

Rach Cat Fort - The Largest French-Built Strategic Fort In Vietnam In Early 20th Century

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Abstract: In 1900, at the risk of the spread of World War I, the French strengthened the defensive lines on the southwestern coast of France as well as the forts along the Germany-France border. In Vietnam, after occupying all six provinces in the South, in order to protect Sai Gon - the capital of the six provinces from other Western powerhouses, the French built a coastal defensive line stretching from present-day Vung Tau to Can Gio (Sai Gon) and to Can Duoc (Long An) to counter the attacks from the coast to the mainland. Long Huu Island, located between the three rivers of Can Giuoc (Rach Cat), Vam Co and Soai Rap (Nha Be) was chosen as the place to build one of the largest military forts in Indochina at that time - Rach Cat Fort (the French also called it "River Defense System" and "Cap Saint-Jacques"). This is one of the earliest military buildings and the most fortified forts across Indochina, which played a crucial role to the French in Southern Vietnam. In the course of its existence, Rach Cat Fort witnessed many military operations. Currently, despite deteriorated parts, the structure of Rach Cat Fort is still intact. With its unique historical value as well as aesthetic value as an old European-style fort, Rach Cat Fort has been ranked as a National Historic Site and is being developed by local authorities into a tourist attraction that attaches historical relics to eco-tourism.

Keywords: Rach Cat Fort, Long Huu, function, operation, Indochina

1. Introduction

In the 90s of the 20th century, at the risk of the spread of World War I, after occupying all six provinces in Southern Vietnam, the French strengthened the defenses of military installations left by the Nguyen Dynasty and modernized them with blockhouses, forts and the most modern guns in the world at that time. In order to protect Sai Gon - the capital of the six provinces from other Western powerhouses (Germany, Austria, etc.), the French built a coastal defensive line stretching from present-day Vung Tau to Can Gio (Sai Gon) and to Can Duoc (Long An) to counter the attacks from the coast to the mainland. The junction of three rivers: Can Giuoc (Rach Cat), Vam Co and Soai Rap (Nha Be) was selected as the strategic point to stop warships from the sea to Sai Gon and control the waterway transport system from Sai Gon to six Southern provinces. The Sai Gon maritime route to other countries was also within the firing range of this fort (Philippe Devillers, 2006, p.213).

Long Huu Island (formerly belonged to Long Huu Village, Loc Thanh Ha Canton, Cho Lon Province, today belongs to Long Huu Dong Commune, Can Duoc District, Long An Province) is located at the estuary of three major rivers (Can Giuoc (Rach Cat), Vam Co and Soai Rap (Nha Be), and has a particularly important geopolitical position. From this place, the waterway and sea transport system from the Western region to Sai Gon - Cho Lon spreading to southeastern provinces, and vice versa, can be controlled. Especially, this route also leads to Laos, Cambodia and Thailand (CDDPC, 1998, p.81). French military officers at that time believed that any forces that want to invade Vietnam have to enter Soai Rap River to capture Sai Gon (Phan Khoang 1969, p.53). Therefore, deploying remote defense (outside the estuary of Soai Rap River) is the optimal measure, instead of allowing the enemy to easily go deep inland and approach Sai Gon. After a survey period, in 1903, the French chose Long Huu Island as the place to build one of the largest military forts in Indochina at that time: Rach Cat Fort (Cochinchina Governor, 1916, File No. RC/21). This is a military fort with unique architecture, which was designed after the architecture of French military garrisons: many platforms were built within the fort to mount combat weapons. Rach Cat Fort truly became an untouchable fort of the French in Indochina. As described by the French press, Rach Cat Fort was built very massively at a cost of about 7 million Francs (Cochinchina Governor, 1916, File No. RC/21), 3.5 times higher than the cost for construction of Hanoi Opera House (Trung Dung, 2018). Although in the course of its existence, Rach Cat Fort did not maximize the role associated with it by the French, it was still the place where troops of France, the US and the Government of the Republic of Vietnam stationed to conduct military and defensive operations. In each period, Rach Cat Fort had different functions and activities. Over 100 years of establishment and development, Rach Cat Fort today is still quite intact and has become a symbol of European-style military construction works in Vietnam, with has great historical and architectural values that can be promoted to become a tourist attraction.

