The great 1954 battle sucked US airmen into Indochina and helped set the stage for the Vietnam War.

Dien Bien Phu

By Rebecca Grant

IT WAS in August 1964—40 years ago this month—that the United States stepped irrevocably into the Vietnam War. However, that step had been foreshadowed a full decade earlier.

On Aug. 4, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that North Vietnamese boats had fired on US warships. Congress on Aug. 7 responded with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which opened the way for large-scale US intervention in Southeast Asia.

Less well known, however, is that the Vietnam fuse had been lit back in 1954. The spark was the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

In early 1954, France, a key Western ally, faced a major crisis in what was then called French Indochina. Several thousand French soldiers were trapped in the fortress at Dien Bien Phu, an isolated town in northern Vietnam, near the border with Laos.

In an effort to assist the besieged garrison, French forces had borrowed and were using a US Navy aircraft carrier, 10 US Air Force B-26s, several C-47s and C-119s, and hundreds of US Air Force personnel.

Washington wanted to help. The question was how far President Dwight D. Eisenhower would go to prevent a communist triumph at Dien Bien Phu.

Photo Bernard Reck via Warren Thompson

United States Air Force B-26s loaned to France sit on the ramp at Tourane, Vietnam—later known as Da Nang. They still wear the nose art they carried in Korean action, mere months before. American airpower assistance was the last hope for the French in Indochina.

Vietnam and other parts of Indochina had been French colonies since the 19th century. Chased out by occupying Japanese forces in World War II, France had returned after the defeat of Japan and sought to re-establish colonial control.

France's actions provoked open warfare with communist-dominated Viet Minh forces—led by Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap—which in 1946 launched a broad armed uprising against the French. In October 1949, China's communists won their own civil war and started sending aid southward.

"Total Destruction"

The Viet Minh prepared for all-out war. Bernard B. Fall, the author of *Street Without Joy,* a classic 1961 study of the 1946-54 Vietnam War, wrote that Giap sought not mere victory but "the total destruction of French forces."

France's goal was a mirror image—total destruction of communist forces. France sought to lure Giap's forces into a set-piece battle, which it felt sure it would win.

In early 1953, France had roughly 200,000 troops in the field. Some 200,000 Vietnamese troops fought with them as allies. French forces held delta areas and towns but they did not control the back country and highlands.

France had an overwhelming advantage in air mobility. This was especially useful for dealing with the rugged inland terrain. In late 1952, French forces established and held a northern strong point at Na San. French air forces supplied the fortified garrison using an air bridge from French-held Hanoi, only 50 minutes of flying time from Na San. In early December 1952, French forces turned back a two-division attack, after which the Viet Minh withdrew.

France relied on airdrop techniques perfected in the China-Burma-India theater in World War II. One such example was a three-battalion para-

AP photo

France employed paratroopers in quick raids that destroyed Chinese supplies for the Viet Minh. Paratroopers were also used to reinforce Dien Bien Phu, but to no avail. French air mobility was not matched by air striking power.

chute drop at Lang Son in July 1953. The French paratroopers destroyed Chinese arms and supplies and left without holding on to "useless real estate," as historian Howard R. Simpson put it in his book, *Dien Bien Phu, the Epic Battle America Forgot.*

The commander of all French forces in Indochina was Gen. Henri Navarre. His plans called for the deployment to Vietnam of roughly half a million French troops by the end of 1954. With such a large force, he thought, he would be able to subdue the Viet Minh once and for all.

In the fall of 1953, Navarre took a bold step. He sent French forces to seize and fortify the town of Dien Bien Phu, an outpost nestled in a deep valley. In Navarre's view, establishing the fortress served two purposes.

First, it would block the route from Vietnam into Laos and thereby force Giap to stretch his supply lines if he wanted to operate in that neighboring country. Second, such a fort would allow France to keep an eye on local opium production, which helped to finance the Viet Minh.

Navarre sensed no danger in taking this step. He knew that heavy artillery could cause him problems, but the commander was convinced that China would not give Giap heavy guns. Even if Giap somehow got such weapons, thought Navarre, the Viet Minh would not be able to move them up onto the hills above Dien Bien Phu.

The French strategy was to make the 15,000-man garrison a strong point and draw Giap's forces into battle in the valley. Navarre ringed Dien Bien Phu with artillery outposts bearing names such as Beatrice, Isabelle, and Huguette. These positions were deeply buried and buttressed to withstand artillery fire.

