

# FRENCH ARMOUR IN VIETNAM 1945-54



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**ILLUSTRATED BY HENRY MORSHEAD**

NEW VANGUARD 267

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# FRENCH ARMOUR IN VIETNAM 1945–54

When armoured units arrived in Indochina, most roads had disintegrated due to lack of maintenance during World War II, and those few bridges that survived were often inadequate for AFVs. Here, an M5A1 of *Groupeement Massu* bypasses a destroyed bridge during Operation *Moussac* in October 1945, the reoccupation of Mytho in the Mekong Delta. The markings identify *1er Compagnie/501e Régiment de Chars de Combat*. The squadron comprised three platoons each with six M5A1 tanks, although a total of 16 were available for this operation. *Groupeement Massu* operated in Cochinchina until March 1946, when it was transferred by LSTs to Haiphong for employment in Tonkin. (Author's collection)



## THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

In the aftermath of World War II the victorious European powers attempted to reassert dominion over their Asian colonies lost to the Japanese. The French government of Gen Charles de Gaulle was determined to reclaim French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos).

At the Potsdam conference in July–August 1945 between Prime Minister Winston Churchill, President Harry S. Truman and Marshal Joseph Stalin, it had been agreed that responsibility for disarming and repatriating the Japanese forces in Indochina would be divided: above the 16th Parallel the task was entrusted to Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist army, and below it to the British Fourteenth Army. However, the power vacuum following Japan's surrender to the Allies on 14 August was vigorously exploited by the Viet Minh – the communist nationalist movement headed by Ho Chi Minh, which had been armed and active in the jungle highlands along the Chinese border since 1944. The heartland of Tonkin was the Red River Delta, around the capital Hanoi and the main port of Haiphong. On 28 August 1945 the Viet Minh's military hard core, the People's Liberation Army led by Vo Nguyen Giap, entered Hanoi, where, on 2 September, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the creation of the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam, embracing Tonkin (North

Vietnam), Annam (Central Vietnam) and Cochinchina (South Vietnam). An embryo Viet Minh administration, enforced by the renamed People's Army (*Quan Doi Nan Dan*), was quickly implanted in the major Red River Delta towns. (For simplicity, hereafter the military organization is referred to as the Viet Minh as well.)

One week later, Chinese Nationalist forces crossed the border and rapidly took control of the North, plundering the countryside as they went, but the Viet Minh soon reached local accommodations with their corrupt commanders. On 12 September, British forces of the 20th Indian Division landed in Saigon to accept the Japanese surrender.

With them was a small French contingent which – together with rearmed Colonial troops released from Japanese captivity – cleared Saigon of the Viet Minh's weaker and less organized southern allies by the end of the month. In October 1945, units of the *Corps Expéditionnaire Français d'Extrême-Orient* (CEFEO), the French Far East Expeditionary Corps under the command of Lt Gen Philippe Leclerc de Hautcloque, landed in Saigon with the broad mission to reoccupy French Indochina.



The first French armour deployed to Indochina in the interwar years had been two five-tank platoons of Renault FTs posted respectively to Hanoi in 1919 and Saigon in 1921, augmented by 28 more in 1927. In 1922–27 a squadron's worth of Peugeot 146 and White TBC armoured cars followed, for internal security, but these AFVs were all obsolete in the face of the Japanese occupation of 1940 and 1941. New armour now had to be shipped out for the reoccupation, and the first unit to arrive was the *Groupelement de Marche de la 2e Division Blindée*, drawn from Leclerc's famous wartime command.

This advance expeditionary group comprised a reconnaissance squadron with M8 armoured cars from *7e Escadron/1er Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains*; a squadron of M5A1 light tanks of *1e Compagnie/501er Régiment de Chars de Combat*; a provisional infantry force drawn from the Colonial *4e Bataillon/Régiment de Marche du Tchad* and the Navy's *Régiment Blindé des Fusiliers-Marins*, with half-tracks; and engineer elements of *71er Bataillon du Génie*. This advance force was known as '*Groupelement Massu*' after its commanding officer, LtCol Jacques Massu. It disembarked between 10 and 15 October, and was immediately committed to combat in the Mekong Delta to capture My Tho, in a joint operation with other French troops landed from British Royal Navy ships.

To extend its flexibility, *Groupelement Massu* was split on occasions into two *sous-groupelements* of infantry and armour, with the latter commanded by Capt Compagnon of 503rd RCC. In the months that followed, other armoured and cavalry units arrived, but several lacked AFVs, and had to fight as infantry until they were equipped with vehicles acquired from the departing British or with wartime American AFVs shipped from France. Step by step, the major towns and roads in southern Indochina were reoccupied, though the hinterland was never pacified.

By a provisional agreement reached with the Viet Minh, other French units disembarked in the Red River Delta in February–March 1946, beginning an uneasy co-existence with Viet Minh (VM) forces already in place. When the Chinese Nationalists finally withdrew in May 1946 French units from Cochinchina pushed north to seize control of Annam and thereafter Tonkin, but were hampered by the monsoon rains. During the rest of that year Ho Chi Minh negotiated with the Paris government over the future status and

Under the watchful gaze of Chinese Nationalist guards and a Viet Minh officer, an M8 armoured car of *7e Esc/1er Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains* – the reconnaissance squadron of *Groupelement Massu* – negotiates the roadway alongside Hanoi's Paul Doumer railway bridge across the Red River. Note the insignia of the Massu Group's parent *2e Division Blindée* and the Cross of Lorraine, symbol of the Free French, on the hull front. This vehicle was the first French AFV to enter the Tonkinese capital on 18 March 1946; the *7e Esc/RMSM* comprised three platoons each with four M8 armoured cars, four jeeps, one half-track and an M8 HMC. (Author's collection)



Troops of the *1er Régiment de Chasseurs à Cheval* (1er RCC) were embroiled in street-fighting and house-clearing in Hanoi for several days starting on 19 December 1946. At this time 1er RCC had only seven M5A1 tanks in the city, together with a few M8 HMCs and M8 armoured cars. The tanks operated in pairs or singly in conjunction with an M3 half-track. Six officers and three NCOs of the tank platoons were killed in the fighting for Hanoi. Following the battle, the Viet Minh withdrew into the hinterland to conduct guerrilla warfare before growing in strength to become a formidable force capable of deploying conventional divisions in the field culminating in the climactic battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. (Author's collection)

After World War II some Japanese equipment, such as these Type 95 light tanks and a Type 89B medium, was pressed into French service, alongside French pre-war vehicles such as Renault UE Chenillette infantry supply vehicles fitted with a locally produced machine-gun housing. These vehicles were employed by an ad hoc unit designated *Commando Blindé du Cambodge*; on 10 August it was deployed to Siem Reap in Cambodia to reinforce the garrison there, together with *1er Bataillon Parachutiste SAS*. (Author's collection)

constitution of the country. During this interim, Giap consolidated the People's Army's safe base areas in the 'Viet Bac' region east of the Red River (the provinces of Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Thai Nguyen, Bac Kan, Lang Son and Cao Bang), and established a new refuge in the 'South Delta Base' (Than Hoa, Nghe An and Ha Tien provinces).

The Franco-VM talks collapsed in acrimony, and from 23 November 1946 hostilities began with a general uprising in Haiphong, spreading to Hanoi on 19 December. After fierce street-fighting the French restored their grip on the Delta cities; the People's Army withdrew to their base areas to build their strength, while guerrilla warfare broke out all over Vietnam. The First Indochina War had begun in earnest.

## THE ROLE OF FRENCH ARMOUR

### The battlefield and the enemy

Indochina incorporates an extraordinary diversity of terrain, mostly inimical to AFVs. The swampy lowland plains, cut by innumerable waterways, are covered with cultivated paddy fields alternating with areas of dense bush. The hills and plateaus of the highlands that make up most of the country are sometimes bare but usually carpeted with trees, bamboo or elephant grass, and rise into densely jungled mountains cut by river gorges. Both the plains and the highland valleys are studded with vertiginous limestone outcrops known





as *calcaires*. In 1945–46 much of the country was inaccessible to any vehicle; the dirt roads and up-country trails had been poorly maintained during World War II, and the Viet Minh invariably sabotaged those that remained, particularly the countless bridges. The roads were frequently impassable during the six-month monsoon season between roughly April and October and those bridges still intact were mostly inadequate for armoured vehicles. Employed for the most part on routine convoy escorts and route clearance, the road-bound armour units were initially greatly hampered by the dire road infrastructure, and suffered several reverses due to opportunistic enemy action.

Nevertheless, with stubborn energy, armour leaders located the best secondary roads and passable cross-country tracks. Routes, river and stream crossing points, and trafficable areas in all sectors were classified carefully according to seasonal variations. As the result of hard work and determination, the various armoured units were able to find areas in which they could readily manoeuvre. In an effort to provide mobility across the inundated rice paddies, swamps and waterways that abounded in the Mekong and Red River deltas, specialized units were formed and equipped with American amphibious vehicles developed for the Pacific campaign. (The outstanding example of such units was the Foreign Legion's *1er Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie* – see page 15). In time, only the most rugged mountain terrain and dense jungle areas remained absolutely impenetrable, though the whole road network remained permanently vulnerable to nightly sabotage by Viet Minh village guerrillas.

Following the reoccupation of Indochina by mobile columns exploiting along roads, it became necessary to extend the struggle all over the country to areas far from highways and passable trails, but these lines of communication always remained a vital battleground. Lacking many airfields or sufficient aircraft, the CEFEO was dependent on overland transportation. Before 1951 much of its infantry strength was dispersed as 'sector troops' in small company or even platoon posts to provide local security, so the road network was essential for establishing and supplying these garrisons. Threatening small posts and ambushing traffic (including the French forces that reacted to such attacks) was the Viet Minh's major operational tactic in 1946–50. French armour had to assume the mission of protecting the roads, rivers, and even the railways.

Armour units were responsible for 'road-opening' – checking the security of a route before the daily or periodic traffic of vehicles or convoys passed.

The dire shortage of AFVs when the first French armoured units arrived in Indochina prompted rapid improvisation, such as this armed jeep with a modicum of armour protection for the driver; it serves with 1er RCC in August 1950, shortly after the regiment arrived in Tonkin. The vehicle is named 'VILLEROY', after a Marshal of France who had commanded this regiment from 1675. The Groupement Massu also employed armed jeeps during its reoccupation of Cochinchina and Annam, fitted with armour plate for the driver and .50cal Browning gunner. Indeed, armed jeeps were used up to the end of the war, in sub-units such as the *Peloton de Jeeps Blindées du 9e Escadron/1er REC* in Laos. That comprised 12 jeeps each with three men, a command jeep with four, and a Dodge WC60 4x4 *Dépannage* repair vehicle. (Author's collection)

An M3A1 White Scout Car of 5e Régiment de Spahis Marocains (5e RSM) patrols a track in Cambodia during 1950. Arriving on 28 September 1949 as the *Groupe d'Escadrons de Spahis Marocains*, the unit became the 5e RSM in January 1950, with two platoons detached to serve on riverine *Vedettes*. Equipped with a motley selection of vehicles, it fought mainly in Cochinchina and Cambodia, where it absorbed the *Commando Blindé du Cambodge* as its 8e Escadron. Note the regimental insignia of a blue Sharifian star with a green outline and the figure '5' in the centre: the number was often just painted in the centre of US factory-applied white stars. The Scout Car is armed with a MAC 31 Reibel 7.5mm machine gun with its characteristic 'camembert' 149-round vertical drum magazine, while the troop compartment is covered in vegetation as a sunshield. (Author's collection)



They then had to maintain security by patrolling or by escorting convoys. The mission was similar on rivers, especially on the Saigon River, from the southern capital down to the sea. On important waterways armoured motorboats were employed, either by separate platoons of six boats or by squadrons with three platoons. The areas of operations of these units extended over wide expanses of country, and included even the smallest tributaries.

Besides the essential mission of keeping routes of communication open, armour units were called upon to act as 'fire brigades'. They deployed at short notice to help besieged posts or units pinned down in ambushes. Day and night the armour platoons moved out to rescue their harassed comrades,

In order to reduce losses from ambushes, armoured trucks were employed as troop transports; this GMC CCKW 353 is on operations in Laos in 1951. The floor of the rear troop compartment was lined with a thick rubber mat as protection against mines, and Reibel 7.5mm machine guns were mounted above each side armour plate and at the rear. The increased weight compromised mobility on the marginal roads, and the steering was extremely heavy, so driving was fatiguing. It was essential to keep the tarpaulin taut so that thrown grenades did not get lodged in any fold of the canvas. (Author's collection)





running the risk of well-sited ambushes prepared by the Viet Minh before they launched attacks to provoke such relief attempts. Infantry battalions also required armour support during search-and-destroy operations against an elusive enemy who became increasingly better trained and equipped, and close cooperation between infantry and armour became the rule. But dispersion of armour units along roads, a shortage of all equipment before at least 1951, and the poor cross-country mobility of integral wheeled vehicles all limited the benefit of such combined operations. Moving at the same speed as infantry on foot, or carrying out monotonous *'bouclages'* (area-control operations, involving patrolling between cordon positions), armour units often used up their resources without any real benefit having been gained.

### Equipment

Mobility was also constrained by the equipment of the French armour units that landed in 1945. The majority was relatively war-weary, of World War II American origin, including M8 armoured cars, M3 scout cars, M3 half-tracks, M5A1 light tanks, and M8 75mm HMCs (self-propelled howitzers). The M8 armoured cars and M5A1 tanks had 37mm cannons as their primary weapons. Some regiments were equipped with British Coventry armoured cars mounting a similar 2-pounder gun, and Humber scout cars with various armaments fitted in locally produced turrets, as well as Universal Carriers. Some had the French Panhard AML 178 armoured car with a 47mm gun, the much-esteemed *'Pan Pan'*.

The characteristic shortcomings of these vehicles were well recognized, but French industry, which had been largely destroyed during World War II, was at that time unable to provide anything better. Moreover, while America supplied equipment for France's NATO army in West Germany, France was forbidden from shipping any of this out to fight a colonial war of which the US government disapproved. Even with their limitations, however, these early armoured vehicles were useful for road security missions, and even in actual combat. (Despite years of rumours and speculation, the French Army did not employ any captured PzKpfw V Panther tanks in Indochina, although they did ship out some SdKfz 251 half-tracks.)

The major turning-point in the war came in October–November 1950. In October, after receiving its first serious aid and training from Communist China following Mao Zedong's victory in 1949, the Viet Minh achieved a stunning victory along *Route Coloniale 4* (RC 4), the highway paralleling the Chinese frontier, and expelled the CEFEO from most of the territory north of the Red River Delta. On 25 November, the Chinese launched a major offensive against the US-led UN forces in North Korea. In the face of what was interpreted as a coordinated communist threat to Western interests in East Asia, US military aid to France began to increase dramatically (eventually, America would underwrite 80 per cent of the material costs of France's war). Similarly, the Viet Minh received increasing quantities of military equipment and training in conventional warfare from the Chinese People's Liberation



Originally armed with a 25mm cannon, some 729 Panhard 178 armoured cars were in service during the Battle of France in 1940. Production continued for a while under German occupation, and the vehicle saw extensive service on the Eastern Front. In July 1945 production resumed of an improved version for the French Army, known affectionately as the *'Pan Pan'*. Here, one of these Panhard & Levasor Type 178B armoured cars, mounting a 47mm SA35 cannon in an FL1 turret, negotiates a narrow trail in support of *1er Bataillon de Parachutistes Vietnamiens* (BPVN) during Operation *Chaumière* north-east of Tay Ninh during April–May 1952. On the turret sides is the insignia of the 5e RSM, and on the front hull the name *'VERCORS'*, commemorating the famous *Maquis* battle of June–July 1944. (Author's collection)



At the start of every day roads had to be 'opened' – patrolled and laboriously swept for mines before traffic was allowed to proceed about its business. From the outset of the war route security and convoy escort were the primary roles of armoured units, then equipped with armoured cars supplied by the British, such as these Coventry Mk I cars of *5e Régiment de Cuirassiers 'Royal-Pologne'* (5e RC) in Cochinchina during 1951. The French Army received 40 Coventry Mk I armoured cars from the British in 1946 that equipped two squadrons of the *Spahis Tunisiens* in North Africa with 35 vehicles while five remained in France. In October 1947, they were transferred to Indochina. Proving too heavy, at 10-plus tons, for many of the rudimentary dirt roads and flimsy bridges, they were soon superseded by other AFVs with the turrets then being reused for other purposes. (Photo by ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

Army (PLA). While most of the equipment was of Chinese, Russian or Czech manufacture, ironically the Viet Minh also received American weapons that had been captured by the Chinese in Korea.

