

CAT in French Indochina, 1949-1954: A Chronology

April 28, 1949:

The American Consulate in Hanoi reports that CAT will inaugurate a freight and passenger service between Kunming and Haiphong in the near future. CAT has obtained a permit (renewable) to operate no more than 30 flights over a two-month period. Descours & Cabaud, a well known import-export house, will act as agents for CAT, and communications apparatus is now being installed on the roof of their office building in Haiphong. CAT will carry mainly tin from Kunming, and miscellaneous products, including gasoline, on the return trip. A major problem in establishing this service has been the lack of aviation fuel at Haiphong. However, Socony Vacuum Company has now rebuilt sufficient storage tanks and feeder lines from the docks to make possible enough fuel to satisfy CAT's requirements (estimated at 1100 gallons for each round trip).

Early June 1949:

Willauer and Wang Wen-sen fly to Kunming to work out arrangements for setting up a large CAT base and to iron out problems with the tin airlift. Willauer writes to his wife on June 16: "We . . . wanted to work with Y. T. Miao on tin which has not actually started even yet. Even Y. T. thinks Ed Way [CAT's representative] is pretty poor quality. Perhaps I can get the General to fire him some day."

June 25-27, 1949:

Over a three-day period, CAT flew 33 trips and airlifted 165 tons of tin from Mengtze to Haiphong.

CAT had been interested in this operation for over two years, and a series of seemingly endless discussions had taken place with American, Chinese, and French authorities. The tin lift would continue, off and on, until the fall of Mengtze in early January 1950. The difficulties were numerous. The Haiphong airstrip was frequently unavailable, as monsoon rains washed away the earth under the strip's thin surfacing. With regard to the French, Frank L. Guberlet, CAT's representative in PIC, has commented: "The French Administration was terribly suspicious of anything CAT did. They installed an English-speaking airport manager in Haiphong to keep track of whatever we did. However, by pure coincidence, the new airport manager turned out to be one of the French Aviation Cadets who had been one of my classmates in primary flight training at NAS Dallas during WW II."

In all, CAT operated some 225 flights and carried approximately 1,060 U.S. tons of tin ingots and concentrates to Haiphong. Return cargo consisted of critically short drummed aviation gasoline, textile machinery, mine equipment, and cigarette paper and foil.

July 11, 1949:

Willauer writes to his wife: "At long last we have started the Haiphong tin deal. And vistas in Indo-China are opening up, at least in my mind."

November 8, 1949:

Norm Jones on take-off from Mengtze with full load of tin has engine catch fire. Both crew members parachuted from aircraft, but Jones goes down with airplane. Hugh Marsh, on vacation, organized a search party that located and returned Jones' remains to family. Co-pilot M. H. Kung survived; R/O K. V. Chin beheaded by hostile tribesmen.

January 16, 1950:

Captain Buol, Station Manager Lincoln Sun, and mechanic J. G. Jawbert captured at Mengtze by Communists. Sun and Jawbert escape, reaching Hong Kong in October. Buol not released until September 1955.

Following the retreat from the mainland, CAT searched far and wide for business. There seemed to be attractive possibilities in Burma, Pakistan, and Indonesia. In French Indochina, with an increasingly level of combat with the Communist Vietminh, there seemed to be a pressing need for additional air transport.

Late May-early June 1950:

Willauer makes two visits to FIC to present proposal for CAT to play a major role in air transport support of the French.

July 20, 1950:

Willauer comments to his wife: "It still looks good for us down there [FIC], but we will not know for sure for a few days more. People out this way are still waging war on a peace as usual basis - I mean the French."

August 19, 1950:

Willauer writes to his son: "The French are supposed to have decided to [use] CAT in a big way . . . for war supply work, but so far we have received no official notice."

August 25, 1950:

Willauer, in Tokyo, cables Chennault that the "Southern Project" [FIC] has been approved. Willauer wants a C-46 to take him to Indochina to conclude the negotiations. "Believe Rousselot or Cockrell pilot because possible can work some survey while I negotiating." [Rousselot and Cockrell were frequently used for covert flying at this time.]

Later in the day, Willauer writes to Corcoran and Brennan: "Last night we got the news that French Indo-China has been approved by Paris. . ."

October 25-28, 1950:

Willauer is in Saigon. The Hong Kong Standard of October 29, 1950, carried the following story, under dateline of Saigon, October 27: Willauer was in Saigon to negotiate with the French for the use of seven C-47's with American pilots. "Mr. Willauer emphasized that the Americans, though willing to carry war materials and drop them to the French garrisons, would take no part in the actual fighting. He told newsmen arrangements would be purely a matter of business."

November 28, 1950:

Guberlet writes from Saigon to Rosbert regarding the status of proposed operations in FIC:

1. Reports a number of telegrams between American Embassy in Paris and U.S. legation in Saigon regarding proposed contract with French Air Force in Indochina. "The State Department in Saigon believes that things are moving much faster and that our proposal will be accepted. They feel that the sudden resurgence of interest is due to the unfavorable military situation in Tonkin."

2. The "COP-BAY AIRLINES" deal does not look favorable. Air France and pro-French members of Vietnamese government have created a new company, Air Vietnam, which has been given a complete monopoly on all profitable routes in Indochina.

3. Am attempting to arrange a charter for ECA medical supplies in Paris and Tokyo destined for Saigon. Problem is difficulty in arranging for return cargoes

4. French Air force officers interested in possibility of engine overhauls and major checks being performed in FIC - engines now being sent to France and North Africa for overhaul - CAT may be able to contract for some of this work.