French officers believed that, by creating interlocking fields of fire, they could defeat an attack in much the same way that they had successfully repelled the enemy at Na San. The Europeans were confident that, even should Giap get a few artillery pieces into play, French counterbattery fires would silence them.

French forces also had the air all to themselves. They planned to use air support to spot and hit artillery and troop concentrations.

Tables Turned

Giap, a brilliant strategist, turned the tables in three ways.

First, he immediately began to build massive concentrations of manpower and supplies in the Dien Bien Phu area.

Second, he brought in Chinese-supplied heavy artillery and Chinese advisors to further train his Viet Minh gunners. Engineers built roads and bridges for trucks. In a few months, his artillerymen had surveyed the whole of Dien Bien Phu.

Third, he put off a frontal attack and set his forces to digging trenches that would come close to the French outposts. He would keep at it until he controlled a trench perimeter around Dien Bien Phu.

As Giap's biographer, Peter G. MacDonald, put it: "The French had thrown down the gauntlet, but, because the jungle country concealed troop movements, it took some time for them to realize that Giap had picked it up."

Giap soon had 50,000 combat troops at Dien Bien Phu and 300,000 soldiers and peasants moving artillery, anti-aircraft guns, and other materiel along the 500-mile supply lines almost with impunity. Those forces outgunned the Dien Bien Phu garrison. The French had flown in about 60 artillery pieces of heavy caliber (57 mm and bigger). However, Giap had in place in January 1954 more than 200 heavy artillery pieces, including the fearsome "Stalin Organs," Soviet-built Katyusha rocket launchers.

Dien Bien Phu would never be the stronghold the French wanted. Instead, it had become a trap.

The situation in Indochina was a headache for Eisenhower. The President deplored France's colonial agenda. Moreover, he had in late 1953 come to hold a bleak view of France's military situation. In his memoirs, he recalls that France's move into Dien Bien Phu raised eyebrows among soldiers "who were well-acquainted with the almost invariable fate of troops invested in an isolated fortress."

Eisenhower was not sure there was a way to win in Vietnam, and he was wary of getting the US involved.

Early US Involvement

Yet America already was involved. President Harry S. Truman reluctantly had provided military aid to French forces in Vietnam, and, now, the US was picking up as much as 75 percent of the cost of France's adventure in Indochina.

According to an Eisenhower biographer, Stephen E. Ambrose, the President ruled out use of US ground troops. He told participants at a Jan. 8, 1954, National Security Council meeting, "This war in Indochina would absorb our troops by divisions."

One month later, he told influen-

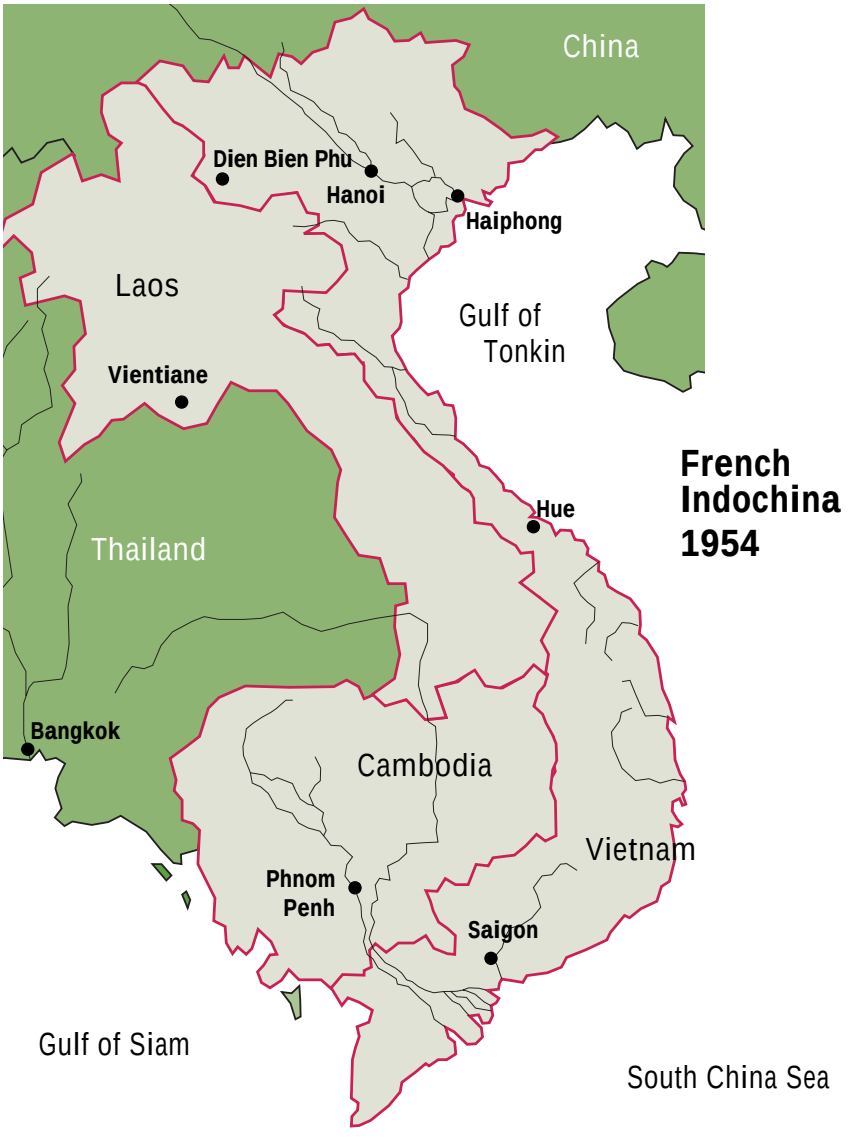
tial Sen. Leverett Saltonstall (R-Mass.) that he was "frightened about getting ground forces tied up in Indochina."

