

History in situ: The Battlefield Today

“Tho' much is taken, much abides...”¹

As noted in Chapter One above, many historians of Dien Bien Phu have faced the same difficulty in framing their analysis of the battle that General Navarre faced in his initial planning of it: they had not visited the location and had been tied to maps of varying degrees of accuracy, and aerial photographs of variable height and thus detail, and therefore had to base their assessments on ground that they had never seen.

Ted Morgan's aphorism that "...a map is to the territory as a name is to the person..."² is very true: it may provide a descriptor but it does not necessarily describe what you need to know. A person's name may, or may not, give clues as to their sex, race, nationality, religion or even age if it is archaic or topical enough, but it will not tell you anything about their height, weight, length and colour of hair, colour of eyes, or the clothes that they are wearing. Thus, whilst a name might be useful for calling out to an individual in a crowd, it is of no use in picking out that individual from the crowd if they cannot be called. Likewise, a map may provide specific detail, and allow a skilled map-reader to deduce many other things about the ground covered, but it is only as good as the detail provided and how this is represented. Like Morgan's map: "... you don't sweat from the heat, or smell the jungle, or get mired in a swamp, or find yourself blinded by fog."³ And on the map of a battlefield it is often difficult, if not impossible, to determine the military crest of a hill, as opposed to the topographical crest; "dead ground" that falls between marked contours; uneven steepness that can make some approaches inaccessible whilst other approaches between the same contours are easy; the going underneath, and how this is affected by rain and drainage; and the small piece of vegetation that blocks a critical line of sight at a decisive moment.

Maps can also mislead because of the way that they are drawn or used. A simple decision on the contour intervals to be represented can transform the perceived shape of feature. For example, even Vietnamese works portray Hill A1 as an attenuated oval rather than the much sharper near rectangular wedge that it clearly is on the ground, a representation that has been repeated for over

¹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1842) *Ulysses* (65)

² Morgan (2010) p.191

³ *Ibid.*

40 years.⁴ A lack of detail can be just as misleading as the wrong detail. As Boylan and Olivier note regarding many representations of the French defences at Dien Bien Phu:

“Unfortunately, the maps found in most books depict ... [the defences] ... as vague, amoeba-like blobs that are meaningless since there were no trenches or barbed wire that followed these outlines. Sometime the amoebas contain symbols that represent individual strongpoints, but these generally do not depict the shapes properly and are often inaccurately placed. The published maps are poor because the French military maps on which they were based exhibit the same shortcomings.”⁵

Contemporaneous aerial photographs provide a useful corrective to map images, but they suffer from two drawbacks: firstly, they flatten contours almost completely; secondly a photograph is, literally, a “snapshot” valid for a set moment, but not necessarily a good representation of what went before or after. They are, however, particularly useful for determining the location of man-made features such as roads, bridges, gun positions and trench lines on a set date.

Walking the ground of a battlefield can do much put the descriptions gleaned from maps, photographs and first-hand accounts into perspective. I have been fortunate to have been able to visit the battlefield five times for a total of 20 days, between August 2002 and May 2019, and my visits have given me the opportunity to explore the geography of the site and understand how the positions interrelate with each other on the ground in a way that no examination of a map, can ever do. It would be foolish to claim that these visits give me infallible insights into what happened sixty-five years ago for two main reasons. Firstly, I am not a soldier and may not see with the eyes of a soldier, although I was particularly fortunate to assist in a “field ride” at Dien Bien Phu, over Tet in 2017, with officers and NCOs of 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment, and colonels from American and French parachute regiments. The views and insights of these professional soldiers have been especially useful to me in forming some of the judgements that appear in this work. Secondly, obviously time, nature and man has changed much of the battlefield: a remote valley that was home to 13,000 people in November 1953 is now a thriving provincial capital with ten times that population.⁶ Much of the battlefield has disappeared under new roads, housing and

⁴ Giap (2007) p.108, an earlier version of which was used by Fall (1967)(a) p.385

⁵ Boylan & Olivier (2018) p48.