January 7, 1951:

Willauer, just returned from Saigon, writes to his wife: "Things suddenly looked as if they were about to break in Saigon and I rushed there hoping to write some contracts at last. Nothing doing. The French are still as stubborn as ever, although good progress was made with ECA on a contract to haul from Paris to Saigon."

Willauer later commented on this phase of CAT's interest in FIC: The French had virtually no air transport. CAT offered to put in a large detachment, complete with maintenance. The French air commander sent a strong cable of recommendation to Paris, and Willauer went there to follow up. "I was shocked when I was turned down on the ground that the French government was afraid that to have CAT in Indochina might make the Commies more irritated and therefore they might fight harder."

While CAT failed to get a major contract, American support for the French continued to increase. The decision to provide military and economic assistance to the French was reached informally in February and March 1950. On 1 May 1950 Truman approved \$10 million for urgently needed military assistance items (announced on 8 May). The first MAAG personnel were assigned to FIC on 24 May. At the same time, the U.S. announced its intention to establish an economic aid mission; the program was first headed by Robert Blum. American assistance, military and economic, was accelerated with the outbreak of the Korean War. Chinese intervention in Korea produced a fear of wider intervention in Asia. National Intelligence Estimate on 29 December 1950 (NIE5) stated: "Direct intervention by Chinese Communist troops [in Indochina] may occur at any time."

In the fall of 1951, CAT did obtain a contract to fly in support of the economic aid mission in FIC. McGovern was assigned to this duty from September 1951 to April 1953. He flew a C-47 (B-813 in the beginning) throughout FIC: Saigon, Hanoi, Phnon Penh, Vientiane, Nhatrang, Haiphong, etc., averaging about 75 hours a month. This was almost entirely overt flying.

Despite American assistance, the war does not go well for the French. The Vietminh open what proves to be the last phase of the war (at least for the French) in October 1952. Three Vietminh divisions strike into northwestern Tonkin ("Thai" country - Thai were largest ethnic minority in country), at least partly to force French to disperse their forces in defensive operations. The French, under pressure from the Vietminh, evacuate smaller outposts west of the Red River and reinforce the garrisons at Na Sam and Son La (west of Black River). The French also respond with Operation Lorraine, using 30,000 troops and the best of their heavy equipment. But Lorraine fails, in large part due to logistical problems, and the three Vietminh divisions remain in the Black River Valley. The Vietminh attack Na Sam in mid-November, but the French resist successfully, thanks to a massive aerial supply operation. The Vietminh withdraw into Thai country to reorganize their supply services (December 1952-March 1953).

The Vietminh offensive places severe strain on French air transport. General Salan received 50 additional C-47's in late summer, 21 provided by the U.S. On 5 December 1952 Ambassador Heath in Saigon reports that C-47's are operating at several times the normal rate which involves increased maintenance. At present there are 18 C-47's awaiting 50-hour check and 18 awaiting 100-hour checks. Salan has asked Paris to send additional personnel, but the French Metropolitan Air Force has few surplus mechanics. Heath requests that 150 USAF mechanics be detailed to Nhatrang to perform the 50 and 100-hour checks. On 22 December 1952, Secretary Acheson advises Heath that State and Defense Departments concur in the decision to send USAF mechanics for maintenance program at Nhatrang.

March 1953:

The 315th Air Division learns that it might be called upon to render some assistance in FIC. Colonels Casey and Henson go to FIC to make preliminary survey of airbase facilities.

March 3, 1953:

Dorothy Cox writes to her parents: "Al is off again. Took off hastily a couple of days ago for Saigon. We're all pretty concerned with development in Indo-China. And heaven only knows why the Thais didn't start bringing troops

to their borders months ago and why the United Nations haven't been able to be of real help to the French in Indo-China. It certainly is an ominous situation and as usual the Communists have the offensive and we seem to be so many jumps behind. Keep your fingers crossed that the French can stop them and keep them from taking Laos. It's pretty vital."

April 9, 1953:

The Vietminh resume their war of movement, marching west from Thai country into Laos, using one regiment to contain the French forces at Na Sam. Vietminh columns advance toward Luang Prabang. As Joseph Buttinger observed: "This first Vietminh invasion of Laos, although it led to no great battles, was nevertheless a dramatic event full of serious implications for the French. It proved that the French were unable to prevent the Vietminh from overrunning all of northern Laos."

April 23, 1953:

The Vietminh surround the French position in the Plaine des Jarres. The French have to be supplied by air from Hanoi (250 miles). By this time, the entire French air transport is engaged in maintaining French outposts in the Thai country and in northern Laos. According to National Intelligence Estimate 91 (4 June 1953) the air transport element of the French Air Force consisted of the following:

28 C-47's and 3 JU-52's in the Hanoi-Haiphong area
5 C-47's and 8 JU-52's in the Tourane/Nhatrang area
16 C-47's and 4 JU-52's in the Saigon area

April 27, 1953:

Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations Douglas MacArthur II reported as follows:

"At a meeting with the President at the White House this afternoon for the purpose of briefing the President on the recent NATO Paris meeting and bilateral talks with the British and the French, the President asked Secretary Dulles what the French views were on the situation in Laos.

The Secretary replied that the French were very gravely concerned about the situation there. He said that when he had met with Prime Minister Rene Mayer last evening just prior to departure from Paris, M. Mayer had stated that the French needed more urgently the loan of some C-119 aircraft to help them get tanks and heavy equipment into Laos to assist in

its defense. Having such equipment might mean the difference between holding and losing Laos. M. Mayer had envisaged U. S. Air Force personnel operating the aircraft during the period of the loan.

