

Sample Translation

France at War

(Frankrijk in oorlog, 1870-1962)

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Translated by Beverley Jackson

[excerpt 1, from ‘The Franco-Prussian War, 1870-1871’]

The beginning

The French armies fought under the command of the emperor himself. Napoleon, fearing that marshals Bazaine and MacMahon might otherwise claim credit for victory, limited their command to individual corps and gave the minister of war, General Lebœuf, the additional post of chief of staff. This placed Lebœuf in a position of authority over the two marshals, to their profound indignation.

Both the aggrieved commanders, MacMahon, the hero of the Crimean War, and Bazaine, the commander of the Mexican adventure, had formidable reputations. Marie Edmé Patrice Maurice de MacMahon (1808-93), was a marquis by birth, and Napoleon III had created him Duke of Magenta and Marshal of France after the 1859 Battle of Magenta. His family originated from Ireland but had fled to France after the fall of the Stuarts during the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This MacMahon served in Algeria, where he rose to the rank of general, and subsequently in the Crimean War, in which he distinguished himself in the storming of the Malakoff Tower, reportedly pronouncing there the immortal words, ‘I am here, and here I will stay’. After that he returned to Algeria and finally served in the Italian campaign of 1859, playing a leading role in the Battle of Magenta. In 1864 he was appointed governor-general of Algeria, a position that came with the not inconsiderable income of 45 million francs a year.¹ On 12 July 1870 he set sail from Algiers and upon arriving in Strasbourg eleven days later, he assumed command of the First Army Corps.

[fig. 113]

François Achille Bazaine (1811-88) was born in Versailles. The son of an engineer, he nonetheless failed the entrance examination for the École Polytechnique and joined the army as a common soldier. He carved out a remarkable career for a man with no educational background, becoming a colonel

by thirty-nine years of age and a general at forty. He had fought hard for these distinctions, first in the guerrilla wars in Algeria, and later in the Crimean War. He had also been wounded in the notorious Battle of Solferino. Bazaine played a tragic leading role in Napoleon III's Mexican adventure. Commanding the French forces there, he defeated the Mexicans and seized Mexico City, after which he married a wealthy local girl who was only seventeen years old, took up residence in a palace and was made a marshal of France. However, the adventure ended badly and Napoleon ordered Bazaine to bring his troops home. The general was rewarded for his efforts with a fine castle, but behind his back the emperor blamed him for the Mexican fiasco, a reproach for which Bazaine would never forgive him. When war broke out in 1870, he was placed in command of the Third Army Corps of the Rhine Army. But he would remain an embittered man.²

It had already become clear that Napoleon's many talents did not include an aptitude for commanding armies on the battlefield. On 28 July he arrived in Metz, together with his 14-year-old son, the Prince Impérial, and took up position at the head of his armies. He was supported by his wife, the empress Eugénie, whom he appointed regent in his absence. This was to prove a major error of judgement. Her last words on bidding him farewell were, 'Louis, do your duty!' But Napoleon's frail state of health alone made this almost impossible. He suffered unbearable pain from a stone in his bladder, was virtually incontinent and could scarcely mount a horse.³

France was widely expected to take the initiative and invade Germany. To the astonishment of many, however, the French invasion failed to materialise: why should one declare war, the French apparently reasoned, if one's own troops were not ready? Their slow mobilisation gave Moltke the opportunity to deploy his own armies and to move them off by train. Even so, the first victory went to the French, when Napoleon took Saarbrücken on 2 August. This was to prove a solitary triumph, however. On 4 August the French troops were surprised and overwhelmed at Wissembourg. The next day, MacMahon massed his troops on the hills near Froeschwiller. The next day witnessed the Battle of Wörth (known

by the Germans as the Battle of Froeschwiller), which was not ordered by either MacMahon or the German commander-in-chief but arose from a spontaneous initiative on the part of their subordinates. Still, the commanding officers were powerless to reverse the decision, and at the end of the day the Germans seized Froeschwiller and MacMahon ordered his troops to retreat. The fighting had taken a heavy toll, with some 10,000 lives lost on each side. That same day of 6 August witnessed another battle in a very different theatre of war, near Forbach-Spicheren on the Prussian border. This too was the scene of fierce fighting and although the Prussians suffered heavy losses, the French again retreated and Forbach was taken by the Prussian troops. The way was now open for them to advance towards Metz.

