

The image is a book cover for 'The Vietnam War: Great Battles for Boys' by Joe Giorello. The background is a composite of Vietnam War scenes. At the top, a UH-1 Huey helicopter is shown in flight against a cloudy sky. Below it, a dense jungle landscape is visible. In the lower half, a large, intense fire consumes a vehicle, likely a jeep, with soldiers in military gear positioned around it. The overall color palette is dominated by greens, browns, and oranges from the fire.

THE VIETNAM WAR

GREAT
BATTLES
FOR BOYS

JOE GIORELLO

Vietnam

Great Battles for Boys

Joe Giorello

with
Sibella Giorello

Great Battles Vietnam

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Excerpt Edition

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This book is dedicated to my brother-in-law Dean A. Labello, a Vietnam veteran and a great man.

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INTRODUCTION



US Marine arriving in Vietnam, March 1965.

THE VIETNAM WAR was the first war ever lost by the United States of America.

But after reading about some of the battles, I hope you'll come to understand that this war wasn't lost by the soldiers and Marines who fought in it.

The war was lost because of poor decision-making by military leaders, turmoil back home in America, and some outright lies by American politicians.

These Vietnam battles are harrowing—which means painful, tormenting, and heartbreaking.

But it's important you know what happened. We can't honor the memory of these brave soldiers, sailors, and Marines unless we know what they endured on behalf of the American people. And if we don't study the past, we risk making the same mistakes in the future.

Speaking of the past, I need to give you a quick introduction to Vietnam's history before we dive into the battles of the Vietnam War. Don't worry—this isn't just some "boring dates and stuff." This history will help you make sense of the war and how it was fought.

Wars don't "just happen."

Wars are the result of years—decades, sometimes centuries—of disagreements, arguments, conflicts, and power struggles between countries, peoples, and tribes.

The same is true of the Vietnam War.

We're going to start by going way back—to the year 969.

For about a thousand years, the Chinese imperial dynasties—kings and such—controlled Southeast Asia and the country of Vietnam. But starting in 969, and continuing for almost 1,000 years, a bunch of other imperial dynasties ruled the country.

Then in the 1600s—about when America was just getting discovered—French traders began going back and forth from Vietnam to gather and trade spices and other goods. In the 1800s, French Christian missionaries started traveling to Vietnam, accompanied by the French military for protection. By 1884, France had taken control of three countries—Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

(By the way, a colony is a land controlled by another country, usually from far away.)



France captures the Vietnamese capital of Saigon, 1859.

These three colonies of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were known as “French Indochina.”

Still with me? Because this information really is leading up to the Vietnam War.

Let’s fast forward to the 1940s and World War II.

If you’ve read my other battle books, you know that the Allied forces won World War II. France was among the Allies, and Vietnam, as its colony, also supported the Allies.

With the end of the war, Vietnam hoped to become its own independent country.

No more colonial rulers.

But France still wanted control of Vietnam. French troops were sent to restore power and were opposed by the Viet Minh. These were Vietnamese soldiers loyal to a Communist ruler named Ho Chi Minh (“Hoe Chee Min”).



Ho Chi Minh.

A popular leader adored by many people, who called him “Uncle Ho,” Ho Chi Minh wanted to turn Vietnam into a Communist country.

Communism is a political idea. It gives the government power to run everything—from every business and farm to all the schools, hospitals, and even the churches (if the government allows churches to exist—in many Communist countries, belief in God is forbidden).

Communism insists that if the government can control all the money, it will divide it equally among every citizen. That idea sounds fair, but in reality, Communism has failed every place it’s been tried. The basic reason for its failure is that the powerful government people at the top get rich, while everyone else gets poor.

While Ho pushed for Vietnam's independence, he also convinced the people to fight for Communism. From 1946 to 1954, Ho's soldiers fought the French Army.

That conflict was called the First Indochina War. Ho's soldiers were known as the Viet Minh.



Ho Chi Minh inspects the Viet Minh forces, 1945.

Ho also found support from two Communist countries, China and the Soviet Union (which is today's Russia). In 1954, in an epic battle you'll soon read about, the Viet Minh finally drove the French out of Vietnam.

But after the French left, did Vietnam become an independent country?

Nope.

A group of world powers, including the United States of America, decided the best solution for Vietnam would be to divide the country in two. The official agreement for this divide was called the Geneva Accords.

Under the agreement, North Vietnam could exist as a Communist country ruled by Ho Chi Minh. And South Vietnam would be a democratic country.

(If you've read my battles book on the Korean War, this division should sound familiar.)



Ho Chi Minh in 1946.

Over the years, South Vietnam had several different rulers, but each leader was basically a puppet—obeying the larger and more powerful Western countries trying to stop the spread of Communism.