The Secretary said to the President that such a procedure would mean the sending of U.S. personnel on combat missions in Indochina. This, obviously, was a decision which would have repercussions and would raise many problems. However, there was an alternative, which would be to loan the French the C-119's, which he understood the Department of Defense was willing to do, and have civilian pilots fly them. Following his return to Washington this morning, the Secretary had made inquiry and had ascertained that there were pilots in Formosa who were not members of the U.S. armed forces and who might well be able to carry out these missions. This possibility was being explored on an urgent basis to see whether it would not be possible to have the aircraft loaned and the above-mentioned personnel in Formosa operate them."

[Secretary Dulles, obviously, checked with his brother, head of the CIA, as to the availability of the CAT pilots. Allen Dulles checked with Al Cox, who replied with a "can do." The CIA's history of Air America puts it as follows: When the Vietminh invaded Laos, the French needed help. At first the French opposed CAT's entry into Indochina because of the stigma it carried as the flag carrier of Nationalist China. However, the French needed aircraft, and it would not be possible for USAF personnel to fly them in a 'French' war. State asked CIA if it could supply non-Chinese pilots from CAT. Cox said affirmative. His fast reaction impressed the new DCI - Allen Dulles, who had taken over on 26 February 1953.]

May 1, 1953:

Felix Smith, E. P. Babel, H. W. Wells, E. G. Kane, Steve Kusak, and N. N. Forte receive word in Tokyo to depart immediately for Taipei. They left Tokyo at 9.30 a.m. for Taipei. They were joined in Taipei by George Kelly, Paul Holden, Pinky Pinkava, M. Shaver, and E. F. Sims. After briefing on mission, departed for Clark AFB. Also: Gordon Nelson as CAT liaison and George Stubbs & J. P. Gotham from Maintenance.

CAT pilots check out at Clark by 483th Troop Carrier Wing in three days of night and day flying and concentrated ground school. USAF markings removed from C-119's and replaced by French Air Force Markings. "Extreme care was taken to remove all visible signs of U.S. ownership." The CAT groups, together with 18 mechanics in civilian clothes from the 483 TCW departed Clark on the early morning of May 5 for PIC.

While the CAT pilots were being checked out at Clark, Cox was in PIC to make necessary arrangements for what CAT called Operation Squaw. On May 2, Cox wired Rosbert and Willauer in Taipei:

"SQUAW RUNNING SMOOTHLY SPLENDID COOPERATION ADVANCE
PARTY PROCEEDING SAIGON X THIRTYNINE MAINTENANCE
PERSONNEL WILL ACCOMPANY PLANES X TENTATIVE COMMENCEMENT
OPS DAWN 6 MAY"

May 6, 1953:

CAT pilots, with French Air Force navigators and flight engineers, begin air drops to French garrisons.

May 10, 1953:

Dorothy Cox writes to her parents: ". . . [B]y special S.O.S. request, Al was in charge of the operation to send American army planes with CAT crews to the French in Indo China during the present emergency. And he just received a very fine commendation, for the way he's handled the operation, from the very top in Washington [Allen Dulles] . . . One thing - concerning the present job for the French - it at last gives CAT entree into Saigon. So far this entree has been refused by the French and we hope now we will have an entree to start running scheduled flights into there."

May 17, 1953:

Dorothy Cox writes to her parents: "Al came back from another trip to Saigon and collapsed completely from overwork and exhaustion." [Dorothy Cox later noted that Al was drinking very heavily at this point.]

May 31, 1953:

Bernard Fall, journalist and author, flies with Steve Kusak on a drop mission to Ban-Ban.

July 16, 1953:

Operation Squaw ends. Aircraft returned to Ashiya.

M/Gen Chester E. McCarty, commander of the 315th Air Division and member of the O'Daniel Commission (U.S. Joint Military Mission to Indochina) surveyed the French military situation in late June and early July. McCarty was unimpressed with French air transport operations. He reported that the French concept of the use of air transport "is extravagant in the extreme, measured by USAF standards." McCarty saw C-119's used to transport such items as champagne and ice. He opposed any long-term loan of C-119's to the French. Unless properly controlled, "... our aircraft probably would join the 'barnstorming' fleet in Indo-China unless they are strictly controlled and removed immediately following the combat operation for which they are loaned." McCarty envisioned the temporary loan of C-119's for specific projects, ferried to FIC and maintained by USAF personnel, operated on combat missions by French crews. As originally planned, each project (later named Ironage) would last no more than five days. [Dien Bien Phu and action in the Red River Delta would prolong Ironage into a continuous operation.] CAT pilots on Squaw were unimpressed with French determination to press the war, and they echoed McCarty's views of the extravagant use of air transport. USAF personnel reported that "The French worked only in the mornings . . . thus giving the men [USAF mechanics assigned to FIC] considerable free time." Colonel Casey of the 483rd TCW was concerned with reports of heavy drinking by the USAF personnel.

The Vietminh began retiring from Laos to northern Tonking during the first part of May. However, they had achieved their objective of absorbing all French reserves, preventing the French from building their offensive strength. The Vietminh departed Laos by June, leaving behind guerilla units. These operations, according to NIE 91, demonstrated that the Vietminh retain the military initiative. They forced the French "to withdraw the bulk of their offensive striking power from the Tonkin delta and disperse it in isolated strong points, dependent on air transport for logistic support."

Korean armistice signed in July 1953. Chinese instructors and Chinese-provided Russian and American equipment begin arriving in FIC en masse.

Heritage of spring offensive of 1953:

1. General Henri Navarre appointed on May 8 to replace Salan.

2. French concern with Laos (and apparent success of airhead at Na Sam) lead to plans to engage Vietminh in battle at Dien Bien Phu.