Napoleon had planned to launch an offensive on 7 August, but when he heard the news of MacMahon's defeat and the retreat at Froeschwiller, he immediately changed his mind and ordered his troops to retreat to Châlons. He himself collapsed: 'I am suffering too much, I cannot go on, let me be!' he cried.⁴ On 12 August he placed Bazaine in command. Now it was Lebœuf who was out in the cold. The situation soon deteriorated for the French. In the battles of Gravelotte and Saint-Privat on 18 August the Germans suffered heavy losses, but Bazaine did not seize the opportunity to build on these successes and to turn them into a decisive victory. His army retreated to Metz, where it soon found itself surrounded. The king of Prussia and Bismarck followed the German advance closely. On 16 August they arrived in Pont-à-Mousson. By now, the French were in a state of panic. Bismarck wrote to his wife that when old women heard his name, they fell to their knees begging him to spare their lives. 'Compared to me, Attila was a lamb' he concluded.⁵

On 14 August, Napoleon left Bazaine behind in Metz, urging him to advance to Verdun as soon as possible. This would never happen. Bazaine stayed in Metz, and his large force played no further part in the war. For this conduct he was later charged with treason and sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. MacMahon, who had arrived in Châlons and wanted to retreat to Reims, was now appointed commander-in-chief of the French forces, Bazaine being out of reach, and ordered

to come to Bazaine's aid. This act of desperation took him to Sedan, where he and his troops were joined by Napoleon. It was there that the French would suffer the greatest defeat of the war. Just as Verdun would come to symbolise French fortitude in the war of 1914-18, Sedan would go down in history as the symbol of French defeat. Emile Zola devoted a novel to the event, aptly entitled *La débâcle*.

Sedan

Sedan is a small fortified city on the river Meuse. MacMahon did not plan to engage the enemy there, merely to allow his exhausted troops a brief respite. But they were not given a chance to rest. By 31 August they found themselves completely surrounded. About 100,000 Prussian soldiers had taken up position in the hills around Sedan. Moltke, arriving to inspect the situation together with the king of Prussia, declared in satisfaction: 'They're in a mouse-trap.' The French general Ducrot used a rather more colourful metaphor: 'We're in a chamber-pot, and we're going to be s__ on.'⁶ Hostilities broke out on 1 September. MacMahon himself was already badly wounded at 5 a.m. while on a reconnaissance mission. A little earlier, at 4 a.m., Bavarian troops had attacked the nearby village of Bazeilles, which was being defended by France's best troops, the marine corps. The house in which they made their last stand, dubbed 'La Maison de la Dernière Cartouche', is one of France's few glorious memorials to Sedan. Today it houses a small museum.

The other moment of glory belonged to General Margueritte's cavalry. Although the cavalry was clearly outmoded as an instrument of war, it still existed and was therefore deployed in battle. General Margueritte himself was shot in the jaw in the first reconnaissance mission, and his troops cried out for revenge. The cavalrymen leapt onto their horses and rode straight into the Prussian front lines, where they were mown down by Prussian fire. That did not prevent them from launching another sortie. When General Ducrot asked if they wanted to try again, their commanding officer replied, 'As often as you wish, general, as long as one of us is still standing'. The drama was thus played out to the end.⁷

The cavalry charges were watched from Frénois, which provided a fine vantage point, by a large Prussian contingent: the King, Bismarck, Von Roon, Moltke and their staffs, as well as numerous German princes and princelings, the rulers of Bavaria, Württemberg, Schleswig-Holstein, Saxony-Coburg and Saxony-Weimar and many more territories besides. They all enjoyed the spectacle, along with foreign observers from Russia and England, the American general Sheridan – and of course the press. The Prussian king was so moved by the courage of the French cavalymen that he exclaimed spontaneously, in French, ‘Ah! les braves gens!’.

