

Parallel Narratives

Vietnam Vignette: The French Groupement Mobile 100

“Groupement Mobile 100 was one of the best and heaviest units of its type. The hard core of its troops were the veterans of the French battalion from the U.N. Forces in Korea, battle hardened elite troops. In Korea, the French battalion had fought in the ranks of the 2nd U.S. infantry and had covered itself with glory at [Chipyong-ni](#), Wonju and Arrowhead-Ridge. Transferred to Indochina after the conclusion of the Korean cease-fire in July 1953 and reinforced with two Vietnamese companies, the *Batallion de Coree* was activated as Groupement Mobile 100 on November 15, 1953.” – [Bernard Fall](#), [Street Without Joy](#).



Image via Wikipedia

Such was the glory of G.M. 100 as it entered into the strange jungle war in Indochina. The elite unit’s exit would not be so triumphant. In the course of the next 9 months the unit would be involved in a series of sieges and ambushes. It’s patrol area was roughly a triangle with corners at Kontum, Ankhe and the Chu Dreh Pass. In trying to secure it, the famous Battalion was whittled down, ambush by ambush, until finally it was effectively wiped out in the last firefight of the first Indochina War..

As part of the [French Expeditionary Force](#), G.M. 100 was stationed in the area known as the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, or Annam as it was called then. At first the unit was positioned 40 miles northeast of Bhan Me Thuot and was relied upon to be the backbone for the defense of the plateau region. From there the Mobile Group conducted mopping-up, reinforcement and road clearing operations in the surrounding jungles and mountains. But, as Bernard Fall points out- “this was not like Korea.”

The [Seige](#) of Dak Doa:

G.M. 100 began to experience hard fighting in the late winter of 1954. In January the unit was ordered to reinforce [Pleiku](#) and [Kontum](#), vital strategic centers in the plateau region. Both were under siege by forces of the [Vietminh](#). By then, the men had been moving for nearly a month without rest. And within days the unit became engaged in a life and death struggle with the 803rd Vietminh Regiment in and around the crucial post at Dak To northwest of Kontum. The bloody struggle went on for days. A siege took place at a post called [Dak Doa](#). By February 11, the G.M. 100 troops had been fighting for seven days. Under continuous fire their artillery and strength was nearly spent. But they continued to fight on. In the meantime the High Command had decided to pull out of Kontum and dig in around Pleiku, making reinforcement of Dak Doa more difficult.

On February 17 the Vietminh launched an attack that Fall called a “model in careful execution and brutality.” Carried out just before midnight, the battle raged throughout the night- lit up by the flames of a burning CP command bunker. There was little doubt of the outcome. The defenders were exhausted and depleted. Finally, radio communication with the post went silent. Legend has it that after the deadly battle, walkie-talkies in the area picked up someone whistling the *Marseillaise* among the smoking ruins- the identity of the phantom whistler has never been discovered.

Dak Doa cost G.M. 100 heavily. More than one hundred soldiers were killed or wounded. But the troubles were not over, not by a long-shot. In March 1954, while the [Battle of Dien Bien Phu](#) was heating up in Tonkin, G.M 100 was again under siege at various

locations in the Central Highlands. They fought Vietminh guerrillas and listened for sappers in the night. Hit and run was the *modus operandi* of the enemy. Battles were fought in and around Pleiku, Kontum, Dak To and Ankhe. In the searing damp heat, the enemy would strike without warning at all hours, fight hard, and then suddenly melt away. When ordered out on search and destroy missions the French G.M. was frequently lured ahead and then ambushed. They were plagued by mosquitos, leeches and fire ants all the way.

The Attack At Plei Rinh:

G.M. 100 setup camp at a small remote outpost called Plei Rinh. There they were viciously attacked again. First came the violent mortar fire, then the concentrated fire of rifles and machine guns. Th CP was targeted and hit. Suddenly came the onrushing wave of black clad Viets screaming “Tien-len!” The post soon burst into flames as the Recoiless cannons peppered the grounds. All was sound, fury, and chaos. Then, as quickly as they had appeared, the soldiers of the 803rd disappeared. The toll was heavy on the French, over 250 casualties- 36 dead. G.M. 100 had been severely crippled. But not beaten.

Before the unit could catch it's collective breath an emergency in Ankhe resulted in orders to protect the road leading to the besieged town. G.M. 100 marched out of Plei Rinh an April 1 headed back to Pleiku and on to Ankhe. In the Ankhe area the Mobile Group was involved in several intense ambushes. In places with names like PK15 and PK22 they took heavy casualties again. According to Bernard Fall “Mobile Group 100 had had a dress rehearsal of its own end ten weeks before it was to occur, and a bare mile from the spot where it would happen.”

[Battle of Ankhe:](#)

Groupement Mobile 100 had taken a severe battering by June 1954. But their mission had not changed. Reinforcements were nowhere to be found. Dien Bien Phu had pulled in all available resources. In what became the last official battle of the [First Indochina War](#) the battle of Ankhe was one of the three bloodiest defeats suffered by the French in the war, the other two being [Dien Bien Phu](#) and the [retreat down RC4](#) from [Cao Bang](#) in 1950.

On June 24, 1954 G.M. 100 was ordered to pull back from Ankhe to [Pleiku](#). The evacuation began at 3am with the various elements of the Mobile Group streaming onto Road 19. It was an 80 kilometer trip to Pleiku through hostile country. Secrecy was impossible with hundreds of troops and civilians in tow. The Vietnamese had seen the stream of aircraft, heavy equipment, and civilians and were moving into position.

