

**THE UNITED STATES MILITARY ASSISTANCE ADVISORY GROUP IN
FRENCH INDOCHINA, 1950-1956**

A Thesis

by

NATHANIEL R. WEBER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2010

Major Subject: History

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

The United States Military Assistance Advisory Group in French Indochina, 1950-1956.

(December 2010)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Brian Linn

This thesis examines the American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) sent to French Indochina, from 1950 to 1956, when the United States provided major monetary and material aid to the French in their war against the communist Viet Minh. MAAG observed French units in the field and monitored the flow of American materiel into the region. Relying upon primary research in the National Archives, the thesis departs from previous interpretations by showing that MAAG held generally positive assessments of France's performance in Indochina. The thesis also argues that MAAG personnel were more interested in getting material support to the French, than in how that material was used, to the point of making unrealistic assessments of French combat abilities. By connecting primary research with the greater history of Cold War American military assistance, the thesis contributes to the scholarship on American involvement in Vietnam.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Linn, and my committee members, Dr. Dawson and Dr. Cerami, for their guidance throughout the course of this research. Thanks also go to the department faculty and staff for making my time at Texas A&M University a great experience. I am particularly appreciative of graduate advisors Dr. David Hudson and Dr. Julia Blackwelder, and History Department staff Anna McCardell, Barbara Dawson, Rita Walker, and Mary Johnson, for all the occasions they have made time to help me work through the logistics of graduate school.

Finally, thanks to my family, friends, and fiancé, Rainlilly Elizondo, for all their care and support.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In early 1952, a United States Army observer stationed in French Indochina wrote that before “August 1950, French Union Forces in Indo-China were poorly equipped. . . . Particularly lacking were motor vehicles, radios, artillery weapons, modern automatic weapons, combat vehicles, ammunition and spare parts.” But France’s military situation had improved greatly since those dark days, because the United States had delivered large quantities of war materiel to the French.¹ By 1952, the French not only drove American-made trucks and tanks, flew American aircraft, and fired American machine guns and howitzers, they wore American helmets and uniforms, ate American military rations, and drifted onto airborne drop-zones beneath American parachutes. France and its colonial possessions fought the war, but, post-1950, the United States subsidized their effort.²

This US Army observer belonged to the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), sent to Indochina in 1950 to monitor the use of, American military materiel

This thesis follows the style of *The Journal of Military History*.

¹ Field Estimate of Effectiveness of French Union Forces (hereafter Field Estimate), February 1952, box 1, Security Classified General Records 1950-1954 (hereafter SCGR), MAAG Adjutant General Division, Record Group 472, Records of the United States Forces in Southeast Asia (hereafter RG 472), National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA).

² George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 25. By 1953, the US footed 40 percent of France’s war bill in Indochina.

delivered to support France in its war against the communist-led Viet Minh. Increasing fear of communist expansion in Asia, especially after the detonation of a Soviet atomic weapon and then “fall” of China to Mao Zedong, had led the United States to reverse long-held policies of anti-colonialism. MAAG’s mission to the French was America’s first real foray into the complex and violent politics of the region, and represented one of many American advisory and assistance missions around the world, during those early years of the Cold War.

Though the historiography of US military assistance in general, and US relations with France during the French Indochina War, is significant, both subject areas often overlook the activities of MAAG in Indochina. Works on US military assistance during the Cold War, are quiet on MAAG-Indochina, usually focusing on either Korea or the post-French period of American Vietnam involvement. Robert Ramsey’s *Advising Indigenous Forces* deals with American activities early in the Vietnam War, but does not discuss the period of Franco-American interaction.³ *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control 1950-1969*, an Army publication from 1973, gave a cursory overview of MAAG’s operations during the French war.⁴ From the same series of works, *Training the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* spends little time in the period before France’s

³ Robert D. Ramsey III, *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006).

⁴ George S. Eckardt, *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control, 1950-1969* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1973).

1956 withdrawal.⁵ Essay collections are also vague. *Military Advising and Assistance: From Mercenaries to Privatization* covers, among other topics, US advisors to the Republic of Korea, Communist Chinese support of the Algerians in North Africa, and American Air Force advisors to the South Vietnamese, but does not mention the French experience.⁶ William H. Mott's two-part study of US military assistance abroad does not address American support of the French in the early 1950s, except to discuss US security policy in South East Asia.⁷

Of major relevance to this thesis is Chester J. Pach's *Arming the Free World*, which examines the origins of US military aid in the early years of the Cold War. Pach argues that US aid was influenced by fear of communist expansion around the world, and was done primarily to hold up the morale of allied countries under the threat of communist uprisings and/or invasions. This made the "giving of military aid more important than the specific purposes to which the aid was put."⁸ Furthermore, military aid was useful for "preparing for a possible war, securing customers for American armaments industries, checking the spread of Soviet influence, and cultivating foreign goodwill."⁹ Pach looks at military aid at the macro-level, studying overall American

⁵ James Lawton Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974).

⁶ Donald Stoker, ed., *Military Advising and Assistance: From Mercenaries to Privatization, 1815-2007* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 81-150.

⁷ William H. Mott, IV, *United States Military Assistance: An Operational Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 313-316, and *United States Military Assistance: An Empirical Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).

⁸ Chester J. Pach, *Arming the Free World* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 230.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

policy-making, but his work does not examine what this assistance missions looked like on the ground.

Historians of the Vietnam War and on Franco-American relations during the war have also pay limited attention to MAAG's efforts in Indochina, and have concluded that French hostility toward MAAG prevented effective cooperation. Mark Atwood Lawrence's *Assuming the Burden* examines American decisions support France in Indochina, but the actual role of MAAG, and the materiel it monitored, falls outside the book's focus, appearing only briefly in the conclusion.¹⁰ This alleged hostility came from the American insistence that the French increase the size of the Vietnamese army and the importance of its role—and, that France grant Vietnamese independence. From the American perspective, such steps would be the only way to defeat the popular forces behind the Viet Minh. From the French perspective, it would defeat their very purpose for fighting the war, the retention of Indochina as a colonial possession. As a visible reminder of American power and influence, MAAG thus received much of France's hostility toward the idea. Kathryn C. Statler argues that French interference and disorganization made MAAG's mission difficult.¹¹ George Herring accused the French

¹⁰ Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 276.

¹¹ Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 27. *French Indochina*, *Indochina*, and the Associated States all refer to the area controlled by France as a colony as a whole, ie, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. *Indochinese* refers to any individual indigenious to that region. *Vietnam* and *Vietnamese* refer specifically to members of that country. *French*, unless otherwise stated, refers to not only metropolitan French military units, but also to those Indochinese units allied to the French (ie, combat elements of the Associated States).

of “reducing MAAG to virtual impotence” by sending their requests for aid to higher echelons of American command and by doing all that they could in Vietnam to block American attempts at dealing directly with the Vietnamese.¹² Ronald Spector held that French restrictions on American movement, antiquated management processes, and obstinate behavior made MAAG’s mission difficult in the extreme. He also maintained that MAAG had poor opinions of the French.¹³ Both Herring and Statler cited Spector’s work as their source; Spector himself used interviews and State Department records to support his argument, but cited few MAAG documents.

A closer examination of MAAG documents from 1950 to 1956 paint a rather different picture. Overall, the reports state that the French maintained their US-provided equipment well, and, with some reservation, even praised France’s combat performance against the Viet Minh. US Army observers, though pleased with the fighting abilities of French army units, criticized the French for failing to train the Vietnamese and for lacking an offensive spirit. US Navy officers, though not as complimentary as those in the Army, contributed little to MAAG documents; this low volume could be attributed to both the small size of France’s navy in Indochina, as well as its “brown water” character. During this period, the US Navy struggled to establish a *raison d’être* in the atomic age, which did not involve the establishment of American riverine capabilities. The strongest disapproval came from the US Air Force personnel, who consistently found fault in the

¹² Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 19.

¹³ Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years: The U.S. Army in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History Publishing, 1983), 117-119.

French air force. They accused the French of poor logistical and maintenance practices, and for having limited combat value. These problems were largely due to the French air force's personnel shortages in Indochina (something to which USAF MAAG personnel admitted), as well as a lack of experience in large-scale aerial operations during World War II.

This thesis will examine the contents of these reports and show how MAAG's view of the French was not as critical as earlier historians have argued. It also provides a detailed look at the daily operations of an American military assistance and advisory mission during the early years of the Cold War. The scholarship lacks such a study, and the insights it provides on American perceptions of the French Indochina War, and how American anti-communism shaped MAAG's assessments of the fighting. Chapter II provides a background of the war in French Indochina, including an explanation as to how the United States became involved in the region. It draws on the large secondary literature available on the subject. After a summary of the remaining years of the war, continuing through the decisive Battle of Dien Bien Phu and France's complete withdrawal from Indochina in 1956, it discusses the overall structure of MAAG and the types of documents it produced. It also shows how, in the early 1950s, the US military's scholarly journals published few articles on the topics of unconventional warfare of the type seen in Indochina, military advisory missions, and the war in French Indochina.

Chapters III and IV describe MAAG's assessment of the French by looking at the opinions held by each of MAAG's branches, the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The chapters will explain the relevant French branch's organization and mission in

Indochina, before examining each MAAG branch's assessments of their French counterparts. Chapter III discusses the Army and its grading of France's ground forces in Indochina. Chapter IV discusses the same reviews made by Navy and Air Force of their French counterparts. Most of Chapter IV concerns itself with the Air Force, because the US Navy produced far fewer documents than both the Army and Air Force, making a detailed assessment of naval opinions difficult.

This thesis concludes with a summary of MAAG's overall view of the French position in Indochina, and show, according to its major published reports, that it was relatively neutral toward the French, and, if anything, maintained an optimistic outlook for France and Vietnam's war against communism. Though the Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel all shared similar hesitations about French capabilities, MAAG as a whole followed the mostly positive assessment held by the US Army, even to the point of disregarding negative evaluations of the French made in MAAG reports. This was likely because of several reasons: the French army's operations in Indochina were much larger than those of the air force and navy, and consumed a far greater portion of US-provided equipment, weapons, and supply, and because US Army personnel made up the majority of MAAG personnel in general, and all MAAG Chiefs were Army generals. Furthermore, the Army personnel's the positive assessments of the French most confirmed the optimistic aims of military aid during the early years of the Cold War. Thus, MAAG's assessments can be seen as more than evaluations of the French—they can also be read as affirmations of contemporary American military assistance policy.

CHAPTER II

THE FRENCH INDOCHINA WAR, THE UNITED STATES, AND MAAG

When the United States began to supply France with military aid in 1950, France had already been fighting a vicious colonial war in Indochina for almost four years. The American decision to support France had not been made lightly, and, in fact, opposed decades of professed American anti-colonialism and increasing diplomatic unease between France and the US since the former's rapid defeat in World War II. This chapter discusses how growing tensions between the United States and the communist powers—the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China—drove the US to support French military efforts in Indochina through the Mutual Defense Assistance Program and the Military Assistance Advisory Group. It also gives an overview of MAAG's activities in Indochina, outlining the unit's structure, mission, and shortcomings.

By the end of the 19th Century, thanks to a combination of treaties and invasions, France had conquered Laos, Cambodia, and the three regions now known as Vietnam—Cochinchina (in the south), Annam, and Tonkin (in the north). Together they comprised French Indochina. France's Southeast Asian colony was rich in rice and several types of ore; it also served as a symbolic and strategic counter to the Asian possessions of Great Britain and the Netherlands.¹⁴ After the wars to conquer the region, soldiers in the

¹⁴ Fredrik Logevall, *The Origins of the Vietnam War* (New York: Pearson Education, 2001), 7-8.

French army considered Indochina a choice assignment, with safe duty (relative to that in North Africa), plentiful women, and high pay.¹⁵ The French colonial administrators valued rice-producing Cochinchina the most, and land-locked, sparsely-populated Laos the least.¹⁶

A professed “liberal imperialism” drove the French colonial effort, concerned not only with gaining wealth and strategic position through the acquisition of colonies, but also “lifting up” the native peoples in those colonies.¹⁷ Despite official positions, this *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) was essentially “conservative and anti-revolutionary.”¹⁸ The French kept harsh control over Indochina; they kept Vietnamese out of leadership positions, except for a small number of French-educated elites (concentrated in the heavily populated and profitable Cochinchina). Imperial authorities ruthlessly hunted anti-French organizations.

These anti-French organizations proliferated in the first half of the twentieth century. A notion of Vietnamese nationalism provided the basis for most of these organizations, a centuries-old tradition of resisting outside invaders. However, a combination of Vietnamese north/south disunity, class conflict, and French action (imperial authorities imprisoned, executed, or exiled Vietnamese nationalists) rendered

¹⁵ Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 506-507.

¹⁶ Martin Stuart-Fox, “The French in Laos, 1887-1945,” *Modern Asian Studies* 29 (February 1995): 111.

¹⁷ J. Kim Munholland, “The French Response to the Vietnamese Nationalist Movement, 1905-14,” *The Journal of Modern History* 47, no. 1 (1975): 655.