Noble and courageous though they were, their efforts, like the rest of the French resistance, were to no avail. Under a ceaseless barrage of firepower, the French troops were eventually driven out of the woods and hills surrounding Sedan. The artillery played a decisive role. A total of 540 German cannons held the French army in an iron stranglehold. That same evening, Moltke saw the white flag being hoisted above the fortress of Sedan. A Prussian officer was sent to gather information. He returned with a general of the imperial staff who bore Napoleon’s famous message to the king of Prussia:

‘Monsieur mon frère,
N’ayant pas pu mourir au milieu de mes troupes, il ne me reste qu’à
remettre mon épée entre les mains de Votre Majesté. Je suis de votre
Majesté le bon frère.
Napoléon’

[‘My dear brother, Having been unable to die in the midst of my troops, it only remains for me to place my sword in Your Majesty’s hands. I am Your Majesty’s good brother.’]

Bismarck and the king studied the letter and Bismarck dictated the following reply:

‘My dear brother, I regret the circumstances in which we meet, accept Your Majesty’s sword, and ask you to authorise one of your officers to prepare the capitulation of your army, which has fought so bravely. I have designated General von Moltke to perform the arrangements on this side.’

The German troops offered thanks to the Almighty for their great victory, and crowded around the campfires in their bivouacs that evening, singing the old hymn, ‘Nun danket alle Gott’.

The French officer assigned the thankless task of negotiating the capitulation with Bismarck and Moltke, while the scope for negotiation was negligible, was General Wimffen. He understandably urged the Prussian victors to practise generosity, but Bismarck, who had indeed been generous in his treatment of the Austrian troops he had vanquished in 1866, saw the French as a very different kettle of fish. In his view, France was a nation of jealous, impetuous men who could not be relied upon, and who had fought German armies thirty times over the previous two centuries.

Wimffen argued that the situation had changed. Thanks to the prosperity of the Second Empire, he claimed, the French were now only interested in money, business and art. But Bismarck was not inclined to accept this materialistic view of history. The French had no option but to accept the Prussian conditions. They signed the conditions of the truce at 11.30 a.m. on 2 September: the vanquished troops were taken as prisoners-of-war and Sedan was surrendered to the Prussian army.

The French dead and wounded numbered 13,000 men. To the existing 21,000 prisoners-of-war were added about 75,000 more. France’s Second Army Corps no longer existed, and the First Corps was still hemmed in at Metz. On 3 September, Napoleon himself became a prisoner-of-war. He was taken to the palace of Wilhelmshöhe near Kassel, once the royal residence of his uncle Jérôme as king of Westphalia. Moltke and Bismarck were not pleased at this outcome. They had hoped to be able to rapidly conclude a peace treaty with Napoleon, and this hope now evaporated. They foresaw the fall of the empire, and feared that from its ashes would rise a more popular and more combative regime, in the form of a republic. They were right.

[excerpt 2, from ‘The Vietnam War’]

Dien Bien Phu

Dien Bien Phu is one of the great landmarks in French military history. It is a true *lieu de mémoire*, but one steeped in ambivalence. For Dien Bien Phu combined elements of Sedan and Verdun. It resembled Verdun, in that it was the story of an indomitable, heroic resistance. And it resembled Sedan in the collapse of that resistance: Dien Bien Phu was to become one of the most resounding defeats in French history, and one that moreover directly precipitated France’s retreat from Vietnam.

Dien Bien Phu sounds like a place-name, but in fact it is simply a phrase meaning ‘big frontier administrative centre’. It lay in a valley in northwest Vietnam, very close to the border with Laos and some 200 miles from the capital city, Hanoi. The roughly one hundred villages and hamlets nestling in this valley had a total population of about 10,000 to 15,000, who were classified as ethnic Thai. At first sight it seems baffling that the biggest battle in France’s Vietnam War should have been played out in such a remote region, and more baffling still that the French generals should have resolved to deal a decisive blow to the Viet Minh in a valley in which their troops could be surrounded by the enemy without the existence of any lines of communication with the remainder of the French forces. These mysteries can be explained by looking at the strategy that had been conceived by the French high command.

De Lattre was succeeded in January 1952 by his second-in-command, General Salan. Salan, born in 1899, had begun his military career with the colonial infantry, had moved on to Saint-Cyr and served in Indochina three times between the First and Second World Wars. He thus became an authority on Asia, a field of expertise that also stood him in good stead after the war. Before taking over from De Lattre as commander-in-chief in Indochina, he had already served there three times. His last term as commander-in-chief in Vietnam was not very successful,

however. He disgraced himself by passing on the conclusions of a confidential report on the situation in Indochina to the weekly paper *L'Express*.

