



AN INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD FALL

The following is the text of a taped interview with Dr. Bernard Fall shortly before his death 12 February 1967. Dr. Fall was killed by a land mine while accompanying a Marine patrol 14 miles north of Hue. He was a professor of government at Howard University and the author of Street Without Joy, The Two Viet-Nams and Hell in a Very Small Place. The interviewer is Marine Sgt Roy Johnson of Combat Info Bureau, Da Nang.

Q. Dr. Fall, when did you arrive in Viet-Nam and why are you here?

A. I've been in this country for two months, making this my seventh trip to Viet-Nam since 1953. I'm here for a year's stay on leave of absence from my university on a Guggenheim Research Scholarship. I'm doing field research on the National Liberation Front—Viet Cong, as we call it.

Q. Will you tell us some of the places you've visited since your arrival?

A. Well, I'd promised Gen Greene before I left Washington that I would spend Christmas with the Marines and I spent Christmas up in Camp Carroll with the Third MarDiv. After that I was down with Army units in the south.

Q. Since your arrival in "I" Corps, Dr. Fall, have you visited any of the Combined Action Companies?

A. Yes. I visited with CAC-31 over at Marble Mountain.

Q. What did you think about them, sir?

A. That's an interesting experiment. I've seen it while the French were fighting here in Viet-Nam in 1953-54. This was done very often in Korea also. We had what was called KATUSAS—Korean and American Army Troops. You have Vietnamese and Americans working side by side in the same units. Usually this works out rather well. The Americans profit from the local experience of the Vietnamese—meaning the Vietnamese

know where the ambushes are, or they usually get the word fairly fast and vice versa. The Vietnamese profit from the American know-how, the military technology and the ability to get fire-power when needed.

Q. I understand that you have recently made a discovery about the first arrival of the Marine Corps in Viet-Nam.

A. That's a rather odd story. It's assumed the Marines got to Viet-Nam in 1965, but this isn't so at all. I was doing research for an article, and I found in some very musty, old, French books dating back to the 19th Century that the French Bishop had been liberated by American Marines in Viet-Nam, and I started checking this out with the Navy Department in Washington. It seems the old *USS Constitution* put into Da Nang, of all places, on May 10th—120 years ago—to take on water and fruit. A little Vietnamese boy walked up to the Marine on guard and handed him a note written in French which read: "Help, I'm a Catholic bishop imprisoned by the Vietnamese emperor. Any help you can offer would be very much appreciated, as they are going to put me to death." The CO of *Constitution* was Capt John "Mad Jack" Percival, US Navy. Capt Percival listened to nothing but his own good heart and landed his Marine Detachment off his ship. The Marines captured the Governor and Vice-Governor of Da

Nang and held them hostage until the bishop was at least assured of not being put to death in Hue, near by. The Vietnamese promised they wouldn't put the French Bishop to death, whereupon Capt Percival released the Vietnamese Governor and Vice-Governor of Da Nang and the Marines evacuated Da Nang 14 days later on May 14, 1845. So, in actual fact, the Marines got to Da Nang, not only as early as 122 years ago, but beat the French by about two years, since the French troops landed in Da Nang in 1847. So, interestingly enough, the American Marines have a rather long history in Da Nang, although very few people know about it. You can find records of it in the log of *USS Constitution* of the time and also other Navy documents.

Q. Sir, recently in the February 10th issue of Time magazine, an article was written that, in your new book, Hell in A Very Small Place, you blame the fall of Dienbienphu on a question of the then Senate minority leader, Lyndon B. Johnson. The article stated that you argued the battle would have been won and the current war avoided had Mr. Johnson not stopped to question who our allies would be. Would you care to comment on this?

A. You know, a weekly magazine always has a tendency of writing shorthand on something. Now I wrote a 544-page book and they tried to sum this up in something like four paragraphs. What indeed did happen is that, when the French leader siezed Dienbienphu, the French had requested American air power to destroy Communist artillery. Then, as now, air power can be used rather handily. It was pretty well known where the artillery batteries were dug in, and so the French requested a B-29 raid on the area. But the President, who then was Senate minority leader, correctly foresaw that involvement of that kind would, like in Korea, be followed by ground troops. He asked the Sec of State, Dulles, on April the 3d 1954: "Look, are we going to go this alone or are there going to be any allies with us?" The Secretary said, "Well, we simply don't have time to check on the allies." Senator Johnson said, "In other words we're going to pay 90 percent of the bills and fight 90 percent of the battles again like in Korea," for which there was apparently no good answer. So Dulles tried to get other allies lined up. It was obviously a hopeless cause. So the United States didn't get into the Indo-China War ten years earlier. Nobody could have saved the Indo-China War from becoming the mess it was. The French had made too many mistakes. But had Dienbienphu not fallen right in the middle of the Geneva Conference, which was taking place at Geneva with the Russians, the Chinese Communists and attendants of North Viet-Nam, etc, etc., it may have been, I say may, that South Viet-Nam would not have helped being as militarily inferior to North Viet-Nam as it did and North Viet-Nam would not have felt as cocky as eventually she did for having won over Dienbienphu, and perhaps built North and South Viet-Nam. By viewing each other on a more equal footing, this war could have been avoided. This actually is the gist of my theory on this. The gist of my book actually is an account of the battle of Dienbienphu. It was quite a rip-roaring battle which lasted 56 days. There were 17,000 French troops involved and 50,000 communist North Viet-namese troops under Gen Giap. Giap is still in command of the North Vietnamese forces.



Dr. Fall prepares for his last patrol.

Q. Dr. Fall, it is rumored that you are one of the few men who has interviewed Ho Chi Minh. Would you care to talk about that interview?

A. Yes, I was legally in North Viet-Nam in 1962 and interviewed Ho Chi Minh. I did a biography of Ho Chi Minh in my book, *The Two Viet-Nams*. It was quite interesting. I had lived in North Viet-Nam before the communists took over, so I had met him in what was formerly the French Governor's Palace. It's now the White House for North Viet-Nam. He heard that I had quizzed some of his old associates about his life and he said to me, "so you're the young man who wants to know all about my life.

"I'm an old man and would like to keep a few secrets until I'm dead." But afterwards he changed his mind and I got a note from him later on, giving me all the details that I had wanted from him anyway. In 1962 the Viet-Nam insurgency was still at a very low level—very few North Vietnamese involved. The guerrillas were listed at 15,000 in South Viet-Nam. I said, "Look, suppose the United States gets into this?" He said, "We licked the French in eight years. The Americans are strong and have a lot of power and so forth. It would take 10 years, but the Vietnamese will defeat them anyway." So that was his view of the war in 1962. By his schedule, we've still got five years to go one way or the other.

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