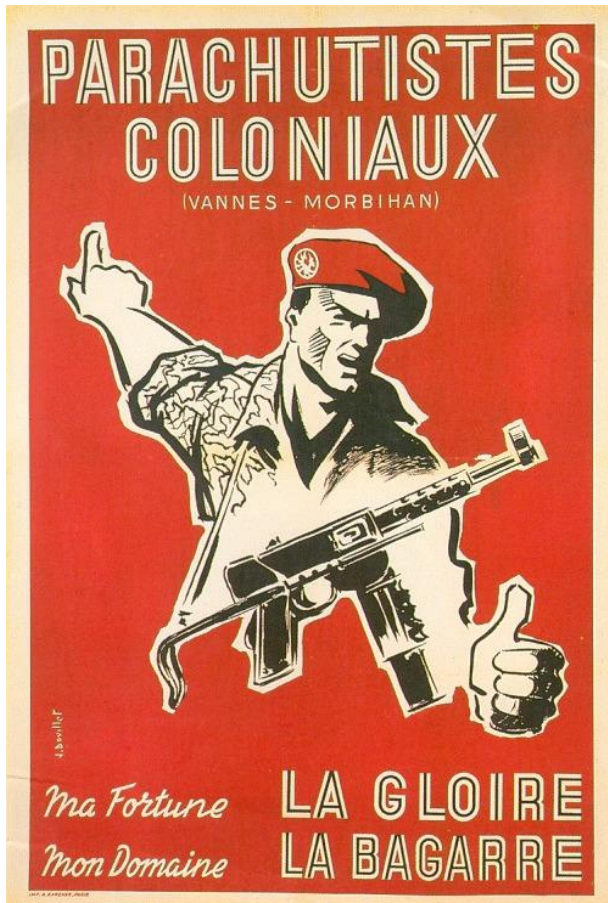


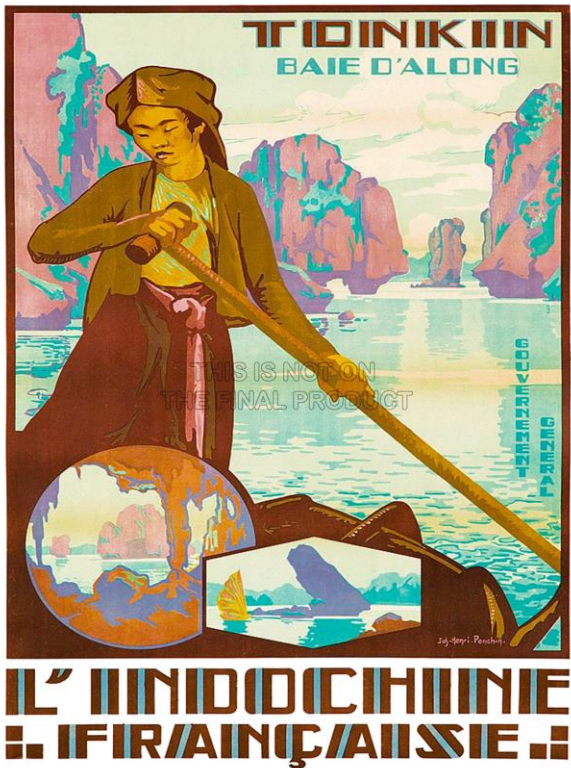
Diaries from Dien Bien Phu



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#### Foreword/My Will:

To whoever may find this book,

If you are reading this, you may know that its writer is likely dead. I, Quan Bonhomme, Lance Corporal of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, French Foreign Legion, on this day, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1954, 23 years old, have fought in this Indochina War for seven years, the past six month of which were here at Dien Bien Phu. As our defenses are on the verge of being overrun by the enemy, I write this in haste. If you may kindly take the time to contact the French Foreign Legion Registry, you will be able to trace me to my father, Pierre Bonhomme. Please give this book to him so that I may not be forgotten, lost in the annals of history. In case you cannot find him, I have left this brief description of my life, in anticipation of my death, so that at least one person may know how I ended up in this valley of death.

