Gen: Vo Nguyen Giap explains a battle map to his aides during the struggle against France in the '50's—"Avoid the enemy's strong points so as to attack his weak ones," he has said.

The Strategist Behind the Vietcong

North Vietnam's Commander in Chief breaks all the rules of conventional warfare. And for 20 years he has been confounding conventionally trained opponents.

By MAX CLOS

GEN. VO NGUYEN GIAP, the North Vietnamese commander, does not have what one might call "a real soldier's mug." His round face beneath a domed forehead, like his corpulent stature, suggests a conscientious functionary of modest rank rather than a war lord. He seems uncomfortable in his beige uniform with glittering epaulettes and flat peaked cap, copied from the Soviet Army. Moreover, this outfit is quite a recent creation. Until 1958, North Vietnamese officers and men all wore the same simple dress of thin green cotton without badges of rank. To explain the meaning of this change, General Giap has had articles published in the press, pointing out that in the "imperialist camp," the object of gold braid is "to strengthen the army as an instrument of oppression," while in North Vietnam, badges of rank "stiffen the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Giap holds an extremely important position in that dictatorship. Besides being Commander in Chief of the army, he is Vice President of the Government, Minister of National Defense and a member of the Central Committee of Workers—i.e., of the Communist party. Some observers believe he is destined to succeed Ho Chi Minh on the latter's death. It is not impossible that Giap even now may be the man in real power at Hanoi.

THE exact strength of the people's army has never been officially revealed. There is general agreement in fixing it at about 300,000 men, to whom must be added the 100,000 troops fighting in South Vietnam. Giap, of course, denies that the military operations in the south are controlled from Hanoi. The official Vietminh version is that an armed insurrection of the population against "the American imperialists and their valets" is directed by a "Liberation Front" composed solely of Southerners. Obviously, the truth is quite different. That is why one can put the total forces under General Giap's command at 400,000 men.

Giap does not belong to the international caste of professional soldiers. He has adopted war as a career, but he remains essentially a civilian. This is perhaps the secret of his extraordinary success. All the generals of the Western world resemble one another, whatever the side employing them. By dint of repeating the same theories time after time in the staff colleges and pondering the same problems, they finish by looking like each other physically, by acquiring the same mannerisms and, especially, the same way of thinking. This is very probably why generals find themselves so completely at sea when a war is not fought according to the rules.

For 20 years, Giap the civilian has been waging wars *not* according to the rules, and for 20 years he has been winning them. Each time, his unfortunate foes declare that they have been "surprised" and then devote considerable time to explaining that logically they should not have been beaten. Such for example, is the case of the French Commander in Chief in Indochina, Gen. Henri Navarre; he is still convinced that victory at Dienbienphu in 1954 should not have escaped him.

GIAP has never attended a staff course, except perhaps for a short time in China in 1941. He is self-taught and has patiently forged the instrument of his victory—an army admirably adapted to the political and geographic conditions peculiar to Indochina. He has also worked out a doctrine of guerrilla warfare which is today studied in staff colleges throughout the world.

The "Giap doctrine" is contained in some 20 newspaper articles and 10 or so directives *(Continued on Page 52)*

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intended for the troops. They make boring reading, as does all Marxist-inspired literature, but they are deceptively simple and they produce results. The Vietnamese peasants who provide the rank and file, and the officers who lead them, understand the theories of their chief without difficulty. They absorb them and learn how to apply them in the field and then win victories.

ON the other side, general-staff officers have studied Giap, have tried to apply his doctrine to meet their own needs, and have come to grief. How can this phenomenon be explained?

Giap's answer is: "Because a people's army is always capable of overcoming an aggressor's forces, whatever they may be."

The little general has an almost mystical belief in the infallibility of his method. During a recent interview on French TV about the situation in South Vietnam, he declared: "Things are going badly with the enemy, because the [South] Vietnamese soldiers do not want to fight for the Americans. But we are in no hurry. The longer we wait, the greater will be the Americans' defeat."