Bernard Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place, p. ix:

"The enemy now [fall 1953] had seven mobile divisions and one full-fledged artillery division, and more were likely to come rapidly from the Chinese divisional training camps near Ching-Hsi and Nanning. It therefore became imperative for the French to destroy at least a large part of the enemy's main battle force as rapidly as possible. This was feasible only if the French could induce the enemy to face up to them in a set-piece battle, by offering the Viet-Minh a target sufficiently tempting to pounce at, but sufficiently strong to resist the onslaught once it came. It was an incredible gamble, for upon its success hinged not only the fate of the French forces in Indochina and France's political role in Southeast Asia, but the survival of Viet-Nam as a non-Communist state and, to a certain extent, that of Laos and Cambodia as well - and perhaps (depending on the extent to which one accepts the 'falling dominoes' theory) the survival of some sort of residual Western presence in the vast mainland area between Calcutta, Singapore, and Hong Kong."

November 20, 1953:

Operation Castor - the occupation of Dien Bien Phu - begins. The French occupy a position 220 miles behind enemy lines.

November 21, 1953:

One of five C-119's on loan from USAF (flown by French crews) drops bulldozer at DBP for repair of airstrip.

November 25, 1953:

First C-47 lands on repaired airstrip.

November 29, 1953:

Navarre selects deCastries to command DBP.

December 3, 1953:

Navarre makes final decision to accept battle at DBP. "The defense of the Northwest shall be centered on the air-land base of Dien Bien Phu which must be held at all costs."

In accepting battle at DBP, Navarre placed a heavy burden on French air transport. Navarre ordered: "The mission of the Air Force shall be, until further orders, given priority and with the maximum of means at its disposal, to the support of our forces in the Northwest." But the French Air Force was in poor condition. At the time DBP was occupied, there were fewer crews than aircraft in Indochina. As Bernard Fall has observed: "Budgetary and political considerations in France had prevented the sending of additional air crews to Indochina despite the promises made to American military-aid planners that more French crews would be made available if the United States provided additional airplanes under its aid program. Yet, by mid-November, there were available to [Colonel Jean-Louis] Nicot [Commander, Air Transport Command, FIC] only 52 military crews for C-47's and 10 crews for the larger C-119 'Flying Boxcar' aircraft [and this despite the fact that the USAF had trained 22 French C-119 crews in the second half of 1953], while a theoretical total of 70 C-47's were available for operations."

And the situation would only grow worse. According to information provided by the Service Historique de l'Armee de l'Air, between late November and early March, there were numerous complaints about pilot fatigue from the French transport crews. Heavy Viet attacks throughout the country in January and February 1954 drew off transports from the Dienbienphu operation. By the end of 1953, there were still only ten French military crews available for C-119's. *[By the time battle of DBP ended, only 40 twin-engine transport crews left in reserve in all of France - US had been misinformed about readiness of French flying personnel (204)]*
December 5, 1953:

First USAF Ironage project begins. Twelve C-119s made available to the French. Aircraft to be maintained by USAF personnel and flown by French crews. The French will determine the tactical use of the aircraft.

Aircraft fly in support of DBP from December 7, 1953 to December 21, 1953. 1070 tons of equipment delivered: barbed wire, tent stakes, and 105 mm howitzer ammunition.

December 1953-January 1954:

Ironage II, III, and IV: approximately 2500 tons of priority cargo delivered to DBP.

As the 315th AD notes, these projects were in response to the moving of four Viet regular divisions to the vicinity of DBP, "making it necessary for the French to build defenses at a feverish pace. In late January the French Air Force was forced to shift some of its airlift to Luang Prahang as the Vietminh diverted some of their reserve forces at Dien Bien Phu to the Nam Hon River Valley."

January 1954:

CAT learns that Squaw II approved; 24 pilots to fly C-119's in FIC. 21 pilots take C-119 training at Ashiya, averaging 10 hours of flying time.

January 29, 1954:

Meeting of the President's Special Committee on Indochina held in Mr. Kyes' office (Asst. Secy. of Defense). Those attending include Admiral Radford, and Allen Dulles, General Cabell and Colonel Lansdale of the CIA. The meeting is to deal with the urgent French request for U.S. assistance.

"Later in the meeting, Mr. Allen Dulles raised the question as to sending the CAP [CAT] pilots the French had once requested. It was agreed that the French apparently wanted them now, that they should be sent, and CIA should arrange for the necessary negotiations with the French in Indochina to take care of it."

The meeting also approved 22 B-26's for the French, to be sent as rapidly as practical, and 200 uniformed USAF mechanics (B-26 and C-47) to augment MAAG. The USAF personnel are to be used at bases where they would be secure from capture and would not be exposed to combat.

February 1, 1954:

~~four~~ Ironage V implemented (to last until March 14). Initially ~~two~~, later twelve C-119's, to drop barbed wire and stakes near Luang Prahang, barbed wire and ammunition to DBP.

February 6, 1954:

CAT alerted for Squaw II.

March 3, 1954

Contract signed between CAT and French. Contract had been negotiated by Fitzhugh and Kirkpatrick, signed by James R. Kelly. Highlights:

1. CAT agrees to provide 12 pilots, 12 copilots, 1 crew chief, and 1 operations specialist, for the operation of 12 C-119's to be loaned and maintained by the USAF. The aircraft are "to be flown under the colors and insignia of France, and to be used exclusively for the benefit of the Expeditionary Corps."

2. CAT personnel at disposal of French military authorities "to insure all missions of a logistical support nature which might be required, exclusive of any combat mission. Bombardment or dropping napalm will never be required."

3. Subsistence pay of \$7.50/day; flight pay for each hour of flight by flying personnel (1 pilot, 1 copilot, as a group), \$70/hour with a minimum monthly guarantee of 60 hours.

4. "Crews will accept, within load limits for C-119 aircraft, cargo as prescribed regardless of its nature."

