

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The French Army and Siam, 1893–1914

Amable Sablon du Corail

Translated by Michael Smithies

ABSTRACT—Concerning the Franco-Siamese crisis of 1893, the forcing of the mouth of the Chao Phraya River by French gunboats under Siamese fire is generally known, as well as the treaty of October 1893 that gave the left bank of the Mekong River to France. Little, however, has been written about the land operations between French and Siamese armies in the region of the Khone Falls, or about the occupation of Chanthaburi district up until 1905. Important for the history of Thailand, these latter episodes moreover illustrate French colonial doctrine very aptly in France's conquest and pacification of Tonkin. The French exported that doctrine everywhere in their empire—reliance on the use of native troops, integration of political and military action, and primacy accorded to civil administration. The present article examines how the governors-general of French Indochina perceived the rapid modernisation of Kingdom of Siam, as they buttressed France's farthest and richest colony.

The beginning of the dispute

On 26 October 1891, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexandre Ribot, claimed in the name of the Annamese Empire all the territories on the east of Mekong River (Tuck 1995: 96). While it was a declaration of principle addressed only to the Chamber of Deputies, it revealed to the world the desire of France to control the Mekong basin and to appropriate an access route to southern China. The explorations of Auguste Pavie had demonstrated the impossibility of turning the huge river into the Far Eastern Nile of the young French colony. Nonetheless, the French so strongly desired to believe in this mirage that they persuaded themselves that the hydrographic, political and economic realities of thousands of years could be overcome.

The Franco-Siamese dispute arose from the status of the Lao kingdoms established on both banks of the Mekong, linked to Siam by rather loose bonds of subjection. The French, not in a position to announce their imperialist ambitions, had to find both a juridical and moral basis for their expansionism in the Mekong region. They claimed that the Kingdom of Siam had usurped from the Annamese Empire and the Kingdom of Cambodia their rights over the regions located to the west of the Vietnamese cordillera. Auguste Pavie had had some trouble in gathering

sufficient proof to justify these claims. Among the reasons advanced were the inflexible nature of the Siamese administration, even though remote, concerning the Lao and the welcome the Lao had given to French explorers.

Pavie regretted that France had limited its claims to the left bank of the Mekong, thereby reducing the territorial integrity of the Lao kingdoms. The French government was concerned to sell to public opinion a simple theme that would mobilise support. Comparing what was to become Laos to Alsace and Lorraine (then occupied by Germany) and the Mekong to the Rhine, was an easy way out that aroused memories of the traumas of the 1870 Franco-German war.

The Siamese government reacted energetically to French pretensions and emphasised the long-standing nature of Siamese domination over the Lao kingdoms. The temporary commissions sent in the 1870s to the tributary Lao kingdoms became permanent posts from the end of the 1880s. In 1888, Pavie obtained the submission of Chinese rebels in north-west Tonkin and pushed back Siamese troops who had taken advantage of their presence to advance as far as Dien Bien Phu. In 1891 three half-brothers of the Siamese king became permanent representatives in the province of Champassak, Nongkhai and Nakhon Ratchasima (Tuck 1995: 83). During 1892 and 1893 a series of incidents occurred, which French diplomats exploited.¹ There was no further need to find old documents establishing the sovereignty of the Annamese Empire over the Lao kingdoms. All that mattered now was proof of the ill will of the Siamese. Their brutal and clumsy reactions to the growing influence of the French in Laos caused the French to reveal their hand. On 12 March 1893 Auguste Pavie, having become in the meantime the minister plenipotentiary of France in Bangkok, officially requested the cession, by the King of Siam, of the left bank of the Mekong. The King, ill advised by the Belgian jurist Rolin-Jaequemyns and imprudently supported by the British envoy Henry Jones, refused.

The government of Indochina had the Siamese posts on the eastern bank of the Mekong occupied in April 1893. The Siamese tried to retake them by force and besieged the fort of Khone in May 1893. They were evicted by the expeditionary column sent there, and which seized the stronghold of Don Som shortly after, in July 1893. Simultaneously, a modest naval demonstration of two gunboats at Bangkok degenerated when the Siamese forts located at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River fired on the French vessels on 14 July 1893. The gunboats forced the channel and anchored before the French consulate in Bangkok. On 20 July, the French government demanded the immediate recognition of the rights of the Annamese Empire over the left bank of the Mekong and the evacuation of this territory within one month. On 29 July 1893 King Chulalongkorn accepted the

¹ In August 1892, an agent of the Upper Laos Association, accused by the Siamese authorities of trafficking in opium, was peremptorily expelled from Houtène and his goods confiscated. The sick French travellers he was accommodating died shortly afterwards. This at least is what can be deduced from the account of Auguste Pavie (Pavie, 1919: 228), and the Siamese version repeated by P. Tuck.

ultimatum, a prelude to the annexation of Laos by French Indochina, confirmed by the treaty of 3 October 1893. The execution of the clauses in the ultimatum was guaranteed by the temporary occupation of the port of Chanthaburi.

The conflict on land

While the diplomatic repercussions of the Franco-Siamese crisis of 1893 are well known, the expeditions on land along the Mekong from April to July 1893 are mostly overlooked, in favour of the gunfire of 14 July 1893. But the expulsion of the Siamese from the left bank of the Mekong decided the conflict as much as the naval blockade ordered by the French government. The crushing defeat suffered by the feudal army of the King of Siam, in spite of up-to-date weaponry and far superior numbers than their adversaries, convinced the Siamese government of the urgent need for military reforms. The operations that took place around the Khone falls, although limited, were very typical of the armed diplomacy undertaken by Western powers to increase their colonial empires at little cost.

The Service historique de la Défense (SHD [Historical Service of the Defence Ministry]), the depository of the former ministries of war and the navy, has few archives on the conquest of Indochina. However, what have been kept are the detailed accounts of French officers commanding the expeditionary columns during the 1893 crisis, as well as a series of reports sent by the general commanding the troops in Indochina to the Ministry of War until the First World War, official regimental histories of the units sent to the Far East, and abundant administrative correspondence in which the problems arising from the defence of an Indochina isolated amidst declared enemies or Western rivals, become clear. The individual career files give some interesting profiles of French colonial officers among the protagonists of the 1893 crisis.

The French army in Indochina and pacification

When the Franco-Siamese crisis erupted in the spring of 1893, all the colony's resources were being used to pacify Tonkin. Disorder had persisted since the Franco-Chinese war of 1884–1885. Several governors followed each other in a few years, without any of them being able to put an end to the troubles. The colony's finances were in poor shape. In 1891, the nomination of Jean-Louis de Lanessan changed the situation. The measures he took right from the beginning resulted in huge improvements in the pacification programme, which was to be completed three years later. It is worth considering this further, for Tonkin was the laboratory of a new colonial strategy of which Gallieni and Lyautey were the most illustrious and most successful examples. Officers trained in these measures were to be found in April 1893 on the Mekong and at Chanthaburi.

The new colonial doctrine was based on the conviction that military action could not be uncoupled from the civilian administration. Both had to be placed under the responsibility of a single person who, according to the local context, could be a civilian or a military person. In 1887 the civil administration of French possessions in the Far East was unified, creating the government of Indochina; up to then it had been divided into the Annam-Tonkin protectorate and the colony of Cochinchina. Conflict between the governor-general and the general commanding the French troops in Indochina had to stop. The decree of 21 April 1891 clearly laid down the respective responsibilities of the civilian and military authorities concerning defence, to the advantage of the governor-general. He, as “repository of power of the Republic in French Indochina” had under him the lieutenant-governor of Cochinchina, the *Résidents supérieurs* of Annam, Cambodia and Tonkin, as well as the senior commander of the troops in Indochina. He was responsible for the internal and external defence of the colony and had under him “the land and sea forces stationed there”. No military action could be undertaken without his authority, but the conduct of operations was left to the military authorities who were accountable to him (Lanessan 1895: 355–357).