¹⁸ Logevall, *The Origins of the Vietnam War*, 8, and Munholland, “The French Response,” 675.

these nationalist movements ineffective.¹⁹ Even the efforts of notable Vietnamese nationalists, like Phan Boi Chau, foundered as they failed to appeal to a broad enough base.²⁰ They needed firm, unifying leadership, and a broad appeal, and this came to them in the form of Ho Chi Minh. Though an ardent communist, Ho was also a dedicated Vietnamese nationalist.²¹ He began to coalesce many of these groups into a united, communist-led front, eventually known as the Viet Minh.²²

French counter-revolutionary efforts enjoyed continued success until the beginning of World War II. The Germans crushed the metropole in early 1940, leaving France's colonies to their own devices. French Indochina was quite vulnerable. French military planning had always left Indochina unprotected, hoping for Anglo-American help, or successful diplomatic action.²³ Neither form of help arrived.

When Japan demanded access to Indochina as a staging area in 1940, the colonial government capitulated to the Japanese, a move that crippled their image in the region. Initially, Japan interfered little with French control of the colony. By March 1945, however, with Japan's overall military position weakening and French leadership in

¹⁹ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 19.

²⁰ William J. Duiker, "Phan Boi Chau: Asian Revolutionary in a Changing World," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 31, (Nov 1971): 77. Phan's plan to "evict the French" paid little to attention to the lower classes.

²¹ Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7-28.

²² Herring, *America's Longest War*, 5.

²³ Martin Thomas, "At the Heart of Things? French Imperial Defense Planning in the Late 1930s," *French Historical Studies* 21 (Spring 1998): 333-334 and 351, and John F. Laffey, "French Far Eastern Policy in the 1930s," *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (1989), 149.

Indochina increasingly vocal and anti-Japanese, the Japanese overthrew the French government in Indochina and took direct control of the region.²⁴ Japan's seizure of control coincided with a severe famine in northern Vietnam, which provided numerous Vietnamese nationalist groups—including the Viet Minh—even more support against both the Japanese and the French.²⁵ Japan's surrender in September 1945 left a power vacuum in Vietnam, which Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh immediately filled. They centered their power in Tonkin, where they enjoyed widespread public support.²⁶

After Japan's surrender, the Allies moved to accept the surrender of Japanese troops throughout Asia and the Pacific, and to establish interim governments in those regions where they were needed. Allied command divided Indochina in half, along the 17th Parallel, with Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist Chinese in charge of liberating north of that line (Tonkin, Laos, and parts of Annam), and Great Britain in charge of the south (Cambodia, parts of Annam, and Cochinchina). The British assisted the French to reassert control in the south, while the Nationalist Chinese in the north were uninterested

²⁴ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 5-6.

²⁵ Vo Ngu Cheu, "The Other Side of the Vietnamese Revolution: The Empire of Viet-Nam (March—August 1945)" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45 (Feb 1986): 297-98, and Bui Minh Dũng, "Japan's Role in the Vietnamese Starvation of 1944-45" *Modern Asian Studies* 29 (July, 1995): 578. The famine resulted when the government (first French, and then Japanese) seized rice crops for military and industrial use, and then worsened after severe weather. Between one and two million Vietnamese starved to death from late 1944 to the end of the war.

²⁶ John Springhall, "'Kicking out the Viet Minh': How Britain Allowed France to Reoccupy South Indochina, 1945-46," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (January 2005): 117.

in Vietnamese politics, and did not provide the French with any help before leaving the country in fall 1945.²⁷

The French expressed a powerful desire to regain their empire in the wake of World War II. In the metropole, only the French communists opposed reestablishing the colonies. France's national pride lay gravely wounded by the humiliations of the war, and the 4th Republic government saw the empire (soon renamed the French Union) as their sole remaining source of prestige.²⁸

France returned to contest power in Indochina, and soon clashed with the Viet Minh, whose control in the north remained strong. Negotiations between the two, in which the Viet Minh wanted independence and the French wanted to reassert full control, broke down. In November 1946, the French navy bombarded the Tonkin port of Haiphong and killed almost 6,000 Vietnamese civilians. Viet Minh soldiers struck at French outposts throughout the country, especially in Tonkin, before beating a hasty retreat into the Indochinese interior. The French Indochina War had begun.²⁹

Despite air superiority and heavier firepower, the French struggled to defeat the Viet Minh, who adapted a strategy of Maoist revolutionary warfare and received

²⁷ Ibid., 116-117.

²⁸ Martin Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, eds., Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2007), 130-135.

²⁹ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 6. The figure of 6,000 dead in Haiphong from France's naval shelling is a common figure.

logistical support from Communist China.³⁰ Desperate shortages in reliable equipment and supplies hamstrung the French forces. France's best potential benefactor, the United States, was initially unwilling to support French colonialism. In the years before World War II, the US maintained an anti-colonial sentiment. Until the very end of the 19th Century, the United States had not possessed colonies in the same way as European nations; this sentiment acknowledged the obvious colonial occupation of the Philippines, but emphasized America's "civilizing" influence there, and that the United States would soon leave that archipelago nation to its own devices.³¹ The "Open Door" Policy toward China, and Asia in general, at least appeared a liberal approach to empire, as it demanded open access to markets—open access that could, in theory, raise the living standards of Asians as well as Americans.³²

Before and during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt embodied this anti-colonial sentiment. He wanted a strong China in command in Asia, and the old European colonial possessions—Burma, India, Korea, Malaysia, the Dutch Indies, and French Indochina—granted trusteeship status and helped into independence by the

³⁰ Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 277.

³¹ Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War Against Japan* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 82-83. The American ideal of anti-colonialism was certainly not without an element of double-think. The Philippines had been "won" from the Spanish, and American interventionism in the Caribbean and Latin America had a distinct imperial tone.

³² William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 6-7. Gunboat diplomacy, extraterritoriality laws, and strict American restrictions on Asian immigration did much to undermine this positive image.

international community.³³ Roosevelt vociferously expressed his anti-colonialism toward French Indochina, where his feelings about empires collided with his feelings about the French nation. He concluded that even *if* a nation had the right to possess colonies, then the French had lost that right when the Germans overran them in 1940, and they caved to Japanese demands in 1940 and 1941.³⁴ Roosevelt also argued that France had “failed” as colonizers in Indochina, stating that “France has had that country . . . for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning . . .”³⁵

During World War II, the Americans also conducted intelligence missions in Indochina, where they encountered the problems of European colonialism firsthand. Allied intelligence in the Pacific and China-Burma-India theaters kept Indochina under surveillance, as the Japanese based troops, aircraft, and ships there. At first relying upon several effective, but *ad hoc*, sources in Indochina, the Allies were forced to look elsewhere when these sources were scattered by the 1945 Japanese coup. The American Office of Strategic Services China branch looked to certain Vietnamese nationalist groups in Indochina for use as both intelligence gathers and pilot rescue; they found Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, and employed them. OSS personnel accompanied the Viet

³³ John J. Sbrega, “The Anticolonial Policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Reappraisal,” *Political Science Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (1986): 65-73.

³⁴ Gary R. Hess, “Franklin Roosevelt and Indochina,” *The Journal of American History* 59, no. 2 (1972): 354.

³⁵ Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 2: 1597. The statement above appeared in a January 1945 memo from Roosevelt to Hull.

Minh when they marched in Hanoi after the surrender of the Viet Minh.³⁶ Ho and his organization impressed the handful of Americans who met him, despite Ho's strong communist connections.³⁷

Roosevelt's death and the start of the Cold War softened American anti-colonialism. Harry S. Truman, assuming the presidency after Roosevelt's death, faced a new political environment. After the defeat of Germany in May 1945, no common enemy stood between the Western Allies and the Soviets, and tensions rose. Hoping to keep the support of European allies, Washington moved to placate them by not forcing the issue of decolonization.³⁸ France and Britain united on this issue; the British feared that French decolonization could lead to the loss of their own colonies, as well.³⁹ Though not in favor of France's return to power in Indochina, the US did nothing to prevent the move.

America's tone changed when China fell to Mao Zedong's communists in 1949 and shifted further still with the outbreak of the Korean War. Where before the United States saw France's war in Indochina as an imperialistic bush war, Americans now saw

³⁶ Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh, and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 310-312, and Ronald H. Spector, "Allied Intelligence in Indochina, 1943-1945." *The Pacific Historical Review* 51, no. 1 (1982): 37.

³⁷ Archimedes L. Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 83-87, and Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution*, 313-314.

³⁸ Hess, "Franklin Roosevelt and Indochina," 365.

³⁹ Christopher Thorne, "Indochina and Anglo-American Relations, 1942-1945." *The Pacific Quarterly Review* 45, no. 1 (1976): 83-85.

the struggle as another front in the global war against communism. To American policy makers, the Viet Minh's communist connections—its bases of operation in Communist China, and the weapons it received from that nation—trumped its nationalist character. Though not in favor of French colonial control of Vietnam, the United States was determined to prevent communist expansion.⁴⁰ US policy makers worried that if they did not support France in Indochina, the French might abandon Indochina to the communists, and oppose American interests in Europe. Washington hoped that it could use military assistance as leverage to induce the French to grant autonomy to the Indochinese states, which American analysts considered the best course of action for the region.⁴¹ In 1950, the US agreed to support France's military effort in Indochina with military equipment and supplies, through the Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP); the first shipments of supplies commenced in late summer.⁴² The Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina (MAAG) deployed to French Indochina in September 1950, in order to monitor the equipment and supplies. From 1950 to 1954, the United States spent more than \$2 billion on the French war effort.⁴³

MDAP and MAAG were both examples of a huge wave of American military

⁴⁰ Thomas Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 26.

⁴¹ Statler, *Replacing France*, 19.

⁴² Herring, *America's Longest War*, 23.

⁴³ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 44.

assistance abroad that began after World War II, as President Harry Truman moved to support American allies against internal and external communist aggression. Military aid was a major aspect of the “Truman Doctrine” in 1947, which was to help defeat apparent communist aggression in Greece and Turkey. By 1950, the Truman Doctrine had hardened into the more dogmatic National Security Council document NSC 68, which laid down American policy as containing communist expansion.⁴⁴ Military aid, had as major a role in NSC 68 as it had in the Truman Doctrine. Such aid had many appeals to American policymakers. It could block Soviet expansion and prevent deployments of American soldiers abroad, provide a release valve for obsolete military equipment, and influence the policies of America’s allies.⁴⁵ When US shipments began arriving in French Indochina in 1950, the US had already sent supplies and advisors to Latin America, Greece, Turkey, the Philippines, and China, as well as most Western European countries. This new, world-wide effort represented a sea change in American policy. Never before, during peace time, had the United States provided foreign nations such levels of military aid. American military advisors had rarely operated outside the western hemisphere, and never in such large numbers.

France’s military situation decayed in 1950, when Viet Minh offensives destroyed France’s bases along the Chinese frontier.⁴⁶ After a series of disasters, the

⁴⁴ George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: US Foreign Relations since 1876* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 614 and 638.

⁴⁵ Pach, *Arming the Free World*, 5. Some members of the Air Force even hoped that if the US gave away much of its combat aircraft, it would force the US to maintain a large aircraft industry.

⁴⁶ Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), 32. The “border battles” near Cao Bang cost the French some 6,000 casualties, many of

French finally turned the Viet Minh back in a large engagement at Vinh Yen, near Hanoi, in January 1951.⁴⁷ The fighting stabilized afterwards: France boasted heavier weapons because of the influx of American equipment, and the Viet Minh had to make good their losses since 1950. A relative stalemate continued.

The French employed an “oil slick” counter-guerilla strategy in Indochina, defending the region’s lines of communication with small, static garrisons, and employed mobile reserves to search for, or respond to attacks by, the Viet Minh.⁴⁸ Though this strategy appeared good on paper—it could allow the French to defend all the vital regions, and still hunt down the Viet Minh—it benefited the Viet Minh’s purposes, by pinning most of France’s forces into static positions, where they could be bypassed or destroyed piecemeal. Further, it put tremendous strain on those mobile reserves (*groupement mobile*, “mobile groups,” and paratroopers), as they perpetually moved from crisis to crisis. These units suffered heavy losses in manpower and equipment.

Worse, the French strategy gave the Viet Minh the initiative in Indochina, and they used this advantage to choose when and where to fight battles. Not as well armed as their French opponents, and totally without an air force or navy to speak of, the Viet

them elite Legionnaires and paratroopers. In the process, the Viet Minh seized enough materiel to arm and equip an entire division. Despite its unusual narrative structure and occasionally grandiose language, *Street Without Joy* captures the desperation of the war probably better than any other book.

⁴⁷ Jacques Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China, 1945-54* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble Ltd, 1990), 138.

⁴⁸ R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea: The United States Navy in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1992), 17.

Minh made up for these shortcomings with their familiarity with the terrain, support of the local populace, and superior overland mobility.⁴⁹ The Viet Minh could come from anywhere, at any time, it seemed; the French called it *la guerre sans fronts*, the war without fronts.⁵⁰ These factors made it difficult for the French to employ their superior firepower. In the main, the Viet Minh only fought battles when the advantage lay with them. Despite modern vehicular and air transport, French mobility was limited by poor road conditions and shortages of transport aircraft. This tethered French forces to the road network, where they were both unable to pursue the Viet Minh, and vulnerable to Viet Minh attack.

The war featured many large engagements, such as those fought at Cao Bang, Vinh Yen, Nan San, and Dien Bien Phu, but the vast majority of combat took place at the company and platoon level. The French referred to the Viet Minh's endless ambushes, booby-traps, hit-and-run attacks, mortar barrages, and sniping as the *grignotage*, "the slow gnawing away man by man, platoon by platoon."⁵¹ The *grignotage* wore down French units until this attrition made them vulnerable to major attack. The Viet Minh replicated this low level effect, where they overran platoons and companies, at the strategic level, where they first pinned the garrisons of an entire region

⁴⁹ Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China*, 97-99. The Viet Minh army consisted of three elements: regular forces, for offensive use throughout the theater; regional troops, who supported the regulars, defended their regions, and attacked isolated French positions; and local militia, who produced weapons and defended their villages. Dalloz eloquently describes the Viet Minh as an army "without impedimenta," able to easily and quietly move through difficult terrain.

