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Death on the Highway: The Destruction of Groupement Mobile 100

This Viet Minh attack on a French convoy had strategic implications

by Captain Kirk A. Luedeke

Introduction

The ambush and subsequent destruction of Groupement Mobile 100 was one of the last engagements in the French-Indochina War that involved more than one battalion of French and Viet Minh troops. This overview will discuss the strategic implications of the time, the area of operations, the antagonists in terms of their leadership, order of battle, doctrine, and strengths and weaknesses.

Strategic Setting

In late June 1954, the French-Indochina War was all but over.¹ The massive French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, along with a proportional yearly increase in French casualties since the conflict began in 1946, had drained France's desire to continue with the hostilities. France was beginning to call her soldiers home.

The fledgling Vietnamese National Government believed their victory at Dien Bien Phu was not enough to guarantee the concessions they desired from the French government.² As such, orders went out to continue to fight the French military and to inflict as many casualties as possible. The more French blood was spilled in Vietnam, the stronger the position of Vietnamese negotiators at Geneva, Switzerland.

The French Army garrison at An Khe was one of several outposts that was abandoned in the wake of Dien Bien Phu. In many cases, civilians and high-ranking military officials were flown out of An Khe, while the majority of French soldiers evacuated An Khe in armored columns along the winding colonial routes that snaked across the Vietnamese Central Highlands. One such convoy was known as Groupement Mobile 100, a conglomeration of infantry and artillery units that had been fighting the Viet Minh in the Central Highlands for over a year. Bloodied and tired, yet proud, the soldiers of G.M. 100 were ready to return home



when they departed their garrison on the 24th of June, 1954. Most would never make it, dying in a little-known ambush that resulted in the destruction of their once-mighty task force. While not a major engagement by the standard of the French-Indochina War, the death of G.M. 100 was characterized by savage fighting, and doomed by the mistakes of its senior leadership. The soldiers of G.M. 100 were some of the best in the French Army, and it was for that reason that any of them at all were able to reach the safety of Pleiku several days after the ambush.

Antagonists

Prior to 1941, Indochina had not been an important colony in the French colonial empire. French involvement there began with priests who first came to Vietnam in the 17th century in an attempt to convert the natives to Christianity. By the 19th century, the French government had discovered that Vietnam's three great rivers might allow them a more direct trade route to China. While the rivers turned out to be useless for trading purposes, the French were in Vietnam to stay.

French rule did not benefit the Vietnamese people. France built a modern

infrastructure of roads, railways, and ports, but this was not done to help the local people, but to exploit them.³ Unlike the British, the French did not allow their colonies a degree of self-rule. As a result, a number of clandestine groups formed to resist French rule, but they lacked dynamic leadership to unite them. Ho Chi Minh would change that.

Ho Chi Minh attempted two uprisings in the 1930s in the name of the Vietnamese Communist Party, but France suppressed both. Ho escaped Vietnam and waited for another chance to free his country from the yoke of colonial rule. After the fall of France to the German blitzkrieg, France was allowed to keep her holdings in the Far East. Japan demanded they be allowed to use Indochina as a staging area for their army and navy, as well as use of Indochina's natural resources.

Japan's defeat in 1945 created a power vacuum in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh and his supporters established a provisional government in Hanoi and attempted unsuccessfully to get the United States to recognize the government as legitimate. France, adamant that Indochina was still its colony, prepared to go to war against Ho and his Viet Minh. Hostilities between France and the VM broke out in November, 1946. The conflict would rage on until July 20, 1954 when the French-Indochina War officially ended.

Area of Operations

Located in the central highlands of Vietnam between the provincial capital of Pleiku and Qui Nhoi, on the coast of the South China Sea, An Khe was an important French Army outpost. Because of its proximity to the few Vietnamese roads in the highlands, the French military was able to patrol the area with its mechanized forces and could interdict Viet Minh combat units as they attempted to infiltrate south.⁴

By late June, 1954, the French Command, recognizing that the Viet Minh were in position to launch a major offensive in the Central Highlands, and with no reserves with which to combat them, ordered An Khe evacuated. The VM intended to strike at the French as they withdrew, positioning themselves to intercept the French columns as they made their way to the various link-up points throughout Vietnam.

Late June, 1954 was dry season in Vietnam. The roadways were easily trafficable, making movement along the Route Coloniales (R.C.s), a rapid affair. Having been in Vietnam for well over a year, the French troops were acclimatized to the summer's brutal heat.

Terrain played a major role in the destruction of G.M. 100. The road between An Khe and Pleiku (R.C. 19), was bordered by tall elephant grass and dense jungle vegetation which provided excellent concealment for attackers. In many places along R.C. 19, the rocky terrain channeled the road into narrow defiles, severely restricting any kind of mounted maneuver. The Mang Yang Pass was the link-up point where G.M. 100 and G.M. 42 would join, 20 kilometers from An Khe. Colonel Barrou viewed the pass as key terrain.

