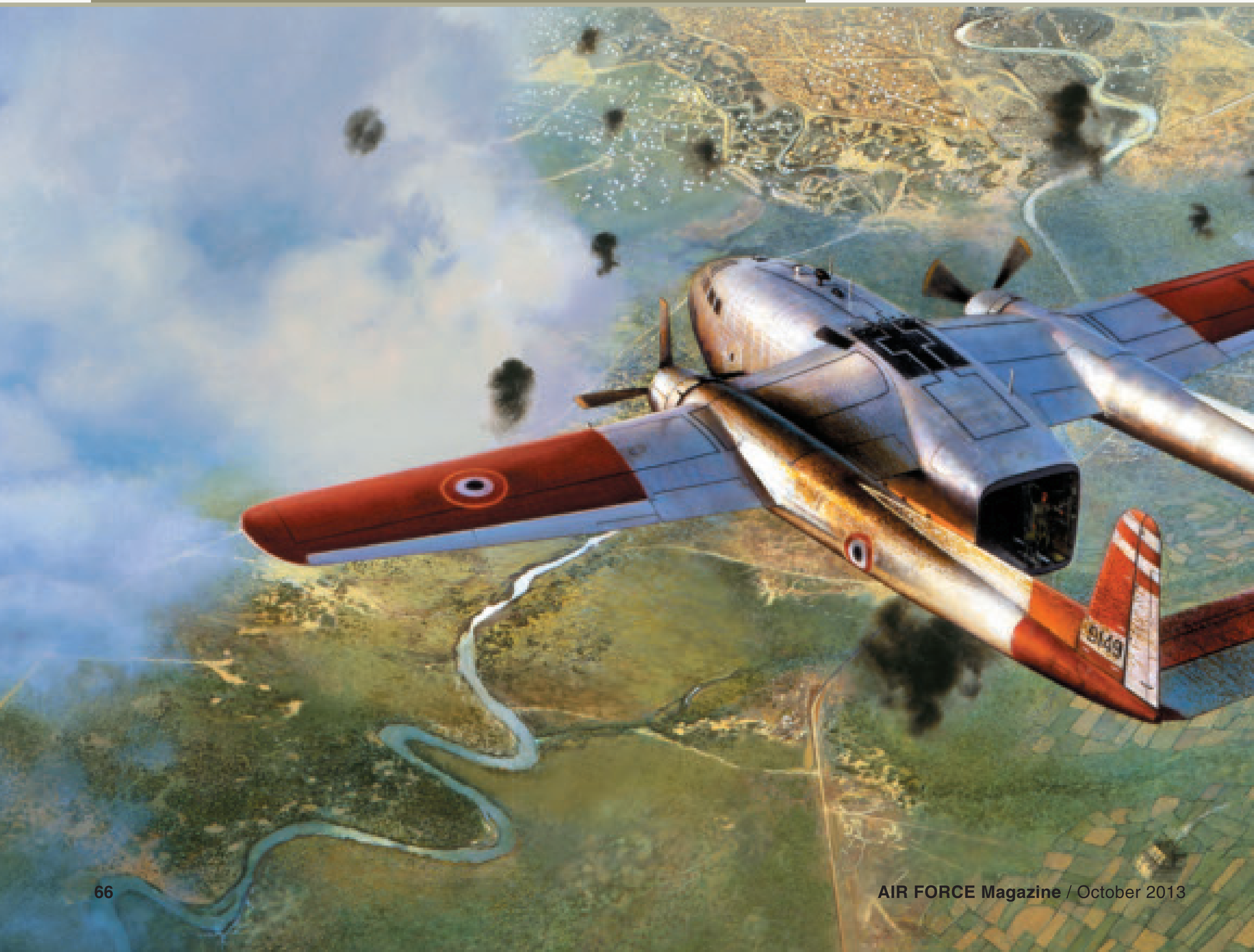
Light in the Tunnel

The French military position in Vietnam had been slipping since 1950, but Gen. Henri E. Navarre, who arrived in May 1953 to command the French Expeditionary Force, sought to change the momentum by going on the offensive.

Navarre's plan had several parts. He would employ his best forces in a more mobile role and seek to draw the Viet Minh into an open battle. He hoped to do this somewhere in Giap's stronghold in northwestern Tonkin, where he also figured to cut off the Viet Minh invasion route into Laos.

An international conference on restoring peace in Indochina had been organized by the major world powers with French concurrence. It was scheduled to begin in Geneva in May 1954, and a victory by Navarre in Vietnam could strengthen the French hand in the negotiating.