(May 2, 1954)

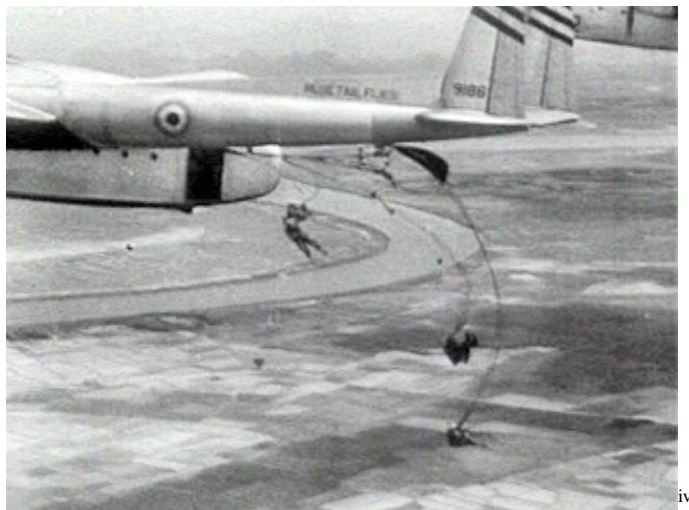
I was born in August of 1930 in Hanoi out of wedlock. My father, Pierre Bonhomme, worked as head of the French colonial administration's telegram/post services district office of Hanoi. My mother, Duong, worked various jobs to help me and my little sister get by, especially after my father fled the country following the Japanese invasion. Even before my father left, he wasn't really there to see us grow up, but he did help get us enrolled in a Catholic school. As one can imagine, growing up as a mixed child was not easy. Our Vietnamese neighbors ostracized me and my mother, but the French wouldn't take us into their communities either. The years of Japanese occupation were very difficult. My mother worked day and night as a launderer and seamstress to keep us fed. She grew gauntly thin herself. Bless her heart. Just as we thought the hard times couldn't get any worse, famine struck all of Vietnam. However, luckily by then most of the Japanese had left and the remaining ones surrendered to the British and French.

Japanese occupation ended and the French were back, but many Vietnamese felt betrayed by the French when they first left the country to be ravaged by the Japanese, not to mention the many injustices the French colonials had also committed. Many agitated for independence and joined the VietMinh. As the insurgency broke out, I was not yet 16. As a mixed race young man in a poor country, I had barely any work opportunities. Supporters of the VietMinh had harassed me, calling me “dirty French bastard” or “imperialist traitor,” but what had I done? But one day on the main avenue of Hanoi, recruiters for the French Foreign Legion in their fine uniforms called out in megaphones. “Join us for the opportunity of a lifetime!” “Excitement, adventure, duty, and honor!” “We take *anyone*! Marianne does not discriminate among those who fight for France! Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité!”

Here was my chance, I thought, to stop being a burden on Ma. If I join the French Foreign Legion, I’ll be well taken care of; one less mouth to feed for Ma. Little did I know what I was signing up for.

The training was brutal to say the least, but for once in my life I felt like I made true friends. The other Legionnaires in my platoon and I developed a strong camaraderie, something Frenchmen call esprit de corp. Jean, Hamza, Philippe, Dietrich, and Hans became my closest comrades. We’ve been through much together. Now, seven years later, most of them are dead. Dead here in Dien Bien Phu.

### Diary Proper



November 21, 1953

Having carried this notebook in my pack since Camarone Day, I finally decided to put it to good use. This morning, we jumped into the jungle mist, into Dien Bien Phu. Even though I have long lost count of how many times I have parachuted, it is still exhilarating every time. It is one of the few things I look forward to now after seven years of endless fighting. For a brief moment, I could feel free and at peace. The enemy can’t kill me while I’m drifting through air. The second my feet strike earth I must be alert again and am free no more.

We’ve been kept busy all day in the valley. We dug trenches and foxholes, filled burlap sacks with dirt to make sandbags, cleared away shrubs... the typical fare.

The drone of C-47 transport planes could be heard all day. All of our materiel had to be airdropped. Every time the parachutes landed, we scrambled out like hunting dogs to retrieve the supplies. Crates of ammunition, mortar shells, grenades, canned rations, medical kits, etc. were gathered and sorted. Even steel planks used for constructing a makeshift airstrip were dropped by parachutes.

Just like that, we built a fortress and airstrip from scratch in the middle of the jungle. At least, we'll be settling here for a while. God knows if we'll ever leave.

December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1953

Everyday we go on long patrols around the perimeter of our base and beyond the forward slopes to reconnoiter enemy positions. I myself have not seen the enemy with my own eyes, but occasionally a few mortar shells would land in our vicinity or a sniper would try to pick off a few patrols. My buddy Jean, the black volunteer from Senegal, was not so lucky on one of these patrols...or perhaps he was lucky. He was injured in the thigh by mortar shrapnel, nothing serious, which earned him some time off at the base hospital. I went to visit him yesterday with Hans, the belching Belgian, and played cards.