⁵⁰ Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

in place, destroyed the majority of them, and then crushed the subsequent French relief operation or counter-offensive through local numerical superiority and surprise.⁵²

Frustrated by the Viet Minh's refusal to fight in a large, conventional engagement, the French established a fortified airfield far in north-western Tonkin, at Dien Bien Phu. They hoped to replicate the successes France had enjoyed in previous large-scale engagements by drawing the Viet Minh into Dien Bien Phu's defenses, where they could be destroyed with artillery and air support.⁵³ The Viet Minh obliged the French but, in an incredible logistical effort, crushed the strongpoints of Dien Bien Phu with devastating artillery fire, methodical siege tactics, and human wave assaults. President Dwight D. Eisenhower considered the use of immediate, and massive, US air support to save the garrison, but decided against this course of action.⁵⁴ The physical destruction of many of France's best units (including most of its "fire brigade" parachute battalions), combined with the psychological damage inflicted by such a comprehensive defeat, drove France to negotiate.⁵⁵ France and the Viet Minh came to a ceasefire agreement in Geneva, Switzerland shortly thereafter. France granted Laos, Cambodia,

⁵² Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China*, 98-99.

⁵³ James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 155-156. These successes had been at Vinh-Yen and Na-San, where French airpower caught large Viet Minh formations in the open.

⁵⁴ Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York: University Press, 1988), xii. Eisenhower had disagreed with the whole idea of the Dien Bien Phu operation, and wanted to avoid the overt application of American force in Indochina.

⁵⁵ Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 42-43. Though based mostly on secondary sources, Windrow's book is a better comprehensive history of the war than Fall's *Hell in a Very Small Place*.

and the southern half of Vietnam their independence, and the northern half of Vietnam remained in the Viet Minh's hands. France finally withdrew from South Vietnam in 1956, as a result of increasing American political, military, and cultural influence in the newly-created South Vietnam.⁵⁶

MAAG'S ROLE IN FRENCH INDOCHINA

The United States' military mission in Indochina began with 70 men of all ranks in September 1950, and grew to 342 by the post-Dien Bien Phu ceasefire in 1954.⁵⁷ MAAG's mission in Indochina was to monitor the flow of MDAP-supplied US equipment, and to make sure that the equipment was used correctly by the French. They assisted the French with specialist personnel and studied French logistical and combat operations, documenting their observations with monthly activity reports, estimates of French combat effectiveness, and MAAG operational notes. From MAAG's establishment in September 1950 through the summer of 1952, command of MAAG fell under Brigadier General Francis G. Brink. He was followed by Major General Thomas J. H. Trapnell, who remained MAAG Chief until April 1954, when he was replaced by Major General John W. O'Daniel. After O'Daniel's departure in November 1955, command passed to Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams. MAAG Chiefs reported to

⁵⁶ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 59 and Statler, *Replacing France*, 6.

⁵⁷ "U.S. Military Aid for France in Indochina," Box 05, Unit 13: The Douglas Pike Collection, the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), who was under the direction of the Department of the Navy.⁵⁸ MAAG's reports were distributed to the Department of Defense, the US ambassador to Vietnam, and the chief of the MAAG mission to France, among others.

Most of the MAAG advisors' reports took a similar form. An introduction provided a summary of the report's message and, often, figures of total MDAP equipment that had been delivered to Indochina during the month of that report's issuance. This was followed by specific reports by MAAG's Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel. Each service-specific section summarized the actions of its respective MAAG personnel. Significant in these documents are "end-use visits" (also referred to as "end item utilization visits")—these described visits to French and French-allied units in the field made by MAAG personnel (in small teams of two to four men), and were primarily observations of how well, or poorly, the units maintained their MDAP-supplied equipment. The Americans also made status reports of these units, taking care to note operational readiness, morale, training, and even key personalities within the unit. MAAG's monthly activity reports included anywhere from ten to thirty such end use visit reports, each of them dealing with an individual French unit, and assigned it a simple (though vague) grade, ranging from poor to excellent. Authors were usually unnamed in MAAG documents, and the exact strengths and composition of MAAG investigative teams unmentioned.

⁵⁸ Eckardt, *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control*, 7-10. "Iron Mike" O'Daniel reduced his rank to Major General so as to remain subordinate to the French Commander-in-Chief Indochina.

MAAG reports discussed concrete issues, with statistics on supplies, combat missions, and so on, but also included assessments of overall French performance. Army, Navy, and Air Force officers alternately praised and criticized French and French-allied activities, on logistics, operations, and combat.

How much attention these reports received is, of course, open to conjecture. Their distribution lists fairly limited, and, in the years around American involvement in the French Indochina War (1949-1954), the U.S. military at large seemed uninterested in advisory missions in general, and Indochina and unconventional war in particular. Scholarly military journals and service publications gave little attention to these subjects. For example, from 1950 to 1954, the Command and General Staff College's *Military Review's* only regular articles on Indochina were in its "Military Notes From Around the World" column, often reprinted from mainstream newspapers. It only printed five articles on the French Indochina War, and their substance varied. One was a four-page (with pictures) review of the French army in Indochina, emphasizing that the French were training their Vietnamese allies to help fight the Viet Minh.⁵⁹ Two were summaries of Indochinese history, reprinted from foreign military journals.⁶⁰ One was a State Department publication, emphasizing that Indochina's "right to freedom" was at

⁵⁹ "The Army of the French Union in Indochina," *Military Review* 32 (December 1952): 96. This article was reprinted from a French journal.

⁶⁰ Captain J.W. Leigh-Cooper, "Indochina Through the Centuries," *Military Review* 34 (October 1954), originally from the *Australian Army Journal*, and Major M. D. Malgonkar, "The Situation in Indochina," *Military Review* 31 (June 1952). This article was originally printed in *Military Digest* in India, Oct 1951, and was included some interesting asides, mainly that the French Indochina War had been blown out of proportion due to the communist ties of the Viet Minh.

stake.⁶¹ Most critical of these articles was one by the academic and journalist Bernard Fall, who criticized the French for tactical “rigidity” and complacency.⁶²

In the same period, the Air Force’s *Air University Quarterly Review* published three articles. One described USAF personnel helping to train pilots from nations receiving US material, mentioning Indochina only once.⁶³ One article explained how Indochina’s difficult terrain made the application of airpower challenging.⁶⁴ The third described the use of air power against the Huks during their insurgency in the Philippines.⁶⁵

In the period 1946-1951, the Navy’s *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* made occasional mention of the fighting in French Indochina, and the French navy’s mission there. Most articles appeared in the “Notes on International Affairs” sections, and were reprints from other publications. Those articles dealing with the French Navy in Indochina had vague overviews of the fighting there.⁶⁶ The Navy’s personnel digest

⁶¹ “Indochina,” *Military Review* 33 (March 1954): 47.

⁶² Bernard B. Fall, “Indochina: The Seven Year Dilemma,” *Military Review* 33 (October 1953): 35. Fall’s article began with an editorial disclaimer, “*The views expressed in this article are the authors and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army or the Command and General Staff College* (28, emphasis in original).”

⁶³ Colonel Benjamin H. Shiffrin, “MDAP Air Training,” *Air University Quarterly Review* 6 (Fall 1953).

⁶⁴ “The Korean War Speaks to the Indo-Chinese War,” *Air University Quarterly Review* 7 (Spring 1954).

⁶⁵ Tomas C. Tirona, “The Philippine Anti-Communist Campaign,” *Air University Quarterly Review* 7 (Summer 1954).

⁶⁶ “Warships Bombard Coast of Indo-China,” *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 72 (April 1946), original printed in the *Washington Evening Star*.

All Hands had virtually nothing to say about Indochina, and few things to note about MAAG duty in the period 1949-1955. One 1953 article, in which MAAG missions were “good duty,” explained that a sailor would “not be expected to attend a language school . . . To teach the languages to be encountered wherever MAAGs exist would involve teaching French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Chinese (several dialects), Greek, Portuguese, Flemish, German, Danish, Norwegian and perhaps even German or a Slovak dialect. This is not done because the host country is expected to supply interpreters.”⁶⁷ Notably, Vietnamese is absent from this list.

The military’s overall lack of interest in both Indochina and the type of warfare that raged there may have compromised the effectiveness of the MAAG mission from the start, as did a variety of other factors. The dismissal of language skills for US personnel shown in *All Hands* manifested itself in Indochina. A Monthly Activity Report from 1955 took note that *no* USAF personnel of MAAG even spoke French, let alone Vietnamese.⁶⁸ Similar conditions existed in the Army and Navy sections. MAAG’s small size meant that its personnel were inundated with work—the small number of personnel had to inspect and observe hundreds of French units in the field. These units were spread over thousands of square kilometers of difficult terrain, much of it in the north contested by the Viet Minh. Simultaneously, MAAG had to monitor tens of thousands of tons of US materiel entering Indochinese ports and airfields. For

⁶⁷ “Want Good Duty? Try Attaches, Missions, MAAGs, and NATO,” *All Hands* no. 442 (December 1953), 52.

⁶⁸ MAAG Monthly Activity Report (hereafter MMAR) May 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. The report did not address the possibility of Americans learning Vietnamese.

example, in 1952, MAAG's 87 men managed the receipt of 94,823 tons of US-provided naval material delivered through MDAP, not to mention the 90,000-some tons of US equipment already in country from earlier MDAP shipments. MAAG's Army personnel were especially overworked, handling the overwhelming majority of that materiel.⁶⁹ MAAG was based in Saigon—though this put them in comparative safety (the Viet Minh was weak in the Mekong Delta) and in close proximity to the United States' civilian missions in Indochina, it also placed MAAG's headquarters far from the main fighting of the war, in Tonkin and Annam.

Though the US military at large may have considered the war in Indochina, and MAAG missions in general, as less important than other regions and missions, the documents suggest that their authors believed that the war in Indochina was part of a greater struggle against communism. Considering the Soviet and Communist Chinese origin of much of the Viet Minh's equipment, this was an understandable sentiment for the Americans. However, such fervent belief that the Viet Minh were mere puppets of the Kremlin at times drove some members of MAAG to criticize their French counterparts more on hypothetical Sino-Soviet interventions than on the basis of the performance against the Viet Minh.

Despite being overworked, undermanned, linguistically separated from the friendly forces they monitored and evaluated, and perhaps clouded by anti-communist sentiments, MAAG's personnel dutifully submitted their reports. The following chapters examine the content of these reports.

⁶⁹ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

CHAPTER III

THE US ARMY

The US Army's reports on the French Army's performance in Indochina centered on French combat abilities and assessments of the French strategic position. American Army personnel wrote with a tone of guarded optimism. They frequently praised the combat abilities of French combat units (including colonial battalions from Africa) and found acceptable France's employment of American-provided equipment in Indochina. However, MAAG's Army representatives questioned the effectiveness of France's Indochinese allies, French strategic deployment, and what Americans described as a lack of offensive spirit in the French high command. Overall, US Army personnel considered France's ground forces to be functioning as well as they could in difficult conditions, and attributed much of their success to the influx of US logistical support.

The French employed a combined-arms force in Indochina. They deployed infantry, artillery, engineering, and armored units throughout the theater. For most of the war, France's units remained at regimental-size or smaller.⁷⁰ In addition to metropolitan French and native Indochinese troops (Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese, and Montagnards), France also used many of its colonial forces, especially from Africa.

⁷⁰ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. French operations usually consisted of several battalions brigaded together *ad hoc*, not unlike German *kampfgruppen* of World War II. Though this allowed the French tactical flexibility, it made their already severe logistical problems worse.

Algerians, Moroccans, and Senegalese fought in many of the war's most ferocious battles, as did France's famous Foreign Legion. Crack airborne battalions provided much of the army's offensive power, delivered to the battlefield by French Air Force transport planes.

Due to the difficulty of the terrain in Indochina, and the hit-and-run guerrilla tactics often employed by the Viet Minh, France relied heavily upon its infantry. In 1952, France had 420,000 troops in the field, including approximately 200 battalions of infantry (10 airborne), and used most of these as static garrisons for key towns and other critical communication points. The army was France's largest force in Indochina—in the same year, there were 12,000 men in the Navy in Indochina, and 7,440 trained personnel in the Air Force.⁷¹

From 1950-1956, MAAG's Army section consisted of around fifteen officers and forty enlisted men.⁷² This small team faced some daunting assignments. Not only were they to observe and grade French units in the field, spread over the huge square mileage of the Red River Delta and the Tonkinese and Central Highlands, they were also to monitor and catalog the tens of thousands of tons of war materiel arriving monthly in Indochina. The French Army consumed the lion's share of the overall US support for

⁷¹Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. French units varied widely in strength, due to high attrition, in-country recruitment, and *ad hoc* reorganization in the field. Theoretically, French combat battalions fielded four rifle companies, for a total strength of around 600 men; regiments, three battalions plus supporting elements, for a total of 2000+ men.

⁷² In January 1953: sixteen officers, one warrant officer, and 38 enlisted men.