⁶ Logan (2006)(b) p6

infrastructure such as the airport and river management scheme. Hillsides have been cut back and contours flattened for construction. And what man has changed of the battlefield by way of pouring concrete, Mother Nature has equalled by growing back trees and vegetation that had been removed in 1954. Whilst key parts of the battlefield have been preserved an important caveat is that the preservation of these parts reflects their condition when preservation started, not their condition in 1954, and at several locations attempts have been made to re-create the layout in 1954, that may, or may not be, totally authentic. Additionally, access routes today may be very different to those in 1954 thus giving false impressions.

Many of the battlefield sites were originally marked by simple white and red triangular concrete stele inscribed “Moc Di Tich Lich Su” [Historical Site] followed by the Vietnamese military designation for the location. Following a study commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Information in 2000⁷ most of these were replaced and major refurbishments made, including the addition of simulated trenches and the installation of commemorative markers and footpaths that were made for the 50th Anniversary of the battle in 2004, and this refurbishment and preservation work has continued since then. Thirteen of the battlefield artefacts, (tanks, guns and de Castries’ bunker,) that had been exposed to the elements were glass-roofed over in 2012 and 2013. This work has been conducted both to enhance the preservation of the site and artefacts and to improve its tourist potential. In 2017 380,000 people visited the sites and that number is increasing.⁸

What follows is an attempt to give a brief guide to finding and interpreting what abides of the battlefield of Dien Bien Phu, described in, roughly, the chronological order of the battle.

Him Lam (Beatrice)

Access

On foot there are two accesses.

- (a) Follow QL 279 (Giap Street,) east out of the town centre and take the second left after the Muong Thanh Hotel. About 400m down the track you come to ponds on your left and the

⁷ Kogan (2006)(a) pp.188-189.

⁸ Conservation of Dien Bien Phu battlefield relics associated with tourism (2018) at <https://tech2.org/vietnam/conservation-of-dien-bien-phu-battlefield-relics-associated-with-tourism/> accessed on 27-DEC-2018

track makes a 90⁰ right hand turn. Follow the road and after about 60m it makes another 90⁰ left hand turn. Don't follow the road but from the bend you will see a path leading off to your right: follow this, it leads up a wooded slope that brings you to the top of B2, although you will have to negotiate the overgrown barbed wire entanglements that were created when the site was restored. This approach is very near that taken by the PAVN's battalion 11 and it gives you a good feel for the steepness of the slope.

- (b) A much easier approach is to take the third left after the Muong Thanh Hotel. The road peters out after about 100m and a short, unmade path will bring you to the concrete path that links the restored positions.

By vehicle take the fourth left after the Muong Thanh Hotel, Tran Van Tho Street, in between the Public Security Building and the City Government Office. Take the next left and at the end of the street you will come to a car park, from whence a concrete footpath leads you into the positions.

The Ground

More restoration has been done on the Him Lam position than on any of the other sites, with extensive shotcreted trench lines and sand bags on B1, 2 and 4, including a re-creation of the bunker that Phan Dinh Giot blocked with his body on B1, which is now the basis of a small shrine. Strips of barbed wire entanglements have been placed on the western slopes of B2 and opposite Giot's bunker on B1. The positions are linked by concrete paths and steps that allow easy access. Although a footpath leads up B3 no re-creation of defences has been made on that hill. The re-created trenches, wire barriers and bunkers by no means completely represent the defences in 1954, but they do give a better impression of what they would have been like than on any other site. The trees and foliage on B1, 2 and 4 were cut back between 2002 and 2008 but are now growing back in places.

The military crest of B2 is near the topographical crest on the northern side, giving clear fields of fire that partially explains the difficulty battalion 11 had in attacking it. On the southern and western side the military crest merges into B4. The military crest of B1 is less consistent, providing more dead ground. To the north the approaches from the Nam Rom River that battalions 11 and 428 attacked across have disappeared under buildings and woodland. From the top of B2 where

two monuments now stand there is a clear sight-line to D1 (Dominique 2) about 1,500m away to the south-west, giving a good impression of the remoteness of the Him Lam position.

