

Filipino Involvement in the French-Spanish Campaign in Indochina 1858 - 1862 by Nigel Gooding

French Indochina was part of the French colonial empire in southeast Asia, consisting of a federation of protectorates of Tonkin and Annam and one directly ruled colony, Cochin China. The capital of French Indochina was Hanoi.

Cochinchina, from Cochin China (known locally as Nam Ky, meaning 'southern region') is a name for the southernmost part of Vietnam, lying southeast of Cambodia. During the French colonial period, it was called Cochinchine in French and its capital was at Saigon. Annam formed the central region and Tonkin the northern region, however these were fairly arbitrary in their geographical extent.

The reigning emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty of Vietnam, Tu Duc, had been on the throne since 1847. The persecution of foreign missionaries and native Christians, on the rise since 1820, came to full flower under Tu Duc and led inevitably to clashes with the West. The emperor feared that Christians in Vietnam might act as a fifth column and deliver Vietnam to the British or the French. There was also the very real possibility that Vietnamese Christians would unite behind one of Tu Duc's dynastic rivals. He had already been faced with one such rebellion in the north.

In the late 1850s, under Napoleon III and the Second Empire, Paris was showing renewed interest in overseas expansion. France was driven both by a self-proclaimed "civilizing mission" and by a nagging fear within Parisian diplomatic and commercial circles that Britain, which already had acquired Singapore and Hong Kong, would snatch up Vietnam if the French didn't beat them to it. In this atmosphere, Napoleon III proved a receptive audience for French missionaries who insisted that Vietnam was ripe for the taking.

The bishop of Tonkin (northern Vietnam), Monsignor Jose Sanjurjo Diaz, was arrested and executed on July 20th 1857. Triggered by the bishop's death and ongoing missionary propaganda, the decision to invade Vietnam was made by Napoleon III in July 1857.

The naval commander of French forces in the Far East, Vice Admiral Charles Rigault de Genouilly, long an advocate of French military action against Vietnam, was ordered to attack the harbour and city of Tourane (modern Da Nang) and to turn it into a French military base. Genouilly sailed into the Bay of Tourane on August 31st 1858 with a flotilla of 14 ships of France's China Seas Naval Division. Tourane was the principal trading port on Vietnam's central coast. The following day, Genouilly's ships shelled and neutralised the gun positions that guarded the city, and on September 2nd 1858, a Franco-Spanish force of 2,500 troops landed.

It was to prove a far more difficult operation than the French anticipated. After six months of inconclusive fighting, they found themselves short of food and suffering from cholera, malaria and dysentery. In February 1859, a frustrated Vice Admiral de Genouilly decided to leave a garrison at Tourane and sail south to seize Saigon and Cochinchina's much-needed stores of rice.

On February 16th 1859, Genouilly's ships took station opposite the Gia Dinh Citadel. This large earth-and-masonry fort, the most important in Cochinchina, was located about 800 meters from the Saigon River and on the south side of Thi Nghe Creek. What transpired was brief and decisive. There was an exchange of fire between de Genouilly's ships and the cannon at the Citadel. When Vietnamese fire began to slacken, French and Spanish troops went ashore. Under the cover of continued shelling from naval guns and of small-arms fire from riflemen stationed in the ships' topmasts, two companies of marine infantry and naval landing parties, all under the command of General Charles-Gabriel-Felicité Martin des Pallires, formed up in column and attacked the Citadel's northeast wall. Des Pallires was supported by a group of engineers and a troop of Spanish light cavalry from the Philippines. By 10am, they had scaled the walls of the Citadel and put the Vietnamese defenders to flight.

Before Genouilly could take advantage of his victory, he received word that his forces in Tourane were in desperate straits. The admiral left a garrison of about 1,000 men at Saigon and sailed north again. What he found was discouraging. The French and Spanish troops were dying from disease at a rate of about 100 per month. Any hope of reinforcements was dashed when word reached the French fleet that Napoleon III had declared war on Austria in May 1859. Disgusted by the lack of support, Genouilly asked to be relieved of command in October. In March 1860, the French finally abandoned Tourane and sailed north to join the British, who had resumed the West's war with China.

The thousand-man French garrison left at Saigon was strong enough to defend what the French had thus far gained, including the Chinese commercial centre of Cholon. Without reinforcements, however, they were unable to capitalize on their position and expand into the hinterland of Cochinchina. Vietnamese forces to the west of the town steadily pushed trench works toward the French lines and conducted increasingly costly raids.