France in Indochina. Thought most of the US equipment was of World War II vintage, it remained serviceable and effective.⁷³ A report published in February 1952 showed that, up to that point the war, the US had delivered to the French 418 combat vehicles (primarily halftracks, armored cars, and light tanks), 3,488 transport vehicles (trucks and jeeps), 7,783 automatic weapons, 3,527 radios, nearly 800,000 artillery shells, and 18,000,000 rounds of small arms ammunition.⁷⁴ An Army document from December reported that eleven transport ships carrying supplies had arrived in that month, delivering 6,796 long tons of supplies for the French war effort, 6,235 of them for the army. Included in this haul, among many other items, were sixty-six armored cars, 245 two-and-a-half ton trucks (the famous “deuce and a half”), 1,213 heavy machine guns, 5,000 carbines, 92,000 rounds of 81mm mortar ammunition, and 530 kits for the treatment of snakebites. For 1952 entire, 81,187 of the 94,823 tons of supplies delivered to Indochina by the United States had been for the French Army, with the remaining tonnage going to the French Air Force and Navy.⁷⁵ A delivery from early 1953 featured 14,000 colored smoke grenades and 10,000 parachutes.⁷⁶ Revealing the increasing rate of US support, 18,184 tons were delivered in March 1953, roughly three times the tonnage delivered in December 1952.⁷⁷

⁷³ With the exception of dry cell battery and some ammunition problems described later in this chapter, MAAG personnel rarely reported any such troubles for the American equipment in French Indochina.

⁷⁴ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁷⁵ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁷⁶ MMAR January 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. The high tempo of French airborne operations in Indochina made parachutes a valuable resource.

⁷⁷ MMAR March 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

The most important detail of France's army in Indochina was the uneven quality of its two constituent parts. "French" units included metropolitan troops (many of them parachute, mechanized, or artillery) as well as France's colonial troops, included among them Algerians, Moroccans, Senegalese, and the Foreign Legion. In fact, US Army reports labeled many units "French", if such distinction was unclear, as it may have been for many of the African units. To confuse matters further, most "French" units in Indochina included large numbers of Indochinese, serving as either replacements for casualties or as non-combat support personnel. Some units had a counter-intuitive composition: the 1st Battalion of the Moroccan Artillery Regiment (1/RACM) apparently fielded no Moroccans, as MAAG documented its strength as one-third French and two-thirds Vietnamese.⁷⁸ The Americans considered the 3rd Amphibian Squadron "French," with its enlisted men were "native" and its officers French.⁷⁹ As a rule, French units performed well on the battlefield, with dependable morale and at least adequate training and equipment. Some units, such as the parachute battalions, had impressive combat records. The Indochinese, or Associated States component of the French army included Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese troops. Though the Indochinese did field some excellent units, including several crack parachute battalions, others performed poorly. MAAG's US Army personnel had a varied assessment of France's army in Indochina, mainly due to the uneven quality of the forces the French employed.

⁷⁸ MMAR September 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁷⁹ MMAR January 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

MAAG's US Army personnel had high opinions of French units and personnel. French soldiers, deployed from France or elsewhere in the colonies, could expect a twenty-four month tour in Indochina; many saw their tours extended to twenty-seven months.⁸⁰ The Americans praised French combat officers. A summarizing document of France's field effectiveness from 1953 described the average French officer, up to the level of battalion, as "excellent. He is well trained in French schools and possesses a great deal of personal courage. Many officers up to company grade are serving their second tour of duty in the Indochina theater and as a result know their job well."⁸¹ The same report called French morale "good." It referred to French engineers as "exceptionally good at field expedients," French gunners "good artillery men," and medical personnel "excellent."⁸² French units performed well in the field.⁸³

A major task of MAAG personnel was the inspection of equipment provided to the French by the United States. These "end use visits" gave detailed examinations of the state of American gear and weapons in the hands of French and French-allied personnel, and, in many cases, also provided an overview of the unit's morale and overall quality. The Americans found that the French handled their US-issued

⁸⁰ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁸¹ Considering the length of a tour, this would mean that French officers in the field could have as much as three or four years of combat experience against the Viet Minh. Major Marcel Bigeard, commander of the superb 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion (a mixed French/Vietnamese unit), fought almost continuously from 1946 through 1954, when the Viet Minh captured both him and his unit (Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 236-237). French officers were fairly old in Indochina—captains, on average, were 38 ½ years old, and lieutenants, 33 (171).

⁸² Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁸³ MMAR January 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

equipment well. As early as December 1950, “It was noted that a considerable improvement in the appearance of the units was evident since the inspections made during September.”⁸⁴ A brief examination of end-use visits from 1952 to 1954 gives the flavor of these reports.

In December 1952, US Army personnel visited seventeen French and Indochinese units in the field. The Americans graded all but one of them as “satisfactory” or better; they cited the one “unsatisfactory” unit visited as having let its vehicles succumb to “general disrepair.” The Americans praised one French unit for excellent equipment maintenance even though the unit had been “subjected to almost continuous and hard service.” They rated one battalion of Cambodian infantry as “excellent,” their good morale and extensive experience “reflected in the manner in which they cared for their equipment.” An engineer unit visited had “excellent working facilities,” and, in proof of their skill at field expedients, fabricated otherwise unavailable materials. A unit of Moroccan *Spahis* had armored cars in “excellent condition,” though the Americans did observe that the vehicles did not display their MDAP markings.⁸⁵

In January 1953, US Army MAAG personnel visited thirteen units, and found every one of them at least satisfactory in equipment maintenance, weapons and gear suffering merely from “minor discrepancies” like mold on binocular lenses. The report

⁸⁴ Supplies, Services, and Equipment, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁸⁵ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

complimented several Vietnamese units for maintaining their equipment well despite enemy pressure.⁸⁶

A Monthly Activity Report from April 1953 stated that “MDAP equipment was found to be maintained an acceptable manner although the overall standard was somewhat lower than that desired. Equipment on hand in all units visited will enable those units to perform their assigned missions in an excellent manner.” The document praised the combat abilities of several units and officers. It also included assessments of French ammunition depots, most of which the Americans found to be in good condition, aside from shortages of lightning rods. The Americans considered one depot highly susceptible to fire were it to be damaged by an accident or enemy attack.⁸⁷

In January 1954, Army personnel visited twenty-four units, and they rated most of them “good” or better. Again, they found only “minor discrepancies.” Further, the report praised the “noticeably effective” maintenance effort made by the French Union, with their January report ratings “exceeding those during any previous period thus far reported.”⁸⁸

American reports made frequent note of the French logistical system’s shortcomings. A December 1953 document commented that despite “visits and discussions” with French commanders, ammunition storage facilities were poor. The author observed that, due to manpower shortages, “coolies” and communist prisoners

⁸⁶ MMAR January 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁸⁷ MMAR April 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁸⁸ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

handled ammunition, instead of qualified soldiers.⁸⁹ “By U. S. standards,” another report read, “their supply system is slow and inefficient. Maintenance problems are increased by a lack of trained mechanics and limited facilities. Much could be done to increase the efficiency of both the support units but also combat units by the setting up of a good system for command inspections and staff supervision.”⁹⁰

The Americans did not consider all of the problems the fault of the French. Some of MAAG’s US Army personnel blamed the problem on the MDAP equipment. Many reports made the distinction between new and “rebuilt” MDAP equipment—much of the equipment fell into the latter category, making it more susceptible to wear and tear. MDAP failed to respond for requests on cleaning agents for artillery bores, forcing many Vietnamese units to use kerosene in the interim.⁹¹ Floods in Japan, where many of the supplies either originated or passed through before continuing to Indochina, could damage ammunition.⁹² Dry cell batteries, for use in man-portable field radios, suffered from shocking failure rates as MDAP failed to “tropicalize” them. Half of one Vietnamese battalion’s dry cell batteries were faulty and inoperable.⁹³ A report from September 1953 estimated that, in one month, MDAP delivered 26,000 unusable dry cell batteries out of total of the 28,000, a staggering failure rate of almost 93 percent.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁹⁰ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁹¹ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁹² MMAR September 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁹³ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁹⁴ MMAR September 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

Indochinese terrain also hampered French logistics. Flooding in Tonkin made it difficult to waterproof ammunition dumps. The primitive transportation system damaged many vehicles. A December 1953 end-use visit commented that many French units suffered from high shock-absorber “attrition” due to rough road conditions.⁹⁵ Another mentioned dirty roads “only sufficient to support one way traffic.”⁹⁶ These accelerated wear-and-tear on vehicles, slowed down vehicular movement, created traffic jams, and made the vehicles more vulnerable to Viet Minh attack.

Thus, US Army observers did admit that other issues influenced French logistical problems. One report, praising several French and Indochinese units for their level of maintenance, made clear that the French made effective use of their MDAP gear, and that despite a “decrease in spit and polish,” there was “no serious or widespread lessening of emphasis on maintenance . . . ”⁹⁷ Another report, from January 1953, made the practical observation that France’s logistical system in Indochina did function, as “evident by their ability to keep their fighting units in action.”⁹⁸

The Indochinese contingent of the French army—the Associated States forces—did not fare so well in American eyes. One Vietnamese battalion’s shortcomings were enough that Colonel Norman Williams, Chief of MAAG’s Army Section in March 1953, attached a memorandum to the Monthly Activity Report, saying that the maintenance of

⁹⁵ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁹⁶ MMAR May 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁹⁷ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

⁹⁸ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

the battalion's equipment was "falling far below the desired standard." He cited rusty and dirty mortar barrels and unserviceable vehicles.⁹⁹ Another Vietnamese battalion, though it did better in the Monthly Activity Report, suffered from an inadequate commander, rusty weapons, and poorly oiled vehicles; the end-use visit added that the unit would be soon revisited for a reassessment.¹⁰⁰ In December 1953, MAAG rated the 29th Vietnamese Infantry Battalion as "poor," as it had "little or no emphasis" on maintenance. The commander of another Vietnamese unit, cited in the same document, lacked interest in the condition of his battalion, whose vehicles suffered a mechanical failure rate of 30 percent.¹⁰¹ Perhaps most damning of these, a report filed in May 1953 criticized the 6th Vietnamese Infantry Battalion, stationed outside Hanoi. In "bad shape," the unit had not even begun routine maintenance on their weapons, despite an impending operation against the Viet Minh. The list of deficiencies continued:

. . . the Battalion Commander had not inspected nor was he familiar with the condition of his equipment, and offered numerous invalid excuses for his negligence; neither the Sub-Sector or Zone Commander, nor their representatives had any time conducted any inspection of this unit; the majority of the personnel were sleeping or resting on the day of inspection . . . Battalion, Sub-Sector, and Zone Commanders, without exception, attempted to excuse condition of the equipment and steadfastly maintained that the 6th Battalion was one of the best in the Vietnamese National Army.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ MMAR March 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰⁰ MMAR January 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰¹ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰² MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

The Americans did not judge all Indochinese units so harshly. An end-use visit from April of that year rated a Vietnamese infantry battalion as “excellent,” with responsible officers quite familiar with the state of their units’ equipment and personnel; it gave a Vietnamese signal company the same rating, praising its storage of weapons and radio gear.¹⁰³ An observation of a Vietnamese mountain battalion in 1953 claimed their esprit d’corps to be “excellent.”¹⁰⁴ A December 1953 report found the 1st Vietnamese Artillery Battalion to be superb condition. Its personnel appeared “well qualified,” its equipment was maintained “in an excellent manner.” Overall, the unit compared “favorably with a similar U. S. Army unit.”¹⁰⁵ Airborne units received special praise. The 1st Vietnamese Parachute Battalion extended “maximum” cooperation during its inspection, and had high morale and well-maintained gear. The 3rd Vietnamese Parachute Battalion received a similar rating, with high praise in morale, training, officers, and equipment maintenance.¹⁰⁶

MAAG also found other Indochinese units to be in good condition. Cambodians appeared popular with American observers. A January 1954 report included assessments of several Cambodian units, and described several of them having equipment in “good condition” due to their “excellent maintenance.”¹⁰⁷ One report

¹⁰³ MMAR April 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰⁴ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰⁵ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰⁶ MMAR September 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰⁷ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

wrote of them as “stronger physically” than Vietnamese. A “French” battalion inspected by MAAG consisted of all Cambodian troops, except for the French officers; its “combat effectiveness was as good as a [Foreign] Legion battalion.”¹⁰⁸

Though the Americans considered some Indochinese units praiseworthy, many others were not. “All the [8th Vietnamese] mountain battalion’s ranks are filled with local tribesman [sic],” wrote one American soldier. “They are smaller in stature and inferior in intelligence, ability, and physical stamina, to the Vietnamese . . . Even those who have succeeded in getting a commission revert to their former habits and primitive customs when the opportunity arises.”¹⁰⁹ According to one US Army soldier, the men of the 40th Vietnamese Infantry Battalion needed “expert supervision.”¹¹⁰

American observers suggested a variety of causes for the overall inferiority of the Indochinese units. Unlike French troops, who trained before deployment to Indochina, Indochinese soldiers did much of their training after they were assigned to their unit. This in and of itself may not have been a significant problem, but Indochinese units had no standards of training, so the quality and duration of training soldiers received was uneven.¹¹¹

In addition to training, US Army personnel saw weaknesses with Indochinese officers, especially in field experience and their absence from the higher echelons of

¹⁰⁸ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰⁹ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹¹⁰ MMAR July 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹¹¹ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

command in Indochina. The problems did not always arise from the quality of the officers themselves, as shown in earlier examples. One report noted that “The officers of the Associated States Forces are considered by the French to be excellent at company grade level . . . one Vietnamese mobile group (similar to a US RCT[regimental combat team]) and several battalions completely officered by Vietnamese, gave an excellent account of themselves.”¹¹² Many Indochinese officers in trained at in-country schools staffed by capable French commissioned and noncommissioned officers.