The Geneva Accords were supposed to lead to free elections. That way, the people of Vietnam could decide if they wanted a Communist government or a democracy. Once that issue was decided, the two Vietnams could unite as one country.

But the ruler of South Vietnam, a man named Ngo Dinh Diem (“No Din Dee-em”), worried that Ho Chi Minh was so popular everyone would choose him as their leader. Diem withdrew from the Geneva Conference to avoid free elections.

Diem was not a good leader. His policies were not fair to the people. And though he hated the Communists, he also hated the Buddhists, a peaceful people who made up nearly 90 percent of the Vietnamese population.

In 1961, hoping to quell the unrest, US President John F. Kennedy sent several hundred troops and other military support to South Vietnam. By 1963, the number of American troops jumped to 16,700 soldiers.

(Hang on—we really are getting close to the start of the Vietnam War!)



Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopters, known as the Huey. These choppers were workhorses in Southeast Asia.

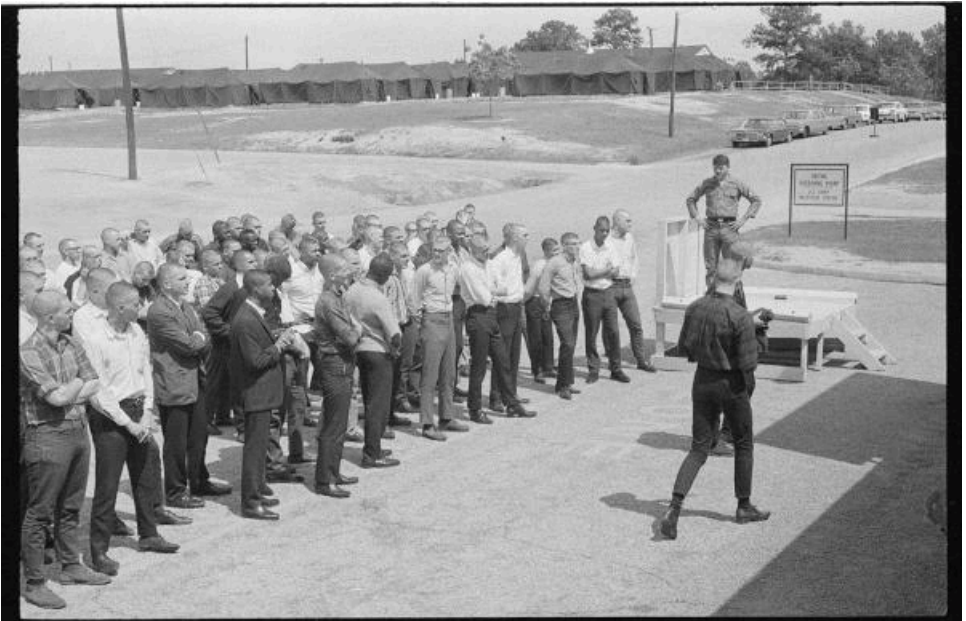
Even with all that American aid, South Vietnam remained in serious turmoil, and the Communist movement continued to grow and gain strength.

On November 2, 1963, during an overthrow of the government, Diem was assassinated. Just days later, President Kennedy was assassinated—on November 22, 1963.

Together, their violent deaths shocked the world and created even more instability.

It's believed by many that President Kennedy planned to pull American troops out of Vietnam. That withdrawal would have changed the entire dynamic between the US and South Vietnam.

However, the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, wanted to do just the opposite. Johnson wanted US forces to remain in Vietnam—and even increase the number of troops and armaments.



Young American men who have just been drafted for the Vietnam War stand at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

As president, Johnson appointed General William Westmoreland as the commander in chief of all US troops in

Vietnam. Westmoreland's primary job was to train and assist the South Vietnamese Army. But Westmoreland continually asked for more American troops.

Then, during the summer of 1964, something big happened. It suddenly shifted the entire situation between Vietnam and the United States.

This "thing" was later called "the Gulf of Tonkin incident."

Here's what happened:

On July 30, 1964, two South Vietnamese patrol boats attacked two North Vietnamese islands in an area called the Gulf of Tonkin.

Days later, on August 2, 1964, some North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the USS *Maddox*, a US naval destroyer.



USS *Maddox* underway at sea in the early 1960s.

Word of this second attack—on a US military ship—brought another US ship into the area.

On August 4, those two US ships were attacked ... or were they?

The commander of the USS *Maddox* sent a message saying he doubted it was a real attack. He believed his crew had probably overreacted.

But President Johnson used that “attack” to ask Congress for approval to send more troops to Vietnam. In turn, Congress voted on the request. The vote was 88–2. Only the senators from Alaska and Oregon voted against sending more military troops to Vietnam.

While still not a “declared” war with Vietnam, that congressional approval for troops and supplies escalated into what we now call the Vietnam War.