The Ambush at Kilometer 15:

At first things remained quiet prompting raised spirits and a feeling of relief. Three miles up Road 19 all hell was going to break loose. Bernard Fall describes the scene: “near kilometer 15, Road 19 emerges onto a small plain covered with dense, six-foot high elephant grass, in which the road winds toward the west in a wide arc. A slight wind stirred the otherwise unruffled surface of the yellow-greenish mass. Not a soul was in sight. Neither were there any birds.”

The Viets were definitely there. Without warning two Vietminh machine guns opened up at 30 yards. The big, final ambush to destroy the G.M. 100 had finally been sprung. Troops assigned to the 803rd Regiment rose up in the tall grass and began the attack. Immediately the French suffered heavy losses.

Fall: “For the men of the 803rd, this was the pay-off for six months of painful marches on roadless jungles, dragging thousands of pounds of food and equipment on their bleeding backs; of eating cold, clammy rice; of suffering from malaria and dysentery; of leaving wounded behind to be eaten by cannibalistic savages or huge armies of black ants; of cowering in helpless terror and hatred as the French B-26's and Bearcats roared overhead with their deadly loads of bullets, rockets and napalm. This was the

moment they had been waiting for and which was going to give them control of the plateau area before the armistice negotiations were terminated in Geneva; the battle, finally, which would wipe off the face of the earth the hated Korea Regiment which still wore on its sleeve the white star and Indian head of the 2nd US Infantry Division.”

The convoy was headed toward PK 22 but it was stopped in the road. A road block had been placed in its path. The 803rd was attacking from both sides of the road. There was no going forward and the raiders were swarming the rear. One of the few survivors would later say “we knew we were cooked.” And that they were. The smell of cordite was thick in the air. It wafted above the high grass. Communist gunners in the jungle pounded the vehicles relentlessly with heavy mortars, recoilless cannon and bazookas. In the spreading friction, the least experienced troops cracked first. The Vietnamese were swarming the convoy and fighting was hand-to-hand at times. Even the arrival of French Air Force b-26’s couldn’t save the day for the beleaguered squad. By dusk, the Vietminh infantry had backed off slightly but accurate, heavy, mortar fire continued. Men lay scattered by the side of the road moaning in pain. By dawn the next morning nothing remained but stripped vehicles and wounded and dead French soldiers.

Amazingly, some of G.M. 100 managed to break through the ambush. But these tired and shaken remnants faced 55 kilometers of enemy controlled road to make it to relative safety in Pleiku. In an attempt to circumnavigate the danger the survivors headed due south into deep jungle. It was nearly impossible- a large body of troops can’t move through thick jungle. Many men collapsed while trying to hack away the dense foliage. The Viets new this of course- they patiently waited for the inevitable French return to the road. Then the French would again come face to face with Vietminh troops, as they would on several more occasions in the coming days and weeks.

The Battle of Mang Yang:

On June 28 and 29th, a mere 30 Kilometers from Pleiku, Mobile Group 100, now back on the open road, was again ambushed. This time they were forced to fight a pitch battle near the town of Mang Yang at a bridge across the Dak Ya-ayun river. Now it was the 108th Regiment poised to strike the column. Caught once again in a hail of Communist mortar and bazooka fire the French defenders took up perimeter defensive positions on each side of the road. Some trucks refused to stop, pushing trucks in front of them into ditches and running over the bodies of their injured brothers. Just after noon the Vietminh infantry rose again from the tall grass and charged. Soldiers on both sides fought valiantly, at times hand-to-hand. Finally the attackers relented and melted away. The survivors regrouped, surprised to be alive. G.M.100 had once again been devastated.

On June 29th the unshaven, rag clad, dysentery dogged remnants of G.M.100 straggled into Pleiku. In five days of fighting, G.M. 100 lost 85 percent of vehicles, 100 percent of artillery, 68 percent of signal equipment and 50 percent of weapons. They had lost more troops in those five days than in all of the Korean War. In fact, the number of troops remaining was less than half what it had been when the unit entered the war. A Colonel and several officers had become prisoners of war.

Slaughter at Chu-Dreh Pass:

But the misery was not quite over for the French Mobile Group 100. On June 29, the survivors of the 1st Korean Battalion were sent out on [Operation Forget-Me-Not](#) with orders to keep open Route Coloniale 14 between Pleiku and [Ban Me Thuot](#). Several weeks later, on July 17, the column was passing through Chu Dreh Pass when it happened. Local units of the Viet Minh 96th Regiment opened up on the convoy with 81mm mortars, 60mm’s, and recoilless cannons. Within moments a dozen trucks were blazing. This was the end of the line for the 1st Korean Battalion. They had come through Chipyeong-ni, Wonju, Arrowhead in Korea; Plei Rinh, Ankhe and kilometer 15 in the Central Highlands, and now this was the end, a mere three days before the cease-fire would end the war. Fall: “the Viets did not even bother to blow them up with their bazookas; they preferred to storm them with infantry in the hope of capturing their guns and radio sets. Within seconds, black-clad Viets were crawling like so many ants over the armored vehicles. The 1st Korea Battalion, flag bearer of France’s contribution to the U.N. effort in Korea and the fighting backbone of the Mobile Group 100 had ceased to exist.” When the survivors finally arrived at Ban Me Thuot the

following day, there were only 107 men remaining out of 452, of those 53 were wounded, in addition a further 47 vehicles were lost.

On September 1, 1954 the French High Command in Indochina dissolved Mobile Group 100.

Incidents described above were portrayed in the opening sequence of the Hollywood movie "*They Were Soldiers Once*." The opening battle of the American Phase of the War was fought nearby at Ia Drang Valley.

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