The greater criticism leveled by the Americans was that the French blocked Indochinese officers higher command. One American observed a “noticeable” shortage of Indochinese field grade (major and above) and staff officers.¹¹³ The lack of Indochinese officers in the French high command meant that, though the Americans urged the French to allow the Indochinese greater military autonomy, Indochinese forces could not function in the field without the French directly supporting and leading them. One 1952 report commented, “The Vietnamese are eager to assume more of the high command functions in the native army. However, the French feel that most of the native officers above battalion level are not sufficiently qualified to command independently and as a result there is some friction on this point.”¹¹⁴ The Americans worried that, with so little experience in leading themselves in major operations, the Vietnamese might be incapable of doing so if they ever gained control of their own army.

¹¹² Ibid. The report continued: “At present, there are 27 Vietnamese battalions and two group mobiles [motorized columns of roughly regimental strength] under command of Vietnamese officers. ”

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

The shortcomings of Indochinese units, including inadequate training, poor maintenance standards, and inexperienced Indochinese officers, resulted in reduced combat effectiveness. One Army estimate found that, in terms of firepower, many Indochinese units had weaponry that made them nearly equal to US units of equivalent size, but this firepower did not translate into an equivalent combat effectiveness, in part because Indochinese units lacked training as cohesive units.¹¹⁵ Most of the units poorly rated by MAAG were static defensive units. Split up into small garrisons of platoon or company size, these units not only lacked experience moving in large formations, their morale fell as boredom and lethargy set upon their isolated jungle outposts.

These problems multiplied after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu, as the Vietnamese army increased in size. Struggling to train the Vietnamese, another MAAG report cited a lack of technical and logistical skills and shortages of experienced leadership as just a few of the problems besetting the Vietnamese Army.¹¹⁶ The move to reorganize the Vietnamese Army into infantry divisions added to the difficulty, as did the semi-autonomy of military units controlled by dissident sects.¹¹⁷ Also troubling the Vietnamese was that much of their equipment had been handed down to them by withdrawing French troops who had not properly maintained the equipment after the ceasefire.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ MMAR May 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹¹⁷ MMAR November 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹¹⁸ MMAR December 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

As Vietnamese troops took a much more prominent role after the cease fire in 1954, the Americans encountered a variety of problems stemming from the Vietnamese' inexperience in handling large formations. Reports from the early days of the Vietnamese army spelled doom and gloom for the Vietnamese. A US Army training visit in early 1956 found the 12th Light Infantry Division suffering from low morale due to poor pay, lack of water, and limited medical care, all stemming from the division's inadequate logistics and administration. Their low morale made them "susceptible" to Viet Minh propaganda, the effects of which the US Army author attributed their high desertion rate. Poor lines of communication, a lack of a rifle range, and a "weak" division commander added to their difficulty.¹¹⁹ A May 1956 report recommended that "the 13th Division be relieved from its present mission and concentrated at either its home station or other suitable location to undergo an intensive training mission." The same document suggested that the 15th Division, which could not "be counted as a trained, effective fighting force" led by a division commander who appeared "weak and unsure of himself" also be returned to its "home station" and retrain.¹²⁰

In addition to training and morale problems, the Americans saw severe logistical issues for the new Vietnamese army. Of the 3d Field Division's 700 vehicles, US Army advisors found that only "26% are serviceable" and estimated that "95% [of communication equipment] is in need of repair. . . . Supply procedures are poorly

¹¹⁹Training Visit Reports (hereafter TVR) 16-30 April 1956, box 1, Training Visit Reports 1956-1957 (hereafter TVR) MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹²⁰ TVR 1-31 May 1956, box 1, TVR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

organized.”¹²¹ The schools where Vietnamese mechanics learned to repair vehicles fared little better: “The failure of ARVN to inaugurate this [vehicle maintenance] school is a prime contributing factor to the unsatisfactory state of vehicle maintenance in the Vietnamese Army.”¹²²

Vietnamese troops also had reason to doubt the effectiveness of their ammunition, as one scathing report indicated of the 703d Ordnance Ammunition Company:

[The 703d] has the worst depot storage area seen to date. Entirely unsatisfactory. The area floods to a depth of two feet during the rainy season. Because of this the bottom rows of ammunition stock piles have been declared unserviceable. Most of the ammunition is stored in the open and incorrectly stacked, and unprotected from the elements. Stocks are just jammed in anywhere they will fit. . . . Lack of technical knowledge of ammunition emphasized by used of live 105 how[itzer] ammunition as a decoration.¹²³

In the aftermath of Dien Bien Phu, the US appraisal of the Vietnamese Army bore similarity to the overall American appraisal of the Associated States units in early 1953. This assessment predicted that the French-allied Indochinese armies, without French support, would be “incapable” of defeating the Viet Minh, let alone a Chinese invasion. The report insisted that “successful conclusion” could only be reached by improving the indigenous forces of Indochina.¹²⁴

¹²¹ TVR 16-30 April 1956, box 1, TVR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹²² TVR 1-30 June 1956, box 1, TVR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹²³ TVR 16-30 April 1956, box 1, TVR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹²⁴ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

Aside from the problems of Indochinese units, and the greater problems with the post-1954 Vietnamese Army, US Army observers disapproved of French strategic deployment. In order to cover the considerable land area of Indochina, the French subdivided their units and spread them over a wide area. Thus, battalions split into company- and platoon-sized posts, and rarely operated as whole units. “It appears certain,” a 1953 document asserted, “that if a reorganization were effected [sic] and larger standardized tactical units formed, i.e., regiments, divisions, artillery battalions, tank battalions, etc. , the overall efficiency [of the French army] would be increased.”¹²⁵ In addition to dispersed deployment, the Americans also felt uncomfortable with the *ad hoc* orders of battle favored by the French. “[Organization] is an outstanding weakness of the French Union forces in Indochina,” said one report. French commanders organized their units “to fit a situation rather than organized as standard type units and then tailored to fit the situation.”¹²⁶

This problem of dispersed units spread to the Vietnamese forces. For their nascent army, the problem not only watered down combat power, it also made training more difficult. The “ARVN must be convinced that it is essential to maintain unit integrity in order to develop trained, effective divisions,” one training visit summary read.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ TVR 1-31 May 1956, box 1, TVR, MAAG Adjutant General Division TVR, RG 472, NARA.

The Army observers were even more troubled by what they perceived as a lack of aggressiveness in the French high command. The Americans saw the French of as being trapped in “defensive strong points” instead going out into the bush, where they could “fight the Viet Minh on grounds chosen by the French.”¹²⁸ A May 1953 report pointed toward dispersed French units and asserted that “the war in Indo-China is waged on a defensive concept with only limited objective attacks being made.”¹²⁹ The Americans believed that French and Indochinese morale could only hold for so long, and that launching a significant offensive could improve morale. The Americans saw a lack of offensive spirit in the French high command as one of the main hindrances to success in Indochina. “It appears that the French command is satisfied to organize strong points,” one report observed. A “lack of aggressive spirit” prevented the French from going on the offensive to “keep the Vietminh off balance.”¹³⁰ Going on the offensive could also mitigate domestic problems in France: if the stalemated military situation “continued for a prolonged period,” it would “undermine both civilian and military morale in Indo-China.”¹³¹

Some of this disapproval of France’s “offensive spirit” may have been due to the American Army’s World War II experiences. The huge campaigns fought by the Army in North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific had made the US Army accustomed to

¹²⁸ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹²⁹ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹³⁰ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹³¹ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

conventional battles; through the late 1940s, the Army trained with World War II weapons in preparation to fight World War II battles.¹³² The fluid nature France's war in Indochina did not fit the model created in Italy, Normandy, or the South West Pacific. Despite the Viet Minh's ability to strike the French when and where they chose, the road-bound nature of the French army and the way that this restricted movement exposed them to Viet Minh ambushes, and the ability of the Viet Minh to withdraw into either the civilian population or the jungle with frustrating ease, MAAG's Army representatives could only suggest that the French build more "offensive spirit."

American observers sometimes admitted that conditions outside the French Army's control added to their difficulties in Indochina. The same report related above remarked that, in the critical Tonkin region, the French had the narrowest of advantages in manpower (inadequate to support a major offensive operation), and that the French had no choice but to commit a considerable portion of its strength to static garrison duty. The document also considered the many difficulties that the limited Indochinese road net presented to the French.¹³³

Some Army observers argued that the French held on because of the equipment granted to them by the United States. According to one: "Prior to August 1950, French Union Forces in Indo-China were poorly equipped. . . . Particularly lacking were motor vehicles, radios, artillery weapons, modern automatic weapons, combat vehicles,

¹³² Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), 501-502.

¹³³ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

ammunition and spare parts.”¹³⁴ French and Indochinese maintenance discipline improved, as the Americans saw it, because of the “salutary effect of the MAAG inspections.” Not only did these inspections improve maintenance practices—they also encouraged native troops to take “considerable pride” in their weapons and equipment.¹³⁵

US Army reports declared that the influx of supplies improved the combat effectiveness of French units. “Better communications, made possible by the delivery of more adequate signal equipment, has improved combat control.” Despite the famous defeats of French motorized groups in the highlands of Vietnam, this same summary praised the new vehicles available for the French as having “greatly increased the mobility of the French Union Forces and made possible the use of a greater number of mobile striking forces so essential to combat conditions in Indo-China.” All this, the Americans asserted, contributed to improved morale.¹³⁶

MAAG’s Army personnel had mixed impressions of France’s army in Indochina. French troops and officers, including those forces from Africa, were professional and made fine soldiers. Indochinese units and commanders, when given proper training and equipment, could also make fine soldiers—though the US Army personnel in MAAG concluded that the French had shortchanged the Indochinese in this regard. They acknowledged French difficulties in Indochina--the terrain, poor roads, and France’s

¹³⁴ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹³⁵ Supplies, Services, and Equipment, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹³⁶ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

limited manpower—but, at the same time, criticized the French for slipping into a passive, defensive footing.

Overall, then, MAAG’s US Army representatives considered the French army in Indochina to be in a fair condition, especially with the supplies, equipment, and weapons provided to them by the United States. Their view was positive, and reflected the reasoning behind military assistance as described by historian Chester Pach and others, that the “giving of military aid more important than the specific purposes to which the aid was put.”¹³⁷ The US Air Force and Navy, however, came to less positive conclusions than their Army colleagues.

¹³⁷Pach, *Arming the Free World*, 230.

CHAPTER IV

THE US AIR FORCE AND NAVY

In contrast to the Army's positive views, MAAG's Air Force and Navy personnel held, with exceptions, negative views of France's small air force and navy (FAF and FRN, respectively) in Indochina. The Air Force section of MAAG endlessly repeated their grievances against the FAF—the FAF had low logistical standards, resisted American maintenance methods, and had limited combat value. MAAG's Navy personnel also leveled criticism against the FRN for logistical shortcomings. Though each MAAG party had a generally negative view of their French counterparts, the Navy produced a much smaller body of documents, making analysis of their opinions and activities much more difficult than that of the Air Force. Significantly, USN writers complimented the FRN's riverine capabilities, but seemed uninterested in investigating these units, possibly as a result of the USN's doctrinal leanings toward large, "blue-water" forces.

Thus, this chapter is subdivided between the two services, first explaining the observations and apparent opinions of MAAG's Air Force and Navy sections. Each section will also describe the French services in question.

THE AIR FORCE

MAAG's USAF personnel frequently criticized the capabilities of their French counterparts, so much so that the USAF sections of MAAG's Monthly Activity Reports often included a subheading entitled "Impediments to Progress," in which the USAF authors listed their most recent criticisms, sometimes in frank language. These centered on three factors: the FAF's lax maintenance and logistical standards; France's apparent reluctance to help train members of the Vietnamese Air Force; and the FAF's limited tactical abilities. USAF personnel argued that these problems originated from French operational inexperience, critical personnel shortages, and arrogance. Some of USAF's criticisms may have come from that service's doctrine of large-scale, strategic bombing campaigns. The USAF observers seldom complimented the FAF, and when they did, their compliments were contrary to the many complaints and criticisms already leveled by the American airmen. The Americans of MAAG's USAF branch laid some of the blame outside of the FAF—principally on MDAP for supply delivery problems—but the FAF itself received most of the disapproval.

Commitments to NATO and laws restricting the deployment of draftees overseas limited the FAF's personnel strength in Indochina.¹³⁸ In February 1952, its manpower strength was 7,440 air force personnel (meaning those with specific, technical training in flying, maintenance, or the strategic and tactical direction of aircraft), 303 of them pilots.

¹³⁸ Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 171-172.

Pilots and aircrew stayed in Indochina for tours of eighteen months, ground-personnel for twenty-seven.¹³⁹ The FAF only marginally increased in size as the war went on. By January 1954, for example, the FAF had (according to MAAG) increased in total size to 7,882 personnel, compared to the 7,440 in 1952, an addition of 442 men.¹⁴⁰ By August of that year, the FAF's strength had grown again to 8,027. Critically, at that late stage of France's involvement in Indochina, the FAF included 418 pilots.¹⁴¹ The FAF made use of indigenous personnel to act as guards and general labor on their airbases; in January 1954, the French employed 3,112 of these "indigs."¹⁴² However, these personnel had no technical qualifications, and could not contribute to the FAF's severe shortage of maintenance personnel. Because of the FAF's limited manpower, they could only put a small number of planes into the sky at any given time, regardless of what the United States desired to provide them.

