

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SURETE IN INDO-CHINA

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TO: Howard W. Hoyt

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VBI REPORT No. 1

SUBJECT: BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SURETE IN INDO-CHINA.

PURPOSE: To increase the understanding of the historical development of the Sureté in Viet Nam.

Period of Inquiry: December 27-30, 1955 and January 1,2,3,9,10, 1956.

PREDICATION

Unless stated otherwise the information in this report is to be attributed to Mr. Charles Lecan, a principal Commissaire of the Sureté, who has had twenty years of service with this agency. Mr. Lecan is a Vietnamese who is a graduate of French schools in South Viet Nam.

The writer of this report is aware of the possibility of error, bias, and lack of thoroughness in the material presented here. It is anticipated that supplementary reports dealing with this subject matter will be submitted in the future as additional and properly verified information is developed.

HISTORY

PERIOD 1875-1918

The Sureté was first created in Viet Nam by the French about 70 years ago. From the day of its creation until March, 1945, all important command positions were held by Frenchmen. Regardless of experience or training, the Vietnamese employees of the Sureté were never considered to be more than auxiliaries.

Often, a Vietnamese agent of the Sureté would have a better education than a Frenchman on his own operational level, yet the Frenchman was paid a salary three times that of the Vietnamese. From the beginning, approximately one third of the Sureté personnel were natives of Pondicherry, Karikal, Chandergor, Mahe, or Yanon, India. These individuals were employed as agents, who used Vietnamese interpreters. They were held in higher esteem by the French, in spite of the fact that most were less well instructed or experienced than many of their Vietnamese counterparts, according to Mr. Lecan.

Originally, Sureté headquarters were located in Hanoi, having control over the then existing five sections of Indo-China, namely: Tonkin, Annam, Cochin-China, Cambodia and Laos. Each section of the French Union was headed by a Chief of Police service, who controlled all police activities in his particular jurisdiction. These individuals were responsible to the Director General in Hanoi on technical matters, involving administration and operations. At the same time, however, they were also responsible to the Governor of each section of the Union for matters having to do with political affairs and specific location of Sureté personnel within their jurisdiction. From about 1875, until after World War I, the Sureté maintained offices in the following cities only:

Tonkin	(Hanoi	Cochin-China	(Saigon-Cholon
	(Haiphong		(Mytho
	(Langson		(Cantho
	(Hue		(Phnom-Penh
Annam	(Tourane	Cambodia	(Kratie
	(Dalat		(Swaerieng
	(Vientiane		
Laos	(Luang-Prabang		
	(Bassac		

The total strength of the Sureté during this period was about six hundred men. Each office had a total personnel of not more than twenty men, commanded by an Inspector (a Frenchman), who usually was a former non-commissioned officer of the French Army. Very few of these men ever had real police training prior to being sent out to the colonies. These inspectors were the only Frenchmen in each office, the others were Vietnamese. The Indians were mainly assigned to Saigon-Cholon, Hue, Hanoi, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane.

At that time, the Sureté concerned itself primarily with criminal activity, which was usually river piracy, since highways were not well developed at that time and since political activity hardly existed at all. Routine field trips were made by steam driven launches from each field office at least once or twice per month. The personnel on these routine trips consisted of the Inspector (French), a Vietnamese interpreter and about ten men armed with single shot muskets. The length of these field trips depended upon the amount of territory the Inspector wanted to visit, or upon the type of investigation being conducted. Usually, in case of short one day investigations, the Inspector, his interpreter, and two men travelled horse-back, on small Vietnamese horses. The Inspector carried a large, heavy revolver, while the men were armed with muskets.

All reports were forwarded to regional headquarters via launch. Communication between Saigon and Mytho was handled by a railroad which was completed in 1877. All communication between Laos, Cambodia, Cochin-China and Annam with Hanoi was by boat, first down the Mekong River in relays to Saigon, via launch, then up the coast to Tourane and Hue, and finally to Haiphong and Hanoi, via sea-going vessels. Messages coming south followed the same route.

The Chief of Police Services in each of the five regions of Indo-China, as well as all of the Inspectors, were given a six months paid leave in France every three years. The cost of transporting these people and their families was borne by the French Government. In addition, these men were given one month's annual leave in Indo-China. In the event of sickness, a man was shipped back to France before the termination of his three year assignment. A man could renew his assignment every three years and all lodging was furnished by the French Government.

