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**A critical analysis of the conduct of the
battle for Khe Sanh by the forces of the
United States of America and the Peoples
Army of Vietnam.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

of

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Abstract:

From the 20th March – 8th April 1968 the 26th Marine Regiment of the 3rd Marine Division, and supporting elements was under siege at the Khe Sanh combat base and a number of surrounding fortified hilltop outposts in the northern Quang Tri Province of South Vietnam. The forces besieging the 26th Marines were those of General Vo Nguyen Giap's Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN), numbering some 17,300 troops.

The 26th Marines were drawn into the siege of Khe Sanh through the desire of the General William Westmoreland, Commander of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), to fix in place the regular divisions of the PAVN, and destroy them through the use of the superior firepower at the disposal of MACV within South Vietnam. Giap, realising Westmoreland's intentions utilised PAVN pressure on the 26th Marines at Khe Sanh, and other Allied positions throughout northern Quang Tri Province to convince Westmoreland that he intended to launch a major offensive into the province. In response to this, Westmoreland moved a significant number of his available forces north to counter this threat.

With the MAVC forces concentrated in the north, this allowed Giap to launch the nationwide Tet Offensive on the 30th January 1968. Giap continued to apply pressure to the Marines at Khe Sanh, with a number of large-scale assaults on the Marine outposts that were defeated with the combined arms of the Marines, Army and the 7th Air Force. Political pressure from President Johnson, who feared a repeat of the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, ensured all available assets were available to support the Marines. As MACV turned the tide of Giap's Tet Offensive, PAVN forces were withdrawn from the Khe Sanh Tactical Area Of Responsibility (TAOR), to support the offensive in the south of the country. Westmoreland directed the relief of Khe Sanh to be initiated on the 1st April 1968, with Operation Pegasus

being initiated. Troops of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airborne), 1st Marine Regiment, and the 3rd ARVN Airborne Task Force conducted road clearing and airmobile operations along National Route 9 (QL9) from Dong Ha to the Khe Sanh combat base, with the 26th Marines declared relieved on the 8th April 1968. Despite estimates that the PAVN suffered up to 15,000 casualties over the course of the siege, the PAVN forces were still able to deploy a similar number of troops within the Khe Sanh TAOR as prior to the siege, upon the closure of the combat base on the 17th June 1968.

For Ally.

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*“Here’s health to you and to our Corps
Which we are proud to serve;
In many a strife we’ve fought for life
And never lost our nerve.
If the Army and the Navy
Ever look on Heaven’s scenes,
They will find the streets are guarded
By the United States Marines.”*

“The Marines’ Hymn”

Also thanks to André Taber for his assistance in editing this document.

Table of contents

Introduction.	9.
Section one: Opening Salvos: 1954 - 68.	11.
Section two: The terrain at Khe Sanh.	23.
Section three: Marine Corps Order of Battle.	31.
Section four: People's Army of Vietnam order of battle.	37.
Section five: Giap vs Westmoreland.	40.
Section six: Intelligence failure?	48.
Section seven: The Dien Bien Phu effect.	55.
Section eight: Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive.	72.
Section nine: The opening phases of the siege of Khe Sanh combat base.	76.
Section ten: The fall of Lang Vei.	92.
Section eleven: Consolidation of the siege.	99.
Section twelve: Offensive action begins.	109.
Section thirteen: Operation Pegasus.	116.
Section fourteen: Supporting Arms.	128.
Section fifteen: Operation Niagara II.	142.
Section sixteen: Closure of Khe Sanh combat base.	156.
Section seventeen: Was Khe Sanh a victory for the Marines?	160.

Appendices:

Appendix one: Marine order of battle: 20 th January to 1 st April 1968.	164
Appendix Two: Research questionnaires completed by members of the 26th Marine Regiment.	167
Anthony Bartleson.	168
Bill Dabney.	171
John Kaheny	175
Paul Knight	178

Larry McCartney	181
Joe Olszewski	183
Matthew Walsh	188

Bibliography:	191
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List of maps:

Map one: I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ 1).	12.
Map two: 3rd Marines assault on 18th Regiment Peoples Army of Vietnam.	17.
Map three: Northern Quang Tri Province.	24.
Map four: Khe Sanh Valley.	26.
Map five: Marine Positions Khe Sanh Tactical Area of Operations.	34.
Map six: Khe Sanh base map.	36.
Map seven: Valley of Dien Bien Phu and Operation Castor 20 November 1953.	60.
Map eight: Approximate locations of Viet Minh siege army Dien Bien Phu.	61.
Map nine: Central position of the Dien Bien Phu fortress.	64.
Map ten: The fall of Dien Bien Phu May 7 1954.	67.
Map eleven: Distribution of Communist Tet Offensive.	76.
Map twelve: Assault on Hill 881 North 20 th January 1968.	77.
Map thirteen: I Company Positions Hill 881 South	81.
Map fourteen: The fall of Lang Vei.	94.
Map fifteen: Marine Positions Rock Quarry.	99.
Map sixteen: Progress of PAVN trench systems towards the Khe Sanh combat base perimeter.	104.
Map seventeen: ARC Light Strike zones around KSCB.	107.
Map eighteen: Operation Pegasus 1 st April 1968.	119.

Map nineteen: Operation Pegasus 2 nd – 4 th April 1968.	121.
Map twenty: Operation Pegasus 5 th – 6 th April 1968.	122.
Map twenty-one: Operation Pegasus 7 th – 8 th April 1968.	123.
Map twenty-two: Operation Niagara II TAOR.	143.
Map twenty-three: Operation Niagara II air-strike zones around Khe Sanh.	145.

List of photos:

Marines on patrol.	20.
Hill 861.	25.
Hill 558	28.
Hill 950.	29 .
View from Hill 950 to Khe Sanh combat base and the Plateau.	33.
Khe Sanh combat base as viewed from the air.	35.
Typical trench line Khe Sanh TAOR.	85.
Marine Positions Khe Sanh.	88.
Napalm strike on PAVN positions outside of the KSCB perimeter.	103.
Marines at KSCB taking cover from an incoming artillery barrage.	104.
Khe Sanh Re-supply flights.	134.
Destroyed C-123 Khe Sanh airfield.	137.
Air strike Hill 861.	146
Aftermath of a B-52 strike.	151
Air strike Khe Sanh.	152

List of tables:

Table one: Manoeuvre Battalions deployed in I Corps 1966 – 68.	51.
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Introduction

"[T]he NVA¹ were too smart and professional to dedicate two and a half of their best infantry divisions, regiments of heavy artillery and air defence assets plus a huge logistical chain in order [to] tie down one regiment of Marines. It makes no sense to believe otherwise because that concept violates several principles of war. It is well known that the NVA tried several mass assaults on the base only to be destroyed by American fire support before their regiments could reach the line of departure."

John M Kaheny, Col. USMC Ret. January 2006².

There has been significant controversy regarding the 77 days in early 1968 when the 26th Marine Regiment, of the 3rd Marine Division were besieged at the Khe Sanh combat base in northern Quang Tri Province of the I Corps Tactical Zone of South Vietnam (see Map one). Contradicting views have been published regarding the intentions of the Communist North People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap³. Was the assault a diversion for the upcoming Tet Offensive, to draw the American forces away from the population centres such as Saigon? Or was this a concerted combined arms effort on the part of the PAVN to inflict a major military and political defeat on the forces of the United States and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

There is truth in both arguments regarding the intentions of the PAVN forces at Khe Sanh; however these arguments must not be examined in isolation. This paper shall provide an analysis of the siege of Khe Sanh and address the key question of what

¹ NVA: The Communist North Vietnamese Army. Also known as the People's Army of Vietnam or PAVN.

² Colonel John M Kaheny, Assistant Operations Officer 1st Battalion 26 Marines. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 16th January 2006

³ Commander of the North Vietnamese Army.

the real intentions of the PAVN forces at Khe Sanh were. Secondly, it will examine how the forces of the United States and ARVN were able to thwart the PAVN goals through the use of the combined Air/Ground team of the United States Marine Corps, and the coordination of the supporting arms of the United States Air Force and Army.

Section one: Opening Salvos: 1954 - 68

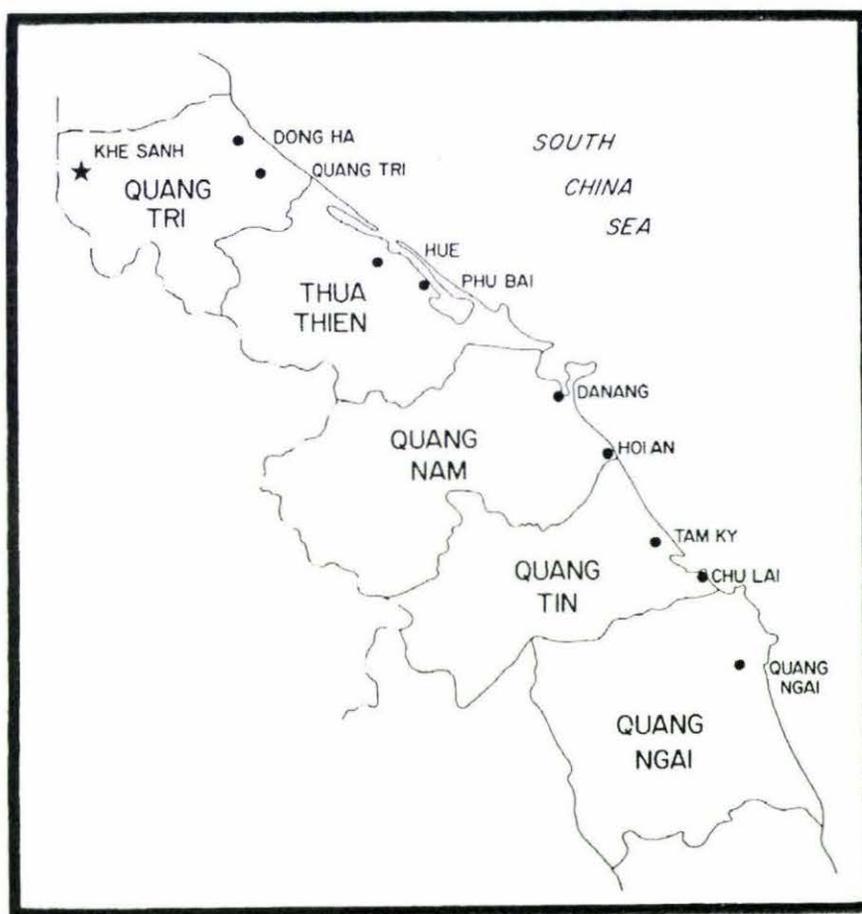
Prior to the examination of the siege of 1968, it is important to understand the background to the siege, and to provide some context as to the strategic goals of the Communist North Vietnam in respect to the activities of its forces in Quang Tri Province of South Vietnam.

Quang Tri Province was the northernmost Province of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (RVN), separated from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The DMZ was an outcome of the first Indochinese War whereby after the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu a negotiated settlement for the withdrawal of French Forces from Vietnam was agreed with the signing of the Geneva accord on the 20th July 1954. Vietnam was to be partitioned along the 17th Parallel, with incursions by either side monitored by an International Armistice Commission. Free elections would then take place within two years of the signing of the Geneva accord. Upon partition, the DRV was established north of the DMZ, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. South of the border Ngo Dinh Diem, supported by the United States, was installed as the leader of the RVN. Tensions between the two nations escalated when Diem refused to hold free elections as agreed to under the Geneva accord. This led to an increase in cross-border tension with the DRV. As the RVN would not comply with the terms of the Geneva accord, the DRV sought to implement regime change in the south.

Incursions by the forces of the DRV into the south began in earnest in 1959, with forces infiltrating into the south via the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and northern Quang Tri Province. As early as 1960 incursions by North Vietnamese forces began through the Khe Sanh Plateau. The decision by the DRV to utilise Khe Sanh as an infiltration route stemmed from the belief that this region provided a more direct route into the RVN. In response to these incursions, United States Special Forces (USSF)

were deployed to Khe Sanh in July 1962 and occupied positions at an abandoned French fort near the village of Khe Sanh. The Special Forces, utilising local Bru tribesmen, began patrolling of, and interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. With the escalation of PAVN and Vietcong⁴ (VC) activity, there was a corresponding increase in electronic communications between PAVN/VC units. In response to this, the first Marine unit arrived at Khe Sanh in May 1964 with the deployment the Signals Engineering Survey Unit (SESU). This unit was tasked with communications intelligence gathering via the interception of PAVN/VC radio traffic.

Map 1: I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ 1)⁵



In 1965, due to the increased pressure from the PAVN/VC, the Special Forces moved from the staging point of the French fort to a purpose built facility, Forward Observation Base 3 (FOB-3) at what would become the Khe Sanh combat base.

⁴ Communist irregular guerrilla forces.

FOB-3 was the staging point for the deployment of Special Forces teams for the interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh trail, and incursions into Laos. Multiple units, with different command structures and mission statements, began to operate from FOB-3. The disparate nature of these forces would lead to command and control difficulties between the Marines who would be charged with the defence of Khe Sanh, and the Special Forces operating from it. (The following groups operated from KSCB: Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]; Green Berets; Marine 3rd Reconnaissance Company; Military Assistance Command, Vietnam - Studies and Observation Group [MAVC SOG]; and Luong Luc Duc Bac [LLDB] ARVN Special Forces.)

The first large-scale commitment of combat troops to Khe Sanh occurred between the period of the 17th April to the 1st May 1966, in response to an increase in PAVN activity. The 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines (1/3 Marines) was deployed on a temporary basis to undertake Operation Virginia, a search and destroy operation from Hill 558, this operation however yielded no positive results.

Due to the increased PAVN build-up around Khe Sanh in 1966, General William Westmoreland, Commander of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), pressured the Marines to increase the level of troops within the Khe Sanh theatre of operations to at least one battalion, and upgrade the existing airstrip capabilities to accept larger transport aircraft. This deployment would create a fundamental difference of opinion between Westmoreland and Major General Lewis Walt, Commander 3rd Marine Division, and the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) in Vietnam, as to the correct utilisation of Marine Corps resources. Walt did not see the value in staging Marine Corps troops at Khe Sanh. Walt felt "*... running search and destroy operations around the camp was not only a waste of time but a waste of valuable manpower [...] felt that the important war was in the populated and fertile*

⁵ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC.
Page 4

*lowlands, digging out the guerrillas and denying large VC and NVA units the food, taxes, intelligence and other support needed to survive.*⁶

In order to press his case for an increased Marine commitment, Westmoreland presented his case to the Chief of the Fleet Marine Forces, Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, and to his own superior, Admiral Ulysses Sharp, Commander In Chief Pacific (CINCPAC). Westmoreland stated "[...] *unprecedented rapid buildup of enemy forces in areas along the entire length of the DMZ presages initiation of coordinated massive attacks.*"⁷ Krulak and Sharp agreed with Westmoreland and directed Walt to the deploy additional resources. On the 29th September 1966 Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 10 (Seabees) arrived at Khe Sanh to commence the extension of the runway, and the improvement of the base facilities. The existing 3300 feet of runway matting was replaced with a new all-weather strip capable of accepting C130 transport aircraft, and was opened on the 5th October 1966. On the 29th September 1966 the first elements of 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines (1/3 Marines) arrived at Khe Sanh, with the Green Berets and their Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Troops displacing to Lang Vei in December, where the Seabees had constructed improved bunkers to house the troops.

By August 1967 MACV intelligence indicated that the PAVN threat to Khe Sanh had reduced, therefore the 1/3 Marines was withdrawn from Khe Sanh on the 1st September 1967, and replaced by E Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9 Marines). E Company was subsequently replaced by B Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines (1/9 Marines). Over this period there was no change in mission statement for the garrison. Extended patrols were still required to reduce the ability of the PAVN to approach the combat base undetected, and to continue interdiction of the PAVN

⁶ Zaffiri S (1994), *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C Westmoreland*. William Morrow and Company Inc New York. Page 169.

⁴ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 49.

supply lines into the south. This effectively left the company Commander, Captain Michael Sayers, with never more than a platoon to man the defences at the combat base, whilst those members of the company who had returned from extended patrolling, were required to rest and recuperate. In January 1967 the Marines deployed their first specialised pacification unit to the village at Khe Sanh; Combined Action Company Oscar (CAC Oscar). This group was charged with the winning of the loyalties of the local tribal minorities known as Montagnards (pacification was more commonly known as the "winning of hearts and minds"). CAC Oscar utilised the Montagnards as a village defense group, and as a resource to assist in patrolling the Khe Sanh Tactical Area Of Responsibility (TAOR).

Over this period the Vietnamese Communist Party 3rd Congress was developing its military and political strategy for the coming 1966/67 dry season. This strategy was outlined in Resolution 13, and was adopted by the Party in early 1967. Resolution 13 was then disseminated through all district echelons of the Communist Party in the south. The strategy outlined: *"The immediate missions of our army and people at present, are to concentrate our efforts to over[c]ome di[ff]iculties [and] to defeat approximately one million American troops and consequently achieve many striking military victories. Furthermore, we must create favourable conditions which will allow our forces to achieve glorious victories on the South Vietnamese battlefield. This will force the Americans to de-escalate their war on the North [...]"*⁸

Resolution 13 identified that there would be a significant step change in the way PAVN/VC forces would be deployed in combat, with a movement away from traditional guerrilla warfare and massed human wave tactics, to a more modern deployment of forces in conventional formations: *"Mobility and concentration of troops are required and it is necessary for us to avoid disadvantages caused by passivity. We must try to gain the initiative. Determination to fight does not mean*

reckless fighting or stubborn fighting despite heavy casualties. We should have a careful plan prior to attacking the enemy."⁹ The key element of Resolution 13 however was the outlining of what would become the Tet Offensive of 1968 or the *General Attack and General Uprising*. This strategic policy, developed by the North was viewed as the key to the eventual defeat of the United States and the Republic of Vietnam. *"Our strategic policy is to fight a protracted war but to gain victory in the shortest possible time. Our strategic determination in the special war and in limited war is to fight for a long time. Our policy for political and military activities essentially consists of attacks and uprisings. The culmination will be the general attack and the general uprising. This policy greatly affects military activities and other tasks. There now exists some inclination to prefer military matters over political tasks. Political tasks are downgraded to secondary importance, especially on the lowland battlefield."*¹⁰ This change of policy would have a significant affect on the Marines stationed at Khe Sanh combat base.

On 24th April 1967 a Marine patrol north of Hill 861 led by Sergeant Harper encountered elements of the 18th Regiment, 325C¹¹ PAVN Division, triggering the first major battle for Khe Sanh (this would eventually be known as the "Hill Fights"). The 18th PAVN Regiment was tasked with attacking Khe Sanh combat base from the northeast with the aim of overrunning the combat base. B Company, 1/9 Marines were in and around Hill 861; 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines (3/3 Marines) was airlifted into Khe Sanh to provide support. On the night of the 26th April Khe Sanh was heavily mortared, with Hill 881 South being occupied with the 18th PAVN Regiment. With the 3/3 Marines fully committed, General Walt committed the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines (2/3 Marines) on 26th April. Due to the heavy casualties inflicted on their ranks by the 18th PAVN Regiment, B Company and 3/3 Marines were withdrawn to Khe Sanh to

⁸ *Resolution 13 From Captured Enemy Documents 18 August 2006*. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 1

⁹ *Ibid* Page 2

¹⁰ *Ibid* page 3

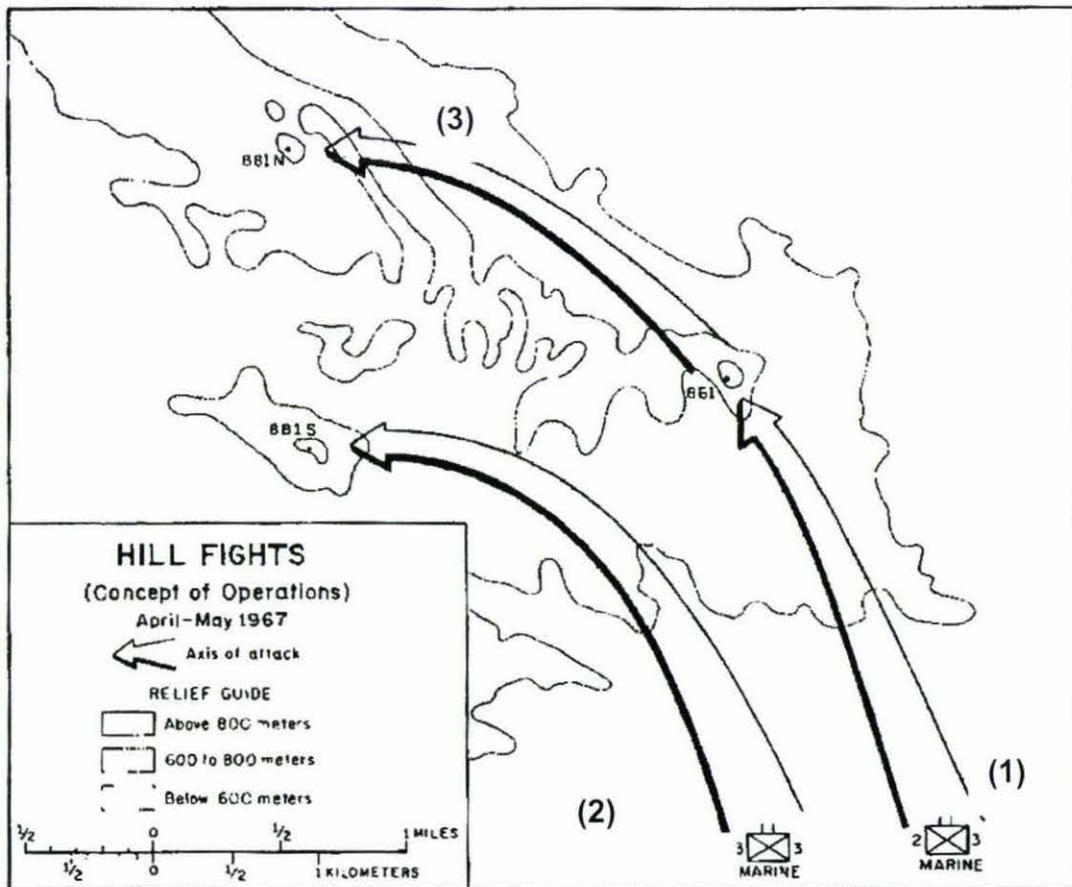
¹¹ C denotes the third iteration of the NVA Division.

refit and rearm. Hill 861 was then subjected to a "softening up" with a combined arms assault from the 175mm guns stationed at the Rockpile and close air support from Marine Corps aircraft.

On the afternoon of the 28th April 3rd Marines initiated the assault on the positions held by the 18th Regiment. This rolling assault was to include three phases:

- Phase one: Hill 861.
- Phase two: Hill 881 South
- Phase three Hill 881 North

Map 2: 3rd Marines assault on 18th Regiment Peoples Army of Vietnam.¹²



¹² Lieutenant General Willard Pearson (1975). *War in the Northern Provinces Vietnam 1966-68*. Department of the Army Washington D.C. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 17.