In March 1965, the first US Marines landed in Da Nang. Their arrival marked the beginning of America’s visible presence in the Vietnam War.

We’re going to dive into some of those battles.

But first, let’s get into the world-famous epic battle that drove the French forces out of Vietnam—and that sowed the seeds for America’s entry: the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

THE BATTLE OF DIEN BIEN PHU

March 13 – May 17, 1954



Vietnamese soldiers fighting the French, 1954.

IF YOU'VE READ my other battle books about World War II, you know that the German Nazis invaded France and occupied the country for most of the war.

In response to that occupation, France split into two territories—one part went along with the Nazis (an area called Vichy France), while the other part resisted enemy occupation.

But when the Allies won World War II, France was liberated. It could then turn its attention back to its many colonies that stretched around the world. In particular, France wanted to regain control of Vietnam. Many French people were already living there,

the land overflowed with natural resources, and, like most colonial powers, France considered Vietnam its own property.

But many Vietnamese people strongly disagreed with that view. They weren't interested in France just waltzing back into their country and seizing control again.

That meant, if France wanted control of Vietnam, it would need to send in its military.

However, the French Army was facing a tough obstacle: Ho Chi Minh, the popular Communist dictator of North Vietnam. He had started fighting the French in 1946, right after the end of World War II.

And at Ho's side was a fierce military commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap ("Voe New-guy-un Gee-app").



General Vo Nguyen Giap in 1957.

General Giap commanded the Viet Minh soldiers with cruel cunning. He wouldn't think twice about sacrificing anybody's life for the cause of Communism. Giap was also one of the twentieth century's most masterful military tacticians. He specialized in guerrilla warfare tactics—ambushes, hit-and-run strikes, wild jungle warfare.

This "irregular" warfare kept French forces on defense. No matter how hard the traditionally trained French soldiers fought, they couldn't beat the Viet Minh soldiers who were fighting in the jungles for their homeland's independence.

In 1953, after several French military commanders failed to win any victories, a new French commander entered the fray.

His name was General Henri Navarre.

General Navarre devised a new approach. Instead of allowing the Viet Minh to use guerrilla tactics in the jungle, the French should lure them onto an open battlefield. That change would force Giap to fight with more conventional warfare—and then lose because the highly trained and skilled French soldiers also had more and better weapons. After this epic but conventional battle, France could retake Vietnam.

Navarre chose to stage his battle at an abandoned military base called Dien Bien Phu ("Dee-en Be-en Foo"). Originally built by the Japanese (the Japanese fight for Vietnam is another story!), the base had fallen into disrepair.

In November 1953, thousands of French forces began landing by plane in the remote Dien Bien Phu Valley. These soldiers were among the best warriors available—paratroopers, Foreign Legionnaires, and Vietnamese soldiers who were loyal to the French. All of them were under the command of Colonel Christian de Castries.

Immediately after landing, the soldiers began repairing the base's abandoned airstrip and fortifying the nine garrisons, or forts.

The forts were separated from each other and stretched down the deep valley to form a forty-mile perimeter.

Forty miles. That's a long distance to protect. So the French landed more than 15,000 troops.

That sure sounds like a large enough force ...

Except, unbeknownst to the French, General Giap was bringing in nearly 50,000 Viet Minh troops!



Giap's forces in a jungle trench at Dien Bien Phu.

The French also didn't fully realize the serious logistical issues at Dien Bien Phu. In any battle, you want the high ground because it's the best position for watching and firing down on your enemy. It's also difficult for the enemy to climb up and kill your forces.

At Dien Bien Phu, Giap marched his forces up the mountains and took the high ground above the forts.

However, Navarre's plan was to draw the enemy down from the heights onto the battlefield for that standard warfare clash. The French also assumed Giap's forces didn't have much heavy artillery—after all, how could the Viet Minh soldiers possibly transport heavy weaponry through the jungle and up steep mountainsides?

And yet, the Viet Minh did have heavy weapons. Secretly, China and the Soviet Union (today's Russia) were supplying Giap with hundreds of artillery and anti-aircraft weaponry. These two Communist countries wanted Ho Chi Minh to control all of Vietnam.

With delivery of the weaponry, Giap's soldiers would dismantle the heavy artillery and shuttle the separate parts up the mountainside using jungle camouflage to keep their movements undetected by the French. Once they reached their position up top, the Viet Minh would rebuild the artillery pieces.



Viet Minh transporting artillery through the muddy jungle at Dien Bien Phu.

The French Army, continuing to believe they would win this fight, stationed its soldiers in the nine forts along the base's forty-

mile perimeter. Each of these forts was given a woman's name (the French are known as romantics). The forts' names were Béatrice, Gabrielle, Anne-Marie, Isabelle, Huguette, Dominique, Eliane, Claudine, and Françoise.

On March 13, 1954, in the dead of night, Giap launched a relentless barrage.

