

***The Last Valley: The Battle that Doomed the French Empire and Led America into Vietnam.***  
**By Martin Windrow. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005. ISBN 0-306-811386-6.**  
**Maps. Photographs. Appendices. Glossary. Notes and sources. Select bibliography. Index.**  
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In Roger Nimier's 1950 novel, *Le hussard bleu*, French *cavaliers*, in armored cars not on armored horses, drive a reeling Wehrmacht back across the Rhine. A lone cavalry scout peers beyond that horizon of time and place toward "l'heure fatale où le bateau s'ébranlera pour l'Indochine," persuaded that "l'horrible événement revivra...là-bas," where "...nous aurons une vie coupable et rêvée" (428). So it is that World War II peels ineluctably into Indochina just as Indochina peels—or so warns us at any rate the imperious colonated title of this return to that *cuvette* along the Vietnamese border with Laos in the spring of 1954—into Vietnam. The debacle that traumatized France and separated her—once and for all perhaps—from her empire, from her army, from her grandeur and that shadowed yet another, soon to separate America from *hers*—if once and for all, we shall see—is a twice-told tale, of course. Windrow, a journalist and *not* a historian, has assembled, reviewed, analyzed nonetheless an impressive clot of documentation (possibly *all* of it, though not necessarily anything new or untoward) and contrived to spade this ground yet once more... with the passion of a fascinated amateur, one commanding narrative skills.

And narrative we have in *Last Valley*, larded with informed disquisitions on anything from the foundation of the French colonial regime to the hydraulics of gunshot wounds, from the mechanics of cargo parachute deployment to the ballistics of high angle artillery fire, from the accessorization of French jungle uniforms to the geometry of trench design (the French commander on the ground, late in the battle, actually put in a request for World War I trench periscopes. Denied, predictably. Where would we find those?), all this punctuating at strategic intervals—much like the sidebars in a magazine article—the somber account of parachute battalions dropped into a far-off jungle basin astride what was thought to be an axis of vulnerability... *and dropped and dropped and dropped*, the last few volunteers jumping in just hours before the doomed garrison at last had—not to capitulate—simply to stop defending itself, vestigial French vanity, of which Windrow, a Brit, is unsparing: "...one must make allowance," he says, "for Gallic phrase-making, which cannot function without the sound of trumpets" (586). But through the mind-numbing order of battle recitation emerges the human saga with its inevitable and gnawing question: "What *were* they thinking?" Windrow is at some pains to retrieve commerce among the *dramatis personae* of this tragedy—Navarre, de Castries, Cogny, Langlais, Bigeard—all of whom surface in French affairs subsequently and with a chip on their shoulder, *la colère des centurions*, as the novelist Lartéguy would say, for this battle was fought almost exclusively by paras and legionnaires, neither group contaminated by the dubious *drôle de guerre*, yet both clearly and nakedly abandoned. This is a volume for the lover of detail. Windrow treads lightly on the cosmic dimension of the battle, firmly on the human... till the last page, that is. The French army, concludes the author, "...had come to see Dien Bien Phu and its aftermath as the defining moment. They responded with that terrible cry of pain which pretends to free a man from his sworn duty, and promises such chaos to come: *Nous sommes trahis!*"