Until now, there has not been much research on Rach Cat Fort. Some typical research works include: *Profile of Rach Cat Fort* compiled by Long An Province Department of Culture and Information in 2000. This work introduces Rach Cat Fort in a quite adequate and detailed manner, including its name, location, events that took

place here, related historical figures, properties, type and survey of the relic, etc. This can be considered the most in-depth and complete research on Rach Cat Fort to date. In addition, there are also *Can Duoc: Land and People*, another compilation of Long An Province Department of Culture and Information, published in 1988, which is a collection of articles about Can Duoc. In which, the authors mentioned the development of Long Huu Island and the formation of waterway transport system, markets and the strategic location of this piece of land. The *Long An Geographical Book*, published in 1989 fully presented information of the location, history, culture and people of Long An, including the position of Rach Cat Fort. These works enable us to understand the reasons for the construction of Rach Cat Fort as well as its importance to French colonists.

In the process of conducting this research, we relied on the following main sources of information: (1) field survey of Rach Cat Fort and interview conducted by the group of authors with witnesses and managers of Rach Cat Fort; (2) personal research works of Vietnamese and foreign researchers associated with their experiences and observations of Rach Cat Fort; (3) French archives currently stored at Vietnam National Archives Centers, describing policies and process of construction and operation of Rach Cat Fort.

This article uses historical and logic research methods to clarify the international and regional context in the 16th and 17th centuries; policies and construction process of Rach Cat Fort; functions and operations of Rach Cat Fort through historical periods. On the basis of assessing potentials, historical and architectural values, we hope to be able to evoke some experience for promoting the values of this building in order to serve tourism development. In addition, we also use interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary methods, such as: analysis, statistics, comparison, etc. to observe and assess research issues in a more scientific and objective way.

2. The competition of Western countries during the colonization in Southeast Asia

The development of capitalism in Europe entailed journeys to find consumption markets in the 15th and 16th centuries. Journeys for geographical discoveries sponsored by Spanish and Portuguese royal families once again restored maritime routes connecting the East and the West. Western countries turned this opportunity into a race to penetrate the Far East market; the most successful of which probably were the Netherlands, Britain, France, and later the US, Germany, etc. This process led to the establishment of colonies of Western countries in Asia, including Southeast Asia in general and Vietnam in particular (Nguyen Manh Dung, 2016, p.321).

The colonization process of Western countries causes many losses to indigenous peoples and earned profits for capitalism. Among these countries, France was slower than other rivals (especially Britain) (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.68). In 1668, the French East India Company (CIO) was founded and quickly established businesses in Surate and Pondichéry (India). From these business places, CIO promoted the search for market in the Far East. Since 1669, the Northern region of Vietnam had been noticed by the French, and in 1680, the first shipment of CIO arrived at the area with the establishment of a trading post in Pho Hien (Nguyen Manh Dung, 2016, pp.95-97). CIO arrived at the Southern region a bit later: it was not until 1744 that De Rothe, a representative of CIO, came to offer trade relations with Lord Nguyen, and the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) first came to the South to open up relations with Vietnam following the scheme of the government of King Louis (Vu Duy Men, 1988).