Salan was succeeded by a new commander-in-chief, General Henri Navarre, who arrived in Saigon on 19 May 1953 and was placed in supreme command over the French expeditionary force. In this position he was responsible for the overall pursuit of the war in Indochina. Unlike the warm-blooded, theatrical De Lattre and the inscrutable 'Chinese' general Salan, Navarre was a reserved, intellectual man. His cool and calculating approach had propelled him to the peak of his career.

Navarre was the son of a Professor of Greek at the University of Toulouse. He was admitted to Saint-Cyr military academy in 1916, and was just in time to serve in the First World War. After that he served in the French mandate territory of Syria, and subsequently in Morocco, in the final phase of the 'pacification'. He worked for French military intelligence for many years, mainly in Algeria, and after the war he alternately worked at army headquarters and commanded troops in the field. When he became commander-in-chief of the operations in the Far East in 1953, he was 54 years old and had risen to the rank of lieutenant-general. He had never served in Asia before. He appointed General Bodet as his deputy and General Gambiez as chief of staff. But the most senior commanding officer below him was not in Saigon but Hanoi. This was General Cogne, commander of the land forces in North Vietnam. Cogne commanded some 120,000 French and Vietnamese troops and was in charge of the fight against General Giap's people's army.

General Navarre's assignment was not to win the war but to arrange for an honourable retreat on terms favourable to France. He adopted the position that the French must retain what they called 'the delta', the mouth of the Red River, more precisely, the triangle south of the line linking the capital city of Hanoi with the major port of Haiphong. He also attached much importance to expanding Vietnam's share in the armed forces. This would take time, and meanwhile a defensive strategy would have to be pursued.

Another objective was to prevent Giap from advancing into Laos and expanding the communist influence there. To do this, it was essential to put pressure on Giap's communications network, which could be done by setting up a base in the western highlands of North Vietnam from which Giap's troops could be bombarded. Since there were no regular overland communication lines, the idea arose that this would have to be a land-air base – that is, a base with one or more airstrips making it possible to fly in reinforcements and supplies for the troops on the ground. This base could also be used to support the Thai partisans who were fighting the Viet Minh.

The best place for this land-air base, according to the conclusions of an investigative report, was the valley of Dien Bien Phu. Eleven miles long, it could accommodate two airstrips. However, the valley was surrounded by hills from which enemy forces would be able to bombard the camp. In a strategic sense, it was therefore a strange place to set up a garrison. But the French generals were confident that their superior artillery could prevail over Giap's. The plan was based on the belief that Giap would not want his rear flank threatened by such a strong French camp and would therefore be provoked into attacking it. He would thus be unable to deploy his favoured guerrilla tactics, and the attack would culminate instead in a regular battle. In this battle, the French army would be able to prove its superiority and strike a devastating blow at Giap's army, paving the way for France to secure an honourable peace. On 2 November 1953 orders were issued to mount a paramilitary operation to occupy Dien Bien Phu. The operation was given the code name 'Castor'.

Operation Castor

The first paratroopers landed at Dien Bien Phu in the early morning of Friday, 20 November 1953. They were flown in by 65 Dakotas, each one with 24 men on board, totalling 1,560 men – two battalions. Others were flown in on transport planes, and more would swiftly follow. By the end of February 1954, the French had 10,000 troops in Dien Bien Phu. Besides paratroopers there were infantry, cavalry, artillery and engineering units, as well as intelligence services and

signals, supplies, police and medical services. There were French, North African and West African units, not to mention the Foreign Legion. The majority of troops, however, were Vietnamese. Of the troops killed on the French side in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, more were Vietnamese than French.⁸ The commander of this force, which had been given the name of Groupe Opérationnel Nord-Ouest, or GONO, was Colonel Christian Marie Ferdinand de la Croix de Castries.