On the afternoon of the 28th April 2/3 Marines advanced up Hill 861 (refer Map 2 - 1) only to find that the PAVN had withdrawn from the hill due to the intensity of the artillery and air strikes. On the morning of the 29th April, 3/3 Marines attacked the heavily fortified Hill 881 South (refer Map 2 - 2), finally securing it on the 2nd May with the assistance of intensive artillery and Marine close air support.

Due to heavy casualties inflicted upon the 18th PAVN Regiment, it was withdrawn from the line on the 1st May and replaced by 95C Regiment of the 325C Division. 2/3 Marines, resumed its advance on 2nd May when it assaulted Hill 881 North from the south and east with the support of artillery and Marine close air support. The advance up Hill 881 North was however checked by a heavy storm, forcing the Marines to disengage to a position 500m meters south of Hill 881 North. This gave the PAVN the opportunity to launch a counter-attack from 881 North in the early hours of the morning of 3rd May (refer Map 2 - 3). Despite the ferocity of the PAVN counterattack, the 2/3 Marines lines held and the attack was repulsed. The 2/3 Marines resumed the assault up Hill 881 North, which was finally secured on the morning of 5th May.

On the morning of the 4th May the PAVN assaulted the Lang Vei Special Forces camp. This assault was initially intended as a diversionary tactic to draw reinforcements away from Khe Sanh, however, the Green Berets and CIDG troops occupying the base successfully repulsed the attack (the early identification of the assault towards Khe Sanh negated this as a diversionary tactic).

The "Hill Fights" resulted in both sides incurring a significant number of casualties. The 3rd Marines lost 155 killed in action (KIA) and 425 wounded in action (WIA). This resulted in the 3rd Marines being withdrawn to Dong Ha for refitting. The North Vietnamese, however, suffered significantly more casualties with 940 KIA¹³ and an

¹³ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC. Page 181

unknown number of WIA. The casualties incurred by the 325C PAVN Division resulted in its withdrawal from the line, it would take six months before it had regained sufficient strength to return to the battle in South Vietnam.

Although the North Vietnamese suffered heavy casualties in their 1967 summer offensive, North Vietnamese propaganda portrayed the change in tactics to direct confrontation of the United States and RVN forces as a victory. *"The military situation in the whole of South Vietnam showed the impotence of the US Command, which no longer was able to launch any large-scale operation of the 'search and destroy' kind, but only medium and small ones to open communication lines and defend the cities. Its strategy had to be altered in the face of three categories of the people's forces: the regulars, the regional forces and the gue(r)rillas. The aggressors got mired down most deeply in the First Corps Area, particularly in Tri Tien¹⁴ along Highway 9 where many divisions and tens of thousands of them decimated."¹⁵*

With the conclusion of the "Hill Fights" the level of Marines forces stationed at Khe Sanh was again drawn down, although intelligence reports indicated that there were still significant elements of the 325C PAVN Division (95C, 101D and 29 Regiments) within the Khe Sanh TAOR. The 3rd Marines were withdrawn and replaced by the 26th Marines (Forward) under Colonel John Padley. The only 26th Marine manoeuvre battalion present was 1st Battalion (1/26 Marines), which deployed one company each, to Hills 861 and 881 South, and a platoon to the radio relay station on Hill 950. 1/26 Marines continued to conduct patrols, but limited the distance from the base to 3,900 metres to ensure that they could receive indirect fire support from the artillery positioned at Khe Sanh.

¹⁴ Tri Thien is an abbreviation of the two northern most provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien.

¹⁵ Ton Vy (1968), *On the Tri Thien Front (From Hue to Khe Sanh)*. Vietnam Studies Number 20. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 125

Over this period two operations were run from Khe Sanh, the first being Operation Crockett from the 13th May - 16th July 1967. The operation had two objectives: Firstly, to occupy and deny key terrain to the PAVN. Secondly, to conduct reconnaissance in force to keep the PAVN off-balance and to destroy any troops entering the TAOR. Due to the significant number of contacts over this period, the 3rd Battalion 26th Marines (3/26 Marines) was transferred to the operational control of the 26th Marine Regiment, and arrived at Khe Sanh on the 13th June. Operation Crockett resulted in a number of actions, with the PAVN incurring 204 KIA whilst the Marines suffered 52 Marines KIA and a further 255 WIA.¹⁶

Marines on patrol.¹⁷



Operation Crockett ended on the 16th July, Marine operations resumed on the 17th July under Operation Ardmore which ran until the 31st October 1967, with a similar

¹⁶ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC. Page 23

¹⁷ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

mission as that of Crockett: to deny the PAVN access to the Khe Sanh TAOR. PAVN contacts resulted in 10 Marines and 100 PAVN KIA.¹⁸

On the 12th August a command change occurred which would see Colonel David E Lownds assuming command of the 26th Marine Regiment. Due to the reduction in contacts with the PAVN the number of Marines stationed at Khe Sanh was reduced with the withdrawal of the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines on the 13th August. This reduction in forces effectively only allowed the 26th Marines to conduct a static defence around Hills 881 South, 861, and the airstrip. Insufficient troops were available to provide a suitable level of security for the static positions, as well as maintain an effective interdiction programme for the Khe Sanh TAOR. *"The Special Forces and SOG ran long range patrols and used air power to harass and interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail complex in Laos called the 'Santa Fe Trail' if I remember right. The Marines bulked up their forces during the Battle of the Hills and then during the siege but did not conduct extensive military operations until Pegasus after the siege. During the late summer and fall of 1967 only one battalion of infantry operated out of KSCB. That was too small a force to do interdiction and protect the base."*¹⁹ This reduction in patrolling and interdiction would allow the PAVN to mass troops within the Khe Sanh TAOR for future efforts against the 26th Marines.

During the Ardmore operation the Marines took the opportunity to improve the defences at Khe Sanh. The airstrip was closed and Seabees undertook an upgrade of the existing facilities. Rock was quarried from a hill 1,500 metres southwest of Khe Sanh, with a hard base-course laid under the aluminium matting to ensure the airstrip was a fully all weather facility, with the airstrip being reopened on the 27th October. Operation Ardmore was closed on the 31st October 1967, with the operations in the Khe Sanh TAOR being renamed Operation Scotland I. The mission of the Marines,

¹⁸ Rottman G.L (2005), *Khe Sanh 1967 - 68, Marines battle for Vietnam's vital hilltop base*. Osprey Publishing Oxford UK. Page 31.

and the forces deployed at Khe Sanh, however, remained the same as under Operation Ardmore.

North Vietnamese pressure on Khe Sanh TAOR increased in the month of December with reconnaissance patrols identifying an increased presence of regular PAVN troops within the Khe Sanh TAOR. The PAVN probed the defences of Khe Sanh and the frequency of the sniping of the outposts on Hill 861 and 881 South increased. MACV intelligence also identified a significant build-up of North Vietnamese troops infiltrating across the border into Northern Quang Tri Province. *"Enemy Strength including North Vietnamese regulars, [Vietcong] main force and hard-core guerrillas was thought to be from 75,000 to 90,000. Of this total, the guerrillas, in many ways more of a problem than the regulars, numbered about 20,000 for all of I Corps. In addition, the enemy was soon able to demonstrate once again, his capability of building up his strength rapidly from sanctuary bases across the borders."*²⁰ Lieutenant General Robert E Cushman, who had replaced Walt as Commander 3rd MAF reacted to the increased infiltration by re-deploying 3/26 to Khe Sanh. The increase in forces now deployed at Khe Sanh allowed Lownds more flexibility in the deployment of his troops in the field, and for the defense of Khe Sanh in the advent of a PAVN assault on the combat base.

¹⁹ Colonel John M Kaheny, Assistant Operations Officer 1st Battalion 26 Marines. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 16th January 2006

²⁰ Brig Gen E H Simmons (1968) *"Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, 1968*. United States Marine Corps. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 293.

Section two: The terrain at Khe Sanh

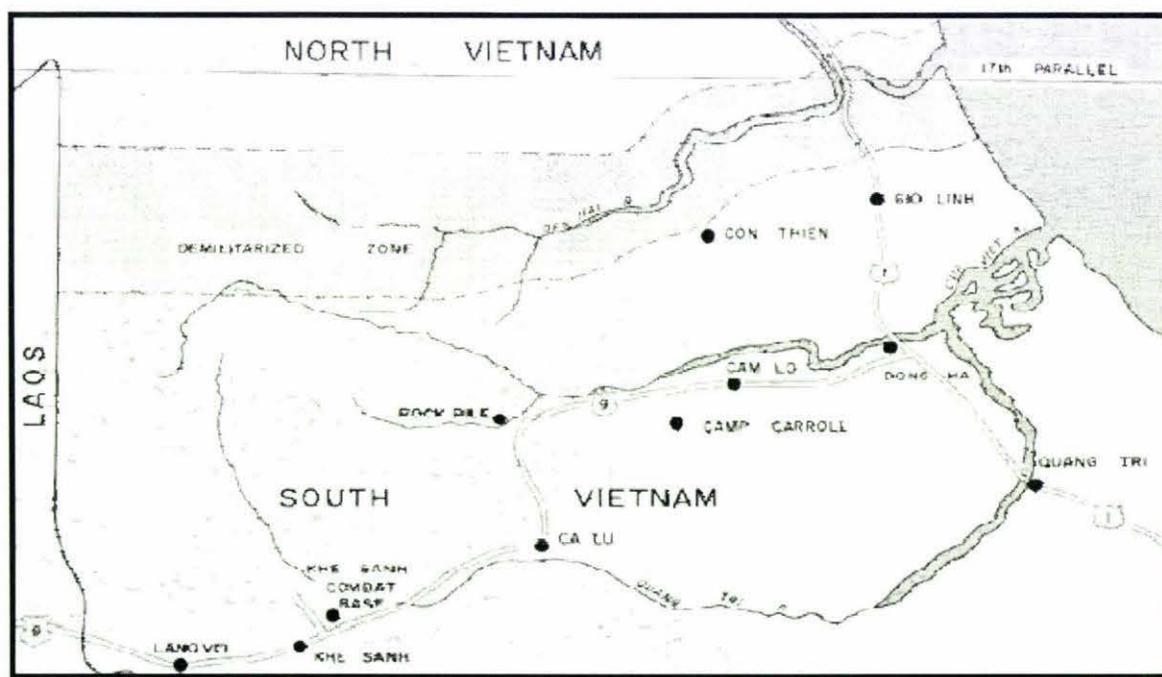
The Khe Sanh combat base was located 68 kilometres west of Dong Ha in the north of the Quang Tri Province, 16 kilometres from the Laotian border. Dong Ha was the logistics and command and control centre for the Marine operations in Quang Tri Province and was part of Combat Tactical Zone 1 (CTZ 1). The main land communication route between Dong Ha and the south was via National Route 1 (QL1) that connected Dong Ha with Hue, and further south over the Hai Van Pass to Da Nang where the Headquarters of the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force was located.

Eight miles to the west of Dong Ha was Camp Carroll where the United States Army had emplaced several batteries of 175mm guns. These guns were utilised to strike across the border into North Vietnam, and provide indirect fire-support for the Marine and ARVN forces operating in CTZ 1. 16 kilometres further west another base was established at the Rockpile, where further batteries 175mm guns were located. These guns could provide indirect fire-support almost to the Laotian border and proved to be a significant asset to the Marines stationed at Khe Sanh. Additional Marine positions were created north-north-west of Dong Ha at Gio Linh and Con Thien; these positions were designed to provide an effective block to PAVN infiltration over the DMZ into the populated coastal plains (see Map 3).

Linking the Khe Sanh combat base to Dong Ha is National Route 9 (QL9); this link was 68 kilometres and 49 bridges, of un-maintained road, which in some places was barely a single lane wide. This road provided the main overland logistics route from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh, and stretched a further 16 kilometres onwards into Laos. QL 9 traversed rivers and deep valleys and was encroached on all sides by a thick double canopy jungle that allowed observation of the road with little fear of discovery. Security of the road was impossible to maintain; any serious attempt would have

required a significant number of troops and supporting arms such as airpower, artillery, engineering support and tanks, resources that could not be spared in Quang Tri Province. Firstly, a limited number of PAVN, or VC could successfully disrupt the flow of traffic via ambushes, mining of the road or by the destruction of bridges. Secondly, when security of one portion of the road had been re-established, the PAVN/VC could easily disengage and strike at another section, either hampering further advance, or cutting of the withdrawal route to Dong Ha. The expertise of the Vietnamese at disrupting mobile columns had been well documented as far back as the French-Indochinese War, when French and Colonial troops suffered 4,800²¹ dead or missing in the withdrawal from Cao Bang along Route Coloniale 4 (RC4). (A French column was caught in an ambush, whereby the road was blocked at either end of the column, with Viet Minh forces destroying the trapped troops.)

Map 3: Northern Quang Tri Province



22

Khe Sanh combat base sat on a Plateau approximately 3.5 kilometres north of the village of Khe Sanh. The village was the location of the Huong Hoa District

²¹ Windrow M (2005). *The Last Valley - Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam*. Cassell Military Paperbacks London UK. Page 110.

Headquarters and CAC Oscar (consisting of platoons CAC Oscar 1 and 2). A road linking the village to the combat base climbed up to the Plateau, where the combat base was established. The Plateau was at an average elevation of 460 metres²³ and was dominated to the north by Dong Tri/Hill 1015 (Tiger Tooth mountain) 4.5 kilometres to the north, and Hill 950, 1 kilometre to the west of Hill 1015.²⁴ Khe Sanh was over-looked to the north-west by a line of hills: Hill 558, 4 kilometres north-north-west of KSCB; with Hill 861 a further 1.5 kilometres south-south west of Hill 558. (Hill 861 had two peaks approximately 400 metres apart; the second peak was subsequently named 861A.) Hills 881 North and South were approximately 7 kilometres west-north-west of Khe Sanh (see Map 4). Direct observation of activities on the airfield could be made from the surrounding hills; therefore in order to maintain the ongoing security of the base, it was essential that the PAVN did not gain control of the hills.

Hill 861²⁵



²² Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC. Page 7

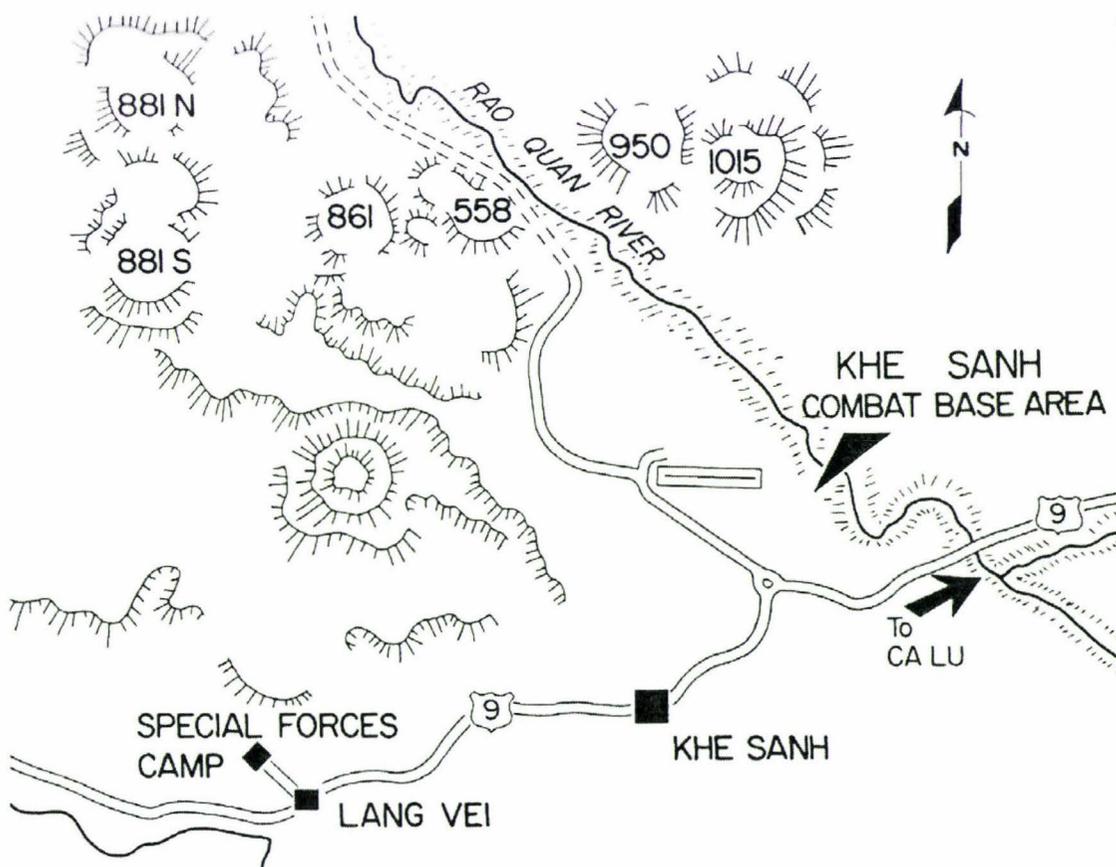
²³ "Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation". Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page B-1-8

²⁴ Denotes height in metres above sea level.

Approximately 800 metres to the north-east of Khe Sanh was the Rao Quan River, a tributary of the Quang Tri River, which ran through a 300 metre deep gorge. Situated approximately 1.5 kilometres south-east of the Khe Sanh was the village of Ta Cong where a platoon of CAC Oscar was located (CAC Oscar 3).

Nine kilometres to the south-west of Khe Sanh and on QL9 was the Lang Vei Special Forces camp. After almost being overrun during the "Hill Fights" of 1967, the camp was relocated a further 1 kilometre to the west of Khe Sanh. The decision to locate, and effectively isolate, the Special Forces camp from the Khe Sanh would have dire consequences for the troops stationed at the camp during the assaults on Khe Sanh in 1968.

Map 4: Khe Sanh Valley²⁶



²⁵ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

²⁶ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC. Page 9.

The terrain around the combat base would both assist and impeded the Marines when defending the combat base. The nature of the soils at Khe Sanh assisted the Marines in the construction of defensive positions. *"Underground construction is excellent around the Khe Sanh airfield. A large area around the airfield is located on a deeply weathered basalt soil. This soil has cohesive property which allows for excavation with minimum shoring and supports. Because of its stability, this soil is excellent for the construction of trenches, fortifications and tunnels"*²⁷ The favourable soil conditions on the Khe Sanh Plateau also however assisted the PAVN with the construction of their own siege-works in much the same way as the Marines. The PAVN were able to construct bunkers and siege trenches without transporting in large amounts of construction material to shore up the bunkers or trenches to prevent collapse. This allowed the PAVN to utilise their tenuous supply organisation for the delivery of ammunition, POL²⁸ and food, rather than construction materials.

The favourable conditions, however, did not stretch to the hill outposts where soil conditions hampered the ability of the Marines to build adequate fortifications. *"In the hills and mountains, underground construction is limited by shallow soil depths and poor soil conditions."*²⁹ Therefore, re-supply flights that could have carried food or ammunition had instead to be allocated to the carrying of construction materials. Another unforeseen factor was the result of the significant expenditure of ordnance during the Hill Fights of 1967. Trees had been riddled with shrapnel, blunting the Marine chainsaws. This required shoring materials for the fortifications to be air-lifted to the outposts.

²⁷ *"Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation"*. Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page B-1-11

²⁸ Petroleum, Oil, Lubricants.

²⁹ *"Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation"*. Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page B-1-12

Hill 558.³⁰



Jungle terrain around the combat base also acted against the Marines. The dense jungle was ideal for camouflage and concealment of the PAVN, inhibiting the ability of the Marines and their supporting arms from visually targeting PAVN positions. *"The use of airpower is somewhat restricted because of poor observation and cover provided by the multi-canopied forests."*³¹ The PAVN could also move troops around the Marine positions with little risk of being observed, aiding in the preparation for assaults on the Marine positions. Due to the dense jungle foliage, there was also the likelihood that air-dropped munitions could explode prematurely in the jungle canopy, limiting the effectiveness against dug-in troops. The dense jungle also impeded the movement of the Marines when conducting reconnaissance patrols, and made it impossible to use armoured forces to support the Marines, other than on the Khe Sanh Plateau and along QL9. *"Foot troops will experience difficult movement in dense undergrowth and may be restricted to existing trails, streambeds and ridgelines. The use of tracked vehicles for cross-country movement in the dense*

1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database
<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page B-1-12

³⁰ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

³¹ *"Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation"*. Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March

*undergrowth is unsuited. Brushwood areas provide for fair to unsuited movement by foot troops and tracked vehicles depending on the local terrain.*³² The restriction of the Marines to the trails made them vulnerable to a PAVN ambush. Once involved in a fire-fight, the dense jungle impeded the rapid response of supporting units, and made it difficult to effectively target close air-support and artillery strikes in support of the engaged Marines.

Hill 950.³³



Weather conditions also had a direct impact on operations within the Khe Sanh TAOR. Monsoon season was from November until March, with the majority of the annual average rainfall of 80 inches falling over this period. The Monsoon was also accompanied by a phenomenon called a *Crachin*. The *Crachin* was a result of the warm air rising up from the Rao Quan gorge and meeting the cold air on the Plateau. The effect of this phenomenon was a dense fog forming over KSCB, reducing

1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database
<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page B-1-12

³² Ibid. Page B-1-13

³³ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

the afternoon. The PAVN specifically choose this season for the offensive in the belief that the *Crachin* would inhibit visibility, and the effectiveness of Marine close air support. This effect could last for several days and impeded the operations at the combat base by disrupting the air-delivery of the necessary supplies to the base, and the evacuation of wounded. The *Crachin* did however have one benefit, in that it also obstructed the view of the PAVN as to the activities on the combat base. *"The monsoons were probably the biggest X factor in the siege. The weather worked for both sides but you never knew what the ceilings or precipitation or the temperature were going to be day to day or hour to hour. This forced both sides to have to be flexible in their planning"*³⁴.

³⁴ Paul Knight Forward Air Controller Hill 861. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 18th January 2006.

Section three: Marine Corps Order of Battle³⁵

The primary Allied force involved in the siege of Khe Sanh was the 26th Marine Regiment, which, although officially assigned to the 5th Marine Division, had been attached to the 3rd Marine Division in Vietnam since the beginning of April 1967. The initial elements of the 26th Marines arrived at Khe Sanh on the 11th May 1967 with the deployment of the 26th Marines forward headquarters under the Command of Colonel John Padley (replaced by Colonel David Lownds on the 12th August 1967), and the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines (1/26) as the only infantry unit attached. With the increased PAVN pressure on the combat base the 3/26, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Harry Alderman, redeployed to the combat base on 13th December 1967. The final elements of the 26th Marines were deployed to Khe Sanh on the 16th January 1968, with the arrival of the 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines (2/26) under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Francis. A further Marine infantry battalion - 1st Battalion, 9th Marines (1/9) was deployed to the combat base, arriving on the 22nd January 1968. The 1/9 Marines was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John Mitchell, and was transferred to the operational control of the 26 Marines. The final infantry element to arrive would be the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion.