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu had begun.

All night, the enemy's artillery shells blasted at the French forces. By the next day, the base's airstrip was so damaged it was totally unusable. This destruction was a masterful decision by Giap. The airstrip was the only way supplies and reinforcements could reach these remote soldiers!

Now Viet Minh troops moved in. But their clever commander used some warfare tactics that were more common to World War I. Giap ordered his men to dig trenches. Each trench protected his men but came closer and closer to the French forts. At the same time, these trenches worked to further isolate the nine forts from each other.



Viet Minh with weapons in trenches, 1954.

With no airstrip for landing, the French Air Force started dropping supplies by parachute. But these supplies sometimes landed in enemy hands, and the planes were shot down by Giap's anti-aircraft artillery.

In all, the Viet Minh damaged 167 planes and shot down more than sixty of them.

But the French had another problem. The base's artillery was almost totally ineffective.

Why?

Because the French expected to lure the enemy off the mountains and fight on a level battlefield, they positioned their heavy guns for level targets. But the enemy remained high above them.

So disastrous was this early stage of the battle that the French artillery commander, deciding he'd failed his men, committed suicide.

Despite being vastly outnumbered and outgunned, the French fighters returned firepower. Dien Bien Phu turned into a killing field, with thousands upon thousands of Viet Minh soldiers getting slaughtered.

Giap's reply?

Keep attacking.

The Communist general had no problem sending his men into the fatal fray. Like most Communists, he believed the individual should be sacrificed for the political mission.

"Every minute," Giap said, "hundreds of thousands of people die on this earth. The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, tens of thousands of human beings, even our compatriots, means little."

However, to keep morale up among these soldiers taking such heavy losses, Giap told them they would receive free land for fighting. (Of course, that meant Giap would have to take land from someone else, but that's how Communism works.)

Giap's men continued to dig trenches and close around the nine forts like a noose.

Soon Forts Gabrielle and Anne-Marie fell to the enemy.

The French fighters began to realize what was happening. Enemy artillery pounded their positions. Casualties were piling up. Ammunition and medicine were running out—while supplies were not getting in.

By March 30, the Viet Minh managed to cut Fort Isabelle off from the other forts. The men stationed inside were completely on their own—with no idea what was happening anywhere else on the base.

On that same day, the Viet Minh attacked two more forts.

For nearly a week, the bloody and desperate attacks raged. About the only thing holding back a Viet Minh victory was the determination, skill, and resolve of the French forces.

But by mid-April, the French Army's situation was even worse. Medicine ran low for the wounded. The number of dead men was

growing. The rest were starving and fighting with an enemy who came so close it was hand-to-hand combat to survive. Moreover, Giap seemed to have an endless supply of soldiers.

Other French paratroopers who were stationed in other parts of Vietnam heard about the death match at Dien Bien Phu.

Amazingly, some of those paratroopers volunteered to jump into the battle.



French paratroopers watch comrades being dropped over Dien Bien Phu.

Imagine the courage of these brave men. Simply to reach the battle, the planes carrying them would be fired upon by anti-aircraft guns. And when these men parachuted from those planes, enemy guns would fire on them as they floated down from the sky. Then, if they managed to reach the ground, their survival was totally uncertain. It was likely they would die at one of the forts—or get taken prisoner by the enemy.

American cargo pilots also volunteered to drop supplies to the forts. Many of these pilots were former Flying Tigers (who you read about in *Great Battles for Boys: World War II Pacific*).

Despite all this help, it was too little, too late.

The Viet Minh continued digging the trenches, ever closer and closer to the remaining forts.

By the end of April, Huguette, Dominique, and Eliane were at risk of falling into enemy hands.

On May 6, a French Army major sent a final message to command headquarters from Dien Bien Phu.

“They [the Viet Minh] are here,” he reported. “I am destroying the radio. Adieu to all.”

“Adieu” is French for “good-bye.”

The Viet Minh now swarmed the forts. The French soldiers kept fighting, most of them on their own, completely isolated from any other soldiers and without any communication with the other forts.



French commander de Castries talks with an officer as they look at a map inside their underground headquarters.

Base commander Colonel de Castries radioed his commanders for permission to surrender.

But French General René Cogny denied de Castries's request: "You have to finish the whole thing now. But what you have done until now, surely is magnificent. Don't spoil it by hoisting the white flag ... No surrender. No white flag."

"All right, mon général," de Castries obediently replied. "I only wanted to preserve the wounded."

Moments later, a French radio operator destroyed de Castries's radio with the butt of his Colt .45 pistol.

Many French soldiers wanted to continue the fight. But de Castries decided a cease-fire would be the best way forward—without a white flag. He ordered his men to destroy their own weapons, radios, and other equipment.

