

Vietnam's forgotten war—Operation Masterdom, British occupation of Vietnam 1945-46

When there is talk of a war in Vietnam, many people might picture US Army "Huey" helicopters flying low over dense jungle, accompanied by the tones of *Fortunate Son* by Clarence Clearwater Revival. Alternatively, perhaps one may think of the French trying to grasp their old colony from the grip of the Viet Minh and their new communist regime. However, little is mentioned about the very beginning of the first war in French Indochina where British Army units attempted to usurp Ho Chi Minh and his government from their power right after the end of the Second World War. The outcome of this short confrontation and its consequences have had broad effects on not only the geopolitics of that region of Asia, but also on the geopolitics of the rest of the world. It affected France and the USA and their attempts to subdue Vietnam, it affected the Cold War and also the end of colonialism more widely. As we rushed to aid our wartime ally's colonial needs did Britain also ruin its relations with the Vietnamese? This is not only a rarely talked about period in British Army history but also a unique one in many ways. It was one of the last times that the Indian soldiers fought as part of a British Army abroad and it was the last time that the wartime Imperial Japanese army saw combat. Nor that this occupation almost ended in success for the allies. But what was the situation in this region at the time, why did the British Army get involved and how effective were they?

Initially we must look west, to Europe and Potsdam where in July 1945 the leaders of the '*Big Three*' allied countries (Britain, USA and USSR) met with attendance from China and France. In this conference the leaders discussed how they were going to carve up the world when they were victors and also how to deal with the problem of the Japanese occupation of much of South East Asia.¹ French Indochina had a regime established by the Japanese which acted as a puppet state under Japan's control. At Potsdam, whilst none of the leaders considered that the war in the Pacific would be over as quickly as it proved to be, given the effectiveness of the atomic bomb was not considered, there was much discussion about post war arrangements.² A plan was devised for Chinese and SEAC* forces to administer the Japanese surrender in Indochina, having been split into north and south sectors along the 16th Parallel. It was agreed that the Chinese would occupy the northern part and SEAC supported by the French would occupy the southern part. Britain had many colonial interests in this area such as India, Burma and Malaya³ and therefore they wanted to maintain political stability in the region. In addition, France had insisted on SEAC assistance at Potsdam, reflecting its comparative military weakness in 1945.

*SEAC = South East Asia Command; A command based in South East Asia comprised solely of British Empire troops and commanders

1. T.O. Smith, *Vietnam and the Unravelling of Empire*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) pp32-56

2. T.O. Smith, *Vietnam and the Unravelling of Empire*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)pp32-56

3. <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/asia.htm>, 11/02/21

At this time the Chinese were part of the allied forces and under Kai Shek they had agreed to occupy the northern sector.

Next, I will discuss the forces and the leaders that were present in Vietnam during the occupation. The British Army units that were to be utilised for the occupation were part of SEAC and were to be drawn from the Fourteenth Army headed by General Slim. This was a large force of over 600,000 men that made up most of the SEAC. Approximately 87% of the Fourteenth Army were from pre-partition India*. These men were very well suited to the fighting style and environment in Indochina as most had been present in the Burma campaign. They were fondly spoken of by Vice-Admiral the Earl Mountbatten who said, "*No words of mine could adequately express the unfaltering loyalty and courage of these men*"¹. The fact that they were confident fighting in the hot and humid conditions of jungle warfare may explain why they were so much more effective and successful than the Free-French commandos that arrived later. More specifically to the occupation force units from the 20th Infantry Division (India) were used under the command of Major-General Douglas Gracey. This was a highly diverse formation that had been formed under Gracey in 1942. It had within it Indian regiments such as the 4th Battalion 3rd Madras Regiment; Nepalese regiments such as the 3rd Battalion 8th Gurkha Rifles; also, it had regiments from Britain, though they were in the minority, such as the 1st Battalion Northamptonshire regiment. They were highly decorated in battle having seen action in Burma and the division distinguished itself on the defence of the Imphal plain during the spring and early summer of 1944. The 20th Infantry Division was also supported by French troops from the 5^e Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale. These were French soldiers that had seen combat in Europe and internal security duty in Algeria. The difference, however, from these French troops to the British ones was that they were unused to fighting in a jungle environment. In terms of the men who led these armies, on the British side the head of the 20th Division was Major-General Douglas Gracey. Gracey was born in 1894 and after having passed out at Sandhurst he was commissioned into the British Indian army and served with a variety of different regiments all around the globe during the First World War including in France and the Middle East. He continued to serve in Asian theatres for the rest of his career which culminated in him being the commander in chief of the Pakistan army from 1948-51. A brief note on some of the other leaders, General Slim was known as the '*soldiers' soldier*'² and is perhaps best revered as having achieved a great victory over the Japanese in Burma. The French, under Gracey, were led by Philippe Leclerc who was a highly decorated French general that had escaped from German capture in