When the Treaty of Peking ended the war in China in January 1861, Vice Admiral Léonard Charner, the new commander of the China Seas Naval Division, was ordered to relieve the French garrison at Saigon and complete the conquest of Cochinchina. In mid-February 1861, Charner sailed south from Shanghai with the 3rd Marine Infantry Regiment and six detached companies from the 4th Regiment (a total of 1,200 men under the command of a Lt. Col. Favre and Lt. Col. Jules Marcelin Albert Testard); the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion (600 men under a Major Comte); 200 artillerymen (commanded by Lt. Col. Pierre François Crouzat) manning 10 30mm and 80mm field howitzers, as well as 12-pounder and 4-pounder cannons; a detachment of engineers; and 800 sailors organized as naval infantry and another 100 formed into boarding parties (both elements commanded by naval Captain François Théodore de Lapelin). These forces rendezvoused at Saigon with a Spanish force (under Colonel Carlos Palanca y Gutiérrez) consisting of 200 infantry and 70 mixed cavalry (Filipino, African chasseurs and Cochinchina spahis) commanded by Captain Charles-douard Hocquard. Including the men available from the Saigon garrison, Charner's small army now numbered about 3,500 men.

The Vietnamese attempts to re-conquer the occupied area failed and on April 13th 1862, the Vietnamese government was forced to cede those territories to France. Anti-French agitation continued however until 1866, when the western provinces of Nam Bo (Chau Doc, Ha Tie, and Vinh Long) were also occupied by the French.

In 1860, most of the Spanish expeditionary force under the command of Admiral Bernardo Ruiz de Lanzarote was withdrawn on French request. All that then remained was a small garrison at Saigon, Commander and Plenipotentiary for Indochinese Affairs, lead by Col. Carlos Palanca y Gutiérrez. This garrison was soon abandoned by the Spanish government and became completely dependent on French supply. Likewise the Spanish authorities showed no interest at all for the attempt to obtain some of the Vietnamese territory and all Spain eventually got in 1862 were some commercial concessions. In 1862, the Filipino soldiers were withdrawn, while the French continued to expand their control of this area. The last Spanish troops returned to the Philippines in 1863.

In 1864, all the French territories in Southern Vietnam were declared to be the New French colony of Cochinchina. In 1867, the provinces of Chau Doc, Ha Tien and Vinh Long were added to the French controlled territory. In 1887, Cochinchina, which had formally been proclaimed a French colony in 1864, became part of the Federation of French Indochina.

In 1933 the Spratly islands were annexed to French Cochinchina. On July 28th 1941, imperial Japanese troops were based in French Cochinchina under defacto occupation, followed on March 9th 1945 by formal Japanese occupation until August 15th 1945. Between 1945 and 1946 Cochinchina was nominally part of the Empire of Vietnam. On June 14th 1949, it became part of the (Associated) State of Vietnam.

Philippine Military Mail Covers

Two Spanish Naval Ships (**JORGE JUAN** and **ELCANO**) made regular mail and supply runs between Manila and Indochina between 1858 and 1862 to support the Filipino soldiers in the French-Spanish Expeditionary Force.

Depicted below are some of the surviving covers addressed to Ignacio Garreta, an engineer on the Spanish warship "Jorge Juan".



19 NOVEMBER 1859: MANILA TO TURON (COCHINCHINA)

5-Cuartos 1854 issue franked with Circular Dotted Cancel and Large Baeza Circular Date Stamp

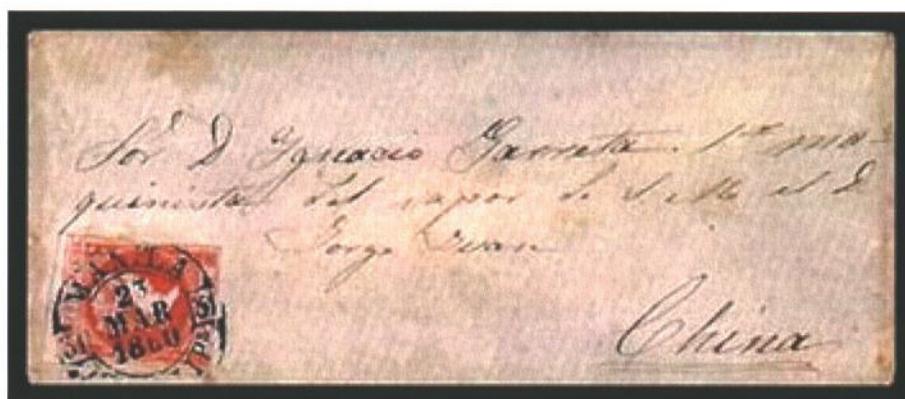


7 DECEMBER 1859: MANILA TO TURON (COCHINCHINA)

Pair of 5-Cuartos 1859 issue franked with Circular Dotted Cancel and Large Baeza Cancel



MARCH 1, 1860: MANILA TO WHAMPOA (CHINA)
 5-Cuartos 1855 issue tied with Circular Dotted Cancellation and
 Large Baeza Departure Circular Date Stamp in Black



23 MARCH 1860: MANILA TO CHINA
 5-Cuartos 1859 issue franked with Small Black Baeza Circular Date Stamp



13 JUNE 1860: MANILA TO CAVITE
 5-Cuartos 1859 issue franked with Large Black Baeza Circular Date Stamp
 Correspondence whilst the ship 'Jorge Juan' was anchored at the Cavite Spanish Naval Yard
 (Don Peterson Collection)