By now, we are told that preliminary defensive positions have been established on the nine hilltops overlooking the central airstrip: Gabreille, Beatrice, Dominique, Eliane, Claudine, Huguette, Anne-Marie, Marcelle, and Isabelle, all named after Colonel de Castries' mistresses.

December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1953

Our platoon finally made contact with the enemy. While on patrol north of Hill Anne-Marie, the VietMinh ambushed us. Their automatic fire inflicted seven casualties among us before our platoon leader, Sergeant Claude van Rijk tactfully instructed us to outflank the enemy machine gun. After lobbing a couple of grenades in the direction of enemy fire, I burst forward and gave them a taste of my submachine gun. They were silenced after that.

We checked their corpses for potential information. Nothing of significance found. We carried off their captured weapons. Hans pissed on their bodies, as it was his personal tradition. I still recall how years ago following an assault on a VietMinh hideout, I tried to intervene when Hans would dishonor the dead. We nearly got in a fistfight. "These fucking Commie Tonkies deserve it," he'd say. I've long since stopped giving a damn about it, even though any of these "Commie Tonki[nese]" could have been my neighbor.

December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1953

Our entire battalion gathered for Christmas mass this morning, after which we received packets marked "Merry Christmas from the citizens of France." Each packet contained a bar of chocolate, a can of paté, and a copy of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. I don't understand why the French people keep on sending us copies of books that make no sense and only remind us of how hopeless our lives are. Do they really expect us to read them? Who do they think we are? University students? Hans joked that the book was only good for ass-wipe. Another joked that the French hated Sartre's books so much that they only want to send them to us.

Anyhow, the dozen or so M24 Chaffee tanks, a gift from the Americans have now all been assembled after having been airlifted here in crates. Amazing how the engineers managed to do that in spite of all the mud and lack of a proper workshop.

I've attached a picture of the tanks, cut out from *Le Monde*, probably taken by one of the journalists who



flew in two weeks ago.

January 8, 1954

The past week has been rather dull, aside from an airstrike we called upon a VietMinh stronghold in a village 40 km to our north. We had been reconnoitering along a strategic road passing through Dien Bien Phu, trekking a bit further each day. Coming upon the enemy stronghold, perhaps garrisoned by hundred of Vietminh, we decided a full-frontal assault would be disastrous considering we were far outnumbered. Hence, the airstrike. It was quite a show for us infantry. The fighters swooped right over the village and dropped napalm. The entire village roared to life in a burst of orange. Even observing 2 km away, I could feel the intensity of the heat. Some of the men hollered and cheered at the spectacle.

When we were not out on scouting missions, we were kept busy maintaining the barbed wire and trenches back at base during the day. At night, we played cards mostly, but even cards were no longer fun as Hamza, the Moroccan legionnaire, would always cheat. I got bored enough that I actually started reading Sartre's book. At least it's not monsoon season yet.

February 1, 1954

As of yesterday, the Vietminh has been sporadically dropping shells on our base. From what we were told by officers, the shells seem to be fired from the reverse side of the surrounding slopes.

Philippe, the Frenchman, and I were assigned night sentry duty a few nights ago. I have always wondered why he, a Frenchman, joined the Foreign Legion when he could've just joined the French National Army. So he explained to me how he ended up here.

Fourteen years ago, he was a conscripted soldier manning a machine gun on the Maginot Line. When the Germans invaded he was taken prisoner and remained in a labor camp for the remainder of the war. During this time his wife had cheated on him with a Vichy official. After Philippe returned home following the war, he murdered the former Vichy official: cornered him at a bar and put a switchblade through the bastard's neck. Now wanted for murder, Philippe went into hiding. He couldn't hide for long and decided he must leave the country. So he changed his identity and enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. What a typical legionnaire. No wonder we're an army of renegades.



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February 25, 1954

We spend much of our time repairing damages to our defenses caused by Vietminh artillery and mortar. Any holes on the iron runway had to be patched up and collapsed bunkers had to be cleared and rebuilt.

