

# The Attack of a Division Command Post by Vietminh Forces

## The Thai Binh Night (3 December 1953)

**A**s soon as General Navarre assumed command, in Indochina, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 1953, he initiated a series of inspections of the territories and forces under his command. The inspection report, submitted to government authorities for approval, is now known as the “Plan Navarre”<sup>1</sup>. This plan that was characterized by a cautious approach attitude aimed at containing the Vietminh battle forces during the 1953-1954 campaign - that corresponded to the dry season -, its objective was, in the Tonkin province, to protect the Delta and to preserve it from any worsening of the situation while opposing any action in force by the Vietminh. It is only during the following campaign, 1954 - 1955, that the commander in chief intended to conduct an offensive operation aiming at destroying the enemy’s battle forces.

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### The “Mouette” Operation (October-November 1953)

In order to be able to oppose any intrusion in force of the Vietminh in the Delta, French military authorities had to locally create a favorable or at least balanced forces ratio. **Since 1950 the basic maneuver unit had not been changed**; it was the “mobile maneuver group<sup>4</sup>” (GM), i.e. a unit gathering a command post, a light signal company, three infantry battalions, and a mortar company<sup>5</sup>. The threat presented by the Vietminh’s battle corps corresponded in 1953 to the engagement of one or several divisions. It was thus imperative **that General Navarre reorganized his own forces** by creating, out of the expeditionary corps units, one or several of these combat echelons. This was the Saigon staff’s objective: **as of the fall of 1953, two divisional size echelons** were operational in the Tonkin province: they regrouped four mobile maneuver groups (GMs) controlled by a **strong command and control echelon**

comprised with a headquarters<sup>6</sup>, a divisional artillery commander, a HHQ company and a heavy signal company. The two first commanders of these “division echelons” were colonel de Castries and colonel Vanuxem<sup>7</sup>.

**By the end of August and early September, the enemy’s field organization** that was, up to then, widely spread across the Thai country and the High Plateaus region was reorganized in a tighter way by Giap **around the Delta with two major groupings**: one pressing from the north and the other from the south east; in the Delta itself, the enemy infiltrated several regular regiments on both sides of the Red River, east of Hanoi. There was no doubt for the land forces’ commander in North Viet Nam Cogne’s intelligence division that Giap’s intent was to isolate Hanoi from Haiphong, which would have constituted a mortal danger for the maintenance of the expeditionary corps’ lines of communication in the Tonkin province.

In order to counter that offensive, Cogne’s intent aimed at destroying the bases<sup>8</sup> of the enemy’s force of maneuver within the framework of a preemptive operation. **This was the origin of the “Mouette (i.e; Seagull)” operation that was to involve both divisional echelons (8GMs), 2 armored groups, 2 amphibious groups and important means from the general reserve.** Air support was provided by air assets deployed in the Gia Lam and Bach Mai bases, located at a 15 minutes flight from their zone of intervention.

**The French operation was launched on the 15 October, the very day when the Viet offensive was to start - French leadership was convinced of it - and it surprised entirely the Vietminh’s military authorities whose reactions were very incoherent.** General Gilles who commanded the operation<sup>9</sup> organized his maneuver with method and precision: departing from the Cho Ganh gap and controlling rapidly

# Lessons learned

the RP59 at Lai Cac, he ordered during the following weeks the Castries and Vanuxem divisions to conduct several raids into the jungle to destroy the Viet depots. In order to avoid being surprised and ambushed in that sort of terrain which is very favorable to that enemy course of action, he paid a careful attention to never engage his infantry or armored units beyond the efficient range of his artillery and air fire support which were remarkably coordinated and hit repeatedly the enemy's positions as soon as they were discovered. This method proved to be successful: **the Vietminh division 320 lost 1,081 KIA, 182 prisoners and 3,000 injured troops.**

**General Navarre's objective was achieved:** the divisions 320 and 304 were unable to conduct in depth infiltration operations in the Delta and, even more important, they were both put out of commission for about two months. On 6 and 7<sup>th</sup> November the operation "Mouette" was stopped, the units left the area and redeployed. General Gilles went rapidly to Hanoi to assume command of the airborne group in charge of the operation Castor<sup>40</sup>. Some of the units were reorganized and the divisions' headquarters were sent in R&R (rest and recreation) after several smaller size operations at the limits of the Delta.