Comparison of Antagonists

When the French-Indochina War began in 1946, France firmly believed that her superior technology and military machine would defeat the Vietnamese peasants quickly enough. France received a good deal of military equipment from the United States and Great Britain and benefited from the support of both nations. France set up a series of provincial commands in Vietnam's towns and cities from which it would launch attacks into the northern portion of Vietnam, using overwhelming combat power to grind the Viet Minh into submission. To help them in their fight, the French also used special operations troops to recruit mountain tribesmen who disliked the Vietnamese. France underrated the ability and fighting savvy of their opponents and would continue to do so for the duration of the war.⁵

The Viet Minh had no illusions about their capabilities against the French military, nor how they would wage their war for independence. The VM initially fought a guerrilla war against the French, ambushing light convoys,

overwhelming under-defended outposts and striking at supply and ammunition depots to hinder France's resupply efforts while adding to their own cache of weapons and ammunition. As the years progressed, the VM, receiving military aid from China in the form of equipment and military advisors, were able to fight larger engagements with French forces, oftentimes overwhelming French forces with human wave tactics. VM doctrine attempted to avoid the set-piece battle unless they enjoyed an overwhelming force ratio, as evidenced in their 12-to-1 advantage against the French defenders at Dien Bien Phu. Ho Chi Minh's strategy was to bleed France dry, knowing that his people were in it for the long run, while the French were not.

The G.M.s were designed as self-sustaining motorized brigades modeled after the U.S. Army's World War II combat commands. The G.M.s typically consisted of three infantry battalions with one artillery battalion, along with elements of light armor or tanks, engineer, signal and medical assets, totaling 3,000-3,500 soldiers. The G.M.s were effective at rapidly reinforcing threatened sectors in the Delta, but the hills and swamps, prevalent in Vietnam, hindered their effectiveness, restricting the G.M.s to narrow roads. Their mobility quickly became their Achilles heel, as their vehicles could not traverse the restricted terrain.⁶

The French order of battle included:

- *Groupement Mobile 100*, Colonel Barrou, commanding.
- Headquarters Company 100, Capt. Fievet, commanding.
- Regiment de Coree (Korea Regiment), Lieutenant Colonel Lajouinie, commanding.
- 1st Bataillon de Coree (Korea), Major Kleinmann, commanding.
- 2nd Bataillon de Coree (Korea), Major Guinard, commanding.
- Bataillon de March /43e Regiment d'Infanterie Coloniale, Major Muller, commanding.
- 10e RAC (Artillery), Major Arvieux, commanding.
- III Escadrille/5e Rgt Cuirassiers ('Royale-Pologne'), Captain Doucet, commanding.

Groupement Mobile 100 was a veteran force with a paper strength of 834

soldiers in each infantry battalion. The Korea Regiment had distinguished itself fighting alongside the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division in Korea and proudly wore the unit's Indianhead patch.⁷ Many of its officers had taken a reduction in rank to serve in the Coree. The 43rd Coloniale was a crack unit of Cambodian and Vietnamese soldiers who had fought well in the past.⁸

It can also be said that G.M. 100 was tired from the bloody fighting and many saw their withdrawal as a sign that the war for them was over. G.M. 100 was well-led by officers and NCOs, at the company level as well as in senior leadership positions. Colonel Barrou was a compassionate officer who recognized the Groupe Mobile's vulnerabilities early in his command when he wrote in his diary:

"The most delicate problem remains that of the protection of the artillery and of the means of command and communications, since the largest possible number of infantrymen must be left free to search out the enemy and fight him.

*"The very means of support and coordination which makes the strength of the G.M. also create some enormous obligations in a mountainous area where roads are rare and of poor quality"*⁹

These words would haunt the colonel later, considering the fate of his unit. G.M. 100's leadership was strong, consisting of blooded, dedicated officers who were no strangers to the war in Vietnam. Perhaps it is a tribute to them — the sergeants, lieutenants, captains and majors of the G.M. — that any of its soldiers survived the bloody ambush at PK 15.

Viet Minh Regiment 803

The Viet Minh enjoyed widespread support among the civilian population of Vietnam, and dealt harshly with those who had profited from the French presence. The Viet Minh army was formed from tough peasants, ideologically committed to an independent, Communist Vietnam. The sufferings heaped upon the people by corrupt Vietnamese in power, as well as military operations and atrocities by the French military, ensured a continuous stream of volunteers into General Vo Giap's VM Army. Those less willing to fight could provide invaluable service to the army as porters. It was the porters or "coolies" who had hauled hundreds of mortar and artillery pieces and

ammunition across the Vietnamese countryside and up to the high ground surrounding the French base at Dien Bien Phu. It is estimated that each regular division needed approximately 50,000 porters to move equipment and supplies.¹⁰

Most of the VM regular units were formed in the Viet Bac and after 1949, at Chinese Camps at Wenshan, Long Zhou, Jing Xi, and Szu Mao. Trained by Chinese Red Army soldiers, the Viet Minh were molded into a fanatical fighting force capable of marching for days with only a few rice balls for sustenance.¹¹

The Viet Minh 803rd Regiment had fought the French in the Central Highlands for two years and had exacted a bloody price from the soldiers of G.M. 100 since February, 1954 with ambushes and mortar attacks on An Khe. It was a price that G.M. 100 had paid in kind at Dak Ya-Ayun in March. It seemed only fitting that the 803rd would be the ones executing the ambush two months later that would signify the death knell of the French unit.