However, the "fate" between France and Vietnam originated from Christian priests. Vietnam's political turmoils in the late 18th century facilitated Christian officials to approach Nguyen Anh. In 1783, fleeing from the Tay Son Army, Lord Nguyen (Nguyen Anh) brought his family to Con Dao and asked the French to help him take back the throne. As a result, in 1787, the "Treaty of Versailles" was signed by Lord Nguyen and Count De Mantmarin (representative of King Louis XVI of France). According to the Treaty, the government of Lord Nguyen would cede to the French the sovereignty of the sea estuary in Da Nang and Con Dao islands in exchange for 4 warships, 1.200 infantry soldiers, 200 gunners, 250 African soldiers and ammunition for the fight against the Tay Son Dynasty (Ta Chi Dai Truong, 1973, pp.182-183). However, due to the overthrow of French feudalism during the French Revolution (1789), legally speaking, the Treaty of Versailles was invalid. However, this had become the pretext for the French invasion in the second half of the 19th century.

The political turmoils due to the French Revolution in 1789 and later the Napoleonic Wars caused France to focus on domestic affairs and issues on the European battlefield. Therefore, it took almost 70 years for the French to settle down their own issues before finding a way back to the Far East. Looking at the colonization map of this period in Southeast Asia, we can see that only the Indochinese Peninsula remained its autonomy. At that time, Indonesia was a Dutch colony; the Philippines was a colony of Spain and later the United States; while Burma, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong belonged to Britain (Nguyen Manh Dung, 2016).

This development made the French anxious and feel the urge to act. The gateway to Southeast Asia was considered a springboard to enter the vast market in China. Especially, the fact that Britain, the arch-rival of France gained great advantages in Asia further raised the French's concerns. Therefore, promoting the invasion of Vietnam was of interest of the French politicians as Britain found its way to enter China through the Opium War in 1842. In 1844, the French established a concession in Shanghai (Nguyen Phan Quang, 2004, p.221). In April 1857, Napoleon III established a Commission to study the Cochinchina (Vietnam's Southern region) issue, which supported the invasion of Vietnam: "The committee recognizes that this is a political opportunity that needs to be grasped. As the British is going to establish their concession in China, we the French must also find our share, not in China - where we will encounter envious rivals and possibly big difficulties, but in a country that is not too far from China with great advantages in terms of maritime travels and commerce. That place is where we find neither opposition or competition, and we can avoid a direct confrontation with the British" (Philippe Devillers, 2006, pp.37-38).

At the end of August 1858, the joint army forces of France and Spain attacked Da Nang Bay by warships, starting the invasion of Vietnam and then the entire Indochina. However, the "quick attack, quick win" plan of the French failed, forcing them to switch to the partial invasion strategy (Nguyen Van Kiem, 2003). And it took nearly 40 years for the French to stabilize the situation before embarking on colonial exploitation. Immediately after the pacification of Cochinchina, the French organized expeditions to the Mekong upstream to find the way to China (Pouyane, 1994, pp.76-78). It can be seen that searching for market, especially entering the Chinese market was the biggest goal of the French. In the process of achieving this goal, Indochina again became the springboard for the French invasion. However, the race to conquer this colony always had hidden risks for Western countries (including France). Because, in the large context of colonization in Southeast Asia, the French started to exploit Indochina in a period of uncertainty due to the competition between the US, Germany and Japan. Thanks to new science and technology achievements, these countries quickly rose to become new imperial states (Phan Khoang, 1969). With great potential but few colonies, causing wars to rebalance the market was the inevitable trend in the imperialist period. Also, in the Indochinese Peninsula, persistent disputes between Thailand and Cambodia often led to conflicts. As the protector of Cambodia, France had to make a lot of interventions, which led to conflicts many times (Philippe Devillers, 2006). Thus, the risk of colonial competition still haunted the French. They often worried about and strengthened the defense of Indochina during the colonial period.

Particularly in Cochinchina, the French paid pretty much attention to the defense at important river and sea estuaries. The terrain of long coastline with many estuaries leading deep into the land made it significant to build defensive works at these estuaries. Therefore, the French built in Cochinchina a number of important military works such as the fort in Nui Lon, Vung Tau Province and Rach Cat Fort on Long Huu Island, Can Duoc District, Long An Province (Pouyane, 1994, p.69). If the artillery system in Nui Lon, Ba Ria Vung Tau was significant for coastal defense and preventing the intrusion from the East Sea into Sai Gon through Can Gio Estuary, Rach Cat Fort on Long Huu Island, Can Duoc Province had military significance in controlling waterway transport system from the Western region to Sai Gon (CDDPC, 2005). These two fortifications helped to closely guard the doors to access to Sai Gon on water. At the same time, Rach Cat Fort also helped to control and ensure waterway security for the important transport route from the southwestern region to Sai Gon.