## The attack of a division's command post

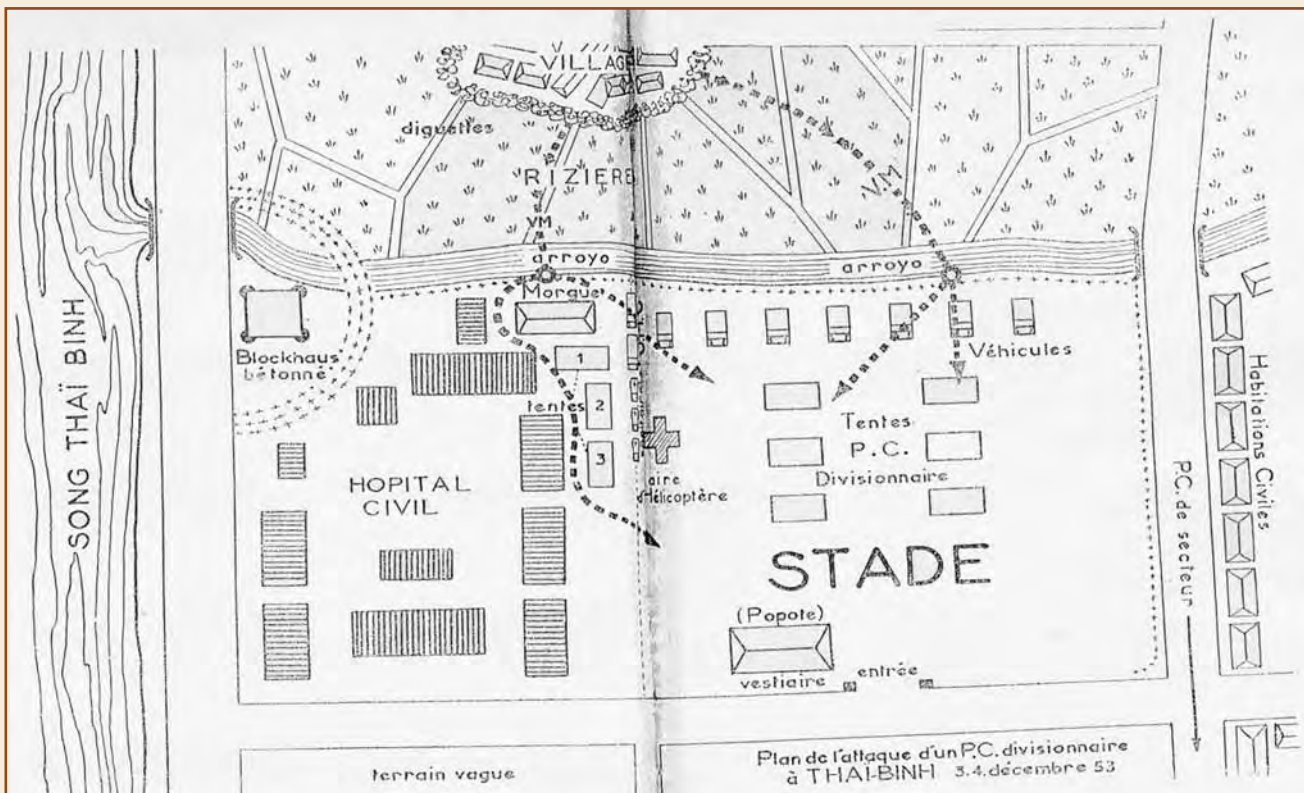
That's about at that time that, due to the lack of an efficient protection, the command post of the division commanded by colonel de Castries was inflicted what a military understatement would call a "problem". **The command post was in R&R in the Thai Binh region, close to Nam Dinh, without the commander and command group being present** - they had left to relieve general Gilles and to assume command of Dien Bien Phu on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. The provisional commander was Colonel Piroth<sup>41</sup>, the deputy for fire support. The various services and supporting units<sup>42</sup> were accommodated in town, in the middle of bazaars, restaurants, cafes and red light hotels and they were conducting "post operation rest and recreation activities".

All these troops were **totally intermingled with the population** that was however under the intelligence division's surveillance; on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December several "local fishermen", whose behavior was not very consistent with their assessed activity, had been arrested and jailed. Observers or enemy spies? As long as the locals were continuing to conduct what was supposed to be their usual activities, there was no need to bother them!

**On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, at about midnight**, when the last bridge or poker players had left the military mess, the attack started without any support from heavy weapons: **a Vietminh commando group infiltrated the position**, crossed the small river that flows into the Song Thai Binh (*see the figure*), neutralized the very few static sentries, burnt the vehicles, got closer to the tents where all soldiers and officers were sleeping and shot them.