5. "CAT should be covered by insurance for all injuries which might be sustained by flying personnel."

6. French Military Services will provide quarters free of charge. Also will provide 4 3/4-ton trucks and one jeep for transportation.

7. Contract effective March 9; valid for three months, renewable by tacit agreement.

March 9, 1954:

First contingent of CAT personnel arrive Haiphong (Judkins, Stubbs, Forte, Shaver, Watts, Pinkava, H. Hicks, Marsh, Milan, Shilling, Sailer, Hughes, Clough, N. Hicks).

"The airport attendants were amazed at the amount of cargo the CAT aircraft disgorged. Not only were there dozens of trunks, suitcases, hand bags and cases and cases of food, but the veteran CAT pilots, who have learned the hard way about 'creature comforts,' hauled a big white electric refrigerator from the C-46 onto the waiting truck. Within thirty minutes after moving into the CAT hotel, there was music coming from several tape recorders, the refrigerator was humming, and a snack and refreshment bar had been setup in Eric Shilling's room."

March 10, 1954:

". . . all hands reported to the airport for briefings and familiarization flights. Ample transportation, consisting of three new weapons carriers and a jeep, had been provided by the French. The only thing lacking from the weapons carriers were the canvas tops, but CAT pilots are accustomed to a little rain, which is standard weather for those parts this time of year.

At Cat Bi airport, the French shared their own C-119 squadron operations building with CAT flying and ground personnel, and also provided an adjoining building as a crew

lounge. Many hours were spent in C-119's, and many hours were spent on briefings, map study, communications procedures and all the various topics necessary to permit CAT pilots to do the competent job for which Civil Air Transport is noted."

[Re Cat Bi: located four miles southeast of Haiphong; main runway 8000' x 170', asphalt and concrete with steel matting in the center; secondary runway of asphalt and concrete, 3875' x 160' - constantly under repair]

March 11, 1954:

Flying cancelled due weather.

March 12, 1954:

". . . the drops began in earnest, even though the weather continued rainy and hazy. A surprise to most of the CAT pilots was the cold weather that persisted . . . a welcome surprise, at that, for most of them know how hot it gets in Haiphong. Several of the pilots on this operation had been in Haiphong towards the end of 1949 during CAT's famous 'tin lift' from Mengtze to Haiphong."

JUST AS CAT BEGINS TO FLY, THE NATURE OF THE OPERATION CHANGES DRAMATICALLY. ON MARCH 13, 1954, THE BATTLE OF DIENBIENPHU BEGINS AS VIETMINH BEGIN HEAVY ARTILLERY FIRE

Bernard Fall: "On the Viet-minh side March 13 was the payoff for almost five months of backbreaking labor: the transportation through hundreds of miles of jungle of thousands of tons of supplies, and the gamble of Gen. Giap and his able chief of staff at Dien Bien Phu, General Hoang Van Thai. . . .

While exact figures will no doubt remain forever unknown, French ground and air observation (which was far from perfect) estimated that the enemy finally fielded at Dien Bien Phu at least forty-eight field howitzers of 105-mm. caliber, forty-eight pack howitzers of the 75-mm. caliber, forty-eight heavy 120-mm. mortars, and at least as many 75-mm. recoilless rifles . . . and at least thirty-six heavy flak guns. Finally, as the battle reached its climax, Viet-Minh began to employ Soviet-built 'Katyusha' multitube rocket launchers. In all, then, the Communists possessed at least 200 guns above the 57-mm. caliber. On the French side, the maximum number of such guns ever available amounted to sixty and dropped to an average of less than forty within the a week after the battle had begun.

Since the French Air Force and naval aircraft could not hope to make up for a four-to-one inferiority in artillery, the disparity in firepower is almost sufficient explanation of the outcome of the whole battle."

King C. Chen: "The battle began in mid-March. The Viet-Minh was under the direction of Chinese advisers. One Chinese general stayed at the headquarters of Giap and many officers were assigned to various levels of the Viet-Minh army. In addition to this and to the construction of the special road from Mengtze to the Dien-Bien-Phu area, the Chinese reinforced the Viet-Minh in early March with one anti-aircraft regiment, providing Giap with 64 37mm. anti-aircraft guns. Chinese soldiers operated the guns and drove the approximately 1,000 Molotova trucks that brought supplies in. With about 80 anti-aircraft guns and 100 105mm. guns the Viet-Minh army was able to establish effective firepower from the hilltops east to the French positions. They shot down or damaged at least a dozen French aircraft in the first three days of the attack . . ."

The French garrison at Dienbienphu requires
170 tons of ammunition and 30 tons of food a
day.

March 14, 1954:

Radio beacon destroyed.

March 15, 1954:

Gabrielle falls; only 12.5 tons of supplies airdropped.

March 16, 1954:

DBP established priorities for drop: (1) personnel, (2) new VHF beacon, (3) medical supplies for main DZ, (4) dismantled artillery pieces and ammunition for DZ Octavie.

March 17, 1954:

Bad weather kept airdrops to a minimum.

March 19, 1954:

CAT C-119's had been dropping pallet loads of one ton or more. The garrison was having problems of moving these loads on the ground under heavy fire. Requests smaller loads.

March 22, 1954:

General Ely meets with Admiral Radford in Washington. Jules Roy comments about Radford: "He was as impressive in intellect as in bearing, a real leader. In his opinion, Southeast Asia was the modern equivalent of the Balkans in the First World War, and, once the Korean War had come to an end, he had taken a passionate interest in the Indochinese conflict. . . . Radford liked to consider himself the defender of the Western world. To begin with, he lifted the ban imposed by the Pentagon on the use of Packets to drop napalm and gave Navarre full freedom to use the planes provided by American aid however, he wished."

