

Opinion

Dien Bien Phu

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Most Americans of this generation have scarcely heard of Dien Bien Phu; or, the significance such a location played in 1954! I've never set foot on that real estate of Northwestern Vietnam; but, I am aware of the battle launched there against the French from March to May of that Year. Somewhere along this calendar, French Indo-China ceased to be an operating venue – as they were overrun by an exceptional number of Vietcong.

At the time, I was a member of Fleet Air Service Squadron Ten, on the Island of Guam and, as an E-5, ran the Paint Shop for the Unit. And as strange as it sounds, I painted some of the Aircraft involved in that battle. I will not endeavor in the summary of events of that hour; but, such was the emanation of horrors of Vietnam.

An old Navy friend from 1949, landed in Guam with a trio of vintage airplanes. He was Flight Engineer of the three B-17 Bombers. I will not attempt to explain the equation, except to say that we did a lot of things back then, that would be puzzling at this interval... i.e., A Navy Warrior with Army airplanes.

WE reminisced about "ole times;" and, I questioned his destination. The answer came back, "Dien Bien Phu!"

I had never heard of the place. Following brief conversation, I learned that my task would be to paint out all American Identification on the planes... a job that would normally require a good many hours. And, "many hours" that I did not have; for he would be departing with the multi-manned pilots and crew in less than twelve hours.

I also realized that such a paint job would not last even through the first flight. But such is common with "pains of War!"

Upon consultation, we decided to use special equipment! With special paint nozzles, a hundred feet of air hose and a hundred pounds of pressure, my team of three embarked on "the unorthodox feature... throwing a three foot pattern."

B-17s are not large aircraft by today's standards; but, even so, this job was unthinkable. In some four hours we completed all three planes! Uuugh!

Very early the next morning, the Team was airborne and headed west to parts unknown!

To this hour... Seventy-Two Years Later... I've yet to hear what happened! Two things I learned from other sources – the French lost a presence in Southeast Asia; and, One of the Settlements in Dien Bien Phu was named "CLAUDINE" ... name of my future wife!



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