Beginning from December 1950, the CEFEO's M5A1 Stuart light tanks were superseded by American M24 Chaffees. The low ground pressure (less than 10psi) of the M24 was its most appreciated characteristic. Light, fast, reliable and well armed, the Chaffee could be driven everywhere during the dry season, and – with care – even across flooded rice paddies. Nevertheless, the M5A1s remained in service until the end of the war, notably in dispersed squadrons as part of new motorized infantry brigade groups. These *Groupes Mobiles* (see below) first proved their worth during Gen de Lattre de Tassigny's defence of the Red River Delta in January–June 1951,

against Giap's premature attempts to follow up his 1950 victory on RC 4. The CEFEO's loss of the Chinese frontier region and the Viet Minh's support by China raised real fears of direct PLA intervention in Tonkin, and consequently a battalion of M36B2 tank destroyers was deployed there in November 1950, together with M4 Sherman tanks. In the event, these AFVs were mainly used to support infantry units as mobile artillery.

The fundamental limitation to armour operations was the lack of a suitable troop transport vehicle with adequate cross-country ability. Despite its wartime reputation, the M3/M5/M9 series of half-tracks was less effective in the difficult terrain of Indochina. Furthermore, most infantry in fact moved either on foot or in unarmoured trucks that were confined to the few arterial roads. These were frequently narrow and flanked by thick vegetation, so motorized forces were prone to ambush, with the tanks and other supporting AFVs severely constrained from manoeuvring off the roadway.

### Tactics

Throughout the war, the CEFEO sought repeatedly to engage the Viet Minh in set-piece battles where its superior firepower, motorized mobility and tactical air support could inflict a crushing defeat. General de Lattre achieved considerable success in this way when Giap brought much of his *Chu Luc* or main force (the Chinese-trained regular divisions) down into the Red River Delta in the first half of 1951, but the Viet Minh learned from that costly lesson. Thereafter, although they continued to employ sacrificial frontal assaults on fixed positions, they chose to fight whenever possible either in 'untankable' terrain (as in the Thai Highlands straddling the middle Black River), or – when the French presented them with the opportunity – along roads where CEFEO units were confined to narrow corridors. During 1951–53 successive French commanders deployed motorized and mechanized units in thrusts to link up with preliminary paratroop assaults, both on objectives that they sought to hold and in temporary raids into Viet Minh rear areas. (The French in Indochina employed airborne forces more extensively than in any other conflict, with over 250 paratroop drops.) While the potent combination of paratroopers and armour often achieved initial success, after 1951 the limitations of the road network and Gen Giap's choices of terrain prevented it from inflicting any decisive defeats.

In November–December 1951 Gen de Lattre launched an offensive to retake and hold Hoa Binh, an important transport hub about 25 miles south-west of the Red River Delta defences and linked to them by RC 6 and a loop of the Black River. A drop on Hoa Binh by three paratroop battalions was accompanied by a drive down RC 6 by four Mobile Groups and two Armoured Sub-Groups including M4 Shermans, and a riverine operation on the Black River (see page 14, ‘Evolution of Armoured Organization’). The attacks were successful and a strong garrison was installed, but Gen Giap then patiently assembled two-plus divisions around Hoa Binh, closing in to attack both the garrison and its communication links. With 20,000 French troops eventually tied down by this campaign, Giap also infiltrated the Delta to threaten the French rear. Eventually, after long and costly running battles to keep RC 6 open, in late February 1952 Gen de Lattre’s temporary successor, Gen Salan, withdrew the Hoa Binh garrison. Unlike their earlier experience on the Delta plains, in 1952–53 French armour was once again obliged to fight on what was sometimes literally a ‘one-vehicle front’.

Against an enemy who excelled in ambush tactics and who increasingly did not hesitate to attack AFVs, the missions of the armoured units required substantial numbers of accompanying infantry. The overall manpower shortage made it impractical for the high command to assign their own infantry units permanently to the tank battalions, since French infantry was too precious to leave it idle while the armoured units were undergoing their inevitably lengthy maintenance or being refitted. The infantry units that worked with armour were frequently rotated, thus degrading the cohesiveness of the task forces and the flexibility and rapidity of their operations. Close cooperation between armour and infantry was vital, but, in the words of one armour commander: ‘The fact was that once an operation began, it was pursued at the relatively slow cadence of the infantry, and thus displayed the classic form, familiar since 1918, of infantry combat supported by tanks.’

Due to lack of resources the fragmentation of units was often carried to extremes, compounded by the numerous requests for armour support from area commanders at all echelons. Nearly always widely dispersed to safeguard communications, when squadrons were assembled it was usually for repetitive operations over the same terrain; these involved the monotony of forming cordons for ‘*ratissage*’ (village searches), which contributed to an attitude of complacency. This routine reduced the effectiveness of armoured units, and also caused a high rate of wear-and-tear on the elderly equipment, which maintenance personnel were hard pressed to redress. Not only were they not organized to support so many widely scattered detachments, and always short of spare parts, but, having only wheeled vehicles themselves, they were confined to roads.

### **Viet Minh anti-armour tactics**

From the outset, Viet Minh tactics were based on ambushes coupled with the extensive use of mines. Some 85 per cent of the AFVs damaged or



Mounting a locally fabricated machine-gun turret, a Humber Scout Car Mk II of the 5e Cuirassiers guards a bridge while protecting a convoy on the road to Dalat, southern Annam, in 1952. Typical armament was two machine guns, with the second in the hull. These turrets were made at the Saigon Naval Arsenal. The French acquired some 78 examples of the Humber scout car. Intriguingly, Humber scout cars with locally produced turrets were still used up until 1974 by Portuguese troops during the war in Angola. (Author’s collection)



In November 1950, the *Régiment Blindé Colonial d'Extrême-Orient* (RBCEO) was formed in Tonkin and equipped with M36B2 Gun Motor Carriages and M4 Shermans to counter the perceived threat of Chinese tanks on the northern border following the communist victory in autumn 1949. Note the RBCEO insignia on the turret sides. When no intervention by Chinese forces occurred, both the M36s and M4 Shermans were usually employed in the fire-support role. The RBCEO was one of the few armoured units to have its own integral M32B1 Tank Recovery Vehicles. (Photo by Keystone-France\Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

destroyed were the victims of mines, ranging from 'IEDs' fashioned from unexploded artillery shells and recovered aircraft ordnance to conventional Chinese-built anti-tank mines. The M24 tank hulls often resisted mine blasts well, and, in general, the maintenance personnel were able to repair such damage and restore the vehicles to combat service in a relatively short time.

In 1946–50, when fighting essentially as guerrillas, even Viet Minh regular units had very few

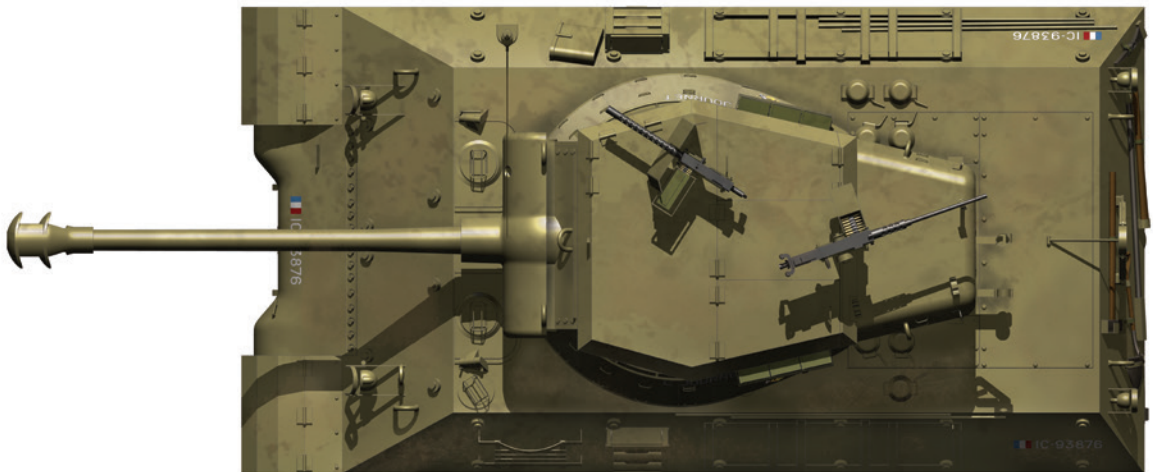
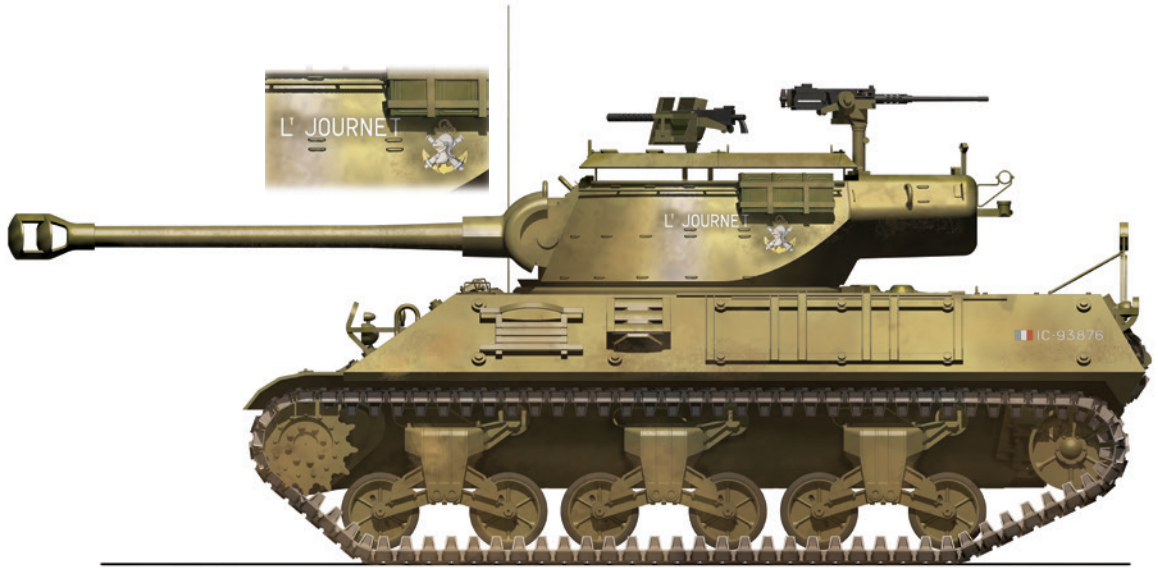
anti-tank weapons, initially limited to World War II bazookas bought on the Asian black market. They began manufacturing their own copies in factories in the Viet Bac from 1947 (though these suffered numerous misfires and duds). From 1950 China supplied modest numbers of Czech P27 bazookas and DKZ recoilless rifles (RCLs), and in that year the Viet Bac factories began turning out smoothbore 60mm copies of the latter, called SKZ (*Sung Khong Giat* – confusingly, the same term as they used for bazookas). During 1952 China delivered some 170 more DKZs, but research suggests that reports of the Viet Minh having more powerful 75mm RCLs prior to the 1954 ceasefire seem to be mistaken. From 1948 VM battalions sometimes received small numbers of attached 75mm guns (French or Japanese) for particular operations, and these were employed 'over open sights' against AFVs during road ambushes. The bazookas and recoilless guns can be credited with only a low percentage of the armoured vehicles destroyed. Often, in fact, after they were immobilized AFVs were actually destroyed only by Viet Minh infantry making direct assaults with explosive charges or Molotov cocktails.

Vietnamese villages were traditionally protected by thick, high earthen walls baked to the strength of brick, and strong palisades of living or cut bamboo in addition to anti-personnel *chevaux-de-frise*. The Viet Minh, able to call upon almost unlimited local civilian manpower, dug or built

A

#### **M36B2 GUN MOTOR CARRIAGE; 4e ESCADRON, RÉGIMENT BLINDÉ COLONIAL D'EXTRÊME-ORIENT; VINH YEN, TONKIN, 16 JANUARY 1951**

The Régiment Blindé Colonial d'Extrême-Orient (RBCEO) was formed in November 1950. The unit was equipped with M36B2 'tank destroyers' and M4 Sherman medium tanks to counter the perceived threat of Chinese armour along the northern border of Tonkin. In the absence of enemy armour they were employed as fire support for the infantry. In one of the first actions orchestrated by the new commander-in-chief, Gen de Lattre de Tassigny, 4e Escadron provided fire support to Groupes Mobiles 1 and 3 at Hills 101 and 210 on Route Coloniale 2 north-west of Hanoi against elements of Viet Minh Division 308 in the crucial battle of Vinh Yen. The RBCEO proved to be an invaluable asset to the infantry, capable of providing directed fire support out to considerable distances. The squadron comprised five M36B2s, and three M3 half-tracks with the *Groupe Porté de Protection* – unit troops providing security for the tank destroyers. On the turret side is the insignia of the RBCEO, and the name 'Lt JOURNET' in commemoration of a fallen officer.



obstacles on all routes – ditches, berms, or log barricades. A classic method was ‘piano-keys’, long runs of trenches dug close together from alternate sides of a road. Despite the perseverance of the French armoured units and attached engineers, it was often very difficult to pass such obstacles; this was achieved only after exhausting and time-consuming efforts, since French armour in Indochina had neither tank-dozers nor bridgelayers.

Viet Minh ambushes against road columns usually followed a similar pattern: stop the column or escorted convoy in a narrow passage or other difficult terrain; deliver intensive fire, often from long-prepared positions, with the heaviest weapons available concentrating on the armour, aiming to block the head and tail of the column; then launch a direct assault. The best counter was obviously to discover and avoid these ambushes, but this was difficult when faced by an enemy who was a past master in the art of camouflage. All armour leaders had orders to maintain mobility at any price when they were surprised; an AFV halted and isolated in an ambush is a blind and almost helpless prey for a sufficiently daring enemy.

## EVOLUTION OF ARMOUR ORGANIZATION

A remanufactured M4A1 Sherman of the Far East Colonial Armoured Regiment or RBCEO advances along a trail in Tonkin during 1952. The regiment was equipped with 53 M4A1 Shermans and six M4A3s with 105mm guns. The 75mm-armed Sherman had no firepower advantage over the Chaffee, while its higher ground pressure restricted mobility on soft terrain such as the paddy fields to either side of this track; the 105mm Sherman suffered from the same handicap, but was at least superior in the fire-support role. (Author's collection)

To enhance flexibility in the ‘fire brigade’ role and for independent operations, the first *sous-groupements blindés* (armoured sub-groups, SGB) were originally organized in 1951. These were not formed units, but temporary assemblies of rotating sub-units. Under the command of a small headquarters, an SGB included one *escadron* of M24 tanks of four *pelotons*, each with three tanks and two half-tracks, plus two mechanized infantry companies mounted in half-tracks. The effectiveness of the formula was confirmed during the operations at Hoa Binh in November 1951–February 1952, and Phu To in November–December 1952, when it allowed French armour to regain some momentum. However, it was still often necessary to attach an infantry battalion to these units, since their organic strength did not provide enough dismounted soldiers to search villages or outflank ambushes. By the end of 1953 these task forces had a headquarters with a large signals element and an 81mm mortar platoon, a tank squadron of M24s, two- or three-strong *escadrons portés* of truck-borne infantry with numerous

automatic weapons, and another carried in half-tracks. (The language in accounts is sometimes ambiguous, but the term *groupement blindé*, GB, seems normally to have applied to a territorial armoured command rather than a tactical unit.)