*The partition of British India in 1947 split the country into 2 independent states, India and Pakistan

1. <https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/remembrance/remembrance-events/vj-day/ww2-commonwealth-contribution/south-east-asia-command>, 11/02/21

2. <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/william-slim>, 11/02/21

the Second World War before joining De Gaulle and his fighting men in both Africa and Europe¹. He and his men were placed under the control of Gracey. On the other side Ho Chi Min was the leader of the Viet Minh having been leading the independence movement from 1941 onwards.

So, how did the events occur during the actual occupation of Indochina. Japan had announced its surrender on the 15th of August 1945 and at this time according to Gerald Prenderghast: *'Gracey and his men were ready to move in the first stage of the occupation, codenamed Operation Masterdom.'*² However, unfortunately there were several events that then occurred that were crucial not only on Operation Masterdom but also arguably set the ball rolling for many more of the events that were to occur later in the century. Firstly, and crucially was the 18-day period that it took from the Japanese announcement of surrender to the actual signing of the document in a symbolic ceremony on the USS Missouri. Although the British forces were ready to administer the surrender of the Japanese in Indochina, it was ordered that no such operation would begin until the surrender was official. The time that this took to occur allowed the Viet Minh to plan and initiate a revolution against the puppet state that existed in Indochina. Supported by OSS³ the Viet Minh proceeded to takeover Hanoi and therefore the government. As suspected by the revolutionary forces the Japanese offered no resistance.

Eventually, on the 6th September 1945 the advanced party of the British Army forces flew into Saigon to make ready for the main force's landing five days later. This preliminary force consisted of two companies of 1/1 Gurkha Rifles and two companies of 1/19 Hyderabad Regiment. According to Pranderghast: *'[They flew in] together with 80th Brigade** headquarters staff and a tactical headquarters. The Hyderabads took control of the airfield and the Gurkhas posted guards on what was to be Gracey's residence.'*⁴ Even after the landing of the main force on the 11th there still were not very many troops in Indochina, this being because the SEAC was spread thin across much of Asia performing peacekeeping and administering the Japanese surrender elsewhere. This initial British force of just over 1300 men was tasked with disarming in excess of 71000 Japanese soldiers and maintaining control over the city of Saigon^{***}. In actuality the number of British army troops were vastly inadequate for this task and when Gracey arrived on the 13th the situation that he arrived into was one of chaos. He was in fact picked up from the airfield by fully armed Japanese forces who politely

*The OSS was the wartime agency of the U.S. Federal government (1942-45) used to gather intelligence, many of its roles were later assumed by the CIA.