Jean-Louis de Lanessan, a Paris deputy and a former naval doctor, was named the new governor-general a few weeks after the publication of the decree; he divided the mountainous regions of Tonkin into four military zones. They were commanded by colonels or lieutenant-colonels who combined civil and military functions. Almost all the military forces in Indochina were placed at their disposition. The security of pacified regions, mostly the Red River delta, was handed over to the civil guard and to the *linh-co*, who were native militias fulfilling the functions of the state police force. The civil guards were to protect the county towns and the largest urban centres officered by European inspectors and senior guards, recruited from among former officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs).² The *linh-co*,

² The militia created by Paul Bert in 1886 was reformed and transformed into an “indigenous civil guard” by a Governor’s order of 19 July 1888. As Paul Bert envisaged it, the militia should include isolated sections, commanded by indigenous sergeants, *phoquam*, and 24 elite companies placed at the disposition of civilian residents or vice-residents, coming under a French lieutenant, a warrant officer, and four sergeants. The French officers and NCOs were placed in a special category, but retained their promotion rights. The natives were recruited in villages, according to Annamese laws, by chiefs of cantons, to the numbers registered. To placate the military’s fears that the militia might become a kind of parallel army, it was specified, in September 1887, that “it was incumbent on the mission, not generally appreciated by overseas armies, to ensure the execution of police action and administrative acts [...]; it is a police force.” The order of 19 July 1888 turned the lieutenants into inspectors, and the NCOs into senior guards (*gardes principaux*). The civil guard was to be divided into posts of 25, 50, or 125 men, officered by 1, 2, or 5 senior guards. The inspectors, one for each residence, were to ensure discipline and the proper functioning of the posts, which they were to inspect at least once a month (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 55). See also E. Daufès, *La garde indigène de sa création à nos jours*. Avignon, 1933, and J. Kim Munholland, “Collaboration strategy” and the French pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 24, n° 3, 1981, pp. 629–650.

responsible for what Lanessan called “the intimate police”, were placed under the direct orders of the Annamese mandarins, the *Phu* and *Huyen*, for the “on-going and detailed surveillance of the villages however small they might be.” The success of the pacification, the hunting down and destruction of the last groups of Chinese and Vietnamese “pirates”, led Lanessan to generalise the methods used throughout Indochina. The militia, where possible under indigenous command, were to be the essential instrument of pacification, and indirect administration the rule. They could be used in limited military operations, under the direction of civilian administrators (“Residents”) to which the *linh-co* and the native guards were responsible in last resort.

As order was established, regular army units handed over to civilian administrators and militias. The native regiments could then be dissolved or return to their original vocation, the defence of the frontiers. Thus in 1889, after the end of the rebellion in Annam, four native regiments were disbanded, as well as a regiment of Tonkinese riflemen and a regiment of Annamese light infantry. Internal security in Annam was transferred to 3,000 civil guards (Devillers 1998: 384). This solution also offered the advantage of reducing the burden of the colony’s military budget, as the unit cost of a militiaman was three to four times cheaper than the cost of a native soldier.

The lessons of the war in Tonkin in general confirmed what the French had learnt from the Cambodian uprising of 1884–1886. Nearly 4,000 regular troops had been mobilised, half of them Europeans, with very meagre results. The treaty of 1886 partially restored to the King of Cambodia the administration of the country’s taxes, with the exception of the customs’ receipts and those deriving from the sale of opium and alcohol. The French withdrew from the kingdom and only retained four Residents, whose security was assured by 200 native militiamen.³

In spite of the progress noted since then, Lanessan indicated in 1891 the persistence of serious disorder, which he attributed to the 1886 treaty. Under the stranglehold of the French over customs receipts, the Cambodian King could not remunerate his mandarins, so they were reduced to pressing their administrators to survive. In consequence, Lanessan recommended the reunification of the Cambodian treasury and a further shift in the direction of indirect administration.⁴

The cost and the extraordinary unpopularity in France of the war in Tonkin prevented the governor, given the new tight budgetary context, from increasing the number of regular troops in Indochina. A regiment of 2,500 to 3,000 native soldiers

³ On 5 September 1886, the Lieutenant-Governor of Cochinchina, Ange Filippini, wrote to the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies: “thanks to the formal instructions I have given to the commander of the troops, military action is entirely subordinated to political action, and the heads of posts and detachments have received the most precise orders to avoid any demonstration likely to run counter to the success of pacification” (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 7/5).

⁴ SHD, Guerre, 10 H 55.

cost the colony between two and two and a half million francs a year, everything included. In 1891, there were three regiments of Tonkinese riflemen (*régiments de tirailleurs tonkinois*—RTT) stationed in Tonkin and an Annamese rifle regiment (*régiment de tirailleurs annamites*—RTA) assuring the defence of Cochinchina, or in other words 12 battalions of native troops, three battalions to a regiment. In addition, there were eight battalions of marines,⁵ as well as four battalions of the Foreign Legion, posted along the Chinese frontiers. The administration of these corps was of unusual complexity. The native regiments were on the payroll of the colony's budget, the marines on that of the Ministry of the Navy and the Foreign Legion came under the Ministry of War. The administration of European military careers depended on the Ministry of the Navy for native troops and marines, on the Ministry of War for the Foreign Legion and home-based units sent as reinforcements.

In the protectorate of Annam-Tonkin, the theoretical military manpower was 8,000 Europeans and 12,000 natives, for an annual budget of 25 million francs. The budget was clearly less than what was needed to maintain such a number of soldiers, so the regiments were left under-strength. If the troops in Cochinchina are added, the 2,200 men in the Annamese Rifle Regiment for 2 million francs a year, the significant total military expenditure for 1891–1892 was 27 million francs. Revenue raised in Indochina grew in the same period to some 47 million francs, to which a subsidy of 19 millions was added from French mainland budgets. Military expenditure accounted for more than 40% of the colony's consolidated budget, and exceeded the total French subsidies. The population of Indochina was about 20 million in 1900. The level of military staffing was therefore slightly above 1 for 1,000 inhabitants. It was one third more than that of British India. Any additional increase in military numbers had to be taken from the colony's own resources (Lanessan 1895: 113–151).

Those resources were extremely stretched, because of the pacification in Tonkin; but also because some of the men had to undertake missions normally assigned to a specialised corps of administrative clerks, military workers, or logistic support units. Apart from the infantry battalions, there were in Indochina only eight artillery batteries, equipped with obsolete arms, a company of engineers, two military baggage trains, and a group of pontoneers in Indochina. In addition, there was a very high attrition rate of Europeans troops in Indochina. When military operations ceased during the rainy season, sickness and epidemics exceeded losses under arms. Military service in Indochina, which several thousand unhappy conscripts were required to do, was certainly not a picnic. In May 1891 a letter from the commander-in-chief to the governor noted 250 evacuations for health reasons per month, 3,000

⁵ The 9th, 10th, and 11th marine regiments, created in 1888 from provisional battalions (*bataillons de marche*) were sent to Indochina. The 11th regiment was reduced soon after to two battalions of four companies; the 9th and 10th regiments stayed at three battalions.

a year, for a total of 8,000 Europeans in Tonkin. There remained to the units 4,000 riflemen who could be called on for military operations.⁶

With less than some 30 infantry battalions, assisted by a few artillery batteries, Lanessan was left very little room for manoeuvre in the crisis of 1893, when operations in Tonkin continued. In Cambodia and Annam vestiges of the 1880s rebellions also continued to give cause for concern. All that remained were the troops defending Cochinchina, but the governor-general could not do what he wished there, so great was the political influence of the French colonials. The administrative autonomy of Cochinchina, as well as a certain strategic orthodoxy requiring Saigon to be the main French stronghold in the Far East and not to be weakened under any pretext, prevented Lanessan from levying more than the absolute minimum.

The Annamese Rifle Regiment was there, created by a decree of 2 September 1879. Like all the native units, recruitment was conducted by roll call. The villages were required to supply a number of soldiers in proportion to their population, and it was up to the village headmen to find volunteers or to designate conscripts. The riflemen were required to serve for two years. In principle, companies were stationed near their recruitment area; but if required, a temporary foot battalion (*bataillon de marche*) could be formed and sent to more distant locations. Thus the regiment had its baptism of fire in Tonkin in 1883–1884, then in Cambodia in 1885–1887. The cost in these campaigns was 26 dead and nearly 100 wounded.⁷ The Annamese riflemen were thus reasonably hardened troops. This regiment supplied most of the manpower during the Franco-Siamese confrontation in 1893, reinforced by some sections of marines.