Doc Lap (Gabrielle)

Access

Drive north on QL12 about 1500m north of the end of the runway and there is a five-way junction. Doc Lap is the hill to the right of this junction. Take the smallest road, at the 3 o'clock position for about 100m and this leads to a stepped, concrete path that leads from the south edge of the hill to the monument near where the French command post was sited.

Ground

The hill is covered by small bushes, rather than trees, so it can be difficult to get around but you can see over most of the terrain. Because of the foliage few fighting positions can be picked out and none have been re-created. In 1945 the main access to the position was by a switchback track carved into the western face. The two sides of the hill on the north-south axis are quite steep, so the military crest tends to follow these edges, and the steepness may explain the choice of the PAVN's two main axis of attack, from the north-east and south-east. Having said that the western slope is probably more sheer than it was 1954 having been cut back to allow for the widening of the road and the buildings that line it.

Just as in 1954 Doc Lap dominates the flight path into the airfield so, if possible, time a visit to coincide with flight arrivals or departures to give a full impression of the importance of siting AAA near the hill. Looking north, east and west it is clear that although Doc Lap was dominated by the hills in those directions much of the ground in between that the PAVN attacked across was quite flat and clear. Looking south the remoteness of Doc Lap becomes clear. It takes binoculars to pick out the monument on top of Hill D1 and the town's television broadcast tower is a good marker for Him Lam about 3km away, (the tower is located on a hill directly across Giap Street from Him Lam.)

Ban Keo (Anne-Marie/ Huguette 6 and 7)

Access

From QL 12 take the signposted road to the south of the water channel west into the Ban Keo/ Ban Noon village area. Follow the road until it forks and take the southern fork. About 50m further on there is one of the old Moc Di Tich Lich Su markers and a path leading off to the north that will bring you to the location of AM 2. Having visited this site continue down the main village road to a T junction and fork south. You come to the edge of the village and a dead straight track across the paddy fields brings you Position 106/AM 4 (later H7) about 250m further south.

Ground

Both positions are instructive. The Ban Keo position demonstrates the problem with using only map-based analysis as the village lies roughly on an east-west axis low ridge line and although the contour differences are small, and are not shown on most maps, the surrounding terrain is so flat any rise will obstruct sight lines. Thus AM 1 and AM 2 on the northern side of the ridge did not have clear sight lines to AM 3 and 4 in the paddy fields to the south side of the ridge. The situation is undoubtedly worse now than in 1954 as buildings and trees further obscure views but standing on AM2 does give an impression of isolation. Thus, the troops of BT 3 here would have seen clearly the destruction of Doc Lap to their north-east but, although they could see the hills of Dominique in the far distance, they could not see their much closer supports in AM 3 and 4 and the Huguettes. This feeling of isolation may well have been a significant contributing factor in the defection of the two northern posts.

Position 106 is the last remaining Huguette position that there is access to, the others have either disappeared or are now located inside the airport security fence and thus inaccessible. The airstrip itself is now further to the east and much longer than the strip in 1954, although the line of the drainage ditch that ran along the eastern side of the old strip can still be seen on Google Earth and it can be picked out on the ground further to the south. Position 106 was an almost Vauban type fortification with a central position and three triangular bastions. It is difficult to be precise but I believe that the remains of the position today are its centre and part of the eastern arm. What is clear from this position is how “billiard table” flat the terrain of the Huguettes was and how difficult it must have been for the PAVN to attack, and the French to counterattack, on. (The French

had their two major counterattack failures on this sort of ground, albeit further north on 15th March and further south on 23rd April.) It is meaningless to talk about a military crest on 106 because the whole position is only a few metres above the surrounding paddy but that small height advantage gave considerable defensive advantages in the flat plain.

E1 (Dominique 1)

Access

From the main roundabout take Giap Street north and take the first left into Le Tong Tan Street. After about 100m a marker on the left indicates the steps leading up to centre of the position.