March 23, 1954:

First napalm drop. [USAF had opposed use of C-119s for napalm drops because tests during Korean War had shown that the returns did not warrant the risk and effort. USAF recommended that French use B-26's for drops. French, however, reported good results with C-119's.] One C-119 destroyed on ground at Cat Bi, taking off with 4,000 gallons of napalm; floor had buckled and props and other portions of aircraft damaged. French pilots reported that his copilot had retracted the gear without signal. [Some 770 tons of napalm had been dropped by mid-April.] No CAT crews involved.

March 24, 1954:

French C-47 caught by flak at 1600 over Dienbienphu; crashed in rice field; crew killed. This is the first in a series of aircraft lost during the last week of March.

March 27, 1954:

Nicot wire to General Lauzin, commander-in-chief of the French Far Eastern Air Force: "It is hardly necessary to insist on the necessity of stopping that carnage. But the air crews, in addition to an obvious physical fatigue, have suffered a psychological shock. . . . It is necessary to immediately stop low-level parachute drops and I have given the order to do so as of tonight."

Fall comments: "For the C-47's, this meant that the daytime parachute drop altitudes went from 2,500 feet to 6,500 feet and later, as enemy flak became even more proficient and largely equipped with Soviet 37-mm. guns, to 8,500 feet. In turn this meant that parachuted loads had to be equipped with

powder-train delays whose small explosive charge would open the parachutes at a pre-set altitude. The first experiences with the delayed drops were disastrous because complete loads either fell into enemy hands or the delay failed to open at all and the cargo impacted inside Dien Bien Phu like a bomb."

March 31, 1954:

Flak extremely heavy; one C-47 tried to come in low and was promptly shot down. Navy Helldivers from carrier Arromanches ("who were loved by the paratroopers for the risks they took, and for which they paid a higher price in lives than the Air Force") found it difficult to get through; one aircraft shot down when caught in crossfire of several flak batteries near Beatrice; both crew killed.

From the journal of Jean Pouget: "The munitions drops are carried out by C-119's at high altitude with delayed opening parachutes. It is the first attempt and is 'catastrophic': 50 percent of the packages fall outside the lines."

CAT crews made approximately 87 airdrops over Dienbienphu in March. Aircraft suffered assorted 50-caliber damage. Acft #557, pilot Hugh Hicks, was one of first hit by 37mm fire. Extensive damage was done to fuselage and both nacelles. "Flight characteristics reported by pilot: extreme vibration and lack of aileron tab control. After being hit, the aircraft completed its drop mission and returned safely to base." Acft #133, pilot Sailor, hit by 37mm gunfire in tail booms and rudders: "The drop mission was successfully completed and the pilot returned his aircraft to base with single rudder operation."

April 1, 1954:

Hanoi cables Paris: Due to problems with American crews, all C-119's should be commanded by French personnel.

The first week of April sees a number of problems arising. The French were concerned that too much cargo was being misdropped. Franco-American cooperation left a good deal to be desired. The CAT crews spoke no French, and the air controllers spoke no English. De Castries complained about American crews failing to follow the instructions of the controllers. Aircraft would drop cargo before reaching D/Z due to language mixup. The CAT pilots were unhappy with the situation, complaining about lack of proper briefings, flak suppression, etc. Cox and Rousselot fly to FIC to

attempt to calm situation. As one pilot recalls:

"The CAT pilots were constantly cajoled and intimidated to continue making life-threatening flights in order to ostensibly buy the French some slight leverage in their peace negotiations at Geneva with the Viet Cong. The CAT pilots wanted out because there were no survival benefits, medical or disability compensation, retirement or any of the other Government underwritten protections enjoyed by most of our leaders (Al Cox being the prime example). . . .The pitch that Al Cox gave at [the] briefing consisted of a heavy dose of flag waving and admonition that we were doing a great service to the United States and French Government."

At the time, however, Cox's appeal was effective. On April 11, 1954, Hanoi telegraphed Paris that after initial difficulties, CAT crews are now participating in the airlift with much spirit ("avec beaucoup de cran"); they are setting an example that has been followed by French civilian crews flying C-47's.

Meanwhile, the anti-aircraft fire increased in intensity. On April 5, Ambassador Dillon in Paris passed along to the Secretary of State a French report that there were now 40 37mm. anti-aircraft guns, radar-controlled, evidently from Korea, now be operated by Chinese crews at Dienbienphu. A note in the French Air Force Archives states that by April 10, the anti-aircraft fire have become intense, reaching up to 12,000'. A further note, dated April 14, states that if CAT pilots accept the risk of flying into Dienbienphu, they are entitled to effective action against anti-aircraft fire.

April 12, 1954:

135 tons dropped.

April 14, 1954:

229 tons dropped. "Only a steady stream of American parachutes from Japan kept the air supply effort from collapsing." Delayed action fuses working much more effectively.

April 15, 1954:

Airdrops reach an all-time high with 250 tons (approx. 15 percent misdropped).

April 16, 1954:

215 tons dropped. Relatively good flying weather in mid-April permits more effective fighter-bomber protection for transports.

April 19/20, 1954:

During night of 19/20, C-119 pilots refuse to come down to lower parachute altitudes due heavy flak.

April 24, 1954:

By April 24, one half of the airstrip at DBP was in enemy hands. This meant a smaller drop zone, which meant that pilots would have to take even greater chances. But the enemy fire continued to build. During the month, enemy anti-aircraft fire would bring down 8 aircraft (including 2 B-26's shot down on the 26th at an altitude of 10,000') and severely damage 47.