3. The construction of Rach Cat Fort

The land of Long Huu consists of two communes: Long Huu Dong and Long Huu Tay, which belong to Can Duoc District, Long An Province and are located on an island separated from the district center by Nuoc Man Canal. This island is the easternmost land of Long An Province located on the downstream of Soai Rap River to the East Sea, with an area of more than 3,500ha, surrounded by Soai Rap River, Vam Co River and Nuoc Man Canal which connects the two rivers (CDDPC, 1988, p.121). Regarding geographical position, Long Huu Island borders Can Giuoc District in the north (Rach Cat River is the boundary); Go Cong District of Tien Giang Province in the south (Vam Co River is the boundary); Rung Sac of Can Gio District, Ho Chi Minh City (Soai Rap River is the boundary); and Phuoc Dong Commune (Nuoc Man Canal is the boundary) (CDDPC, 1988, pp.121-122).

Long Huu Island has geomorphic characteristics of the Mekong Delta, with interlaced canal system and is surrounded by 3 large rivers and 12 inland rivers, the tidal of which is a favorable point for economic development and defense as well as military attack (Ho Son Dai, 2005). Due to its especially important location on the waterway and seaway to Sai Gon, the French conducted survey and built one of the largest military defensive works in Indochina at that time on this island. In 1902, the French carried out a field investigation on this island and a year later (1903) started to build one of the largest military defensive works in Indochina at that time: Rach Cat Fort (LADCI, 1978, p.21). This is one of the earliest military buildings and the most fortified forts across Indochina.

In terms of construction, Rach Cat Fort covered an area of 30,000m² with a length of 300m, a width of 100 m and 5 floors (2 above ground and 3 underground). 22 ha of land surrounding the fort was marked with boundary markers (Cochinchina Governor, 1916, File No. RC/21). Currently, Rach Cat Fort has an area of 100,893m², the area around its walls alone is 11,889m² (Trung Dung, 2018). The fort includes two building blocks: the above-ground block consisting of 2 floors, and the underground block consisting of 3 floors. Rach Cat Fort is designed in arc shape. To ensure the defense, the fort is surrounded by a system of walls of 60 to 80 cm thick, with doors made of 10cm thick steel (LADCI, 2000). The wide moat system around also helps to strengthen the fort's defense. Loopholes are arranged densely around the outer wall system in order to deal with attacks on land (Cochinchina Governor, 1916, File No. RC/21).

Rach Cat Fort is a 5-floor construction (3 underground and 2 above ground) surrounded by concrete walls that are strong enough to withstand the attacks by weapons of that time. At the top floor, there are two platforms with a diameter of 6m, on which 4 large cannons (type 605 mm) are mounted (LADCI, 2000). This structure is made from cast iron of 10 cm thick. The entrance consists of a 70-cm thick, 5-m high and 84-m long gate with two rows of loopholes. The main gate of the Fort is 2.4 m high with two 1.2-m long doors at the center of the wall. The arched gate has an inscription in French: "Ouvreges du Rach Cat 1910". To get inside the Fort, soldiers must cross a 17-m long, 2.5m wide cement bridge over the moat. Later, the French built a series of reservoirs of 2m high attached to the wall, thus sealed the loopholes below (Cochinchina Governor, 1916, File No. RC/21).