During France's war against the Vietminh, from 1946 to 1954, the Communist propaganda services often employed this kind of language. French officials and officers laughed at them. Occasionally, they admitted partial reverses. They granted Giap a measure of military talent, which at times made things difficult for certain units of the French Expeditionary Force, but it was unthinkable that the Vietminh could inflict a defeat on the French army. Then came Dienbienphu.

EVEN though Westerners have a good knowledge of General Giap's politico-military doctrine, relatively little is known about the man himself. Communist leaders are not given to confidences—especially the Vietnamese, who have an excessive taste for secrecy. Everything in Hanoi is secret, and all questioning is suspect. Besides, the Vietnamese are both crafty and distrustful and excellent actors. The result is that it is very difficult to tell when the person you are talking to is sincere.

During the 1945-46 period of negotiations which preceded the final rupture between France and Ho Chi Minh, a number of Frenchmen had dealings with Giap. Some describe him as "sentimental and a fanatic, wholeheartedly devoted to his country." In 1946, for example, when General Leclerc arrived at Hanoi, Giap shook him fervently by the hand, exclaiming: "The first resistance fighter of Vietnam salutes the first resistance fighter of France!" It is known that during the period of confusion following the Japanese surrender, Giap, then Minister of the Interior, personally saw to it that French civilians were not massacred by an overexcited mob.

But this "sentimentalist" is also a man animated by an inflexible will, who has no hesitation in resorting to the most cruel methods. In 1944, when Giap led the first Vietminh rebellion in the mountainous region dominating the Tonkinese delta, the harshness with which he treated wealthy peasants and local notables suspected of lukewarmness became notorious.

To those who draw attention to the suffering the conflict has caused his people, Giap replies: "Hundreds and thousand of men die every minute on the earth. Even if they are Vietnamese, the deaths of a hundred, a thousand, or tens of thousands of men amount to very little."

VO NGUYEN GIAP was born in 1912 in the province of Vuangbinh in the part of Vietnam that was then called Annam. His father was a modest scholar who at the same time cultivated his rice fields in order to maintain his family.

Young Giap enrolled at the French college in Hue where he attracted attention both by his quick intelligence and by his nationalist ideas — that is, his hostility to French colonial rule. The Security Police began to keep an eye on this hot-headed boy in whom they saw a future agitator.

In 1930, disturbances broke out in the Hue district. Giap, at 18, was arrested.

When he emerged from jail, he immediately enrolled in the Communist party. His decision was based upon realism more than ideology. At that time there existed in Vietnam an infinite number of secret societies and clandestine parties, all with the aim of winning Vietnam's independence. But they were completely ineffective, their meetings spent in endless talk and the passage of resolutions never carried out. The Communists were well-organized, efficient and disciplined. Giap, the sentimental dreamer, was also a youth who wanted results. He felt that the Communist party alone was capable of passing from words to deeds. That was why he chose it. Much later, when the conflict with France broke out, great numbers of non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists were to rally to the Vietminh for the same reason.

Giap left Hue for Hanoi, continuing his law studies, teaching history in a private school —and continuing to work actively within the party. In 1938 he received his doctorate of law. By then, he had married

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the daughter of one of his former teachers.

When World War II broke out in 1939, the French Government outlawed the Communist party. Its principal leaders, among them Giap, withdrew to China. His wife, herself a party leader, remained behind, and was arrested by the French Security Police; she died in prison in 1943. Giap's sister-in-law, also a militant, was guillotined. Giap's hostility toward France and the French increased.

AT Tientsin in 1941, Ho Chi Minh created the Vietminh Front. Giap, at the age of 29 already reckoned one of the most brilliant members of the party, was given the task of organizing the first rebel underground groups. He succeeded admirably. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Vietminh seized power at Hanoi, and Giap became Minister of the Interior in Ho Chi Minh's first Government. With the final rupture between France and Vietnam in December, 1946, Giap was appointed Commander in Chief of the young Vietnamese Army.