The FAF in Indochina flew mostly American aircraft. One USAF author, writing in 1954, commented that the "overwhelming portion of the material in use in the French Air Force, Extreme Orient, has been furnished by MDAP funds. With the exception of a few obsolete liaison aircraft, the FAF is currently using only USAF type aircraft and munitions . . ." ¹⁴³ Another MAAG account listed the number of aircraft so far supplied

¹³⁹ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁴⁰ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁴¹ MMAR August 1954, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁴² MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁴³ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. Interestingly, some of these "obsolete liaison aircraft" included French-built *Storch* planes, copies of the general purpose *Luftwaffe* liaison aircraft.

by the US, and included 190 single-engine fighters, 49 twin-engine bombers, and 32 C-47 transport aircraft, all of World War II vintage.¹⁴⁴ The French used their American-made fighters (F-8F Bearcat interceptors), exclusively for tactical support, as the Viet Minh possessed no aircraft of their own. Though they performed this task well, they had shortcomings as attack aircraft. The F-8F's had a short operational range, preventing them from operating for extended periods of time in or near Laos (a shortcoming that proved critical during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu). The FAF's twin-engine bombers, the B-26 Invader (originally the A-26) had excellent range and payload, but were only available in limited numbers. The French used C-47 Dakotas for airborne and resupply operations. It was a rugged, dependable plane, but, again, the French lacked both numbers of aircraft and the pilots to fly them.¹⁴⁵ This was a small air force indeed. As a matter of comparison, some 600 B-29s bombed Japan *daily* at the height of the American air campaign against that country in 1945, thousand-plane raids against Germany were not uncommon, where the various bomber groups could deploy more than 5,000 B-17s and B-24s.¹⁴⁶

Rather than focusing on the small size of the FAF, many MAAG documents noted the US Air Force's dissatisfaction with the FAF's maintenance standards and

¹⁴⁴ Operations and Reports 1953, RG 472 SCGR.

¹⁴⁵ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 268-272. The F-8F had a payload of 1,000 lbs, and also sported .50 caliber machine guns. The B-26 could deliver 8,000 lbs of ordnance, and carried a battery of .50 caliber machine guns in its nose for strafing runs.

¹⁴⁶ Carroll V. Glines, Jr., *The Compact History of the United States Air Force* (New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1963), 267, and Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, and Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907-1960* (Air University Press: Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1971), 151.

logistical practices. One 1955 document reported that in “a visit to the units at Cap St. Jacques [a French airbase], it was very noticeable how lax and disorderly the maintenance was in comparison to USAF standards.”¹⁴⁷ A 1953 Monthly Activity Report included a litany of criticisms for the French, citing ammunition storage issues at a FAF base. The French neither stacked ammunition properly nor provided it with dunnage. They stored the ordnance too close to other structures, and did not provide the ammunition facilities with adequate drainage. USAF personnel even witnessed ground crews carelessly handle bombs.¹⁴⁸

These issues all stemmed from the USAF assertion that FAF followed inferior maintenance standards to those of the USAF. “Supply discipline is lacking,” reported one document from September 1954. “Methods employed are cumbersome, antiquated, and overextended through decentralization.”¹⁴⁹ One February 1952 piece summarized, “The supply and maintenance functions of the French Air Force are not also not up to USAF standards. The lack of qualified personnel and poor maintenance practices contribute greatly to the reduced effectiveness which no amount of logistical support can overcome.”¹⁵⁰ One estimate found that the French managed about twenty-five flight hours per month per aircraft. The USAF, with similar types of aircraft, had and could

¹⁴⁷ MMAR December 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁴⁸ MMAR December 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. Dunnage is any type of inert, shock-absorbing material used to protect ammunition from accidental detonation and wear and tear.

¹⁴⁹ MMAR September 1954, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁵⁰ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

manage seventy five hours.¹⁵¹ Another estimate put average French flight hours per aircraft at half that of the USAF.¹⁵² These comparisons showed, to MAAG reporters, that the FAF was a much less efficient air force than the USAF.

Americans attributed some of the problem to French attitudes. One report, after urging that the French should embrace preventative maintenance, and apply USAF training and supply practices, lamented that the Americans were “attempting” to train the French in US administrative techniques, but that the French resisted: “Training in all phases of Air Force functions should be, but is not being, conducted.”¹⁵³ A frustrated airman in 1955 wrote, “The problem is summarized simply: Fully qualified MAAG representatives say to the French, ‘We believe you can repair with your existing facilities and manpower items that have not been attempted.’ The French may say, ‘No, we can’t.’ An impasse immediately arises. . . .”¹⁵⁴ American personnel were not shy in laying the blame, either. A 1953 document considered that the problems of the French Air Force in Indochina—especially those of a logistical nature—“must be attributed directly to the French Air Force” and its “lack of aggressive attitudes to correct [administrative] malpractices.”¹⁵⁵ A January 1954 report used almost the same phrasing

¹⁵¹ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA..

¹⁵² MMAR January 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁵³ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁵⁴ MMAR February 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁵⁵ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

to describe the problem: a “lack of an aggressive attitude to correct their malpractices . . . Has a terrific bearing on supply support problems.”¹⁵⁶

After the negotiations that followed the Viet Minh’s crushing victory at Dien Bien Phu in spring of 1954, the FAF’s slip-shod maintenance and supply system suffered a total collapse. The United States had ceased its support of French operations in Indochina in July 1954 as a result of the ceasefire agreement.¹⁵⁷ The lack of fresh aircraft and replacement parts combined with the logistical problems USAF observers had long documented, and USAF personnel declared, as early as August 1954, that the FAF had suffered a “complete breakdown of combat capabilities since the ceasefire and stopping of supplies from the United States” and worried, if fighting broke out again, the French would be unable to hold their positions.¹⁵⁸ This same document made sure to mention that “This MAAG has continually emphasized to the French that under the . . . policy of the United States, Indo China was to become self-sufficient after FY 55 . . .” and that the FAF’s collapse was due to “the reluctance of the French to except [sic] this advise.”¹⁵⁹ Even simple communications proved difficult: “There are instances,” a MAAG airman wrote in May 1955, “of correspondence taking ten to fourteen days to travel a distance of less than two (2) miles.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁵⁷ The July 1954 Monthly Activity Report opens with, “This month’s activities feature a cease fire agreement.”

¹⁵⁸ MMAR August 1954, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁵⁹ MMAR August 1954, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁶⁰ MMAR May 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

The French did not respond to USAF complaints, perhaps because their discombobulated logistical system prevented an effective response. An American report from February 1955 commented on numerous French inadequacies: “[The FAF base at Bien Hoa still suffers from] conditions . . . that were recommended for correction in June 1954. . . . Recommendations for establishing assembly line techniques for repair, as practiced by USAF . . . are still unheeded . . . Skilled technicians and/or repairmen are not effectively utilized. . . .”¹⁶¹ One American assessment hoped that the lack of fresh replacement equipment from the United States would force the French to efficiently use what they had on hand. That same report suggested that the French be allowed supplies in the future with specific conditions: that Americans be in charge of the handling of shipments to ensure proper records, US accounting procedures be used, and programs be developed to exploit indigenous (i.e., Vietnamese) capabilities.¹⁶²

This issue of training “indigenous” personnel became quite important after the ceasefire in 1954, when both France and the US moved to reinforce the militaries of the Associated States. USAF personnel criticized the FAF for failures to support the new Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). As with the French, the US centered its disapproval on supply and maintenance issues, accusing the French of failure to train the Vietnamese in aircraft service and logistical procedures.

The criticisms started well before the cease-fire. One such accusation, though subtle, appeared in a January 1954 report, where the USAF author tabulated FAF

¹⁶¹ MMAR February 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁶² MMAR September 1954, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

personnel strength in Indochina. He included totals of pilots, aircrew, administrative/technical personnel, and non-technical personnel and emphasized that the number of “Vietnamese OJT [On-the-Job-Training] in FAF [was] 0.”¹⁶³

Other documents summarized the problems with less subtlety. A September 1954 report listed a variety of French shortcomings: “Indigenous industry possessed with a current technical ‘know-how’ is for all practical purposes non-existent in the fields of aircraft and/or aircraft engine overhaul or repair.” This rendered the Vietnamese mechanics on both FAF and VNAF air bases “copyists” rather than competent and independent mechanics. “It would appear through informal discussion that the FAF has little or no interest in developing the latent potential that must certainly exist within the mechanically minded but unexploited indigenous personnel.”¹⁶⁴ In May 1955, another airman wrote that the French Air Force displayed a “lack of appreciation for this indigenous potential.” Referring to the French as “lethargic,” “complacent,” and “reluctant,” he accused them of failing to take advantage of “mechanically minded Vietnamese.” These mechanically-oriented indigenous personnel, he continued, were currently “copyists,” but had a “keen desire to become exposed to more complex maintenance and supply problems calling for the exercise of their own initiative.”¹⁶⁵ They needed more supervision, which the Americans urged the French to provide.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁶⁴ MMAR September 1954, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁶⁵ MMAR May 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁶⁶ MMAR February 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

These problems continued. In 1955, the VNAF's continuing logistical inadequacies were a "matter of grave concern" to the USAF:

The major impediment to progress . . . is the reluctance on the part of the FAF advisors to entrust responsibility for planning to the Vietnamese. There appears to be a certain amount of passive resistance toward giving the Vietnamese feel that they can do their job. The stock answer to 'Why don't you give the Vietnamese more responsibility?' is, 'They are not capable. They are not ready to assume responsibility.'¹⁶⁷

The Americans attributed a great deal of the VNAF's problems to their French advisors. "This [training] program," wrote the same author who lamented for the Vietnamese mechanics unable to reach their potential in the VNAF, "is hampered by the intense anti-French feeling and the superior attitude of the French."¹⁶⁸ According to MAAG, the French provided the Vietnamese with "poor or inadequate" logistical instruction.¹⁶⁹ The USAF saw poor relations between FAF and VNAF "a handicap of major consequence . . ."¹⁷⁰

Several American reports wanted the USAF to participate more in the VNAF's training. A February 1955 report included a request to more define American involvement in Vietnamese training.¹⁷¹ The language barrier provided one major obstacle to this goal. Many Vietnamese officers spoke French, but few MAAG personnel in were similarly qualified, and, at least in May 1955, it appears that *no* USAF

¹⁶⁷ MMAR November 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁶⁸ MMAR May 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁶⁹ MMAR November 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁷⁰ MMAR August 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁷¹ MMAR February 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

personnel of MAAG were so qualified. The source in question did not address the possibility of Americans learning Vietnamese¹⁷² Furthermore, the USAF personnel had an unclear role in training the Vietnamese—hence the February 1955 request. USAF instructors wanted their positions clarified. “The VNAF personnel lack the experience and initiative to correct” inadequate French training, one document read, “and USAF personnel lack the authority to take remedial action.”¹⁷³

Along with maintenance, logistics, and the training of the Vietnamese, the USAF also saw the FAF’s tactical shortcomings as a major problem. France benefited in Indochina from having no enemy aircraft with which to contend. Though the FAF performed ground-attack, reconnaissance, and airborne operations as well as they could with their limited resources, a USAF writer remarked, in January 1954, “There is no air defense system in operation, therefore, if enemy air action were introduced, the effectiveness of the FAF would be greatly reduced.”¹⁷⁴ Another report, in 1953, warned that the French needed to establish effective air defense, and that many French pilots had minimal training in air-to-air combat.¹⁷⁵ Such comments reflected American military planners’ concerns about Communist Chinese intervention in Indochina, as had happened in Korea in 1950.

¹⁷² MMAR May 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁷³ MMAR November 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁷⁴ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁷⁵ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

Even without an enemy air force to oppose them, USAF personnel observed in January 1954 that the FAF's losses were "not exactly at a minimum." The French had lost fifty-two of the 182 F-8F fighters delivered by MDAP by that time, as well as ten of the fifty-five B-26s, a loss rate (from all causes) of 26 percent of the FAF's MDAP-supplied combat aircraft.¹⁷⁶ This loss rate spoke to more than just the state of aircraft maintenance in the FAF, as it must be remembered that, before the Viet Minh deployed 37mm anti-aircraft guns at Dien Bien Phu, the French had almost never encountered ground fire heavier than machine guns.¹⁷⁷ It is significant to note that, except when describing French aircraft losses, USAF observers never mentioned or described in detail French tactical air support, aerial resupply, or airborne operations.

MAAG's USAF personnel had some positive comments to say about their French counterparts. A January 1954 report admitted that the FAF "does accomplish its current mission in a satisfactory manner according to the French."¹⁷⁸ Another stated, in January 1953, that "the morale of the French Air Force is very high" and that the FAF supported ground operations against the "rebels."¹⁷⁹ Few other documents from the period 1950-54 mentioned the French Air Force's high morale, but none indicated the reverse. In a December 1952 Monthly Activity Report, the author admitted that "there is

¹⁷⁶ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁷⁷ At Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh massed several batteries of 37mm anti-aircraft guns, which all but closed off the French outpost to aerial resupply.