Direct fire support was to be provided to the base and the outlying positions by the 1st Battalion, 13 Marine Artillery Battalion (1/13) with one 4.2-inch mortar battery, plus three 105mm Howitzer batteries. A further battery of 155mm towed Howitzers from the 1st Provisional Howitzer Battery was also allocated to the combat base. When the tactical situation demanded further support, the 175mm Howitzers of the 2/94 Artillery stationed at Camp Carroll and the Rockpile could also be called upon to support the Marines.

³⁵ A full Order of Battle is included in appendix 1.

Armoured support was also provided to the Marines via the deployment of five M48 Tanks from the 3rd Tank Battalion, and 10 ONTOS³⁶ from the 3rd Anti-Tank Battalion.

Total strength of the major Allied units deployed at Khe Sanh combat base totalled 6520 men and was allocated across the following units:

- Headquarters Company 26 Marines (Forward): 191
- 1 Battalion 26 Marines: 1,301
- 2 Battalion 26 Marines: 1,254
- 3 Battalion 26 Marines: 1,279
- 1 Battalion 9 Marines: 1,192
- 1/13 Marine Artillery: 397
- Forward Operating Base 3 (FOB 3): 588
- 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion: 318³⁷

Colonel Lownds deployed the major units in the following manner: Firstly, to maximise the ability of the Marines to hold the high ground; secondly, to observe PAVN movements and dominate the likely avenues of approach to the combat base (See Map 5 for major Marine positions).

To the north-west of the combat base, on Hill 881 South, Captain William Dabney was positioned with I Company 3/26, two platoons of M Company 3/26, along with a Command Group and three 105mm Howitzers from C Battery 1/13 Artillery Battalion. To the east of Hill 881S is Hill 861, where K Company 3/26, two platoons of A Company 1/26 along with two 4.2-inch mortars were located under the Command of Captain Norman Jasper Jnr. A knoll further to the east of Hill 861, subsequently

³⁶ Anti-tank mobile tracked vehicles each deploying six 105mm recoilless rifles capable of firing either anti-tank or anti-personnel canister rounds.

³⁷ Rottman G.L (2005), *Khe Sanh 1967 - 68, Marines battle for Vietnam's vital hilltop base*. Osprey Publishing Oxford UK. Page 47

named 861A, was occupied by E Company 2/26 under the command of Captain Earle Breeding Jnr. Further to the north-east of Hill 861 was Hill 558, which overlooked the Rao Quan valley, a likely PAVN avenue of approach to the combat base. To block this avenue of approach 2/26 was positioned on Hill 558. To the east of Hill 558 was Hill 950, where the Marines positioned a radio relay station, and which was occupied by 2nd Platoon, A Company 1/26. As well as providing security for the radio relay station, 2nd Platoon could observe PAVN movement through the Rao Quan valley.

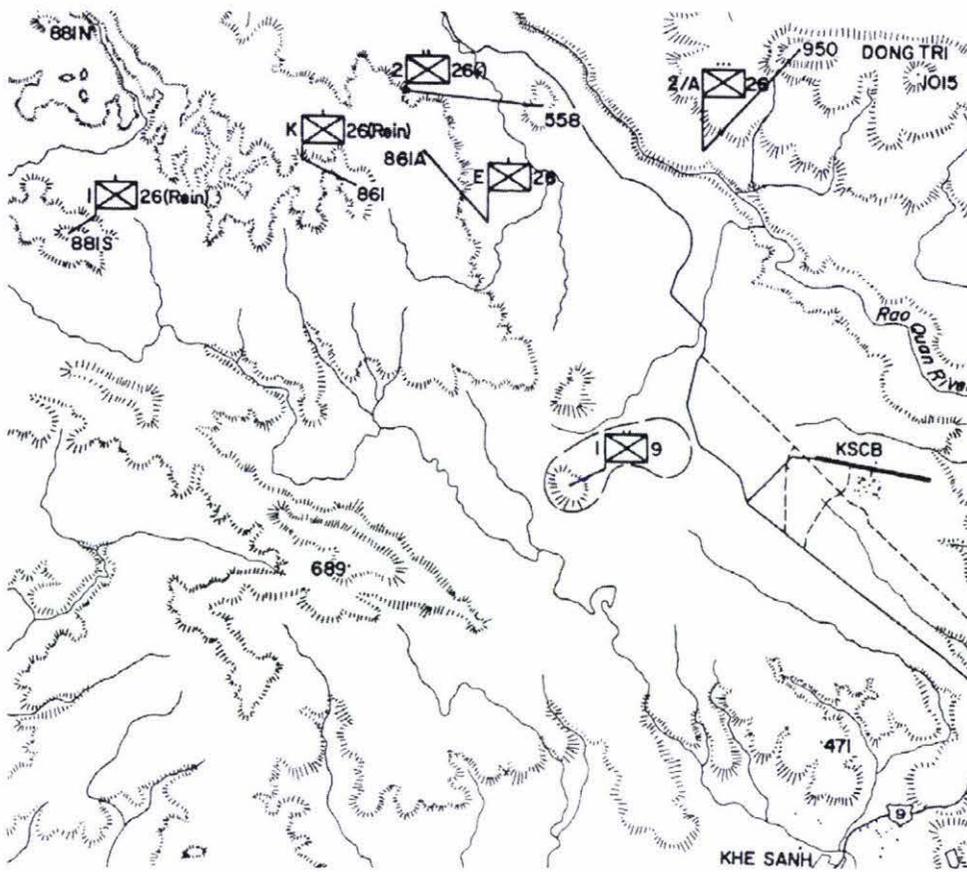
View from Hill 950 to Khe Sanh combat base and the Plateau.³⁸



To the west of the combat base lay the Rock Quarry, which had been developed by the Seabees when extending the Khe Sanh combat base runway. To close this as an avenue of approach for the PAVN, Lownds directed the 1/9 to occupy this position, with a further platoon detached approximately 500 metres west of the Rock Quarry to Hill 64 (see Map 5 for Marine positions).

³⁸ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

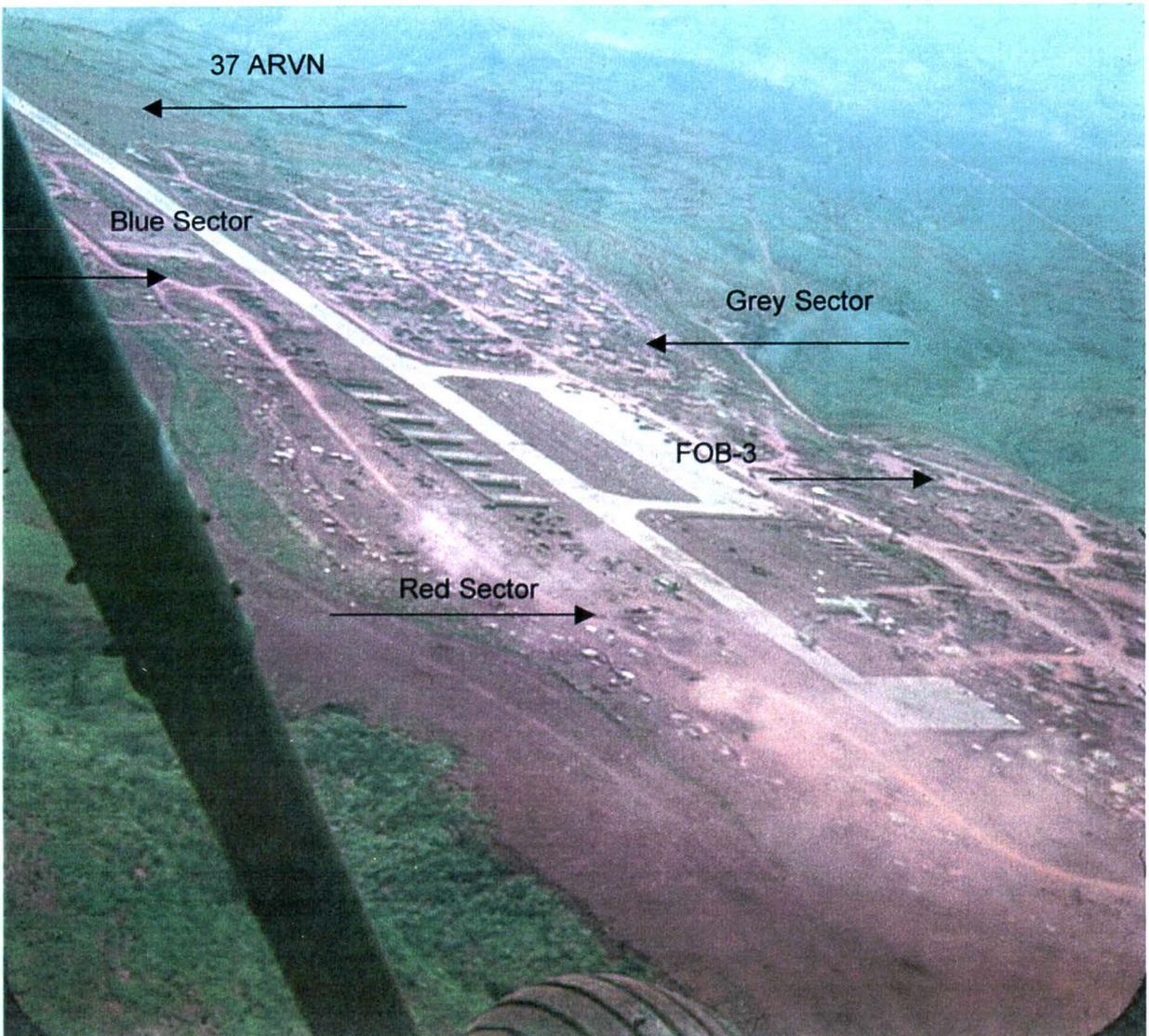
Map 5: Marine Positions Khe Sanh Tactical Area of Operations.³⁹



The remaining forces at Lownds' disposal were arrayed around the combat base to provide security to the airstrip and the various combat support and logistics units operating from the airstrip. The defence of the airstrip would be split into four sectors: Red, Blue, Grey and FOB-3. 1/26 was tasked with the majority of the perimeter defence of the combat base. Positions held by the 1/26 included: Blue sector to the north-west and Grey sector to the north, east and south, linking into FOB-3 at the south-west of the airfield. L Company 3/26 was tasked with the security of Red sector, which was at the western end of the runway and linked into FOB-3 to the south-east and Blue sector to the north-west. With the arrival of the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion, this unit was emplaced at the eastern end of the runway, in front of the positions of the 1/26 (refer Map 6).

³⁹ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC. Page 50

Khe Sanh combat base as viewed from the air.



40

⁴⁰ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

Section four: People's Army of Vietnam Order of Battle

On the 6th December 1967 the Military Central Commission of the DRV established the Central Committee and Military Command for Route 9 of the Tri Thien Front, under the Command of Brigadier General Tran Quy Hai. The objective of this command was to engage the American and South Vietnamese forces in a battle of attrition.

Deployment of the forces for this battle began in late 1967 when the 304th Division infiltrated down from the north via the Ho Chi Minh trail and established itself in positions to the west of the combat base. A second division, the 325th C Division, veteran of the earlier Hill Fights, moved back into the Khe Sanh region to the north of Hill 881 North after refitting from the losses incurred in the earlier battles. To the north-east of Khe Sanh and stationed in Military Region 4 were two further divisions; the 320th Division and the 324th Division. These divisions were tasked with providing support and reinforcements for the two divisions assaulting Khe Sanh, and, to close QL 9 to Dong Ha as a means of supply and reinforcement to the Marines. A further source of replacement troops was in the Tchepone area of Laos where the PAVN had established a logistics base linked to the Quang Tri Province via National Route 9.

The total established strength of a PAVN Division was 12,500 troops and usually included three infantry regiments and one artillery regiment. The PAVN forces facing the Marines at Khe Sanh were under-strength due to previous engagements, but they still included a formidable number of infantry assets.

In a study presented to Westmoreland on the 10th March 1968, it was estimated that the 304th Division had an estimated strength of 9,800 troops⁴², whereas the 325th C Division had an estimated strength of 7,500, or a combined strength of 17,300, effectively outnumbering the Marines by three-to-one in combat troops. Traditional military doctrine identified that for a reinforced position to be successfully assaulted, the attacking force would require a minimum of a three-to-one ratio for success. Giap had sufficient forces available to meet this requirement. Giap's reinforcement capability was estimated at 20,400 troops (320th Division with 7,400 troops; 324th Division with 9,500⁴³ troops; and logistics/security elements in Tchepone Laos were 3,500⁴⁴).

As well as the artillery units directly supporting the Infantry Divisions, the PAVN had tunnelled into the face of Coc Roc Mountain, to the west of Khe Sanh and across the border into Laos, within these tunnels the PAVN had emplaced 152mm Howitzers. These Howitzers outranged the Marine guns, and would provide unopposed indirect fire onto the Marine positions on the combat base and surrounding outposts. Due to the emplacement of the Howitzers within the tunnels, and effective camouflage and concealment on the part of the PAVN, air power was ineffective in destroying the Howitzers over the course of the siege. However, the Marines positioned on Hill 881 South could observe the PAVN artillery shoot, and provide advance warning to KSCB, allowing the Marines to seek shelter prior the artillery rounds striking the base.

⁴² "Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation". Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page B-2-1

⁴³ Rottman G.L (2005), *Khe Sanh 1967 - 68, Marines battle for Vietnam's vital hilltop base*. Osprey Publishing Oxford UK. Page 51

⁴⁴ "Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation". Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page B-6-1

Other elements identified by MACV as providing support for the infantry divisions were the 14th Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA) Battalion, which was traditionally attached to the 304th Infantry Division. Each infantry regiment traditionally also had one AAA company attached. A further element identified was the 198th Tank Battalion. MACV, however, believed that the terrain surrounding the Khe Sanh Plateau would limit the effectiveness of the armour, with the PAVN reliant on the use of National Route 9 for the movement of the armour making them vulnerable to American airpower. As the roads within the Quang Tri Province were in a poor state of repair, it was believed by MACV that the PAVN would also have to deploy significant engineering assets to assist in the movement of their armour.

Section five: Giap vs Westmoreland

In 1968 there was a dramatic escalation in the level of violence within South Vietnam, and it was viewed as a watershed year in the way the DRV employed its strategy for the prosecution of the war against the RVN. It has been hypothesised that this upsurge in activity was designed to achieve a political resolution to the Vietnam War by making the cost of the casualties incurred by the United States politically unacceptable to the electorate.

The strategy employed by Giap in the fight for South Vietnam was based on the Marxist-Leninists strategy of mobilising the entire population as an armed force, and defeating the opposition via an integrated “people’s war.” This strategy was to be employed in three distinct phases:

1. *“In partial uprisings, our Party, based on secret political and armed organs, motivated by the masses in each locality to valiantly arise to overthrow the enemy’s local administration and establish the revolutionary administration, then to promote local guerrilla warfare, to step up political and struggles [...] preparing for the general uprising to wrest political power by force.*
2. *“in the general uprising, the part motivated by all Northern and Southern people to adhere to the board and National United Front and simultaneously arise throughout cities and rural areas in order to smash the imperialists [...]*
3. *After carrying on the revolutionary war, possessing an improved steady rear and the peoples administration, the mobilization and organization of the people for combat were more gigantic and comprehensive”.*⁴⁵

⁴⁵ General Vo Nguyen Giap (1969). *The Party’s Military line is the ever-victorious banner of the people’s war in our country*. Vietnam Documents and Research Notes No 70. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 17

For the period immediately after the signing of the Geneva accord, the DRV utilised the *partial uprising* approach whereby local VC forces employed guerrilla warfare against the forces of the RVN government. With the deployment of the first United States ground forces at Da Nang in August 1965, this strategy was escalated by incursions of regular PAVN forces into the Central Highlands, and the northern regions of Quang Tri Province. These incursions more often than not resulted in heavy casualties to the PAVN, as they were subjected to superior mobility and firepower of the United States forces.

In 1966-67 a power struggle to determine the most appropriate strategy for the winning of the war in the south was taking place between Giap and the commander of the Communist forces in the south, Nguyen Chi Thanh. Thanh advocated mass, widely distributed attacks on built-up areas to blunt the effectiveness of Allied firepower. Firstly, this would reduce the effectiveness of Allied firepower by distributing its employment against multiple attacking forces. Secondly, the Allies would be reluctant to deploy it within built-up areas due to the fear of civilian casualties. This approach would, however, require the investment of additional regular forces from North Vietnam. Neither Giap nor the Politburo supported this approach, as they believed the Northern forces were not sufficiently strong enough to challenge the Allied forces. Giap advocated continuation of the partial uprising in order to allow further development of the regular forces of the PAVN. This dispute continued until the reported death of Thanh in a B52 strike on the 6th July 1967.

By October 1967, it is clear from the publication of Resolution 13 that Giap believed the PAVN had sufficiently strengthened, allowing the transition to the phase of the *general uprising*. This change in strategy can also be linked to the success that the Allied forces were having in the pacification of the lowlands, and the casualties that the VC irregular forces were incurring when matched in open warfare with regular Allied forces.

A further factor with the development of Resolution 13 and the concept of the *General Attack General Uprising* was the growing concern in the North regarding Westmoreland's well-documented desire to utilise I Corps as firstly a springboard for an incursion into Laos, to destroy the North Vietnamese supply and logistical depots. Secondly, for a potential invasion, north of the DMZ, with the aim of disrupting the infiltration of PAVN forces into northern Quang Tri Province.

By concentrating regular troops in the DMZ and Laos, Giap enjoyed several advantages over those forces deployed within southern Vietnam:

1. Shorter logistical/supply lines that enabled more consistent level of supplies to be deployed into the DMZ. There was also less risk than travelling the length of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to enter southern Vietnam.
2. Closer to the sanctuaries of Laos and northern Vietnam where units could withdraw if under significant Allied pressure.
3. Closer to the unit training centres, which enabled fresh troops to be supplied to deployed units, a higher level of training than irregular units within the South. This also enabled Giap to match the escalation of United States forces within the I Corps region. Due to the geographic spread of the United States forces, the ability to dramatically reinforce I Corps was limited, large troop re-deployments would impact on the ability to secure the lowland areas of South Vietnam.
4. By utilising the VC for the operations in the South, Giap could isolate his most effective units for operations against the United States forces in I Corps.

Therefore, from Giap's perspective, the most effective region for such a test of forces was Quang Tri Province. It also allowed him to utilise the bulk of the irregular units in southern Vietnam to achieve the political impact of the assault, through highly visible assaults on the heavily populated cities, and the organs of the RVN central government.

In preparing for the *General Uprising, General Attack*, Resolution 13 clearly states that in order to achieve the withdrawal of the United States forces from southern Vietnam, a military victory would be required to alter the political will of the United States. Such a victory would be unacceptable to the public of the United States, and public opinion would force the United States to de-escalate the war. Giap therefore was proceeding with a dual strategy of achieving a military and political victory. North Vietnamese propaganda at the time of the assault on Khe Sanh reinforced the political goal of achieving a significant military victory over United States forces: "*Hail to the people's liberation combatants of Quang Tri, Route 9, and Khe Sanh who have developed to a high degree the historic traditions of Dien Bien Phu, have fought resolutely and perseveringly, endured hardships, and courageously struck the enemy's most crucial line of defense at Route 9, winning very glorious victories which constitute a forerunner to a new Dien Bien Phu-type heavy defeat for the enemy.*"⁴⁶

Westmoreland viewed the forces stationed in Quang Tri Province as an essential barrier for the infiltration of PAVN forces directly into the northern provinces of Vietnam. By maintaining the United States forces in and around Khe Sanh, Westmoreland hoped to achieve the following:

1. Impede the infiltration routes of the PAVN into South Vietnam via interdiction by Special Forces and air strikes.
2. Provide a springboard for the eventual invasion of Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
3. To provide a barrier system utilising the strong points such as Camp Carroll, Con Thien, the Rockpile, and Khe Sanh combat base that would channel the PAVN forces into areas that could be dominated by United States firepower.

⁴⁶ *Vietnamese propaganda broadcast transcript 20 February 1968. Liberation Radio 0900 GMT 18 February 1968.* Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

4. To provide a target worthy of the PAVN, employing regular units that could then be fixed in place and effectively targeted by United States firepower, unlike in the south where hit-and run raids by the VC did not allow the full weight of firepower to be utilised.

Westmoreland, however, had a fundamental difference of opinion with the Marine commanders in I Corps as to the optimum strategy for the defeat of the PAVN. Westmoreland believed that the PAVN would mount a significant attack across the DMZ with the intention of occupying all of Quang Tri Province. To combat this, Westmoreland viewed the attrition of the PAVN as the key goal. This would be achieved by, firstly, the utilisation of the forward positions such as Khe Sanh for the launching point for Special Forces to target rear areas and lines of communication, but more importantly, the strong points provided a barrier to prevent the PAVN getting into the populated areas of the coastal plains. *"[...]if the enemy held Khe Sanh he could have rolled up the defense positions to the east of Khe Sanh and south of the 18th Parallel in addition to that, the enemy wanted to get into the populated areas and mixed among the people which would have made it very difficult to be rooted out and would have been very costly since civilian property would have inevitably been destroyed[...]."*⁴⁷ Secondly, by "inviting" the PAVN to attack the outposts, Westmoreland could fix in place the PAVN units. Then MACV would employ overwhelming firepower to defeat the enemy. Such an approach was not, however, consistent with the Marine commanders in I Corps, who believed that the majority of the infiltration into southern Vietnam came via the eastern coastal plains and not through the western Laos border region. Thirdly, it was also viewed that the PAVN could effectively outflank the western defences through utilising the border region to travel further south into the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The Marines stationed at Khe Sanh also supported this view. Captain William Dabney

⁴⁷ "General Westmoreland Interview University of North Carolina 22 February 1978". Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

commented, *"I believe Gen Westmoreland thought Khe Sanh could at least inhibit their use of the HCM (Ho Chi Minh) Trail. Perhaps, by its patrols and their target ID/designations, they did to some extent. But the country to the west of Khe Sanh is similar for hundreds of miles to the west. The HCM could easily be moved. Also, it was like an ant trail – temporary interruptions had no lasting effect. There were insufficient troops to both defend and project for any distance."*⁴⁸ The use of Marines, who are because of their training more appropriately utilised as offensive assets, in static position was also viewed as a waste of resources. It was the view of Marine commanders in I Corps that a more effective strategy would have been to rely on mobile operations and to enhance the rural development and pacification programmes.