Imagine that scene: These soldiers are wounded and starving. The enemy wants to slaughter them and will be there at any moment. But here they are, destroying their own weaponry.

The French forces then waited in silence.

Journalist Bernard B. Fall later described the battle's ending.

"As a French colonel surveyed the battlefield from a slit trench near his command post, a small white flag, probably a handkerchief, appeared on top of a rifle hardly 50 feet away from him, followed by the flat-helmeted head of a Viet Minh soldier.

"'You're not going to shoot anymore?' said the Viet Minh in French.

"'No, I'm not going to shoot anymore,' said the colonel. ...

"And all around them, as on some gruesome Judgment Day, soldiers, French and enemy alike, began to crawl out of their trenches and stand erect for the first time in 54 days, as firing ceased everywhere. The sudden silence was deafening."

Giap, seeing the French soldiers without weapons, realized the cease-fire was real.

After such a brutal battle, with valiant displays of bravery on the part of the French, the Viet Minh forces showed their respect by taking the French prisoner instead of killing them.

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu was over.

The battle would end French colonial rule in Vietnam.

Later, Giap wrote about the battle.

“Finally, we were rid of the enemy. It fulfilled the dreams the Vietnamese people had held for hundreds of years.”

Some 13,000 French soldiers survived the battle. The Red Cross—which provides medical aid in wartime—looked after the most seriously wounded. Giap’s forces marched the other 11,721 men to prison camps.



Captured French soldiers, escorted by Vietnamese troops, walk to a prisoner-of-war camp after Dien Bien Phu.

The inhumane conditions inside the camps killed more men than the battle did. Only 3,290 men survived prison camp and returned to their homeland.

The battle cost Giap 8,000 men. Another 16,000 were wounded.

The July 1954 peace agreement ending French rule called for a temporary divide between North and South Vietnam. And national elections.

As you know, the elections never happened. Instead, the Communists controlled North Vietnam with support from the Soviet Union and China. South Vietnam was a democracy supported by the United States and other allies.

These two Vietnams, divided geographically by the 17th parallel, marked the beginning of American and allied troops being deployed to protect South Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh knew what was to come, as Giap later explained.

“When I returned to [Ho Chi Minh’s northern base] and met Ho,” Giap wrote, “he told us while were we celebrating the victory that we’d have to prepare ourselves to fight another war, this time against the Americans.”

WHO FOUGHT?



Pierre Fauroux.

WHO WERE THOSE brave men who parachuted into this deadly battle while it raged?

One of them was Executive Officer Pierre Fauroux.

Born in 1921, Fauroux graduated from a French military academy. During World War II he escaped from the pro-German government that was ruling France and made it to Spain.

He joined the French Resistance and fought to free his country. Fauroux also trained with the British Special Operations and was among the men who parachuted into France on D-Day.

After World War II, Fauroux was sent to Vietnam as an executive officer of a parachute battalion. Despite knowing the battle was lost at Dien Bien Phu, Fauroux went anyway.

In his memoirs, he wrote about the battle.

“On the afternoon of May 6 [an officer] asked me to go with a radio operator toward the center of the fighting to look for a less pulverized place where we could reassemble the surviving elements of the battalion. I advanced through the trenches in mud up to my chest. The shells never ceased to fall. At a bend in a trench I lost sight of the radio operator. He must have been killed by a shell and swallowed up by the mud. I realized then that the end was at hand.”

Fauroux survived the battle and became a prisoner of war (POW). He was among the few who survived the torturous conditions. He later served in Algeria, North Africa, and was awarded the French Legion of Honor and the American Silver Star.

In 2010, six years after finishing his memoirs, *Night Jump into Dien Bien Phu*, Pierre Fauroux passed away. He was almost ninety years old.

BOOKS

Dien Bien Phu 1954: The French Defeat that Lured America into Vietnam by Martin Windrow. This 96-page book is well researched with good illustrations and focuses on many details of the battle.

INTERNET

Read an excerpt from Pierre Fauroux’s memoirs:

www.historynet.com/night-jump-dien-bien-phu

Here is a 14-minute video on the battle, with some live footage, including how the Viet Minh transported heavy artillery onto the hillsides:

youtu.be/tSWWGFPb7Xc

MOVIES

Battle for Dien Bien Phu. This 49-minute documentary tells the harrowing story of the Viet Minh siege at Dien Bien Phu.

Jump into Hell (1955). Not a documentary, but a solid production that tells the story of the 15,000 French troops holding the forts at Dien Bien Phu while an ever-tightening vise closes around the base.

THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL



Marine Corporal K. Philpot on alert in his bunker to sight any possible North Vietnamese Army movements.

IF YOU'VE EVER walked in the woods, you know that sometimes it can be difficult to follow the trail. Plants and tree limbs grow over pathways. Rain washes away the soil.