**80th Indian Infantry Brigade was a brigade of the WW2 Indian army assigned to the 20th Infantry division.

***The city formally known as Saigon is now called Ho Chi Minh city and is the most populous city in Vietnam

1. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacques-Philippe-Leclerc>, 11/02/21

2.G. Prenderghast, Britain and the wars in Vietnam: The Supply of Troops, Arms and Intelligence, 1945-1975 (Jefferson, NC, McFarland Publishing, 2015)p.14

3. <https://parallelnarratives.com/vietnam-vignette-the-oss-and-ho-chi-minh-1945/>, 12/02/21

4.G. Prenderghast, Britain and the wars in Vietnam: The Supply of Troops, Arms and Intelligence, 1945-1975 (Jefferson, NC, McFarland Publishing, 2015)p.15

led him to his headquarters. Crucially, Gracey elected, on orders from Mountbatten, to ignore the greeting party of Viet Minh officials who had come out to greet him, thereby refusing to recognise their albeit precarious authority in the region.

What happened next was under the jurisdiction of Gracey, but some would argue was also just as chaotic. The British troops had for example circulated leaflets that stated that those who performed attacks on Europeans would be arrested and shot. General Slim himself paid a visit to Gracey in Saigon on the 16th September and appreciated the fact that there were not enough troops on the ground for the British to maintain control in southern Indochina. Therefore, he agreed to send more troops from the 20th Division (India), which would not arrive for another month and even though Gracey regarded the Viet Minh as a problem that would be for the French in the future, he still needed to assert control in the south as Kai Shek had done in the north. What this forced Gracey to do was not only strange and unique but also may have led to many of the problems that the region faced later in the century. Gracey first set about freeing French prisoners of war and directing them to captured weapons dumps to arm themselves. These POWs, full of resentment as to their captivity went about beating the Vietnamese citizens. Furthermore, due to the lack of troops Gracey was also forced to utilise Japanese troops that had retained their arms. The Viet Minh then decided to claim the right to govern the entire of Vietnam under the name of 'The Independent Government of Vietnam'. In Gracey's eyes, the only way to safely administer the surrender of the Japanese and organise the repatriation of the Japanese soldiers and the allied POWs was to take action against the Viet Minh and their government. There was subsequently a dialogue between Gracey and Mountbatten that included the French and SEAC command also which exposed divisions within SEAC. Many different approaches as to how to deal with the Viet Minh were suggested but it was difficult for all the parties involved to agree on the action that should be taken.

The exchange started on the 21st of September 1945 when Gracey wrote to Mountbatten stating that he was in charge of all the British, French and Japanese troops and then outlined what he intended for criminals and saboteurs (i.e., non-compliant Viet Minh). These orders were as follows:

- *No demonstrations or processions would be permitted.*
- *No public meetings would take place.*
- *No arms were to be carried, except by authorized personnel.*

- *A curfew would be enforced in Saigon and Cholon between 21.30 and 5.30 hours.*¹

It was clear what Gracey intended with these orders - to quash any sense of revolution among the Viet Minh and their followers whilst also maintaining authority and control in the region's main population centres. Any person found breaking these orders or performing any other criminal activity would be shot. The dialogue is somewhat confusing at this point but with hindsight it is possible to see that both Gracey and Mountbatten and the SEAC were right in some respects. It was not possible for the British Army soldiers to maintain control outside of Saigon, so it is recognised as a shrewd decision by Gracey to employ the Japanese troops as a policing force to maintain order as the Viet Minh were very unlikely to fire upon their former allies and the people who were supplying most of their arms. However, the Viet Minh did not simply comply with the strict rules that had been put in place as the fervour for independence was strongly felt by many at that time. Therefore, what developed was a type of irregular warfare that would become characteristic in the country in the coming decades with some rioting but mostly resistance in the form of limited attacks on smaller parties of soldiers. One such example was when on the 24/25th of September a mob of Viet Minh abducted and brutally killed a large number of French and French Vietnamese, also one British soldier was killed in the subsequent counter attack. In Mountbatten's response to Gracey after this attack, he in fact criticised Gracey's decision to claim that the British were responsible for law and order in the region, particularly since he had not consulted SEAC. However, he recognised that Gracey was the *'man on the ground.'* and should therefore retain operational control. This rhetoric was emblematic of Mountbatten who came away from this period better off than Gracey by letting him take responsibility almost in full.