In conjunction with the use of the existing strong points, Washington developed the concept of a barrier system to assist with preventing the infiltration of PAVN forces into South Vietnam. The concept was driven from the office of the Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and envisaged the use of technology (seismic and infra-red sensors to detect movement), backed up by a number of strong points stretching from the sea 30 kilometres inland to the point whereby the coastal plains began to rise up into the Annamite mountains. Khe Sanh was to be the lynchpin in the western portion of the barrier system. From this point, only where infiltration was likely would the routes be blocked via wire obstacles, minefields and manned strong-points on suitable hills. From the border with Laos, an electronic barrier of sensors code-named MUSCLES SHOALS would be deployed. This system would forward data to orbiting EC121 aircraft acting as a repeater station, which could feed the data to waiting strike aircraft and a control centre in Thailand coded-named DUTCH MILL. DUTCH MILL analysts would then interpret the data and direct the necessary countermeasures. General Walt, however, objected to the construction of the barrier

⁴⁸ Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 19th January 2006.

system as it was estimated that it would tie up all the resources of the 3rd Marine Division, which could be utilised more effectively elsewhere.

The construction of the barrier system known as DYE MARKER (or more commonly the McNamara Line), began in April 1967. However, due to the complications of construction and the strain on logistics the project was shelved on the 6th January 1968 when it was clear the resources would need to be utilised for the impending PAVN summer offensive. Westmoreland communicated this significant strategy change to Admiral Sharp and General Wheeler in a top-secret memo dated 22nd January 1968. *“On 20 January, I instructed LTG Cushman to defer any further work on the trace involved in the DYE MARKER Project so as to keep maximum troops available to react to enemy initiatives.”*⁴⁹ By placing such focus on the strong point and barrier operations, Westmoreland had effectively fixed in place a significant number of his resources within I Corps TAOR, with the potential for these units to be isolated and reduced one by one. The units installing the barrier system were also subjected to interdiction from the PAVN, either via direct or indirect fire from across the border, which hampered in the installation of the barrier system.

Opposition to the Westmoreland strategy was also coming from independent advisors to President Johnson in Washington. Retired General Maxwell Taylor, who had previously championed Westmoreland's career, now advised Johnson against the current strategies employed. Taylor believed that rather than seeking the PAVN on terrain of their own choosing via crossing into Laos, they should tempt the PAVN out of the Laotian sanctuaries and engage them on terms more suitable to MACV. (The wisdom of this advice was confirmed in 1972 when the ARVN, supported by United States airpower and advisors launched Lam Son 719, whereby the ARVN suffered a significant defeat). Secondly, Taylor did not see the value in the strong-

⁴⁹ *Westmoreland Memo to Wheeler MAC 00992, 21 January 1968.* Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 2.

point approach, whereby MACV would allow the PAVN to choose the time and place for a set-piece attack, on ground of his choosing, allowing him to position his forces and his logistics at his leisure. Although the United States forces could utilise air-power to impede this build-up, the effectiveness of this would be limited when the PAVN utilised their favoured tactic of closing tightly with the adversary, limiting the use of indirect supporting arms.

Section Six: Intelligence failure?

Traditionally a ceasefire was observed over the Tet lunar new year, as both the North and South would celebrate the coming new year. This resulted in a de-escalation of violence over this period. In 1967, however, the North announced a further strategy to de-escalate the conflict via a statement from Vice Premier Trinh on the 7th January 1968: If the United States would cease bombing of northern Vietnam, the North would begin negotiations for the full cessation of hostilities. It is now accepted that this was ruse to divert United States attention away from the coming Tet Offensive. There is little doubt that there was significant intelligence indicating a build up of PAVN and VC forces. To what extent, however, did these indicators point to a major offensive?

As early as October 1967 ARVN Intelligence had indications of the significant policy change in the way the DRV would conduct the war when a copy of the full text of Resolution 13 was obtained. Additional confirmation was obtained through documents seized in Tay Ninh Province dated the 1st September 1967. This document outlined the two main objectives of the Communist forces:

1. The removal of the United States forces from South Vietnam
2. The establishment of a coalition government in the South.

On the 3rd November 1967 ARVN forces captured a further document during the battle of Dakto. This document originated from the headquarters of the B3 Front that was conducting the battle of Dakto. This document outlined the objectives of the forces in the Central Highlands. Further intelligence was obtained in November from Quang Tin Province that specifically mentioned the *General Offensive, General Uprising*. This document stated, "*This is the time we should proceed with our General Offensive-General Uprising. Through the coordinated use of military forces combined*

*with country-wide popular uprising we shall attack every provincial city, and every district town, including the capital Saigon, which we shall liberate.*⁵⁰

Westmoreland, in his September 1967 *“Military Assessment for the Month of September”* cable to Wheeler, indicated that the PAVN in I Corps *“[Giap was] devoting a maximum effort towards the re-supply and reorganization of his forces prior to the monsoon season.”*⁵¹ Further intelligence was obtained indicating that the PAVN was reinforcing the units in the south by shifting regular units from the north. Observation of the Ho Chi Minh trail identified an upsurge in vehicle traffic over the months of October to December from the September average of 480.

- October - 1,116
- November - 3,823
- December – 6,315.

This was coupled with the reorganisation of the forces within the DMZ and Quang Tri Province. In a memo from Westmoreland to Wheeler dated 7th January 1968 intelligence had identified a *“[...]thinning of forces along the demilitarised zone with a shift of mass into Laos. Hanoi’s military posture will be improved significantly. The gains are these: Operations can be launched on a west-east axis from a relatively secure, well established, easily supported base complex located on good lines of communication.”*⁵² Westmoreland made the following assumptions as to the possible reason for the reorganisation of these forces:

1. Was a defensive move in response to the DYE MARKER program that would provide I Corps with flank protection for an invasion into Laos to disrupt major logistics depots and infiltration routes.

⁵⁰ Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung (1978) *The General Offensive 1968 – 69*. General research Corporation, McLean Virginia. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 34.

⁵¹ *Military Assessment for the Month of September* – Cable to Westmoreland to Wheeler Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 4.

⁵² *Memo Westmoreland to Wheeler dated 7 January 1968*. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

2. The concentration of forces was primarily an offensive act that would have allowed the north to launch a coordinated attack into the northern Quang Tri-Thua Thien region.

To assist in the collection of intelligence, Westmoreland directed General William Momyer, his air commander, to initiate a "[...]coordinated intelligence collection effort was initiated on the Khe Sanh area (NIAGARA I) using maximum available resources."⁵³

Further south in III Corps, General Weyand informed Westmoreland on the 9th January of PAVN troops leaving the border sanctities and moving towards the populated areas of III Corps, such as Saigon. Weyand requested the cancellation of offensive action along the border regions, with troops moved back to protect the cities. Westmoreland did not believe that the movement of PAVN warranted the transfer of United States forces to the cities to counter this threat. Westmoreland believed that with the PAVN forces massing along the Laotian border with Quang Tri Province, this was an immediate threat, and that the forces in the south would not take any offensive action until after the Tet celebrations. *"While an attack can be made in I Corps prior to Tet, current troop dispositions, reinforcement activity, and preparations indicate a post Tet [o]ffensive of major proportions. He needs time to reposition forces in and [s]outh of I Corps, to prepare the battlefields, and to assure coordination of country wide attack plans. The Tet stand-down provides an opportunity to make final troop moves and bring up supplies."*⁵⁴ To further enhance the defences of I Corps, Westmoreland dispatched the 1st Air Cavalry Division to Hue/Phu Bai, followed by 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division from Weyand's III

⁵³ Westmoreland Memo to Wheeler MAC 00992, 21 January 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.. Page 1

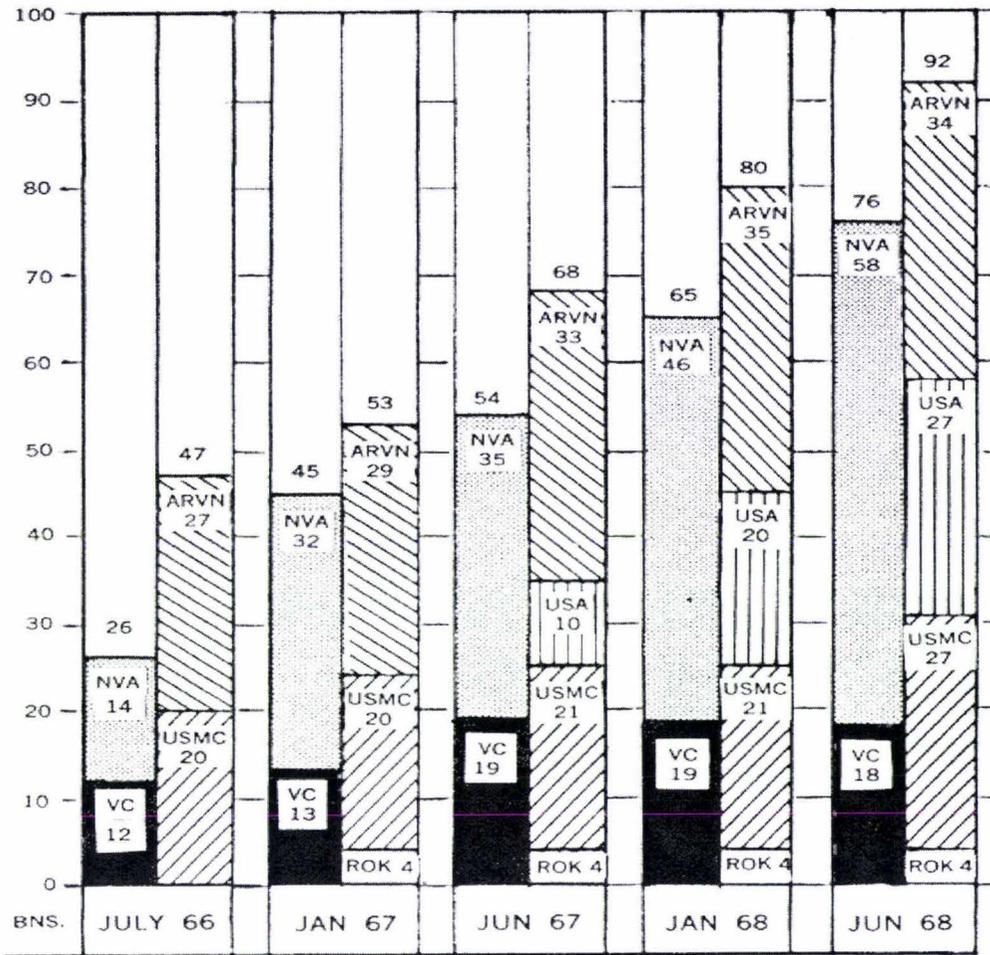
⁵⁴ Memo Westmoreland to Wheeler dated 7 January 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

Corps on the 20th January. By the close of January Westmoreland had deployed close to 50% off all MACV's manoeuvre battalions into the I Corps TAOR.

Table 1 demonstrates the increase in PAVN/VC troops within I Corps. In 1966 there were 26 PAVN/VC manoeuvre battalions available for combat in I Corps. By January of 1968 infiltration from the North had seen the available troop numbers swell to 76 manoeuvre battalions, an increase of 300%. Of greater concern to MACV, however was that the force superiority ratio had fallen from 1.8:1, to 1.2:1, identifying that the PAVN/VC forces had a greater capacity for reinforcement than the Allied forces. Therefore, in real terms Giap had more combat troops available for operations within CTZ 1, as the greater proportion of Allied forces were fixed in static defence positions. The majority of this troop increase was regular PAVN units of greater combat effectiveness than the irregular VC forces. Infiltrated from the north, they were well trained, motivated and supplied with modern combat weaponry; capable of matching those forces deployed against them.

In and around the Khe Sanh combat base PAVN activity intensified. Active patrolling on the part of the Marines uncovered bivouacs and caches that indicated a movement of the PAVN into the Khe Sanh TAOR. Of greatest significance, however, was an incident on the 2nd January 1968 when a listening post 400 metres from the western end of the combat base reported contact. A patrol from L Company, 3/26 intercepted a PAVN patrol and a brief firefight took place resulting in five PAVN casualties, with a sixth member escaping into the jungle. It has been speculated that one of these individuals was a regimental commander conducting a personnel reconnaissance of the combat base defences, however definitive evidence to support this claim is yet to be provided.

Table 1: Manoeuvre Battalions deployed in I Corps 1966 - 68⁵⁵



With the level of threat towards Khe Sanh growing, Westmoreland directed that a study of the deployment of the MUSCLE SHOALS sensor system be made for the Khe Sanh TAOR. The decision was made to deploy the system, and air dropped sensors began to be employed on the 20th January, with a total of 316 sensors⁵⁶ being deployed by the end of January.

Of more significance, however, was an incident that occurred on the 20th January when a PAVN rallier (defector) named Lieutenant La Thanh Tonic surrendered to B Company 1/26 on the north-east perimeter of the combat base. Tonic identified

⁵⁵ Lieutenant General Willard Pearson (1975). *War in the Northern Provinces Vietnam 1966-68*. Department of the Army Washington D.C. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 98.

⁵⁶ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 301

himself as the Commander of the 14th Anti Aircraft Company, 95C Regiment of the 325C Division. Information provided by Tonc indicated that a strong force from the 95C Regiment would assault Hill 861. This information was passed immediately on to Lownds, who in turn forwarded it to General Tompkins, Commander 3rd Marine Division. Such intelligence hardened Westmoreland's view that Khe Sanh would be the critical centre of gravity for the impending PAVN offensive. In response to the intelligence supporting the impending assault Westmoreland met with Ambassador Bunker,⁵⁷ President Thieu⁵⁸ and General Vien⁵⁹ and requested a cancellation of the Tet ceasefire. Thieu refused, but did allow the limitation of the Tet leave for the ARVN troops to 36 hours, with 50% of the troops remaining at their posts.

Although Westmoreland was concerned with the build-up of the PAVN forces throughout I Corps, he also viewed it as the opportunity he had been seeking to engage in a major conventional battle with the PAVN. In a memo to General Wheeler Westmoreland stated, *"While these courses of enemy action will present obvious dangers, either will give us great opportunities to destroy many of his troops. With this in mind, I am devoting a maximum effort to fixing these major reinforcements as targets for B52 and tactical air strikes"*⁶⁰

It is clear that there were significant indicators as to a wider scale offensive than just within I Corps. Documentation captured from the Communists indicated that a major offensive was planned for the early part of 1968. It is therefore surprising that Westmoreland committed the bulk of his forces to I Corps. Westmoreland stated that he expected a nationwide offensive post the Tet new-year holiday, it would have therefore seemed prudent to re-deploy sufficient forces to the populated areas to meet this threat. This would imply a strategic error underestimating the potential

⁵⁷ Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. United States Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam.

⁵⁸ President Nguyen Van Thieu, President of the Republic of Vietnam.

⁵⁹ General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the South Vietnamese General Staff.

⁶⁰ *Memo Westmoreland to Wheeler dated 7 January 1968*. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

scope and timing of the offensive, rather than a failure of intelligence that clearly indicated a major assault against the populated areas. Secondly, it is also clear from the communications to President Johnson, via General Wheeler of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that Washington was well aware of the impending offensive. Thirdly, although Weyand provided intelligence that Communist forces were infiltrating into the populated areas, Westmoreland's decision to leave the forces in the border regions is consistent with his previous approach of meeting the infiltration at the point of entry, rather than allowing the Communists to choose the field of battle. This, however, ignored the intelligence that there were already significant North Vietnamese assets in place preparing to strike at the populated areas.

Human intelligence, such as the active patrolling by the Marines, coupled with Special Forces and prisoner interrogation, identified Khe Sanh as a PAVN objective. MUSCLE SHOALS and traditional airborne reconnaissance (to be discussed in-depth later) also identified an increased level of Communist deployment down the Ho Chi Minh trail and into the Khe Sanh TAOR.

Intelligence was also accurate in that significant forces would be deployed against I Corps. Intelligence had identified elements of four PAVN divisions deployed in and around Quang Tri Province, with the Marines at Khe Sanh likely to bare the brunt of any potential assault. This was the equivalent of 30% of the Vietnamese forces employed in the upcoming offensive. Westmoreland deployed his resources to meet this threat whilst leaving the Marines fixed in place at Khe Sanh. It could also be argued that the Marines and associated airpower had fixed in place a significant portion of the PAVN forces; that could then have allowed Westmoreland to redeploy his forces to the populated regions to meet the upcoming offensive.

Section seven: The Dien Bien Phu effect

Although it was a conscious decision on the part of Westmoreland to seek a confrontation with the PAVN in and around the Khe Sanh combat base, there was a significant level of concern within both MACV and the Johnson administration, fuelled by media coverage and Communist propaganda that the siege of Khe Sanh would lead to the eventual defeat of the Marines.

Johnson was concerned that the repeat of a loss similar to that of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 would be as politically unacceptable to the American people as it had been to the French electorate. The information from his field commander, Westmoreland, indicated that the Communists were about to strike at Khe Sanh, and Westmoreland was welcoming this approach. Wheeler concurred with Westmoreland that there was a tactical reason for the Marines to remain at Khe Sanh. In a memo to Johnson on 29th January, Wheeler stated that the Joint Chiefs had reviewed the plans for the defense of Khe Sanh, and the contingency plans for the continued support of Khe Sanh. Wheeler also emphasised the importance of Khe Sanh as *“(a) It is the western anchor of our defense of the DMZ area against enemy incursions into the northern portion of South Vietnam; (b) its abandonment would bring enemy forces into areas contiguous to the heavily populated and important coastal area; and (c) its abandonment would constitute a major propaganda victory for the enemy which would seriously affect Vietnamese and US morale.”*⁶¹

In order to address these concerns Westmoreland directed his command historian, Colonel Argo, to complete an analysis of the Khe Sanh situation, with particular reference to the siege at Dien Bien Phu, compared with classical sieges from history. Argo and his team reviewed 39 sieges from Constantinople in 1453 to Dien Bien Phu in 1953. Of those sieges, only 11 of the besieged armies successfully withstood the

aggressor. The last successful siege being that of Bastogne in World War Two, whereby 101st Airborne held out against a resource weakened German Panzer Army for 9 days, until relieved by Patton's Third Army.

Argo presented his findings to Westmoreland and his staff in Saigon on 11th February 1968. The major conclusion put forward to Westmoreland was that in general very few besieged armies have been able to successfully withstand the siege. Argo attributed this to:

1. *"The besieged force fixes itself and forfeits the initiative. This leaves the enemy freedom of action to concentrate his forces and reduce the fortress in the manner and at the time of his choosing.*
2. *Supply problems generally develop.*
3. *During sieges of any length the defenders become demoralized by the lack of initiative, waiting, bombardment, and supply shortages.*⁶²

Furthermore, although Argo stated that the Marines possessed the advantage of significant external resources, these could be managed by the PAVN through the tactics (demonstrated so convincingly at Dien Bien Phu) of cover and concealment, and "hugging" (closing tightly with the Khe Sanh defensive perimeter) to minimise the opportunity for Westmoreland to deploy his overwhelming firepower. In conclusion Argo stated *"If a purely defensive course of action is pursued at Khe Sanh, the enemy may succeed in concentrating sufficient combat power to overwhelm our base in spite of our firepower, as has been the case in most sieges in the past."*⁶³ The report presented by Argo did not provide the confidence boost that Westmoreland had hoped to achieve within MACV.

⁶¹ *Wheeler Memo JCSM-63-68 29 January 1968.* Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

⁶² Colonel Argo (1968). *Analysis of the Khe Sanh Situation in Light of previous Sieges.* MACJ031. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 1

⁶³ *Ibid* page 4

In an attempt to alleviate Johnson's concerns regarding another Dien Bien Phu, Wheeler sought clarification from Westmoreland regarding the risks of Khe Sanh falling. *"Our situation at Khe Sanh as compared with the French at Dien Bien Phu is different in three significant respects. We have supporting air (tactical air and B - 52's) for all-weather attack of enemy forces by order of magnitude over that at Dien Bien Phu. We have reinforcing heavy artillery within the range of the Khe Sanh area from USMC positions east of the mountains. We have multiple and vastly improved techniques for aerial supply and we are within helicopter support range for troop reinforcement, logistic support, medical evacuation and other requirements"*⁶⁴

The Vietnamese, however, sought to emphasise the similarities via propaganda broadcasts accessible by the Western media agencies. On 10th February 1968 Liberation Radio broadcast the following statement: *"They are afraid that a new Dien Bien Phu-type battle will take place at Khe Sanh. Therefore they have been trying by every means to avoid a serious defeat like that of Dien Bien Phu. However, the Quang Tri Liberation Armed Forces, with a courageous, persevering spirit, endurance in the face of hardships, determination to overcome difficulties, and flexible and wise fighting method have always held the initiative on battlefields, have always been on the offensive, and have repeatedly dealt the enemy a hard blow."*⁶⁵ Such statements also emphasised to the Johnson administration that the PAVN viewed Khe Sanh as a crucial battle to win.

The concern in Washington and Saigon that there would be a repeat of the French failure at Dien Bien Phu was not however felt by the Marines at Khe Sanh. Colonel John Kaheny, Headquarters and Support Company, 1/26 Marines stated: *"In the operations centre for 1st Bn 26th Marines, we had a copy of Bernard Fall's "Hell In A*

⁶⁴ *Memo for the President CM-2944-68, 3 February 1968.* Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 1

⁶⁵ *Liberation radio Broadcast Transcript 18 Feb 1968 0900 GMT.* Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

[Very] Small Place.” It was required reading. However, we were well aware of the strategic and tactical differences. First, we held the outlying hills, the French lost them, or failed to defend them. Second, we had an incredible air support that the NVA tried but could not stop. Third, we had sensor technology that gave us effective targeting information against infantry attack. Fourth, the combat assets (tanks, Ontos, dusters and artillery) supporting the base and the hills were exceptionally effective.”⁶⁶

In order to better understand the comparisons between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu, it is appropriate to briefly examine the siege of Dien Bien Phu, and the similarities to Khe Sanh.

Dien Bien Phu is in a valley in the northern highlands of Vietnam in which an airstrip had been built by the French in the early 1920s, and subsequently utilised by the French in opposition to the Japanese invasion of Indochina. With the advent of the French-Indochina war Dien Bien Phu was lost to the Communist Viet Minh following the October 1952 incursions into northern Vietnam. The French Command believed that the occupation of the valley by the Viet Minh allowed them to utilise it as a communications hub, and to support any future invasion of Laos. Operation Castor was therefore conceived to return Dien Bien Phu to French hands, and utilise it as an air-land base to dominate the region, and prevent the incursions of Viet Minh troops into Laos.