Also in 1951, *groupes d'escadrons de reconnaissance* (reconnaissance groups, GER) were organized. These were composed of an M24 tank squadron; an armoured car squadron, of three platoons each with five M8s; and a platoon with three M8 75mm SP howitzers. In addition, each group had attached indigenous infantry. (Virtually





This Chaffee of the *Groupe d'Escadrons de Reconnaissance Divisionnaire* (GERD) – a formation retained under strategic control in Tonkin – came to grief during an operation north of the Bamboo Canal in the Red River Delta in January 1954. During 1952–54, 398 French AFVs were destroyed, 84 per cent of them by mines and improvised explosive devices. Generally, M24 hulls were rarely ruptured; crew casualties were therefore limited, and maintenance personnel were able to repair the damage relatively quickly – although they were severely hampered by a logistical system that suffered supply delays of six months to a year. In contrast to the M24, other AFVs were often damaged beyond repair or completely destroyed. Once the Viet Minh overcame their psychological fear of tanks they often attacked them with satchel charges at close quarters, irrespective of casualties. (Author's collection)

all CEFEO combat units recruited a proportion of their manpower locally, as integral troops distinct from the attached irregular '*partisans*' also recruited by unit intelligence officers.)

The Armoured Sub-Groups and Reconnaissance Groups must not be confused with the Mobile Groups which were created during the same period. The model was the *Groupe Mobile Nord-Africain* of three Algerian and Moroccan battalions, which disembarked in August 1949; this was redesignated as GM 1 in December 1950, when Gen de Lattre adopted self-contained mixed-arms motorized formations based on the concept of the World War II US Regimental Combat Command. Of brigade size, with 3,000 to 3,500 men, a GM was normally composed of a headquarters, three truck-borne infantry battalions, a towed 105mm artillery battery, usually a platoon of three to five tanks, plus integral signals, medical and other service elements. (A *Groupe Mobile* might be task-organized with additional battalions attached for a particular mission.) In all 17 *Groupes Mobiles* were created during the war, numbered GMs 1-11, 14, 21, 42, 51, 100 and 101. In summer 1953 there were six GMs simultaneously operational in Tonkin and three in Laos and Annam, and three more were created that autumn. The usual infantry composition was one Foreign Legion or Colonial battalion plus two North African or Vietnamese, but two complete GMs of the Vietnamese National Army (ANV) were later formed.

### **Amphibious units: 1er Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie**

Elements of 1er REC from Morocco disembarked at Tourane (Da Nang) on 4 January 1947, but without vehicles. They were obliged to fight on foot as two *bataillons de marche* (expeditionary battalions) until April, and then as truck-borne infantry in Annam, including the recapture of Hue. Once equipped with British light AFVs (including Coventry armoured cars, Humber scout cars and Universal Carriers), the regiment comprised six armoured squadrons. The 1er and 2e Escadrons were based in Saigon, and

M29C *Crabes* of the Foreign Legion's 1er Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie (1er REC) disembark from an LCT at the outset of Operation *Normandie* in June 1950 on the Plain of Reeds, which began about 15km west of Saigon. An LCT could carry up to 25 'Crabes' on such operations; it took approximately 30 minutes to load such a number, and just over 10 minutes to disembark them. At this time a platoon comprised eight M29Cs: five armed with light or medium machine guns, two with an M18A1 recoilless rifle, and one command vehicle. A 60mm mortar was also carried within the platoon for indirect fire support, as well as rifle grenades. The 'splashguard' bow plate was invariably fixed in the vertical position to allow the driver improved vision to the front. (Author's collection)



the others in Annam: 3e at Tourane, 4e at Hue, 5e at Dong Hoi and 6e at Phan Thiet. In December 1947, 1er REC was reorganized as two squadron groups: *1er Groupe d'Escadrons* with 1er and 2e Esc based at My Tho, and *2e Groupe d'Escadrons* with 3e, 4e, 5e and 6e Esc in the locations listed above, the last having an independent role. The *Escadron Hors Rang* (HQ and services squadron) remained at Tourane. From early 1948 the armoured squadrons received American equipment, including M5A1 tanks.

From the earliest days, the CEFEO sought the means for increased cross-country mobility across waterlogged terrain, and formed its first amphibious units with unarmoured M29C Weasel cargo-carriers, called '*Crabes*' (Crabs) by the French. These were initially used by artillery and infantry units for resupply and casualty evacuation, with limited success. In the words of one high command report: 'They were too few in number, and were handled by poorly qualified personnel. They thus sowed the Plain of Reeds with their burnt-out hulls.' (This *Plaine des Joncs* was a million-acre expanse of thickly overgrown swampy terrain and countless waterways between Saigon and the Cambodian border, where the southern Viet Minh had long established many hideouts.)

The 1er REC first acquired M29Cs from *13e Demi-Brigade de la Légion Étrangère* (13DBLE) in late 1947, and trials were conducted by the 1er and 2e Esc in the Plain of Reeds. Once suitable tactics and techniques had been worked out, the two squadrons formed a *Groupe d'Escadrons Amphibie* (GEA). Armed with an LMG or .30cal machine gun, the Crabe performed better than either foot or motorized troops could, in the type of terrain where it was difficult to discern where the land finished and water began. In the deltas, swamps, inundated paddy fields, along streams and canals and also on coastal beaches, the squadrons undertook a host of varied missions; the Crabes were now claimed to be 'ranging over the Plain of Reeds, sowing confusion in the ranks of the enemy'.

Like any armoured unit, 1er REC assured security and pacification in its area of operations, controlling lines of communication and relieving besieged





Crabes and Alligators of 2e Esc, 1er Groupe d'Escadrons/ 1er REC plough through a rice paddy in support of Legion 13e DBLE infantry near Tra Vinh deep in the Mekong Delta during the first operation with LVTs in November 1950. During operations in paddy fields and swamps the suspension of the M29C tended to become clogged with rice shoots and other vegetation that overtaxed the relatively fragile mechanism, so crews had to dismount repeatedly in order to clear the bogie wheels and tracks. (Author's collection)

static garrisons. The GEA participated successfully in combined operations, such as Operation *Véga* in February 1948 in the Plain of Reeds, where it supported 13e DBLE principally by searching and clearing innumerable waterways as well as forming cordons. Thereafter an infantry platoon from 13DBLE was assigned to the Crabe units. Over time, the primary goal of freeing Saigon from all serious threats on this front was attained.

A logical development of the capabilities of the amphibious units came on 25 October 1950, with the introduction of the US Landing Vehicle Tracked (LVT) amphibian tractor or 'amtrac', which the French called by its World War II nickname of 'Alligator'. The LVT4s had a much larger capacity, were armoured, mounted medium or heavy machine guns



In a classic image by Ernst Haas (who would later become a famous photographer of America's Vietnam War), Crabes come ashore from a typical waterway displaying the colourful markings of 1er REC. By the end of the war the Legion amphibious units were entitled *Groupements Amphibie*, and were administratively independent of 1er REC. The diminutive M29C was cramped for its four-man crew, so it was common for one man to sit on the raised 'splashboard' to guide the driver or keep an eye out for mines or underwater obstacles. Crewmen also stood on the splashboard to survey the surroundings through binoculars, and this often caused it to bend in the middle – a common characteristic of Crabes in Indochina. (Photo by Ernst Haas/Ernst Haas/Getty Images)

and recoilless rifles, and had the seaworthiness that the Crabes lacked. Conversely, the Alligators did not have the same level of mobility across waterlogged terrain as the lighter Crabes. Initially, the Alligators were employed independently in platoons of eight: four troop-carrying LVTs (normally carrying indigenous infantry, termed *chasseurs*); a command LVT, two 75mm LVT(A)4 fire-support amtracs, and one recovery LVT. This separation did not prove successful, however, leading to a decision to integrate the Crabes and Alligators – a combination that soon demonstrated its effectiveness across the Mekong Delta.

A Groupe d'Escadrons Amphibie still consisted of two squadrons, but now each had one Alligator platoon (as above) carrying a company of infantry, and three Crabe platoons each with five M29Cs, of which one mounted a 57mm recoilless rifle. Thus the 7e Groupe d'Escadrons Amphibie comprised 7e Escadron/1er REC with Crabes and 17e Escadron Porté/1er REC in Alligators. Two such GEAs became the *1er Groupement Autonome* on 1 September 1951; over time these units became a formidable force of five amphibious groups, with the composition of 1er REC rising to 13, then 18 squadrons. They fought in both the Mekong and Red River deltas, as well as along the coastlines of Annam and Cochinchina. Eventually they became the autonomous *1er Groupement Amphibie*, completely independent of 1er REC except for its insignia and traditions, and a 2e Groupement Amphibie was formed in Tonkin.

The final composition of a Groupement Amphibie in 1954 included a mobile group headquarters and two tactical sub-group HQs, controlling task forces tailored from the following subordinate elements:

- Two Crabe companies, each of three platoons with 11 Crabes each.
- Three Alligator platoons, each with 11 LVTs and three fire-support LVT(A)4s. Each platoon normally carried three infantry platoons aboard the LVTs.
- A separate fire-support platoon of six LVT(A)4s.
- Other elements such as tank platoons were assigned as necessary, depending on the operation.

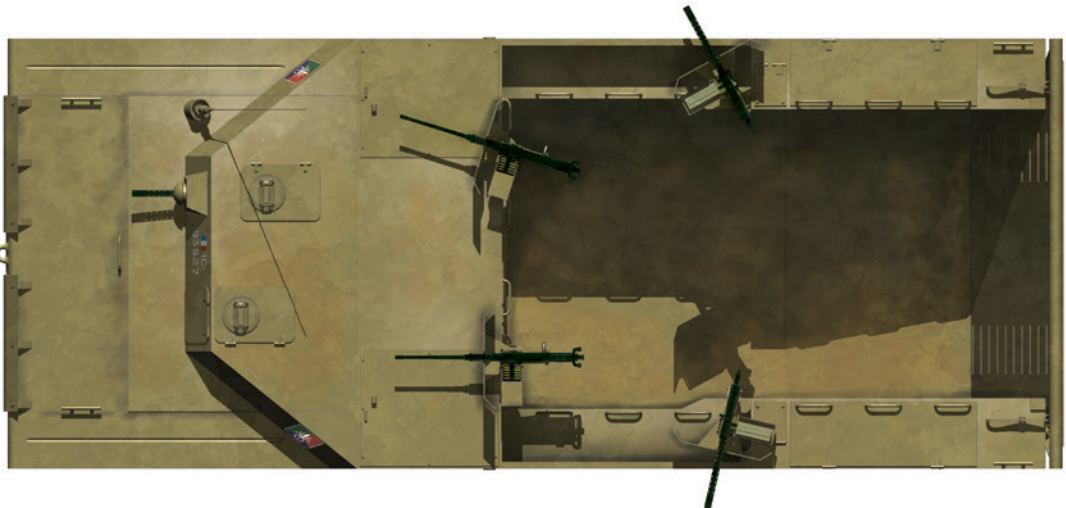
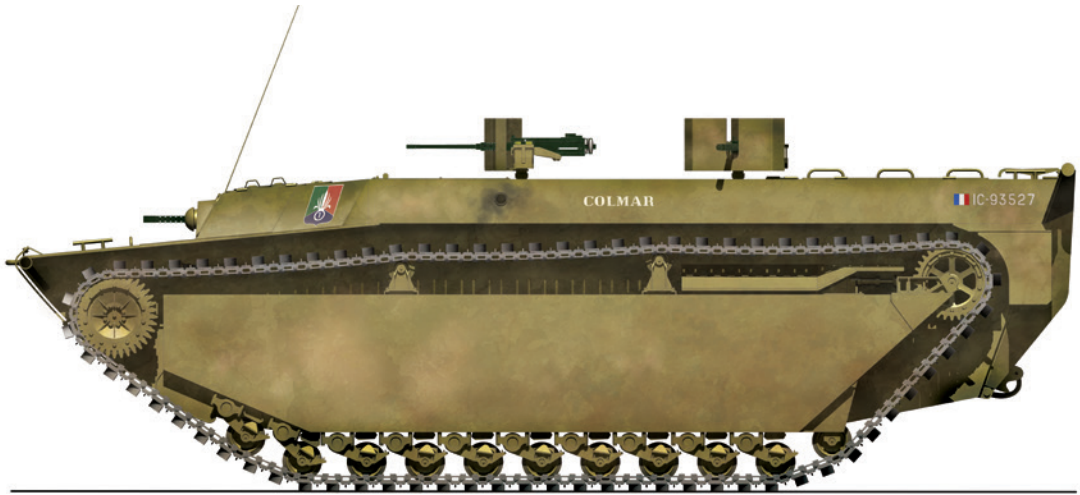
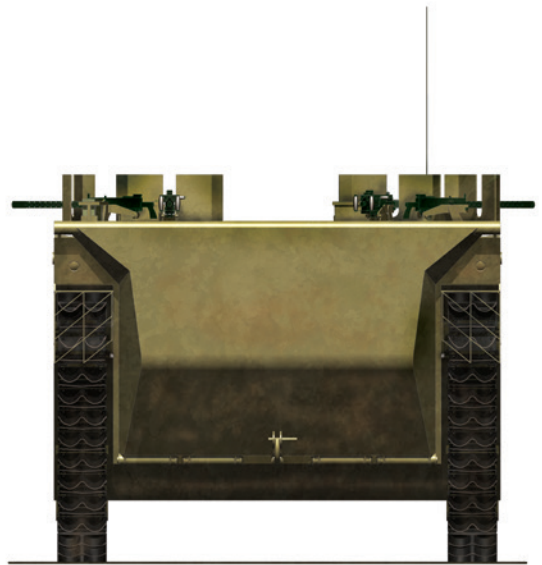
### Armoured launches

In addition, a *Peloton de Vedettes Blindées* of 4e Esc/1er REC based at Dong Ha manned armoured launches. These operated among the numerous inland waterways, in particular the Dong Ha and Quang Tri rivers, as well as the Benh Hai that subsequently became the border between North and South Vietnam.

## B

### LVT4 ALLIGATOR, 8e ESCADRON, 2e GROUPEMENT AUTONOME/1er RÉGIMENT ÉTRANGER DE CAVALERIE; OPERATION CRACHIN, TONKIN, FEBRUARY 1952

In late 1945 a French purchasing commission to Manila in the Philippines procured M29C and LVT4 amphibious vehicles surplus to US needs after the Pacific campaign. These became the standard equipment of the 1er Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie for combat in the extensive swamplands of Indochina. The first combined operation conducted by the two vehicles being in November 1950, and thereafter their deployment by expanding units spread all over lowland and coastal Indochina. Operation *Crachin* took place in the Ninh Giang region deep in the Red River Delta, against Viet Minh Division 320 and its regional support units (*crachin* was the French slang for the cold early-morning mist and drizzle so prevalent in Tonkin). This LVT4 of 8e Escadron is named 'COLMAR', after the French First Army's battle honour in Alsace in 1944; this is painted in white along the sides, together with the vehicle registration number towards the rear. The latter is repeated beside the driver's position, and on each front quarter is the regimental insignia of 1er REC.