That left airpower—land-based and sea-based. In fact, Eisenhower put US airpower at the heart of all secret discussions of US assistance to France. This was consistent with President Eisenhower's so-called "New Look" defense policy, which emphasized airpower—especially strategic nuclear airpower—as the centerpiece of US military power.

Only a few months before, in a famous speech in January 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had unveiled the new concept of "massive retaliation." With that phrase, Dulles was signaling that the United States would not try to match communist forces tank for tank, gun for gun, or rifleman for rifleman. Rather, the US, faced with aggression, would "retaliate instantly by means and at places of our choosing."

AFP/Getty Images

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap (in black) plans the encirclement of Dien Bien Phu. Using the cover of the jungle, Giap moved men and artillery ever closer to the French outpost, holding fire to avoid alerting the defenders.



The clear implication was that the United States was prepared to resort to nuclear weapons.

At first, however, France only requested use of 25 B-26 bombers and 400 USAF support personnel to maintain them. The plan was to use B-26s for strafing and bombing of the encroaching Viet Minh troops. Eisenhower sent only 10 B-26s and 200 US airmen to maintain them. He also laid down the strict proviso that they would rotate out of Vietnam and be home by June 15, 1954.

Still, it was impossible to miss the significance of the American deployment. "For all Eisenhower's emphasis on reduced numbers and a definite date for withdrawal," wrote Ambrose, "he had sent the first American military personnel to Vietnam."

Meanwhile, Giap bided his time. He had canceled his original assault plan, which called for launching the main attack in January 1954. He did this because he had not yet finished the disposition of his forces. However, the French appear to have drawn the wrong inference, concluding that their artillery and air strikes were weakening the communist force. What they did not know was that Giap was steadily moving his artillery closer, positioning it down the front slopes of the hills, all con-

Photo by Edgar Burts

C-119 Flying Boxcars such as this one were lent to the French for both mobility and attack. Most of the aircrews flying these aircraft were Americans—some military advisors, some civilians.

cealed by camouflage. Giap's 105 mm guns had yet to be fired.

Throughout this period, the Dien Bien Phu garrison was bleeding. French commanders had dispatched soldiers on armed patrols, hoping to clear the surrounding hills of Viet Minh, but sniper attacks and firefights with small clusters of guerrillas were having an effect. France had suffered 1,000 casualties by February 1954.

The Siege Begins

The attack that formally began the siege of Dien Bien Phu was launched March 13, 1954.

Giap's forces unleashed fire from 105 mm guns and other artillery on three key northern strong points and on the main airstrip. The artillery shells cratered the runway and destroyed aircraft on the strip. French mechanics hastened to repair what they could and got three F8F Bearcat fighter-bombers airborne to escape. Viet Minh gunners turned six others into scorched hulks.

The artillery outposts fell within hours. Then began a dismal trickle of wounded survivors into Dien Bien Phu's garrison hospital. The French plan to create intricate fields of fire was falling apart. One who knew it was the French artillery chief, Col. Charles Piroth, who had assured his leaders that his guns would silence the enemy's. On March 15, he killed himself in the fortress, using a hand grenade.