So, we can split the time that the British were in Indochina into three parts, the consolidation of power in the initial occupation, the way that the Viet Minh were countered and the handover to the French. Firstly, the consolidation, this was a relatively simple task due to the fact that the British soldiers displayed highly effective tactics. In the initial period that the British troops were in Indochina there were some attacks by Viet Minh on patrols. However, the Viet Minh suffered high casualties as the British soldiers, used to jungle warfare, were easily able to combat the Viet Minh who had no combat experience, particularly against a strong enemy.

To further complicate matters, in early October, Leclerc and his 30,000 French troops arrived in Indochina and were placed under Gracey's control. This was a time of relative peace in the region due to the fact that the Viet Minh thought that the British would administer the surrender

of the Japanese and then leave. Unfortunately, this was quickly brought to an end by an unprovoked attack on an engineering reconnaissance party at Ton Son Nhut airfield which killed four British troops and injured others. This attack among others, having started soon after the French arrival in Indochina, were justified by the Viet Minh as to inciting retaliation from the British since they claimed the British were simply a cover for a build-up of French troops designed to quash the sovereignty of the independent Vietnam that they desired. This increase in attacks and mob mentality in the areas under his jurisdiction meant that Gracey met with the Japanese Field-Marshal Terauchi to discuss increasing efficiency of his Japanese troops. Gracey's promised reinforcements from the 20th Division had still not arrived and Japanese troops were reluctant to fire upon the Viet Minh or protect French citizens. This meeting improved things greatly as Prenderghast states: *'Terauchi was genuinely angry at his men's behaviour and passed on stringent orders that improved the situation dramatically, ensuring the safety of French citizens and the security of vital installations from that time on.'* Although during this period Gracey suggested to SEAC that he remain with the British Army troops until all the Japanese were repatriated, it is clear to see that he was quickly realising that dealing with the emerging Viet Minh challenge was no simple matter and that he considered it a French problem that they could deal with once the British force had pulled out in early 1946.

With the arrival of thousands of French troops anxious to reassert control over Indochina and an increasingly assertive Viet Minh, Gracey faced the possibility of British Army units becoming embroiled in conflict. A war was the last thing that Mountbatten wanted and it looked like that was what might happen. The risk of such escalation was mitigated due to the way in which the British Army combined with Japanese troops through aggressive patrolling and combat. They managed to push the Viet Minh away from Saigon and became very close to defeating the force that the Americans failed to beat 20 years later but with a tenth of the troops. The way in which the British and Japanese force managed to effectively combat the Viet Minh was called GATEFORCE. After a violent month of attacks around Saigon with notable battles being at the Tan Son Nhut airfield on the 13th October where Viet Minh sappers and troops came within 275m of the control tower and an attack on a Japanese base at Phu Lam where 100 Vietnamese were killed. GATEFORCE was formed at the end of the month, named after Lt. Col. Gates of the 15/13th Frontier Force Rifles. This force consisted of Indian infantry and armoured units combined with a battalion of Japanese infantry. All of the men in the force were very experienced at fighting in the jungle (against each other in some cases) and therefore with every engagement that they had with the Viet Minh they always emerged victorious. This is

clear by the reported 40 casualties in total for Operation Masterdom of all the British, Japanese and French troops, very slight compared to the Viet Minh who suffered hundreds of men killed.

The policy of GATEFORCE was simple and brutal yet effective. The considerably large force set up a patrol base and upon finding Viet Minh troops they were told to use maximum force against them, disarm all Vietnamese and burn down any village that stood as opposition. This had the simple yet considerable effect on the Viet Minh who from then on understood that there was no safe place for them to conduct their operations from anywhere surrounding Saigon. It is considered by historians that if the British Army units had not pulled out in early 1946 the Viet Minh forces would have been completely wiped out and ceased to cause problems for the French and later the Americans.