Operations north of the Khone falls

In March 1893, when Governor de Lanessan decided to expel the Siamese posts on the east bank of the Mekong, he designated three Residents, each accompanied by 100 men, Annamese riflemen or civil guards. Coming from Annam and Cochinchina, they were to call on the Siamese administrators to abandon their positions. The most important of the troops was named “the expeditionary column of the Upper Mekong”; placed under the current Resident (whose name was Bastard), it numbered 108 men of the Tenth Company of the Annamese Rifle Regiment, commanded by Captain Thoreux. In addition, the officering included six European non-commissioned officers, four officers, and 12 native NCOs. The company left Sadec in the night of 25–26 March, took a steamboat as far as Thma-Kré, from where the men and baggage were transferred to some 30 dugout canoes.

⁶ SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11.

⁷ SHD, Guerre, 10 H 19/1.

On 1 April the French arrived at Stung-Treng. Taken by surprise, the Siamese commissioner agreed to cross over to the right bank after only a few hours of negotiations. Four days later, the same scenario was repeated at Khone. On 5 April the French flag was flying over Khone island and the Siamese withdrew to Khong. Putting a good show in face of adversity—and concerned with saving face—the representative of the King of Siam was extremely courteous: “after an exchange of greetings, the *khaluang* very graciously offered to show us the more picturesque sites on Khone island, in particular the Sampanit falls.”⁸ The riflemen immediately began to construct billets and to dig trenches.

A month later, on 23 April, a second column left from Hué, led by one Dufrenil, who was escorted by civil guards commanded by Inspector Garnier. It easily took possession of Kemmarat, 300 km north of Khone, after marching more than 250 km across the Annamese cordillera, on 26 May 1893. On 18 May, the Resident Luce, who had left the post at Napé two days sooner, had evicted the Siamese commissioner at Kham-Kheut (Pavie 1919: 330–1). At the end of May the French, without striking a blow, had made themselves masters of the left bank of the Mekong over nearly 650 km.

The account of Captain Thoreux reveals the detailed preparation made for this show of strength. The embarkation was conducted at Sadec in strictest secrecy; for additional security the captain had circulated the rumour that his formation was preparing to leave on manoeuvres. Lanessan had clearly indicated that the initiative for the negotiations with the Siamese representatives was the task of the civilian Residents. The commander of the Cochinchina brigade had for his part recommended that things be hurried up. As Thoreux concluded, “I can affirm that the success obtained was in large part due to the speed of our movements.”

In spite of some fever and the earthworks required of the riflemen, their health remained good throughout April. The French straight away settled down in anticipation of a long-term occupation. Stung-Treng was linked by telegraph to Saigon and a customs post was set up. Thoreux estimated 150 Annamese riflemen were needed to defend the two posts, of which 50 at Khone, if the French had to face up to the armed forces of the local Siamese governor. Bastard wanted to set up a Residence at Stung-Treng, where 1,200 of the 3,000 inhabitants of the district dwelt. In agreement with Lanessan, the administrator counted on replacing as quickly as possible the riflemen with a local force.

The Siamese took nearly a month to react. Lacking a permanent army, the Siamese authorities raised in haste several thousand men. Recruited by force, hardly trained, or not trained at all, their enthusiasm for combat was all the weaker in that

⁸ Report of Captain Thoreux to the lieutenant-colonel commanding the regiment of Annamese riflemen on the events which led to his own capture along with three riflemen at Ka-Sadam and to their captivity (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11).

they were mostly Lao, and little inclined to die for the King of Siam. However, they received suitable arms, European-made 80 to 120 mm guns, and above all rapid fire Mannlicher Austrian rifles, whose range was greater than the 1874 Gras rifles with which the Annamese riflemen were armed. The Siamese officers showed proof of determination, but their courage scarcely concealed the deficiencies in their training. Entrenched behind their fortifications, or sending out disorderly and dispersed assaults against the French posts, they were never in a position to seize the initiative against their adversaries. Their men in combats behaved correspondingly; the Siamese and Lao were hasty, quick to flee, firing too quickly, from too far and too high. On 28 June 1893 Lieutenant-Commander Le Myre de Vilers addressed from Bangkok a note about the situation concerning the Siamese army. His judgment was severe: “Levies of men have been made, but these people receive no military training. By giving them a uniform, it is thought they have become soldiers. A large number has been sent to the Mekong, many have deserted, and on arrival the initial manpower was much diminished, pay has not been distributed, and these poor people receive nothing in kind except perhaps for a meagre ration of rice.”⁹

Hostilities began on 6 May, when Captain Thoreux was captured on the Mekong while transporting supplies from Stung-Treng to Khone in canoes. He then had to endure nearly three months of arduous captivity. The report he gave detailing it on 25 July 1893 is a long, unoriginal account condensing almost all the Western prejudices concerning “the yellow race”. The mandarins are treacherous and cruel, devising refined tortures and mouthing oriental proverbs. The prisoner, tightly bound, beaten, and humiliated, was terrorised by being shown the severed heads of two Lao captured when taking a message to him. He retained his dignity in all circumstances. The account, it has to be understood, was to arouse compassion in the official hierarchy; it seems to have succeeded in that. On 1 July 1893, while Thoreux was still in Siamese hands, the commander of the Annamese Rifle Regiment rewarded the unfortunate captain with a sharp half-yearly assessment. “Captain Thoreux is an extremely weak individual; with the desire to satisfy an ambition which is justified by nothing, he abandoned his authority of head of the Upper Mekong detachment to a civilian Resident. His carelessness led to his capture along with that of the escort and the supplies detachment.” *Vae Victis!* It should be observed in passing that the colonel commanding the regiment does not seem to have absorbed the new strategic doctrine; it was ill-advised on his part to reproach Captain Thoreux with having followed the orders of the governor-general of Indochina by placing himself at the disposition of Resident Bastard.

Six months later, things were different. On 1 January 1894 Thoreux was rehabilitated: “an officer of average intelligence who conscientiously and zealously fulfils the functions of company commander. He is rather too paternalistic with his

⁹ SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11.

men... He lacked flair and was not accompanied by a sufficient escort, which led to his capture and the supplies he was bringing being seized. He was unfortunate rather than culpable in the circumstances.” Ten years later, he had become “a learned, intelligent and hard-working officer, calm and reflective.” Pierre Thoreux, born in 1856, an officer from the ranks, entered the marines in 1884. He had already seven years of active service in Indochina in 1893 and obtained a language proficiency certificate for his knowledge of Vietnamese. He retired in 1905, with the rank of chief of battalion, probably for reasons of health, since he died two years later. An honourable career, in spite of his faux-pas in 1893, and fairly typical of many colonial officers.¹⁰

The eve of Captain Thoreux’s capture, 1,000 Siamese had already besieged the French post at Khone, defended by Lieutenant Pourchot, six French NCOs and 98 riflemen. It was a blockade rather than a siege, as the Siamese never attempted to seize it by assault. They had several artillery pieces in the forts they had built on the islands in the Mekong, north of Khone, but they were much too heavy to be transported by canoe. The Siamese did no more than invest the French post from a distance, and shell it intensively if inoffensively. After 17 days, a French expeditionary column obliged the Siamese to raise the siege. The losses were very slight on both sides, the Siamese losing only a few men and the French one person slightly wounded.

The relief column was commanded by Captain Adam de Villiers, a very colourful character, the complete opposite of the drab Captain Thoreux. Born in 1857 on the island of Réunion, a graduate of Saint-Cyr in 1879, he chose to enter the naval infantry and spent most of his career in Indochina. Turbulent, quarrelsome, uninterested in administration, he became a hardened gambler in the first years of active service. The punishment he received in 1880 on account of his gambling debts was the first in a long series for a whole range of offences. By the end of his career he had accumulated 163 days of open arrest and 60 of close arrest.¹¹ Adam de Villiers was, nonetheless, an excellent leader, skilful in manoeuvres and audacious, who was to bring off remarkable successes in operations.