¹⁷⁸ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁷⁹ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

a noted trend toward self-improvement as American methods are proven feasible and do work when applied with reason and judgment [emphasis added].”¹⁸⁰

Notable among the positive statements, the USAF asserted that, despite its shortcomings, the FAF helped to hold the line in Indochina. With all their new equipment, issued by the Americans, the FAF had turned “the tide of battle with timely air support and continued interdiction of enemy supply routes.”¹⁸¹ A January 1954 report stated that “The MDAP support furnished the FAF has converted it from a weak, ineffectual force into a semi-modern air arm according to French standards capable of performing a mission in a satisfactory manner. It is according to the French a standard effective combat offensive and defensive weapon. . . .”¹⁸² These positive comments appeared infrequently in the USAF’s documents. Furthermore, considering the Viet Minh’s ability to contest, if not control, large areas of the Indochinese countryside, the ease with which the Viet Minh moved supplies by foot and bicycle in hilly jungle compared to the difficulty the French endured moving supplies by truck on roads, and the failure of the FAF to supply a distant outpost at the decisive moment of the war—Dien Bien Phu—it would appear that USAF statements about the FAF “turning the tide of battle” were written too soon.

The USAF saw several reasons for the FAF’s troubles in Indochina, aside from those already mentioned, including inexperience in large scale operations. Unlike the

¹⁸⁰ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁸¹ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁸² MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

USAF, “The French lack World War II experience in the logistics support of a modern air fleet,” one report remarked.¹⁸³ During the war, the French only flew an air force of significant size for a short time before it was unceremoniously crushed by Germany’s *Luftwaffe*.

The FAF’s manpower shortages also worried the USAF. Though the entire French war effort starved for manpower, the technical skill requirements of the air force made it especially understrength. Almost every MAAG USAF document mentioned, at least once, the criticality of FAF manpower shortages. As early as November 1950, a USAF observer wrote “The most hampering factor [for the FAF] is insufficient numbers of highly qualified personnel . . . no enlisted French Air Force personnel under the grade of Sergeant are assigned for duty in Indochina [due to the French selective service system].”¹⁸⁴ The problem grew worse. An April 1953 document stated that “lack of personnel within the French Air Force in Indo-China . . . is still the largest single impediment encountered in assisting the French toward accomplishment of their goal of establishing an adequate and efficient force in being.”¹⁸⁵ The FAF’s manpower shortage “hinders the full exploitation and application of the air combat potential.” The shortages of pilots, aircrews, and maintenance personnel were all critical. “Relief from this situation [slow/inadequate aircraft maintenance, exhausted mechanics, etc.],” one

¹⁸³ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁸⁴ Supplies, Services, and Equipment, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. Such was the shortage of French FAF personnel that their more qualified men had to perform non-technical tasks; the author of the document added that his French driver was a FAF Sergeant and a mechanic.

¹⁸⁵ MMAR April 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

account declared, “cannot be expected until additional trained technicians are made available.”¹⁸⁶

The shortage in personnel made all other problems secondary. Though the French had many competent mechanics with anywhere from five to fifteen years of experience, they did not have enough of them to go around.¹⁸⁷ Shortages of capable personnel caused part of the logistical problem suffered by the French.¹⁸⁸ One 1953 report lamented that France’s situation in Indochina could not improve “until the Air Forces of French Indochina are properly augmented with critically needed flight and support personnel.”¹⁸⁹ When the FAF received small numbers of H-11 helicopters, they had great difficulty keeping them in the air because of “the critical shortage of [French] helicopter mechanics.”¹⁹⁰

The USAF personnel of MAAG criticized the French for the FAF’s problems, but they also targeted MDAP. USAF authors complained about the quality of MDAP materials and the slowness of MDAP deliveries. In January 1953, 7 million of the 12 million .50 caliber machine gun rounds available to the FAF were corroded and unusable—the MAAG author noted that the ammunition boxes in question were labeled

¹⁸⁶ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁸⁷ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁸⁸ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁸⁹ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁹⁰ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

“For Training Use in Continental US Only.”¹⁹¹ A January 1954 Monthly Activity Report accused MDAP of slow deliveries: “The slow working of MDAP in developing programs, procuring funds from Congress, slow procurement and late delivery of urgently needed items does not fully satisfy the requirements of supporting an active war.”¹⁹² Sometimes, deliveries may have been on time, but were unrequested and lacked utility, such as inapplicable instruction manuals for use by French personnel:

There has been an increasing number of publications arriving which were not requisitioned and which are not applicable [to the FAF]. Recent examples are: One on the winterization of aircraft, another in ski equipment for aircraft . . . stocklists that have long since been outdated, receipt of complete price lists. . . in practically all cases, these [publications] arrived by priority air cargo at a time when air cargo space is at a premium. Once they arrive, it is necessary to closely screen all [items] to determine which should be delivered to FAF. Those which are not, are then burned. 500 lbs is a rough estimate of the quantity destroyed since 1 January of this year [1954].

The USAF had a bleak assessment of the FAF. There were a few complimentary features—the FAF’s high morale (before the ceasefire), the ability of the FAF to support ground operations, and, in the earlier years, the apparent willingness of the French to update their logistical methods. The USAF also spread some of the blame to the MDAP program. Ultimately, however, the USAF saw the FAF in a poor light. The French Air Force lacked effective air defense, either in flak or in air-to-air combat ability, rendering them exposed to air attack in the event of formal Chinese (or even Soviet) intervention.

The French were not training a replacement air force, the VNAF, which would leave the

¹⁹¹ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. MAAG documents frequently complained about ammunition received in Indochina (particularly .50 caliber ammunition), as it had not be “tropicalized” or arrived damaged after floods in Japan.

¹⁹² Ibid.

nascent Vietnamese state without the effective use of aircraft in any coming combat against the communist North. The FAF suffered from severe personnel shortages. And, perhaps most galling of all to MAAG's USAF personnel, French airmen apparently ignored American advice on updating their logistical practices. This made French air bases disorganized and unkempt places, their aircraft run ragged, and French ground forces without reliable support and resupply from the air.

The frustrations of MAAG's USAF personnel can be summed up with a USAF January 1954 assessment. "Lack of trained personnel, inability to formulate long-range logistics and operational plans, plus continued utilization of obsolescent accounting and maintenance procedures, contribute to the reduced effectiveness of the French Air Force which no amount of logistic support can overcome."¹⁹³ The USAF was unimpressed with their French counterparts in Indochina.

THE NAVY

The US Navy (USN) personnel of MAAG contributed much less material to MAAG's documents than did those of the Army and Air Force. What the Navy did report was mixed. US Navy authors praised the French riverine forces, but criticized French maintenance of ships and facilities. The quality of France's blue water forces and their training of the nascent Vietnamese navies also disappointed the Americans of MAAG.

¹⁹³ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

The French navy's (FRN) had a two-fold mission in Indochina. It conducted riverine operations against the Viet Minh and in support of various French outposts, and interdicted Viet Minh attempts to move supplies from China by sea to various points along the Indochinese coast; and provided escort to other ocean vessels if necessary.¹⁹⁴

To achieve its objectives, the FRN had 12,000 men, including unskilled, indigenous laborers. French naval personnel served for 18 month tours.¹⁹⁵ The French operated several small aircraft carriers during the war, including the *Arromanches*, a British-built light carrier on loan to the FRN.¹⁹⁶ Primarily, the FRN deployed vessels suitable for riverine operations, such as World War II vintage landing ships. With these craft they formed the *Dinassaut* units, detachments of shallow-bottomed FRN craft which patrolled Indochina's many inland waterways and conducted amphibious attacks and hit-and-run missions against the Viet Minh. French combat operations near the coast could take advantage of fire support from their handful of destroyer-sized surface ships. In addition, the FRN operated aircraft from shore-side bases. The United States provided the FRN with the vast majority of its boats, ships, and aircraft.

¹⁹⁴ Indo-China Country Statement for Presentation of the 1954 MDA Program, February, 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁹⁵ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA, and Charles W. Koburger, Jr., *The French Navy in Indochina: Riverine and Coastal Forces, 1945-54* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 36. The actual strength, according to various MAAG authors, varied from 10,000 to 12,000. Mostly likely, some US Navy personnel included the indigenous personnel in the French Navy's strength, while others did not. Though the Americans referred to the French navy as the FRN, the French term was *Forces Navales en Extrême-Orient* (FNEO).

¹⁹⁶ Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 29. Eventually, the French operated four separate carriers over the course of the war, though never more than two at any one time: the *Dixmude* (capacity 12 aircraft), *Arromanches* (30+), *La Fayette* (26), and *Boix Belleau* (26). The *Arromanches* was the most frequently deployed carrier of the war, on station off the Vietnamese coast for much of the war.

USN reports focused on the conditions of FRN vessels. Overall, American observers found French ships to be functional, but, as a 1953 report commented, “based on the United States standards their long-term maintenance procedures are found to be deficient. . . . Guns are in good condition, electronics operate satisfactorily . . . but hull maintenance, cleanliness, upkeep of magazines, stowage of ammunition and living spaces are neglected. When an officer from the Navy section, MAAG visits an MDAP-furnished item, his observations are based upon United States Navy standards, but scaled to the standards generally found and considered satisfactory in Indochina.”¹⁹⁷ The Americans ranked several ships visited in July 1954—the *Rapiere*, *Jonquille*, and *Trident*—as serviceable, but remarked upon “dirty and unkempt” crew quarters and filthy engine bilges.¹⁹⁸ Some French ships received fine reviews from the Americans, as a 1952 report found of the *Golo*, whose material condition was “good, and the morale of the officers and crew is excellent,” but most reports emphasized substandard French maintenance.¹⁹⁹

In addition to vessels, MAAG personnel also inspected French navy land facilities. In this area, the French fared better. A February 1952 report commented that “There is plenty of warehouse space here [in Cat Lai, a French naval base near Saigon], good hangars, and good handling facilities.”²⁰⁰ Navy observations in December 1952

¹⁹⁷ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁹⁸ MMAR August 1954, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁹⁹ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

²⁰⁰ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

found several FRN airbases in good condition.²⁰¹ By 1953, US Navy personnel observed continuing improvements in the Saigon Navy Yard.²⁰²

MAAG's USN evaluators gave considerable praise to France's riverine operations. Two thirds of France's navy personnel were "khaki navy"—or, by American terminology, "brown water."²⁰³ Vietnam is well suited to riverine operations, due to the massive Mekong and Red River deltas, in Tonkin and Cochinchina, respectively. France deployed their riverine forces to these inland waterways, in order to deny their use to the Viet Minh, and to keep them open for French military and commercial traffic.²⁰⁴ France's khaki navy executed numerous successful riverine attacks during the war, and were instrumental in defeating three large-scale attacks made by the Viet Minh in their attempt to end the war in early 1951.²⁰⁵ The presence of these riverine forces, described one Navy report, made Vietnam's rivers "safe in all areas occupied by friendly forces."²⁰⁶ Another document reviewed the French as "probably better qualified by experience and equipment than any other naval force for the particular type of river warfare which confronts it in Indochina. . . . Amphibious-type vessels (armored and

²⁰¹ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. The seaplane base at Cat Lai was old, but in "reasonably good shape." The FRN's Privateer base was "excellent."

²⁰² Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

²⁰³ Koberger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 38. Rather than "blue water," the French referred to their ocean-going forces as "white navy."

²⁰⁴ Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 20-22.

²⁰⁵ Koberger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 43-44.

²⁰⁶ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

transport) permit its use of the inland rivers and canals, and to deny their extensive use to the enemy. [Combined with carrier-based air support, the French Navy] constitutes an effective river and coastal navy very well suited for present warfare in Indochina.”²⁰⁷ As well as combat operations, France’s khaki navy performed an important logistical function on the rivers, when the Viet Minh and/or terrain made overland supply deliveries impossible. One Navy writer described the task as “a constant and heavy undertaking which they accomplish with facility.”²⁰⁸

The Americans did not have such strong praise for France’s blue water navy. After admitting to the riverine force’s effectiveness, a January 1954 report added that, “In other more orthodox naval warfare, they [the French] are not trained nor well equipped.”²⁰⁹ American observers cited vulnerability to submarines as a major French handicap. Though the Viet Minh did not have any submarines to capitalize on this weakness, American planners were acutely aware that the Soviets, and perhaps even the Chinese, did possess such vessels, and, American concerns of overt Sino-Soviet involvement in Indochina (as happened in Korea), made this concern understandable.

²⁰⁷ Field Estimate, January 1953, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

²⁰⁸ Indo-China Country Statement for Presentation of the 1955 MDA Program, 26 January 1954, box 2, SCGR, MAAG General Adjutant Records, RG 472, NARA. The Americans praised the French navy for having stopped the Viet Minh from moving their supplies by water (river, canal, and coast), but several historians consider this highly unlikely, given the sheer amount of coastline and riverbank in Vietnam, and the large numbers of water-going merchant vessels in that country. Charles Koburger, to give some insight on the sheer number of Vietnamese fishermen who daily took to the water (any of whom could have been smuggling supplies for the Viet Minh), paraphrased a French sailor’s observations: “from a single point off the Annamese coast, he counted more than 500 small craft whose sails appeared to touch each other, giving the appearance of a white sea (*The French Navy in Indochina*, 39).”