It was an overwhelming task, but he felt his way, learning his profession at the same time as practicing it.

By the end of 1953, he felt he was ready. The French had made the mistake of concentrating their best troops in the hollow punch bowl of Dienbienphu, much too far from their bases. Giap weighed the risks, then decided to throw his entire force into the battle—and won.

To a journalist asking him to sum up his theories of war, he replies: "The essential is to have a workable politico-military doctrine." His system is not original. He has taken the main points from the works of Mao Tse-tung. Mao himself borrowed largely from a Chinese general of about 500 B.C., Sun-tzu. Giap has assembled these disparate elements into one coherent whole, easy to understand, and has hammered them deeply into the political and military cadres of his country.

IN a book published in Hanoi in 1961, the Vietminh commanding general explained his theories. Basically, everything comes from the people. Nothing is possible without its cooperation. The army should not be a body separated from the population. The two should be intimately associated. It is the famous idea of the guerrilla as a "fish in the water," to use Mao's phrase.

Without the civil population, writes Giap, "we shall have no information. We shall be able neither to preserve secrecy, nor carry out rapid movements. . . The people suggests stratagems and acts as guide. It finds liaison officers, hides us, protects our activities, feeds us and tends our wounded."

Commenting on the opera-

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tions against the French, he says: "Thanks to the existence of party cells in all parts of the country, partisans were to be found everywhere. . . In the enemy's rear, our irregulars forced him to split up his forces, wearing him out and bringing him to a standstill in places specifically chosen to allow our extremely mobile troops to come up and wipe him out. These partisans turned the enemy's rear into our advance posts and thus provided guerrilla bases as springboards for the attacks of our regular units."

IN Vietnam, a regular Communist unit never operates "uncovered." It acts only in sectors already "softened up," where the population has been taken firmly in hand by political commissars, stiffened by guerrilla troops recruited in the same villages and ready to intervene brutally at the least sign of treachery — or even lukewarmness — on the part of the inhabitants. It is a sealed-off universe into which the enemy has the greatest difficulty penetrating. The chief difficulty of the war in Indochina is that in sectors under Vietminh control it is practically impossible to get information.

For the population to cooperate efficiently with the army it must do so of its own free will. This is essential. The people must never be coerced — at least at the outset. They must first be convinced—"educated," as the Marxists say.

THE work of "softening up" begins with the visit of specially trained political commissars, who explain to the population of the village what is expected of it. They carefully avoid threatening any who are refractory. The object of the operation is to win the assent of the majority of the inhabitants gradually. Only then are methods of terror employed.

Fortified by the support of the majority, the Vietminh officials will ask the people to indicate the "traitors" and enemy agents among them. "Assassination committees" are then entrusted with carrying out executions. Following this, the guerrillas are recruited. At this stage, the village has become a new Communist base, capable of bring-

DIENBIENPHU—A Vietminh prisoner ducks under fire during Giap's final battle with the French.

ing effective aid to the regular units.

The Vietminh army corps is divided into three classes. Giap defines them like this: "The task of the regulars is to carry on a war of movement over a wide theater of operations, in order to wipe out the enemy's main forces. The regional troops operate in their own localities and insure the coordination of tasks between the regulars and the guerrillas. The guerrillas defend their own villages, take a hand in production and join the regular and regional forces to prepare for and then engage in battle."

Within the army, iron discipline is imposed on the men. The object is always identical: to maintain complete agreement between the people and the troops.

Every Vietminh combatant takes an "oath of honor," several points of which concern relations with the population. Everything is thoroughly worked out. He must not enter a house without the owner's consent; he must sweep and clean the place where he has been living. He may not share the inhabitants' food if doing so would make them go short.

Another essential principle of Giap's doctrine can be stated as follows: "War must pay." As he sees it, the principal virtues of a military chief are, in order, intelligence, initiative, the offensive spirit, resolution, secrecy, ra-

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pidity and perfect execution.