After raising the blockade of Lieutenant Pourchot’s company on 23 March 1893, the French built two more posts to the north and south of Khone island, and then waited for reinforcements and instructions from central command before pushing upstream on the Mekong. The Siamese remained in control of the islands north of the Khone falls. They had established two forts on the left bank, at 3 and 4 km to the north-east of Khone, a fort on an island between Khone and the left bank, and some small outposts on a dozen islands and islets. On the south-eastern part of Don-Som island, some 4 km north-east of the small fort of Khone, the Siamese

¹⁰ File of the career of Major Pierre Thoreux (SHD, Guerre, 7 Yf 51273).

¹¹ File of the career of Lieutenant-Colonel Adam de Villiers (SHD, Guerre, 9 Yf 24640).

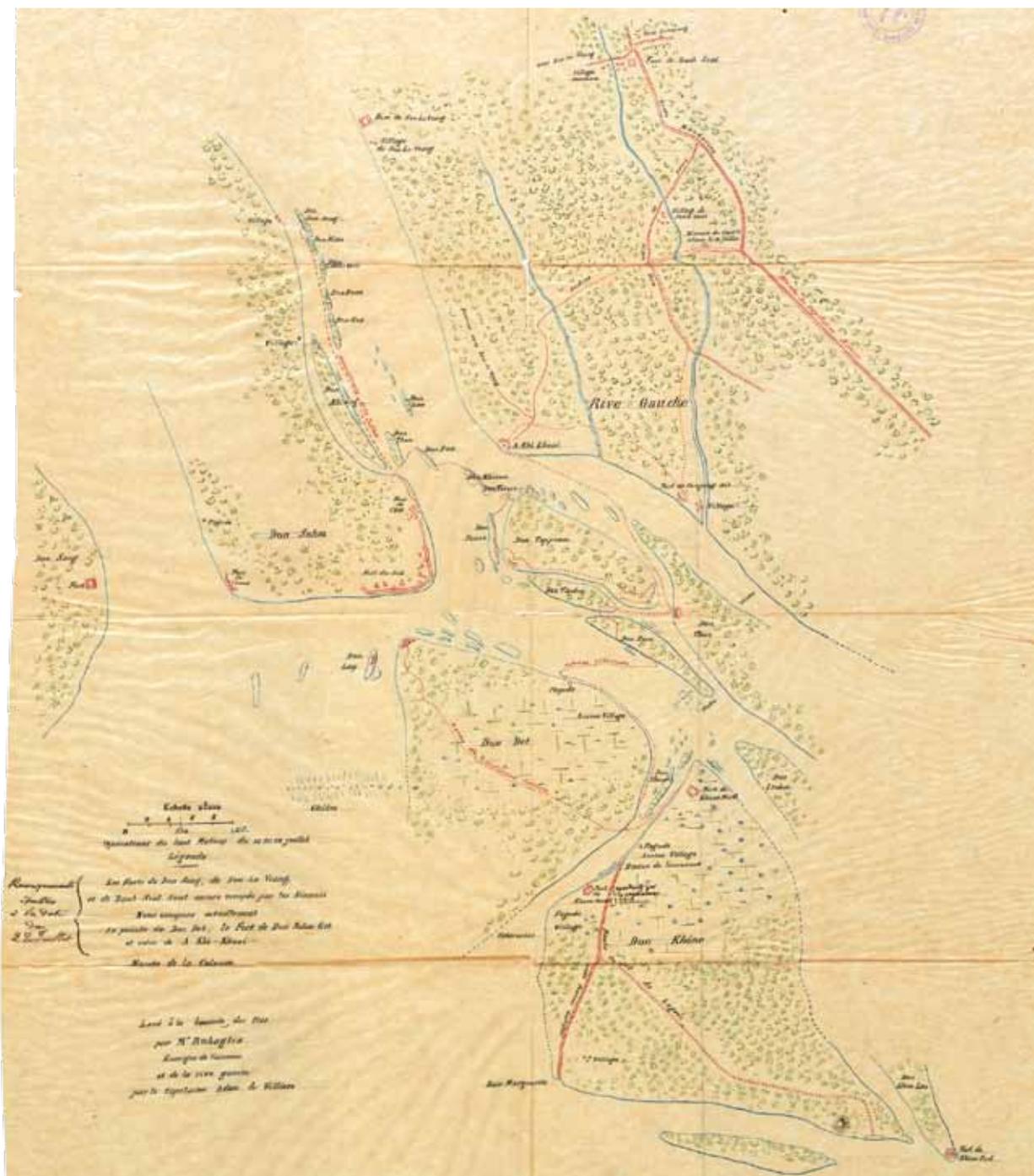
had built impressive fortifications, comprising trenches, casemated shelters and double stockades, able to withstand field artillery shots, defended by a garrison of more than 1,000 men and five guns. Captain Adam de Villiers received the order to seize this at the beginning of July.¹²

He had the equivalent of three companies of Annamese riflemen, a platoon of marines, two 80 mm Bange mountain guns and two 40 mm revolving guns. The pieces of ordnance were very light, the 80 mm cannon tubes weighing less than 100 kg. They could be transported on dugout canoes, but came with only a very limited supply of shells—235 for the mountain guns and 960 for the revolving guns. The expeditionary column numbered 406 men, commanded by 10 French officers, accompanied by 280 coolies and oarsmen. Only the naval platoon, commanded by Lieutenant de Puységur, was equipped with long-distance 1886 Lebel rifles. Captain Adam de Villiers had left 77 men to guard the Khone posts.

The captain divided his forces into two columns. The first, under Captain Simon, was to take from the rear the forts built on the left bank. The second, commanded by Adam de Villiers, received the delicate task of seizing the islands to the west and north of Khone. Adam de Villiers then intended to land at Don-Som and to attack the Siamese fortifications from the rear. The manoeuvre, simple and sensible, was not without risks, as the French would come under fire from Don-Som throughout the operations, and would sometimes be less than 800 metres away from the Siamese. Navigation would be slow, given the reefs of the river, and the force of the current, against which the canoes had to move. The canoes were equipped with armoured plating 15–20 cm high, sheltering the men from the enemy fire. Revolving guns had been placed in the bow of two canoes and could be fired when it was moving. The hope was that the Siamese were not able to adjust the fire of their artillery and no small craft would capsize, tipping men and material into the raging waters of the Mekong.

On 14 July 1893 in the morning, the column under Simon took without difficulty the left-bank forts of Compong-Set and Hach-Khy-Khoai. Threatened with being encircled, the garrisons occupying them fled into the surrounding forest, leaving several prisoners in French hands. Entrenched in Hach-Khy-Khoai, 800 m away from the fortress of Don-Som, Captain Simon's men experienced a barrage of gunfire, to which they could only reply indifferently, given the limited range of their firearms. During this time, Captain Adam de Villiers, who had left Khone in the middle of the night during a torrential rainstorm, arrived at Don-Det, a large island between Don-Som and Khone, at dawn. To create a diversion, he sent a detachment to the north of the island, only 300 m from Don-Som. At about eight in the morning Villiers crossed a river that was swollen with the previous night's

¹² Report of Captain Adam de Villiers to the colonel commanding the Cochinchina brigade on the operations of the Upper Mekong column from 13 to 22 July 1893 (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11).



Map 1. The seizing of Don-Som fortress

NOTE: Map drawn by the French during the Upper Mekong campaign, annexed to the report of Captain Adam de Villiers on the operations of the Upper Mekong column from 13 to 22 July 1893.

SOURCE: SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11.

rain and was very difficult to pass over. About eleven o'clock, he disembarked on Don-Taphum, a small island between Don-Som and Don-Than, the garrison of which was then isolated. Don-Than fell in the early afternoon. The men in Simon's column occupied the forts they had taken and repulsed several attacks from the Siamese who had fled into the forest in the morning.