Crabs and Alligators of 8e Esc/1er REC congregate as Dakotas drop supplies during Operation *Crachin* to interdict Viet Minh infiltration routes across the Red River Delta in February 1952. On the bow of this LVT4 is an M20 75mm recoilless rifle. During Operation *Crachin* 114 soldiers of the Viet Minh 320th Division were reported killed. (Photo by Keystone-France\Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)



As early as 1945, the French Navy organized the first *Dinassaut* or Naval Assault Division, composed of LSTs, LSIs, LCTs, LCIs, LCMs and LCVPs for operations along the coastlines and among the dense network of inland waterways. The second of these Landing Craft Mechanized 3 seen at the Haiphong naval yard is a Monitor, converted from a standard LCM3 by the Saigon Naval Arsenal. The bow ramp was removed and a circular mounting installed for a Coventry armoured car turret fitted with spaced armour. In addition the Monitor was armed with two 20mm cannon, two .50cal machine guns, an 81mm mortar and four rifle-grenade launchers. (Author's collection)

### Armoured train 'La Rafale TB'

Within months of the resumption of hostilities, the railway network across Indochina was heavily interdicted by the Viet Minh and in certain areas completely destroyed. In one incident on 13 February 1948, a train was attacked near Phan Thiet and its passengers massacred. The colonel commanding this sector of South Annam turned to the resident infantry regiment to address the problem, and the task was given to Capt Raphanaud of 2e REI. He personally developed and oversaw the construction of an armoured train (Train Blindé or TB), partly recycling armour plate from Japanese ships. Completed on 10 November 1948, it was christened 'La Rafale' (variously meaning either a wind-squall or a burst of gunfire).

In fact 'Les Rafales' would be more accurate, since it could be operated as two separate trains. It comprised two armoured locomotives; 14 armoured wagons, of which eight were fighting platforms; one command and communications wagon; an infirmary wagon; two wagons carrying spare railway tracks and equipment; two ballasted 'pillbox' wagons to proceed the train to thwart mines; and finally (being French), a cookhouse and eating wagon. The main armament was twin 20mm cannon and one 40mm Bofors in two improvised turrets, and the 2-pdr turret from a Coventry armoured car. These were backed up by eight twinned 7.5mm MAC 31 Reibel machine guns, a 60mm and an 81mm mortar, plus grenade launchers.

All told, the *Rafales* had a crew of almost 100 officers, NCOs, légionnaires and local troops. The turret crews were drawn from 1er REC and other armoured units, in particular the *4e Régiment*





*Vedette FOM (France Outre Mer)* manned by dragons from the 4e RDP, escorting junks carrying rubber from the Michelin plantations along the Saigon River. These armoured motor boats, able to navigate narrow creeks in pursuit of enemy sampans, came in two sizes, 8m (as here) and 11m long; the former was usually armed with one .50cal Browning and two or three Reibel 7.5mm machine guns, together with rifle-grenade launchers. Five or six crewmen were drawn from armour units, such as the 4e RDP, RICM, 5e RSM and 1er REC. At the end of the war, 89 Vedettes were in service in all parts of Indochina. (Author's collection)

*de Dragons Portés*. It was customary for two *Rafales* to head and tail a standard passenger train closely as escorts. The armoured train first successfully fought off a direct attack on 29 April 1949; others followed, but they soon decreased (although rail bridges remained highly vulnerable to sabotage by night). The *Rafales* operated once a week on the rail network running from Saigon to Nha Trang; from Tourane to Hue and Dong Ha; and from Haiphong to Hanoi. In July 1954 the *Rafales* were passed to the Vietnamese National Army.

The 40mm Bofors of an armoured train engages potential enemy ambush sites during a run from Saigon to Nha Trang in Annam during February 1952, so this is a Train Blindé de la Légion manned by men from 2e REI and 1er REC. The armament of the 'Rafales' seems to have differed from time to time and depending on which wagons were coupled in, but the heaviest armament was this turreted Bofors; turreted twin 20mm cannon, reportedly fitted at some date with infra-red sights; and the 2-pdr turret from a Coventry Mk 1 armoured car. (Author's collection)





Vehicles of Sous-Groupement Blindé 2 pause on RP21 during Operation *Tulipe* in November 1951, during the four-month battle for Hoa Binh against the Viet Minh Divisions 304, 308 and 312. These M24 Chaffees of 2e Esc/1er RCC carry légionnaires of III/5e REI on their rear decks. Typically of Indochinese roads, there is hardly room for even two vehicles to pass each other. Unpaved and bordered by dense undergrowth, these roads were constantly subjected to sabotage, mining and ambushes. (Author's collection)

## REPRESENTATIVE UNIT HISTORY: 1er RÉGIMENT DE CHASSEURS À CHEVAL

### Cochinchina and Tonkin, 1946

Following the fall of France in 1940, the *1er Régiment de Chasseurs à Cheval* remained in being with the Armistice Army allowed by Germany, but was disbanded in August 1942. Reconstituted on 16 March 1945 at Montauban in southern France, and equipped with American AFVs, it was intended for deployment to the Far East to fight the Japanese. The Japanese surrender in August 1945 saw 1er RCC's mission change to reasserting French authority in Indochina, and the regiment's advance party arrived in Saigon at the beginning of January 1946.

Lacking equipment, 1er RCC acted in an infantry role, although the regiment did have some armed jeeps (see page 7) for its part in pacification operations in and around Saigon. Two squadrons then received Coventry Mk 1 armoured cars and Humber scout cars, and the HQ Sqn was also equipped with wheeled armour. The most common missions were route security and the support of infantry units on patrol or caught in ambushes; the fighting in Cochinchina at this time was chaotic, involving not only the Viet Minh under the Southern leader Nguyen Binh, but also gangs of renegade Japanese stragglers and religious cultists. When the first armoured car patrols were undertaken their appearance was usually enough to put the opposition to flight, however, and casualties were minimal.

In summer 1946, the regiment transferred from Cochinchina to Tonkin, after first handing over two squadrons of Coventry armoured cars to the *5e Régiment de Cuirassiers* (whose traditional title was '*Royal-Pologne*', '*Royal Poland*'). Shortages in personnel were made up by the wholesale transfer of men from the *Régiment de Marche du 8e Dragons*, which was stood down on 31 July 1946. Once in the North, 1er RCC replaced the Groupement Massu at the end of its tour in November 1946, taking over its equipment. The 1er Esc received the M5A1s of 501e RCC, and the 2e Esc the M8s of the RMSM. The 1er RCC was based at Hanoi, but with a platoon of M5A1s detached to Lang Son – 150km (93 miles) north-east up RC 1, near the Chinese border. (Thereafter, for the rest of the war the regiment practically only fought in this theatre of operations, under administrative command of the *Groupement Blindé du Tonkin* headquarters.)

At this time a *modus vivendi* was still in force between Ho Chi Minh's provisional government and troops in Hanoi and Haiphong and the French authorities, but the Viet Minh were visibly preparing for hostilities – fomenting anti-French feeling among the population, erecting checkpoints and barricades, and quietly surrounding many French outposts. Fighting finally broke out with an exchange of fire in Haiphong on 20 November; on the 23rd the French commander-in-chief (C-in-C) Gen Valluy unleashed naval gunfire and air attacks in support of his troops, who controlled Haiphong by 28 November. Ho and Giap quietly withdrew their regular troops from Hanoi to their refuges in the hills and southern Delta, but a French attempt to disarm remaining regional troops on 19 December led to a general

insurrection in the capital. In the street-fighting that followed the French managed to hold the strategically vital Paul Doumer Bridge over the Red River, which allowed them a measure of tactical mobility. The armoured platoons of the 1er RCC were soon embroiled in urban warfare, but by 22 December the capital was firmly back under French control. Gia Lam air base was held throughout, which facilitated reinforcement and resupply, and the outer suburbs were finally pacified by 2 January 1947.



### Operations 1947–50

While these operations were conducted it was only possible to perform minimal maintenance, and intensive patrolling continued with little respite until 20 February 1947. By that time road communications between Hanoi and Haiphong, via Hai Duong, were securely in French hands. The 1er RCC now ranged farther, first with a raid north of the Rapids Canal, then with the reoccupation of Ha Dong south-east of Hanoi. The regiment then drove the Viet Minh out of Nam Dinh and its economically important cotton plantations. By April 1947 the main towns and roads in the Red River Delta were effectively pacified, and the 1er RCC took some well-earned rest. The regiment was now to undergo a reorganization to incorporate a higher proportion of *chasseurs portés* – cavalrymen serving as motorized infantry. They served in three of the regiment's mixed squadrons combining armoured cars and truck-borne infantry; the 1er Esc remained an all-armoured squadron, with six platoons each of two M5A1s, an M8 HMC and two half-tracks. The 1er RCC's squadrons were detached north and south throughout Tonkin. The 1er Esc itself had platoons spread between Lang Son 150km north of Hanoi, and Nam Dinh 100km (62 miles) south-east of the capital: this posed significant logistical and manpower problems.

In October 1947, Gen Valluy launched a major offensive by road columns, parachute assaults and riverine forces in an attempt to surround the Viet Bac and capture the Viet Minh's high command, but these Operations *Lea* and

The M5A1 tanks of 3e Esc/ 1er REC refuel near Phu Vang on 25 August 1952 during Operation *Sauterelle* in the sand dunes between Quang Tri and Hue bordering Route Coloniale 1, the notorious *Rue sans Joie* – 'Street without Joy'. Shortly after this operation 3e Esc finally received M24 Chaffees to replace its ageing M5A1 Stuarts. (Author's collection)

A trio of AFVs of 1er RCC negotiates a *diguette* or paddy dike. The rice fields themselves were impassable to such vehicles in the growing seasons; accordingly, the Viet Minh often mined these narrow banks, with inevitable consequences. An M8 Howitzer Motor Carriage named 'WAGRAM' leads a pair of M3 half-tracks similarly adorned with regimental insignia. The M8 HMC used by sub-unit headquarters elements was popular despite its high ground pressure, on account of its capacity for indirect fire and for engaging targets on high ground, such as *calcaires*, during ambushes. The M3 series of half-tracks was the main AFV for the infantry attached to armoured units, despite its limitations of mobility in difficult terrain. (Photo by Howard Sochurek/ The LIFE Picture Collection/ Getty Images)





The crew of an M29C returns fire during an engagement in Tonkin during 1952. Initially the Crabes were armed with a single .303in Bren or 7.5mm FM24/29 light machine gun, but later the .30cal M1919 Browning became standard issue, and some even mounted an M18A1 57mm recoilless rifle. (Author's collection)

Native *chasseurs* disembark from an LVT4 of 6e Groupe d'Escadrons Amphibie/1er RCC, forming part of 2e Groupement Amphibie during an assault in the Nam Dinh region. The four troop-carrying LVTs of an Alligator squadron could carry at least one company of slightly built Vietnamese soldiers. Apart from machine guns, some LVTs were fitted with a supplementary M18A1 57mm or M20 75mm recoilless rifle either at the bow (invariably, with an M20) or, as here, on the rear hull quarter. (Author's collection)



*Ceinture* made few demands on 1er RCC, which remained on the defensive while other troops were deployed up-country. These operations were only partly successful; the Viet Minh withdrew deeper into the Viet Bac, and the French return to the Chinese border country along RC 4 between Lang Son and Cao Bang further stretched their resources.

The year 1948 saw no major French operations; the CEFEO was suffering badly from a shortage of manpower, since World War II enlistees had been repatriated and it was no longer legal to deploy French Army conscripts to Indochina except as individual volunteers. Nevertheless, 1er RCC found itself constantly patrolling, and was often called

upon to break up Viet Minh ambushes. The regiment's vehicles were in many cases elderly, and in the punishing tropical environment they needed constant maintenance to keep them running. Many risky recovery operations were conducted, or mechanical problems addressed, while under enemy fire.

The high command's main attention now swung back to Cochinchina, and by that winter many of the units in Tonkin were being sent south. The trickle of replacements from France did not keep pace with those departing after fulfilling their military service, and a decision to create a 5e Esc of 1er RCC was only achieved by absorbing a complete squadron of the 4e Régiment de Dragons before it was transferred to Cochinchina. For operations in the waterlogged areas of the Delta the 1er Esc received the first of an eventual 33 M29C Weasels; by spring 1949 the fully trained Crabe squadron was based at Nam Dinh.

Following the French reoccupation of the Chinese border country in November 1947, a *Groupe d'Escadrons Nord* from 1er RCC was detached for operations on Route Coloniale 4. A small staff led by one of the regiment's majors with an administrative section headed the 3e and 5e Esc based at Lang Son, the former for security operations on RC 4 South (Lang Son-Tien Yen) and the latter on RC 4 North (Lang Son-Cao Bang). These routine missions were not without cost, principally due to mines and booby traps. Lieutenant Bonfait and his whole crew were lost on RC 4 South on 18 April 1949, and Lt Christian Préaud was killed in action on 17 September 1949 during a resupply convoy to the post of Ban Xam. A son of Lt Gen Marie Henri Pierre Préaud, he had four brothers all serving with cavalry units in Indochina;

the regiment had seldom lacked a Préaud on its roll of officers. In October 1949 the 5e Esc was given extended responsibility for RC 4 all the way from Cao Bang down to Loc Binh south-east of Lang Son.

The shortfall of replacements during 1949–50 necessitated the recruitment of local personnel directly into French units. The 1er RCC was one of the first units to embrace Vietnamese recruitment, which would increase, as a matter of high command policy, during Gen de Lattre de Tassigny's tenure as C-in-C in 1951; this process was known in the slang of that time as '*le jaunissement*' – 'the yellowing'. (The overall strength of the ABC in Indochina would



rise from 11,396 all ranks in December 1950 to 16,956 in December 1951, and of the latter total no fewer than 7,391 were Vietnamese.) By 1954 as many as 70 per cent of 1er RCC's effectives would be Indochinese; they served in mixed-race vehicle crews, with unquestioned loyalty and admirable courage.

General de Lattre's appointment on 6 December 1950 followed a disastrous defeat in October 1950 that changed the whole tempo of the war. After the communist victory in China in September

1949 the Viet Minh acquired safe havens just across the north-west and north-east borders of Tonkin, and over the coming months and years they would be equipped, supplied and trained as conventional troops by the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Conscription was introduced, allowing the assembly of existing and new regiments into nine-battalion divisions, with recoilless guns, some light artillery and anti-aircraft weapons. The Viet Minh now progressed from guerrilla warfare to major confrontations with the CEFEO, employing the same costly mass-assault tactics as the PLA in Korea.

The first warning of Gen Giap's new capabilities and ambitions came in September 1950, in the jungle mountains that stretched along the Tonkin-China border in north-east Tonkin. Route Coloniale 4, paralleling the frontier, led from the Frontier Zone's rear base at Lang Son up to the furthest northern bastion at Cao Bang, studded along its length with small French posts. In September a sudden Viet Minh assault with artillery support captured Dong Khe, an important post on RC 4 south of Cao Bang. The long-considered decision to abandon Cao Bang was then taken, but the withdrawal was badly mishandled. Outnumbered, both LtCol Charton's garrison and LtCol Le Page's brigade sent north to meet them were cut to pieces in the jungle hills in early October, and other garrisons fled south. The 'disaster of RC 4' saw the destruction of eight-plus French infantry battalions, with the loss of 5,987 men dead and missing from 7,409 engaged.