Confident of success, one of Navarre's aides told *Time* magazine, "Now we can see it clearly—like light at the end of the tunnel." Years later, that famous phrase would be mistakenly attributed to US



In this painting by Jeffrey Bass, CAT pilot James "Earthquake McGoon" McGovern, his copilot, Wallace Buford, and two French crew members struggle to make it over the border into Laos after being hit by flak over Dien Bien Phu. They made it, but died in the crash. McGovern and Buford were the first Americans killed by the Vietnamese in combat.

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, who never said it.

The place Navarre chose to make his stand was identified on French maps as Dien Bien Phu, close to the Laos border but 185 miles from the French Tonkin theater headquarters in Hanoi. The name meant "big frontier administrative center," referring to a post established by the French in 1889 at the obscure village of Muong Thanh.

Dien Bien Phu lay in a valley, 11 miles long and seven miles wide, surrounded by mountains. Colonial Route 41 cut through the center, alongside a narrow river and numerous small hamlets. There was also an airstrip, built in 1939.

Fundamentally, the French did not believe that colonial insurgents could defeat a modern European army and in their arrogance made several fatal miscalculations. They assumed that Giap would be unable to transport and sustain a large force in a remote location, and in particular that he would not be able to move in artillery. French airpower would interdict the approach routes. If Giap somehow managed to bring his cannons into action, they could be silenced in minutes by counterbattery fire.

In Operation Castor, Nov. 20, 1953, three airborne battalions parachuted into Dien Bien Phu and captured it from the Viet Minh defensive force. The French repaired and reopened the runway, which had been sabotaged. There was not much timber in the valley, so they tore down every house and shed in the villages for construction materials to build fortifications.

It did not amount to much protection, but the French did not believe they needed much. They placed their own artillery in open pits so it would be free to swing around unobstructed and fire in any direction. Col. Charles Piroth, the French artillery commander, assured Navarre that "no Viet cannon will be able to fire three rounds before being destroyed by my artillery."

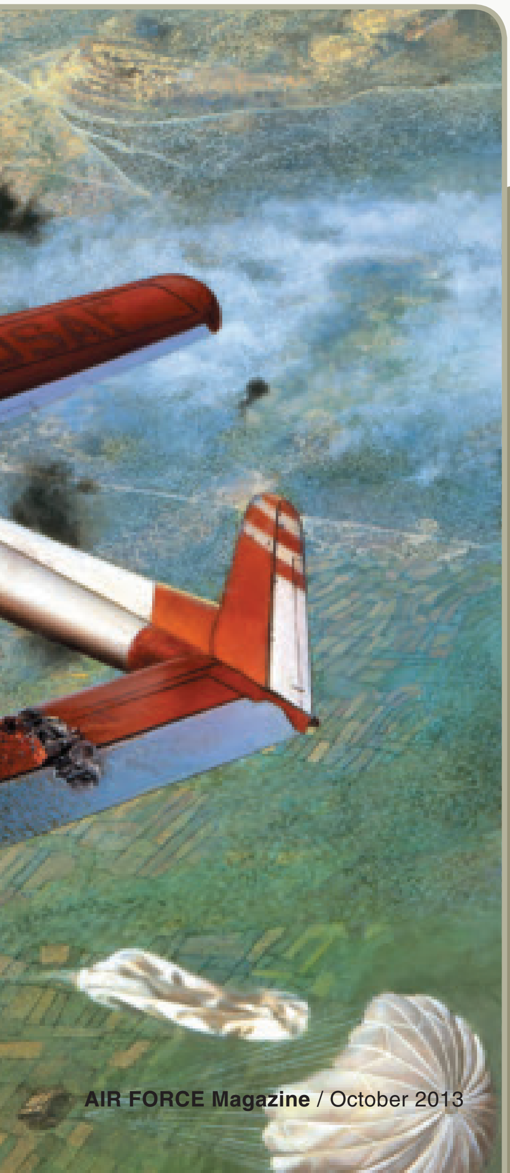
Airhead Under Attack

The commander at Dien Bien Phu, Col. Christian de Castries, established his headquarters near the airstrip, where the village of Muong Thanh had stood. The encampment consisted of nine strong points named Anne-Marie, Beatrice, Claudine, Dominique, Elaine, Francoise, Gabrielle, Hugette, and Isabelle. Gabrielle on the northern point was more than five miles from Isabelle in the south, where a small secondary airstrip was built.

The outpost was an airhead, totally sustained by airlift. The French air force had four squadrons of C-47s and a few C-119s in country, a resource that had to support operations elsewhere in Vietnam as well.

By January, the French presence at Dien Bien Phu had grown to about 11,000 troops. Most of the air support came from bases around Hanoi and Haiphong, but there were usually a few Bearcat fighters at Dien Bien Phu as well as half a dozen Morane Criquet light spotter airplanes to find and mark enemy artillery positions.