By evening on 14 July all the Siamese forts had been taken, except for Don-Som. The Siamese had lost 250 men, 100 or so being killed and 38 taken prisoner. The French had one rifleman dead and seven others wounded. The Siamese artillery of Don-Som had only replied to the firing of the 80 mm guns, without attempting to target the canoes, which they probably only noticed when it was too late. The garrisons of the forts of Don-Than, Hach-Khy-Khoai and Compong-Set, 150 men in each place, unable to assist each other, were attacked one after the other, and offered no serious resistance.

All that remained was to outflank the fortress from the east, going from one islet to another, under cover of the fire from the French occupying Don-Det and Hach-Khy-Khoai. That operation occupied the next five days. On 15 July, the French took three small islands beside Don-Thaphum and sent for artillery supplies from Stung-Treng, as there remained only a few dozen shells for 80 mm guns and 100 rounds for the revolving guns. On 17 July the commander of Don-Som indicated that France and Siam had reached an agreement. He therefore asked Captain Adam de Villiers to cease firing. The captain refused, and gave the Siamese until 19 July in the morning to evacuate Don-Som. At two in the morning a supply of 80 explosive shells and 700 rounds for the revolving guns arrived from Stung-Treng. The captain immediately sent a deluge of fire on the last islands still occupied by Siamese detachments, forcing them to withdraw to Don-Som. In the morning of 20 July, Villiers disembarked on the flank of the eastern side of the fortress, leading an assault column of 210 men, comprising the Europeans soldiers of the marine section and a company and a half of riflemen. The French artillery, regrouped on Taphum island, fired its last shells. The Siamese commander was killed, and when the French captain ordered the assault to be sounded, the garrison took flight and abandoned the position.

Thus ended this seven-day day campaign, which had pitched between 1,500 to 2,000 Siamese and Lao against 400 Frenchmen and Annamese riflemen. The Siamese lost 500 men, of which 300 were killed, according to the estimates of Captain Adam de Villiers; the French lost one killed and less than ten wounded. The taking of Don-Som was the bloodiest episode in the Franco-Siamese crisis of 1893. These violent encounters occurred outside any declaration of war, with Siamese and Frenchmen trying to apply the decisions taken by their respective governments. Only a small number of men were involved, in what was a war zone of barely 100 sq km. Both sides were anxious to limit the use of force, the Siamese because of

military weakness, the French in order not to aggravate an international crisis over their territorial claims. The success of the campaign showed the high level of the native troops. The Annamese Rifle Regiment, one of the most recently formed in the colony, had provided nine-tenths of the soldiers of the expeditionary column of the Upper Mekong. They had demonstrated considerable progress in a few years. In 1889, general Borgnis-Desbordes forbade using in Tonkin less than two thirds of Europeans. True, the Chinese Black Flags were much more redoubtable opponents, but even in Tonkin the confidence of the French in their native troops rose considerably.

Captain Adam de Villiers was mentioned in despatches, and given immediate promotion to the rank of chief of battalion. He became a lieutenant-colonel in 1899 at the age of 42, an age when many graduates of both Saint-Cyr and the *École de Guerre*, while still captains, were kicking their heels in mainland French barracks. Unfortunately for him, Adam de Villiers had not shed his downside, which made him likeable when he was just a junior officer but made him detestable to senior commanders as soon as he was given more important responsibilities. He continued to gamble. In 1909 a bailiff sold his furniture at the insistence of his creditors; in 1912 a military shoemaker in Toulon laid claims to his pay to recover the money he had lent him.

He became commanding officer of a newly created regiment of colonial infantry in 1904, but only one year was needed to ruin his career. He was accused of having sold the rice not used by the Europeans and diverted money allocated for the coolies' wages. The regulations strictly forbade the creation of *masses noires* (slush funds) for the profit of units, even when they were used to defray common expenses. Even though he had used these funds to buy books to go into the regimental library, the officers had preferred the relaxation of their senses rather than their minds, and spent the money so gained in absinth, champagne and perfumes. Adam de Villiers only just avoided dismissal. This lack of proper bookkeeping cost him his command. Confined to uninteresting duties of adjutant to regiment commanders, any further promotion was impossible. In 1912 he was offered for the last time the rank of colonel. His commander described him as a very good senior officer, educated, intelligent, sound in his judgments, zealous, vigorous, active, a good horseman and even a "bicyclist". The general commanding the troops in Indochina was not of the same opinion. Considering him "obese, lazy and embittered", he deferred Adam de Villiers. He retired from active service in July 1914. When the First World War broke out one month later, he wanted to re-enlist. Placed in the mainland territorial army, he commanded with distinction the 131st Territorial Infantry Regiment, sent to the front from July 1917 to October 1918. Adam de Villiers died of influenza in 1919.¹³

¹³ File of the career of Lieutenant-Colonel Adam de Villiers (SHD, Guerre, 9 Yf 24640).