Vietnamese agents were theoretically granted fifteen days of leave per year, although in practice, they hardly ever actually received more than seven or eight. Quarters were not furnished Vietnamese employees. Agents from India, Senegal and Martinique received the same treatment in terms of salary, lodging and leave as the French. The double standard applied only to the Vietnamese.

Actually, the period 1875-1918 was one devoted to study and adaption with a view to future development in terms of Sureté organization and operations in Indo-China.

The beginning of strong nationalistic feeling in Indo-China occurred at about the time of WWI. Approximately 900,000 Vietnamese went to France during the period 1914-1918 to serve directly in the French Army or in some auxiliary service organization. The French Government was supposed to have promised independence to what is now known as Viet Nam, in return for aiding France in it's war against Germany. Since Cambodia and Laos were far less advanced, this promise was not made to those countries.

PERIOD 1918-1939

After WWI, the French failed to live up to the promises made to the veterans and to the citizens of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, causing uprisings throughout these areas in the years 1920, 1921 and 1922. During and following these years, the size of the French military establishment in Indo-China was very greatly increased. At the same time, however, increasing anti-French activity among the Vietnamese developed.

It was during this period that the development of roads and communication facilities occurred in order to aid the army in the five states of Indo-China. Because the security of the country was being internally disturbed by anti-French activities, a virtually complete reorganizational change took place within the Sureté. Approximately twenty experienced and trained police officials were sent to Indo-China by the French to aid in the reorganization and revitalizing of the then existing Sureté. Incompetent officials and agents of the Sureté were dismissed and training programs were begun both with regard to law enforcement operations, as well as with regard to learning the local language. It was required that all prospective French Sureté personnel be French high school graduates (brevet élémentaire) and that they complete a three months course at the French Police Schools which existed in each of the five states of Indo-China. Also, it was required that all new French Sureté agents complete a course in the language of the state to which assigned. At the end of six months, these people were given an examination in their respective language courses. Actually, these courses were of little practical value since many of the agents were not interested in learning the local language, and, also, since the final examinations results were rigged. In all fairness, however, Mr. Lecan pointed out that many French Sureté agents prior to 1939, were able to understand Vietnamese fairly well, but that they still relied upon interpreters in making themselves understood.

During the period 1918-1939, the total strength of the Sureté was increased from about 600 to close to 5,000 people - these figures included all of Indo-China. Of the 5,000 personnel, approximately 80% (4,000) were Vietnamese, all of whom were operational or administrative service personnel in the lower ranks. About 7% (350) were French from Metropolitan France. These people held all of the high command positions in the Sureté in all of Indo-China. Approximately 10% (500) were Eurasians, most of whom were French nationals. These people held positions as inspectors, agents in charge of provincial Sureté brigades, adjutant commissaires, and other medium and lower ranking command positions. The French relied considerably on these people inasmuch as they were generally fairly well educated and spoke both French and Vietnamese fluently. The remaining 3% (150) were Indian, Senegalese, Moroccans, Tunisians, Algerians, or Martiniquans - all of whom were naturalized French citizens. These people were utilized as administrative help, mechanics, guards, drivers, supervisors of building maintenance and payroll clerks.

Actually, the four separate categories of personnel described above did not mix socially whatsoever. The only relationships which existed were purely of an official nature.

During this period, the Sureté became motorized and the communication system was developed to include telegraph and radio services which were operated by the postal telephone and telegraph service of the Government. A telephone network was developed permitting inter-province communication. The Sureté did not have a communication system exclusively owned or operated by the Sureté; the available public communication services had to be used. The use of launches as a means of transportation and communication became virtually insignificant during this period. From about 1925 on, all reports forwarded from Saigon to Hanoi were sent via railroad; the use of sea-going vessels was discontinued. Travel time between Saigon and Hanoi was about 48 hours, with a train going in each direction every 24 hours.

During this period, prisons were constructed in each province, the warden of which was always a Frenchman. French law was applied throughout Indo-China and all prosecuting attorneys and judges were French. Criminal courts existed only in Saigon, Cantho, and Mytho in Cochinchina; at Hue and Tourane in Annam; at Haiphong and Hanoi in Tonkin; at Phnom Penh in Cambodia; and at Vientiane in Laos. All of Indo-China was also divided into judicial districts, as well as purely administrative areas.