The French would have been astounded had they known the size of Giap's force in the hills around Dien Bien Phu. He had five army divisions—50,000 regular troops—no longer the rag-tag guerillas of days gone by. He also had 144 artillery pieces, 36 antiaircraft guns, and some rocket launchers. Many of the guns were of American manufacture, captured by the Chinese in Korea. All told, Giap had



Artwork courtesy of Jeff Bass, commissioned by Fairchild Corp.

What Ike (May Have) Said

Disagreements linger, almost 60 years later, about what the Americans and the French said to each other about the possibility that US forces might enter the conflict in Indochina. The most contentious question of all is how seriously the use of nuclear weapons was considered.

The definitive word on US policy was long presumed to be a statement by President Eisenhower. When the thought of using atomic bombs in Vietnam was brought forward, he supposedly said, "You boys must be crazy. We can't use those awful things against Asians for the second time in less than 10 years. My God!"

All references to that statement track back to a sole source, *Eisenhower the President,* published in 1984 by popular historian Stephen E. Ambrose, who attributed it to an interview with Eisenhower.

Problems set in when the Eisenhower Library at Abilene, Kan., discovered in 2010 that Ambrose had exaggerated his contact with Eisenhower, and that many of the interviews he reported had not in fact happened.

Before his death in 2002, Ambrose admitted to shoddy methods in other works, but none of that compared in importance to the issue of the Eisenhower interviews. The library's revelations did not specifically invalidate the statement about the atomic bomb. Some of the interviews were real, and some of the attributions were surely valid.

Among those willing to give Ambrose the benefit of the doubt on this one is Jean Edward Smith, a well-established historian whose *Eisenhower in War and Peace* was published in 2012. To him, the atomic bomb quotation "rings true," he says.

an advantage of four-to-one over the French in artillery.

Giap sustained his force in several ways. Modified bicycles—with wooden struts for extra strength and extensions on the handlebars—could haul up to 440 pounds of supplies. Porters carried additional loads on bamboo poles. The Viet Minh had about 600 Russian trucks, which they used to carry the artillery from the Chinese border over roads kept open by manual labor. Historian John Prados estimates that Giap transported as much tonnage into Dien Bien Phu as the French did.

Incredibly, the French did not see that Giap was emplacing his guns on the forward slopes of the hills, looking directly down on the camp. The peaks were steep, and howitzers on the reverse slopes would have had to fire at unfavorable angles of elevation to clear the ridges. The guns would have been vulnerable on the forward slopes except that Giap placed them in deep casemates, narrow embrasures dug into the face of the hill, protected by several yards of overhead cover with only the muzzles protruding. Since each gun was assigned to a single target, there was no need for the barrel to move.

When Giap began sporadic bombardment in January, the French took it to be pointless harassment. In fact, the guns were sighting in on their specific coordinates. The main attack, which began at twilight on March 13, was devastating. The French batteries were unable to target Giap's guns and their artillery spotter airplanes were destroyed on the airstrip.

Strongpoints Beatrice and Gabrielle were overrun the first night and Anne-Marie was taken soon thereafter. By the fifth day, the French had lost the equivalent of three battalions. Giap's casualties were even greater, but he was now able to strike the encampment with mortars and artillery.

French artillery chief Piroth, who had guaranteed that the Viet Minh guns would do no harm, committed suicide.

The Question of Intervention

As the situation deteriorated, the clamor increased for the United States to enter the conflict. Eisenhower effectively ruled out sending ground troops but left the possibility of airpower slightly open. He listed four firm conditions for US intervention: a formal request for intervention; sanction of the response by the United Nations; participation by other nations; and approval from Congress.

Meanwhile, staff officers and bureaucrats were busily conducting studies and putting together contingency plans. At Navarre's headquarters in Saigon, French and American officers conceived of Operation Vautour (Vulture), in which US B-29 bombers and carrier-based aircraft would attack the insurgents around Dien Bien Phu.

In early April, the French government requested that Operation Vulture be carried out, believing that it had already been approved in Washington. They had gotten that impression, apparently, from enthusiastic discussions between Adm. Arthur W. Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. Paul H. R. Ely, the French chief of staff.

The previous month, Radford had sought concurrence from the other members of the Joint Chiefs on a recommendation to commit US airpower at Dien Bien Phu and had been rebuffed. The State Department told the French they must have misunderstood Radford and said no on Operation Vulture.

A further misunderstanding, this one about nuclear weapons, also arose from a freewheeling idea by staff planners. In early 1954, the Joint Advanced Study Committee in the Pentagon reached the strange conclusion that the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu could be defeated with three atomic weapons. It is unknown how the committee figured to do this without also wiping out the nearby French forces.