While attending to these menial duties, I struck up a conversation with Dietrich, a German volunteer. I was curious as to why a German, the enemy of France in many wars, would fight for France. He said that in the final year of the war in Europe, he was conscripted right out of secondary school to serve on the Western Front. During this time, his family whom resided in Dresden, all died in the infamous bombing raid. When the news reached him, he was completely distraught and considered suicide. After his regiment surrendered to Free French forces, they were taken to a prisoner camp, where one day, French Foreign Legion recruiters came by. The camp officials turned a blind eye as the recruiters signed up many of the prisoners, some of whom were Nazi war criminals. Now without a family to return to in an uncertain war-torn Germany, Dietrich decided to volunteer. Another typical legionnaire. We're army of renegades *and* orphans.

March 19, 1954

All hell has broken loose. Since 1700 March 13, Vietminh artillery has been pounding us nonstop. How do they have so many shells! And how in hell did they move those guns in place without our noticing!

Our platoon was on Hill Beatrice when the bombardment began, followed soon by a massive Vietminh assault. Never in my seven years of fighting the communists had I witnessed such a large attack. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Vietminh troops dashed forth and up the hillside. Mines and barbed wire did not impede them. Our machine guns cut many of them down, but soon we were about to be overrun. We gradually retreated.

I helped cover my comrades' retreat. I'd hurl a grenade here or there; shoot the closest enemy gunman, dash 50 meters or so, then repeat... Once, an enemy grenade fell within two meters of my feet. I quickly kicked it away and threw my body to the ground. In another instance, a bullet grazed my helmet. I'm afraid some of my comrades did not make it.



Philippe had been struck by several bullets in the abdomen during our retreat. Another comrade helped carry him down the unconquered side of Hill Beatrice. By the time we brought him to a temporary shelter in a shell crater, he had already lost a lot of blood.

I was by his side when he died. His last words were: "Tell my wife I forgive her and that I still love her..." Just like that and he was gone. All this happened on the night and early morning of March 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>.

We spent the next few days either dodging shells in our bunkers or holding back frequent waves of Vietminh attacks.

The airstrip has suffered much damage. The few fighter aircraft we had on the ground were completely destroyed by the bombardment. And now, Vietminh anti-aircraft fire proved a worse threat. Just as their artillery had been moved on to the forward slopes facing our garrison, so now have their 37mm AA guns. Any plane flying in or out of Dien Bien Phu was at great risk of being shot down.

Just a couple of nights ago, a C-47 loaded with wounded troops taking off for a medical evacuation was struck by the intense AA fire and crashed in a blaze into the hillside. The sight of a medevac aircraft crashing sunk our morale more than anything else these past several days. Knowing one could not be safely evacuated even when severely injured makes us feel so trapped, even claustrophobic. But I still have hope. Just like Colonel de Castries said, as long as reinforcements can parachute into Dien Bien Phu, as long as supplies can be airdropped, as long as outside help can arrive, we can hold off the Vietminh assault and roll them back. Seven years of hard-fought gains could not end here!



March 30, 1954

We've counterattacked! As weary as we may be this past week, we have fought well, pushing back the enemy and boosting our morale.

On March 22, we recaptured Hill Isabelle to our south but at the cost of nearly 150 killed and 70-something wounded across the battalion. There's nothing like charging forward in assault on the coattails of our tanks, supported by our artillery and fighter-bombers.

We were again on the offensive on March 28 to destroy the Vietminh anti-aircraft gun positions to our west. With our tanks, fire support, and air support, we wiped out a large swath of their gun positions, captured many weapons, left over 300 Vietminh dead, and even managed to take some prisoners. As I knew Vietnamese, I decided to speak to some of the prisoners. "Has General Vo treated you well?" They ignored me at first. Eventually, one spoke up. "We've all undergone hardships, but we've done our part for the people of Vietnam while you guys wreaked havoc... Look at you! You're a mutt! You think you can be a French gentleman and rule over us just because your father defiled your mother..." I was enraged. I knocked him down with the butt of my gun and began kicking him. Some fellow legionnaires had to pull me back. I swear I would have gutted him like a pig had my comrades not stopped me. Our platoon leader, Sergeant van Rijk intervened: "What did I tell you? Don't talk to prisoners!"

I couldn't sleep that night, and not because of the shell explosions for I have gotten used to that. It was the thought of what would happen to me once the war ends. The French aren't in a good position across Vietnam. The Vietminh might actually win this. What will I do then? Will I flee south where the French may still have a hold? If the Vietminh capture me, they'll certainly execute me. Might I be able to flee to France? Perhaps I can find my father there. Will he still recognize me? Will I fit in there?

