ERIC MARGOLIS

Fateful battle

On the afternoon of May 7, 1954, an elite unit of Vietnamese sappers raised the flag of the communist Vietminh over the ruins of the last remaining French strong point in the fog-shrouded valley of Dien Bien Phu. The victorious peasant army of Gen. Vo Nugyen Giap had changed the course of 20th-century history.

Thirty years and a second Indochinese war have elapsed since that fateful day: France's futile struggle to retain its Indochinese empire now seems lost in remote antiquity. Yet today, the effects of this great battle are still being felt.

In 1953, after five years of fighting, the French High Command in Hanoi concluded that Ho Chi Minh's communist forces were close to victory unless the war could be reversed by a dramatic coup. Accordingly, the French decided to parachute 10,000 troops into the valley crossroads of Dien Bien Phu, 170 mountainous miles northwest of Hanoi.

The long, narrow valley, shaped, ironically, like a frying pan, controlled the Vietminh's supply lines from China into Annam and Laos. The Vietminh would be forced to fight to reopen its supply lines, at an impossible 500 miles distance across mountains and jungles from its logistics base in China. The Vietminh, unable to transport artillery or ammunition across such terrain, would be pinned down by French ground troops and shattered by air attacks.

In March, 1953, the French dug into the valley, creating a chain of strong points with names like "Dominique" and "Huguette." The garrison of Dien Bien Phu was composed of some of France's finest units: Foreign Legionnaires, paratroopers and colonial battalions from Vietnam and North Africa. They had only four surgeons, but possessed ample supplies that included 49,000 bottles of wine and a mobile field bordello.

Responding with stunning speed, Gen. Giap force-marched 30,000 troops at 20 miles per day across the mountains, quickly encircling the low-lying French positions. With superhuman tenacity, an army of 20,000 Vietnamese peasants hewed trails through the jungle uplands. Bicycles were used to transport rice and ammunition, each one carrying as much as 450 lbs. Soldiers and peasants alike lived on rainwater and one or two bowls of rice a day.

Incredibly, 200 medium guns were hauled 500 miles across the mountains; for the final 200 miles of this epic trek, they were disassembled and carried on bicycles or on the backs of coolies. Emplaced in caves above the valley at Dien Bien Phu, they proved invulnerable to French air strikes or to counter-battery fire.

On the morning of March 12, Vietminh artillery opened deadly plunging fire on the enemy forces below, delivering a monstrous surprise to the French and causing the garrison's artillery commander, who had scoffed at the threat of enemy guns, to commit suicide.

Suicidal human-wave attacks

Over the ensuing three weeks, one French strong point after another was crushed by enemy shelling and then overrun by suicidal human-wave attacks. Fog and clouds often shrouded the valley, limited French air support. In a desperate move to save the garrison, 5,000 more elite paratroopers were dropped into the fortress.

Neither reinforcements nor air strikes prevented the Vietminh from sapping up to the French lines by digging a 100-mile long maze of trenches. Ferocious hand-to-hand fighting continued day and night.

The French fought like tigers; but Gen. Giap's troops, now superior by 3 to 1, fought like army ants, inexorably closing in on the last remaining strong points. Vietminh sappers threw themselves across barbed wire and cleared mines with their bodies.

Realizing that Dien Bien Phu was doomed, the French appealed to the U.S. for massive intervention. President Eisenhower briefly considered "Operation Vulture," which called for dropping three small atomic weapons on the besiegers. But strong opposition from Britain and the U.S. Congress — led, ironically, by John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, both of whom were later to send U.S. troops into Vietnam — caused the plan to be abandoned.

As Vietminh troops stormed the French command bunker at Dien Bien Phu, the radio operator ended his last message with "We have done our duty, vive la France." Then the radio fell silent. In France, thousands wept openly in the streets. Fifteen thousand French troops were dead, held prisoner or missing in the bloody cauldron of Dien Bien Phu.

The first Indochinese war was over. Two months later a ceasefire was signed at Geneva: North Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were created out of the wreckage of French Indochina.

Dien Bien Phu electrified the world and proved the death knell for what remained of the French and British colonial empires; it ignited a train of nationalism that led to the emergence of independent nations in Asia and Africa. This battle, along with the Suez fiasco three years later, marked the end of France and Britain as world powers.

From this great mountain battle came the second Vietnamese war, the unification of Vietnam, and America's first military defeat. The after-effects of this victory are evident today as Vietnam consolidates its hold over Laos and Cambodia.

We cannot help but admire the indomitable courage of the Vietnamese soldiers and the brilliance of its generals. Their victory has made Vietnam into Asia's second power. As for the French, the journalist Robert Guillain wrote their epitaph: "The only victory that remains is the victory of our honor."

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)