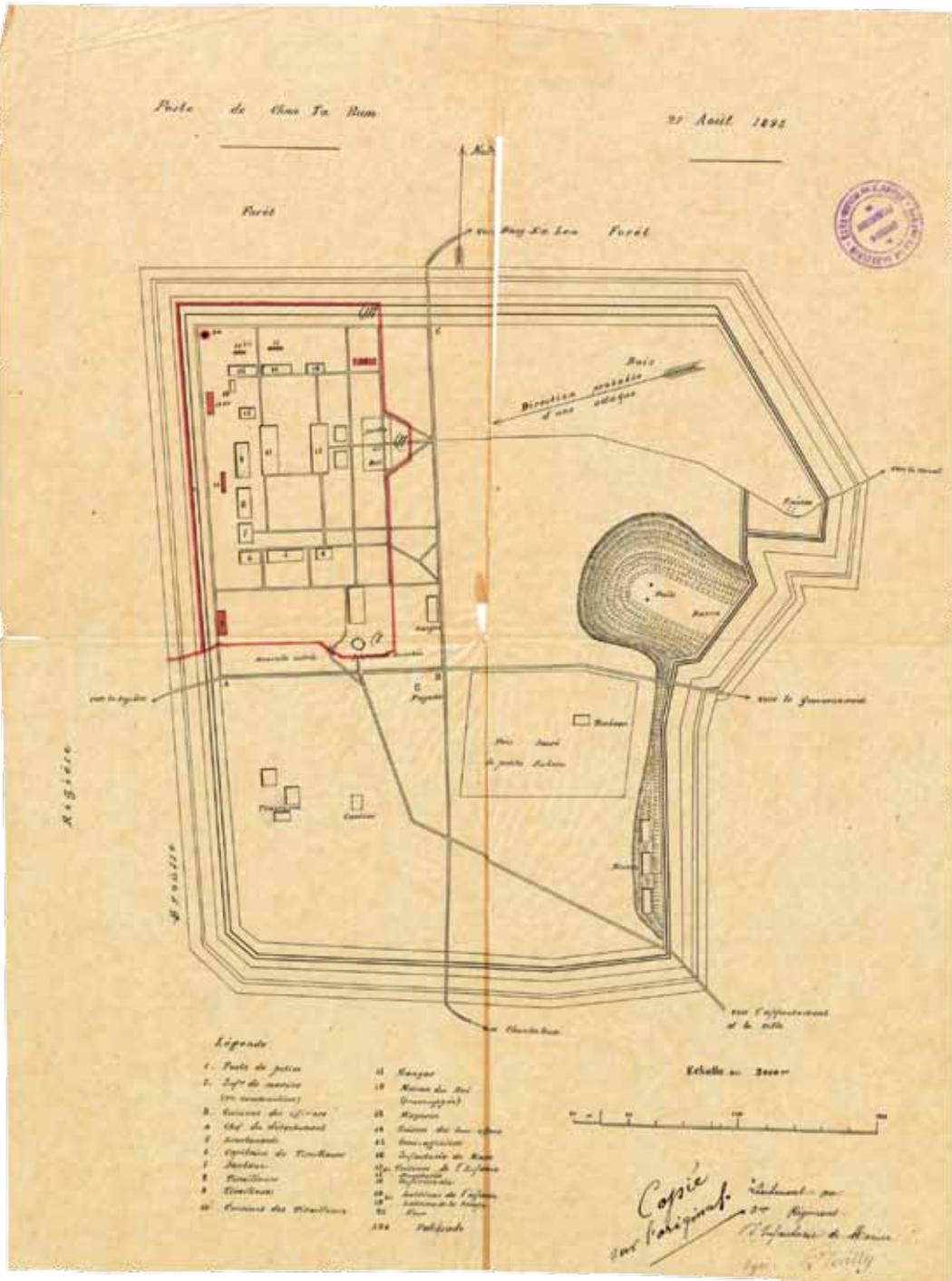
The occupation of Chanthaburi

After the Siamese accepted the ultimatum of 20 July 1893 and the complementary guarantees demanded by the French government on 30 July 1893, an occupation force was assembled on 9 August 1893 to occupy the port of Chanthaburi. Commanded by Captain Gérard, it comprised the 11th company of the Annamese Rifle Regiment and a section of the 9th Marine Infantry Regiment, in all 196 men, including 54 Europeans, among whom were four officers and a doctor.¹⁴ They embarked on a double-decked steamboat and arrived on 17 August at Pak-Nam Chanthaburi, at the mouth of the river leading to Chanthaburi proper, 20 km inland. On the 18th, the captain called on the governor to evacuate from the town the 600–800 Siamese soldiers still there, and to supplying 10 junks to transport the French troops. He refused, claiming that only the port of Chanthaburi was to be occupied by the French. After two days of discussion and beating about the bush, on the morning of 20 August, Gérard embarked his detachment on a heteroclite fleet of a dozen whaleboats, dinghies and canoes, since the Siamese only agreed to supply two junks. By the end of the afternoon, he took possession of the citadel of Chanthaburi, handed over by the governor, who had tried to escape from the humiliating ceremony by claiming to be unwell. The captain gave to understand that if he did not come, “the detachment commander would have no contact with him and would consider him as an enemy.” The French took an inventory of the weaponry in the citadel, which they had agreed to take in custody and return when the occupation ended. They found eight Broadwell 80 mm guns there, in perfect condition, munitions, and 1,000 or so obsolete rifles.

The citadel dominated by some 20 m the town of Chanthaburi, which was totally flooded in the rainy season. “It has the general form of a square of 450 m on each side; it is surrounded by an earth rampart with external moat between 6–10 m. In several places it is in poor condition, especially to the east and the south. The moat is filled by thick undergrowth, and to the north this undergrowth is like a small forest. In the north-east corner, where the barracks are located, the rampart is in good condition, and it is where it is highest and thickest.”

The French decided to dig in the north-west sector and install barracks adapted to the size of the small detachment. In the centre of the citadel was the king’s residence, surrounded by a French-style garden that was “splendidly maintained”. At the request of the mandarins, the royal residence was not occupied, and Captain Gérard agreed to include the whole garden in the perimeter of the French post so it would not be spoilt. The captain, who drew up his report some 10 days after having arrived, considered the post was safe, but would need 500 men, or 350 men

¹⁴ Extract of the report of the Captain commanding the occupation detachment in Chanthaburi, 29 August 1893 (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11).



Map 3. The French post set up in the fortress of Chanthaburi

NOTE: Map drawn by the French and annexed to the report of Captain Gérard, 29 August 1893.

SOURCE: SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11.

and three 80 mm mountain guns. The hygiene was considered “satisfactory”, the number of sick men not exceeding 15–25 a day, a sickness level of 10%, in spite of continual rains. The soldiers ate fresh meat one day in three, fresh bread one day in two. Gérard complained of the high cost of supplies and labour, as well as the spasmodic functioning of the telegraph lines linking Chanthaburi to Bangkok and Battambang, which was cut 5 days in 10. A steamboat plied between Bangkok and Chanthaburi once a week.

It seemed to Captain Gérard that the district was mostly peopled by Vietnamese Catholics. A French missionary, Fr Cuaz, lived in the town. “The Siamese, Chinese and Burmese are suspicious; they seem hostile, or rather fearful and surprised. The Annamese, on the contrary are most relaxed. They are almost all Catholics and, formed by the French missionary, all devoted to the French cause. The Annamese speak the same tongue as the riflemen and sympathize with them. They come readily to the fort, but are closely observed by the mandarins and dare not serve us as much as they would like for fear of reprisals if the occupation ceased.” The relations between Gérard and the Siamese mandarins were good, but not devoid of ambiguity: “the Siamese authorities up to now have been accommodating, almost obsequious... In order to obtain something from them, it is best to speak them very firmly,¹⁵ while never straying from the most correct courtesy.”

Captain Gérard, suspicious, had been informed by his spies that the Siamese soldiers who had evacuated the citadel had dispersed in small groups in the villages located at less than three hours march from the town. While they had left their artillery in store on Chanthaburi, they had taken with them all the Mannlicher repeating rifles. Furthermore, in the mountains at one and a half day’s march north were armed villages: “gold and tin mines, as well as precious stones, sustain a floating population of Chinese, half-cast Burmese and Malays, whom it is wise to watch, on account of illegal arms trade.”

The central command followed the recommendations of Captain Gérard, and significantly strengthened the garrison of Chanthaburi. At the time of the first confrontations in May 1893, Governor de Lanessan had urgently requested the Ministry of War to send to Indochina an additional battalion of foreign legionnaires. The core of the Legion was the 1st and 2nd Foreign Infantry Regiments, stationed in Algeria from the beginning of the conquest. This elite troop, subjected to strict discipline, was often called upon to take part in very distant colonial expeditions. When the need arose, provisional battalions (*bataillons de marche*) were created. The battalions sent to Tonkin in 1883 had stayed on and constituted a kind of permanent mixed detachment of the 1st and 2nd Foreign Infantry Regiments. The pay for foreign legionnaires came under the Ministry of War, which regularly sought relief from the colonial authorities.

¹⁵ Underlined in the report.

The provisional battalion of Foreign Legion for Siam (*bataillon de marche du Siam*) embarked in two lots on 13 and 21 July 1893 at Oran. It arrived after the fighting, but in time to be named for the occupation of Chanthaburi. It comprised 715 men, divided into four companies, under the command of the battalion chief Tournier. Each regiment provided half of the men of the battalion.¹⁶ Two companies were sent to Chanthaburi, and the others were sent to reinforce the garrisons on the Mekong. From 5 September 1893, the section of the 9th Marine Infantry Regiment left for Cochinchina, but it was considered politically judicious to leave the company of Annamese riflemen.

The first few months of the French occupation passed off well, if the generous appreciation expressed by the civilian authorities of the actions of Captain Gérard are to be believed. In October 1893, the governor sent a telegram addressed to the commanding general in Indochina praising his ability, “noting the prudence and firmness he had shown in his Chantaboun [Chanthaburi] mission and assumed us a tranquil occupation and sympathy with the civilian population in difficult circumstances.” Pavie, from Bangkok, was more explicit: “I have been particularly satisfied with the services of Captain Gérard. This excellent officer, through his firm and prudent conduct, was able to thwart the intrigues of the Siamese who wished to establish the occupation forces at the unhealthy beach of Paknam; the military measures he took in the march on Chantaboun and the setting up of the camp demonstrated considerable foresight and exceptional capability in an officer of his rank. I would add that, even during the period of the most tendentious negotiations, he managed, in spite of all kinds of provocations, to maintain friendly relations with the local authorities and to avoid causing the government of the Republic serious complications with either Siam or with England.”¹⁷

Augustin Gérard was the exact contemporary of Pierre Thoreux and Adam de Villiers, and in the same class as the last-named at Saint-Cyr. He entered the colonial army in 1885, and was immediately sent to Tonkin, joining the 3rd Tonkinese Rifle Regiment. After three years in the Ministry of the Navy in Paris, he returned to Indochina in 1892 as an aide-de-camp to General Duchemin, commander-in-chief of French forces. Given his success in Chanthaburi, Lanessan asked that he be put down for advancement. Although he took umbrage at the interference of civilian authorities in military careers, Duchemin agreed, and, like Adam de Villiers, Captain Gérard reached the rank of battalion chief soon after. Such a promotion was unprecedented in that it was not a result of outstanding action in combat, such as the taking of the fortress of Don-Som. It shows that the military authorities were now aware that a colonial officer should not merely be a leader of men, but also a diligent administrator attentive to ethnic and cultural differences of the people in

¹⁶ SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11.