Lieutenant Pascal's platoon of 5e Esc/1er RCC from Lang Son, rushed up to That Khe south of Dong Khe, were killed almost to a man while fighting to cover the escape of survivors of the Charton and Le Page columns. Only Staff Sgt Soulet and one of the regiment's Vietnamese NCOs escaped to tell the tale, staggering into French lines weeks later. In mid-October a panicky decision was made to evacuate Lang Son itself, and it fell to 1er RCC to cover the withdrawal. Lang Son was abandoned without destroying huge military stores, allowing Giap to capture enough arms and ammunition for a whole division. The whole Chinese border region was lost, exposing the Red River Delta to attack, and this shocking reverse had a severe effect on French morale both in Tonkin and in Paris.



Mounting 40mm Bofors guns, Alligators of 6e GEA/1er RCC form a 'bouclage' (cordon) near Nam Dinh, 1953. A number of LVT4s were fitted at Haiphong naval arsenal with an open-topped turret mounting a Bofors for the fire-support role. These vehicles were only employed by the amphibious units of 1er RCC – note the regimental insignia well forward on the hull sides. They proved effective in the Tonkin deltas, but the increased weight and height affected their seaworthiness, so they were rarely used in amphibious coastal assaults. With no threat of air attack, the equipment of the *Artillerie Antiaérienne Légère* units was distributed for other purposes; 40mm Bofors guns were deployed on armoured trucks, armoured trains and LVTs. (Author's collection)

## 1951: 'The Year of de Lattre'

Entrusted with retrieving the situation, on 17 December 1950 Gen Jean de Lattre de Tassigny arrived in Vietnam with full military and civil powers. The former C-in-C of the French First Army ('Rhine and Danube') in the Liberation of North-West Europe, this famous and flamboyant soldier commanded confidence and loyalty. He immediately launched into a whirlwind of firing and hiring, and used language that soldiers could relate to. He would soon begin one ambitious programme of building a belt of artillery-proof concrete posts around the perimeter of the Red River Delta, and another to regularize and expand the formerly ad hoc enlistment of locals, laying the foundation of the Vietnamese National Army. He also began to form a reserve of manoeuvre units from troops freed from 'sector' garrisons, fielding the first couple of Mobile Groups. First, and most importantly, in mid-January 1951 he put heart back into the CEFEO by winning its first unequivocal victory.

General Giap led two Viet Minh regular divisions in an offensive at Vinh Yen north-west of Hanoi; he made early progress, but de Lattre checked him with GMs 1 and 3, artillery, and aircraft dropping (for the first time) napalm as well as bombs. He rushed in reinforcements by air from all over Vietnam, and after savage fighting drove Giap into retreat, costing him some 5,000 killed and 8,000 wounded. It had been a close call, and the French lacked the troops to pursue and exploit, but it had shown that the new Viet Minh could be defeated. In March/April 1951 Giap sent parts of

### C

#### **1: UNIVERSAL CARRIER Mk 2; 1er COMPAGNIE, 43e RÉGIMENT D'INFANTRIE COLONIALE; COCHINCHINA, 1951**

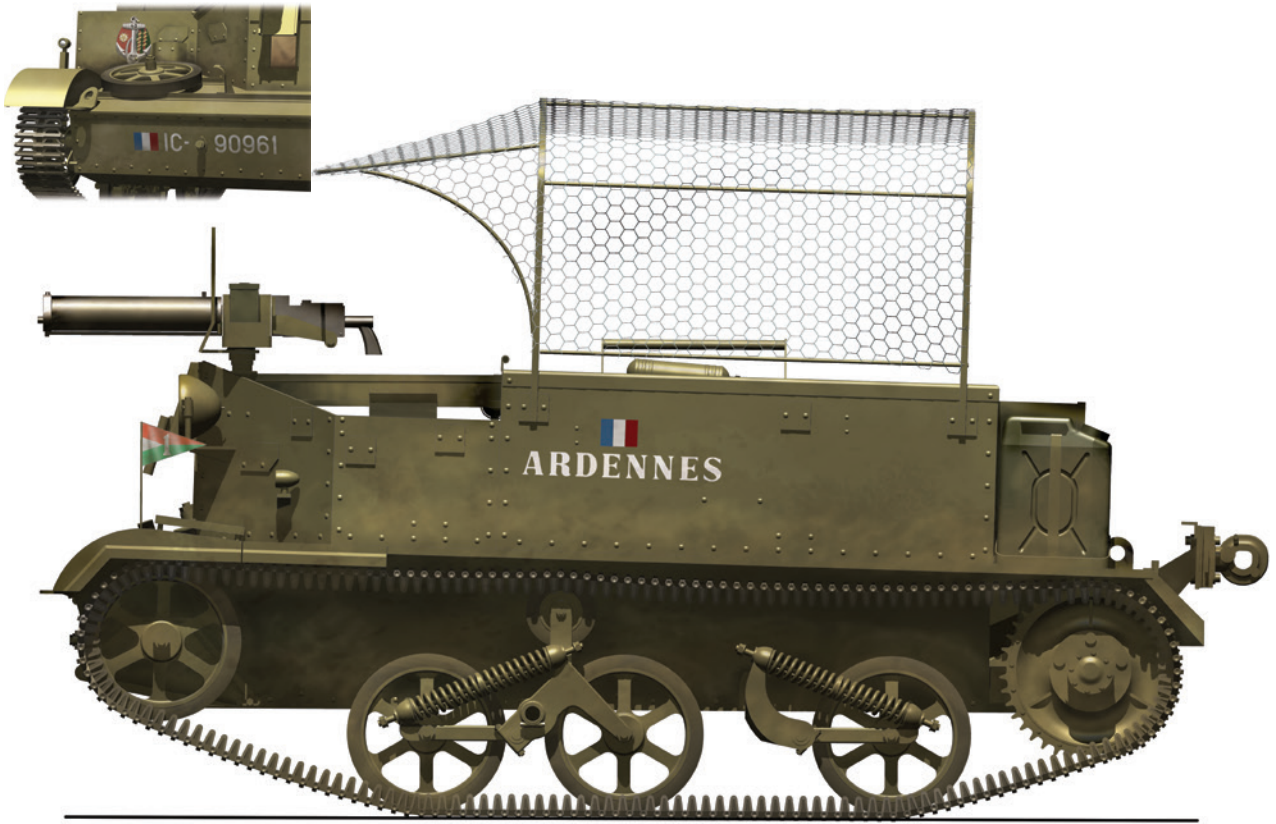
The original configuration of the CEFEO was predominantly infantry, since tanks were not deemed suitable for the Far East theatre of operations. Once the region was reoccupied, 'sector infantry units' were made responsible for security in specific territorial areas. In time the infantry received surplus AFVs from armoured units for patrolling and other mobile missions. As an indication of the improvisation necessary at the time, a skate ring for a water-cooled M1917A1 .30cal machine gun has been fitted to this Universal Carrier. The vehicle displays its name on the sides – the battle honour 'ARDENNES' below a *tricolor*. On the lower front hull is the registration number, and at the driver's position a hand-painted version of the regimental insignia of 43e RIC featuring the fouled anchor of the Colonial (formerly Naval) units, which retained the nickname of '*marsouins*' or 'porpoises'. On the front track guard is a *fanion* indicating 1er Compagnie: the colours here are conjectural, but based on those of the regimental insignia. Above the crew compartment is a wire mesh anti-grenade screen.

Arriving in Cochinchina in February 1946 as part of 3rd Colonial Infantry Division, the 43e RIC was reconfigured as three independent battalions in December 1948. I/43e RIC was stationed at Vinh Long, Can Tho and Long Xuyen in the Mekong Delta, and subsequently became the 19e Bataillon Vietnamien.

#### **2: M8 ARMoured CAR, 3e ESCADRON BLINDÉ DE RECONNAISSANCE VIETNAMIEN; NAM DINH, TONKIN, MAY 1952**

On the turret near side this armoured car displays the insignia of 3e Escadron; it is not repeated on the other side. The vehicle name 'SONG DAY' refers to the Day River in the Red River Delta; the other vehicles in the squadron were similarly named after rivers, e.g. 'SONG BO' and 'SONG LE'. On the wheel arches '50 LBS' is painted in white to denote the correct tyre pressures; above the front wheel mudguard the initials 'MDAP' indicate that the vehicle was supplied by the USA under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program. The 3e Escadron Blindé Vietnamien was created in the summer of 1951, one of six such units formed in that year. Equipped with M8 armoured cars, it served in Tonkin until January 1954 when it became part of the ANV's 3e Régiment de Dragons Vietnamiens. At the time of partition the unit moved to South Vietnam in July 1954, and was subsequently equipped with M24 Chaffee tanks after the departure of the French. The plate H-D31 is repeated on the rear left hull.

1



2



Under the direction of Gen de Lattre de Tassigny, national armies were raised in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (the countries of the so-called 'French Union') from 1950 onwards. Five Vietnamese armoured units were organized, and one each in Laos and Cambodia. The creation of these national forces was intended to free French troops from static garrisons for mobile warfare against the Viet Minh; however, training them and providing them with French cadres was a severe strain on the CEFEO's skilled manpower. Perched atop the turret of this M8 HMC is Capt Duong Ngoc Lam, the CO of *1er Escadron Blindé d'Intervention* during 1953. (Photo by Keystone-France\Gammama-Rapho via Getty Images)



A flight of Grumman F6F-5 Hellcats of *Escadrille 1F* from the carrier *R95 Arromanches* drops napalm on Viet Minh positions at Phu Nho Quan on 4 November 1953 during Operation *Mouette*, as an M24 of 2e Esc/1er RCC stands by during fierce combat against the Viet Minh 320th Division. Ten days earlier, on 24 October, tanks of 1er RCC fought a decisive action at Lai Cac where 180 Viet Minh were killed and 20 captured in a single day. (Author's collection)



three divisions in a second thrust, at Mao Khe and Dong Trieu to threaten Haiphong; this too was repulsed.

While some individual platoons of 1er RCC were engaged at Vinh Yen, most of the regiment was deployed to cover Hanoi. It had received its first M24 Chaffees in December 1950, allocating them to the 2e and 5e Escadrons. Each squadron now had four platoons of three tanks each, together with two half-tracks for *chasseurs portés*. The manpower issue was addressed by the creation of an improvised Vietnamese motorized infantry unit, the *Bataillon de Marche du 1er RCC* or BMRC. This was led by Maj Cousteaux, with a few lieutenants (including Gen de Lattre's only son, Bernard) commanding squadrons. In late May to early June, Giap launched his third and most ambitious offensive, by three divisions across the Day River in the south-east Delta to threaten Phu Ly and Nam Dinh. This too was defeated, with the loss of some 10,000 killed or captured, by a combination of eight Mobile Groups, armour, artillery and air power. However, the BMRC suffered heavily on 29/30 May during its 48-hour defence of a hill position near Nam Dinh; among its dead were three squadron commanders – Lts Brisgard, Mercier and de Lattre de Tassigny.

### **Diversification, and Operation Lotus**

The arrival of the M24 resulted in other organizational changes. For many months the two Chaffee squadrons were paired with mechanized infantry squadrons from the *8e Régiment de Spahis Algériens* (8e RSA)



Throughout the war French armoured units suffered from an almost total lack of tank recovery vehicles. This M24 of the 2e Peloton, 2e Esc/1er RCC became bogged during Operation *Gerfaut* in the rice-growing region of Thai Binh on 19 December 1953. Wielding his walking stick, the squadron commander Capt O'Mahony directs the recovery operation: the other tanks of the platoon were attached together in a chain by tow cables, and pulled the casualty free. Like many armour officers, Capt O'Mahony has a .50cal cartridge case jammed on the end of his walking stick to test the 'going' for his tanks – a technique that originated in the Great War. (Author's collection)

mounted in half-tracks; this unit comprised three squadrons of Algerians and one of fiercely anti-VM Muong tribesmen. Each of these two *Sous-Groupements Blindé* was formed from one M24 squadron of 1er RCC and two half-track squadrons of 8e RSA. Control of the SGBs was shared: 1er SGB served under command of 8e RSA, and 2e SGB under 1er RCC.

Two other 1er RCC squadrons, the 3e Esc (M5A1s) and 4e Esc (M8 armoured cars) were incorporated into the *Groupe d'Escadrons de Reconnaissance Divisionnaire* (GERD), operating nominally under 1er RCC control but assigned missions by the Commanding Officer Western Tonkin. The GERD was reinforced with infantry as required, although it also raised its own Vietnamese '*Commando*'.

During Operation *Medusa* in April 1951, the effectiveness of the M29C Crabe in rice paddies led to the Crabes of the 1er Esc/1er RCC being detached to form the core of a *Sous-Groupement Amphibie* (SGA), coupled with a platoon of four LVT4 Alligators. This was eventually expanded into an 11e Esc/1er RCC. By the end of 1951 there were thus detachments of the 1er RCC serving in five larger battlegroups: the BMRC, two SGBs, the GERD and the SGA.

Although Gen de Lattre was an extremely dynamic commander, and his aggressive tactics brought many local victories to French units operating throughout the country, the Chinese-supported Viet Minh proved stubbornly resilient. Despite a dip in Chinese supply deliveries due to the PLA's parallel commitment to North Korea, these never stopped, and recovered after mid-1952. Tens of thousands of volunteers and conscripts continued to be trained in Chinese bases, so the Viet Minh were able to reconstitute units shattered by French firepower at a pace the French could not match. Viet Minh operations were always characterized by impressive mobility across country and extensive knowledge of the terrain, so units were seldom cornered.

Attacks were normally made in large numbers and under cover of darkness, and commanders took no heed of their units' losses.

The goals of Operation *Lotus*, the reoccupation of the Muong capital Hoa Binh in November 1951, were to regain control of a transport hub between the South Delta Base and the Viet Bac, and to force the Viet Minh into battle on French terms. However, the links down RC 6 and along the Black River passed through dense terrain, which the Viet Minh could traverse while the CEFEQ was limited to road and river traffic. Sous-Groupement Blindé 2 and elements of GERD were among the units tasked with safeguarding posts vital to French command of the Black River and with keeping RC 6 open. In December, when Gen de Lattre – heartbroken by the death of his only son, and dying of cancer – left Indochina, Giap's encircling divisions struck.

On 11 December 1951 the outpost at Tu Vu on the Black River north of Hoa Binh, defended by Lt Chevreuil's tank platoon and two platoons of infantry from 3e Esc/1er RCC plus a small artillery detachment, was attacked by a large Viet Minh force. As thick ground mist blanketed the area, the Viet Minh attacked at 2115hrs and kept up the pressure until dawn. The mist hampered the gunners' observation, and after five successive human-wave attacks the perimeter was penetrated. Only the quick and sacrificial action of the tank platoon averted complete disaster, and Lt Chevreuil was among the tank crewmen killed in action. A counter-attack by Foreign Legion troops relieved Tu Vu at daylight. Later, a similar action at Xom Pheo on RC 6 north-east of Hoa Binh cost the Viet Minh over 800 killed – an indication of how many men they were willing to expend in combat. The Black River link was severed on 12 January, and shortly thereafter it took Gen Salan 12 battalions with heavy artillery and air cover, and 12 days, to reopen RC 6. Hoa Binh was abandoned the following month.

### **1952: Operation *Lorraine***

During the Hoa Binh battles, the troops deployed inside the Red River Delta were also hard pressed by the ever more determined Viet Minh. In January

## **D**

### **LVT4 ALLIGATOR DE DÉPANNAGE, & M29C CRABE; 1er ESCADRON/1er RÉGIMENT ÉTRANGER DE CAVALERIE; OPERATION ACQUARIUM, COCHINCHINA, MAY 1951**

The M29 Weasel, originally designed for operations in snow and ice, only became amphibious with the M29C version, and had too little freeboard for most sea conditions. In the difficult terrain of Indochina the *Crabe* suffered mechanically from its overladen suspension and the fragility of its engine and clutch. During early operations many were lost because of breakdowns, and had to be destroyed by fire for lack of any means to recover them. This was overcome by better troop training, and the introduction of the *LVT4 de Dépannage*. This was fitted with the twin-boom lifting equipment from an Ernest Holmes Model-45 HD Wrecker bed and a Gar Wood 15,000lb (6818kg) winch, for extracting even the most deeply bogged vehicle. The recovery *Alligator* also carried 250kg naval anchors to provide a stable platform during recovery missions.

