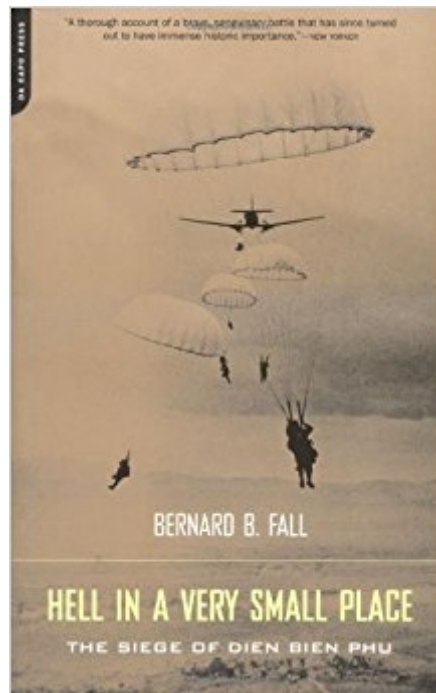


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Hell In A Very Small Place: The Siege Of Dien Bien Phu



Synopsis

The 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu ranks with Stalingrad and Tet for what it ended (imperial ambitions), what it foretold (American involvement), and what it symbolized: A guerrilla force of Viet Minh destroyed a technologically superior French army, convincing the Viet Minh that similar tactics might prevail in battle with the U.S.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A thorough account of a brave, sanguinary battle that has since turned out to have immense historic importance." -- The New Yorker

Bernard B. Fall was forty when he was killed in South Vietnam in 1967. The author of the classic Vietnam account, *Street Without Joy*, he wrote for the New York Times and the Washington Post.

Bernard Fall was the most knowledgeable author of that place and time. His background as a teenaged French resistance fighter during WW II, followed with a doctorate degree and a career in teaching and journalism made him the most qualified 'embedded reporter' of his generation. Most journalists like Cronkite wanted photo ops and controversy or blood and guts stories for the News at 6. Fall saw a nation tearing itself apart and wanted to help America really understand how it might contribute to a workable outcome. Like Ernie Pyle of WW II, he lived in the boonies with soldiers and understood a combat soldier's life. More than that, he had been in Vietnam since the 1950s and had developed a passion for understanding the people, personalities and politics of Southeast Asia. As

a result he wrote a great number of books which should have been mandatory reading at CG&S and the US Army War College by 1964 instead of talking doctrinal issues, Field Manuals and listening to the 'guest sleepers'. In any case, Fall did a great job replaying the French debacle and Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu. It is a classic story of military hubris and should be found in the home library of all career military officers and NCOs. More importantly we see the beginnings of American support for the French in Indochina and a growing fear of all things politically Red without a clue of understanding about the oppositional leadership. If you like Fall, then 'Street Without Joy' is a must read as is 'The Two Vietnams'. Fall died in 1967 while covering an operation with the US Marines after hitting a landmine.

The men of the French garrison of Dien Bien Phu most likely didn't expect to become a huge geopolitical metaphor, but they did. In losing their position in that valley to the surrounding Viet-Minh soldier, they signaled both the twilight of French (and western) colonialism and the stoking of fears of the dreaded 'Domino Effect' for the inheritors of the new colonialism. Unfortunately for 53,000 American soldiers, sailors, and airmen, the lessons of this battle were not internalized in time, and the French mistakes were redone under a different flag. Bernard Fall, a soldier and a scholar, details the day by day actions in the garrison for the reader in this book. The first part of the book is slow, as we see the building of the fortress and the slow build up on the surrounding hills from the other side. The Viet-Minh lines encircled the French until it was a noose taking the air out of the men. The book doesn't pick up until the details of the last desperate weeks of the battle are detailed, but the slower parts illustrate the quiet desperation that overtook the situation: boredom punctuated by panic.

Fall's writes the siege of DienBienPhu from ground level of the defenders. The reader lives the siege with the Foreign Legionnaires, the regular troops, the assortment of other services pressed into service at the end. It is a tough read going day by day through the ordeal of the battle. It should be read in conjunction with "The Last Valley," by Martin Windrow. Whereas Fall takes the reader through the siege in tactical detail from the defender point of view criticizing French strategy and praising Vietnamese strategy, Windrow points out the Vietnamese mistakes, weaknesses and shortages. Nonetheless, Fall's book is important for an understanding of the siege and is well worth reading. It is said to have been required reading for any Almerican to assignment to Vietnam.

While chatting about military history with a former manager who had attained a certain rank within

the military I was introduced to this book. Having a broad interest in Vietnam in general I quickly placed my order and am glad to report that this really is a great military history book. I had feared that the 'angle' of this work would be too, well, staff college fodder in its demeanour for me to properly take in but I was quite happily proven wrong on that score. In essence my feelings regarding this book can be summed up as follows;# Mr Fall obviously had access to a great wad of documents and really pored over them. While there is was the potential pitfall of him being too close in time to the events portrayed to put them in context in my estimation his very closeness in time and space has allowed him to invest his work with a great atmosphere and to speak to interview people while their memories were still fresh.# The book is a bit of a brick but it has to be said that the mountain of detail in the work does appear to flow quite easily. You don't have to have been to staff college or be a closet weapons geek to understand what is going on. But a word of warning - I would not make this my first military history book ever. It helps if you have some concept of warfare and the wars in Vietnam during the 50's, 60's and 70's in particular.# While the outcome is known from the outset of the book the author has still succeeded in creating a sense of suspense and his portrayal of the action is quite gripping and there is plenty of praise for the heroism of both sides sprinkled throughout the pages.# My last point would be to praise how the author has created a sense of tragedy. The pitfalls of the French actions are shown fully and the reader finds themselves wondering inwardly how on earth the battle was ever allowed to take place in any event. Not to mention the waste of many very brave men on both sides.All up this is not the breeziest war book I've ever read. There are undoubtedly plenty of books focussed more on quick payoff action sequences and at the end of the day it also comes down to what particular period of military history you are interested in but for me this is perhaps the book that has felt the most complete to me in that it gave me a sense that I was getting the full story and it's encapsulation of so many rear echelon aspects of the battle as well as gripping flurries of action gave it pretty much perfect pacing.

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