Ground

The hill is now completely covered by trees but it is worth trying to hack through to the west beyond the monument at the top of the steps because there are the remnants of fighting positions in this area, (they could be the original French or later PAVN positions because they are fragmentary and it is difficult to determine their precise alignment;) and because the views offered across the Nam Rom show how important E1 was as both as a site for direct fire PAVN artillery and as an observation post, overlooking as it does the French positions at Opera, the southern Huguettes, and Dominique 4 on the other side of the river. But, again, remember that the runway is rather closer now than it was in 1954.

Because of the river training scheme water backs up from the weir downstream and the Nam Rom below E1 is much wider than it was in 1954 when the water is high, although the narrower original course of the stream can be divined if the water is low. The trees that grow on the hill now make it difficult to determine where the military crest is, but it seems to have quite steep initial slopes that ease off towards the topographical crest. Aerial photographs show that the track in the little valley below the eastern side is much narrower than the present road so the slope was probably not as steep then as it is today. Even so, the resulting dead ground would have been more of a problem for the French to cover against an assault from the east rather than for the PAVN using the hill to observe the French positions in the distance to the west. A trench led from the north western side of the position down to the Nam Rom

D1 (Dominique2)

Access

From the Giap Street roundabout either take the 313 steps⁹, or you can drive to the top via the access road at first left south of the steps. This road climbs anti-clockwise to the top, arriving at the western top of the hill and a large carpark. A small entrance fee is charged for both the steps and the road.

Ground

The top of D1 was levelled in 2004 to build the Victory Monument, (and prior to that the city's television station and broadcast tower had been located there,) so nothing remains of the French position which formed a "Y" shape with the leg of the Y parallel to RC 41B with the main access was via a jeep track leading up from that road to the north east arm of the Y. Two antennae trenches extended the arms of the Y downhill and Boylen and Olivier conclude that these were to provide flanking fire into dead ground that could not be covered from the summit.¹⁰ Since the top of the hill has been flattened it is impossible to establish where the military crest was. However, the general topography remains, and because the land is generally rising to the east the eastern and south-eastern slopes of D1 are less steep and shorter than the slopes on the north and west faces.

D3 (Dominique 5)

Although the hill that D3 stood on can still be clearly seen it lies inside the garden of grounds of the Provincial Government Offices and has not been accessed. The "Honeycomb Hill" with its incised southern face is probably the slight elevation upon which the Office building now sits.

⁹ Others state 350. I have climbed the steps twice but cannot vouch for the number because checking my heartbeats became more important than counting the steps! I was given the number by a much younger, and very much fitter, paratroop officer who was not aware of the significance of 313: if he is correct it matches the date of the start of the battle.

¹⁰ Boylen and Olivier (2018) p.137

C1 and C2 (Eliane 1 and Eliane 4)

Access

Take Phan Dinh Giot Street. The road is “Y” shaped with both arms joining Giap Street. The junction of the Y is the “saddle” between C1 (Eliane1) and C2 (Eliane 4). At this junction steps lead up to a monument on C1 on the left side of the road and to a monument on C2 on the right.

Ground

Both hills are heavily wooded and because of this it is very difficult to trace the topography. In particular, the crest of C1 and the “flagstaff” position cannot be determined but the overall dimensions of C1 and the general slope of the land can be easily divined by walking around its base, which is encircled by Phan Dinh Giot Street and Tran Can Street, although there are many buildings and the initial slopes have been cut back and steepened to facilitate them.

C2 is not quite as heavily vegetated and fighting positions can be found behind the monument, although again it is not possible to trace the crest. It is also possible to see across to A1 (Eliane 2) and thus appreciate how the C1, C2 and A1 positions made an interlocking system with the defence of any one depending greatly upon possession of the other two, with all three within easy coverage of the integral support weapons of the units holding them.¹¹

A1 (Eliane 2)

Access

Located on Giap Street at the junction of Hoang Cong Chat Street and a small fee is charged for admission. There is a small museum behind the cashier’s booth and the area next to Giap Street houses a collection of vehicle relics of the battle that were originally housed in the Museum on the other side of the road and will, presumably, be returned there. The eastern end of the hill from which the PAVN attacked can also be accessed be from Hoang Van Thai Street.