Here the recovery LVT4, registration number IC-93810, exchanges the engine of a *Crabe* in the field: a task that took one hour for an M29C and two hours for an LVT. This Crab was commanded by Warrant Officer Blesch, the leader of 2e Peloton, 1er Esc/1er REC, as indicated by the playing card heart symbol. The regimental insignia is painted on the near front quarter. On the far bow quarter is an insignia of a crab combined with the Foreign Legion's grenade, identifying the 1er Groupe d'Escadrons/1er REC, the tactical grouping of the regiment's 1er, 2e and 6e Escadrons which operated the Crabes and Alligators at this date. The insignia was later retained by the 1er and 2e Groupements Autonomes, and the 1er and 2e Groupements Amphibies, as these expanding tactical units were later renamed.



'METZ', the M24 Chaffee of Lt Michel Henry of 1er RCC stands guard as troops search yet another native village, a repetitive task known as 'ratissage'. The M24 proved to be the outstanding AFV during the war in Indochina. It possessed just the right combination of firepower with an effective high explosive round; good armour protection against most Viet Minh weapons; and, above all, excellent mobility thanks to its low ground pressure. At the end of the conflict, French armour forces in Indochina comprised four armoured groups, two amphibious groups, three reconnaissance groups and six separate armour battalions. (Author's collection)



1952, near Dong Coi on the Rapids Canal east of Hanoi, Lt Lieutenant Bertrand Turret's tank platoon of 5e Esc/1er RCC were in action with SGB 1. By night, infantry attacked them from close quarters with satchel charges, and the tank crewmen had to use their co-axial machine guns to 'hose' them off their comrades' tanks.

On 29 October 1952, Gen Salan launched his ambitious Operation *Lorraine* north-west out of the Delta up RC 2 and the Clear River. This had the dual purpose of destroying Viet Minh supply bases in the Phu Doan-Tuyen Quang area, while hopefully distracting Giap from the campaign he was leading far south in the Thai Highlands with three of his five divisions. Salan committed 30,000 men in four motorized brigades, one airborne, two armoured and two riverine groups; among them were the 1er RCC's 2e and 5e Esc, detached respectively to SGB 1 and SGB 2. The paratroops dropped on Phu Doan on 9 November, the armour reached them the next day, and the Viet Minh depots were duly destroyed. The enemy remained elusive until the return march down the narrow corridor, when, on 17 November, the columns were attacked with great ferocity in the Chan Muong Pass by VM Regt 36. Once again the AFVs were attacked fearlessly with satchel charges, and the crews had to shoot the Viet Minh off each other's turrets. Before the column fought its way back into the Delta the road was again cut, by Regt 176, on 23/24 November.

Fighting an enemy who had lost any fear of French armour, all of the regiment's squadrons were embroiled in many small battles in the Delta throughout the winter of 1952–53. The practice of carrying Vietnamese infantry on the M24s was adopted; their small stature and agility allowed up to 24 men to ride on each Chaffee, deploying at the first sign of enemy presence. This arrangement permitted longer patrols without tiring the foot soldiers, and patrolling areas that trucks could not access.



## 1953: reorganization, and Operation *Mouette*

General Henri Navarre replaced Gen Salan as C-in-C on 8 May 1953. France no longer believed in a military victory, but Navarre's orders were to improve the military position vis-à-vis the Viet Minh to permit a negotiated political resolution. Navarre had too little armour for it to be decisive at the strategic level, but he attempted to modify his mobile forces into a common organization to permit their enlargement with the equipment at hand.

The Sous-Groupements Blindés and Sous-Groupements Amphibies in which the 1er RCC's squadrons were operating were reorganized, as was the regiment itself. First, the 1er RCC personnel were withdrawn from 2e SGA, which now came under control of 1er REC thus removing the Crabs and Alligators from the 1er RCC's inventory. The joint 8e RSA and 1er RCC armoured sub-groups of GB 2 were also rationalized: the 8e Spahis and 1er RCC were to be equipped and organized as separate, identical manoeuvre units. Each had a headquarters, a squadron of M24s, a squadron of *chasseurs portés* in half-tracks, and three squadrons of truck-borne infantry. The new organization allowed the two regiments to take and hold ground, and each could respond rapidly to multiple threats over a wide area. Collectively, these reorganizations removed all amphibious vehicles and most armoured cars from the regiment's inventory. The exception was 4e Esc with M8 armoured cars in the GERD, which remained under the territorial commander of North-West Tonkin.

The 1e RCC now had six squadrons, which made the constant shortage of junior officers even more evident. In Indochina all junior officers had to shoulder responsibilities above their rank. Only three officers could be provided for each squadron; it was commonplace for a warrant officer or senior NCO to command one platoon in a squadron, but with four platoons in each of six squadrons half of them were now led by non-commissioned ranks.

The first combat deployment of the new organization was Operation *Mouette* on 15 October 1953, a major thrust out of the south Delta enclave against VM Div 320, which involved seven GMs, paratroops, amphibious and riverine units, and armour. The 1er RCC now formed the basis of SGB 2, though the 6e Esc started the operation very short of manpower. By the time



Based on the wartime Fieseler Storch observation aircraft, a Morane-Saulnier MS-500 Criquet or Cricket flies low over a pair of LVT(A)4 of the 1er REC during an operation below the Khé-Non Mountains in the final weeks of the war. The heavily armed LVT(A)4 proved to be a highly effective fire-support vehicle to the M29C Crabe formations across the inundated regions of Indochina. With three .30-calibre machine guns and an M3 75mm howitzer that was mounted in the LVT(A)4 and the M8 HMC. In French service, it was known as the '*lance-potates*' or '*potato-thrower*'. (Photo by Keystone-France/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

The commander and crew of an M24 of 6e Esc/1er RCC observe an airstrike on 24 June 1953 during an operation near Phuc Yen in the Red River Delta. At this time 6e Escadron was attached to the *Groupe d'Escadrons de Reconnaissance Divisionnaire* (GERD), controlled by the territorial *Groupement Blindé de Tonkin* as a strategic asset for widespread independent operations. This image graphically displays the Chaffee's outstanding characteristic – the low ground pressure providing mobility even in a waterlogged rice paddy. (Author's collection)



*Mouette* withdrew on 6/7 November, Div 320 was sufficiently mauled that it was non-operational for more than four months, having lost about one-third of its strength. In one action alone, on 24 October near the important French-defended crossroads of Lai Cac, the regiment recorded 180 Viet Minh killed and 20 captured. As usual, the Viet Minh withdrew in the face of strong French advances, aiming to close in behind, but on this occasion the French artillery was well prepared and inflicted heavy losses. 1er RCC elements reconnoitred the forest roads south of Lai Cac, routes perfectly suited to Viet Minh ambushes, and Regt 48 duly manoeuvred to hit them on a stretch of road confined by steep terrain on one flank. This time, however, the 1er RCC anticipated the ambush, and tanks and infantry platoons charged into the expected site before it was properly set. Once again, the Chaffee crews machine-gunned enemy assault sappers off the outside of each others' tanks.

For the rest of winter 1953–54, the 1er RCC elements operating with SGB 2 and the GERD had little respite. The regiment patrolled the Son Tay and Phuc Yen areas, and SGB 2 those of Phuy, Nam Dinh and Thai Binh. The new regimental organization proved effective, permitting wide dispersion but rapid deployment and concentration.

During 1952–53, when Gen Giap's widely manoeuvring divisions opened new fronts far from 'tankable' territory, the French high command had sought to counter them by using their increased air transport fleet and airborne brigades to establish '*bases aéro-terrestres*' in their path, complete with artillery. The theory was that the Viet Minh, still weak in field artillery and lacking anti-aircraft weapons other than machine guns, could be lured to smash themselves against strong defensive positions installed, supplied, and covered by the French Air Force. Some of these operations were successful, particularly at Na San in December 1952. In autumn 1953, for a variety of strategic reasons, the choice for one of these 'air-ground bases' fell upon Dien Bien Phu, an airstrip in a remote valley in the Thai Highlands near the Laotian border. This was duly captured by



A Bristol 170 Freighter Mark 2 F-VNAK belonging to Air Viet Nam was impressed into military service for the transport of large items into Dien Bien Phu during Operation *Rondelle II*. It carried the hulls and turrets of the ten M24 Chaffees into the isolated *base aéro-terrestre*, while C-47s delivered the remainder of the tank parts and spares in half-a-dozen separate flights. The first Dakotas of Operation *Rondelle II* landed at Dien Bien Phu on 16 December where they were unloaded by VM prisoners. Six Dakotas and one Bristol had already landed when the first Chaffee hull arrived on 18 December. In less than three days, the first Chaffee was reassembled. The French used the British name 'Dakota' for the C47, and the term '*dakotable*' came to describe any airstrip that could accept this aircraft. F-VNAK was finally destroyed on 18 December 1961, when it crash-landed at Wollongong in Australia. (Author's collection)

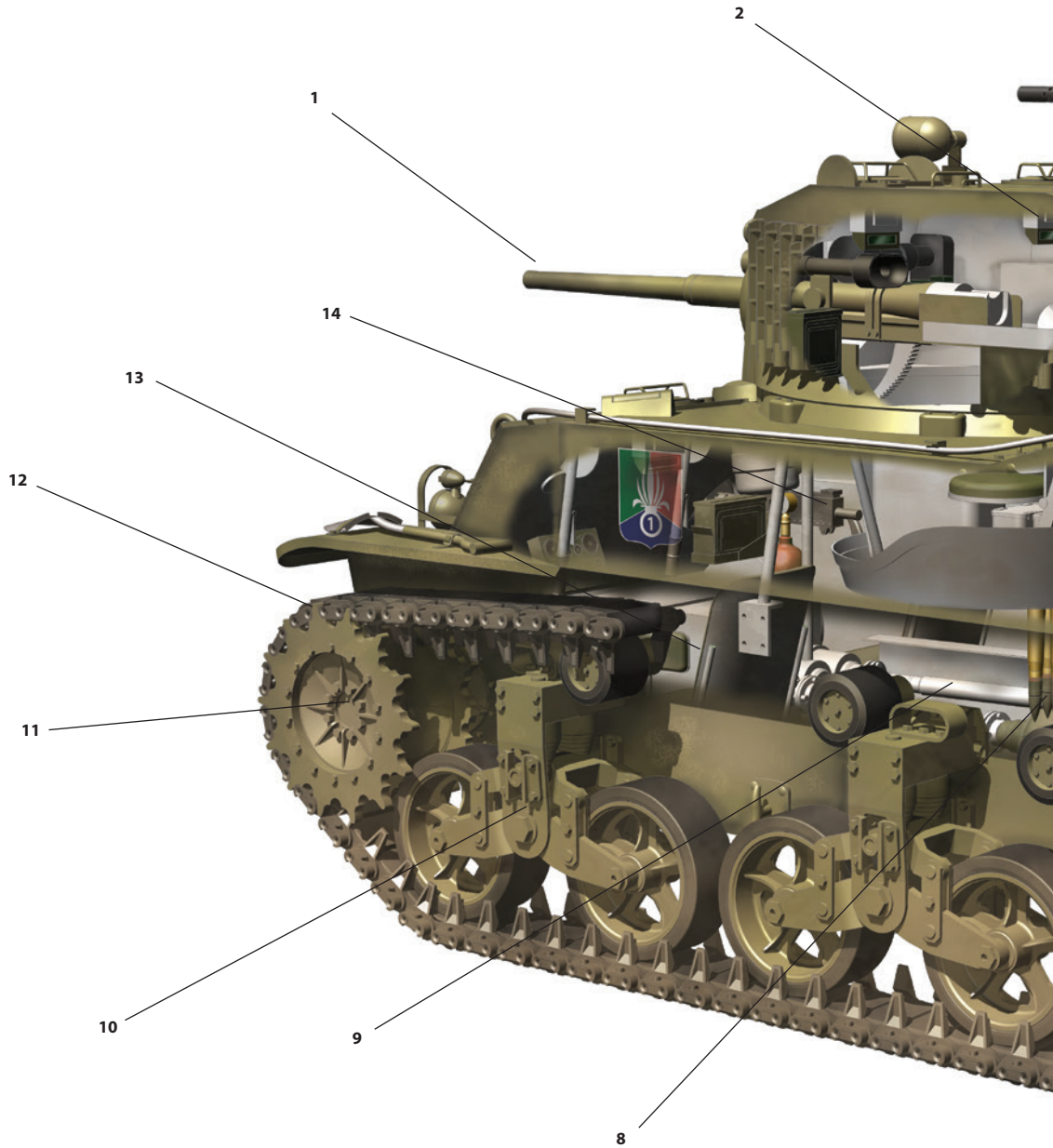
paratroopers on 20 November with Operation *Castor*, and by the 25th the old airstrip had been repaired sufficiently to take Dakota transports.

### 1954: The 'Bisons' of Dien Bien Phu

The *base aéro-terrestre* at Dien Bien Phu was conceived not only as an 'anvil' on which enemy forces diverted from around the Red River Delta could be hammered to destruction, but also as an offensive base from which mobile units and tactical aircraft could strike at the Viet Minh in south-west Tonkin and northern Laos. To augment its offensive capability, a composite squadron of ten M24 tanks was airlifted into the camp.