For reasons yet unclear, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles—the strongest advocate in Eisenhower's Cabinet of US military aid to the French—discussed the Pentagon study with French Foreign Minister Georges A. Bidault, a leading advocate of victory in Indochina. Bidault later said that Dulles offered him the use of two (not three) atomic bombs, but that he had declined.

AP photo

Dulles said he was "totally mystified" by Bidault's claim.

The United States loaned the French some additional C-119s and other aircraft and assigned almost 300 US Air Force personnel to Vietnam to provide maintenance and support. The French had few aircrews qualified on C-119s, so they contracted with Civil Air Transport—a CIA proprietary airline that would later be renamed Air America—to fly the C-119s on the Dien Bien Phu run.

French bombers did little damage to Giap's fortified artillery positions and the fighters seldom caught his infantry in the open during daylight hours. Napalm, employed by C-47s and C-119s, was somewhat more effective, mostly because of the fear it created. From beginning to end, Giap had the initiative.

The last airplane landed March 8, after which the Viet Minh guns prevented any further use of the airstrip. Dien Bien Phu was totally dependent on airdrop for reinforcements and supplies.

The airlifters, coming straight down the valley, were starkly vulnerable. To escape the flak, the French C-47s flew at 10,000 feet and the C-119s, almost all of them crewed by Americans, flew at 5,000 feet. The airdrops, especially from the higher altitudes, often went wide. More than half of the airdropped food, ammunition, and other supplies fell into enemy hands.

Aircraft, both French and American, took hundreds of hits. In April alone, C-119s flown by CAT pilots were hit more than 60 times.

The first Americans to die in combat were CAT pilot James B. McGovern—a big man with a bushy beard, nicknamed "Earthquake McGoon" for his resemblance to a character in the comic strips—and his copilot Wallace A. Buford. On the afternoon of May 6, they came down the valley at 3,000 feet with six tons of ammunition for strongpoint Isabelle. Hit by ground fire over the target, McGovern, Buford, and their two French crewmen made it across the Laos border before the C-119 crashed and exploded.

The Fall of Dien Bien Phu

The last reinforcements parachuted into Dien Bien Phu on May 4, three days before the end. The final French position was no larger than a baseball field when the Viet Minh overran it on May 7.

The French lost 2,080 killed and 5,613 wounded in the eight-week engagement. Viet Minh casualties were much higher, estimated at 7,900 killed and 15,000 wounded.

Of the 6,500 French troops taken prisoner, more than 4,000 died or disappeared in captivity, the result of mistreatment, disease, poor food, and lack of medical care. Of the 15,000 French Union troops who served at Dien Bien Phu, "no more than four out of every 10 ever went home, wounded or unwounded," said historian Martin C. Windrow.

The French still held numerical military superiority in Vietnam, but Dien Bien Phu had taken the starch out of them. The Geneva Accords on July 21, 1954, partitioned Vietnam at the 17th parallel. The Viet Minh got the north. The south remained briefly in the French Union until President Ngo Dinh Diem declared independence. The last French forces left Indochina in April 1956.

The Viet Minh bided their time until 1959 when they moved to consolidate Vietnam, creating what would become the Ho Chi Minh Trail as an infiltration route to the south. The long effort to overthrow the government in Saigon was relentless.

US President John F. Kennedy, elected in 1960, subscribed fully to the Domino Theory, as did his advisors and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. US entry into Vietnam began with civilian advisors and trainers and evolved to major combat before the departure, called "peace with honor," in 1973. South Vietnam finally fell to the North in 1975.

Laos and Cambodia were taken over by the communists, but the falling dominoes stopped there. Next door Thailand kept its independence as well as an alliance with the United States.

In 2005, the French ambassador to the United States presented the Legion of Honor, France's highest award for service, to the seven surviving CAT pilots who flew missions to Dien Bien Phu.

The scars of battle are gone from Dien Bien Phu, which has been the capital of Lai Chau province since 1993. The mountain valley, now with a population of 60,000, is a destination for both Vietnamese and French tourists. Rusting French cannons are still scattered about, and there is a small museum. The displays include relics from both sides, including one of the bicycles modified to carry 440 pounds of cargo to the Vietnamese forces in the hills. ■

AP photo

Far left: Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and President Dwight Eisenhower confer at Lowry AFB, Colo., in 1954. Dulles was a strong advocate of military aid to the French in Vietnam. Left: Viet Minh steer a convoy of modified bicycles, configured to carry hundreds of pounds of supplies. The French believed Vo Nguyen Giap, the Viet Minh leader, wouldn't be able to transport and sustain a large force in a remote location like DIen Bien Phu. They were wrong.

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine *for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "The Second Coming of Counterinsurgency," appeared in the September issue.*