The 803rd's leadership is unknown. There is no record of any of the names of its regimental or battalion commanders, for theirs was a war of anonymity. The Viet Minh won its battles at great human cost and therefore, many of its officers did not survive the vicious fighting. A private in one battle could very well find himself leading VM troops as a sergeant or lieutenant in the next. As their struggle was one for freedom and liberty, the Viet Minh did not recognize individuals, but fought as a collective. Viet Minh leadership was different than that of the French, but it was effective enough. There was much politics in the VM Army, as commissars often worked in conjunction with the officers and NCOs who led the Viet troops to ensure their dedication to the Communist cause.

The Destruction of G.M. 100 – Opening Moves

With the fall of Dien Bien Phu complete and no French reserves available to stem the tide of the imminent Communist offensive into the central plateau, the French high command gave the order for G.M. 100 to evacuate An Khe and move to Pleiku, 80 kilometers west over enemy-held road. G.M. 100 was to depart on 25 June, upon completion of the air evacuation of French civilians, high-ranking officials, and equipment from An Khe.

By the 23rd of June, intelligence reports indicated that the Viet Minh 803rd regiment was on the march to R.C. 19 from its base near An Hoa. Indications were that the 803rd had every intention of stopping the evacuation force before it could reach Pleiku. This information proved to be critical, leading to Colonel Barrou's first costly mistake that contributed to the destruction of his force. Moving the departure date up one day to the 24th of June, Barrou decided that G.M. 100 would drive 22 kilometers to Mang Yang Pass, where elements of G.M. 42 and Airborne Groupe 1 were waiting to link up and escort the An Khe convoy into Pleiku. Barrou intended to drive the distance quickly, forsaking reconnaissance and security for speed. The original plan had called for G.M. 100 to halt at kilometer (PK) 11 while one company from the 43rd Coloniale conducted a recon of the next 11 kilometers before committing the rest of the force to the narrow defiles and restricted maneuver terrain between kilometers 12-20. Barrou now called for the column to move to PK 22 in one bound. He hoped to beat the 803rd to Mang Yang Pass and was prepared to sacrifice security to do so.

G.M. 100 departed An Khe at 0300 hours on 24 June, 1954. The Cambodian-French 43rd Coloniale led the column, followed by the 2nd Korea and the 1st Korea. All three battalions had dismounted and were providing a screen for the Groupe's vehicles. Also present in G.M. 100's formation was the 520th Tieu-Doan Kinh-Quan (TDKQ or Commando Battalion), a unit comprised of Vietnamese schooled in the fighting methods of the Viet Minh and designed to close with and destroy the Communist guerilla units. The TDKQ unfortunately were an undisciplined force, and their presence in the armored column that fateful day would end up having dire consequences for Colonel Barrou and his men.¹²

Each of the infantry battalions in G.M. 100 had one artillery battery task-organized to them. Headquarters Company and the Groupe's mobile command posts were placed in the convoy behind the 520th TDKQ. By dawn, the column was on its way to Pleiku followed by 300 or so civilians from An Khe who had not been evacuated by air. Although it was against the orders of the French High Command to allow civilians to move with a military convoy, nobody in G.M. 100 seemed to

either notice or care. As the formation moved down the open road, French B-26 bombers destroyed the ammunition and supplies left behind at An Khe. The road march was underway.

The Viet Minh 803rd Regiment knew where G.M. 100 was going and at this point, they were in a footrace to reach Route Coloniale 19 before the French could rendezvous with G.M. 42 and AG 1. The VM knew that if the French were successful in linking up, the VM would not have the combat power to interdict their move to Pleiku. It would be critical to the mission's success that they hit the French column somewhere between PK 11 and 15.

Colonel Barrou did have one asset at his disposal he fully intended to use. A company of Bahnar tribesman led by Captain Vitasse, an elite French commando who had fought in Vietnam for over four years, was positioned in the jungle to the north of R.C. 19. Any Communist unit attempting to cross the road west of An Khe would be spotted by Vitasse and thus provide the French with early warning.

At 0900 hours, the convoy reached PK 6 and was hit with automatic small arms fire. Several soldiers in the 1st Korea were wounded, but the enemy withdrew as quickly as it had come. First blood went to the VM. As the column continued its march, the Groupe's soldiers grew increasingly edgy, sensing the dangers that potentially lay in the dense jungle surrounding them.

G.M. 100 conducted a short halt at PK 11, the initial target for the road march's first day. After PK 11, the road, surrounded by the thick jungles and rocky overhangs, passed through numerous sites along the route ideal for ambush. It was here that Colonel Barrou decided to split the convoy into four elements, each consisting of infantry, artillery and light armor, each a self-contained unit capable of defending itself if trouble arose, while preventing the entire column from annihilation in the event of a VM trap. The first element of the 43rd Coloniale, its first company led by the veteran Captain Leouzon, left PK 11 at 1250, the second element at 1300, the third at 1330 hours and the fourth and final element departed at 1400. All groups maintained radio contact as the march resumed.

