

1945 - 1954: Indo-China, The Final Ignomity

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu began on 13 March. The monsoon season also started early. Torrential storms sent oceans of WATER DOWN THE HILLS AND TURNED THE FRENCH POSITIONS INTO A QUAGMIRE.

Shellfire rained down on the weakest of the fortified positions, held by the LEGION'S CONTINGENT. THE TRENCHES AND DUGOUTS EXPLODED AROUND THEM. MANY WHO WERE NOT HIT BY BOMBARDMENT WERE BURIED ALIVE IN THE MUD AND SLIME. WITHIN EIGHT HOURS, THE POSITION LOST CONTACT WITH THE BASE. THE FEW LEGION SURVIVORS MANAGED TO SCRAMBLE BACK TO THE FRENCH LINES THE FOLLOWING DAY: 326 MEN WERE KILLED OR CAPTURED.

At the end of the first week, devastated by their lack of intelligence on Viet Minh, Colonel Charles Piroth, pulled the pin on a hand grenade and killed himself.

An incredible, bloody stomach churning horror story of rows of mutilated bodies on whom Dr. Paul Grauwin's underground hospital became a desperate scene, sewing up and cutting off damaged pieces. Many became double amputees, had their faces half shot away. Overhead, the shells continued their continuous downpour.

On the night of 7 May, the surviving troops of the French had pushed back into desolate, body strewn patch pitted with smoking raters in the centre of Dien Bien Phu, and one remaining Legion outpost.

On 21 July, 1954, the two sides met under international mediation in Geneva, to agree a pact formally ending the Indo-China war. The president of the Republic of North Vietnam was Ho Chi Minh. The south would remain under Emperor Bao Dai. In Washington,

Still they come. Year in and year out, young men from across the globe turn up at one of the many recruiting stations around France to volunteer for the French Foreign Legion. They come from vastly different backgrounds and creeds, with no common language. Most owe no allegiance to France itself.

Some are drawn simply by the romantic notion of the Legion, others by sheer renown of its soldiering, and many need to escape anonymously from the pressures of life. And once he has joined, under an assumed name, the Legion makes the new recruit a promise of unequalled protection as long as he serves (although criminals, they say, need not apply). It famously became one of the toughest military regimes on earth.

France's war in Vietnam from 1945 to 1954 was aptly described by the French themselves as the 'Dirty War'. French pride and privileges of a corrupt minority of pro-Japanese collaborators in Indo-China, as well as the spread of communism.

One historian between 1967 and 1969 compared Ho Chi Minh popular support in the country to Tito in Yugoslavia. Ho built the Viet Minh into a political organization providing effective resistance to the Japanese and the French.

French restoration was achieved with the indispensable aid of the British, who themselves were suspicious of American anticolonialism.

Towards the end of 1951 when every Viet Minh offensive had been squashed, new disaster threatened the French. Giap's men were posed to engulf a large characteristically isolated French base. About 40,000 men - trained and equipped in Mao's Red China, though it was artillery that was to cause 75 per cent of French casualties. Dien Bien Phu.

Casualty figures among the Viet Min were large 'The ground before us was covered in bodies, they just kept coming and eventually we

stacked them up on top of each other to form a protective shield` said a Legion sergeant who scrambled back to base clutching the stump of his handless left arm.

Beneath the earth, the field hospital commanded by Dr. Paul Grauwin ` into a glutinous hole of collective, perspiring flesh, amputated limbs, living stumps upon which white grubs grazed, oozing mud, discarded dressings, faeces, dead bodies, exuberant fungi. Round the clock, shells fell once every second. There was no way out of Dien Bien Phu.