¹¹ I am grateful to Lt Col. Duncan Mann, OC 2nd Bn. Parachute Regiment for this insight.

Ground

Given its location, right on the junction on which also sit the main cemetery and the museum, A1 was the main preservation and commemoration site of the battle before the work was conducted on D1 and Him Lam in the early 2000s, and it is still the best preserved of the sites. After 2002 many, but by no means all, of the trench lines and fighting positions were re-created using shotcreted trenches. The “Mannequin Knoll” bunker is marked at the bottom of the hill but in 1954 this would have been a more extensive defensive system probably extending to the present vehicle sheds. The northern face of the position appears to have been cut back and, presumably, steepened a bit when Hoang Cong Chat Street was built. Other than that, the topography remains very much the same as it was in 1954 and the top of the position, but not its sides, is kept relatively clear of trees and vegetation so sight-lines can be easily appreciated. Particularly relevant are the clear sightlines down the “Champs Elysees” from the military crest, and the steepness of the southern face of the position dominating the flat ground further south, (this latter feature is best appreciated from the cemetery the other side of Hoang Van Thai Street,) and the northern face covered by C1 and C2. This combination makes it clear why the PAVN’s assaults were channelled as they were into the killing ground on the Champs Elysees.

The eastward facing military crest of the hill is marked by a re-created transverse trench. To the west of this the bunker that caused the PAVN so many problems remains, although it seems that much of the surrounding and covering soil has been removed so access is now much easier, and it is hard to appreciate the difficulties that the PAVN encountered trying to find the entrance to the bunker.¹² The mine crater on the Champs Elysees has been concreted to prevent backfill and erosion and further down the slope the mine entrance is marked so you can have an appreciation of the length of the mine tunnel.

From the top of the hill the relationships between A1 to Hill F (“Mont Fictif”) to its north-east, and Doi Chay [Burnt Hill] (“Mont Chauve”) to its south-east on the other side of Hoang Van Thai Street can be appreciated. They are dominated by the peak of A1 but provide dead ground behind which an attack can be prepared and are higher than the lower slopes of A1. Bear in mind that both

¹² Interview No.23 Nguyen Hai Bang, Hanoi 3-OCT-2017

are now heavily wooded so they appear higher than they are. In 1954 both were cleared, and Hill F was also dominated by C1 and C2.

Other Positions East of the River

As can be seen from the age of the buildings, the flat-lands between the river and Giap Street were amongst the first to be developed as Dien Bien Phu expanded from a collection of villages into a provincial capital, and the other positions east of the river have disappeared under this development. Approximate locations can be determined for some sites.

A3, (Eliane 3) was located where the museum is now. (Interestingly the letter designation given to A3 by the PAVN implies a hill position which was not evident when I first visited in 2002. It may be that a slight rise on the site was levelled when the old museum was built. The new, circular museum on the same site has a slope raised around its base, but this an architectural feature constructed in 2014, not the natural lay of the land.)

Positions 210-505 (Dominique 3) would have been located along the line of Nguyen Chi Thanh Street (which runs parallel to and west of Giap Street,) one to two blocks north of Be Van Dan Street, behind the post office. Nothing remains of “the dead arm of the Nam Yum” behind this position.

Position 507 (Eliane 12) was located north of Be Van Dan Street next to the river. A monument to Colonel Piroth sits in a small bog on the site.

The Bailey Bridge and the River

Access

Neither the Thanh Binh Bridge that takes QL 12 over the Nam Rom, (usually referred to as Nam Yum or Nam Youm in older accounts,) and the much newer A1 Bridge to the south, existed in 1954, and the river was crossed by a Bailey bridge and a wooden bridge. The Bailey bridge at the end of Be Van Dan Street is still in use for pedestrians and bikes.