Below the cannon platforms is the fourth floor, which is divided into several bow-shaped rooms. This area was used as the place to supply ammunition as well as electricity power from a generator to operate the artillery system. This power source was also supplied to the underground floors. The fourth floor also has two rotating turrets to increase damages in combat. In addition to two cannons, the French also built a row of rooms of 2.5-m high with stairs leading up to the roof of the fort (LADCI, 1978). Along with two iron cannons, Rach Cat Fort's defense was also strengthened with many blockhouses where machine guns were mounted. On the opposite of the fort's gate, machine guns were mounted on a 1.3-m high blockhouse. And on the outer ends of this blockhouse, the French built two concrete cannon platforms to mount two cannons: the left one had the symbols of M 138, R 1927, 5500 kg and the right one had the symbols of M 138, 1924, R 1927 N4, 5500 K (Cochinchina Governor, 1916, File No. RC/21).

The most important part of Rach Cat Fort was its artillery at both ends, which were considered the most modern type at that time. Each turret had two cannons with barrel diameter of up to 240 mm (Cochinchina Governor, 1914, File No. QĐ/212). Each weighed 140 tons, and the ammunition dedicated for these cannon weighed up to 62 kg. The maximum firing range of each cannon was 22.7 km. These cannons were mounted on a thick steel turret, designed to help rotate them at 360° angle, thus increase maneuverability during combat (LADCI, 2000). With this firing range, Rach Cat Fort can control the situation in the entire sea estuary to Vung Tau as well as the areas of Can Giuoc, Go Cong, Can Gio, Sai Gon (Son Lam, 2020).

Throughout the French domination, Rach Cat Fort was repeatedly repaired and added artillery arrangements. After the Japanese coup d'état (March 9, 1945) in Vietnam, Japanese troops occupied the fort and destroyed many fortifications there. As the French re-invaded Vietnam, Rach Cat Fort continued to be occupied by French troops and became a place where Vietnamese revolutionary patriotic soldiers were imprisoned. During the war against the US (1954-1975), the artillery at Rach Cat Fort continued to be used by the Sai Gon army to sweep the lower areas of Can Duoc District, Go Cong Province, Can Gio District, etc. After the South was completely liberated (1975), Rach Cat Fort was garrisoned by a troop of Long An Province.

4. Functions and operations of Rach Cat Fort

The construction of Rach Cat Fort started in 1903 and was basically completed in 1910. The French quickly arranged for personnel and resources to turn it into an important military fort to control both military and commercial routes in the downstream part of Mekong River. In the second half of the 19th century, Britain, Germany, Japan, etc. also joined the colonial competition in Indochina. Therefore, after conquering Cochinchina, the French clearly demonstrated their plan to monopolize Indochina. For potential enemies like Britain, Germany, Austria, etc., the French understood that if the warships of those countries want to attack Sai Gon through the waterway from Vung Tau to Soai Rap River, they must be intercepted in Vung Tau and Rach Cat. Therefore, since the beginning of construction of Rach Cat Fort, the French purposely created a link between Sai Gon - Rach Cat - Vung Tau through radio system.

In 1903-1945, the primary function of Rach Cat Fort was to defend and supply to other French fortifications in Cochinchina. To perform this function, the French designed and built a rather large wharf with length of more than

50 m and width of 2.4 m (CDDPC, 2005). This was used as a docking area for military ships and stations to supply ammunition or resupply weapons to other localities. With strong firepower from modern, long-range cannons and observatories, people inside the fort can monitor surrounding locations within a radius of 20 km and control the whole sea estuary to Vung Tau as well as the area of Can Giuoc, Go Cong and even the area close to Sai Gon.

In Indochina, Rach Cat Fort was included in the French defensive fortification system connecting Phnom Penh - Sai Gon - Rach Cat - Vung Tau (Pouyanne, 1994). Under the French colonial rule, Saigon and Phnom Penh military divisions, the 3rd Brigade and the defenses of Vung Tau Fleet were often headed by one French general (Huynh Minh, 2003). With the above preparations, the French had well prepared to fight other Western countries if the world war spread to Indochina. However, the plan of "anticipating" World War I of the French did not prove to be successful. In 1914, World War I broke out, but Indochina was not the main battlefield. So, the most modern weapons at that time at Rach Cat Fort was in excess compared to the French defense needs. The French decided to withdraw troops and 4 cannons at Rach Cat Fort to support other battlefields. After World War I, the French troop at the fort consisted of only Vietnamese and Cambodian soldiers under the command of a French general (Ho Son Dai, 2010).