During this period, 1918-1939, the number of arrests continued to increase annually, 80% of which were for purely political reasons. Agitation against the French continued to increase and to become more intense. Arms were purchased by the so-called nationalists in China, Burma and Thailand through nationalist groups in these countries acting as purchase agents. These arms were transported via elephants, boats and by men along jungle trails and rivers. All roads were patrolled by the French Army. The number of Nationalist agents within the Sureté during these years was very small, since most of the Vietnamese serving in the Sureté were former soldiers in the French Army, whose loyalty was known by the French.

The period of 1918-1939, as far as the Sureté was concerned, was a period of expansion, training, reorganization and a period of fierce repression of anti-French or Nationalist activities.

PERIOD 1939-1945

From September, 1939, (beginning of World War II in Europe) until August 1940, the situation in the Sureté in Viet Nam, was more or less the same as during the years immediately prior to this period. However, with the indecision in Europe, and with the shipment of thousands of French troops to France, the activities of the Nationalists became very open. In South Viet Nam (Cochinchina) several open revolts occurred which were suppressed, resulting in the deaths of about 500 Vietnamese by firing squad and in hundreds of suspects being sent to prison or concentration camps in Tonkin, Annam and in Cochinchina. The notorious prisons were located on the island of Poulo-Condore and at Lao Bao in Tonkin.

In August 1940, Admiral Jean Decoux became Governor General of Indo-China, as the representative of the Vichy Government of France. In September of 1940, the Japanese Army of Kuangsi Province, China, invaded Tonkin. The remnants of the

French Army (3/4 Vietnamese) were defeated in a two-day battle at Lang Son. The Japanese then began to occupy all of Indo-China and finally arrived at Saigon in March 1942. In order to maintain security within Indo-China, particularly insofar as Japanese nationals were concerned, the Sureté was allowed to function as in the past. However, at the same time, the Japanese carried on a subtle propaganda campaign encouraging the Vietnamese to revolt against the French. The Japanese purchased information from certain Vietnamese Sureté agents - who were very well paid for services rendered. This permitted the Japanese to know what was going on in the country, as well as within the Sureté.

On March 9, 1945, the Japanese seized direct control of the Sureté and the French Army. All French nationals were arrested and imprisoned. This was the result of the fact that many French and Vietnamese began to join various De Gaulist or Free-French resistance groups. From March 9, 1945, to August 10, 1945, the Japanese directed the activities of the Sureté and Japanese replaced all Frenchmen in the Sureté. In August 1945, the English troops came to Saigon to disarm the Japanese troops. All French citizens were freed but were required to remain within certain compounds in Saigon since the internal security of the country was still in the hands of the Japanese. The Japanese continued to make considerable propaganda against the French at this time. Meanwhile Tonkin was occupied by Nationalist Chinese troops.

British troops remained in Viet Nam until December 1945. During the period of British intervention, the Viet Minh seized direct control of all police agencies in the country. The Viet Minh replaced all the Japanese within the Sureté, and one NGUYEN-VAN-TRAN was placed in charge. The Viet Minh were actually in control of all governmental activity in Indo-China, having placed their people in the various offices of the government under the guise of being nationalists. The Viet Minh attempted to secure the backing of General Gracey, British Commander at Saigon, but were not successful. General Gracey realized that he could not rely upon the Japanese to maintain order and security in the country. Therefore, he re-armed between 2,000 to 3,000 French troops, who had been former Japanese prisoners and who were being restricted to cantonments in Saigon. When the Viet Minh learned of General Gracey's action, they retired from Saigon, leaving terrorists and saboteurs behind. This occurred during the night of September 22, 1945. The city of Saigon was re-occupied, so to speak, by the French at that time, with the willing help of the British and the unwilling help of the Japanese. Many Sureté records were burned by the Viet Minh. The command and control of the Sureté was again in French hands on the morning of September 23, 1945, under one Major Pauwels, who had formerly been in the French Sureté in China. From September 23, 1945, until about the last week in December 1945, the French and British controlled only the city of Saigon; Cholon was still in the hands of the Viet Minh.

PERIOD 1945 TO PRESENT.