Operation Castor began on 20th November 1953, with the parachuting of 2 battalions of French paratroopers into the valley, followed by a third battalion later in the afternoon. With the valley secured after heavy fighting, further troops were parachuted into the valley, as well as heavy equipment to re-open the airstrip and commence building of the fortifications for the air-land base. The base consisted of a

⁶⁶ Colonel John M Kaheny, Assistant Operations Officer 1st Battalion 26 Marines. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 16th January 2006

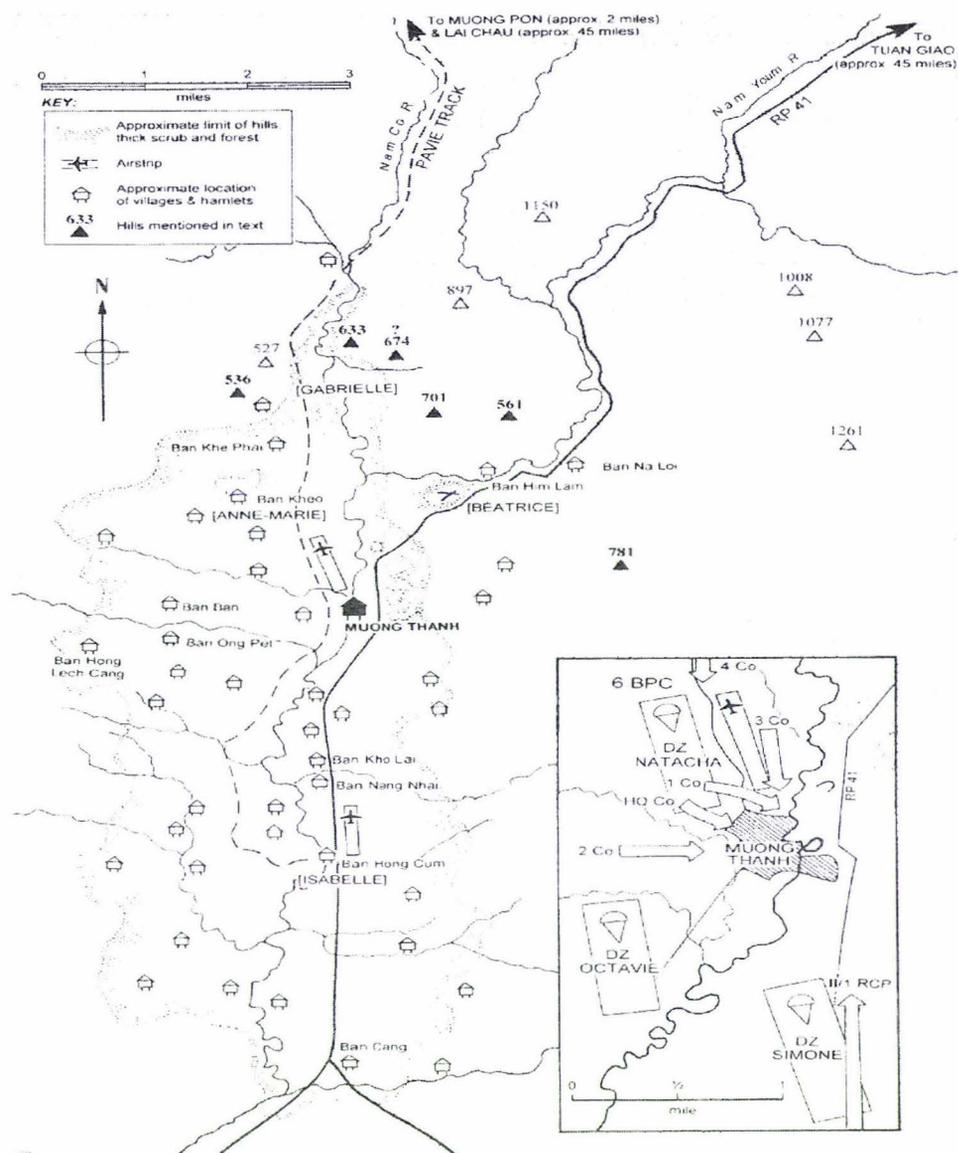
main central position around the airstrip, with four independent positions covering likely avenues of approach to the base. Initial preparation of the base defences was poor: with limited aircraft resources available for the delivery of construction materials, the majority of re-supply flights were devoted to the delivery of airfield construction material. Building of defensive positions did not fully commence until the surrounding hills had been occupied by the Viet Minh. Construction material had to be delivered by air. However, due to competing requirements for the deliveries of supplies and troops, there were insufficient aircraft resources to meet the demand. Adverse weather conditions impacted on the ability of the French to maintain the defences, as monsoon rains, coupled with the poor drainage qualities of the soil, saw much of the trenches flooded. They then collapsed which was attributed to the inadequate construction materials, and poor soils for the digging of defences.

Total troops eventually assigned to the base amounted to 15,105 and consisted of French nationals, Algerians, Foreign Legion, Vietnamese, and Tai tribesman. The quality of the troops employed was mixed, and deteriorated as the siege progressed, with a significant number of desertions. Direct fire support was provided to the base via 24 105mm and four 155mm calibre artillery pieces, 10 M24 Chaffee tanks,⁶⁷ Heavy and Light Mortars, and two x Quad 0.50 calibre anti-aircraft systems utilised in a ground role. External support was to be provided by air strikes conducted by the French Air Force/Navy. Total close support aircraft available to the French totalled 130 aircraft, including 47 B26 Bombers and eight Privateer antisubmarine aircraft⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ "Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation". Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page A-5

⁶⁸ Ibid Page A-5

Map 7: Valley of Dien Bien Phu and Operation Castor 20 November 1953.⁶⁹



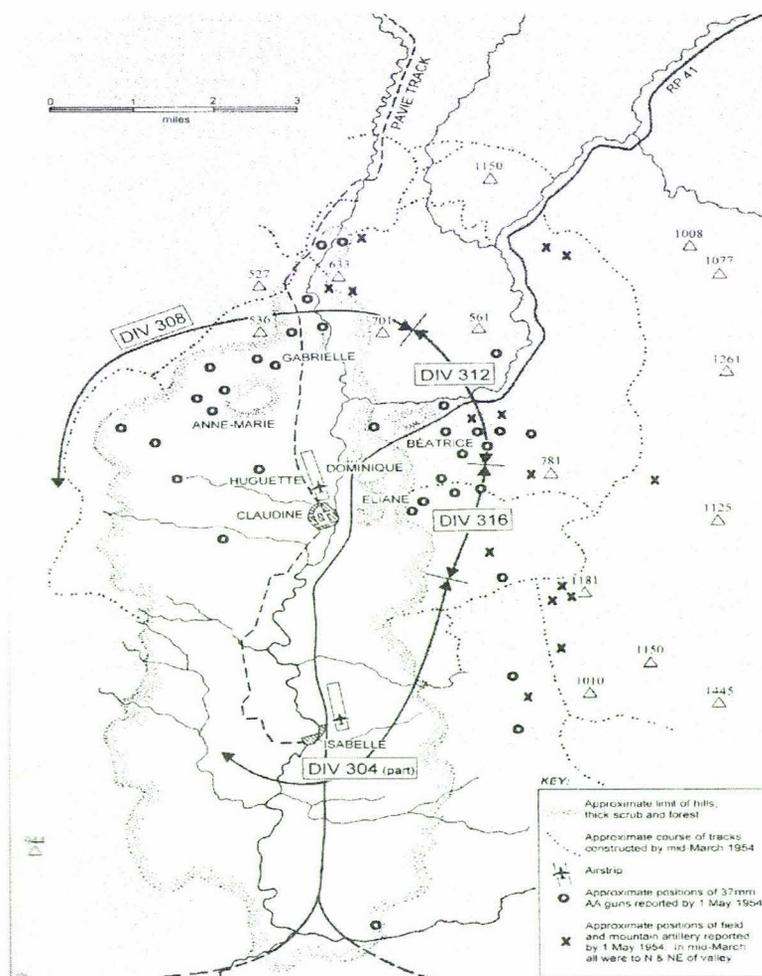
The Privateers were utilised for long range interdiction of the Viet Minh supply lines. Re-supply of the base was to be provided by an air bridge to Hanoi, which was in excess of 200 kilometres from the base. In order to successfully maintain the base, 200 tons of supplies daily would need to be delivered by the air bridge. However, due

⁶⁹ Windrow M, (2005) *The last valley – Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam* Cassell Military Paperbacks, London United Kingdom. Map 9.

to the Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA), the base only averaged 120⁷⁰ tons per day, with a significant amount falling in Viet Minh hands due to misdirected air drops.

Opposing the French were the forces of General Vo Nguyen Giap, who believed a major French defeat and the resulting adverse political fall-out would drive the French to the negotiating table. Giap had at his disposal in excess of 49,500 combat troops in five divisions and one independent brigade. Giap's forces also included 48 Howitzers and Katyusha rocket launchers of varying calibre and 60 mortars of varying calibre.

Map 8: Approximate locations of Viet Minh siege army Dien Bien Phu.⁷¹



⁷⁰ "Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation". Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page A-6

⁷¹ Windrow M, (2005) "The last valley – Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam" Cassell Military Paperbacks, London United Kingdom. Map 10.

Giap did not have an air force, but did have significant anti-aircraft weaponry with an estimated 24 37mm, and 50 0.50 calibre anti-aircraft guns⁷². Giap's supply lines were also long and subject to interdiction by the French air support and relied on a force of 100,000 coolies to maintain the delivery of supplies to Dien Bien Phu.

Giap employed the following tactics for the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu:

1. Cutting of the air-bridge through the bombardment of the airfield, destruction of organic airpower, destruction of airfield facilities and air traffic control. The emplacement of Anti-Aircraft artillery on the surrounding hills to destroy incoming supply flights.
2. Reduction of outlying defensive positions to allow the Viet Minh to close on the main French positions, and to eliminate available drop zones for parachuted supply drops.
3. Preparation of the battlefield for the final assault. This consisted of the construction of siege-works and approach trenches and the bombardment of the French defences.
4. Massed human wave assaults to destroy the French forces at Dien Bien Phu.

Colonel Piroth,⁷³ the French artillery commander, assured Colonel de Castries, Commander of the French forces, that he possessed sufficient resources to defeat the Viet Minh Artillery and protect the base from assault. The French, however, underestimated the Viet Minh. Artillery pieces were well camouflaged, deployed in caves, or dug into leading edge of hillsides making counter-battery fire near on impossible. The ability to direct counter-battery fire was also limited: French air observation was driven away by AAA, or destroyed on the ground in the opening

⁷² "Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation". Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page A-7

⁷³ Colonel Piroth committed suicide due to his inability to defeat the Viet Minh artillery.

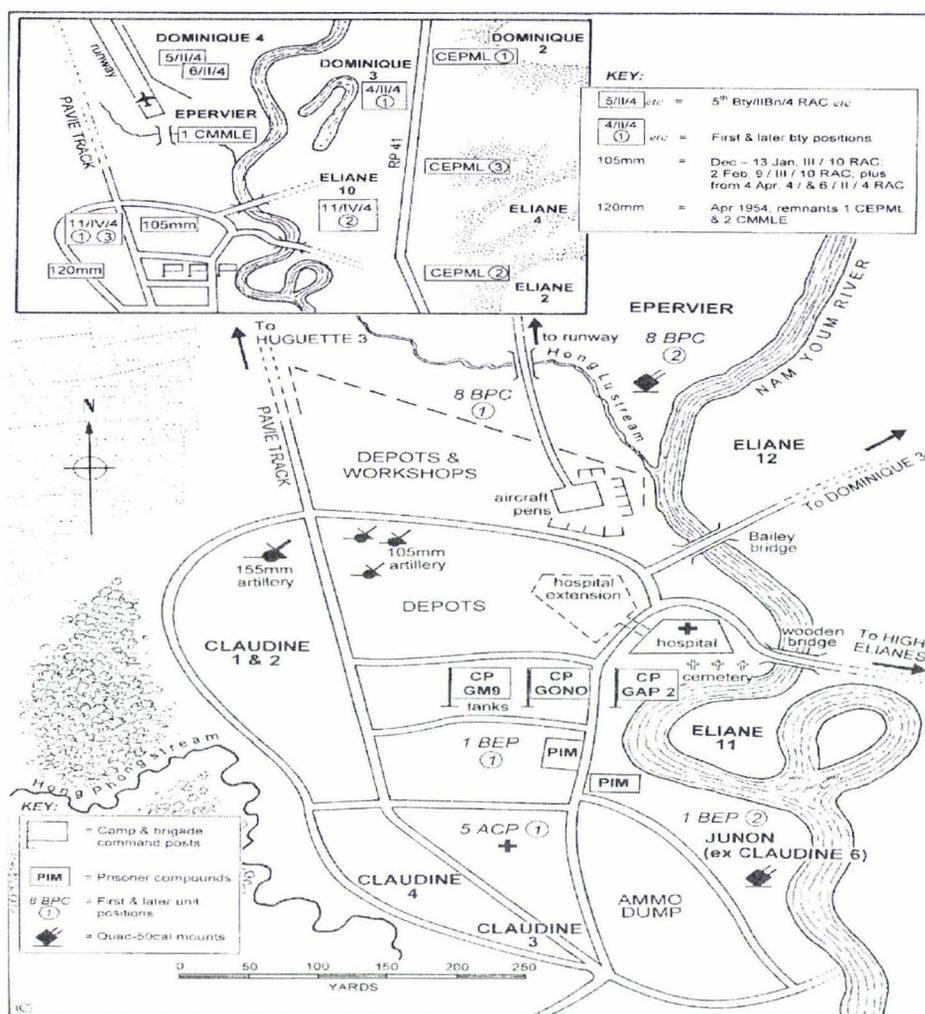
stages of the siege. Close-air support was both insufficient in numbers to target the positions, and suffered heavy casualties from the AAA. The ceding of the high ground to the Viet Minh allowed direct fire and observation of the base, eliminating the key artillery positions, allowing the Viet Minh to close on the base.

With the interdiction of the airfield, all reinforcements and supplies had to be air-dropped into the siege-ring. Due to the limited number of aircraft and skilled pilots available the French could not deliver sufficient supplies or reinforcements to meet daily attrition. Secondly, the need to keep the base supplied with necessary ammunition, medical supplies and fuel limited the ability to deliver sufficient amounts of food to the defending forces. This lack of basic resources not only impacted on the ability of the French to withstand the Viet Minh assaults, but affected troop morale, leading to a high number of internal⁷⁴ desertions amongst the troops. Thirdly, as the siege progressed, air-supply resources were utilised to a greater extent to deliver much needed medical supplies for the large number of wounded troops in the underground hospitals of the base.

The French positions at Dien Bien Phu consisted of four outlying elevated positions; Gabrielle, Anne-Marie, Beatrice and Isabelle designed to provide a buffer to the main French positions grouped around the airstrip and the re-supply drop zones. The initial ground assaults commenced at 5.20pm on the afternoon of the 13th March 1954; when Viet Minh troops supported by heavy artillery support assaulted the French position Beatrice from the north and south. The French suffered heavy casualties from the Viet Minh artillery due to the poor defensive works and the inability of Piroth's artillery to suppress the Viet Minh guns.

⁷⁴ Troops refusing to fight and congregating by the Nam Youm River

Map 9: Central position of the Dien Bien Phu fortress.⁷⁵



The French artillery was situated in open gun-pits that made them vulnerable to Viet Minh counter-battery fire. Piroth had also underestimated the number and quality of the Viet Minh artillery units. Viet Minh troops dug approach trenches up to the barbed wire entanglements, which were then breached by Bangalore Torpedoes.⁷⁶ This was followed by a human wave assault that overwhelmed the French troops; with the position secured by 11pm on the night of 13th March.

Giap again successfully utilised these tactics on the night of the 14th and 15th March and reduced the position Gabrielle, which was again assaulted simultaneously from

⁷⁵ Windrow M, (2005) *The last valley – Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam* Cassell Military Paperbacks, London United Kingdom. Map 11.

⁷⁶ Bamboo pipes packed with explosives designed to breach barbed wire entanglements.

the north and south. The French artillery was again unable to provide sufficient supporting fire and contributed to the loss of the position. Morale of the native troops was adversely affected with the wholesale desertion of the Tai troops holding the position at Anne-Marie, leaving a cadre of French troops to defend the position. *Anne-Marie* fell on the afternoon of the 17th March, allowing the Viet Minh to close on the main positions at Dien Bien Phu, to isolate the French position Isabelle, and move artillery and anti-aircraft artillery closer to the airfield.

The period from 17th - 30th March was utilised by the Viet Minh to prepare for the second phase of the battle with the reduction of the French defences and the digging of approach trenches. On the French side, they attempted to improve their defences with the arrival of more troops, attacks on the approaching trench-line, and road clearing operations to the position at Isabelle. Giap's primary objective over this period was to close the main runway at Dien Bien Phu and effectively cut the French off from their primary supply lines. Once the airfield was closed on 28th March, the French had to rely on the delivery of supplies and reinforcements by parachute. This required the French Air Force, and civilian flyers to run the gauntlet of Viet Minh AAA, that had been moved closer to the airstrip with the loss of the outlying positions.

Due to the following factors the French Air Force could not maintain the air-bridge, sealing the fate of the French defenders:

- Accurate Viet Minh AAA fire that resulted in aircraft losses and poor delivery of reinforcements and supplies onto the drop zones.
- Inadequate numbers of pilots to fly the supply missions. Pilot fatigue resulted in miss-drops and aborting of supply missions.
- Aircraft losses resulting in poor morale and combat fatigue.
- Reliance on civilian pilots who withdrew services due to aircraft losses.
- Insufficient French air force resources to mount flak suppressions missions over the drop zones.

The net affect of these factors resulted in the defenders of Dien Bien Phu being starved of sufficient resources to withstand the siege.

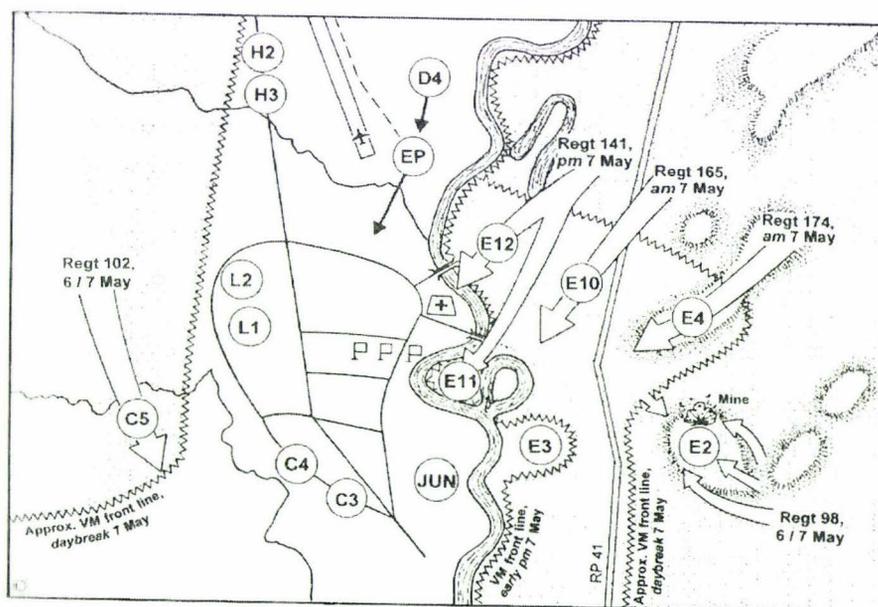
The second major assault on Dien Bien Phu, the "Battle of the 5 Hills" was launched on the night of the 30th March against the positions known as Dominique and Eliane; these positions consisted of a number of elevated hills. Results were mixed with the Dominique falling along with a number of the outlying positions of Eliane. The losses suffered, and the effect of the siege, began to affect the morale of the defenders with internal desertion becoming a problem with the native troops. These deserters grouped by the river, within the defences of Dien Bien Phu, requiring additional combat troops to be deployed within the fortress to prevent the theft of valuable supplies from the defenders. The number of deserters was eventually estimated to be in excess of 2,000 troops, seriously limiting the number of combat troops that could be deployed against the Viet Minh assaults. Controversy also exists about the transfer of effective command of the Dien Bien Phu from de Castries to Colonel Langlais of the Paratroopers. Various accounts have stated that a mutiny occurred, with a dissatisfied Langlais assuming command of the defences. De Castries continued, however, to act as the link between Dien Bien Phu and French command in Hanoi.

As it became apparent that the forces at Dien Bien Phu would not survive without the intervention of an external relief force, French High Command under General Navarre directed that operation "Condor" from Laos be initiated on 13th April. "Condor" was initially conceived to commence in December 1953, consisting of 5,500 troops and would create an over-land route into Dien Bien Phu. When it was finally given the go-ahead, troop numbers had been reduced to 3,088 men⁷⁷ and it was at best designed to be a relief operation for Dien Bien Phu, at worst it would act as a diversion to draw Viet Minh troops away from Dien Bien Phu, reducing the pressure

on the base and allowing the French forces to break out and link up with "Condor." The relief operation created its own challenges for Dien Bien Phu, crucial troop transports and close air support had to be diverted away from Dien Bien Phu in order to support the "Condor" operation, adversely impacting on the ability to supply Dien Bien Phu. In the end "Condor" was too little too late, as Dien Bien Phu fell prior to the "Condor" forces closing sufficiently with the base to provide the relief it was designed to achieve.

The third and final phase of the siege began on 1st May when the Viet Minh forces attacked the position known as Huguett from the north-west, assuming control of it by 4th May. From the north-east more Viet Minh troops struck at Elaine with mixed results.

Map 10: The fall of Dien Bien Phu May 7 1954.⁷⁸



The final assaults occurred on 7th May with resistance in the main defences of Dien Bien Phu ceasing at approximately 5.30pm on May 7. The French defenders had been exhausted both physically and mentally, and lacked sufficient resources

⁷⁷ Fall, B (1966). *Hell in a very small place -The siege of Dien Bien Phu*. De Capo Press United States. Page 318

⁷⁸ Windrow M, (2005) *The last valley – Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam* Cassell Military Paperbacks, London United Kingdom. Map 21

through Viet Minh attrition to fight on any further. One final act of defiance came from the strong-point of Isabelle that attempted to break out towards the "Condor" forces, however the tight siege ring, and insufficient resources doomed this to failure. Overall the French forces incurred approximately 15,000 casualties, with the Viet Minh incurring significantly more at 22,900⁷⁹, with an unknown number of coolies killed by French air strikes on the Viet Minh supply lines. Despite these casualties Giap had produced his military victory and created a French political willingness to negotiate the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam.

The key lessons that the Marines at Khe Sanh could learn from the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu were:

1. The choice of the position of the air-land base at the end of a tenuous 200 kilometre supply line with limited airlift capacity was a significant tactical error. Aircraft losses and interdiction of the airfield allowed the Viet Minh to strangle the French forces at Dien Bien Phu.
2. The Viet Minh were allowed to occupy the surrounding hills allowing direct observation and fire onto the base.
3. The defence of the air bridge was not maintained, allowing the French forces to be slowly "strangled" due to a lack of supplies and reinforcements. This was coupled with poor logistics planning and inadequate air-lift support.
4. The French lacked fire-power, both organic stationed with the troops at Dien Bien Phu, and from indirect resources, to break up the Viet Minh assaults.
5. There was insufficient air-support to provide close air support for counter-attacks and to interdict Viet Minh supply lines.
6. Poor planning of the defences and inadequate construction materials to protect vital emplacements and supporting arms from Viet Minh artillery. The

⁷⁹ Windrow M, (2005) *"The last valley – Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam"* Cassell Military Paperbacks, London United Kingdom Page 487.

land formations also did not support the construction of under-ground defences.