General De Castries

De Castries was 51 years of age and came from one of France's most prominent aristocratic and military families, one that had produced nine generals, an admiral and a marshal of France. Yet Christian de Castries (1902-90) opted to pursue a different path. He did not attend military academy, and immediately after the First World War he enlisted in the cavalry as a common soldier. He was promoted to the rank of sergeant, after which he was selected as a candidate to be trained as an officer at the cavalry school in Saumur. This move precipitated De Castries into a life of some considerable luxury, in which he took part in horse-races, became an amateur pilot, ran up debts and made several amorous conquests. In the Second World War he maintained a heroic stand against a superior German force, in the course of which he was wounded and taken prisoner. He made numerous escape attempts, the fifth of which, through a tunnel in 1941, was successful. After a dangerous trip through Germany, France and Spain, he reached the Free French Forces in London. From there he took part in the Allied campaigns in Italy and Germany. Immediately after the war he went to Indochina, where he was decorated on several occasions. At one point he drove over a mine and both his legs were crushed. After that he walked with the aid of a stick. Following a period of convalescence, he served at the Allied headquarters, but then volunteered to serve another term in Vietnam. In short, he was a well-respected, experienced and courageous fighting soldier, and with his tall stature, silvery-grey hair, bushy eyebrows and hooked nose, he looked every bit the part. For General Navarre he seemed the ideal man to place in command of Dien Bien Phu, but events were to prove otherwise.

Giap

General Vo Nguyen Giap was the leader of the other camp. He too was a man of great military experience. Giap was born as the son of a low-ranking mandarin, in or around 1912. He attended secondary school in Hué and went on to study in Hanoi. He became politically active early on, and had already served three years in prison before graduating in law. So his name was known to the French authorities, but when the Indochinese Communist Party was banned in 1939 he evaded prosecution by fleeing to China. There he joined Ho Chi Minh and became a military specialist. He attended the Red Army's school of guerrilla warfare and pored over the writings of Mao Zedong. He followed the Chinese example of the revolutionary war, penetrated the Vietnamese frontier during the war there and set up a clandestine group of party officials. By the end of 1943 he had a force of several hundred trained men and women at his disposal. In 1944 a secret army was formed. After Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence in 1945 he played a key role in the Viet Minh, primarily as a military expert.

Giap, who had by then gained a great deal of experience with guerrilla warfare, was initially at a loss to decide what the French were planning with their Operation Castor. Was it a temporary movement of troops or a permanent occupation? It soon became clear that the latter was intended. He had to decide how to respond. Should he risk deploying his forces in a battle against this strong French force? How many troops would he need? How could they be transported and supplied? Giap's main bases were about 300 miles from Dien Bien Phu. To mount a successful attack, he might need as many as 50,000 men. Good artillery, too, was essential. This too would have to be transported over immense distances across a territory without any roads. Meanwhile, the advancing Viet Minh troops would constantly be exposed to attack by the French air force, which ruled the skies. All these factors magnified the risks inherent in a large-scale attack on Dien Bien Phu, but Giap was in much the same situation as Navarre. With the negotiations in Geneva looming, a military success could decisively influence the

results of the conference. It was this consideration, weighing heavily on both sides, that invested the Battle of Dien Bien Phu with unique significance.

The advance

The advance of the Viet Minh troops to Dien Bien Phu is one of the great stories of military history. There were scarcely any roads, the Viet Minh had virtually no means of transport, and there was an ever-present danger of air raids. The troops had to take everything they needed with them. They would require field artillery, anti-aircraft artillery, shells and ammunition in Dien Bien Phu. In part of North Vietnam they would be able to use Russian trucks, but these too were vulnerable to attack from the air. This made alternative modes of transport essential.

Sometimes it was possible to travel by water, but the majority of the materiel had to be carried by hand. Two men could carry a wheel and four the rest of each 75 mm cannon. Rice was transported by bicycle, almost a hundred kilos per bike. An estimated 50,000 to 75,000 coolies were involved in this work – twice the number of fighting soldiers. Many lives were lost along the way, from causes ranging from disease and snake-bites to marauding tigers, accidents or simple exhaustion.

