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FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1952–1954, INDOCHINA, VOLUME XIII, PART 1

751G.00/1–354: Telegram

The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the Department of State

SAIGON, January 3, 1954—9 a.m.

SECRET
PRIORITY

1151. Repeated information Paris 351, Hanoi unnumbered. Department pass Assistant Secretary Robertson and Admiral Radford at Pearl Harbor. I spoke with Navarre shortly after my return from Manila December 31. He expressed entire confidence in ultimate success of his military plan but admitted possibility of reverses in next weeks to come. He believed he could hold Dien Bien Phu which available intelligence indicates will be attacked by Viet Minh but admitted it was possible that Viet Minh might take it, remarking that Communist China was now furnishing 37 mm. ack-ack which could cause losses to French planes which hitherto have been able to bomb and strafe with impunity. Viet Minh now have been given tractors to move 105 cannon which could be moved up and placed on heights overlooking approach to Dien Bien

Phu. The 37 mm. ack-ack could hamper or prevent French planes from putting such batteries out of commission.

Navarre said loss of Dien Bien Phu or even as many as 10 battalions of his battle corps would not prevent his moving on to eventual victory. Loss of 10 battalions in war of this size was not in itself important. However, the effect in France of such losses and series of reverses which might occur and even extend over several weeks or longer without compensating victories would be serious and might even cause some deterioration in morale of Franco-Vietnamese forces.

The cutting, only temporarily he hoped, of land and water communications with Vientiane and introduction now of 37 mm. anti-aircraft guns on Viet Minh side made role and task of his aviation all-important and very difficult. He, therefore, needed more planes (B-26 light bombers), pilots and maintenance crews. He inquired whether 12 C-119s now on brief loan and flown by French pilots could be flown by Americans on purely logistic missions to non-battle areas, thus freeing French pilots for combat and transport tasks. His deputy General Bodet was studying these questions and would consult with us following day.

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Bodet saw General Trapnell, MAAG Chief, and me last night.

He said (a) he needed immediately 10 more B-26s to bring his two squadrons up to full strength and (b) later, if and when Paris furnished him additional pilots, an additional squadron of 25 B-26s; (c) he needed immediately and temporarily an American ground crew or crews to provide maintenance for two of his four C-47 transport squadrons which now must greatly increase operations and for one of his B-26 squadrons; (d) he would need additional mechanics later if he trained another squadron of B-26s; (e) he wanted American pilots to fly the 12 C-119s on supply tasks for a time in order to free French pilots for other missions and (f) infra-red photo equipment with American instructors for its use to spot heavily camouflaged gun emplacements, matériel depots and enemy troop and supply movements which take place only at night or under haze conditions.

He also asked for radar plane spotting equipment if small enough to use on his present planes and a small observation dirigible if latter could be delivered by plane to Dien Bien Phu.

General Trapnell agreed to recommend immediately all above items. As regards American pilots for temporary operation of C-119s, he would recommend CAT civilian pilots be furnished as they were last spring during first invasion of Laos until French pilots could be trained and sent. Trapnell assumes that CAT pilots would be readily available as they were last spring. If not, then Department and Defense would have to make policy decision whether American military pilots could be used on non-combat supply missions.

Trapnell leaves January 5 to consult with General Weyland C-in-C FEAF in Tokyo about continuing loan of C-119s and furnishing civilian pilots, ground crews and infra-red photo equipment requested.

HEATH

INDOCHINA

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- [Prelude to the Geneva Conference, January-April 1954: Continued deterioration of the French military position; the siege of Dien Bien Phu; the question of United States intervention; the search for united action](#) (Documents 491-801)

PERSONS

[Heath, Donald R.](#)

[Navarre, Général Henri Radford, Admiral Arthur W. Robertson, Walter](#)

[S. Trapnell, Major General Thomas J. H.](#)

ABBREVIATIONS & TERMS

[C-in-C, CINC](#)

[CATFEAFMAAG](#)

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