¹⁷ File of the career of the Major General Augustin Gérard (SHD, Guerre, 9 Yd 555).

the French Empire. The subsequent careers of Adam de Villiers and Gérard were to confirm this. While Villiers vegetated in the gambling dens of Cochinchina, Gérard had a brilliant destiny. In 1894 he became chief of staff to general Gallieni in Madagascar. The general took him under his wing and pushed him to the highest levels of the military hierarchy. From his career file, it appears that Gérard had a brilliant record. Gallieni, though, noted he was rather “too absolute in his ideas” and lacked flexibility. Another regretted his frigidity and his character, which was not “expressive”. If he did not arouse sympathy spontaneously, he made up for his lack of charisma by his energy, initiative, his calm and firmness, and by his Masonic membership. Promoted brigadier general in 1909, although he had never attended the *École de Guerre*, a major general in 1912—then the higher grade of the French military hierarchy—he commanded the 1st army in 1916, then the 8th army in 1917–1918 on the front in Lorraine.

After the departure of Captain Gérard, the composition of the Chanthaburi garrison fluctuated, and it seems impossible to follow exactly the movements of the units. The presence of a whole battalion of the Foreign Legion to oversee the frontier with Siam soon appeared superfluous. Two hundred men were sent to Tonkin to complete the numbers of the four battalions there. The usual health problems occurred in the European units, so that by June 1894 the battalion was short of 281 men, including four officers. When the governor of Indochina requested the Ministry of War to send to Siam 235 men, the ministry remonstrated, noting that “when this battalion was sent to Siam, it was agreed that its stay in the Far East would only be temporary.”¹⁸ The Ministry in consequence asked that it be replaced as quickly as possible by marines. The governor, supported by the general commanding in chief, pointed out that the presence of the foot battalion in Siam was essential for the security of the frontier, and that, furthermore, the colony’s budget was so tight that it was not able to pay the return travel expenses of the legionnaires. After bitter inter-ministerial negotiations, the Ministry of War sent a draft of 280 relief troops in July 1894, but five months later, two of the four battalion companies left for Algeria. Only 315 men and 4 officers remained in Indochina, probably half at Chanthaburi, half at Khone and Stung-Treng. In 1897 the security of the frontiers seemed sufficient for the two last companies to return to their original regiments at the end of the year.

The garrison at Chanthaburi was probably much reduced after the departure of the company of legionnaires. It turned out though that a company of Annamese riflemen would remain there permanently, as well as, in all probability, a company or at least a section of the 11th Marine Infantry Regiment.¹⁹ This took the name of the 11th Colonial Infantry Regiment in 1900, like all the other marine units,

¹⁸ SHD, Guerre, 10 H 11.

¹⁹ Regimental histories of the units stationed in Indochina (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 55).

henceforth attached administratively to the Ministry of War and functionally to the Ministry of Colonies. The composition of the garrison at Chanthaburi becomes clearer after September 1903, when the 12th Colonial Infantry Regiment and a 22nd Annamese Rifle Regiment were constituted, both stationed in Cochinchina. The defence of the colony was reorganised, and the guard at Chanthaburi and its port of Paknam was assured by a company of the 12th Colonial Infantry Regiment and three companies of the 2nd Annamese Rifle Regiment, in all some 700 men.²⁰ They remained there until the evacuation of Chanthaburi and Paknam on 5 and 8 January 1905, in accordance with the Franco-Siamese convention of February 1904. Thus the garrison at Chanthaburi mostly numbered between 200 and 300 men, being mostly Annamese riflemen. It was only at the beginning of the occupation, from September 1893 to November 1894, then again from September 1903 to January 1905, when negotiations over the implementation of the Franco-Siamese convention gave rise to some minor tensions, that the garrison ever considerably exceeded 300.

Defence of the Siamese frontiers within the general military organisation of French Indochina

On the whole, the political situation in Siam did not greatly concern the French civil and military authorities in Indochina until 1909–1910. With the exception of Chanthaburi and the garrisons of the Upper Mekong, no regular unit was stationed near the Siamese frontier. Cambodia was so well pacified, and Laos so calm, that a police force of much reduced numbers was sufficient to maintain order. In 1903–1904 there were 1,314 militiamen in Laos,²¹ officered by 32 French inspectors and senior guards, or one European for 44 natives. The ratio was lower still in Cambodia, where there were only 1,064 militiamen and 15 inspectors and senior guards.

The French, congratulating themselves on the easy integration of Cambodia in the Empire, in 1903 created a battalion of Cambodian riflemen, comprising one then two companies. “Consequent to a study conducted on the spot, the general commanding the second division asked for the progressive creation of six new Cambodian companies, and the major general commander-in-chief forwarding this proposal in letter 3098 of 18 July opined that the number of companies could be brought up to four by 1 January 1905. Recent reports compiled by the Residents in Cambodia on the subject of the use of the militia in time of war insist on the confidence which could be placed on the Cambodian population, and on the major

²⁰ Annual reports on the issues pertaining to occupation troops and the defence of Indochina. Report of the year 1904 (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 23).

²¹ Of whom 723 Annamese and 591 Lao.

contribution they could provide in case of trouble with the Annamese population.”²² Faithful to their racial policy, the French high command thought in the first instance of the support the Cambodians could provide in any uprising by the Annamese majority. The first company was posted to Phnom-Penh, the second in the territory of Kratt which the French had just annexed to offset the evacuation of Chanthaburi. The Cambodian battalion was like the symbol of the rediscovered grandeur of the Khmer Kingdom placed under the protection of France... In 1905 the low value of the Cambodian riflemen was noted; “these soldiers are very attached to their land; they cannot be relied on for the general defence of Indochina.”²³

Meantime, Siam began its *aggiornamento*, or renewal. Before being able to undertake far-reaching military reforms, the allocation of funds and a fiscal administration appropriate to a modern state, which Siam aimed to become, had to be organised and rationalised. The broad autonomy of the local mandarins and the scattering of revenues among ministries responsible for their collection and use were obstacles that could only be progressively eliminated. In 1892–1893, the first consolidated budget of the state was for 26 million baht, about 40 million francs at that time. It was roughly equivalent to that of just the colony of Cochinchina, then undergoing a considerable expansionism, thanks to its rice exports. If Tonkin was in ruins after 10 years of singularly ferocious war, it offered even greater possibilities of development. The Siamese government was clever in not starting too soon its rearmament. In 1899 it only allocated a little over one million baht (1.3 million francs) to defence, much less than the 25 to 30 million francs of the total costing of the military budget of the government of Indochina (Brown 1992: 78).

The real change occurred in 1905–1906. The Siamese budget, continually increasing from the joint effect of remarkable economic development and a more rigorous control of state finances, reached 60 million baht (around 80 million francs). In order to construct railway lines, Siam launched its first international loan, underwritten by the Bank of Indochina and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, which was a great success among European investors. The loan of 1905, of 1 million pounds sterling, or 25 million francs, was followed by another in 1907, three times greater, floated with a lower interest rate. Military expenses took off, going in a few years from 10% to 23% of the budget (Brown 1992: 88, 118). In 1910, Captain Billotte—a future army general in 1940—wrote a very well-documented report titled “The defence of Indochina given the political situation in the Far East”.²⁴ He noted that a gap was forming between Indochina and nearby countries. Siam, then

²² Annual reports on the issues pertaining to occupation troops and the defence of Indochina. Report of the year 1904 (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 23).

²³ *Idem*, report of the year 1905.

²⁴ SHD, Guerre, 10 H 24. General Billotte commanded the 1st Army Group when he was fatally injured in a road accident in May 1940.

a country of 7 million inhabitants, had a budget of 90 million francs, of which 33 million, or 37%, was allocated to the military. Indochina, in spite of its 20 million inhabitants, only allocated 13.5 million of its 135 million incomes to its defence.