By January 1954, the French garrison was hemmed in on all sides. Giap's artillery was positioned in bunkers concealed in the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu. His army had dug tunnels at right-angles to the entrance, making the cannons invisible and invulnerable to attack. They were moved back into these hiding-places after use, placing them out of range of counter-fire. Ammunition stockpiles and commando and observation posts were also installed. These were well camouflaged and impossible to detect from the air. The strength and sheer size of Giap's artillery was the big surprise at Dien Bien Phu: forty cannons, fifty mortars and sixty other pieces of artillery were arrayed around the French camp. This meant that in artillery – and more emphatically still in infantry – Giap's army had the upper hand. In total, the ratio of Vietnamese to French troops was approximately five to one, but in terms of fighting men who could be deployed in an attack, the number was lower, at around three to one. The rest of the Vietnamese were auxiliary troops.

The garrison

The French garrison in Dien Bien Phu was an impressive spectacle. At the centre, near the upper airstrip, was Colonel De Castries's headquarters. Nearby were the military hospital, the munitions depot, workshops and the graveyard. The engineering corps needed a large number of reinforcements. Defensive positions had been set up in the hills around the camp. These all bore women's names. The northernmost camp was called Gabrielle, while the southernmost one was Isabelle. In the west were Anne-Marie, Huguette and Claudine, while Béatrice, Dominique and Eliane were in the east. It was said that they were named after the rather numerous mistresses of a former general.

The garrison had everything it needed. It had a bakery and a supermarket, cold storage and a slaughterhouse. The officers ate extremely well, and had good wine and spirits at their disposal. In mid-January the facilities were further enhanced by the arrival of a mobile field brothel or 'bmc' ('Bordel Mobile de Campagne'), staffed by Vietnamese prostitutes. A second 'bmc' was added later, with North African women, ensuring that all tastes were catered for. The camp became a tourist attraction. High-ranking officers, politicians, and other prominent individuals, including Graham Greene, author of the famous book *The Quiet American*, came to visit. They were given a grand reception. High-ranking guests found themselves attended by a Foreign Legion guard of honour, in full regalia with white kepis and decorations, and were driven around the camp by De Castries himself. They visited the military positions and were invited to stay for a lavish lunch with first-class wine before being flown back to Hanoi.

The Battle

The long-anticipated battle finally began on 13 March 1954. Each of the Viet Minh attacks started with artillery fire in the late afternoon: early enough to benefit from daylight and late enough to make it impossible for the French to carry out air raids. The first assault targeted the northern fortifications, Béatrice and Gabrielle, while the central camp and other positions were shelled at the same

time. A new shell landed every second. Béatrice and Gabrielle were in the most isolated locations and were closest to the Viet Minh communication lines. Each devastating barrage of artillery fire was followed by an attack by the infantry. The Viet Minh had already dug trenches before the battle began. The foremost trenches were located close to the French defence positions, so that the attacking troops were close by, sometimes only a few dozen metres away from the barbed wire barricades. The positions Béatrice and Gabrielle fell on 14 March, with the loss of hundreds of French soldiers. Colonel Piroth, who was responsible for the defeat of the French artillery, committed suicide the following day. The Vietnamese forces attacked the positions with vastly superior strength (between ten and twenty times as many troops) and suffered far greater losses than the French. Giap lost so many soldiers that he was compelled to call for a cease-fire. This intermission lasted until 30 March, during which time both sides brought in reinforcements. Between 13 and 27 March the French were able to fly out some of their wounded – there were five hundred in the field hospital – but after that the airstrip could no longer be used.

Once both airstrips had been put out of action, the only way for French reinforcements and materiel to be brought in was by parachute. Large numbers of men volunteered for the task, many of whom had never jumped before. Their first jump was over Dien Bien Phu. It was frequently their last. The enthusiasm to jump grew to such heights that the French had too few parachutes and were again glad to accept the help of their American allies. As many as 60,000 parachutes were flown in from Japan and the Philippines within just a few hours.

At the end of March the attack was renewed, and a week later different positions were attacked. By this time, the area occupied by the base had been halved. The hostilities continued throughout the month of April, with the Viet Minh troops moving their trenches ever closer to the main camp of the French, and all De Castries's positions coming under constant attack. It was a war of attrition. The garrison faced an increasingly bleak outlook. Even so, right up to the end, French troops kept parachuting in over Dien Bien Phu, heading for

certain death, injury or captivity. Several possible solutions were considered, one of which involved a French relief force to advance over land from Laos. This plan was discarded. Another solution was to request American air support. This did not materialise, largely because of the opposition of Senator Lyndon Johnson, who would later, as president, have far fewer qualms about attacking from the air. At one point nuclear weapons were even considered, referred to in Franco-American consultations by the seasonal code name of ‘Easter eggs’.⁹ This option was fortunately rejected, and it is certainly hard to see how a nuclear attack could have harmed the Viet Minh without destroying the French troops as well. The air force, on which the French had pinned all their hopes and the power of which had been the basis for the entire concept of the land-air base, proved completely ineffective, partly because of the poor weather.