Since 1930, the situation in the world and Vietnam had undergone many changes. Japan revealed its conspiracy to invade Indochina. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, on February 3, 1930, the Communist Party of Vietnam was established, and the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam thrived, causing the French to face many difficulties. In 1939-1945, the French colonial government in Indochina encountered two great challenges: the threat of Japanese troops occupying Indochina and the growing revolutionary movement in Vietnam. In addition, in 1939, World War II broke out, and the risk of Japanese fascist invasion of Indochina was higher. In response to the above changes, the French strengthened the defense of Rach Cat Fort: building two more platforms on either side of the fort to mount two M138 cannons; adding seven 75-mm cannons, building water reservoirs and more houses outside (Thach Phuong, 1989), turning Rach Cat Fort into a show of strength of the French colonial government and a gathering place of forces to suppress the Vietnamese revolutionary movement as well as to prepare for the Japanese invasion of Vietnam.

On March 9, 1945, the Japanese coup d'état in Vietnam was successful, and the Japanese troops took over Rach Cat Fort. Some weapons inside Rach Cat Fort were removed and took elsewhere by the Japanese. On August 24, 1945, an insurrection took place in Can Duoc and quickly ended in victory, leading to the occupation of Rach Cat Fort by the youth pioneer force of Long Huu commune. Aiming to turn this fort into a revolutionary base, this force repaired the M138 cannons and brought ammunition to aid other places. Two platoons were sent to the fort to guard the weapons and monitor the travel of ships and boats, contributing to the defense and protection of the newly-established revolutionary government (LHCPEC, 2007).

On September 23, 1945, the French with supports from British and Japanese forces went with their plan to retake Saigon and expand the war to Southern provinces. In November 1945, the French defeated and occupied Can Duoc, and reclaimed Rach Cat Fort. They decided to increase the weapons and soldiers stationing at the fort. A French troop and mercenaries as well as a platoon of Vietnamese soldiers were arranged to garrison here. The number of soldiers stationed here was up to 40-50 people (LADCI, 1978). The French command consisted of 4 people, all with their own code name, namely Sectiecvr (Phu Lam), Quotiver (Sai Rap), Soquourtier (Can Duoc), Quertur (Can Giuoc) (LADCI, 1978). More barracks were built and the stilt house was repaired, turning the fort into a residence for soldiers and their wives and children.

From 1947, Rach Cat Fort was both a French military fort and a prison where Vietnamese revolutionary soldiers were detained. Prisoners at Rach Cat Fort were horribly tortured. Sale, the French commander, often used a stick with curved handle to grip prisoners' neck and made them fall on the ground. In addition, prisoners were also hung upside down, electrocuted or forced to stay in the heat of the sun: "... the French commander was Sale (who was also called "The Curved Stick", since he often used that type of stick to torture prisoners). He turned a prisoner's neck with the curved handle of the stick, making he fall on the ground, then kicked him on the chest or abdomen until he cough up blood. He also ordered his soldiers to stand in four corners and hit people, hang prisoners on the trees surrounding the fort (and called them "Vietnamese aircraft"), electrocuted or forced them to stay in the heat of the sun on the pier. When torturing was fruitless, or there was no more to find, they shot the prisoners dead and dumped their bodies into the river to drift into the sea" (LADCI, 1978).

In 1954, with the historic victory of Dien Bien Phu, the French was compelled to sign the Geneva Accords to restore peace in Indochina. From 1954, the US replaced the French to occupy South Vietnam. Under the control of the US and the US-established government of the Republic of Vietnam in the South, Rach Cat Fort was not as invested in as it was under the French rule; however, it was still an important military base where fierce struggles

between revolutionary forces and the US along with the government of RoV took place. After April 30, 1975, as Vietnam was completely liberated, Vietnamese military forces took over and used Rach Cat Fort as a station to this day.