The French tried to hit back with artillery and airpower. Already in action were some 30 US C-119 Flying Boxcars modified to drop napalm on the Viet Minh artillery. According to Ambrose, Eisenhower believed that napalm would "burn out a considerable area and help to reveal enemy artillery positions."

Most of the aircrews flying these C-119s were American employees of Civil Air Transport (CAT), the contract airline founded by Maj. Gen. Claire Lee Chennault, the head of the World War II "Flying Tigers." More than a few aircrew members included US pilots from the Military Assistance Advisory Group, stated Simpson.

The first napalm strike was carried out March 24. It targeted revetted gun positions about one-half mile outside Dien Bien Phu. According to Simpson, Viet Minh Gen. Tran Do credited the strikes as being somewhat effective. Do later said: "Under the enemy napalm bombs, even stone and earth took fire." Yet the Viet Minh "held on," according to Do, and continued with the artillery fire.

At the Dien Bien Phu airstrip, daylight operations ceased. Night operations worked for a few days, due in part to an unusual tactic described by Simpson. One C-47 would roar over the strip at full power as if dropping supplies. Meanwhile, a second C-47 cut its engine and glided in to land. The first C-47 followed in turn. Flares and light from artillery fire ended the trick as Viet Minh gunners wised up. Soon, C-47s were gliding into an anti-aircraft barrage.

At that point, Dien Bien Phu could be supplied only via airdrop. A reinforcement group of paratroopers made it within the garrison a few days after the start of the siege. Indeed, small groups of personnel were being dropped into the fortress until a few days before it fell.

However, dropping and retrieving supplies soon became a nightmare as Viet Minh artillery shrank the effective size of the drop zone. Morning fog and stretches of cloudy weather made it even harder. On

Sigmund Alexander via Warren Thompson

This ex-US Navy F8F Bearcat in theater was armed with napalm. Napalm raids were flown by these and the C-119s in a desperate effort to strip away Giap's jungle cover so his forces could be more accurately targeted.

March 27, French Col. Jean Louis Nicot, the man in charge of the aerial resupply effort, had to raise the drop altitude from 2,000 feet to 8,000 feet. Drop zone accuracy declined, and some supplies inevitably fell into Viet Minh hands.

By mid-April, the drop zone had been compressed into a ground area only 1,500 yards in diameter. Giap's cunning had put a gaping hole in the Hanoi-Dien Bien Phu air bridge.

Operation Vulture

With the drop zone all but gone, the French—with the encouragement of some US officials based in Saigon—pressed hard for the US to launch an overwhelming air strike to save Dien Bien Phu. In fact, only 10 days after the start of Giap's initial assault, Gen. Paul Ely, the French Chief of Staff, arrived in Washington to plead the French case to US policy-makers.

Ely met with Dulles and Adm. Arthur W. Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They discussed and approved Operation Vulture, a plan attributed in part to US and French officers in Indochina and in part to Radford's own staff.

Operation Vulture was to be a type of massive retaliation with airpower. The target was to be the Viet Minh forces arrayed around Dien Bien Phu. This was the first time that US leaders had seriously contemplated a major military intervention with airpower alone.

Eisenhower was still open to the possibility of such an airpower operation. After the Ely visit, he confided to Dulles that he would not "wholly exclude the possibility of a single strike, if it were almost certain this could prove decisive results."

Yet Ike had concerns about the tactic. "There were grave doubts in my mind about the effectiveness of such air strikes on deployed troops where good cover was plentiful," he said in his memoirs.

Operation Vulture, however, was the source of considerable confusion.

One version of the plan, detailed in Simpson's book, envisioned sending 60 B-29s from US bases in the region to bomb Giap's positions. Supporting the bombers would be as many as 150 fighters launched from US Seventh Fleet carriers. The fighters were needed because of the proximity of Chinese airfields to the border with Vietnam. With the experience of Korea fresh in their minds, senior officials thought China would not hesitate to open a new "MiG Alley" over northern Vietnam and Laos.

AP photo

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (left) meets with President Eisenhower. Dulles advocated "massive retaliation" to combat communist aggression, but Eisenhower refused pleas to employ nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

That was not the most disquieting aspect of Operation Vulture, however. The plan included an option to use up to three atomic weapons on the Viet Minh positions.

Radford, the top American military officer, gave this nuclear option his backing. US B-29s, B-36s, and B-47s could have executed a nuclear strike, as could carrier aircraft from the Seventh Fleet. Eisenhower, who liked to deal directly with his Chiefs on military matters, certainly knew of the JCS option.