At 1330, Captain Vitasse sent an urgent dispatch that G.M. 100's radio truck received: "Important! Viet Minh

elements 3 kilometers north of R.C. 19." Almost simultaneously, a French reconnaissance plane identified another VM formation at Kon-Barr, 8 kilometers north of PK 11. Soon, the 105s of 4th Battery, who had not yet left PK 11, were sending rounds at the grid the spotter plane had identified near Kon-Barr. With this critical information, it seemed the French convoy had what it needed to avert disaster.

G.M. 100's radio truck compiled the reports and relayed them down the line to the different elements of the convoy. The 520th TDKQ, 1st and 2nd Korea, 10th Colonial Artillery battalions all acknowledged the transmission. The problem was, the radio truck never contacted the 43rd Coloniale, and they were leading the march! It was never discovered how this fatal error happened, for the radio truck and its personnel were all killed in the battle that followed. However, Colonel Barrou had complained several times previously that he was short 20 radio operators from his authorized strength. Without the critical warning that the VM were at R.C. 19, Leouzon and the rest of the 43rd Colonial Infantry marched on unaware.

Luckily for G.M. 100, Captain Leouzon was a savvy jungle fighter who had seen his share of VM ambushes in his several years of fighting. At PK 15, the road stretched out into a small plain covered with 6-foot-tall elephant grass through which the road wound further west. It was quiet. Too quiet. There weren't even any birds to be seen and this made Leouzon nervous. Contacting Major Muller, his battalion commander, he requested permission to send out a screen prior to moving the entire column through the area. Muller was concerned about the time it would take to do so. He also felt that if Leouzon ran into enemy, Muller's other companies would not be able to support him with the dense vegetation obscuring their fields of fire. Undaunted, Leouzon proposed a compromise:

"Well, then let's cut the problem halfway. I'll leave the road with my company and just cut across the arc of the road through the high grass. If there is nothing that close to the road, it'll give us an additional screen, and if I get caught, it'll give you an early warning and permit you to support me without having to weaken the convoy."¹³

Muller gave his consent and Leouzon's 1st Company left the road and

moved cautiously through the elephant grass, attempting to move to a small hill in the middle of the plain that would afford them a better view of the surrounding area. Sergeant Li-Som, a Cambodian, and one of Leouzon's best soldiers, stopped and told his squad to be silent. He listened intently, eyes widening when he realized what he was hearing. When a large body moves through elephant grass, the long strands make a "knack" sound as they return to their normal position after having been trampled out of place. Li-Som quickly deduced that the Viet Minh were there and ready to destroy G.M. 100 as they moved through the wide open area without cover. Suddenly, two VM machine guns opened up on another platoon of Leouzon's Cambodians at a range of about 30 meters. Sergeant Li-Som charged towards the machine guns' reports, ordering his platoon with him. As he threw the grenade that destroyed one enemy gun, the other gun killed Li-Som with a hail of bullets. The time was 1420. The battle had begun.

The Battle and Subsequent Actions

Leouzon's 1st Company immediately went into action, returning fire. Leouzon's RTO attempted to contact Major Muller, but his radio had been smashed by a .50 caliber bullet. Destroying the rest of the radio set so that the VM would not be able to use it, he joined the battle. The VM savaged the 43rd Coloniale with fire from their machine guns, bazookas, recoilless rifles, and heavy mortars. The 803rd was in fact fully-deployed along PK 15 and now executing a perfect ambush of a confused and disoriented foe. The elements observed by the spotter plane had apparently been decoys, for the 803rd had been in place for several hours prior to the arrival of G.M. 100. The French had lost the race to Mang Yang Pass and were now fighting for their lives.

Prior to 1420, Colonel Barrou traveled behind the armored platoon, consisting of three half-tracks and two M-8 armored cars. Barrou was in an open jeep, but moved with the Groupe's radio truck, which informed him of a light stone barricade in the road at PK 15 at 1405 hours, as reported by another light recon plane.

By 1415, Barrou noted that the lead element of the convoy picked up speed and the armored platoon widened the gap between the lead element and

headquarters company to keep up. Barrou ordered the radio truck to tell the armored platoon to slow down. Immediately after the platoon leader acknowledged the transmission, Barrou heard the machine gun burst and Li-Som's grenade explode. Suddenly, the Headquarters Company was struck by heavy mortar and recoilless rifle fire. Trucks and vehicles began exploding and the screams of men struck by bullets and shrapnel threatened to drown out the explosions.

Within four minutes, the armor platoon was destroyed. All three half-tracks and one M-8 were ablaze. The remaining M-8, though immobilized, located an enemy machine gun raking halted French vehicles on the road, and tore it apart with a blast of automatic fire. At 1425, G.M. 100's radio truck took a direct hit from an enemy 57mm recoilless rifle and exploded in a ball of fire. Anybody inside who might have explained why the 43rd Coloniale had not been warned of the presence of the Viet Minh in the area died a fiery death. Along with the truck went Colonel Barrou's ability to command and control the convoy. The 43rd Coloniale and Headquarters Company were both in contact, having to fight separate battles for survival. Chaos reigned.