5. Historical and architectural values of Rach Cat Fort

Rach Cat Fort is a relic of both historical and architectural values. Aged over a hundred years, throughout its existence, Rach Cat Fort became a very important French military base, as well as one of the most fortified and modern forts in Indochina in the early twentieth century. There, the French arranged for defense and set their sight on protecting the surrounding areas under their control, as well as conducted military operations and captured civilians to serve inside the Fort.

Although Rach Cat Fort was built with the goal of serving the colonial regime, this relic not only had military value but also played a role in the irrigation and rice trade in Cochinchina. Rach Cat Fort also had a crucial role in the development of Vietnam's revolutionary war. With over 100 years of existence (from 1903 to date), Rach Cat Fort has gone through many different historical periods and become a special relic of Long An in particular and of Vietnam in general. During the construction of the fort, the French encountered many difficulties (land clearance, natural resources, transport of materials, etc.) as well as the opposition of civilians living around the fort (An Binh, 2008, p.21). However, the French were very determined to build the fort and this proved that Rach Cat Fort played a very important role in the French invasion of Vietnam. Situated at the intersection of rivers, equipped with modern weapons and even linked to Sai Gon and Vung Tau, Rach Cat Fort helped the French to control a vast area, but could not assist them to monopoly Indochina when the World War broke out.

During 9 years of French re-invasion of Vietnam (1945-1954), in addition to being a fort, Rach Cat Fort was also a prison where Vietnamese patriots were detained and tortured (both mentally and physically). However, it also witnessed the revolutionary spirit of the imprisoned communists. During the Resistance War against the US (1954-1975), Rach Cat Fort continued to serve as an important military base. The US and Sai Gon troops stationing at the fort initiated many operations to search for and sabotage Vietnamese revolutionary forces. During this period, Vietnamese revolutionary forces also repeatedly occupied Rach Cat Fort and turned it into a source of materials for weapon production facilities. At many points of time, even Rach Cat Fort itself became a factory where weapons were produced and supplied to the revolution. After 1975, Rach Cat Fort became a station of Vietnamese military forces.

Rach Cat Fort is one of the largest French military buildings in Cochinchina which is still quite intact in present day (Son Lam, 2020). Due to its location on Long Huu Island, which is quite separate from fierce battlefields, the fort remained quite untouched and less damaged by war. Built in the first decade of the 20th century, Rach Cat Fort was designed and applied the most modern military techniques of France at that time. Across the Southern region in particular and Vietnam in general, this is the only large-scale military building that is still standing as waterway defense with a system of blockhouses, cannons and piers. This building is typical of French defensive fortifications in Indochina, with moats, loopholes on the walls and turrets.

Rach Cat Fort is a typical example of Western fort architecture, which was built as a continuous transportation system that allowed maximum support for areas in the fort. In front of the fort is a wall, and people inside the fort can monitor a wide area, while approaching it from the outside is a challenge. The upper floor of the fort used to be a continuous battle ground with steel cannons and fortifications. It was thick layers of reinforced concrete built as slides that disabled attacks by artillery coming straight from the river (Son Lam, 2020). The rooms in Rach Cat Fort were built into basements with many alleyways to ensure the safety of its residents. The entire structure of Rach Cat Fort is to ensure the active position in attacking and safety in retreating in the event of war.