7. Poor fire direction and planning of supporting counter-battery fire allowed the Viet Minh to dominate the French artillery.
8. There was a lack of aggressive patrolling, therefore the French failed to keep the Viet Minh off-balance and to provide enough separation from the base perimeter to prevent harassment and interdiction fire from the Viet Minh.
9. A lack of quality troops and desertion severely impacted on the number of effective troops available to defend against Viet Minh assaults. Therefore the maintenance of troop morale was crucial to the defence of the base.
10. Poor command and control from de Castries who effectively abdicated command. This was coupled with poor direction and support from Hanoi.
11. Poor planning of the relief operation that lacked sufficient troop's numbers and resources to affect the link up with Dien Bien Phu.

In order to prevent a repeat of Dien Bien Phu, Washington prepared to dramatically escalate the conflict with a deployment of weapons that had previously not been considered against the PAVN. Westmoreland stated to Wheeler; *"The use of tactical nuclear weapons should not be required in the present situation in view of the authority to use COFRAM.⁸⁰ However, should the situation in the DMZ area change dramatically, we should be prepared to introduce weapons of greater effectiveness against massed forces. Under such circumstances I visualise that either tactical nuclear weapons or chemical agents would be active candidates for employment."⁸¹*

When questioned as to whether the Marines on the ground believed that the PAVN could "pull off" another Dien Bien Phu, Captain William Dabney commented; *"If the PAVN thought they could pull it off, they had learned little about the USMC. A*

⁸⁰ COFRAM: Controlled Fragmentation Munitions, known as "Firecracker." Highly effective anti-personnel sub-munition fired from Khe Sanh 155mm artillery.

reporter at Khe Sanh asked a PFC the same question, pointing out that the French had surrendered at DBP. The Marine replied, "Yeah, but they were French. We're Marines!" Perhaps they could have taken it, but I cannot imagine their doing so without losing a division or two in the process. An again, the fire coordination of the Marines was superb, and nothing the PAVN had could stop that rain of hot steel. To assault, they had to expose themselves, at which point they were dead meat. Overrunning a Marine infantry regiment is akin to assaulting an active volcano. You may get there, but you'll be consumed in the fires."⁸²

It is also important to understand the views of the individual enlisted Marines on the ground that would not always be privy to the larger tactical picture, and would receive mail from home voicing concerns as to the plight of the Marines at Khe Sanh. There is little evidence that the Marines on the ground shared the concerns of MACV that Khe Sanh would be another Dien Bien Phu. Lawrence McCartney, a Private First Class on Hill 861A stated, "there was NO conversation among the men I served with about capture or surrender. In addition, since I was a very junior enlisted Marine, I can't say that I recall an conversation mentioning Dien Bien Phu; I'm not sure many of us were aware of it."⁸³ Joseph Olszewski stationed on Hill 558 stated "I never heard my troops discussing such a comparison and we had complete confidence in our air and even naval support from U.S. Battleships that fired 16 inch guns forty miles to support us. Once you witness an air strike, you have tremendous confidence that any large enemy force will never over-run your position."⁸⁴ Matthew Walsh when questioned as to whether Khe Sanh was viewed as another Dien Bien Phu stated; "I don't think this view was shared at all. Looking at the two situations they were very

⁸¹ *Memo for the President CM-2944-68, 3 February 1968.* Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 3

⁸² Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 19th January 2006.

⁸³ Master Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence McCartney. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 8th August 2005.

⁸⁴ Joseph Olszewski Golf Company Hill 558. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 15 January 2006.

*different. At Khe Sanh we held the high ground, had massive Artillery and Air support. Also potential relief and ground troops were not that far away. Our morale was very high even on the bad days, and most were looking towards an eventual fight to end the on-going shelling.*⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Matthew Walsh Hill 861A, Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 18th January 2006.

Section eight: Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive

The Tet Offensive was initiated by the PAVN/VC in the early hours of the morning of 30th January 1968, with a series of attacks in the Central Highlands and coastal plans around Hoi An and Nha Trang. It appears that these initial assaults were launched early as the majority of the assaults by the PAVN/VC forces were not launched until the following day. In all Giap targeted 36 out of the 44 provincial capitals, five out of six autonomous cities, and many more hamlets and villages. Giap believed that the offensive would result in a rapid break-down in the cohesion and morale of the South Vietnamese forces and population, paving the way for the overthrow of the South Vietnamese Government. In all Giap utilised in excess of 80,000 troops, the majority being VC, with the regular forces utilised to a greater extent in the Northern and Central provinces.

Although initial gains created consternation in the United States, actual gains by the North Vietnamese forces were minimal. The majority of the attacks were repelled within three days, with only Hue and Saigon facing continued attacks. The greatest North Vietnamese victory was in the old Imperial Capital of Hue, where they succeeded in occupying the old Imperial Citadel until the 25th February. It was only after the use of extensive close air-support, artillery and tanks that the Vietnamese forces were driven from the Citadel. This, however, was a hollow victory, as it resulted in the virtual destruction of the city of Hue and the historic Citadel. In Saigon, ARVN forces battled the VC in and around the Cholon district with wide tracts of the district destroyed in the battle to evict the VC from their positions amongst the buildings.

In terms of men and material, Tet was a significant defeat for the North Vietnamese and Giap. Firstly, 58 373 troops were killed, the majority being VC from the South,

and a further 9,461⁸⁶ captured. Secondly, the much-anticipated uprising of the Southern population did not occur. In fact the opposite occurred. The brutality of the North Vietnamese forces hardened Southern resolve to resist, with AVRN forces showing significant improvement in the resistance against the assaults. Thirdly, with the significant losses and virtual destruction to the VC forces and infrastructure in the South, the North could no longer rely on purely Southern recruitment, and increased infiltration of Northern forces was required, destroying any myth that it was purely a Southern insurrection. In terms of the Allied forces, losses amounted to 1,536 killed, and a further 7,764 wounded.⁸⁷ ARVN forces incurred a further 2,788 killed, and a further 8,299 wounded.⁸⁸ Although in material terms the losses were not significant, the Tet Offensive did achieve Giap's strategic goal of influencing world public opinion, with political opinion turning significantly against the war in Vietnam, and the anti-war protests escalating.

For the Marines at Khe Sanh the Tet Offensive did not bring about an immediate PAVN offensive, as anticipated by Westmoreland and MACV, with the base only subjected to sporadic shelling and rocket fire over the initial days of the offensive. Within northern Quang Tri Province the only major North Vietnamese assault was conducted by the 8th PAVN Regiment recently infiltrated across the DMZ from North Vietnam, and was directed against the provincial capital, Quang Tri city. At 4am on the 31st January the city was heavily shelled and a ground assault conducted by PAVN troops disguised as ARVN paratroopers. After initial gains by PAVN sapper units who had managed to infiltrate into the city, the assault was stopped by AVRN and Regional Force troops. Scattered mortar and rocket fire continued to strike the city over the night of the 31st January. On 10th February the village of Duong Loc, 12

⁸⁶ Ed: Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Son (1968). *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive 1968*. Military History Division, Joint General Staff RVNAF Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 56

⁸⁷ Ed: Bernard Nalty. (1998). *The Vietnam War, The History of America's Conflict in Southeast Asia*. Salamander Books London UK. Page 189.

⁸⁸ Ibid Pg 189

kilometres to the north of Quang Tri city, was assaulted by K8 Battalion and two VC companies. This assault was repelled by the Popular Forces platoon stationed in the village.

Of greater danger to Khe Sanh was the disruption of the overland lines of communication to their major logistics centre at Dong Ha. This route stretched from Da Nang, which was south of the Hai Van Pass, onto Hue then to Dong Ha. PAVN forces had infiltrated three Vietnamese divisions south of Quang Tri City effectively cutting National Route 1, isolating the American/ARVN forces in the north. Bridges had also been blown by sapper units and a crucial aviation pipeline and bulk-storage facility was destroyed. Westmoreland had to resort to a sea-bridge to re-open the supply lines. The lack of supplies seriously hampered the ability of the United States forces to react. Fuel shortages effectively grounded the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, initially preventing it from assisting in the recapture of Hue.

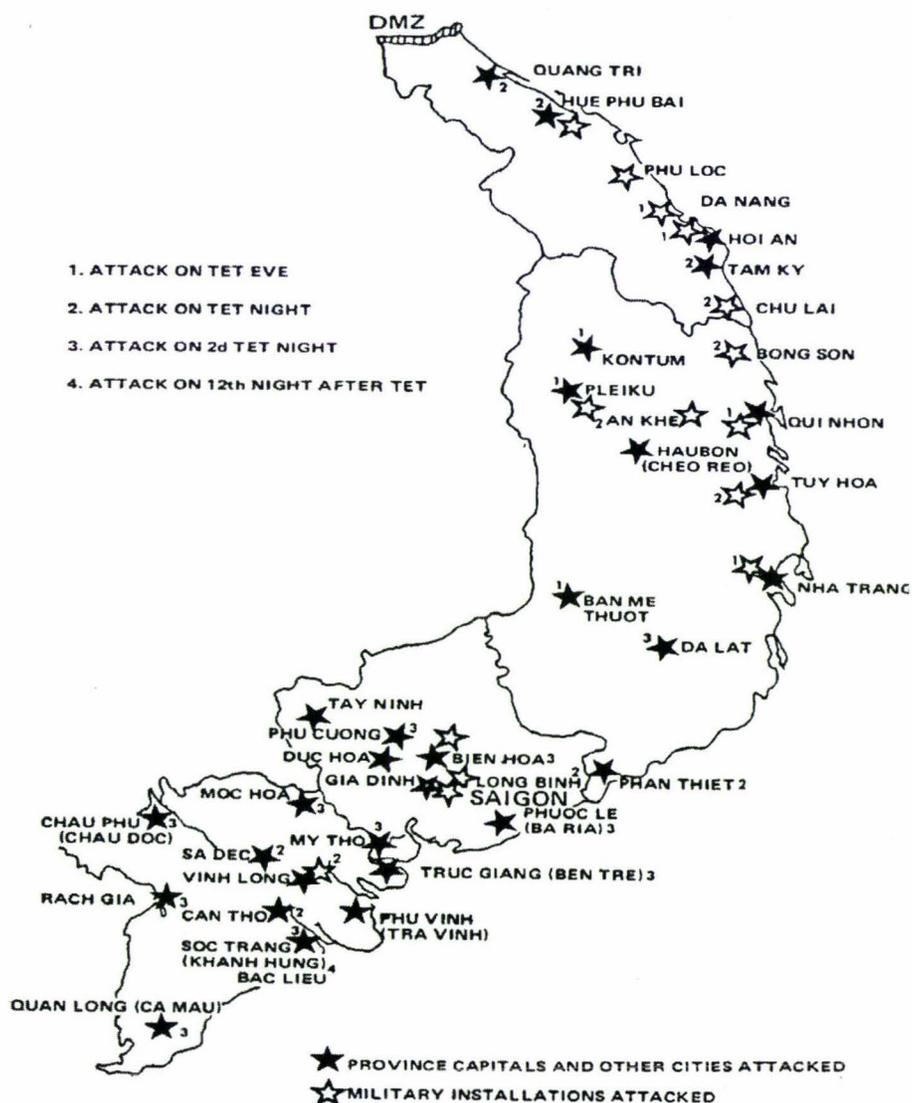
In response to the Vietnamese offensive Westmoreland directed his deputy, General Creighton Abrams, to establish MACV Headquarters Forward at Phu Bai in order to gain control of the situation in and around Hue. Prior to any offensive action being opened to relieve the Marines at Khe Sanh, the situation in Hue had to be resolved. MACV Forward was finally established on the 13th February, with Abrams charged with the following priorities:

1. Reduce the siege of the Imperial City of Hue.
2. Open the overland lines of communication to Dong Ha, resuming shipments of supplies.
3. Stockpile supplies for future offensive action against the PAVN.
4. Build up troop levels for deployment into the northern province.
5. Relieve the siege of Khe Sanh.

The crucial task of the opening of the overland supply routes to Dong Ha was completed by 1st March, with the eviction of the PAVN troops in and around Hue. All other tasks were to be completed by 1st April.

It is clear from the widespread nature of the attacks by the Communist forces, which in the main had been directed against targets in the central and southern provinces, that Giap had utilised the assaults on the Marines at Khe Sanh as a diversion to draw the Allied forces away from the provincial capitals and population centres.

Map 11: Distribution of Communist Tet Offensive:⁸⁹



⁸⁹ Lung, H N (1978), *The General Offensives of 1968 -69*. General Research Corporation, Mclean, Virginia United States Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.Page 48.

Section nine: The opening phases of the siege of Khe Sanh combat base

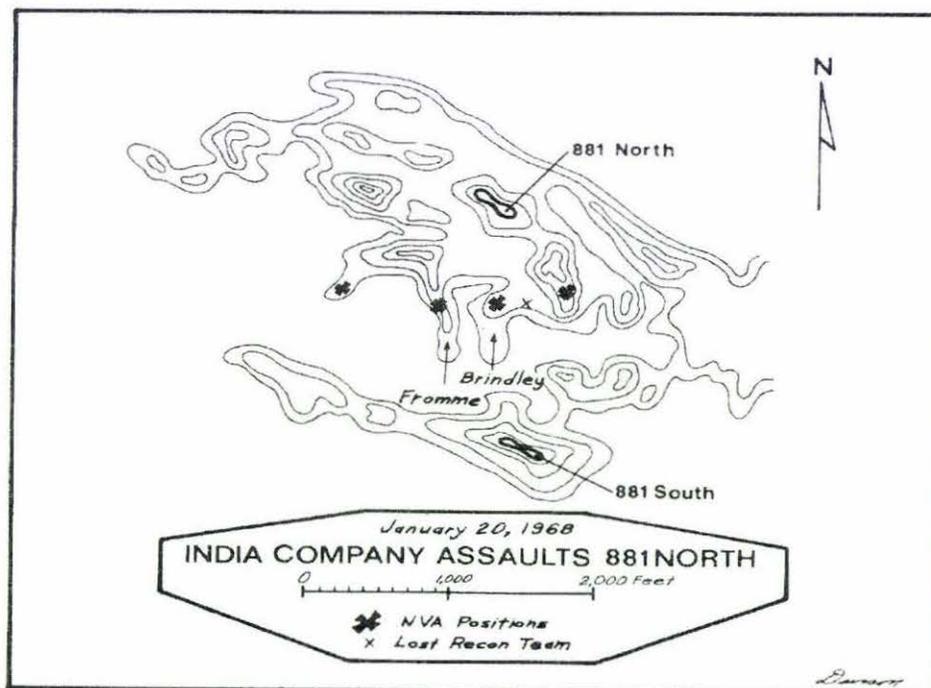
On 17th January a reconnaissance team of B Company 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion was ambushed by PAVN forces to the southwest of Hill 881 North with the team leader and the radioman killed in the ambush. Although the team had successfully extracted the bodies of the dead, the radio and codebooks had inadvertently been left at the site of the ambush. In order to recover the radio and the codes, 3rd Platoon from I Company 3/26 was dispatched from Hills 881 South on 19th January. Whilst searching the ambush site, the Marines were again ambushed by approximately 25 PAVN troops, but with the assistance of the Marine artillery from Khe Sanh, contact was broken with the Marines withdrawing back to Hill 881 South.

The following day Captain Dabney moved I Company out from Hill 881 South to conduct a reconnaissance in force towards the summit of Hill 881 North (see Map 12). In order to secure the rear, and provide fire-support for the assaulting I Company, two platoons and the command element of M Company, 3/26 was airlifted onto Hill 881 South. I Company moved off Hill 881 South at 5am along two separate axes of departure. Upon dropping down into the valley between the two hills, the company would divide and approach the summit of Hill 881 North via two ridgelines approximately 500 meters apart that climbed gradually towards the summit. 1st and 2nd Platoons climbed up the left ridgeline, with 3rd platoon assaulting up the right ridgeline. Progress of the troops was slowed by heavy fog that required a cautious approach by the platoons in order to avoid ambush. By 9am the fog was clearing, enabling the Marines to quicken the pace of advance towards four hills just below the summit, which was then struck by a preparatory 105mm artillery barrage.

The Marines were then struck by small-arms, 12.7mm machine gun fire and Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) rounds. Dabney instructed Lieutenant Brindley of 3rd

platoon to consolidate, whilst calling in artillery fire on the PAVN positions. 1st and 2nd Platoons were instructed to push forward and place flanking fire on the positions holding up Brindley's advance. 1st and 2nd Platoons were then struck by fire from PAVN positions on the other enemy held hills with 20⁹⁰ men wounded and needing to be evacuated. A 155mm artillery barrage was directed onto the positions blocking 3rd Platoon. On the cessation of the barrage, Brindley urged the assaulting Marines forward and successfully occupied the hilltop. Brindley, however, was killed in the final assault on the crest of the hill. In order to consolidate the gains, Dabney ordered 1st platoon to provide supporting fire on 3rd platoons flank, whilst directing 2nd platoon to advance and support 3rd platoon.

Map 12: Assault on Hill 881 North 20th January 1968⁹¹



Heavy fighting continued throughout the day. In order to provide support to Dabney, 3/26 commander Lieutenant Colonel Alderman, his operations officer and members of the KSCB Fire Support Coordination Centre (FSCC) flew to Hill 881 South to assist in the command and control of supporting fires. Fire support for the assaulting

⁹⁰ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC Pg 35.

Marines was provided by mortars, recoilless rifles and 105mm batteries from Hill 881 South and KSCB, along with Marine airpower dropping 500lb bombs and napalm strikes.

By the afternoon I Company was gaining ascendancy over the PAVN troops dug in on Hill 881 North, Alderman therefore requested additional reinforcements from Colonel Lownds to exploit the gains already made and secure the hill. Lownds, however, had been informed of the capture of Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc and the information of a major PAVN assault planned for that night against Hills 861 and 881S. Lownds instructed Alderman to withdraw I Company back to Hill 881S and prepare for the upcoming PAVN assault.

In Captain Moyers Shore's account of the siege for the Historical Branch of the Marine Corps, he stated "*The order was passed on to Captain Dabney and it hit him like a thunderbolt. His men had been fighting hard all day and he hated to tell them to call it off at that point. Nonetheless, he rapidly disengaged, collected his casualties and withdrew. The struggle had cost the enemy dearly: 103 North Vietnamese were killed while friendly losses were 7 killed, including two platoon commanders, and 35 wounded. As the weary Marines trudged back to Hill 881S, they were understandably disappointed at not being able to continue the attack.*"⁹² However, on discussing this incident with Captain Dabney, he has a different perspective on his reaction to the order to withdraw: "*I don't think it bothered the troops a bit to go back to a defensible, prepared position. Attitude on the front lines was more like "We've done what we set out to do, let's go home." It was surely my attitude. It was never my intention to occupy and defend 881N. I simply suspected that on it, or between it and 881S, lurked an enemy I needed to find. Once I did, the mission was accomplished. The*

⁹¹ Pisor R (1982) *The End of the Line – the Siege of Khe Sanh*. W W Norton & Company Inc. New York. Page 29

⁹² Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC Pg 39.

order to withdraw came as a surprise only as to its timing. My mission was always to hold 881S and I had every intention of returning ASAP. Others have said that I was dismayed. I was not. The problem was that we were still engaged, had wounded to get out, and were missing some men. It took about four hours to get supporting fires placed to cover our disengagement, find and evacuate all the casualties, and execute a fighting withdrawal back to 881S (they pressed us by fire only initially, because as soon as we disengaged completely we used VT-fuse arty on them, which quickly discouraged them, since they were maneuvering in the open too.) 881N was not a good terrain feature to defend. There were too many good avenues of approach, it was a long ridge rather than a peak like 881S, and thus was too big at the military crest for a company - probably would have required a battalion to hold. More to the point, it was masked by 861 from direct observation of the base, (unlike 881S, which offered a clear view), and from observation to the south (Lang Vei, Coc Roc, Rt 9) by 881S, so the only value in holding it would have been to keep the PAVN from using it as a rocket-firing site. Marines had taken it in '67, but in view of those shortcomings, declined to garrison it.⁹³

The PAVN assault, as indicated by Lieutenant Tonc struck Hill 861 just after midnight on 21st January by the 4th Battalion, 95C PAVN Regiment. The assault was preceded by a heavy 30 minute mortar barrage, followed by RPG, automatic and small arms fire. Sapper teams armed with satchel charges and Bangalore Torpedoes then rushed the wire and breached the southwest perimeter in a number of places, with the assault troops moving through the breaches in the wire. The Marines of K Company 3/26 responded with interlocking fires from machine gun positions; however, despite heavy losses the PAVN succeeded in occupying the lower trench line and the helicopter pad. K Company mortars fired at maximum elevation, supported by the guns from Hill 881 South, in an attempt to keep the PAVN from

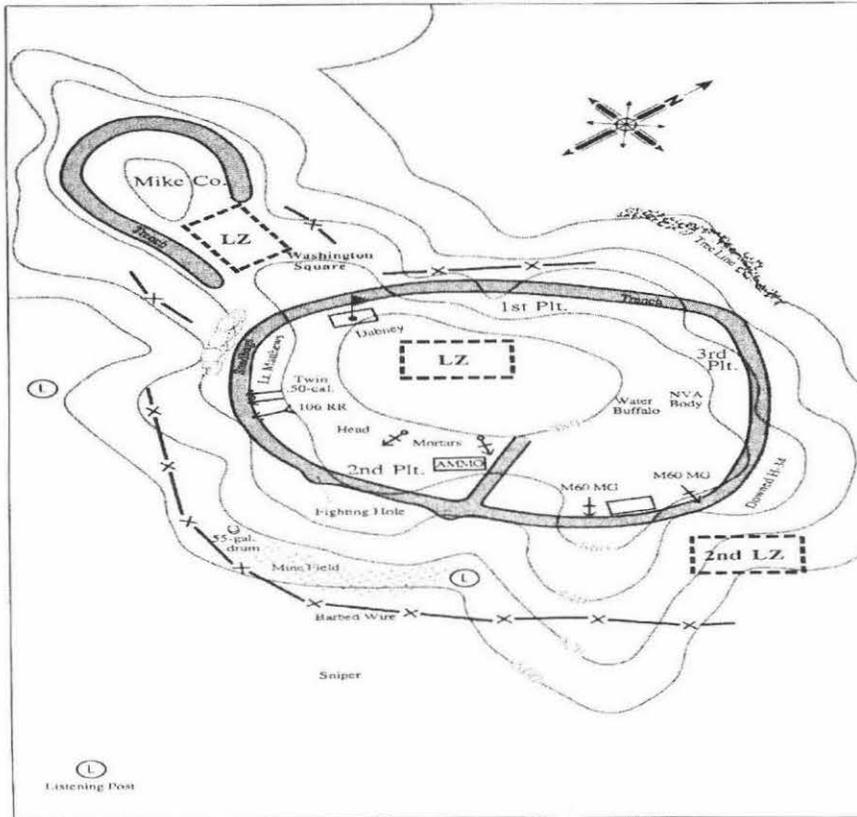
⁹³ E-mail correspondence with author, Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South 20th January 2006

overrunning the remaining Marines on the hill. Indirect fire-support was also directed by Lownds from the artillery at KSCB, and air strikes were directed against suspected PAVN troop marshalling points in an attempt to prevent further troops of 95C PAVN Regiment joining the assault. The PAVN assault stalled as they began to loot the Marine bunkers without first consolidating their position, handing the initiative to the Marines. At 5am K Company counter-attacked along the trench line and overran the PAVN troops in heavy hand-to-hand combat, with the PAVN leaving 47 dead in the Marines positions.