Colonel Barrou and Captain Fievet, Headquarters Company's CO, attempted to rally soldiers for a counterattack on VM positions on the hill crest north of the convoy that was continuing to rake the halted vehicles of G.M. 100 with murderous fire. Fievet fell, mortally wounded, while Colonel Barrou was also hit in the thigh and rolled into a ditch next to the dying Fievet where he conferred the Officer's Cross of the Legion of Honor on Fievet before he expired.

Lieutenant Colonel Lajouanie, CO of the Korea Regiment, also counterattacked against the enemy-held hill. The surviving M-8's canister shells were suppressing the enemy positions there and it appeared that the French might be able to take the hill in a flanking maneuver. However, as Lajouanie led the attack, the M-8's gunner was killed and the VM turned their full fury on the charging Frenchmen who were mowed down by the murderous fire. Lajouanie fell near Colonel Barrou and he too, was awarded the Legion of Honor. By 1445, Headquarters Company had been destroyed as a fighting force, and several key officers of G.M. 100 were dead.

Barrou crawled to the silent M-8 and manned the vehicle's weapon attempting to bring fire on the Viet Minh positions. Unfortunately for Barrou, he was spotted and shot before he could get the machine gun going again. Barrou was knocked from the vehicle and rolled into a ditch where he resolved to die. Tearing up his identification, he lay there until a medic bandaged him. Not recognizing his colonel who lay there covered in blood, the corpsman moved on towards positions of the 43rd after providing first aid.

Major Hipolite, the Korea Regiment's executive officer, was killed shortly afterwards and Viet Minh infantry swarmed the headquarters trucks, executing wounded soldiers and continuing the G.M.'s destruction. Ten minutes after the ambush began, G.M. 100 had lost its means of communications and all three of its ranking officers. Major Muller and his 43rd Infantry were in the fight of their lives, but help was on the way. Muller did the right thing and took charge of his element, not waiting for orders from Colonel Barrou. Little did Muller know that his CO was lying in a ditch dazed from his wounds and in no condition to lead the fight.

The 520th TDKQ, normally not a part of G.M. 100 and bearing a poor reputation as combat troops,¹⁴ broke and ran at the outset of hostilities, leaving the Headquarters Company and the 10th Artillery's Headquarters Battery alone to fight the Viet Minh. Truck drivers carrying engineer demolitions abandoned their trucks and ran into the jungle seeking safety. At 1500, the abandoned engineer trucks, packed with pyrotechnics and demolitions began to explode under the onslaught of Viet rounds. Shrapnel tore into French soldiers nearby, who were using the trucks as cover.

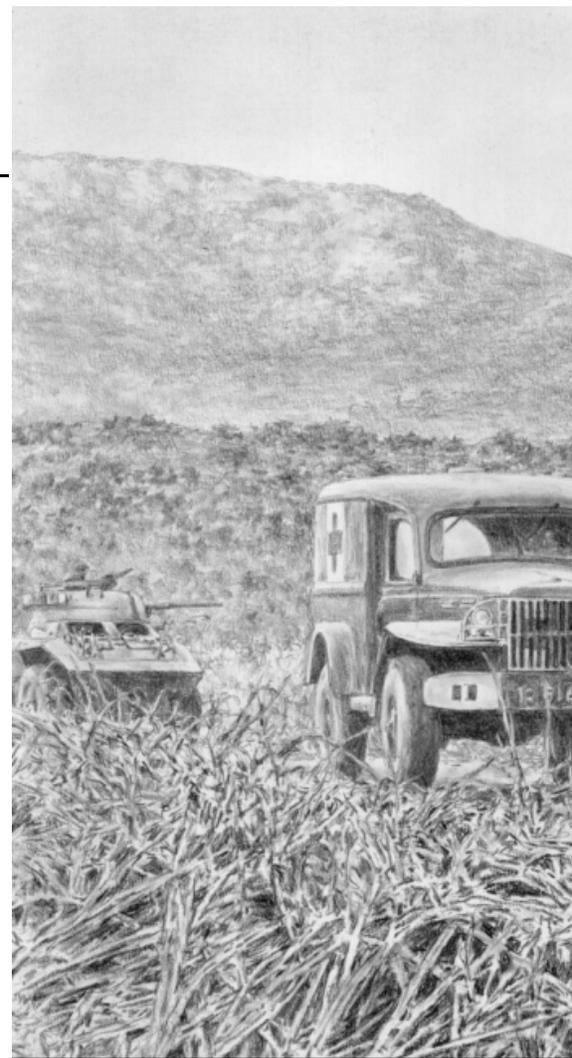
The 2nd and 1st Korea Battalions arrived shortly after 1500 and pressed forward through the mass of burning vehicles in order to link up with the 43rd. Taking advantage of the Viet Minh surprise at the arrival of two fresh battalions and their artillery, the 43rd attempted to break out with as many vehicles as they could and suffered heavy losses under the VM fire. A few vehicles from the 43rd did manage to escape the carnage and arrive at PK 22 to tell of the ambush.

Major Kleinmann, 2nd Korea's CO and the ranking officer left in G.M. 100, organized a defense around the shattered convoy. He ordered his 4th Battery to set up their howitzers and fire fuzes at minimum setting into the Viet Minh positions as enemy infantry attempted to charge the French. This action undoubtedly saved the French, as the VM attack broke under the devastating artillery fire. For the beleaguered soldiers of the 43rd and Korea Battalions, seeing the Viets cut down was a tremendous lift to their morale and they seemed infused with the elan to continue their savage fight for survival.