Ground

Although it has been refurbished, and has had parts replaced, and was placed on new concrete abutments when the river control work was carried out, the Bailey Bridge is still in the same location and alignment as in 1954. The remains of a Maxon quad .50 calibre mount, (without the guns,) is located at the western end of the bridge opposite a commemorative plaque on the storming of the bridge.

The river control work has changed the configuration and width of the river considerably. The river north of the bridge is now much wider and that to the south somewhat wider. In 1954 the river width was, (unsurprisingly,) the width of the Bailey bridge and about the same both north at south of the bridge. The wooden bridge, of which nothing remains today, was located just below the location of the present-day weir after which the river made a sharp 180⁰ meander to the west which was undercut by an ox-bow lake on the eastern side, that has now disappeared.

The concrete revetments for the river control work have covered most of the so-called “cliffs of the Nam Youm.” I saw these before the river was controlled, and “cliffs” is certainly a misnomer. They were simply the steep banks formed where the meanders of the river cut into the soft alluvial soil. They were about three to five metres high, as attested by the height of the present-day revetments. They were certainly a complete barrier to vehicles but not to men on foot, and whilst sheer in some places they could be climbed in many places without the use of hand-holds.

Claudine and the Positions West of the River

Access

The new, wide Nguyen Huu Tho Road runs parallel to the river, just inland of which runs a smaller road which follows the line of the main French thoroughfare through Claudine.

Ground

North of the Bailey bridge new roads, the extended and re-aligned airport runway within its restricted area, and buildings cover the locations of the Vietnamese designated “200” series positions, (Epervier.) The turning apron at the southern end of the present runway is in almost the same position as the dispersal bay revetments for the single-engined French aircraft were in 1954.

There is a tank and, appropriately, a display of French aircraft wreckage, just off Di Thanh Luong Street next to the bridge. By taking the first right on Di Thanh Luong you can skirt the airport restricted area and enter the paddy fields and determine the line of the drainage ditch that ran to the east of the runway in 1954. How easy this is will depend on the time of year and if the paddies are wet or dry. A tank marks the location of Position 206 (H1) although nothing remains of the position itself.

South of the bridge the old, small road dissects the location of the French hospital and hospital extension, of which nothing remains, and brings you to de Castries' bunker for which a small admission fee is charged. The bunker itself has been well preserved with the approach trenches concreted, and it has been glass-roofed over. To the west and north of the bunker the artillery positions are still open. Several artillery relics have been lined up under cover and one placed in a concrete fire position. To the west of the artillery site urban development covers the "300" series positions (Francois, Lily and Claudine.)

Just south of de Castries' bunker on the east side of the old road is another tank. This location used to stand above the river bank, so it gives you another appreciation of how the river control work has altered the course of the river.

About 200m further south on the eastern side of the old road, just before you come to the left-hand slip road that will bring you back to Nguyen Huu Tho Road and the A1 bridge lies the French memorial.

Hong Cum (Isabel)

Access

Drive south on QL 279 5.75km from A1. On the way you will pass through the hamlet of Noong Nghai in Thanh Xuong Commune where there is a monument to the bombing of civilians in April 1954. The monument for Hong Cum is on the western side of the road next to a brick factory. This is still west of the river so it is actually Strongpoint Weime. To cross the river continue about 1.8km south on QL 279 and take the left turn in Thanh Ban Phu that will lead you to Ban On. Before you get to that village take the first right after the bridge that will take you north again into the location of Isabel itself.

Ground

Nothing remains of the Hong Cum position itself but the ground, on both sides of the river is very instructive. It is just as flat as the positions next to the airfield but much further from the hills that offered support for the PAVN, and from the main position that offered support for the French. Both the remoteness and the completely flat terrain emphasize how difficult it must have been for both sides to seek cover and attack on this ground.