This comparison requires several comments. The budget allocation per inhabitant is almost twice more in Siam than in Indochina (13 francs against 6.75 francs). Such a difference tends to weaken the common opinion that the French government of Indochina inflicted a hard fiscal oppression on the native population. Conversely it points to the sacrifices made by Siam and its inhabitants. Year after year, more quickly than the French thought, these efforts bore fruit: in 1905 a system of Western-style conscription was instituted. In addition to the Danish instructors who had long been present in Siam, the Siamese called for assistance from the Japanese, exalted by their recent victories over the Russians.²⁵

The reports addressed to the Ministry of War point to a marked revision of military opinion concerning the Siamese army. In 1905 the annual report of the general commanding the troops in Indochina reported that “The Kingdom of Siam has entered a more important period of military and social transformation, in which a Japanese element plays a very important role, the results of which are impossible to predict at present. There is talk of conscripting the natives who are obliged to pay a head tax and all the Chinese half-castes. Whatever the case, at present, Siamese troops are not a threat to Indochina, neither in number nor in their intrinsic value. A battalion chief of the colonial infantry, who traversed the country this year from east to west, and who saw the troops close to, considers that the Siamese soldier is greatly inferior to our Indochinese riflemen, and the level of instruction of the Siamese officer, coming out of the military college in Bangkok, is still low.”²⁶

In 1906 scepticism was still evident, but demonstrated a new interest: “Military recruitment, recently required, seems to make the people discontented, but the Siamese government is still pressing ahead energetically with the organisation of its army with the help of Japanese instructors. The special corps, called *gendarmerie*, continues to be taught by French and Danish officers. An attempt at grand manoeuvres took place last March in the Khorat region: there were 9,000 men (active and reserves) in all. The health services were rudimentary, the overcrowding of the sanitary formations became such that after a fortnight, the troops had to be sent back to their garrisons, though a longer programme of manoeuvres was planned.”²⁷

²⁵ See the detailed study of the Siamese army by Noel Alfred Battye, *The Military, Government and Society in Siam, 1868–1910 : Politics and Military Reform during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*, unpublished thesis, Cornell University, 1974.

²⁶ Annual reports on the issues pertaining to occupation troops and the defence of Indochina. Report of the year 1905 (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 23).

²⁷ Idem, report of the year 1906.

The Billotte report

In 1910 Captain Billotte outlined a generally very positive picture of the young Siamese army: “Siam has devoted all its efforts for the last 10 years or so to create a modern national army: it could, in 2 or 3 years, provide a corps of 25,000 men and 15 batteries, 4 or 5 squadrons taught and equipped in the European manner.” The *gendarmérie* constituted an elite corps of 8,000 men trained by Danish officers. Military service, lasting two years, had become customary, though it was far from being universal. Being prudent, the Siamese only enlisted one tenth of the yearly contingent. The Siamese army already had 10 divisions, each comprising two infantry regiments, a regiment of light infantry or cavalry, an artillery regiment, a company of military engineers, an ambulance corps, and a baggage train company. All these units were far from being operational; the infantry regiments had only one battalion of four companies of 100 men, the artillery regiments two batteries of four pieces of mountain ordnance. But these became each year more substantial and the Siamese military had assimilated the integrated organisation of Western divisions, comprising infantry, cavalry, artillery, and support services. Billotte estimated that in 10 or 12 years, the kingdom could assemble 60,000 campaign troops, the equivalent of a European army corps with four divisions.

Siam though was far from being the main preoccupation of Captain Billotte. The most likely and most dangerous adversary remained China. The Middle Kingdom was emerging from nearly a century of opposition to progress and was beginning to modernise. In 1910, 20,000 soldiers were massed along the Sino-Indochina frontier, to which 15,000 men of the auxiliary police force were added. Opposing them, the three battalions of Foreign Legion, the six battalions of colonial infantry (9th and 10th Colonial Infantry Regiments), and the nine battalions of Tonkinese riflemen (1st, 2nd, and 3rd Tonkinese Rifle Regiments), only numbered 12,000 men. The difference was even greater with the artillery. To 25 Chinese batteries, equipped with Krupp and Schneider rapid-fire cannons, the French could only muster three batteries of old 80 mm mountain and two batteries of 75 mm field guns, the pride of the national artillery. The future was even less reassuring. After Siam, China had adopted conscription in 1909. The Chinese government expected to have 37 divisions in 1913; that is, 4,000 officers and 378,000 men on a peace footing.

The Billotte report illustrates the difficulties inherent in long-term geostrategic analysis. In 1911 the Chinese Revolution occurred, and it was to plunge the chief adversary of French Indochina into chaos for nearly 40 years. Billotte did not include Japan in the list of potential enemies, and only mentioned the Kingdom of Siam to underline the lack of preparation of the French. Lastly, rather ironically, he only had one line about the emergence of American power in the Pacific: “It does not appear that Indochina has a part to play in American history.” Billotte’s

analysis of the internal situation and of the military weakness of French Indochina is fortunately more perspicacious. He in fact insisted on the necessity of associating the Vietnamese population more closely with the administration and defence of the colony. “Faced with the forces being prepared in China, we can only hope to defend victoriously Indochina with the participation of a national Annamese army.” But the captain noted the increasing hostility of the Annamese to France, which he put down as dating to the Russo-Japanese war.

The French government did not seem to have worried as much as Billotte about the rise of nationalism in the Far East. The military effort agreed in 1903–1904, when the 12th Colonial Infantry Regiment, the 2nd Annamese Rifle Regiment and the battalion of Cambodian riflemen were created, was not followed up. The French troops in Indochina felt the full thrust of the budgetary cuts decided upon by the French parliament. Far from bowing to the alarmist reports of the technical committee of the colonies and the commanders of the troops in Indochina, who set at 50 battalions the minimum number which France should have in Indochina in peacetime, the parliamentary deputies reduced the occupying forces of 47 battalions in 1905 to 23 battalions in 1909. In 1913, the mobilisation plan only foresaw, for the defence of Cochinchina and Cambodia in times of war, a small mobile column of two European battalions, two native battalions and four batteries, in addition to fortress troops.²⁸ Does this imply that the parliamentarians showed a scandalous lack of foresight? The French were confronted with an insoluble strategic problem. Given the political uncertainties in this region of the world, so far from the mother country, the French troops in Indochina would always have run the risk of being too few in a general conflict. In these conditions, the only reasonable decision was to maintain a reduced armed force, capable of handling internal disorders and the repercussions of events in neighbouring countries, particularly China. Billotte was right, Indochina could not be defended without the adhesion of the population to French domination.

²⁸ Minutes of the proceedings of the defence board of Indochina held on 14 and 15 March 1913 (SHD, Guerre, 10 H 24).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Battye, Noel Alfred. 1974. *The Military, Government and Society in Siam, 1868–1910: Politics and Military Reform during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*. Cornell University: unpublished thesis.
- Brown, Ian. 1992. *The Creation of the Modern Ministry of Finance in Siam, 1885–1910*. London: Macmillan.
- Daufès, E. 1933. *La garde indigène de sa création à nos jours*. Avignon: D. Seguin.
- Devillers, Philippe. 1998. *Français et Annamites : partenaires ou ennemis ? 1856–1902*. Paris: Denoël.
- Forest, Alain. 1979. *Le Cambodge et la colonisation française, histoire d'une colonisation sans heurts, 1897–1920*. Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan.
- Lanessan, Jean-Louis de. 1895. *La colonisation française en Indo-Chine*. Paris: F. Alcan.
- Munholland, J. Kim. 1981. "Collaboration strategy" and the French pacification of Tonkin, 1885–1897. *The Historical Journal*, 24.3, p. 629–650.
- Pavie, Auguste. 1919. *Mission Pavie, Indo-Chine, 1879–1895, VII : Journal de marche (1888–1889). Événements du Siam (1891–1893)*. Paris: E. Leroux.
- Service historique de la Défense (SHD), Ministère de la Défense. Passim.
- Tuck, Patrick. 1995. *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb, the French Threat to Siamese Independence, 1858–1907*. Bangkok; Cheney (Wash.): White Lotus.