**It was a total surprise.** Colonel Piroth had just the time to jump off its burning truck and was deprived from the ability to coordinate efficiently a response. The Vietminh soldiers caught the troops who were trying to get out of the tents, they attached them and took them away. The soldiers who had not been injured tried to flee individually out of the area that was under the Vietminh's fires. From the top of the watch tower of what had been a military post, a machine gun tried to shoot enfilade fire along the small river to block the withdrawing commando that was trying to join back its supporting element that was installed on the dykes, south of the village.

Following half an hour of a total mess, regroupings took place and emergency measures were taken. The military sector sent rapidly two companies supported by a few armored vehicles to control



the village whose chief had obviously disappeared. The medical doctor<sup>13</sup> organized the initial triage and started the interventions. **The toll was heavy: 20 KIA - 15 by fire arms, and 5 by knives and bayonets - 50 injured troops and 15 prisoners.**

## Lessons too easy to learn

### The command post's personnel had let themselves be totally surprised.

The CP was however comprised with experienced people with strong character which, on the top of it, had just ended a series of fruitful and even victorious operations. This demonstrates well that no unit, whatever might be its qualities and value, is exempt of that sort of "problem".

A mere temporary defensive mining of the river's well known crossing points would have allowed to either avoid the incident or at least to have more time to react. And as far as population control is concerned, this is a process that remains always uncertain, unless it is made systematic as it will be the case, later, during the Algerian conflict.

In addition, it is important to notice that the Vietminh commando that was well aware of the situation didn't attack the watch tower - a simple ad-hoc bamboo built building but with its basis being well protected with barbed wire network and mines. This shows that a simple physical protection dissuaded the assaulting party to attack.

And **last the choice to deploy the staff services within the population appears to be questionable, since it constituted a major vulnerability:** fully observable by the locals, anybody had the capability to freely forward to the local Vietminh authorities first quality target intelligence.

*1 To better understand this plan, one should read Georgette Elgey, in La République des contradictions Fayard 1968, pages 551 and following, where she published in annex entire report by an investigation committee on the Dien Bien Phu defeat - the committee was presided by general Catroux - the report starts with a detailed analysis of the "plan Navarre".*

- 2 Associated researcher at the joint forces historical center.*
- 3 Forces Employment Center/Command Structures division.*
- 4 To better understand the origin of these mobile maneuver groups, one should read Boyer de La Tour in Le martyre de l'armée française, de l'Indochine à l'Algérie Les Presses du Mail, 1962, page 173.*
- 5 The armored units were regrouped within six battalions (FR: régiments) and never dispatched within the mobile maneuver groups; they were kept as general reserve units.*
- 6 Built with the excess in personnel of the Saigon and Hanoi staffs.*
- 7 The choice of senior colonels, whatever might be their experience, to command these actual divisions (12 battalions), illustrates well the dramatic shortfall in general officers at the expeditionary corps level.*
- 8 These bases consisted of fortified villages or groups of villages within which were deployed important concealed depots of armament, ammunitions or various sorts of supplies.*
- 9 A junior brigadier general was thus commanding two divisions, several armored groups and had several air squadrons under OPCON which, once again illustrates the expeditionary corps' shortfalls.*
- 10 Taking over the Dien Bien Phu intersection that was the mandatory crossing point for any Vietminh attack in direction of the Laos.*
- 11 The future artillery commander of Dien Bien Phu, and who died tragically.*
- 12 Especially the Major Grauwins surgical field hospital. He published his souvenirs in J'étais médecin à Dien Bien Phu (France Empire 1954 page 159). This book provided most of the historical data to write the account of the attack of the divisional command post. The title of this article has even been borrowed to one of this book's chapters.*
- 13 Doctor Grauwins, a "true soldier", succeeded in getting out of his tent with the assistance of one of his local nurses.*

Local Vietminh had perfectly prepared the operation: **by attacking a command post**, which by nature has few combat means, **they perfectly knew that they were targeting a prime choice objective that constituted a weak link in the French organization.** It is always the weakest links - command posts, logistical deployments, communication facilities - that have to be protected the most.

And *last but not least*, even after a series of successful operations, military authorities should never release their attention and even though human organisms - physical and psychological - need phases of rest, this should never be understood as being a generalized liberation without any measure of protection.