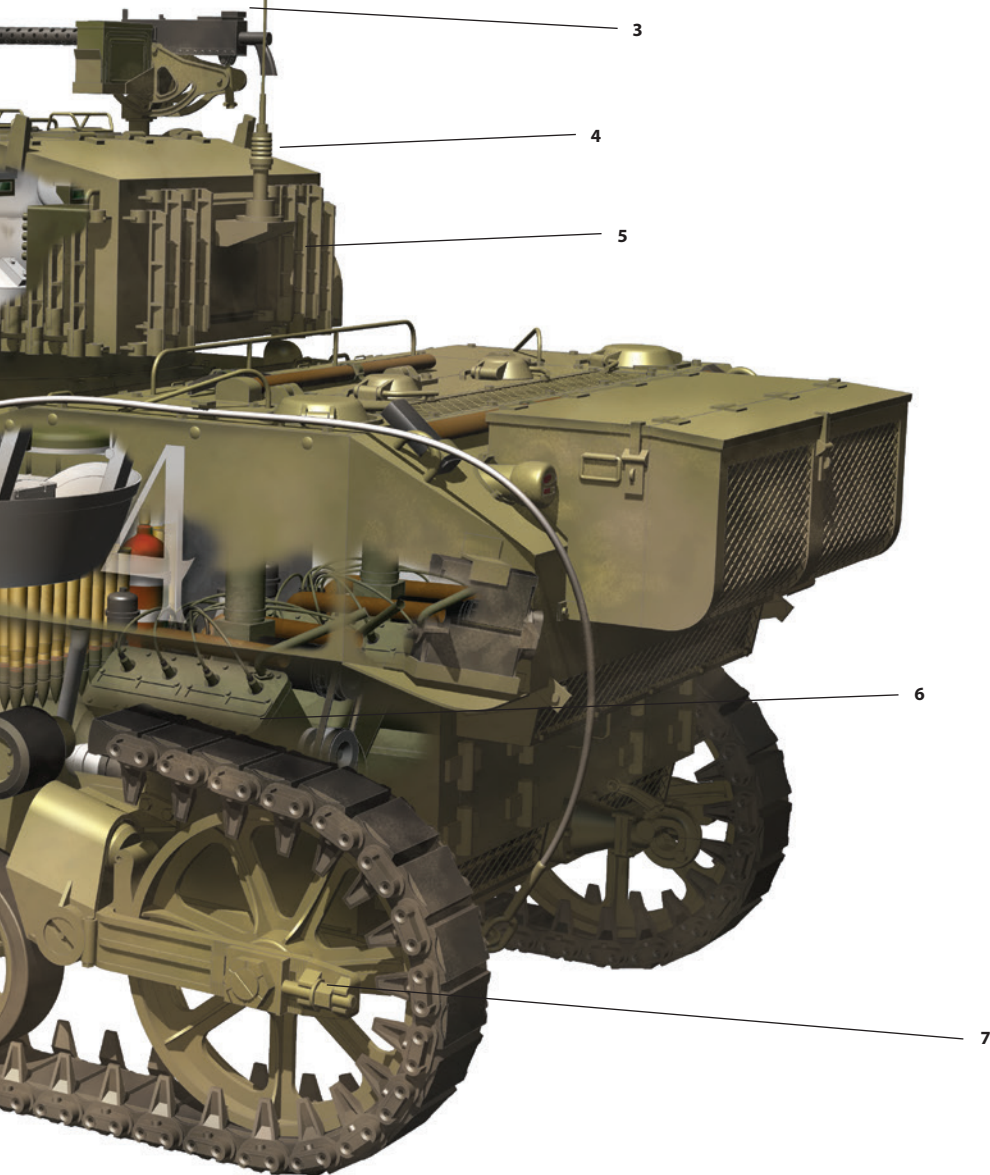
Since the French possessed no aircraft capable of transporting an entire 18-ton M24, each tank was dismantled in Hanoi into 180 assemblies, and the pieces flown into the valley. The shipment of each tank required six flights by C-47 Dakotas, and two by requisitioned civilian Bristol 170 Freighters, whose large frontal clamshell doors could accommodate the tank hull and turret separately. Even when stripped of every nut and bolt the hull weighed 1,761lb more than the Bristol's official lift capacity of about 14,000lb (6.27 tons), so to enable it to gain sufficient altitude over the mountains and to carry enough fuel many components had to be removed from the aircraft to reduce weight, including the co-pilot and even his seat. The loading of the Bristol was so critical that when a hull weighed in at 800lb extra it was refused. A new hull had to be selected.

Operation *Rondelle II* began on 16 December 1953, when Lt Bugeat's platoon from a Foreign Legion AFV repair company, 2e CREBLE (*Compagnie de Réparation d'Engins Blindés de la Légion Étrangère*), set up an assembly line for the tanks beside the airstrip, and two days later the first 'skeleton' arrived. Lieutenant Henri Préaud of 1er RCC recalled: 'When we saw our tanks in little pieces like a jigsaw puzzle we thought we would become infantrymen, never believing that anyone could make a tank out of this collection of pieces.' Nevertheless, two Chaffees were



## KEY

1. M6 37mm gun in M44 combination gun mount
2. Turret periscope
3. .30cal anti-aircraft gun
4. Antenna mount base
5. Track grousers
6. Twin Cadillac Series 42 16 cylinder (8/engine)
7. Trailing idler wheel
8. 106 rounds of 37mm ammunition
9. Propeller shaft
10. Vertical volute spring suspension
11. Drive sprocket
12. T16 series rubber padded tracks
13. Hydramatic transmission
14. Co-driver's M1919A4 .30cal machine gun





In a classic example of ‘*Débrouille-toi!*’ – the Foreign Legion’s traditional mastery of improvisation – légionnaires of 2e CREBLE painstakingly reassemble the M24 Chaffees beside the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu. 2e CREBLE was normally based in Hanoi to service the amphibious vehicles and other AFVs of 1er REC and GB 2 in Tonkin. The team arrived at Dien Bien Phu on 16 December 1953, and on the 18th began the reassembly of the first Chaffee ‘jigsaw puzzle’. The gantry for lifting the turrets and other heavy components was also used by 11e Batterie/4e Régiment d’Artillerie Coloniale to assemble their airlifted 155mm howitzers. (Author’s collection)

completed by 24 December, and the first platoon – *Peloton Carette*, named for its commander – was formed on Christmas Day from personnel of the mechanized *Régiment d’Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc* (RICM); the other crews came from 3e Esc/1er RCC serving with the GERD. *Rondelle II* ended on 15 January 1954, with the completion of the ten tanks a fortnight ahead of schedule. They were divided into three platoons of three tanks each, plus a headquarters tank for the squadron commander, Capt Yves Hervouët of 1er RCC. The squadron became operational on 20 January, assuming the title *Escadron de Marche/1er RCC*; administratively, it remained attached to 3e Esc/1er RCC. To the troops of the garrison the tanks were known as ‘Bisons’; the Viet Minh would call them ‘Oxen’.

The HQ tank and two of the platoons were located in the *centre de resistance* at Dien Bien Phu. Nine of the tanks were named, as was standard practice, after battle honours, painted in white capitals along the turret sides. Hervouët’s tank (callsign ‘*Bison Autorité*’) was ‘CONTI’, after a seventeenth-century commander of 1er RCC’s ancestor regiment. The ‘Colonials’ of Blue platoon (WO Carette, ‘*Bleu 1*’) crewed ‘BAZEILLE’,

## F

### **1: M24 CHAFFEE, 2e PELOTON, 2e ESCADRON, 1er RÉGIMENT DE CHASSEURS À CHEVAL; OPERATION MOUETTE, TONKIN, 24 OCTOBER 1953**

With the distinctive regimental insignia of 1er RCC on the turret sides, this M24 named ‘METZ’ is finished in the standard US olive drab of American-supplied AFVs. ‘METZ’ was commanded by Lt Michel Henry, and the numeral ‘5’ denotes the platoon leader’s tank of 2e Peloton. The registration number – French *tricolor*, ‘IC’ (signifying Indochina), ‘94113’ – is displayed on the turret rear and on the lower front hull plate, which also carries a bridge classification plate: a black ‘18’ on a yellow disc, indicating the tank’s weight in tons. Operation *Mouette* (15 October–6/7 November) was a major French offensive out of the southern defences of the Red River Delta to fix and destroy Viet Minh Division 320. The operation involved airborne assaults, seven *Groupes Mobile*, *Dinassaut* riverine units and armour support from 1er RCC. On 24 October the tanks of 2e Escadron fought a fierce action against elements of Div 320 near Lai Cac, where 180 Viet Minh were killed and 20 captured in a single day.

### **2: M5A1 STUART, 4e PELOTON, 3e ESCADRON/5e RÉGIMENT DE CUIRASSIERS, GROUPE MOBILE 100; PK15, ROUTE COLONIALE 19, 24 JUNE 1954**

The tanks of ‘III/5e Cuir’ were ancient but re-engined M5A1s. The 4e Peloton, commanded by Lt Goldstein, comprised three M5A1 tanks, two M8 HMC Howitzer Motor Carriages and two M3 half-tracks. Vehicle names began with the letter ‘D’ – the platoon leader’s tank was ‘DROUOT II’, the others ‘D’ARC II’ and ‘DE SAXE’; the M8 HMCs were ‘DUROC’ and ‘DON QUICHOTTE’, and the half-tracks ‘DAGOBERT’ and ‘DAMOCLES’. The tank ‘D’ARC II’ was commanded by Staff Sgt Leopold de Temmermann; like the others, it was abandoned and burned after the unit fought a determined action at Pointe Kilométrique 15 when 4e Peloton saved (temporarily) from annihilation two companies of the *Régiment de Corée*, battle-hardened veterans of the French battalion that fought with UN forces in Korea. Along the hull sides are the registration number, tank name and the insignia of the ‘Royal-Pologne’. The registration number 16207 is repeated on the glacis plate.





In mid-February 1954 the Chaffees of 3e Esc de M/1er RCC were camouflaged to break up their visual outlines against the predominant earth colours of the Dien Bien Phu *cuvette*, which was honeycombed with diggings. At *Point d'Appui Isabelle*, 'AUERSTAEDT' – commanded by Lt Henri Préaud, with the callsign 'Green One' – was adorned with brown and yellow stripes over the olive drab base colour. Using both scrounged paint and mud mixed to a paste, no two crews applied the same scheme, but the vehicle names were left visible. (Author's collection)

'DOUAUMONT' and 'MULHOUSE'; Red platoon (Staff Sgt Guntz, 'Rouge 1') had 'ETTLINGEN', 'POSEN' and 'SMOLENSK'. All the camp's strongpoints were given female names, in alphabetical order; the most distant was 'Isabelle', 5km south of the main centre, to which Lt Henri Préaud's Green Platoon was allocated, with 'AUERSTAEDT' ('Vert 1'), 'RATISBONNE' and 'NEUMACH'. The squadron's initial strength was 67 all ranks, of whom 32 were Vietnamese. After a preliminary period of running-in and final adjustments, carried out under cover of the morning mist or '*crachin*' to avoid revealing their numbers, the tanks conducted patrols along the 11-mile-by-3 mile valley to familiarize themselves with the terrain. When not in use the Bisons were concealed in sandbagged revetments incorporating dugouts for crews, ammunition and fuel.

The Bisons first saw combat on 1 February during an action north-west of 'Gabrielle', the most distant strongpoint to the north-west, and the next day they practised with 8e BPC (*Bataillon Parachutistes de Choc*) the reinforcement of 'Béatrice', out to the north-east. The Viet Minh artillery now began periodic harassing and ranging fires, and the tanks undertook numerous offensive patrols in conjunction with paratroopers to the slopes of the surrounding hills. Attempts to locate the VM gun positions that eluded French spotter aircraft failed, and Lt Préaud recalled this as an impossible task: 'We were never able to pinpoint the exact location of their artillery ... What's more, they had dug tunnels into the mountainsides so the cannons could be completely concealed. They were impossible to spot. We never did locate them, let alone destroy them.' The tanks were also tied into the overall plan for night-time artillery fires.

The noose of three Viet Minh divisions gathered around Dien Bien Phu by Gen Giap had already taught the garrison the impossibility of offensive sorties by the afternoon of 13 March 1954, when a heavy and sustained artillery bombardment struck the camp. Giap's two-dozen well-concealed 105mm howitzers smashed carefully plotted targets all over the valley, and that night the isolated strongpoint 'Béatrice' was overrun by wave after wave of Viet Minh infantry. 'Gabrielle' fell 36 hours later; a counter-attack by tanks and paratroopers failed to relieve the Algerian garrison, but did extricate survivors. The airstrip was closed by VM artillery fire on 29 March, and thereafter parachute drops were the only way to get men and supplies into the shrinking perimeter.

The loss of the two northern strongpoints considerably reduced the tanks' field of action, but they still provided the shock element in many night-time





counter-attacks up the eastern hills, lit by air-dropped parachute flares, and they inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. The squadron, whether in the field or in its static positions, was constantly subjected to artillery bombardment. In spite of the revetments maintenance was very difficult, and replenishing with ammunition was often only possible by placing the tank over a trench and passing the rounds up through the floor escape hatch.

Replacements were vital, as Capt Hervouët and Blue platoon commander WO Carette were both wounded while Red platoon commander Staff Sgt Guntz was killed. Of a total of 23 men who commanded tanks during the battle, four were killed and 15 wounded (four, including Yves Hervouët, would later die in captivity). In April, Capt Hervouët led the squadron in action with both arms wounded after suffering a second injury, when his right elbow was hit by the recoil of the 75mm gun. The renowned medical surgeon hero of Dien Bien Phu Paul Grauwin stated: 'I believe I knew all the tank men, from the captain to the trooper. Even trying very hard, I cannot remember one, who was not bandaged, in splints, or in plaster ...'

A total of 36 volunteer replacements, some of whom had no jump training, were parachuted in by night during the course of the siege. One of these was 2nd Lt André Mengelle, who recalled: 'I could see the Viet Minh artillery and mortar fire bursting on the camp as I landed. It was right out of Dante's "Inferno". Then in the darkness I heard the noise of the tanks with their Cadillac engines. What a welcome sound! I immediately headed in their direction.'

With the tanks acting in a fire-support role, ammunition consumption was high. During the battle each tank fired on average 1,500 shells – some

A plume of fire and smoke rises above the Dien Bien Phu *centre de resistance* from a burning fuel dump on 17 March 1954, four days after the start of the battle proper. In the foreground is the *poste de commandement* of Col Christian de Castries, and beyond are the Chaffee revetments housing 'POSEN', 'SMOLENSK' and 'ETTLINGEN' of *Peloton Rouge*, commanded by Sgt Ney after Staff Sgt Guntz was killed during the counter-attack to 'Gabrielle' on 15 March. The 17th was a relatively quiet day as the Viet Minh replenished their stocks of artillery ammunition, while the French evacuated their wounded by Dakota and helicopter and buried their dead. During the second half of March the Viet Minh concentrated on extending their approach trenches; although fighting continued astride the road down to 'Isabelle', major assaults only resumed on 30/31 March. (Author's collection)

three times the recommended life of an M6 75mm gun barrel. In a typical engagement, between 60 and 100 rounds were fired by each tank, but the M24 carried a basic load of 48 rounds. Extra ammunition was carried on the trackguards and rear decks as well as on the turret floor and in the co-driver's position. This reduced the fighting crew to four, so the drivers alternated their tasks, with one sleeping while the other undertook maintenance to the tank. Firing so many rounds in such a short time caused problems with the recoil system. Supplies of the specialized oil for the recuperator cylinders were soon exhausted, so the crews resorted to using the olive oil out of sardine cans from K-ration packs. These were taken from anyone who had them, willing or unwilling, but the cans and fish were handed back once the oil had been drained.

Préaud recalls:

Inside the tanks we were relatively safe but the real problem was when we had to replenish the tanks with ammunition or fuel since the crew then had to do these tasks outside the armoured protection of the tanks and that was when we suffered the majority of our casualties. It got so bad that we dug deep trenches at night and then placed our reserve ammunition in the bottom. The trenches were narrow enough that we were able to straddle them with the tanks so we were able to pass tank rounds up through the escape hatch in the floor of the tank and avoid the worst of the enemy shelling. However, refuelling the tanks from five-gallon jerry cans remained a major problem to the end. In my platoon I suffered more casualties during refuelling and replenishing outside the tanks than during the battle inside them.

Similarly, for the crews thirst was a critical problem, as Préaud recalls:

As the battle intensified we were making between two and three sorties a day in support of the infantry and to repel Viet Minh attacks. Despite extensive battle damage the tanks continued to perform admirably although there were problems with the gun recoil system on account of the high number of rounds fired. Since there were none of the special oils available to replenish the guns' recuperators we were obliged to use the olive oil from the sardine cans in the combat rations – nobody was allowed to consume the oil during meals but to save it for the tanks. It was the men rather than the tanks that were suffering most and the worst aspect was the thirst. The only water we had was from the Nam Yum river but it had been contaminated by the Viet Minh with rotting carcasses of water buffalo. We didn't have enough fuel to boil the water to sterilize it so the lack of water got worse and worse. Anyway many of the troops, particularly the legionnaires, relied on Vinogel to make the water palatable – Vinogel was a jellied concentrate of *vin rouge* that when mixed with water formed a revolting substitute for wine. Morale only really dipped

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**M24 CHAFFEES 'AUERSTAEDT' & 'CONTI'; 3e ESCADRON DE MARCHE/1er RÉGIMENT DE CHASSEURS À CHEVAL; DIEN BIEN PHU, 28 MARCH 1954**

Lieutenant Henri Préaud and Capt Yves Hervouët confer in their tanks 'AUERSTAEDT' and 'CONTI' during the assault against Viet Minh anti-aircraft positions at Bon Ong Pet and Ban Ban west of the camp on 28 March 1954, when the squadron's *pelotons Bleu & Vert* supported the paras of 8e and 6e BPC respectively. The M24s of 'Green platoon' ('AUERSTAEDT', 'RATISBONNE' and 'NEUMACH') came up from their position in the southern strongpoint 'Isabelle' by about 1000hrs, in time to help repulse an enemy counter-attack on 6e BPC.