But imagine you're walking in a thick jungle. The big-leaf trees block sunlight and stand like endless green walls. Ropy vines grip every surface, including the marshy ground where fungus grows and strange animals prowl. Thousands of poisonous insects—

including spiders as big as baseball gloves—hang in the trees, where snakes slither across limbs.

Let's also say you need to hack your way through that thick jungle to create a trail other people can use, too. But you'll only have shovels and machete ("mah-shet-tee") knives to do it.

And what if I told you that this trail will eventually stretch for more than 12,000 miles—which is longer than if you went around the entire perimeter of the continental United States!

Well, that's exactly what the North Vietnamese people did to create the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Named after the Communist leader of North Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was a series of paths that meandered through Southeast Asia—from North Vietnam into Laos and Cambodia, then circling back into South Vietnam.

This 12,000-mile-long trail allowed the North Vietnamese Communists to supply their troops who were fighting in South Vietnam. Moreover, this trail was one way they could move men and supplies—and spies—without being detected by the American forces.

The trail became even more important to the North Vietnamese after the US Navy set up a blockade along the coastline of South Vietnam to keep any enemy ships from arriving.

During the trail's early stages, a person needed about six months to walk the entire route, end to end. People carried supplies, but the Communists also transported necessities using mules, oxcarts, and bicycles.

Portions of the trail wound through some of the most challenging terrains in Southeast Asia, from mountains that rose as much as 8,000 feet to valleys that plunged so deep they were camouflaged by a triple canopy of tree leaves.

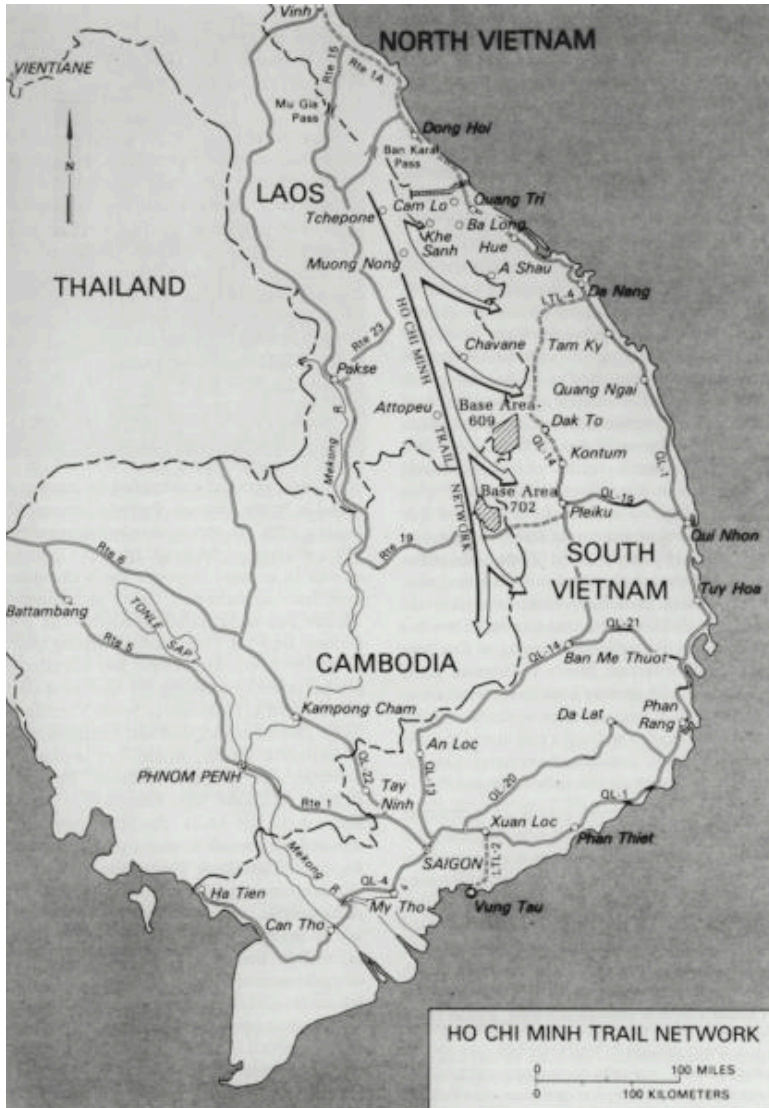


Transporting goods on the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.

When the Vietnam War began, the trail widened due to heavy use. In 1964, an estimated 10,000 North Vietnamese Army, or NVA, troops used the trail as the major supply route. The following year, as the Soviet Union and China began heavily supplying the NVA with equipment, the trail widened even further.

By 1968, as many as 100,000 NVA troops and many tons of supplies passed through the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By 1973, trucks could drive the entire length without emerging from the canopy of trees, unless they were crossing streams and rivers. Portions of the route became well marked and paved, like regular roads, and included underground facilities such as fuel tanks and hospitals.