Sites on QL 279 (RC 41Bis)

Access

Driving north out of Dien Bien Phu along QL 279 there are three sites of interest as follows:

105mm Artillery Battlefield Monument

Located in Thanh Minh on the right-hand side of the road about 4.75 road km beyond Him Lam between H4 and H7 of KM68, this site corresponds to the location given for the four M2A1 105mm howitzers of Company 806, Battalion 954, Regiment 45.¹³ The guns here were located approximately 3,600m from Him Lam, 5,100m from D1 and 4,500m from Doc Lap. Thus, all the main French positions at Dien Bien Phu were within comfortable range for the guns with their only restriction being the arc of fire allowed by the emplacements. Nguyen Duc Tinh was a Quan Thong observer for this battery and called down fire on Him Lam, E1, and D1, and after the fall of E1 he directed fire from there on the central positions until the end of the battle.¹⁴

The site consists of two positions, in one of which there are two recently restored (re-created?) 105mm gun positions, including the guns. The restoration has been conducted to allow for easy access and to show the means of construction rather than showing the earth filling over the log construction and camouflage that would have been present during the battle. The site is instructive because it dispels the myth of the PAVN field artillery firing over open sights. Whilst the 75mm artillery usually used direct fire this was not the case for most of the 105mm batteries. None of

¹³ QDND (1982) p.360

¹⁴ Interview No 22. Nguyen Duc Tinh. Hanoi 1-OCT-2017

Company 806's targets are clearly visible from this location. All their fire was indirect, called down and adjusted by Quan Thong.

Monument to the Gun Pullers

Continue north on QL279 up the valley of the Nam Rom. The scenery is spectacular and will give you an appreciation of the difficulties that the PAVN's engineers and dan cong had to overcome in opening-up RC 41Bis and keeping it open. After another 6.5 road km you come to this relatively new monument located on the mountainside opposite side of the river to the road. There is an information centre at the carpark with a display room. A small entrance fee is charged and then you proceed via footpath, bridge and steps to the monument, which is further than you think because it is larger than you think: the sculpted guns and pullers being larger than life.

Although not exactly a historical site the Monument serves its purpose well by commemorating the herculean effort made in January 1954 to pull the 105mm guns of Regiment 45 from near here,¹⁵ which was the road-head for trucks on RC 41Bis, to their firing positions, six to eight km away. They had to be pulled out again only a week later when the attack was cancelled.

Muong Phang Historical Relic Site (Giap's Headquarters)

Continue along QL 279 and after 4km you come to KM 62 where the valley widens. This was the location of one of the PAVN's major logistics and hospital concentrations for the battle and a small monument on the right hand side of the road commemorates these efforts. After another 5.5km you come to Ban Na Tau and here leave the main road and turn south onto the recently upgraded QL 279Bis. Follow this road as it cuts a switchback path over the watershed for 9.5km to Ban Phang where there is a monument to the People, the Party and the Army working together to win independence. A further 850m brings you to the entrance of Giap's Headquarters. This is about 15km from Him Lam as the crow flies.

(An alternative route from QL 279 to Ban Phang via the newer 15km long road DT141 that branches off about 1 km after the Gun Pullers Monument at KM61 and then follows the line of the

¹⁵ Interview No 22. Nguyen Duc Tinh. Hanoi 1-OCT-2017

reservoir cutting over two watersheds. It is considerably shorter than the main road route but the road is older in places and more tortuous as it climbs into and out of the valleys.)

At the carpark there is an information centre and tourist stalls. A small admission price is charged. Steps lead up to a paved, undulating footpath that takes you through the woods and brings you to the Muong Phang Headquarters complex. In dry weather a flatter access path leads from the end of the road beyond the entrance to the car park, but this is unpaved and crosses the small stream near the complex by a bamboo step ladder, so can be difficult when wet. The complex consists of various preserved and re-created huts and conference rooms, and an underground tunnel complex leading through a small hill with the huts occupied by Giap at one end, and his chief-of-staff Hoang Van Thai at the other. The natural vegetation remains on the site which gives you an appreciation of how difficult it would have been to spot from the air.