April 10, 1954

The monsoon rain has begun falling and will not cease. Neither does the fighting. Our trenches are flooded, our bunkers waterlogged. Meanwhile we have been receiving many more reinforcements, all descending from the sky. But there are still not enough of them to replace our casualties. And as casualties mount, they have nowhere to go. Our airstrip has been completely obliterated, and it is too difficult to land a helicopter in the monsoon rain, not to mention the anti-aircraft fire.

The fighting continues to be as fierce as previously. We've made several attempts to recapture some hills already overrun by the Vietminh. All attempts were futile. They have also stopped with the human wave attacks. Hundreds, if not thousands of their dead bodies now litter the valley of Dien Bien Phu. The monsoons have washed some of their bodies down the Nam-Youm River that flows through the valley. Other bodies lay bloated with maggots, rotting.

As the Vietminh tighten the perimeter of our garrison, their artillery fire becomes more concentrated and thus more intense.

Some of our colonial Moroccan and Tai Vietnamese troops have deserted. Some defected to the Vietminh. Others hid away in caves by the Nam-Youm. The desertions have motivated one of the other battalion's commanders to issue the warning that all deserters will be shot.

How the fuck did we come to this!? Having finished Sartre's book, I am convinced I am in hell. But hell is not "other people." If anything, "other people," as in my comrades – Jean, Hamza, Dietrich – are the only bit of hope I have for surviving one more day. Hell is monsoons, hell is not being able to stay dry, hell is having to wade through trenches just to move somewhere so doesn't get shot by Vietminh snipers, hell is artillery shells and not knowing where they may strike, hell is knowing one is powerless to do anything about this, powerless to get up and leave, powerless to see one's family again... There is no exit from Dien Bien Phu.

April 16, 1954

Much of our time is now spent keeping our bodies from being submerged in the deluge and from being flayed by shrapnel. The garrison food dump was struck by direct shell fire two nights ago. Just like that, we now have to make due with half-rations. And food isn't the only supply we're running low on.



We have been instructed to conserve ammunition and thus make every bullet count. That is fine with us as we're mostly huddled in the bunkers anyway. What is perhaps most aggravating is that much of the materiel being airdropped fall over enemy lines. Desperately needed food and medicine are now benefiting the Vietminh.

While the hopes of a relief force to arrive overland have vastly diminished, we still think our war could be resolved through diplomacy. Newspapers from previous airdrops mentioned a peace talk conference to be held before the end of the month in Geneva. But there were also rumors that the Communist Chinese may sweep in from across the border. In any case, few of us talked about peace or ceasefire, but we all silently hoped for the fighting to end soon.

April 19, 1954

Dietrich has now died. He only stepped out of the bunker to take a piss. And a mortar shell hit him almost directly. The explosion split him in half. None of us wanted to scurry out to collect his bloody mangled remains. We had to wait till night. At least Dietrich had no family to return to anyway.

April 21, 1954

The Vietminh have in the past weeks closed in more on us, constricting our perimeter even more. Since their massed assaults ended, they've switched to digging trenches and tunnels, gradually and stealthily. In some parts, their positions were only a few hundred meters away from ours.

Yesterday, our bunker took a direct hit from a 105mm shell, causing the rafters to collapse upon us. Despite being buried alive for two hours, none of us were seriously hurt. I suffered some bruises, but nothing bad enough to earn me down time in the hospital.

May 1, 1954

Yesterday was Camerone Day, a day for commemorating gallantry in the French Foreign Legion. Despite the dire situation that we have been in, we did our best to celebrate it as normally as we could. For the very occasion, two special containers of Vinogel wine concentrate were airdropped. But naturally it fell behind Vietminh lines.

Wine! Now, that's something worth fighting for. Sure enough, a small task force was sent out to retrieve it. What gallantry indeed! As we drank into the night still hunkered in our bunkers, an oddly bittersweet feeling came across us all.

By now we have all accepted the fact that the Vietminh may overrun us any day and that we may very well die here. The thought of death no longer troubled us. Is it not French Foreign Legion tradition to fight to the last man? Is it not our destiny as Legionnaires to embrace our fate? Or perhaps, the wine has worked its magic.

And today when we woke – some hungover – we did not awake to the usual tempo of artillery fire. Instead, loudspeakers were blasting “Internationale” from the enemy lines. Red flags were raised all over the Vietminh positions. So this was their day of celebrating the cause for which they fight. May Day.