Declassified material confirms that Operation Vulture was seriously considered—and that it had room for both conventional and atomic weapons. In fact, France evidently thought the plan was a "go," but it wasn't.

A "Misunderstanding"

In his book *Eisenhower: Soldier and President,* Ambrose recounted the situation this way:

"On the morning of April 5, Dulles called Eisenhower to inform him that the French had told [the US ambassador to Paris] that their impression was that Operation Vulture had been agreed to and hinted that they expected two or three atomic bombs to be used against the Viet Minh. Eisenhower told Dulles to tell the French ... that they must have misunderstood Radford."

Clearly, Eisenhower saw an air attack as a distinct possibility, but was he ready to use tactical nuclear weapons? On this point, Eisenhower never showed his hand. His longtime aide, Army Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, recalled in a 1967 interview that the President simply "never told anybody whether he would or not."

Meanwhile, Air Force Gen. Earle E. Partridge, commander of US Far East Air Forces, visited Saigon in April, bringing along Brig. Gen. Joseph D. Caldara. Their discussions with the French officers there left them convinced that the Dien Bien Phu defenders had not thought through the consequences of the air strikes. With Giap's trenches now at the forts, there was no way to separate the fortress itself from the bombs that would fall from B-29s or from the blast radius of nuclear weapons.

Moreover, according to Simpson, Caldara flew his B-17 over Dien Bien Phu and came back with the conviction that only a daylight raid was possible.

The time for decision came in late April. On April 24, Dulles told Eisenhower that Paris was begging for Seventh Fleet air cover because it would allow the French to send in a relief column from Laos. Dulles cabled back that the US could not act without Congressional support—support which Eisenhower knew from previous feelers would not be forthcoming.

Navarre also demanded action. A

AP photo/Vietnam News Agency

Dien Bien Phu fell on May 7, 1954, and the defeated French left Indochina shortly thereafter. Here, captured French soldiers trudge through the fields after the surrender at Dien Bien Phu.

cable from Saigon informed Dulles that Navarre wanted "immediate and massive air support."

Now, the French were desperate, and "they wanted us to go in and bomb," Eisenhower recalled in a 1967 interview.

In the end, Eisenhower was not willing to step all the way into Vietnam. He ruled out unilateral US intervention at an April 27 press conference. He later declared, "Airpower might be temporarily beneficial to French morale, but I had no intention of using United States forces in any limited action when the force employed would probably not be decisively effective."

The defenders of Dien Bien Phu were now on their own. In the last two weeks before the fortress fell, French (and some American) aircrews continued to do what they could to bomb and strafe Viet Minh positions and to deliver aerial supplies, despite increasingly intense anti-aircraft fire. The US carrier *Belleau Wood*, manned with a French crew and equipped with Corsair fighter-bombers, arrived in the Tonkin Gulf to take over from a French carrier whose airplanes had been supporting Dien Bien Phu. The French Navy, flying US-built F6F Hellcats, had provided effective and heartening air support, but their 500-pound bombs could not knock out Giap's heavy, revetted artillery.

Dien Bien Phu fell on May 7.

After that, momentous events unfolded rapidly. France realized that it had lost Indochina and made clear that it would fight no more. Paris began preparations for a full withdrawal from that part of the world.

In June 1954, France, charged with civil administration in southern Vietnam, granted that region its independence.

Six weeks later, on July 20-21, 1954, the US, France, Britain, and the Soviet Union met in Geneva. Out of this conference came measures that were supposed to end the Indochina war.

The conference agreed to a partition of Vietnam into north and south. Partition was to be temporary, with unification to come after national elections in 1956. Elections never came.

At the same time, however, the US began organizing a collective defense system aimed at blocking communist advances. In September 1954, the US and seven other nations signed the Manila Pact, basis of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.

It was one of the pillars of America's own Vietnam War.

By that time, however, American blood had already been spilled in Vietnam. On May 6, 1954, CAT pilots James B. McGovern and Wallace A. Buford were flying their C-119 Boxcar on a Dien Bien Phu airdrop mission. Clear weather made it easy for the Viet Minh anti-aircraft gunners to target the aircraft. The stricken Boxcar crashed behind enemy lines.

Thus it was that McGovern and Buford—two pilots—became the first Americans known to have died in combat in Vietnam. ■

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Only four months after the surrender, Dulles signed the Manila Pact, the basis for the SEATO treaty. The treaty commitment helped pave the way for America's own Vietnam War.

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