This secret supply route offered the NVA a clear advantage—they could move men and supplies behind enemy lines without ever being detected.



The trail moved through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam.

But this access route was a serious *disadvantage* for the Americans. And it wasn't easy to destroy the trail, either.

Laos and Cambodia were supposed to be neutral in this war, meaning they wouldn't take sides (more on that in a moment). American military leaders didn't want to conduct ground campaigns within those countries. So instead, the trail was attacked with air campaigns.

Bombs were dropped from B-52s and other fighter aircraft. Sometimes the destruction was effective, at least for a while. But the North Vietnamese Army always rebuilt the routes. In fact, the NVA had a special army tasked with maintaining and protecting the trail.



An Air Force F-100D Super Sabre aircraft fires 2.75-inch rockets at enemy positions in Vietnam. Super Sabre pilots were noted for their accuracy during bombing and strafing runs in the supersonic fighter.

NVA forces—which were mostly Viet Minh and Viet Cong, or Chinese, soldiers—even built dummy roads to confuse the US forces. The roads looked like they were part of the trail but actually went nowhere.

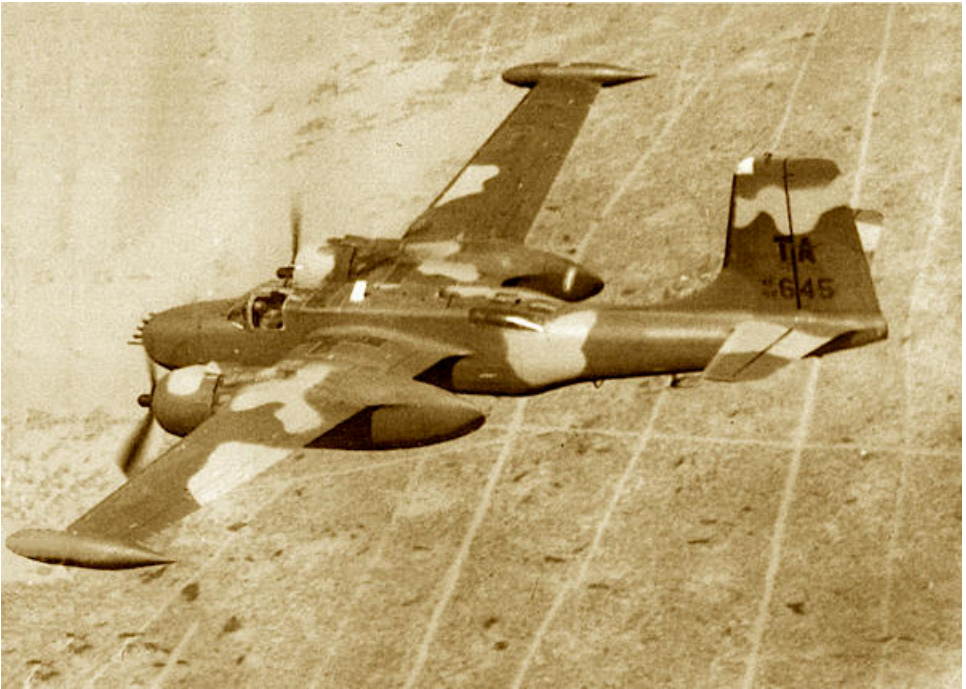
One of the projects launched by the US to destroy the trail was called Igloo White. The American military dropped some 20,000 battery sensors on the trail, some disguised as animal droppings.

The goal was to detect the sound of people and vehicles—because it was too hard to see movements through the thick leaves. The project cost the American taxpayer about one billion dollars—and it didn't work.

Project Popeye was another plan. The US Air Force seeded the clouds over the trail with rain-producing elements, such as silver iodide and lead iodide. This seeding produced torrential downpours of rain. But bad weather didn't stop the NVA troop movements.

And how about this one: Project Commando Lava. The US Air Force dropped 120 tons of powdered soap on the trail to create a goo-like substance that was supposed to slow down or stop the vehicles that were motoring up and down the trail. That one didn't work either.

But none of those failures can discount the daring pilots who flew into serious danger using older aircraft, such as the piston-engine T-28 Trojan, originally a training plane, and the A-26A Invader, a light bomber that was also used in World War II and Korea. These slower planes didn't have the speed or agility of fighter jets, and therefore the enemy could more easily shoot them down. On the other hand, slower speeds allowed pilots to spot more activity on the trail.



US Air Force Douglas A-26A Invader in Southeast Asia, 1967–1969. Note the .50-caliber machine guns in the nose of the plane.

Forward air controllers were also flying above the Ho Chi Minh Trail, searching for any potentially usable airstrips positioned near enemy forces. US Air Force pilots also flew many extremely hazardous recovery missions to rescue aircrews who got shot down and who might otherwise be killed by the enemy. Reconnaissance pilots gathered intelligence on enemy positions and geography, and regularly risked their lives during solo flights over the trail.

