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 Vietnamese version is that an armed insurrection of the population against “the American imperialists and their vassals” 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. There 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 Dien Bien Phu, 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 describe common people and they produce results. The Vietnamese peasants who provide the Vietcong with food help the officers who lead them, understand the theories of their chief without difficulty. They understand how to apply them in the field and then win victories.

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

Giap's answer is: "Because a military man is 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: "We are going badly with the enemy, because the [South] Vietnamese soldiers do not want to fight for the Americans, while the Vietcong do 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 French and the Belgian (now the Belgian) services often employed this kind of language. French military officers laughed at them. Occasionally, they admitted partial reverses. They granted Giap a measure of military talent, which is always made things difficult for certain units of the French Expeditionary Corps, 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 de Gaulle's doctrine, relatively little is known about the man himself. Communist China, which is often 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 shrewd and acting from a very excellent actor. The result is that it is very difficult to tell when you are talking to is sincere.

During the 1945-46 period of negotiations which preceded the Indo-China war, 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 an adopted son 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, the Americans in the Interior, personally saw to it that French civilians were not massacred or over worked. But this "sentimentalism" is also a man animated by an iron will, who is always reasoning in morton's cruel methods. In 1944, when Giap led the 40th infantry regiment in the mountainous region dominating the Tonkine delta, the harshness with which he treated Vietminh agents and local notables suspected of usefulness became notorious.

To those who draw attention to the suffering of the conflict, has caused his people, Giap, a thousand and thousand of men die every day on the earth. Even if they are not the peasants, the death of a hundred, a thousand, or tens of thousands of men amount to very little."
At Tienstal in 1945, Ho Chi Minh created the Vietminh Front. Giap, at the age of 29 already reckoned one of the most charismatic and capable members of the party, was given the task of organizing the first regular underground groups. He succeeded admirably. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Vietminh, augmented by Chinese and Ho's forces, came to power. Giap was made Minister of the Interior in Ho Chi Minh's first government. With the end of World War II, French and Vietminh leaderships met in December, 1946, Giap was appointed Commander in Chief of the young Vietnamese Army.

It was an overwhelming task, but he felt he was ready. The French had made the mistake of concentrating their best troops in the hollow punch bowl of Dien Bien Phu, and Giap had his 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 replied: "The essence is to have a workable political-military doctrine." His system is not new. He has arrived at the main points from the works of Mao Tse-tung. Mao himself borrowed liberally from a Chinese general of about 500 B.C., Sun-tzu. Giap has assembled these disparate elements into a cohesive whole, but the logic is easy to understand, and has hardened them deeply into the political and military, eddies of his country.

In a book published in Hanot in 1961, the Vietminh commanding general summed up his theories. Basically, every thing comes from the people. Nothing is possible without their consent. The army should not be a body separated from the population. The two should be one. The army is the people's army. It is not the idea of the guerrillas as a "fish in the water," to use Mao's phrase. Rather, it is the civil population, writes Giap, "we shall have no information. We shall be a people moving in the sea with no secrecy, nor carry out rapid movements. The people suggest strategies and acts as a whole. The fact that some of the officers, hides us, protects our activities, feeds us and tend our wounded."
(Continued from Preceding Page) 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 standoff 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 bringing 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 co-ordination 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-
pidity and perfect execution. "Intelligence," writes Giap, "consists of avoiding the ene-
my's strong points so as to attack his weak ones. In order 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. Therefore, in con-
sequence, one must avoid suf-
f ering losses by trying to hold one's ground at all costs. Our troop's post is to be wasted merely for the sake of the defense or the occupation of territory.

The spirit of initiative "con-
sists of always trying to make contact with the enemy with-
out waiting for him to contact us. If he wants rapid action, force him to slow down. If he wants to rush, force him to fight. If he wants to take one particular road, obligate him to take several—
all this with the object of de-
stroying him detachment by detachment."

ANYONE who has fought in revolu-
tionary war knows how difficult an army organ-
ized on Western lines finds this type of war. There is a de-
eply hidden reason for this, according to Giap, and Western leaders can do noth-
ing 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 fact that an en-
paign is he commanding obliges the en-
emy to split up his forces so as to be able to occu-
upy the invaded territory. During the war against the French . . . the enemy was thus faced with a second condi-
tion: It was impossible for him to occupy the invaded terri-
ty without splitting his forces. By their dispersal, he created difficulties for himself. His scattered units be-
came an easy prey for our troops and his mobile forces dwindled more and more. . . .

"While the French became more and more spread out each day, the revolu-
tionary army on the one hand con-
cluded to expand the guer-
illa war, and on the other carried on the endless task of driving off the French. So we progressed from inde-
pendent companies to mobile bat-
taillons, then to brigades and divisions."

THIS picture of the war against the French Expedi-
tionary Force is applicable per-
haps a little too literally to the con-
situation in South Vietnam. Giap's essential principles are being applied in South Vietnam.

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

Second, the Communists con-
trol the population. The offi-
cial South Vietnamese authori-
ties have always maintained that the Vietcong was abso-
utely hostile to the Vietcong and that it collaborated only when forced to do so. This theory does not hold up for examination.

As long as ago as 1960, special Communist commando units set off to seize the peasants. They had two effec-
tive arguments. The first con-
sists of the following peasants: "The régime is not working for Vietnam but for the Ameri-
cans. 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. Many of these landlords have fled to take refuge in the cities. You no longer have to pay them rents, nor taxes to the government. Now for the land is yours. If anyone comes to disturb you, we will protect you. In the war, you will give us your unied assistance."

The result has been almost total cleavage between the Saigon Government and the population. In spite of the propaganda efforts here are giv-
ing the Vietnamese Army and their increasingly direct par-
ticipation in the operations, the Vietcong are not in need of improving the sit-
uation.

In his book "The People's War—the People's Army," General Giap explains that military operations must al-
ways be experienced in three phases: first, the defensive, during which the population is loyal to the regime; whilelear-
ning the enemy in control of the main centers; second, offensive guerrilla warfare, which is to keep the enemy to split up his forces; during this period, the organization of regular forces is con-
tinued actively, on a battal-
ion and brigade scale; finally,
the third phase, the "gen-
ceral 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 war of liberation that has begun." French military experts calculate that it is already in the second phase, that of a generalized guerrilla war. It is hardly probable that Giap has the means of stating the "total counteroffensive" before a consider-
able time. Yet, it must not be forgotten that in 1964, when Vo Nguyen Giap launched that "general counteroffensive" of which Dien Bienphu was the result, the French and American forces specifically did not give him one chance in a hundred of success.