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# DAILY ENTERPRISE



## (U) HISTORY TODAY - 6 May 2015

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### (U) A look back -- COMINT in the Vietnam War



(U) This article is based on a recent Vietnamese article, and the details cannot be confirmed independently.

(U) In 1953 Colonel Le Trong Nghia was chief of the Military Intelligence Department for the Communist Party Central Committee and the on-going war with the French. He attended a meeting with President Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap about the developing military situation.

(U) Ho warned the others that, "You must never underestimate the enemy. It's no problem if you raise your assessment and are proven wrong. But never underestimate the enemy." Ho added, "Intelligence officers must never try to please their commanders. Your duty is to report what is, not what your commander wants to hear."

☒ (U) (Historical photo-from left, General Vo Nguyen Giap with Prime Minister & President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Ho Chi Minh.)

(U) From left, General Vo Nguyen Giap with Prime Minister and President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Ho Chi Minh.

(U) The Viet Minh, a nationalist organization with ties to the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), was seeking to expel the French colonial government. France had colonized much of Southeast Asia by military force in the late nineteenth century, had relinquished control to the Japanese during World War II, and had re-established a measure of control after the war. The Viet Minh had fought the Japanese, and in the late 1940s and early 1950s were seeking to resist French control. The French fielded conventional military units, while the Vietnamese largely waged an unconventional war, a style that would become familiar to Americans a generation later.

(U) Colonel Nghia became experienced in integrating diverse sources of intelligence information, including HUMINT and COMINT.

(U) In late 1953, the French, frustrated that they had not been able to bring their enemy into a set-piece battle, deliberately set out a target that they hoped the Viet Minh would be unable to resist. The French stationed a large military force at a remote, mountainous area in northern Vietnam, a place

called Dien Bien Phu; they expected the Viet Minh to launch a conventional ground attack against it. When that happened, superior French air forces and artillery would destroy the attackers.

(U) In fact, the Viet Minh moved a large force into the mountains around Dien Bien Phu, and were preparing to attack. Local commanders accepted advice from PRC advisors to strike quickly. General Giap, accompanied by senior staff officers, including Colonel Nghia, arrived in early January 1954.

(U) As planning for the attack continued, Colonel Nghia was told by his COMINT unit that the French had advance knowledge of the Viet Minh's plans. The French had captured a Vietnamese soldier and extracted key information from him by "severe questioning." The Viet Minh intercepted a later French radio warning message giving the date and time for the attack. Intercept revealed French paratroopers were about to occupy a key position and launch a counterattack; a second French unit would strike the Viet Minh from behind, crushing them between the two French forces.

(U) An observation post reported the arrival of the French paratroops. Other intelligence sources confirmed additional details of the French plan.

(U) Informed of this intelligence, General Giap visited the intercept site and talked with the operators. He read the intercept and questioned the operators about it.

(U) Giap ordered Colonel Nghia to maintain absolute silence about his source of information. This went beyond protecting sources from compromise to the enemy: many of the intercept operators had French educations and were politically vulnerable at a time when Communist Party ideology emphasized peasant backgrounds.

(U) Major military decisions for the Viet Minh were made by a party committee in which General Giap had only one vote. His three colleagues preferred to defer to the PRC advisors who advocated a "fast strike" policy. It took time and considerable effort, but Giap convinced them the attack had to be canceled. Just a few hours before the attack was to start, the Viet Minh forces withdrew from their forward positions. Giap later titled a publication about this: *Hardest Decision*.

(U) The French forces at Dien Bien Phu were cut off from resupply sources and over time, their defense perimeter shrank under Viet Minh advances. Later, their position came under attack from Viet Minh artillery, dragged up the mountains at great effort. The French at Dien Bien Phu surrendered on May 7, 1954; this effectively ended their attempt to restore Vietnam as a colony.

(U) The story of the battle for Dien Bien Phu was well told by author Bernard Fall in his classic history, *Hell in a Very Small Place*. However, the role of COMINT in the battle has only recently come to light.

(U) Click [here for larger view of photo](#).

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