Among the steepest challenges for the US Air Force was that the NVA was defending the trail with powerful anti-aircraft weaponry, such as 37mm guns and 12.7mm machine guns. And even when the American pilots managed to destroy some main supply routes, the NVA would reconnect the trail using hundreds of other smaller trails.

The NVA also cleverly used convoys and relay stations. Supply trucks shuttled from one stop to the next, unloading their goods onto a “fresh” truck that would then drive to the next station. This

relay system cleverly ensured that if one truck got destroyed or broke down, it was easily replaced with another vehicle in the convoy until, eventually, the final station was reached—sometimes in Laos or Cambodia. Supplies were also placed on boats that shipped the goods to enemy forces inside South Vietnam.

Ingenious logistics, huh?

However, the US bombing strikes were effective enough that the NVA trucks shifted to using the Ho Chi Minh Trail only at night. Drivers would begin traveling at dusk, motor through the night, and stop just before dawn, when the US fighter bombers would start attacking the trail again. Although American forces did send out some night bombers, imagine how difficult it was for those pilots to spot their targets and drop bombs into a dense jungle in the pitch-black dark.

You might be wondering about those other countries that were part of the trail—Cambodia and Laos.

Cambodia claimed neutrality in the Vietnam War, although it also helped the Communists. Laos, however, was not neutral, and the United States bombed the country from 1964 to 1973. In fact, US planes dropped as many as *two million tons* of bombs on the country, including cluster bombs. Those bombs work like a shotgun, but instead of pellets bursting out, mini-bombs explode.

Why did the US bomb Laos so heavily?

Laos sits in a strategic location among six other countries, including Vietnam. Some of the Communists in Laos supported North Vietnam and helped supply the NVA. To avoid sending troops into North Vietnam, the United States secretly bombed Laos instead. The hope was that the bombs would halt the flow of supplies to the NVA.

And now that you know about the supplies and logistics, we're going to concentrate on the Vietnam part of this war. So let's get to another battle.

WHO FOUGHT?



Ho Chi Minh surrounded by Vietnamese children.

WHO WAS THIS leader who pushed out the French and became so dear to the Vietnamese people that they called him “Uncle Ho”?

Ho Chi Minh was born in Vietnam on May 19, 1890. At that time, Vietnam was a colony of France. But at birth, his name was Nguyen Sinh Cung.

Historians don’t know a lot about his childhood, except that it wasn’t happy. His father was a scholar, and Ho received a disciplined education, but the family struggled. He left Vietnam as a young man to travel the world. He worked various jobs to support himself, including as a waiter, gardener, and sailor.

While living in Paris, France, he became a Communist. He believed the government should control everything—including what jobs people have, how much food, even how many children parents can have. Although Communism has failed the people everywhere it has been tried, the system often sounds ideal to many people because it seems like everyone will be equal.

In 1930, he helped organize a Vietnamese Communist political group. Around 1940, he changed his name to “Ho Chi Minh.” The name in Vietnamese means “he who enlightens.” Many, many people began to worship him for his intelligence, his writings, and his personality, much like the Germans at that time who were worshipping another powerful political figure, Adolf Hitler.

During World War II, the Japanese captured Vietnam from the French. But the Allies, particularly the United States, defeated Japan in that war. The French came back, but Ho and General Giap finally defeated them at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Vietnam divided, with Ho as president of North Vietnam, and soon the Vietnam War broke out.

However, in 1969, as the war raged, Ho Chi Minh suffered a heart attack. For the rest of the year, his health declined. US President Richard Nixon wrote a letter to Ho, delivered secretly, and suggested working together to end this “tragic war.” However, Nixon warned Ho that North Vietnam must make concessions—give up some things—during the peace talks or else America would use “measures of great consequence and force.”

Ho replied with his own letter dated August 25, 1969. Ho welcomed peace talks with the US but made no concessions.

Just a few days after he wrote that letter, Ho Chi Minh died. He was seventy-nine years old.

The Vietnam War continued ...

BOOKS

Ho Chi Minh Trail 1964–73: Steel Tiger, Barrel Roll, and the secret air wars in Vietnam and Laos by Peter E. Davies. With good illustrations, this book showcases the air assaults that attempted to destroy the trail.

Breaking Stalin’s Nose by Eugene Yelchin. This powerful novel features a ten-year-old boy whose sufferings reveal what it’s like to live under a Communist government. Reading level 4th to 7th grade.

INTERNET

Veteran Keith McKim describes the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the dense jungles of Vietnam: youtu.be/n74TzxeFMI8

This short video shows wartime footage of the Ho Chi Minh Trail: youtu.be/g9jlA8zh6MY