"Intelligence," writes Giap, "consists of avoiding the enemy's strong points so as to attack his weak ones . . . not to continue the battle unless success is certain. . . . One must keep in mind that the main object of a campaign is the destruction of the enemy's main forces and that, in consequence, one must avoid suffering losses by trying to hold one's ground at all costs. Our troops must never be wasted merely for the sake of the defense or the occupation of territory. . . ."

The spirit of initiative "consists of always trying to make contact with the enemy without waiting for him to contact us. If he wants rapid action, force him to slow down. If he wants to rest his men, compel him to fight. If he wants to take one particular road, oblige him to take several—all this with the object of destroying him detachment by detachment."

ANYONE who has fought in revolutionary war knows how difficult an army organized on Western lines finds this type of warfare. There is a deeply hidden reason for this, according to Giap, and Western leaders can do nothing about it. It is what he calls "the contradiction of the aggressive colonial war."

"This war," he writes, "can have only one objective—the occupation and the subjection of the country. The nature and the very aim of the campaign he is conducting oblige the enemy to split up his forces so as to be able to occupy the invaded territory. During the war against the French . . . the enemy was thus faced with a contradiction: It was impossible for him to occupy the invaded territory without dividing his forces. By their dispersal, he created difficulties for himself. His scattered units thus became an easy prey for our troops and his mobile forces dwindled more and more. . . .

"While the French Army became more and more spread out each day, the revolutionary army on the one hand continued to extend the guerrilla war, and on the other carried on the ceaseless task of concentrating regular units. So we progressed from independent companies to mobile battalions, then to brigades and divisions."

THIS picture of the war against the French Expeditionary Force is applicable point by point to the present situation in South Vietnam. Giap's essential principles are being applied in the field.

First, the Communist forces have succeeded in concentrating their formations. Two years ago, the Vietcong was operating on a platoon basis only. It reached the battalions stage last year. Recently, there have been attacks by entire brigades.

Second, the Communists control the population. The official South Vietnamese authorities have always maintained that the population was resolutely hostile to the Vietcong and that it collaborated only when forced to do so. This theory does not bear examination.

AS long ago as 1960, special Communist commando units set about winning over the peasants. They had two effective arguments. The first consisted of telling the peasants: "The régime is not working for Vietnam but for the Americans. We are struggling to get rid of the Americans for you; they are coming here to replace the French."

The second argument touched the peasants on the raw. The Vietcong said: "You are working in the rice fields for the benefit of rich landowners who lead luxurious lives and grow fat on the sweat of your brows. Now these landowners have fled to take refuge in the cities. You no longer have to pay them rents, nor taxes to the Saigon Government. The land is yours. If anyone comes to disturb you, we will protect you. In exchange, you must give us your undivided assistance."

The result has been almost total cleavage between the Saigon Government and the population. In spite of the substantial help they are giving the Vietnamese Army and their increasingly direct participation in the operations, the Americans have not succeeded in improving the position.

IN his book "The People's War—the People's Army," General Giap explains that military operations must always pass through three phases: first, the defensive, during which the population is taken in hand, while leaving the enemy in control of the main centers; second, offensive guerrilla warfare, which obliges the enemy to split up his forces; during this period, the organization of regular and local units is continued actively, on a battalion and brigade scale; finally, the third phase, the "general counteroffensive," whose object is to crush the enemy's main forces.

When queried about the present situation in South Vietnam, Giap dodges the question. He merely says: "The second war of liberation has begun." French military experts calculate that it is actually in its second phase—that of a generalized guerrilla war. It is hardly probable that Giap has the means of starting the "general counteroffensive" before a considerable time. Yet it must not be forgotten that in 1954, when Vo Nguyen Giap launched that "general counteroffensive" of which Dienbienphu was the result, the French and American military specialists did not give him one chance in a hundred of success.

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