²⁰⁹ Indo-China Country Statement for Presentation of the 1955 MDA Program, 26 January 1954, box 2, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

US Navy advisors also criticized the French for their slowness in establishing a Vietnamese navy. American personnel complained that the French only trained Vietnamese as crews for small boats and, like their US Army counterparts, wanted the Vietnamese sailors to have more responsibilities within the French Navy.²¹⁰

The Navy's reports touched on a variety of issues, but what may be even more notable is their brevity. The Navy section of any given MAAG report was almost always the shortest section. While the Army reported extensively on France's ground units, and the Air Force on French shortcomings, the Navy wrote very little, often including only a few ship inspections. Why the Navy observers wrote so little is unclear. By comparing the tons of US-supplied equipment in Indochina to the number of MAAG personnel available to monitor them, the Navy was no more overworked than the Air Force personnel, and much less so than the Army.²¹¹ Furthermore, USN authors were also uninterested in the FRN's amphibious operations, some of them comparable to assaults the USN had conducted during World War II.²¹²

²¹⁰ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

²¹¹ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA. In 1952, as noted in Chapter II, the US delivered 94,823 tons of materiel to Indochina, of which 5,890 were for the French navy, 7,746 for the air force, and 81,187 for the army. MAAG's Navy section consisted of thirteen officers and enlisted men; the Air Force, nineteen; and the Army, fifty-five. Thus, after a crude analysis, each US sailor was responsible for monitoring 453 tons of MDAP material; each airman, 407 tons; and each soldier, 1,476 tons.

²¹² Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 144. Operation *Carmague* was one of the largest, launched to clear the length of *Route Coloniale 1* between Quang-Tri and Hue, the very road after which Fall named his book. The assault consisted of elements of "ten infantry regiments, two airborne battalions, the bulk of three armored regiments, one squadron of armored launches and one armored train, four artillery battalions, thirty-four transport aircraft, six reconnaissance aircraft, twenty-two fighter-bombers, and about twelve Navy ships, including three LSTs."

Like the US Army, the US Navy's had an uneven assessment of the French Navy. Whereas French naval facilities pleased them and they praised France's "khaki" sailors for hard fighting on Vietnam's rivers and canals, they criticized FRN maintenance standards, conventional naval abilities, and training of the Vietnamese. Nevertheless, their limited commentary makes any assessment of their attitude toward the French more general.

CONCLUSIONS

The US Air Force and Navy sections of MAAG presented an unusual collection of assessments of French performance in Indochina. Like the Army, they criticized the logistical performance of the French and their training of native (Indochinese) forces, but also emphasized the positive impact of American equipment on France's military position in Indochina, and the bravery and capability of French personnel in combat.

Despite these agreements with Army assessments, however, USAF and USN personnel also presented some contradictory observations. For example, the USAF alternated between praising the FAF for turning "the tide of battle with timely air support" and criticizing it for heavy losses and a substandard ratio of maintenance-to-flight hours.²¹³ The tone of USAF reports gives a reader the impression that the French were lucky to get aircraft off the ground, let alone turn the "tide of battle" or even carry

²¹³ Field Estimate, February 1952, box 1, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

out their “mission in a satisfactory manner,” but several of their reports ultimately argued these points.²¹⁴

Though MAAG’s Navy personnel praised the riverine operations, they had little else to say about them. This is also surprising, as in the immediate post-World War II environment, the US Navy found itself in a state of flux. Due to the apparent dominance of the Air Force in the immediate aftermath of the war, the Navy’s strategic value appeared limited to politicians. Even officers in the Navy wondered what their ocean-going branch could accomplish, when the Soviet Union had no navy to speak of, and atomic weaponry could sink or irradiate entire fleets with a single blow. These problems combined with a hasty demobilization to leave the Navy unsure of its future.²¹⁵

In retrospect, it should have been in the US Navy’s best interest to pay more attention to France’s riverine forces. These types of operations could have been a new direction for the Navy to take, as it argued to continue its own existence in the atomic age. The Navy predicted potential involvement in peacekeeping operations, for which riverine operations would be well suited. Organizing riverine units would allow the Navy to apply very specific force in an unstable nation’s waterways, using shore parties and .50 caliber machine guns instead of Marine divisions and battleship cannon. The

²¹⁴ MMAR January 1954, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

²¹⁵ Vincent Davis, *Postwar Defense Policy and the U.S. Navy, 1943-1946* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 268. Davis wrote: “Indeed, [Secretary of the Navy James V.] Forrestal himself, although convinced that the USSR was the new enemy, was unsure how naval power could be used against them.

French Navy's inland operations provided an excellent opportunity to observe riverine forces in action.²¹⁶ MAAG's Navy personnel were in a good position to do just that, but did not take the opportunity. Indeed, the very environment of the Navy may have left these men uninterested in riverine operations. From 1949 to 1954, the Navy's personnel digest, *All Hands*, printed only two articles loosely dealing with riverine operations—one an excerpt from a book on naval fighting during the American Civil War, and another about US Navy-manned, repurposed German patrol boats on the Rhine.²¹⁷

It is significant that, unlike the Army, both the Air Force and Navy expressed concern over France's ability to resist a conventional, external attack on Indochina. Though they did not mention it specifically, they appear to have envisioned a scenario similar to the Chinese intervention in Korea. USAF writers complained of France's inability to resist conventional air attacks, with limited air-to-air combat training and little or no air defense assets in-theater, and Navy personnel criticized the French for its lack of anti-submarine and other "blue water" capabilities. Why they focused on such concerns, while Army observers never did, is unclear. This concern of large scale Chinese intervention helps explain why USAF personnel so criticized the French. Despite their admissions that the FAF could carry out its support duties in "an acceptable manner," they may have worried that the FAF was only a single Sino-Soviet intervention away from total destruction.

²¹⁶ Davis, *Postwar Defense Policy*, 158.

²¹⁷ "Book Excerpt," *All Hands* No. 393, November 1949: 59-63, and Kenneth Barnsdale, "Watch on the Rhine," *All Hands* No. 396, February 1950: 9-10.

Together, the US Air Force and Navy held negative opinions of their French counterparts in Indochina. Some of these opinions were on the lax maintenance and logistical standards of the FAF and FRN and their shortcomings in training Indochinese personnel. Others were more subjective, reflecting concerns about the intervention of major Sino-Chinese forces. Finally, the US Navy, as an institution, was not interested in the small-scale of naval operations France carried out in Indochina. In the main, both the USAF and USN proffered much different versions of France's performance than did the US Army.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

How, then, did MAAG as a whole see France's military performance in Indochina? MAAG's constituent services held a variety of opinions. The Army, Air Force, and Navy representatives agreed that the French were logistically inefficient and paid too little attention to training their Indochinese allies. The Army and the Air Force both questioned the combat abilities of their French counterparts. The Army saw the French as passive, allowing the Viet Minh to retain the initiative; the Air Force, believed that the French used their aircraft poorly and were vulnerable to air attack, should the Soviets or Chinese enter the war. The Army and the Navy were both complimentary of French combat units. As a whole, however, the negative appraisal of the French attributed to MAAG by historians only applies to the USAF personnel, not to MAAG as a whole—the Army in particular rated the French well, despite their misgivings about logistics and passive “oil slick” tactics.

An examination of a variety of MAAG documents reveals that at the top levels, MAAG's official tone was neutral toward the French, and sometimes even complimentary. The summarizing section of any given MAAG report emphasized the effect had by MDAP-provided equipment and supplies and the status of this materiel. These summaries tended to lean toward the US Army's positive assessment of the French rather than the more critical Air Force and Navy perspectives. In some ways, the

assessments conveyed an optimistic view of the war in Indochina that individual observers may not have shared. They often disregarded the poor positions of the French and condemnatory reports of the US Air Force, and emphasized the positive effects of American support, and the need for continued resistance against communist expansion in Asia.

MAAG reports emphasized improvement in French handling of MDAP materiel and the positive effect this materiel had on the war effort. “End-use inspections and other observations,” one report from 1952 stated, “reflect the increasing ability of the French and Associated States Forces to store, use, and properly maintain materiel received under MDAP.”²¹⁸ Though MAAG expressed that materiel was not always cared for to the standards of the US Army, it was at least maintained in an “acceptable manner.” The equipment granted to the French enabled them to “perform their assigned missions in an excellent manner.”²¹⁹ Other Monthly Activity Reports echoed this sentiment: “. . . the French and Associated States forces are capable of handling properly and storing MDAP materiel and that materiel and equipment are being used for the purpose intended,” and “[MDAP provided] equipment on hand in all units visited will enable these units to perform their missions in an excellent manner.”²²⁰ This positive attitude reached an unrealistic peak in when a January 1954 document, after emphasizing

²¹⁸ MMAR December 1952, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

²¹⁹ MMAR April 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

²²⁰ MMAR March 1953, box 1, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

the need for continued MDAP support for the French, stated, “. . . it is considered that the French Union forces have the capability of destroying the Viet Minh in the next few years.”²²¹ In May and June of that year, the Viet Minh annihilated many of the best units in the French army, and peace negotiations had commenced at Geneva.

Some reports by MAAG personnel apparently ignored the complaints of non-Army members of the group. For example, after his departure from Indochina in April 1954, former-MAAG Chief Major General Thomas J. H. Trapnell wrote that American materiel given to the French air force “has converted it into a modern air arm capable of performing its combat mission in a highly satisfactory manner. It is an effective offensive or defensive combat weapon, the full potential of which has not been realized.”²²² Trapnell gave this report after years of negative USAF reports on the FAF.

That MAAG’s reports tended to reflect the US Army’s view of the French rather than that of the USAF and USN is not surprising, considering the overwhelming majority of materiel the US sent to Indochina was intended for ground forces. Though the Air Force wrote heated reports, often with obvious frustration, the French air force they investigated represented only a small portion of the overall force commanded by the French in Indochina. Between them, the French air force and navy fielded around 20,000 men, while the army consisted of hundreds of thousands. Because of France’s

²²¹ Indo-China Country Statement for Presentation of the 1955 MDA Program, 26 January 1954, box 2, SCGR, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

²²² Major General Thomas J.H. Trapnell, “Former Chief of MAAG, Indochina Comments in his Debriefing on the French Situation in Indochina,” Box 03, Unit 13: The Douglas Pike Collection, the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

limited resources, much of the war depended upon the operations of French and French-allied army units. These units, patrolling the swamps, rice paddies, and cane fields of Indochina's lowlands, and battling through the jungles and mountains of the highlands, were the deciding force of France's war in Indochina. Their success in rooting out Viet Minh troops, so it seemed, would determine the course of the war.

Not only were the majority of MAAG's personnel Army, but *every* MAAG Chief between 1950 and 1956, was an Army general officer. Furthermore, occasional contradictory elements of USAF and USN reports may have weakened their positions in the eyes of their MAAG Chiefs. Both of these helped push MAAG summaries toward emphasizing Army opinions of the French.

MAAG report summaries painted an unrealistically optimistic image of the war in Indochina, focusing as they did on successful shipments of US supplies, weapons, and equipment. They could be criticized for this assessment, but it must be remembered that MAAG-Indochina operated under difficult conditions. Their small size meant tremendous workloads, and thus limited available time per soldier, airman, and sailor. They used their resources to focus on their primary mission, to process and monitor US materiel provided to the French. When Army personnel made it into the field, they did so in small teams, and rarely to direct combat zones. Air Force observers could not ride along on airstrikes with French pilots. Amongst the services, only the USN seemed to neglect direct observation of, and interaction with, the primary forces of their French opposites, France's brown-water riverine units.

MAAG's assessment of the French tied in neatly to the prevailing sentiments of US military aid—that its use could prevent communist expansion around the world, and that the very presence of military aid was enough to ensure success, without regard to how it was put to use. Though this hope was checked at Dien Bien Phu, MAAG clung to it in the years before that fateful battle. Anti-communism, and the assumption that communist nations around the world served Moscow, appeared in MAAG writings. General Trapnell, in his debriefing after command passed to General John W. O'Daniel, hoped French Indochina would “occupy a blocking position against the expansion of Chinese Communist influence” into Southeast Asia, fearing that if the communists were successful there, Burma, Malaya, and Thailand would surely fall, followed in time by India, Ceylon, Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand. He added that “as in Korea, Iran, Malaya, and Burma, the war in Indochina is not a separate entity. It is another tentacle of the octopus, another brush fire on the periphery of the iron and bamboo curtains. The problem can only be solved completely if the masters of the Kremlin decide that Indochina should be abandoned in favor of more profitable enterprises elsewhere.”²²³

MAAG's Monthly Activity Reports, field estimates of effectiveness, and other documents cannot be used alone to understand the French Indochina War. Reports from March, April, May, and June 1954 do not mention the fighting at Dien Bien Phu. The ceasefire in July 1954 is only commented upon in passing. Very little of the war's

²²³ Ibid.

desperation can be seen in the MAAG documents. France's last stands in places like Cao Bang and Dien Bien Phu; the embattled marches of French mobile groups through the Vietnamese Highlands; the terrible human cost of French punitive measures and Viet Minh reprisals; the Viet Minh's willingness to advance through artillery and napalm, no matter the cost, to achieve their objectives—none of these make an appearance in the MAAG summaries.

To MAAG, the war was a matter of cataloging materiel delivered, training visits, and equipment inspections. What the men in MAAG wanted in Indochina can be seen through them: an optimistic “can-do” attitude that the communists, through application of American materiel and logistical might, could be stopped. In December 1955, Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, then MAAG Chief, spoke at a monthly advisor's conference, as, by that period, Americans and Frenchmen were working together to train the growing Vietnamese Army. His tone was positive. “All of us, regardless of trials and tribulations, frustration, and at times discouragement, must maintain an optimistic view point . . . We Americans and French have time to be anti-communist, only.”²²⁴

²²⁴ MMAR December 1955, box 2, MAAG Adjutant General Division, RG 472, NARA.

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