By 1620, ammunition was running short. Air Force B-26s arrived to provide close air support, but by then much of the fighting was occurring so close, that both French and Viet soldiers were cut down by the indiscriminate machine gun fire from the air. As dusk approached, the French realized they would not be able to hold much longer. The 4th Howitzer Battery was out of action; its crews dead and wounded, its guns out of ammunition. While the French had stopped the VM infantry attacks, enemy mortar fire rained down on the French perimeter ensuring a steadily rising casualty count.

At 1715, Major Kleinmann was ordered by French Zone Headquarters to abandon the Groupe's vehicles and break through to PK 22 on foot with his infantry and whatever wounded he could carry, to link-up with G.M. 42 and other French forces there. Kleinmann discussed options with the 2nd Korea's CO, Major Guinard. Both decided that there would be no way to carry out the seriously wounded. Having to trek a distance greater than 10 kilometers through thick jungle and doing so under fire would only create more casualties. They made the decision to leave the wounded on the road, along with all remaining medical supplies and any medical personnel volunteers willing to stay with them. The following conversation between Major Kleinmann and Major-Doctor Varme-Janville, G.M. 100's surgeon, epitomizes the self-sacrifice and dedication to the wounded that the French doctor possessed.

"Janville, we've just received our orders. We're pulling off the road at 1900."



"And the wounded?"

"Janville — the wounded are staying here. You know there's nothing we can do for them once we're off the road."

"Gentlemen, I don't think I can be of much further help in this. They've got good doctors up in Pleiku but my men need me here. I'll stay with them."¹⁵

Unfortunately for Varme-Janville, all the wounded he elected to stay with eventually died because the Viet commissars refused to allow him the supplies to treat them. It was a dark chapter in the doctor's life, for he was forced to watch his men suffer and die, all the while he was prevented from attempting to save their lives.

At 1900, the remaining soldiers of G.M. 100 broke out of the trap that had killed so many of their brethren. As they escaped into the surrounding jungle, they saw their leg-wounded comrades still with the convoy fight one last delaying action in order to buy the



rest of the infantry time to escape. The battalion commanders realized that the VM would figure out that they had withdrawn and attempt to cut them off. They decided to split the remnants of the battalions into platoon-sized groups under the command of an officer of senior NCO, to make the trek to PK 22.

For the next several days, the groups encountered impossibly dense jungles, isolated Viet Minh ambushes, and mountain tribesmen who attempted to kill and rob the French. Finally, at 1130 hours on 25 June, a platoon from 4th Company, 1st Korea encountered a patrol from the 1st Airborne Group. The battered remnants of G.M. 100 had finally reached PK 22. While these men had arrived alive, their unit, the once-proud G.M. 100 had died the day before at PK 15 on Route Coloniale 19.

Key Events, Outcome of Action

Sadly, for the men of G.M. 100, their ordeal was not quite over. They had to brave 55 kilometers more of enemy

road and the conglomeration of G.M.s 42 and 100, plus the 1st Airborne Group, was harassed continuously until they arrived in Pleiku on 29 June. Of the 222 men assigned to Headquarters Company when G.M. 100 left An Khe, only 84 were left. The 43rd Coloniale, 1st and 2nd Korea Battalions, containing 834 soldiers each could now claim 452, 497 and 345 soldiers respectively. The 2nd Group, 10th Colonial Artillery had only 215 out of an original 474. Eighty-five percent of G.M. 100's vehicles, 100 percent of the artillery, and 68 percent of the signal equipment had been lost. Fifty percent of the Groupe's rifles and machine guns were captured by the Viet Minh.

Colonel Barrou, amazingly, survived the destruction of his unit, and was discovered by a French patrol and carried out on a stretcher. The patrol was later captured by the VM and Barrou participated in a death march over a hundred or so miles to enemy prisoner of war camps, but he did survive the

war, and was eventually repatriated back to France.

The 803rd Viet Minh Regiment gave as much as it got and received a battalion of replacements within a day of the fight at PK 15. They quickly rejoined operations in the Central Highlands and continued to fight the French until the armistice was signed on July 20.

Because of the nature of the Viet Minh's operational security, it is not known how many casualties the unit suffered, but there is no doubt that the regiment covered itself in glory by destroying one of the best mechanized outfits in the French Army. Years later, the 803rd would return to action against another invading force. This time, the Army of the United States.

The Viet Minh's goals for destroying the French convoys en route to Pleiku were relatively simple. By demonstrating their ability to inflict massive casualties on the French Army in the wake of the disastrous defeat at Dien Bien

“Our armed forces committed the same mistakes the French made, fighting an enemy that was far more dedicated to the country of Vietnam than we were. Our blind fear and loathing of the spread of communism dictated that we undertake a battle we were not committed to win.”