The increasingly dramatic situation in the besieged camp was reported daily by the international press. French public opinion, which had previously taken no more than a passing interest in Indochina, was now riveted by ‘the heroes of Dien Bien Phu’: the Duc de Castries, by then been promoted to the rank of brigadier-general – his general’s stars were delivered by parachute – as well as Colonel Langlais, the indomitable organiser of the defensive actions, who was effectively in charge of the French operations, and the tireless medical staff. Dr Grauwin was to be seen bending over the operating table at all hours of the day and night, with bared torso and a cigarette drooping from his mouth, mainly performing amputations. Such a mountain of amputated limbs had accumulated that no one knew what to do with them. Then there was the legendary aristocratic nurse Geneviève de Galard, just twenty-eight years of age, who soon became known as ‘the angel of Dien Bien Phu’, comforter of the hundreds of wounded, amputees and dying men. An unreal atmosphere had descended over the ghostly camp. While every day brought more dead and the dwindling army of survivors could scarcely stand on their feet from exhaustion, insomnia and shock, Geneviève de Galard was awarded the Légion d’honneur on 29 April, and the following day the Foreign Legion staged its annual commemorative celebrations.

In the latter half of April, the number of French victims rose to almost a hundred a day, with fifty new troops parachuting into the camp daily as reinforcements. The Viet Minh lost about half of its men in this period, and the morale of their troops – understandably in the face of such appalling losses – had sunk to an all-time low. Giap therefore decided to wait some time before launching what must be the final, decisive assault. The Geneva Conference was due to start on 26 April 1954, and he would have preferred to attack before then, but he did not feel confident enough of victory.

In the event, the final offensive was launched on 1 May. The last of the positions around the central camp were seized by Giap's troops. The French were staring certain defeat in the face, and the only possible course of action seemed to be for those soldiers who were still fit to attempt to break out of the camp, leaving the dead and wounded behind. But even this option proved impossible, and they were forced to simply wait for the final assault. When it came, on 7 May, De Castries decided to capitulate in the course of the afternoon. But his superior in Hanoi, General Cogy, would not allow anything so explicit. 'No capitulation and no white flag', were the orders. De Castries was given permission to stop firing at the enemy but not to formally capitulate. For this, averred the general, 'too much had been achieved'.¹⁰ The end came just after 5.30 p.m. General De Castries was taken prisoner, the first and only French general ever to fall into the hands of the Viet Minh. The battle was over, but the huge loss of life was yet to come.

When the camp fell on 7 May, there were over 10,000 French troops in Dien Bien Phu. Of the 1,500 who were badly wounded, the French were allowed to evacuate about half (roughly 800 men). Another 9,000 prisoners-of-war were removed, about one-third of whom were sick or wounded and therefore scarcely had any chance of survival. These 9,000 men were taken to the prisoner-of-war camps that the Viet Minh had set up. The nearest was over 300 miles from Dien Bien Phu, while the other one was about 500 miles away. The journey was undertaken on foot. There was scarcely any water, and food rations were scarce. There was no need to guard the prisoners, since their chances of survival in the

jungle were even poorer than while marching or in the camps. The death rate in the camps too was high, not so much through acts of cruelty as from disease, exhaustion and malnutrition. In total only 3,900 men returned; less than half had survived the journey and captivity.

¹ Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*, 25.

² Ibid. 70.

³ Milza, *Napoléon III*, 587.

⁴ Roth, *Guerre*, 70.

⁵ Roth, *Guerre*, 65.

⁶ Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, 207-208.

⁷ Ibid. 216.

⁸ Windrow, *Last Valley*, 333.

⁹ Jean Lacouture, 'Dien Bien Phu', *Études sur la France*, Paris: Seuil, 1985, p. 241.

¹⁰ Windrow, *Last Valley*, 615.