A key element in the defeat of the PAVN assault on Hill 861 was the fire-support provided by I Company on Hill 881 South (see Map 13). Although the information provided by Lieutenant Tonc indicated that Hill 881 South would also be assaulted, this did not materialise, nor were the Marine guns on Hill 881 South subjected to PAVN counter-battery fire suppression. Captain Dabney hypothesised that *"881S was the most isolated and vulnerable position, yet it was the only one not assaulted that night. The PAVN officer who surrendered at Khe Sanh that afternoon listed 881S as scheduled for assault that night. I can't (be) sure without access to Hanoi's archives, but I believe we bloodied the designated PAVN 881S assault force enough to dissuade it."*⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 20th January 2006.

Map 13: I Company Positions Hill 881 South⁹⁵



The celebration for the success of the Marines in withstanding the PAVN assault on Hill 861 was short-lived as at 5.30AM the PAVN opened up a heavy barrage on the combat base of 82mm mortars, 122mm rockets from the south side of Hill 881 North, and artillery rounds from Coc Roc in Laos. Damage on the ground was significant, with several helicopters, living structures and vehicles damaged in the initial strike. Most significantly, however, was the destruction of the main ammunition dump, Ammunition Supply Point No. 1 (ASP No. 1). The ammunition dump located near the east end of the airfield was struck in the initial salvos. The dump, which held the Marines 1,500 ton stockpile of ammunition, erupted, in a series of explosions that destroyed the bulk of it. The resulting explosions launched unexploded munitions and CS Gas (tear gas) canisters across the base, many of which detonated on impact, adding to the destruction of the PAVN barrage. Personal from Force Logistics Group Bravo displayed significant courage in suppressing the fires within the ammunition

⁹⁵ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 388.

dump; this however did not prevent Khe Sanh losing the bulk of its supply of ammunition. Throughout the explosions of the dump, Marine artillery from C Battery 1/13, stationed next to the dump, continued to provide counter-battery fire in response to in-coming PAVN fire. The barrage and the resulting explosions cost the Marines 14 killed, and 43 wounded.⁹⁶

The next move by the PAVN, timed to coincide with the artillery barrage on the combat base, was to strike the Marines of CAC Oscar at Khe Sanh village, the South Vietnamese seat of Government in the Huong Hoa district. Under the cover of the early morning fog 7 Battalion, 66 Regiment, 304 Division assaulted the village, breaching the wire in numerous places. The Marines and the Regional Forces withdrew to the district headquarters compound and called in air strikes and artillery to prevent the Marines and Regional Forces from being over-run. The artillery at Khe Sanh placed a barrier of Variable Time (VT) fused air burst munitions, over the defensive wire catching the assaulting PAVN in the open. In response to the pressure on Khe Sanh village, Lownds ordered D Company, 1/26 to mount a relief operation, however, he later rescinded the order due to the risk of ambush from the PAVN troops surrounding the combat base and the village.

On the evening of 21st January, Robert Brewer, the Quang Tri CIA senior advisor organised a relief operation in conjunction with the ARVN province chief, Colonel Nguyen Am. The goal of the relief operation was to deploy the 256th Regional Forces Company, via 9 UH-1E helicopters at the Old French Fort, after an air-strike had cleared the landing zone. Confusion between the forward air-controller, who was to direct the air strike, resulted in its delay; with the Commander of the helicopters believing it had been cancelled. The decision was made to proceed, with the

⁹⁶ Rottman G.L (2005), *Khe Sanh 1967 - 68, Marines battle for Vietnam's vital hilltop base*. Osprey Publishing Oxford UK. Page 58.

Regional Forces Company being dropped into a PAVN stronghold. One helicopter was immediately shot down by PAVN ground fire, with two more suffering extensive damage requiring them to crash-land at the combat base. The fighting resulted in 27 American servicemen and 74 Regional Force soldiers⁹⁷ being either killed or listed as missing in action.

Due to the isolation of the Khe Sanh village, Lownds made the decision to withdraw the Marines and Regional Forces from the village. His rationale for this was firstly: the likelihood of any attempted relief resulting in significant casualties, secondly that the supporting fires from Khe Sanh were required to protect the combat base, and the Marines stationed in the hills. Brewer struggled to convince the commander of the ARVN 1st Division, Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong, who was charged with the defence of Quang Tri Province, with the need for the withdrawal. Truong believed that the goal of the PAVN was to occupy the South Vietnamese seat of government in the Huong Hoa, not the occupation of the Khe Sanh combat base. However, with the impending withdrawal of the Marine fire support for Khe Sanh village, Truong eventually agreed to the withdrawal. On the morning of the 22nd January, helicopters lifted the Marine CAC Oscar and the wounded from the village, with the Regional Forces exfiltrated by land to the combat base, and absorbed into the positions of FOB-3.

The withdrawal of the forces from Khe Sanh village was contentious, as Lownds made the decision to supply only sufficient helicopters to withdraw American Troops. The decision by Lownds provided an indication of the feeling of the Marine Commander towards the activities of the irregular forces operating within the Khe Sanh TAOR. Prados and Stubbe noted, "*The choppers took out thirty-four wounded*

⁹⁷ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 263.

*and then lifted thirty-five CAC Marines. However, given the constant fire on the LZ, the Marines refused to provide helicopters to lift out the 915th Regional Forces troops. As a result Major Clark and his advisory team refused to be evacuated and instead walked out with their RFs, an LLDB officer and thirteen CIDG strikers who happened to be in the village when the battle began. Lang Vei offered to supply a Mike Force company for support, but this offer was rejected. Luckily Clark and his men reached the combat base safely."*⁹⁸

In Shore's account it was recorded that "*Helicopters flew in and picked up the Marines, U.S. Army advisors; the Vietnamese troops and officials of the local government moved overland. Upon arrival, the CACO and RF companies which totalled about 250 men, took up positions in the south-western sector of the base and were absorbed into FOB-3.*"⁹⁹ A further account from Pisor states "*Because he believed the road between the combat base and Khe Sanh might be held by enemy forces, he sent in helicopters to pick up the Americans. South Vietnamese government officials and regional forces would have to walk to the combat base.*"¹⁰⁰

If it was indeed correct that the road between Khe Sanh village and the combat base was held by the PAVN, Lownds knowingly abandoned the South Vietnamese forces and government officials to their fate. It was, however, fortunate that the South Vietnamese traversed the road without succumbing to a PAVN ambush. The loss of the Khe Sanh village effectively sealed the fate of the Special Forces at Lang Vei, as the only over-land route to the Lang Vei was now effectively cut.

The final acts of the PAVN in the opening assaults in the Khe Sanh combat base occurred on the 21st January, when at 7.50pm, 2nd Platoon, L Company 3/26

⁹⁸ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 264.

⁹⁹ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC Page 45

¹⁰⁰ Pisor R (1982) *The End of the Line – the Siege of Khe Sanh*. W W Norton & Company Inc. New York. Page 118.

detected movement outside of the wire in Red Sector. The Marines opened fire, killing 14 of the attacking PAVN, with the remnants of the attacking force withdrawing with their wounded.

Typical trench line Khe Sanh TAOR.¹⁰¹



In response to the anticipated PAVN assault on Khe Sanh, Westermoreland cabled Admiral Sharp and General Wheeler, informing them of the actions, and communicating that he had directed Operation Niagara II to be initiated to provide all available air support to the Marines at Khe Sanh. *"The anticipated enemy attack on Khe Sanh was initiated last evening. Khe Sanh military installation has been under constant rocket and mortar fire since early morning, and Hill 861 has been under ground attack. Ammunition and POL dumps have been hit, with fire and explosions reported by Air Force FAC¹⁰². 7AF¹⁰³ is maintaining an Airborne Command Post and FAC's in the area[...]* To meet the threat in the Quang Tri -Thua Thien Area, I have

¹⁰¹ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

¹⁰² Forward Air Controller.

*directed my Deputy Commander MACV Air Gen Momyer, to develop a plan to concentrate all available air resources (in the battle area). The initial concentration will be around Khe Sanh (Niagara II). Depending upon the tactical situation the area will be shifted."*¹⁰⁴

Due to the destruction of the main ammunition dump, and the significant volume of munitions expended in the defence of Hill 861, and Khe Sanh Village, immediate re-supply was critical. Due to damage inflicted on the Khe Sanh airstrip, larger C130 aircraft could not land; therefore smaller C123 began the immediate re-supply of the combat base. Repairs to the runway were completed by 23rd January, allowing the use of the larger C130 aircraft for re-supply of the combat base.

On the 22nd January the 1/9 Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell were dispatched to Khe Sanh from Camp Evans north of the city of Hue. Due to the intelligence gained earlier from the capture of Lieutenant Tonc, 1/9 was entrenched at the Rock Quarry to the west of the Khe Sanh perimeter to provide a blocking force against a PAVN assault along the valley. A platoon was dispatched to a small hill, subsequently called Hill 64, further west of the Rock Quarry to provide an early warning against any potential PAVN assault. To provide greater flank protection to the Marines on Hills 558 and 861, Lownds transferred E Company 2/26 from Hill 558, to a ridgeline to the north-east, and at a slightly higher elevation of the existing Hill 861 position, this new position is designated Hill 861A.

An event occurred in the early hours of the morning of the 24th January across the Laotian border at Ban Houei Sane, which would have an ominous impact for the

¹⁰³ 7th Air Force.

¹⁰⁴ *Westmoreland memo to Sharp/Wheeler MAC 00992, 21 January 1968.* Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

Special Forces stationed at Lang Vei. The Laotian army unit BV 33, funded by the CIA was emplaced across the PAVN supply route (QL9) for which they were to interdict, for the forces attacking the Marines at Khe Sanh. In order to secure these supply lines, the Laotians were assaulted by a force of three PAVN battalions, supported by seven PT 76 tanks, in what which would be the first combined operation of the PAVN troops of the war. Outnumbered and lacking the firepower necessary to defeat the PAVN army, the Laotians broke and fled across the border with a large number of refugees to the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. Air support was directed to support the Laotians, however adverse weather conditions prevented any successful strikes. The report of the tanks across the boarder was of significant concern to the Special Forces at Lang Vei, so a large number of LAW 66 light anti-tank weapons were requested and dispatched to Lang Vei.

The period between the fall of Khe Sanh village and anticipated Tet Offensive could be described as preparatory for both sides. The PAVN conducted daily shelling and rocket fire onto the combat base, with PAVN forces probing the defences of the various outposts. The Marines continued to improve the defences of the combat base, and build up ammunition and POL supplies due to the destruction of the main supply dump on the 21st January. A significant number of refugees from the dependants of BV 33 and from Khe Sanh village also had to be evacuated from the combat base to prevent unnecessary casualties when the PAVN assault began. Lownds also received the last of his combat troops with the arrival of 318 men of the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion.

Marine Positions Khe Sanh.¹⁰⁵



The Marines at Khe Sanh were also limited in the amount of offensive action that they could undertake. In order to limit the potential for Marines to be drawn away from the organic fire-support of combat base, General Tompkins limited Marine patrols to 500 meters from the combat base. The patrols were primarily for the immediate security of the combat base; if PAVN forces were encountered, the Marines were to call in fire-support from the combat base, disengage and return to their lines. Although this instruction was designed to limit Marine casualties is also had the following effect:

¹⁰⁵ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

1. It reinforced the impression to the media that the Marines were under siege and could not leave the confines of the base due to the besieging PAVN forces.
2. It handed the initiative to the PAVN forces. They could attack where and when they choose to, with the Marines reacting to PAVN thrusts.
3. It had the potential to impact adversely on Marine morale. Marines are primarily offensive troops; being limited to defensive duties is inconsistent with the role they are trained for.

Although the combat base main land-line of communication had been severed, the Joint Chiefs of Staff still maintained a level of confidence that the base could continue to be effectively re-supplied. A memo dated 3rd February 1968 from Wheeler to Westmoreland states *"regarding presidential concern relative to the reinforcement and re-supply of Khe Sanh during bad weather with the highway closed and the airfield interdicted. I reported to you that my response was that helicopters can fly when fixed wing aircraft cannot and that helicopters do not need an airstrip. Also weather so bad that helicopters cannot fly some part of the day is most unusual, Moreover, in extremes the road can be opened, but at a cost."*¹⁰⁶

The next phase of the PAVN attack on Khe Sanh occurred was initiated at 3.05am on the morning of the 5th February 1968. PAVN artillery fired nearly 200 artillery rounds onto KSCB and the surrounding hill-top outposts, coordinated with a ground assault on E Company 2/26 entrenched on Hill 861A. The PAVN ground assault followed the earlier format as to the assault on Hill 861. An intense 82mm mortar barrage was directed at the Marine positions, followed by RPG rounds directed at the crew-served weapon positions, implying detailed reconnaissance prior to the attack. Closely

¹⁰⁶ Finsch T (ed) (2001). *Top Secret The Vietnam War: Confidential Files on the siege and loss of Khe Sanh* New century Books Texas US. Page 49.

following this barrage were approximately 200–300 PAVN troops who breached the wire on the northern sector of the hill with Bangalore Torpedoes. 1st Platoon, who was holding this sector of the line, was pushed back by the ferocity of the assault to the secondary defensive lines. In response to the assault the company commander, Captain Earle Breeding called for CS Gas to be fired on the advancing PAVN troops. Ill-discipline of the PAVN troops was again their downfall as they began to loot the Marine positions. This lull in the assault allowed first platoon to launch a counter-attack along the trench-line, evicting the PAVN from the hill with fierce hand-to-hand fighting. The retreating PAVN troops were then engaged with direct fire from the recoilless rifles positioned on Hill 558 causing further casualties. Breeding also controlled fire support from the artillery and mortars positioned on hills 881S, 861, 558, KSCB and the 175mm from Camp Carroll. A second assault was launched at 6.10am; however, this was beaten off with supporting arms and did not breach the Marine positions.

PAVN casualties were reported as 109 KIA. Marine casualties have been recorded separately by Prados and Stubbe, and Pisor as seven Marines killed and 35 wounded. However, in a memo from Wheeler to President Johnson, casualties were reported initially as *“US Marine casualties, all from the company on Hill 861, were placed at seven killed and 44 wounded.”*¹⁰⁷ However, in a follow-up memo the following day, the casualties figures were revised *“An updated report on the US Marine Casualties during the attack on Hill 861 shows 14 killed and 32 wounded.”*¹⁰⁸

A crucial tool available to Lownds in the direction of fire-support to the Marine positions was provided by Marine Air Support Squadron 3. Air Support Radar Team Bravo provided the ability to conduct radar controlled bombing (TPQ) runs, by aircraft

¹⁰⁷ *Memo Wheeler to Johnson CM-2970-68 5 February 1968.* Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 1.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid* Page 1

such as the B52 on targets of opportunity that were outside of the range of the organic firepower of KSCB or required a greater concentration of ordnance to be delivered on the target. Intelligence for these strikes could be provided in a number of ways: By the large number of seismic sensors dropped into the surrounding hills; aerial reconnaissance; or directed at likely avenues of approach of the PAVN when conducting approach marches to the combat base or the outlying Marines positions. The radar-guided strikes also provided the Marines with a valuable all-weather attack capability that could be relied upon when poor weather prevented visual bombing to be conducted. In the case of the assault on Hill 861A, TPQ radar guided strikes were directed at likely avenues of approach to the hill. *"US tactical aircraft flew 216 strike sorties in support of US marine units at Khe Sanh during the past 24 hours (79 US Air Force, 94 marine Corps, and 43 US Navy). Bomb damage assessment of the forgoing sorties included 3 structures destroyed, seven bunkers destroyed and three secondary explosions. Weather prevented complete bomb damage assessment."*¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ *Memo Wheeler to Johnson CM-2968-68 5 February 1968*. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 2

Section ten: The fall of Lang Vei

One event that ignited a significant degree of controversy was the defeat of the Green Berets and their indigenous forces at the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. At 12.45am on the morning of 7th February 1968, KSCB began receiving radio traffic indicating that the Special Forces camp was under heavy PAVN assault, which included for the first time in South Vietnam, the use of armour in the form of PT 76 amphibious tanks.

Forces on hand at the time of the assault consisted of 24 Green Berets, 14 Luong Luc Duc Bac (LLDB) ARVN special forces, 161 Mike Force, 282 CIDG Strikers, and 520 Laotian soldiers from BV 33 stationed at the old Lang Vei camp.¹¹⁰ These forces were well armed with 24 mortars of various calibres, two 106 mm and four 57mm recoilless rifles, two 0.50 calibre and 39 0.30 calibre machine guns, along with 100 LAW¹¹¹ disposable rocket launchers recently delivered due to the reports of PAVN tanks. The base consisted of a number of hardened bunkers surrounded by wire; there were, however, few anti-tank rounds for the recoilless rifles and no anti-tank mines around the perimeter. The base could also call on pre-registered artillery support from Khe Sanh.

The PAVN assault was opened with a 152mm artillery and 82mm mortar barrage on the Lang Vei camp with KSCB also subjected to heavy in-coming fire to prevent fire-support missions for Lang Vei. At 11.25pm 11 PAVN PT 76 tanks from 198th Tank Battalion (refer Map 14) and supporting infantry from 3rd Battalion 101C Regiment, 4th and 5th Battalion 24th Regiment conducted a coordinated assault onto the Lang Vei Base. 6th Battalion 66th Regiments also attacked BV 33 at the old Lang Vei

¹¹⁰ Stanton S (1985) *The Rise and Fall of an American Army – U.S. Ground forces in Vietnam 1965 – 1973*. Ballantine Books New York. Pg 248

camp in an attempt to prevent the Laotians reinforcing the Special Forces. The Special Forces under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Schungel, the commander of all Special Forces in I Corps, and an overnight visitor to Lang Vei, rallied the defenders and attempted to engage the PT 76 Tanks with LAW's and recoilless rifles. The defenders succeeded in destroying two of the PAVN tanks, however, the weight of numbers and the deployment of flame-throwers caused the indigenous forces to disengage and withdraw, with the Green Berets and LLBD withdrawing to the command bunker. The PAVN attempted to blast the Special Forces from the bunker with satchel charge and tear gas, however without success. Air and artillery strikes were called in on the Lang Vei camp, a request was also made for a relief force to be dispatched from Khe Sanh. Lownds, however, denied this request due to the risk of ambush on the road to Lang Vei. This view was supported by both General Cushman and General Tompkins: *"At four o'clock in the morning the acting commander of Special Forces in I Corps – Schungel was presumed lost – asked the Marines to send a relief force at dawn. An officer in the marine Communications centre noted the request and the response:*

0400 – Conference call with Col Smith III MAF and Cptn Edwards USSF – wants relief force at first light.

0405 – Gen Cushman and Gen Tompkins confer.

0406 – Gen Tompkins passes the word Negative on relief force."¹¹²

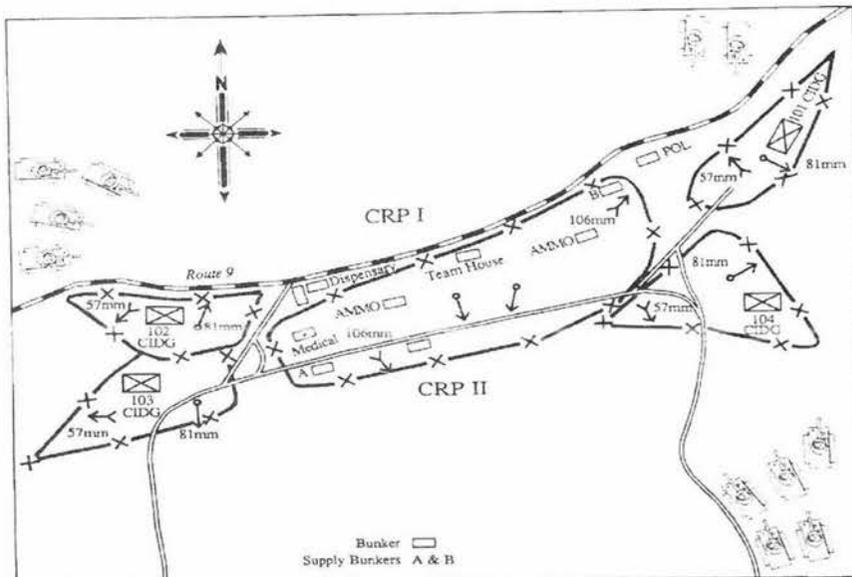
Under previously established plans the Marines at Khe Sanh were to provide support to the Green Berets if attacked by the PAVN. With the Marine refusal to mount the relief operation; Colonel Jonathan Ladd; Commander of Special Forces Vietnam contacted Westmoreland directly and requested that he intervene and order the relief operation to be mounted. Westmoreland however declined to "second-guess" the commander on the ground. It was however reported by marine Brigadier General

¹¹¹ Rottman G.L (2005), *Khe Sanh 1967 - 68, Marines battle for Vietnam's vital hilltop base.* Osprey Publishing Oxford UK. Page 68

Edwin H Simmons that “Westmoreland was left in a “cold fury” by the fact that the Marines were not making an attempt to either reinforce Lang Vei or rescue its defenders.”¹¹³

Green Beret Advisors attached to BV 33 directed unsuccessful counter-attacks from old Lang Vei camp in an attempt to relieve the trapped forces. At 7am the PAVN began to withdraw back into Laos, allowing the trapped Green Berets to extricate themselves from the command bunker and withdraw towards the old Lang Vei camp where they were met by a relief force from the Special Forces of FOB-3 from Khe Sanh and airlifted to the old Lang Vei camp via helicopters from Da Nang. Total casualties suffered by the Green Berets was 10 Killed and 14 wounded, along with a further 209 indigenous forces killed and 64 wounded.¹¹⁴

Map 14: The fall of Lang Vei.¹¹⁵



¹¹² Pisor R (1982) *The End of the Line – the Siege of Khe Sanh*. W W Norton & Company Inc. New York. Page 195.

¹¹³ Zaffiri S (1994), *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C Westmoreland*. William Morrow and Company Inc New York. Page 301

¹¹⁴ Stanton S (1985) *The Rise and Fall of an American Army – U.S. Ground forces in Vietnam 1965 – 1973*. Ballantine Books New York. Pg 249

¹¹⁵ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 316.