The third and final section of Operation Masterdom was the handover of power to the French and the exit of British troops from Indochina. By January 1946 Gracey and his force had relative control over their sector of Indochina and there were enough French troops present to begin the handover of power. De Gaulle believed it was in France's best interests to regain control over their colony. This was because having just been liberated themselves they wanted to look strong again on the world stage. To add to this the Japanese and even the British troops were finding it hard to fight alongside the French who the Japanese described as '*scheme less*' and who Gracey spoke of as '*Leaving a pretty good trail of destruction behind them.*' At last, on the 30th November Gracey obtained the official surrender from Field Marshal Terauchi and then Leclerc and he met to plan the departure of British troops. The first British troops left between the 25th and 27th December and this was recognised by the Viet Minh who began preparing for large strikes on the British before they left. This was combatted by pre-emptive strikes which occurred in the early part of January. On the 25th January Gracey officially handed over power of the French forces to Leclerc and he himself left the country. That left only one company of 2/8 Punjab and 4/10 Gurkha Rifles along with a single machine gun company. All Japanese troops were due to be relieved by the French and the last British soldiers left Indochina on the 26th of March.

In conclusion, the events and causes of Operation Masterdom often get overlooked in the history of this turbulent region but it in fact had great effect on the later part of the century. Perhaps the Viet Minh could have been defeated by the British and Japanese had they had a few more months and therefore the wars in Vietnam might never have happened. But we have to consider the situation of General Gracey in really challenging circumstances.

Gracey was never expecting to fight a war in Indochina, only to accept the surrender of the Japanese. Moreover, being in control of Leclerc and his forces was a great pressure, Gracey lacked the public and military profile as compared to the hero of the Free-French that was Philippe Leclerc. Furthermore, despite the criticism of his decision making by SEAC during the occupation and the behaviour of the French troops Gracey's ability to command troops from three different nations with very different military traditions was no mean feat. This indicates that Gracey's demonstrated some superb leadership in challenging circumstances.

Bibliography:

T.O. Smith, *Vietnam and the Unravelling of Empire* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

G. Prenderghast, *Britain and the wars in Vietnam: The Supply of Troops, Arms and Intelligence, 1945-1975* (Jefferson, NC, McFarland Publishing, 2015)

R. Lewin, *Slim* (London, Leo Cooper Ltd., 1976)

D. Chandler and I. Beckett, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994)

A. Holcombe, "The Vietnamese Revolution, August 1945 to March 1946." In *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960*, 17-37. HONOLULU: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020.

R. Indurthy, and M. Haque. "THE KASHMIR CONFLICT: WHY IT DEFIES SOLUTION." *International Journal on World Peace* 27, no. 1 (2010): 9-44.

J. Springhall, "'Kicking out the Vietminh': How Britain Allowed France to Reoccupy South Indochina, 1945-46." *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 1 (2005): 115-30.

<https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/potsdam-conference>, 12/02/21

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-the-potsdam-conference-shaped-the-future-of-post-war-europe>, 13/02/21

<https://parallelnarratives.com/vietnam-vignette-the-oss-and-ho-chi-minh-1945/>, 12/02/21

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacques-Philippe-Leclerc>, 12/02/21

<https://www.forces.net/heritage/history/britain-vietnam-war>, 13/02/21

<https://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/asia.htm>, 11/02/21

<https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/remembrance/remembrance-events/vj-day/ww2-commonwealth-contribution/south-east-asia-command>, 12/02/21

<https://burmastarmemorial.org/archive/stories/1405858-20th-indian-infantry-division>, 13/02/21

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/5e_r%C3%A9giment_d%27infanterie_coloniale#Apr%C3%A8s_guerre, 10/02/21

<https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/william-slim>, 13/02/21

Final Word Count: 3454 (Excluding Bibliography and Footnotes)