C-119 Battle Damage Report: "Once over the drop zones, the C-119's found themselves caught in a murderous and continuous cross-fire which was always extremely heavy and quite accurate. Despite the fact that the Flying Boxcars could discharge all of their cargo on a single pass and were not in the anti-aircraft maximum fire zone more than about three minutes, nearly 60 direct hits were made on the ships flown by the American and French crews. Tail booms in particular came in for a large number of hits by both machine gun slugs and flak, as did tail surfaces and propellers. . . ."

On many of the Dien Bien Phu runs, the C-119's flew at about 6,500 feet, climbed to about 13,500 feet to get out of flak range, then dropped in to altitudes of about 300 feet for passes over the drop zone. Later, as enemy gunfire became more intensive, drops had to be made at increasingly high altitudes. By early May, supplies were being dropped from as high as 10,000 feet and still were landing with great accuracy on a DZ 1,000 feet square.

Information from Civil Air Transport records, Fairchild field representatives, and the press show that most of the C-119 hits were scored by .50 cal. machine gun and 37mm anti-aircraft fire, although at least one aircraft was said to have been hit by an 88mm piece. . . ."

As Bernard Fall reported, the CAT pilots had performed with distinction: "It had become common knowledge among the troops at Dien Bien Phu that the American civilian pilots were in many cases taking greater chances than the transport pilots of the French Air Force . . ."

However, on the 24th, there is trouble. Paul Holden, CAT's chief pilot, was flying in the right seat during a drop mission; Wallace A. Buford was in the left seat. A 37mm shell exploded on contact inside the flight compartment, severely wounding Holden. Fragmentation destroyed the top part of the compartment near the escape hatch. Another 37mm shell went through one of the booms and the tail but did not explode. Buford completed the mission and returned safely. Holden's right arm was in bad shape. As his wife recalled: "The French surgeons intended to amputate Paul's arm but during his lucid moments he kept insisting that he be evacuated to any American military hospital in the area. Fortunately someone with enough sense managed to get him on a plane and shipped off to the Clark Airforce Base Hospital in the Philippines." The arm was saved.

Holden's injury brought to a head the long-simmering problems that had appeared earlier in the month. ~~They~~ were frustrated with having to lead the way in a French war. They were tired of seeing French Air Force fighters sitting at 15,000' during drops. [Basically, the problem was that CAT was attempting to perform a mission that it was never intended to do. Covert, dangerous flying would work when it was on a limited basis, and Rousselot could pick and chose his pilots. But this was combat flying - as dangerous as any flying in World War II - and it became more and more difficult to convince a majority of the pilots that it was worth it in terms of patriotism (when the French seemed so indifferent) or in terms of money (\$10/hour hazard pay!). American Air Force intelligence reported that the CAT pilots were "unhappy and want to quit." Their contract stated that they did not have to fly in combat. After returning from their missions on the 24th, the pilots refused to fly further missions. Some flying may have taken place on the 25th, but the CAT pilots were withdrawn on that date.

April 25, 1954:

Only 63 tons dropped.

April 26, 1954:

91 tons dropped; Navarre authorizes transfer of French crews from C-47's to C-119's; 50 aircraft hit by flak, 3 shot down.

April 27, 1954:

Pouget's journal: "The high altitude drops are catastrophic. Seventy percent of the packages fall outside of the camp."

April 28, 1954:

No supplies dropped.

April 30, 1954:

In the face of the desperate situation, CAT crews return to the C-119's. The French Air Force promises to provide adequate fighter cover. 212 tons dropped (from 10,000'); 65 tons fall to the enemy.

During the month of April, CAT crews flew approximately 428 airdrop missions to Dien Bien Phu.

May 1, 1954:

197 tons dropped, but at least half lost due problem with delay fuses on parachutes.

May 2, 1954:

Pouget's journal: "The anti-aircraft no longer holds back its munitions, and the precision of the drops suffer. . . . A Morane observation [plane] . . . and a Marine 'Corsair' are shot down. 128 tons were dropped but 50 percent fell beyond the limits. Level of supplies - Food: 5 days; 5 105 fire units; 3 155 fire unit; 3 120 fire unit; 60 centimeters of mud in the trenches."

French civilian pilots refuse to fly; they will not return until May 6.

May 3, 1954:

Heavy rain at Dienbienphu. Most C-119's abort mission due weather.

May 4, 1954:

Continued weather problems; only 57 tons dropped with 40 percent lost.

May 5, 1954:

Heavy rain; only 40 tons fall within perimeter.

May 6, 1954:

French civilian pilots return. Break in weather permits largest supply drop in nearly three weeks. 196 tons dropped, most of which falls outside the perimeter that has been reduced to the size of a baseball field. The material that does reach the garrison is too late to do any good. During a day when aircraft filled the air over Dienbienphu, McGovern and Buford are killed.

CAT crews had volunteered to fly low altitude drops over Isabel. Art Wilson had 37mm damage in aft section of left tail boom; he lost elevator control but completed drop and returned. McGovern's loss reported from CAT Bulletin (taken from Kusak's statement): "Earthquake's aircraft was hit in the left engine while turning into the drop run over Dien Bien Phu. The left engine was feathered, and the tail received another hit, all in the space of a few seconds. Mac couldn't hold the aircraft, so started the left engine again, although he failed to get much power from it. Capt. Kusak was in radio contact with him and directed him to closest area that looked possible for a belly landing. The C-119 was losing altitude rapidly and yawing badly, but Mac and Buford were putting up a good fight. Barely staggering over one ridge after another, and dipping down on the other side, the C-119 was guided toward a narrow, winding river. Finally, with the river a few yards away, and altitude down to feet and inches, the battle was lost. The left wing dug into the steep slope alongside the river, the aircraft flipped over twice and exploded - with Earthquake's last words still ringing in Kusak's ears - 'Looks like this is it, son.'" [According to several pilots, McGovern probably should have bailed out and taken his chances of being picked up by helicopter. According to one report, he told Kusak over the radio that he did not want to be captured again 'and do all that walking.'