The French Army returned to Saigon during the last week of 1945, with approximately two regiments. Military operations were begun immediately to drive the Viet Minh out of the Saigon-Cholon area. Many Japanese, particularly non-commissioned officers and enlisted men, had joined with the Viet Minh. Once the larger cities of Indo-China had been cleared of Viet Minh, efforts were made to clean-out the rural areas. As the Army advanced in all directions, the Sureté command personnel

once again returned to the various provinces. In May 1950, the entire Sureté organization was turned over to the Vietnamese under the command of Nguyen Van Day, who was a former judge and a French citizen. Inasmuch as Day had had no police or command experience, the Sureté efficiency began to drop. In 1951, terrorism reached high proportions in Saigon. For example, a grenade was thrown into the Pagode Restaurant on Catinat Street, killing three Vietnamese and wounding a French Sureté Commissaire. A few days later, another French Sureté Commissaire, Mr. Marcel Bazin, was murdered by two Viet Minh using pistols in a daytime assault which occurred across the street from the Pagode Restaurant. Mr. Day was removed from office. One General Mai Huu Xuan was put in charge of the Sureté around July 1951. In less than 90 days, Saigon became calm and secure as the result of proper management of the Sureté and local police forces.

Under General Xuan, the Sureté was well directed and operated efficiently. President Nguyen Van Tam decided to remove Xuan for reasons not known by Mr. Lecan. Xuan was sent to France on some sort of a mission. He was replaced by a former Prefect named Le Quang Ho in about March of 1952. Ho retained control of the Sureté for about 18 months, until about September of 1953. Sureté operations became inefficient as a result of Ho's habit of playing favorites among Sureté personnel. Ho even hired one of his concubines, one Nguyen Thi Cua, as a stenographer secretary.

When Bao Dai removed President Tam in September 1953, Prince Buu Loc became President. He immediately removed Ho as Director General of the Sureté and put General Xuan in charge once again.

In about January 1954, it became known that Bao Dai had already signed an order making Lai Van Sang, Director of the Sureté, replacing Xuan. Sang was a Binh Xuyen military expert. Buu Loc refused to confirm Bao Dai's selection of Sang and pigeon-holed Bao Dai's order. It was necessary for Sang to wait until May 1, 1954, when Buu Loc's cabinet was dismissed by Bao Dai, before he became Director General of the Sureté. Xuan became a Colonel in the Vietnamese Army.

Immediately, Sang replaced all headquarters personnel with Binh Xuyen personnel, from his immediate assistants down to the chauffeur levels. Assistant Director Ton Ngoc Chac was made a secretary. Mr. Charles Lecan, a principle commissaire at headquarters, was demoted to Brigade Commander at Can Tho; Mr. Tran Ban Thanh, the present Director of the Sureté for SVN, was sent to the Army as a Major.

All the Binh Xuyen personnel acted and operated as though they were legitimate Sureté agents for the benefit of the general population. Actually, they were selling various licenses, passes, and permits for high prices to anyone who had the purchase price. They controlled the shipment and sale of Laotian opium in Viet Nam and they controlled the gambling dens and houses of prostitution in Cholon. They also controlled the importation, slaughter, and sale of pork for all of the Saigon-Cholon area. Prices of pork were raised in order to increase their illegal profits. They also obtained control of the salt water fishing industry.

The Binh Xuyen carried out several assassinations of certain Vietnamese officials who had or were opposed to them. Further information regarding Binh Xuyen activities will be developed and reported in the future.

In July 1954, Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem became President of Viet Nam. On several occasions, Diem ordered Sang to leave the Sureté. Sang refused on the grounds that he had been appointed by Bao Dai, not by Diem and, therefore, did not recognize Diem's orders as having any value.

Finally, in May 1955, President Diem's offensive against the Binh Xuyen was carried off successfully. As the Binh Xuyen left the Sureté, they took arms, ammunition and vehicles with them. The Binh Xuyen were not able to take the weapons, ammunition and vehicles of the Sureté located in the provinces.

General Le became Director General in June 1955 - Mr. Tran Ba Thanh again regained his original position.

The Binh Xuyen stole the more important files dealing with various personalities and political organizations, etc. It is believed that these records are now in France.

All Binh Xuyen personnel were removed from the Sureté immediately. Those former agents who had been fired by the Binh Xuyen were rehired. However, there is the possibility that the Binh Xuyen were able to leave a few of their people behind within the Sureté.

At the present time, the Sureté in Free Viet Nam has a total of about 6,517 men, who are distributed throughout the country on a regional basis. Each of the three regions of Viet Nam has a Sureté headquarters. Those headquarters are located in Saigon, Hue and Dalat. The entire organization is controlled by a general headquarters, located in Saigon, which is responsible to the Minister of Interior.

As additional or more correct data regarding the background and history of this organization is developed, supplementary reports will be submitted.