Phu, the Viets could then dictate the terms of the peace agreement between France and Ho Chi Minh's Provisional Government of Vietnam. Under no circumstances did the Viets want France to retain any portion of Vietnam, nor did they want the French to feel tempted to resume the war. By destroying France's armored convoys, the Viets were kicking an enemy who was down, but they did so to send the unequivocal message that Vietnam was the victor.

The war was, for all intents and purposes, over when G.M. 100 died on the 24th of June, 1954. However, by doing what they did, the Viets hastened France's departure from Vietnam and resigned the French to the fact that until the last soldier withdrew, it was a fight to the death. France had lingered too long in a place they were now prepared to give up. Just to ensure there were no second thoughts, no serious French considerations to the feasibility of continuing the war in Indochina, General Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnam's greatest general, continued to apply the pressure until France realized that maintaining its presence in Vietnam would come at the cost of more of its soldiers. Less than one month after the disaster at PK 15, the last French soldier departed Vietnamese soil.

Several events contributed to G.M. 100's destruction. Colonel Barrou normally was careful and made good use of reconnaissance and an advance guard when maneuvering the Groupe. When he received reports of the 803rd Regiment attempting to cut him off from Pleiku, he attempted to race the Viet Minh, rather than conduct the proper reconnaissance and security measures that might have prevented the ambush. Thanks to the independent actions of one Captain Leouzon, the column had a very small measure of early warning before the convoy came under direct and indirect fires. This action saved G.M. 100's destruction from being even more devastating than it was. Splitting his force also resulted in allowing the 803rd to mass on the lead elements of the convoy, inflicting heavy damage on them before the Korea Battalions could arrive to stem the tide.

The inability of the radio truck to notify Major Muller and the 43rd Coloni-

ale Infantry that the Viet Minh had been observed near PK 15 was critical information that might have altered the method in which Muller deployed his combat power. When Captain Leouzon requested to screen the convoy's flank, neither he nor Muller had any idea that VM forces were in the area. This critical failure in communications no doubt contributed a great deal to the deaths of French soldiers at PK 15.

G.M. 100 lost all of its leadership and command and control nodes in the opening minutes of the ambush. As a result, all three infantry battalions were fighting on their own, without coordination of any kind. The battalion commanders did a superb job of fighting their units, but without any central leadership, the French were unable to make a concerted effort to break the ring of death around them, making several unsuccessful piecemeal attacks before withdrawing into a perimeter defense. The deaths of LTC Lajounie and MAJ Hipolite, and the incapacitation of Colonel Barrou, had a devastating effect on G.M. 100 and it was only because of the discipline and leadership within the infantry ranks that the entire force was not wiped out.

The commander of the 803rd Regiment did an excellent job of choosing the appropriate ground in which to kill his enemy. He used his heavy weapons effectively, destroying vehicles and thus stacking up the convoy within his kill sack where his soldiers were able to continue to inflict devastation upon the French ranks. Maintaining a steady fire with his heavy mortars, he never allowed the French an opportunity to effectively consolidate and reorganize, and was able to easily defeat the piecemeal counterattacks. When his infantry began to become attrited during their attacks, he pulled them back to allow his mortars and heavy machine guns to weaken the French resolve. He executed a perfect ambush from which any French at all were lucky to escape.

Conclusions

With the defeat of G.M. 100 came the realization that any further bloodshed in Vietnam was futile. The war had been lost before the ambush at PK 15, but a French victory over the 803rd would not have altered the armistice in

the least. France failed in its bid to retain Vietnam as a colony, not because its army was not capable of defeating the Viet Minh, but because France was not willing to pay as much of a price to keep Vietnam as its people were willing to pay for independence. France learned this lesson at a cost of over 172,178 French and French-Allied troops killed and wounded. France learned that despite having a professional army with excellent equipment, the mass and fanaticism with which the Viet Minh fought each day was more of a match for her. This lesson was there for all to see, yet the United States failed to pay attention to what happened to the French, and had to re-learn many of the lessons paid for in blood by the French Army.

Vietnam's struggles were not over with the defeat of the French in 1954. Ho Chi Minh desired to see a united Vietnam under the banner of Communism. However, South Vietnam, under President Ngo Dinh Diem, had no interest in Communism. Raised under the influence of French Colonial rule, Diem was pro-West and did not share Ho Chi Minh's vision. Minh dedicated the remainder of his life to uniting North and South Vietnam and as early as 1957, his Communist agitators began infiltrating the south in preparation for a war of unification, one in which the United States soon became involved.

Had the United States' senior leadership studied the patterns of the French-Indochina War, perhaps much of the loss this country incurred fighting in Southeast Asia might have been averted. Our armed forces committed the same mistakes the French made, fighting an enemy that was far more dedicated to the country of Vietnam than we were. Our blind fear and loathing of the spread of communism dictated that we undertake a battle we were not committed to win. The long-term effects of the bloodshed at PK 15 on June 24, 1954 can be seen in every American name written on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The Principles of War

Maneuver. The Viet Minh knew that the French column, caught in the open, would not have the time or ability to maneuver once they initiated the am-

bush. The French infantry operated dismounted, but the tall elephant grass prevented them from coordinating their attacks with other infantry and their vehicles. This lack of ability to maneuver doomed the French to having to fight a defense in the open while surrounded by enemy who had the benefit of concealment and high ground.