Interestingly, around noon, their loudspeakers spoke to us. A composed voice rang across the garrison: “Soldiers of France! Lay down your arms! You are far from home and need not be fighting a war you do not care about... Brave men of Morocco and Algeria! This is not your war. What have the French ever

done for you!... Fellow Vietnamese brethren! Why fight for your oppressors? This is your country now!”  
But is this really *my* country.

The artillery bombardment resumed late in the afternoon, and with renewed vigor. Back in the bunker, I felt the need to write my will and leave something of a legacy. When I die here, I don't want to be forgotten forever in some mass grave.

May 4, 1954

Jean died today. He was trying to retrieve an airdropped package that fell just beyond our trench. Vietminh riflemen shot him at least a dozen times.

The massed attacks resumed. And by now, few of us were left standing to stop them. The able-body fighting force has been greatly reduced. By my estimate, the garrison is about a third of what it had been in mid-March when the enemy first began their large-scale assault. Our own platoon has gone from 40 men to fewer than 20.

I couldn't help but feel that I have run out of emotions regarding our desperation. Or rather I do not know how to capture it with words anymore. I may literally die mid-stroke whilst writing a sentence.

I am by now very exhausted. Me and the few others of the platoon now count the hours as we race from one part of our shrinking perimeter to another to fend off attackers. Even as I write this, I do so with my eyes trained across the body-strewn no-man's land, pen in one hand, gun in the other, notebook against my knee. I fear that if I put my diary down, I may not be able to pick it up again.

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<sup>i</sup> Image 1:

[https://www.google.com/search?q=french+foreign+legion+seal&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjjsjFORwcHTAhVF4IMKHQYfDU0Q\\_AUIBigB&biw=1362&bih=719#tbm=isch&q=french+foreign+legion+flag&imgsrc=j6eXjhg1YalgtM:](https://www.google.com/search?q=french+foreign+legion+seal&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjjsjFORwcHTAhVF4IMKHQYfDU0Q_AUIBigB&biw=1362&bih=719#tbm=isch&q=french+foreign+legion+flag&imgsrc=j6eXjhg1YalgtM:)

<sup>ii</sup> Image 2:

[https://www.google.com/search?q=french+foreign+legion+seal&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjjsjFORwcHTAhVF4IMKHQYfDU0Q\\_AUIBigB&biw=1362&bih=719#tbm=isch&q=french+indochina+poster&imgsrc=DVrOmxmFdxGsVM:](https://www.google.com/search?q=french+foreign+legion+seal&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjjsjFORwcHTAhVF4IMKHQYfDU0Q_AUIBigB&biw=1362&bih=719#tbm=isch&q=french+indochina+poster&imgsrc=DVrOmxmFdxGsVM:)

<sup>iii</sup> Image 3:

[https://www.google.com/search?q=french+foreign+legion+seal&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjjsjFORwcHTAhVF4IMKHQYfDU0Q\\_AUIBigB&biw=1362&bih=719#tbm=isch&q=french+indochina+poster&imgsrc=kft-DN0bh6K0TM:](https://www.google.com/search?q=french+foreign+legion+seal&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjjsjFORwcHTAhVF4IMKHQYfDU0Q_AUIBigB&biw=1362&bih=719#tbm=isch&q=french+indochina+poster&imgsrc=kft-DN0bh6K0TM:)

<sup>iv</sup> Image 4:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Dien\\_Bien\\_Phu#/media/File:Dien\\_bien\\_phu\\_castor\\_or\\_siege\\_deinterlaced.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Dien_Bien_Phu#/media/File:Dien_bien_phu_castor_or_siege_deinterlaced.png)

<sup>v</sup> Image 5: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M24\\_Chaffee#/media/File:French\\_M24\\_Chaffee\\_Vietnam.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M24_Chaffee#/media/File:French_M24_Chaffee_Vietnam.jpg)

<sup>vi</sup> Image 6:

[http://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/the\\_battle\\_of\\_dien\\_bien\\_phu\\_1954-en-fc970caa-8ef6-44ed-8589-56c4f8fb1a71.html](http://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/the_battle_of_dien_bien_phu_1954-en-fc970caa-8ef6-44ed-8589-56c4f8fb1a71.html)

<sup>vii</sup> Image 7:

<https://padresteve.com/2013/05/06/remembering-hell-the-fall-of-dien-bien-phu-59-years-gone-by-and-still-forgotten/>