Over a long period of time, Rach Cat Fort has been subjected to constant changes due to human impacts and time. However, thanks to its building materials and construction techniques, the armored structure of Rach Cat Fort today is still almost intact, except for concrete works which were damaged. According to tourism officials, if Rach Cat Fort is promoted to be a tourist attraction, it will become an interesting destination, not only because of its historical values, but also its architectural ones. In order to protect and promote the potentials of this relic, on August 22, 1992, the People's Committee of Long An Province issued a decision to protect the military architecture relic of Rach Cat Fort, along with the mangrove ecosystem on Long Huu island, combining historical relic tourism with ecotourism and leisure travel on weekends. In 2010, Long An Province Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism initiated a project and called for the State to invest in and exploit the potentials of Rach Cat Fort in the form of socialization. The State will invest in infrastructure, while investors will build functional zones for tourism, entertainment, leisure activities, conferences, seminars, camping and ecological conservation with a total investment of up to 250 billion VND in 50 years (PCLAP, 2010).

In our interview, Mr. Nguyen Thanh Thanh, an official of Long An Province Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism said: “Rach Cat Fort has potentials of terrain and landscape, which are suitable for the exploitation and promotion of relics with historical values. Rach Cat Fort was built 100 years ago, and is one of the earliest and most fortified forts in the whole Indochina at that time. After 1975, there have been about 10 films that use Rach Cat Fort as the setting for scenes of ancient forts. In the Southern region, no forts can be compared to Rach Cat Fort in terms of grandeur, ancient and poetry atmosphere. We hope that the project is able to enjoy incentive policies in accordance with current regulations”. According to Mr. Le Phu Dung, Head of Tourism Management Division, Long An Province Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism: “The artillery system here is also the setting of more than 10 films shot after 1975, including the famous “Dat Phuong Nam” (Southern Land). However, it is still difficult for tourists to visit this place, since a military unit is still based in here. Therefore, visitors need to be granted access by competent authorities. In the near future, Rach Cat Fort will be made “civil” for domestic and international tourists to come and visit”. Currently, Rach Cat Fort has been recognized as a national historic site, and is turning into a focal attraction in addition to ecotourism destinations that are built in harmony with the characteristic river landscape of the Southern region.

6. Conclusion

Fearing the World War spreading to Indochina and for the goal of invading Vietnam, the French selected Long Huu Island as the place to build a stronghold in order to gain a head start in the war as well as to control the waterway transport from the Western region to Sai Gon and vice versa. Rach Cat Fort was constructed for both political and economic purposes. The building is a military fort with unique architecture following the model of French military fort, which is surrounded by high walls and has platforms for mounting cannons. It was built into a strong fort that can both be used for attacks as well as a hiding place. After its construction was completed and it was put into operation, Rach Cat Fort truly became an untouchable fort of the French colonists in Indochina. Although throughout its existence, Rach Cat Fort did not maximize the role associated with it by the French, but this place was still a military base of French, American and henchman government troops where military operations and defense activities were conducted. In each period, Rach Cat Fort had different functions and operations. From being a military fort during the war, Rach Cat Fort today is performing its new function in peacetime, that is, to serve the education and learning of history as well as people’s need of visiting tourist attractions.

Today, Long Huu is known as a beautiful island with two national monuments, namely the 100-pillar house and Rach Cat Fort. In addition, it also has several community facilities for worship; a path to Rung Sac, Can Gio and another path to Go Cong Beach (Tien Giang) through Vam Co River, as well as to the East Sea through Soai Rap Estuary, not to mention Nuoc Man Canal which connects western provinces, Ho Chi Minh City and southeast provinces. From Ho Chi Minh City, it takes only about an hour to reach this area if traveling by road. Following Soai Rap River to the north, across Rach Cat Estuary is Long An International Port (where seven berths are being constructed to accommodate international cruise ships of over 70,000 tons in the next few years). To the south of Soai Rap River, across Vam Co Estuary is the land of Go Cong. On the bank of Soai Rap River is Can Gio, from which it is easy to go to Rung Sac Can Gio attraction and Vung Tau Artillery Field. With its special location and great historical significance, along with the surrounding mangrove landscape and interesting canal system, Rach Cat Fort has been planned by the local government to become an ecotourism attraction and a special tourist sub-area in the East-West waterway transport system of Southern Vietnam.

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