May 7, 1954:

Heavy rain. None of C-119's complete drop. DBP falls at 1730.

Estimates of supplies dropped, March 13 to May 7, vary from 6,410 to 6,900 tons. 82,926 parachutes used, including 3,763 large cargo chutes. Fall: "Parachute nylon, like courage, was one of the common items at Dien Bien Phu, and on both sides."

48 aircraft shot down over DBP; 167 damaged. "Considering that these losses were inflicted in five months upon an air force which never had more than 100 supply and reconnaissance aircraft and 75 combat aircraft available for Dien Bien Phu, they were extremely heavy.

Dien Bien Phu, like almost all other besieged fortresses, eventually died from its supply deficiencies. . . . If any particular group of enemy soldiers should be considered indispensable to victory, then it must be the Viet-Minh antiaircraft gunners and their Chinese instructors."

[Fall: "Air power on a more massive scale than was then available could not have changed the outcome of the Indochina War, but it would have saved Dien Bien Phu."]

315th AD: Re USAF C-119's - three aircraft lost (one on ground at DBP in early March, one during first napalm mission, and McGovern); five sustained major damage (more than 175 man-hours to repair); thirty sustained minor damage. It is estimated that approximately 50 percent of the drops were effective.

CAT pilots made approximately 682 airdrops in all. Pilots who made more than fifty drops: Judkins (65), Kusak (59), Marsh (58), Cedegren (57), N. Hicks (57), Pope (57), Verdi (56), Pinkava (54). Judkins received hazard pay for 209:23 or \$2,092.30 (at one point, his aircraft was hit by 37mm shell; suffered damage to inboard flap and oil tank; returned on one engine).

G. T. Ewart, a Fairchild Technical Representative in the Far East, reported:

"Every C-119 Flying Boxcar that we have here in Indo-China is marked with battle damages, some not bad as others, but they show that they have gone through hell. It is the deadly anti-aircraft and artillery fire that's causing the damages. Artillery concentration at Dien Bien Phu was worse than anything since Verdun. Flak fire, it is claimed, was as dense as anything allied planes encountered over the German Ruhr towards the end of World War II."

May 8 - mid-August 1954

CAT pilots continue to fly C-119's, making drops to isolated French outposts and landing loads at various points. When Communists incited riots throughout country, CAT flew ammunition and other supplies from Hanoi to Saigon, and brought in tear gas from Okinawa (August).

July 21, 1954:

Truce agreement signed at Geneva.

August 18, 1954:

Kirkpatrick signs contract for Operation Cognac - the airlift of northerners moving south under terms of the Geneva Agreement (some of the 900,000 who would make the move). CAT to supply up to 12 C-46's with crews. CAT to receive \$192/hour for aircraft with a minimum guarantee of 1000 hours a month; plus \$70 per flying hour for crew (pilot and copilot). French to insure against loss (\$10,000 per individual, \$90,000 per aircraft). Contract to take effect on August 22. [Cognac lasted on October 4] CAT operations at Hanoi; transferred to Haiphong on September 19. Maintenance at Haiphong. Brongersma was Management Representative, with A. V. Ozorio in charge of Flight Operations.

An interesting aspect of Cognac was the association with Lansdale's Saigon Military Mission (CIA). As Lansdale later reported: "CAT asked SMM for help in obtaining a French contract for the refugee airlift, and got it. In return, CAT provided SMM with the means for secret air travel between North and Saigon."

SMM was born in Washington policy meetings during early 1954, before the fall of Dienbienphu. As Lansdale wrote: "The SMM was to enter into Vietnam quietly and assist the Vietnamese, rather than the French, in unconventional warfare. The French were to be kept as friendly allies in the process, as far as possible. The broad mission for the team was to undertake paramilitary operations against the enemy and to wage political-psychological warfare. Later, after Geneva, the mission was modified to prepare the means for undertaking paramilitary operations in Communist areas rather than to wage unconventional warfare."

Lansdale arrived in Saigon on June 1. On July 1 Major Lucien Conein arrived (paramilitary specialist, well-known to French for his help with French-operated maquis in Tonkin against the Japanese in 1945 - the one American guerilla fighter who had not been a member of the Patti Mission).

Conein was responsible for developing a paramilitary organization in the north, to be in position when the Vietminh. Conein had MAAG cover, moved north as part of MAAG staff working on refugee problem. The team had headquarters in Hanoi, with a branch at Haiphong. Among its cover duties, the team supervised the refugee flow for the Hanoi airlift operated by CAT.

Meanwhile, a second team operated in the south, exploring possibilities of organizing resistance against Vietminh from bases in the south. Members included Raymond Wittmayer, Fred Allen, and Edward Williams (Edward Bain and Richard Smith assigned to support group).

The northern group was involved in a number of "dirty tricks" operations, including the sabotage of busses and the railroad. They also identified targets for future paramilitary operations. However, the mission generally was a failure, with little success in leaving an effective stay-behind network. "The northern SMN team left with the last French troops [on October 9], disturbed by what they had seen of the grim efficiency of the Vietminh in their takeover . . ."

CAT provided secure, covert transportation for personnel and supplies.

CAT's role in Indochina did not end with Cognac. Although continuing with only a limited operation [as late as October 1958, there were only four Americans - including Pope and Clyde Bauer - assigned to Saigon], CAT's presence in Indochina would last until the ultimate fall of Saigon. And this presence would be tied closely to Lansdale and his successors.