Economy of Force. Although the French convoy had over 2,000 fighting soldiers at its disposal, Colonel Barrou split his force on the road, allowing the Viet Minh to attack G.M. 100 as it piecemealed into the ambush. The numbers on both sides were about even on paper, but by the time the Korea Battalions arrived, the 520th TDKQ had been routed, the Headquarters Company had been destroyed, and the 43rd was surrounded and under heavy fire. The French were never able to mass their forces at any one point, or else they might have been successful in breaking the ambush.

Mass. The Viet Minh 803rd Regiment employed mass against G.M. 100 to great effect. Employing machine gun, heavy mortar, 57mm anti-armor and small arms fire against the exposed convoy, the VM succeeded with deadly effect. Conversely, the French were unable to mass, having been separated and without the means to effectively coordinate their counterattacks. The French inability to counter the Viet Minh's superior employment of mass doomed G.M. 100 from the start.

Security. Colonel Barrou sacrificed security at the cost of speed and many of his soldiers paid the ultimate price. By not adequately reconnoitering the area west of PK 11, he allowed his mounted force to advance blind, without knowledge of the terrain or what dangers lay ahead. In doing so, he gave the Viets the initiative and a clear advantage. The Viets knew where the French were, and the extent of their combat power. Colonel Barrou had no concept of VM locations other than the fact they had been spotted near RC 19. Instead of adjusting his plan to create some local security, he continued on blindly.

Surprise. The French force's lack of adequate security allowed complete surprise for the Viet Minh. Although the French had an idea they were out there, the column's lead element did not. Had Leouzon's instincts not dictated that he screen the battalion's advance through the area surrounding PK

15, the surprise might have been complete and the entire column might have been caught on the open road. As it was, the Vietnamese still benefited from surprise and used it to great effect.

Unity of Command. G.M. 100 had plenty of leadership, yet disaster struck in the opening minutes when the top three ranking officers went down. Because the other battalion commanders were in the midst of the fight for their lives, nobody took charge until Major Kleinmann arrived 40 minutes after the ambush began. In those 40 minutes, the entire armor platoon was destroyed as well as most of the convoy's vehicles. Kleinmann inherited chaos and did the best he could with it, but by the time he arrived, the ability for the French to seize the initiative had passed and the battle was firmly in the hands of the Viet Minh. Barrou had no concise plan for countering an ambush, nor did he provide any guidance to his subordinates on what to do should he be taken out of action. As a result, critical time was lost in re-establishing a chain of command, and with that time went G.M. 100's ability to win the battle at PK 15.

Epilogue

The men of Groupement Mobile 100 were some of the best in the French Army. They had "faced the elephant" on numerous occasions in the highlands of Vietnam over the previous year and were some of the most experienced and professional troops anywhere in the world. The 1st and 2nd Korea Battalions had won battlefield glory at places such as Chipyeong-Ni and Arrowhead Ridge several years before and were proud of it. Yet, as those veterans would soon discover, "Indochine no est Coree." Vietnam is not Korea. G.M. 100 died at PK 15 because of a series of mistakes that compounded to create a battle they had no chance of winning. Poor judgment on the part of the Groupe's senior leadership lost the lives of many of its troops, just as outstanding leadership at the junior level saved many more. Such is the way of war. LTG (Ret.) Harold G. Moore perhaps summed up G.M. 100's fate best in his book, *We Were Soldiers Once.. And Young*.

"Shortly after we arrived in Vietnam, Sergeant Major Plumley and I took a jeep and a shotgun guard and drove ten miles west of An Khe on Route 19, into no-man's-land, to the PK 15 marker post. There, the Viet Minh had de-

*stroyed most of French Group Mobile 100 in a deadly ambush 11 years earlier. We walked the battleground, where a bullet-pocked 6-foot-high stone obelisk declares in French and Vietnamese: 'Here on June 24, 1954, soldiers of France and Vietnam died for their countries.'...Plumley and I walked the battleground for two hours. Bone fragments, parts of weapons and vehicles, web gear and shell fragments and casings still littered the ground. From that visit I took away one lesson: Death is the price you pay for underestimating this tenacious enemy."*¹⁶

Notes

¹Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (Stackpole Books, New York, 1964) p.187-188.

²Fall, p. 190.

³Jim Mesko, *Ground War - Vietnam 1945-1965* (Squadron Signal Pub., Carrollton, Texas, 1990) p. 3-4.

⁴Fall, p. 186.

⁵Mesko, p. 6.

⁶Martin Windrow and Mike Chappell, *Men-At-Arms Series: The French Indochina War* (Osprey Military Publications, Wellingborough, UK, 1998) pp. 16-17.

⁷Robert Barr Smith, *Men At War* (Avon History, New York, 1997) p. 349.

⁸Fall, p. 193.

⁹Fall, p. 189.

¹⁰Windrow, Chappell, pp.20-21.

¹¹Windrow, Chappell p. 21.

¹²Fall, p.206.

¹³Fall, pp. 210-211.

¹⁴Barr-Smith p. 350.

¹⁵Fall, p. 218-219.

¹⁶Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once...And Young* (Harper Perennial, New York) 1992 p. 49.

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