One of the perennial problems for armour units in Indochina was the tendency of higher command to employ them in 'penny packets' or even as single tanks, as here. With its crew's bunker in the background, an M24 Chaffee guards a crossroads overlooking the Day River near Phu Ly in the southern Red River Delta in June 1954. On 28 June, Col Vanuxem's masterly fighting retreat, Operation *Auvergne*, will withdraw French forces from the southern Delta into an enclave around Hanoi and Haiphong in preparation for leaving Tonkin. The sand-coloured beret of the crewman is the cotton so-called '*gurkha*' type, worn by cavalry units pulled to the right in British style, usually with a locally made white-metal regimental badge above the left eye. (Bettmann/Getty Images)



when consignments of Vinogel dropped by parachute fell behind enemy lines. After firing a large number of rounds in combat the fumes inside the turret made the thirst even worse. As the tank commander my throat was so dry that I was often unable to give orders over the radio. At times we resorted to the most basic means to slake our thirst when a helmet liner was passed around the five-man tank crew and each urinated into it. We then added a sachet of Nescafe granulated coffee to the bitter cocktail before we tried to ease our thirst.

Postscript Henri Préaud continues: 'In the midst of that awful battle I vowed that if I survived I would produce my own wine and now I have 20 hectares of vines here in the heart of Provence and that is what you are drinking today but I still recall how terrible Vinogel was.'

During the 57-day siege most of the tanks suffered more or less severe damage from bazooka, RCL and artillery fire. 'BAZEILLE', penetrated twice, was abandoned on strongpoint Eliane 2 on the night of 31 March/ 1 April. Several other tanks, including 'DOUAUMONT', 'ETTLINGEN', 'POSEN', 'RATISBONNE' and 'SMOLENSK' were also hit; 'MULHOUSE' was struck by hollow-charge projectiles three times, and after a 105mm hit the turret had to be patched by welding on a mortar baseplate. Battle damage caused distortion of the turret rings that impeded or prevented traverse, and therefore the ability to lay the guns accurately. By 7 May three tanks' main guns were out of action for this reason, though the machine guns still allowed their use as 'blockhouses'.

The olive drab base colour of the squadron's tanks was roughly camouflaged in mid-February whatever paint was available, mostly red-brown, but this was heavily augmented with streaks or blotches of the ochre earth of the valley mixed with petrol; no two tanks looked the same. Beside the tank names, left clear between the ad hoc streaks of camouflage, the only markings carried were the registration number on the lower hull front and turret rear, 'AUERSTAEDT' being IC-94266 and 'RATISBONNE' and 'NEUMACH' -67 and -68 respectively. 'AUERSTAEDT' was the only tank to survive the entire battle without serious damage, and on the evening of 7 May it was destroyed at 'Isabelle' by its crew. The engine was drained of oil and run at high revs until it seized, the main armament was incapacitated with incendiary grenades, while the ammunition and small arms were thrown into the Nam Youm River. (During a visit in

November 1993, Gen Préaud discovered the hulk where he had left it; it was later moved to the main battlefield museum.)

From the tactical point of view, Capt Hervouët's gallant squadron played a crucial part in the defence of Dien Bien Phu. Because of their small numbers and their distribution between two widely separated positions it was only ever possible to employ more than six tanks together on one occasion. Nevertheless, in the determination of its attacks, the accuracy of its fire support, and the risks taken in assisting the infantry, the squadron's outstanding conduct was in the highest traditions of the cavalry. Their courage, and the grievous suffering of their wounded, were to no purpose. Dien Bien Phu was overwhelmed on 7 May, and that evening the crews disabled their tanks as thoroughly as they could. In all, 15 crewmen were killed or disappeared, and virtually all the rest were wounded, four seriously enough that the Viet Minh allowed their evacuation. Among the very few soldiers of the garrison to escape across country were a total of nine tankers, the most senior of them bearing a resonant name: Staff Sgt Fernand Ney reached safety on 3 June, after trekking 125 miles.

## THE FINAL BATTLES

Although the fall of Dien Bien Phu cost the French Union forces less than 5 per cent of their total manpower, the shock – like that of the Tet Offensive 14 years later – proved fatal. The French people were weary of '*la sale guerre*'; the Paris government fell, and its successors attended the peace conference at Geneva determined to negotiate a settlement at any price. In the meantime, fighting continued. On 28 June the new C-in-C, Gen Ely, launched Operation *Auvergne* – the abandonment of the southern Red River Delta, to concentrate forces around Hanoi and Haiphong. During a carefully prepared and conducted 'collapsing bag' retreat with air and artillery cover, armoured and motorized groups gave an excellent account of themselves, and on 3 July at Phu Ly they shattered six VM regular battalions.

Further south, assets had been stripped to reinforce Tonkin. In Annam, the mobile defence of the whole Central Highlands plateau now rested on two brigades, Groupes Mobiles 42 and 100. Colonel Barrou's GM 100 had a good reputation and some first-class units, including the two-battalion Régiment de Corée, veterans of the Korean

Scoured to bare metal by years of blistering sun and monsoon rains, an M8 HMC lies forlornly by the roadside of RC 19 in the Central Highlands at the height of America's Vietnam War in 1969, some 15 years after the destruction of Groupe Mobile 100 by VM Regts 108 and 803 on 24–27 June 1954. Tragically, the US armed forces failed to learn the lessons of the French experience, and were condemned to make many of the same mistakes during their war in South-East Asia. (Author's collection)



War; the mainly Khmer BM/43e RIC; and 3e Esc/5e Régiment de Cuirassiers, with M5A1s. Since its arrival in the Central Highlands in mid-December 1953, GM 100 had covered almost 2,000 miles through enemy-dominated territory, continually harassed by forces outnumbering it 5 to 1. On 24–27 June, while moving to link up with GM 42 on RC 19 in heavily overgrown country between An Khe and Pleiku, the brigade was blocked, driven off the road, and almost destroyed in repeated ambushes. Casualties were reckoned as about 35 per cent in men and 85 per cent in vehicles, including all the armour, and 100 per cent in heavy equipment.

The fate of GM 100 was to cast a long shadow, for it greatly influenced American military thinking on the use of armour in Vietnam. To many casual observers it seemed to prove the impossibility of armoured operations in jungle warfare; in fact, of course, GM 100 was not an armoured unit at all, but was composed of truck-mounted infantry with only one armoured squadron in support. Confined to movement on roads, it was vulnerable to ambushes that gradually but inexorably whittled it away. Nevertheless, its destruction generated among the US Army considerable prejudice against using armour in South-East Asia, and this persisted for many years.

On 15 July the remainder of 1e RCC joined the GERD in the Son Tay area, staying in action until the 27 July ceasefire agreed under the Geneva Accords signed on 20 July 1954. Vietnam was partitioned along the 17th Parallel, and on 9 October the last French troops left Hanoi. By an awful irony, the last tank to leave the city bore the name ‘ALGÉRIE’ – where, for the next eight years, the French Army was to be mired in yet another futile, bloody war.

## FRENCH ARMOUR UNITS IN INDOCHINA 1945–54

*Note:* After the partition of Vietnam in October 1954 some units moved from Tonkin and northern Annam to the new Republic of (South) Vietnam, and the last French troops did not leave that country until April 1956.

- *Groupement de Marche de la 2ème Division Blindée*, including the *1ère Cie de March du 501ème RCC* but with volunteers from all three tank battalions of the *2ème DB*, as well as from the *7ème Esc du 1er RMSM*. The unit arrived in Saigon on 10 September 1945 and was disbanded 16 November 1946.
- *Commando Blindé du Cambodge*. Based in Phnom Penh. Using various equipment including ex-Japanese armour and British vehicles. Later attached to the *5ème Régiment de Cuirassiers* as its *8ème Escadron* in September 1946.
- *9ème Régiment de Dragons*. Arrived in Saigon in October 1945. Became *GUALBEO* in January 1946 *Groupement d’Unités d’Armes Lourdes de la Brigade d’Extrême Orient*. Equipped mainly with British vehicles (Universal Carriers and Humber scout cars *et al.*). Disbanded July 1956.
- *Escadron Autonome de Reconnaissance*. Recce unit of the *Brigade d’Extrême Orient*. Arrived in Saigon in February 1946. Fully equipped with British vehicles (Universal Carriers and Humber scout cars).

- *Bataillon Porté du Groupement Blindé du Haut Tonkin*. Mixed armour/infantry unit. Formed October 1946 and disbanded April 1947 with remaining elements composing the *5ème Escadron du RICM*.
- *Groupe d'Escadrons de Marche de l'Arme Blindée*. Created January 1947 with volunteers from North Africa. Lack of equipment resulted in deployment as infantry. Consequently disbanded in March 1947 and personnel dispersed to various cavalry units.
- *Escadron Lourd de Réparation*. Specific maintenance unit attached to *1er RCh* from January 1947 and then to RICM in January 1951.
- *Régiment de Marche de Spahis d'Extrême Orient*. Arrived in Saigon in February 1947. Equipped mainly with M8 armoured cars. Became *2ème Régiment de Spahis Marocain* in May 1947. Repatriated 30 March 1955.
- *1er Régiment de Hussards Parachutistes* with one company incorporated in the *2ème Bataillon du 1er Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes*.
- *1er Régiment de Chasseurs*. Arrived in Saigon January 1946; repatriated and disbanded 1955.
- *5ème Régiment de Cuirassiers 'Royal-Pologne'*. Arrived 2 February 1946. Organized on the model of British recce unit using Coventry armoured cars, Humber scout cars and initially ex-Japanese tanks before issue of US equipment. Repatriated at the end of the conflict.
- *4ème Régiment de Dragons Portés*. Arrived in March 1947. Unit specifically using armoured trains and riverboats. Disbanded in June 1954.
- *8ème Régiment de Spahis Algériens*. Arrived 18 April 1950. Disbanded at the end of the conflict.
- *2ème Régiment de Spahis Marocains*. Formed on 1 December 1947 from the *Régiment de Marche de Spahis d'Extrême Orient* formerly with *Groupement Massu*. Transferred to Morocco in 1955.
- *5ème Régiment de Spahis Marocains*. Arrived as GESM or *Groupe d'Escadrons de Spahis Marocains* on 28 September 1949. Became *5ème RSM* in January 1950, with two riverboat platoons detached. Disbanded January 1955 with remaining personnel moved to the *2ème RSM*.
- *6ème Régiment de Spahis Marocains*. Arrived in 18 February 1949. Repatriated August 1955.
- *1er Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie*. Arrived 4 January 1947. Transferred to Tunisia from November 1955–January 1956.
- *Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc*. Arrived in Saigon 4 November 1945. Transferred to Algeria in May 1955.
- *Régiment Blindé Colonial d'Extrême Orient*. Formed November 1950. Disbanded February 1955 with remaining personnel transferred to RICM.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

In Osprey house style, French unit titles in this text have English capitalization, e.g. *1er Régiment de Chasseurs à Cheval* rather than ... *à cheval*. Such titles and other French administrative terms are italicized on first mention but not thereafter.

French ranks are generally Anglicized in this text. A cavalry corporal was a *brigadier*, but there is no British or US equivalent to the next senior rank of *brigadier-chef*. The ranks of cavalry sergeant and staff-sergeant were *maréchal des logis* and *maréchal des logis chef* respectively; the equivalents of the British warrant officer class II and class I were *adjudant* and *adjudant chef*. The titles of majors' ranks varied according to appointments; a major in a cavalry line command was a *chef d'escadrons*.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This New Vanguard volume draws heavily on the account *Le 1er Régiment de Chasseurs à Cheval en Indochine* (L'Arme Blindée Cavalerie – Revue Historique des Armées Paris 1984) by Colonel Robert d'Alançon, who commanded the regiment in 1953–54, and is duly acknowledged.

I am immensely grateful to General André Mengelle and General Henri Préaud for the graphic accounts of their experiences at the battle of Dien Bien Phu: suffice to say these were imparted during excellent luncheons at their respective homes in the south of France. Colonel Michel Henry ABC, formerly of 1er Régiment de Chasseurs à Cheval, provided much important information, again over memorable meals at restaurants in Paris and his home in Normandy.

For the section on the 1er Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie, the author has drawn on the researches of Martin Windrow, and on *Kepi Blanc* magazine *passim*. Osprey's *Men-at-Arms 322, The French Indochina War 1946–54* by Martin Windrow (Oxford, 1998), is an essential introduction to the political background, opposing forces and complex course of the war. His magisterial work *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam* (Wiedenfeld & Nicolson; London, 2004) is an outstanding account of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, but set in the context of the events and armies of the war as a whole.

My sincere thanks to Colonel Thomas Seignon ABC, of the French Army's tank museum, the Musée des Blindés at Saumur. The author wishes to express his gratitude to the office of the Chef d'État Major de l'Inspection de l'Arme Blindée et Cavalerie for providing much of the material for this book.

Finally, this book would never have seen the light of day without the stalwart efforts of M.P. Robinson, who diligently translated numerous French documents over many months.

## ABBREVIATIONS & FRENCH TERMS USED IN THE TEXT

ABC	<i>Arme Blindée Cavalerie</i> (Armoured & Cavalry Arm)	RCC	<i>Régiment de Chasseurs à Cheval</i> (Light Cavalry Regiment), also <i>Régiment de Chars de Combat</i> (Combat Tank Regiment)
BM	<i>Bataillon de Marche</i> (task-organized expeditionary battalion, operating independently of its parent unit)	RDP	<i>Régiment de Dragons Portés</i> (Motorized Infantry Regiment)
BPC	<i>Bataillon de Parachutistes Coloniaux</i> , also ... <i>de Choc</i> (8e BPC)	REC	<i>Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie</i> (Foreign Legion Cavalry Regiment)
CEFEO	<i>Corps Expéditionnaire Français d'Extrême-Orient</i> (French Far East Expeditionary Corps)	<i>régiment</i>	cavalry regiment (Brit), squadron (US)
DBLE	<i>Demi-Brigade de la Légion Étrangère, 13e</i> (Foreign Legion Half-Brigade – an infantry regiment, so-named to commemorate its World War II legacy)	REI	<i>Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie</i> (Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment)
<i>escadron</i>	cavalry squadron (Brit), troop (US)	RICM	<i>Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc</i> (Morocco Colonial Infantry Regiment – mechanized)
GEA	<i>Groupe d'Escadrons Amphibie</i> (group of amphibious squadrons)	RMSM	<i>Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains</i> (Moroccan Cavalry Expeditionary Regiment)
GER	<i>Groupe d'Escadrons de Reconnaissance</i> (group of reconnaissance squadrons)	RSM	<i>Régiment de Spahis Marocains</i> (Moroccan Cavalry Regiment)
GM	<i>Groupe Mobile</i> (motorized infantry brigade group)	RP	<i>Route Provinciale</i> (secondary road)
<i>peloton</i>	cavalry troop (Brit), platoon (US)	SGB	<i>Sous-Groupement Blindé</i> (armoured sub-group)
<i>porté</i>	lit. 'carried' – motorized infantry (e.g. see RDP)	VM	Viet Minh (for simplicity, used in this text for both the political movement and its People's Army)
RBCEO	<i>Régiment Blindé Colonial d'Extrême-Orient</i> (Far East Colonial Armoured Regiment)		
RC	<i>Route Coloniale</i> (main road), also <i>Régiment de Cuirassiers</i> (Cuirassier Regiment)		