The fall of the base can be partly attributed to the disparate nature of the chain of command responsible for the command and control of the Special Forces. Although the Special Forces were operating in the Khe Sanh TAOR, Lownds had no direct control over their activities. Dabney commented that; *"They came and went of their own choosing without so much as a "by your leave" to the tactical commander at Khe Sanh, they had no coordinated overall defensive plan for the four disparate units represented at Lang Vei (in two cases, they had discrete compounds at their position), and they neither had common communications means nor plans to coordinate the positions defense with Khe Sanh."*¹¹⁶ Although a fire-support plan for Lang Vei had been established, there was a delay in its implementation, allowing the PAVN forces to breach the wire and enter the camp. It was suggested by Prados and Stubbe that there were difficulties in Lang Vei contacting the Khe Sanh Fire Support Control Centre (FSCC) to request supporting fires when the PAVN assault commenced. *"... the American Artillery did shoot, and with a fair degree of effectiveness. But the effort was hampered by the initial incredulity, by delays in responding to calls for fire missions and by communications difficulties"*¹¹⁷ This view is also supported by Dabney, who, although in a position to provide indirect fire-support was unable to do so due to the inability to contact Lang Vei. *"I stood on 881S and watched it fall. I could see the tank on top of the bunker. I also had 105mm Howitzers and plenty of ammunition with which to support them if they asked, but I had no call signs or frequencies and thus no way to coordinate the fires."*¹¹⁸

The decision by Lownds to not dispatch a relief force was based on the belief that it would be ambushed on the narrow road from the combat base. The security concerns were increased with the fall of Khe Sanh village, which provided the PAVN

¹¹⁶ Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 19th January 2006.

¹¹⁷ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 326

¹¹⁸ Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author .19th January 2006.

an effective blocking position on Route 9 to Lang Vei. It was also viewed as impractical to dispatch a relief force overland to Lang Vei. This approach had been attempted previously as indicated by Colonel Kaheny; *"My former company, Alpha Company, lead by a very capable and professional John Raymond, attempted to reach Lang Vei cross country before the siege in order to test the feasibility of a relief operation. It could be done but it would take too long as the terrain on either side of Route 9 was extremely difficult to traverse, and this was without enemy contact. Anyone who has walked through those ravines as I have would have come to the same conclusion. The Special Forces commander was made aware of the problem but did not want to move the CIDG camp again. Any attempt to drive through Khe Sanh village on Route 9 to get to Lang Vei would have resulted in a large scale battle and put the entire defense of KSCB at risk. It would never have gotten there in time."*¹¹⁹

The removal of troops from the combat base to mount a relief operation would also have adversely impacted on the security of the combat base. Line troops would have to be withdrawn to mount the operation, reducing the volume of firepower that could be deployed to defeat a PAVN ground assault. Any relief force would also require significant supporting fire missions. To accommodate this, the outlying Marine positions, such as 881 South would have to rely on their own organic fire-support if the PAVN launched a ground assault. This would weaken the overall defence of the base and was unacceptable to Lownds in the face of massing PAVN troops. Captain Dabney also viewed the relief of the Special Forces as unfeasible; *"Could we have "rescued" I? Perhaps, but with the forces available, doubtful. It would have taken at least a battalion out of the Khe Sanh lines, And to rescue 50 men? I'd guess we'd have taken 5 times that number of casualties in the attempt, even assuming it was successful. Col Lownds was absolutely correct in refusing to mount a rescue mission.*

¹¹⁹ Colonel John M Kaheny, Assistant Operations Officer 1st Battalion 26 Marines. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 16th January 2006

*Lang Vei was doomed the day the siege began, and most of us Marines, officer and enlisted, had accepted that.*¹²⁰ There is also the potential, albeit unproven by PAVN documentation that the assault on Lang Vei was a diversion, the aim of which was to draw the Marines out from their defensive perimeter, making them vulnerable to PAVN ambush.

An unexpected advantage occurred with the reduction of the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei, as it allowed the Marines to deploy B52 strikes into areas that had previously been off-limits due to the close proximity of the Special Forces camp. The B52 Arc Light strikes were restricted to no closer than 3000 meters¹²¹ from allied forces due to the risk of allied casualties. Dabney commented that;” *Arc Light strikes were prohibited within 3 km of friendly forces. Lang Vei was a bit over 6 km from the base defen[c]es which meant that the B52 could not bomb between Khe Sanh and the Laotian border along Rt 9[...]* Their taking of Lang Vei was probably critical. Massive fire support held Khe Sanh, and once Lang Vei was removed as an inhibitor of that fire support, they were doomed. Yes, they could attack by fire and they could probe. But to assault they had to mass, and once they did so, we could destroy them.”¹²²

The Special Forces camp at Lang Vei was doomed with the fall of Khe Sanh village as this cut the only road route to the camp from which any relief operation could be mounted, providing sufficient forces could be identified. With the massing of the PAVN troops within the Khe Sanh TAOR, the withdrawal of the Special Forces should have been initiated prior to the assault. The Lang Vei camp was isolated from the main positions, it was therefore logical that the PAVN forces would see this as an

¹²⁰ Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 19th January 2006.

¹²¹ Subsequently reduced to 1000 meters.

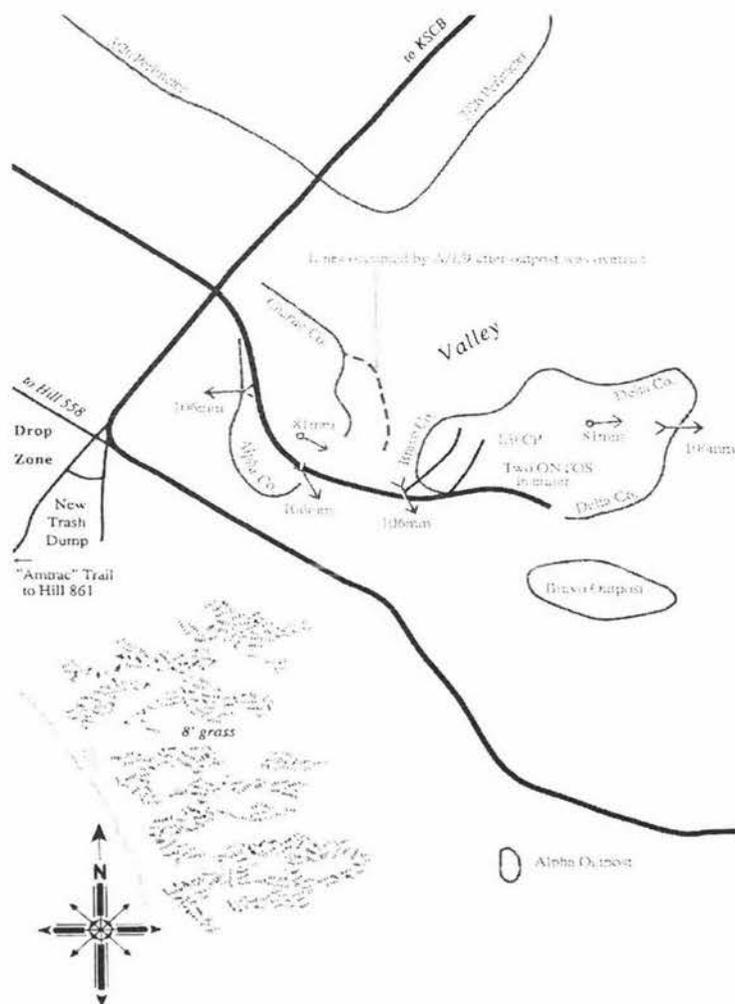
¹²² Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 19th January 2006.

initial objective to achieve as it had the potential to disrupt PAVN rear areas and direct strikes onto the massing troops. The quality of the forces at Lang Vei was also questionable. The indigenous troops were trained for guerrilla type operations and reconnaissance patrols; they were not suitable to hold a fixed position against a massed PAVN assault backed by artillery and tanks.

Section eleven: Consolidation of the siege

Following the fall of the Lang Vei Special Forces camp, the PAVN forces sought to consolidate the siege of the Khe Sanh combat base. The PAVN kept up a daily barrage of shells and mortar rounds onto the combat base and the outlying hill-top outposts in an attempt to reduce the fortifications; disrupt re-supply of men and materials, and to lower the morale of the defending Marines. Coupled with this, the PAVN forces initiated a series of infantry assaults onto the Marine positions located on the Khe Sanh Plateau, which were providing a buffer zone to the combat base.

Map 15: Marine Positions Rock Quarry.¹²³



¹²³ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 344.

Early in the morning of 8th February the PAVN launched the first daylight assault onto a Marine position. Located approximately 500 metres west of the 1/9 Battalion's positions in the Rock Quarry (refer Map 15) was a platoon of A Company that was entrenched on a small hill known as Hill 64. At 4am the PAVN opened up an artillery and mortar barrage onto the combat base and the Marines positioned at the Rock Quarry. This was followed by an infantry assault directed at the Marine positions on Hill 64. Following their usual practise, the PAVN began the assault onto Hill 64 with a heavy artillery and mortar barrage, followed up with an infantry assault by a battalion from the 101D Regiment, 325C Division. RPG fire was directed at the support weapon positions, whilst PAVN infantry breached the wire defences with Bangalore Torpedoes in the northwest and southwest sectors of the position. Through weight of numbers the PAVN rolled up the Marine defences, destroying bunkers with satchel charges, and soon occupied the western portion of the position.

The platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Roach Jnr, rallied the Marines and launched a counter-attack down the trench-line with the Marines and PAVN forces engaging in vicious hand to hand fighting. Roach was hit by PAVN fire and killed, so command of the remaining Marines was assumed by the weapons officer, Lieutenant Lovely. The 22 remaining Marines consolidated their position on the crest of the hill and fought off the PAVN assaults. Although the PAVN forces now controlled the western portion of the position, they lacked the numbers to complete the occupation of the position. Pre-registered support fire from the Marines located at the Rock Quarry and from the combat base prevented further troops from entering the fray.

A relief force consisting of a platoon from A Company under command of the company commander Captain Radcliffe was dispatched from the 1/9 Battalion position at 7.40am. The advance up Hill 64 was supported from the Rock Quarry positions with direct fire from a section of tanks, and from the Marines from B and D

Companies. This supporting fire preventing the PAVN forces from counter-attacking and prevented the link-up between the attacking and support force. A preparatory air strike was launched prior to the final assault on the hill, with the relief force reaching the beleaguered Marine platoon position at 9am. Fighting continued until 12pm, at which time the PAVN forces succeeded in retreating from the hill, leaving 150 dead scattered through the Marine positions. Marine casualties amounted to 21 killed and 26 wounded.¹²⁴ Due to the exposed nature of the position, Lownds instructed the Marines to be withdrawn into the perimeter of the 1/9 Battalion positions at the Rock Quarry.

In the typical understated fashion of the previous reports to President Johnson, Westmoreland's daily report of the 8th February played down the serious nature of the threat to the position, and subsequent casualties incurred. *"At 4.25PM the Marine outpost southwest of Khe Sanh started receiving rocket and mortar fire, followed by a ground attack. The attack continued until 5.45 pm. The enemy penetrated the wire of the platoon outpost but was repulsed. The enemy broke contact at 6.30pm. At 8.00 pm a Marine reinforcing element moved into the position at the outpost. The position continued to receive sporadic incoming fire throughout the morning (last evening Washington time). The enemy fire was returned but with unknown results. During the period one Marine was reported killed and two Marines were wounded and evacuated."*¹²⁵

As the month of February drew to a close, direct PAVN pressure on the combat base increased, with daily shelling and an increase in harassment fire of the Marines via snipers and probes of the perimeter defences. On the 21st February the first

¹²⁴ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC Page 71

¹²⁵ Fensch T, Ed (2001), *TOP SECRET: The Vietnam War: Confidential Files on the Siege and Loss of Khe Sanh*. New Century Books, The Woodlands Texas Page 83.

significant probe was launched directly at the perimeter of the combat base. The assault commenced at 12.45 with PAVN rockets, artillery and mortars pounding the eastern defences of the combat base held by the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion. After a barrage of 350 rounds an estimated company probed the defences and a long range fire-fight commenced. The ARVN Rangers, supported by the Artillery from the combat base, forced the PAVN forces to break off the probe with an estimate of 20 - 25 casualties. The combat base also however suffered casualties, with six Marines and 18 ARVN Rangers wounded in the encounter.

Of greater concern to Lownds was the appearance of PAVN siege trenches creeping closer towards the perimeter defences, reminiscent of the tactics utilised by Giap and the Viet Minh in the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu. The trench system appeared to be an extension of the PAVN positions around Hill 471. A reconnaissance flight on the 25th February identified that that siege trenches had moved to within 25 meters of the combat base perimeter wire and appeared to be a departure point for a major assault on the base. Marine intelligence provided by sensors and aerial reconnaissance had also identified a build-up of PAVN supplies and troops in the KSCB TAOR. With the siege works progressing at 200 - 300 meters per night, active measures were required to combat the threat (see Map 16).

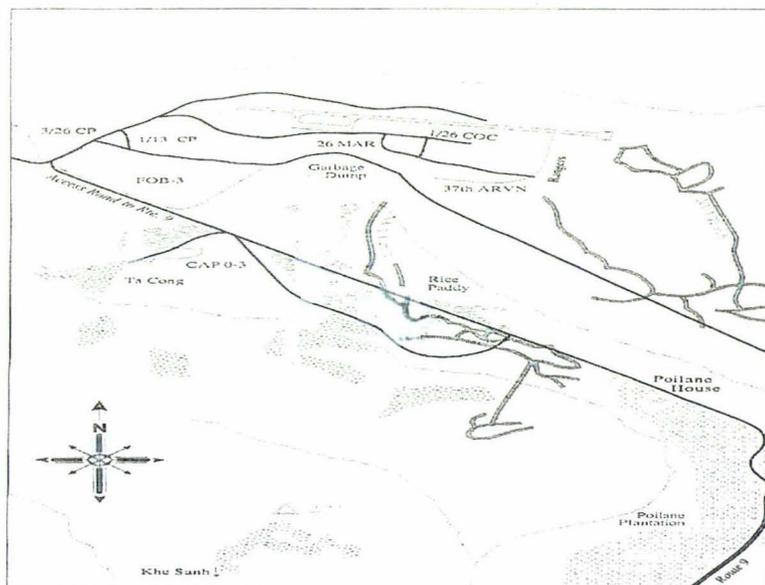
A variety of measures were utilised to delay the advance of the siege works: daylight close air support missions were conducted close to the perimeter wire with 2000lb bombs and Napalm, whilst Mini and Micro ARC Light Strikes were conducted between 500 and 1,500 meters from the combat base. C47 Spooky Gunships, with their multiple six-barrel rotary cannons, were also utilised to suppress the PAVN progress.

Napalm strike on PAVN positions outside of the KSCB perimeter.¹²⁶



From the combat base, artillery fire missions with VT fused munitions provided constant overnight harassment fire to disrupt the progress of the PAVN engineers, whilst individual Marines lobbed fragmentation rounds from M79 grenade launchers into the encroaching trench line.

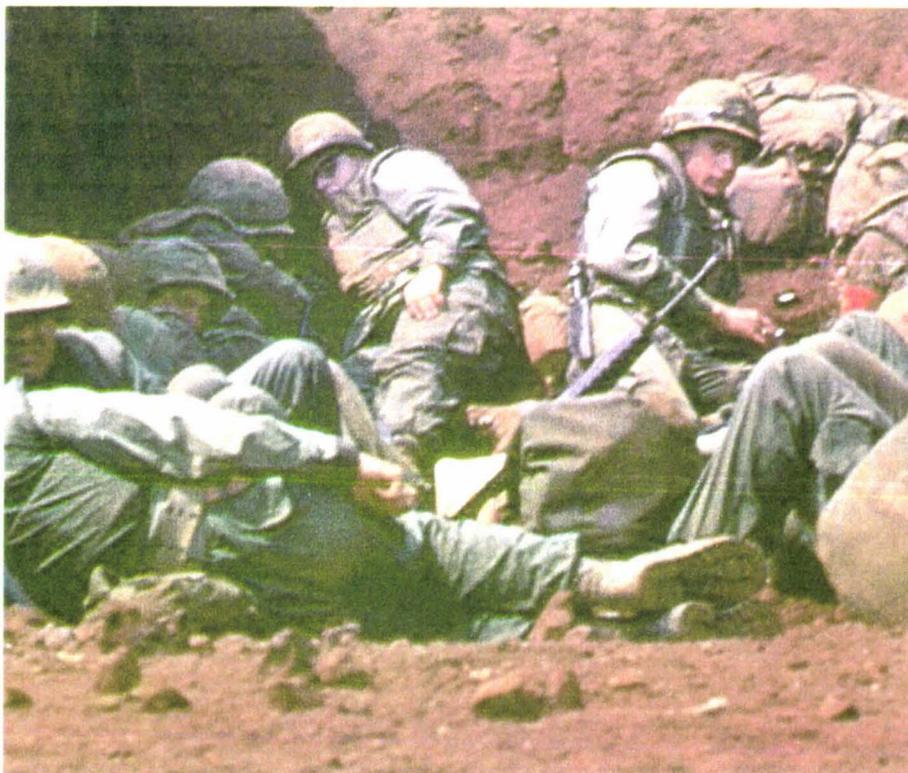
Map 16: Progress of PAVN trench systems towards the Khe Sanh combat base perimeter.¹²⁷



¹²⁶ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski
¹²⁷ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 396

Further evidence of an impending PAVN assault on the combat base was provided via the heaviest single day of incoming shellfire yet experienced by the Marines. On the 23rd February 1,307 rounds of PAVN artillery struck the base, including 130mm and 152mm rounds fired from Coc Roc in Laos. The barrage inflicted damage on the runway and Marine positions, however most significantly the ammunition dumps were again struck, resulting in a large explosion and the loss of 1,620 rounds of 90mm and 106mm ammunition. Marine casualties from the barrage numbered 10 killed and 51 wounded.¹²⁸

Marines at KSCB taking cover from an incoming artillery barrage.¹²⁹



The increased PAVN pressure on the KSCB perimeter required the Marine commanders to react and identify the true nature and direction of the threat to the combat base. On 25th February Colonel Wilkinson, commander of 1/26 directed, a

¹²⁸ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC Page 122.

¹²⁹ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

reconnaissance patrol to be dispatched from the southern positions of the combat base in an attempt to locate PAVN mortars that had been harassing the Marine positions. The task of conducting the patrol was delegated to Captain Pipes of B Company. The patrol was to consist of two squads from the 3rd Platoon, under the command of Second Lieutenant Jacques, reinforced with heavy weapons and forward observers. The patrol was to total 47 Marines; with orders to ensure that the patrol remained within 1,000 meters of the combat base.

The patrol departed at 8am and reached the first waypoint at approximately 9am without encountering any resistance, and completed the required radio check to Pipes. After departing for the second way-point the patrol deviated from their planned route, moving 600 meters further south than required, towards the plantation road that intersected with Route 9. On approaching the plantation road several PAVN troops were spotted, with Jacques giving the order to pursue and capture them for interrogation. Despite the warnings from the ARVN scout attached to the patrol of the possibilities of an ambush, the Marines pursued the PAVN across the road into the jungle and the inevitable PAVN ambush.

Jacques's patrol had walked into an L-shaped ambush with fortified PAVN bunkers to the front and west, and immediately incurred casualties from the heavy automatic weapons fire. Jacques dispatched a squad to out-flank the PAVN positions from the west and provide suppressing fire onto the PAVN positions. However, the squad was decimated before it could complete the manoeuvre. Jacques attempted to lead the remaining squad to the east out of the kill-zone, however, heavy fire forced him to order a withdrawal back to the combat base. Jacques was severely wounded in the groin during the retreat and died of the wounds before he could be evacuated to the combat base. Heavy fire from the PAVN caused the Marines to lose cohesion during

the withdrawal, preventing them from establishing a suitable base of fire to allow them to disengage and successfully reach the safety of the combat base.

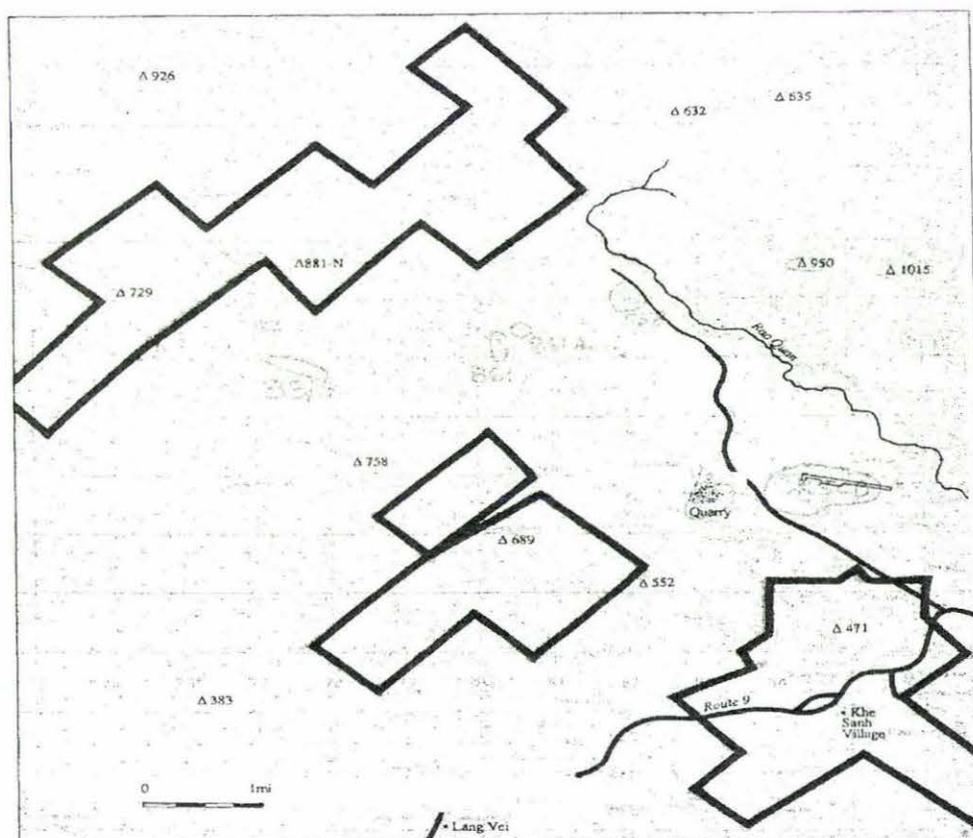
Pipes, realising the patrol was in serious danger of being over-run, dispatched the 2nd platoon to assist 3rd platoon to disengage from the ambush; the PAVN, however, had anticipated this manoeuvre and installed a blocking force behind the withdrawal route of 3rd platoon, cutting them off from the combat base. Pipes requested the dispatch of ONTOS and the M48 tanks to provide direct support fire onto the PAVN positions. However, ground fog and the proximity of the Marines prevented adequate deployment of these support weapons. After four hours of heavy fighting the surviving Marines were recovered back to the combat base. Marine casualties amounted to one dead, 25 missing and presumed dead, 13 wounded and evacuated for treatment, eight wounded and returned to duty. The number of PAVN casualties was not able to be determined. Pipes requested the dispatch of D Company to attempt the recovery of the wounded, however this was refused by Colonel Wilkinson, as he believed it would significantly weaken the combat base defences and invite another ambush.

Colonel Wilkinson now believes that the strength of the patrol led to Jacques having a false sense of security, and believing that if drawn into an ambush they would have sufficient fire-power to extract themselves. *"In hindsight," Jim Wilkinson now says, "[T]hat patrol should have been a much smaller patrol. It should have probably been a squad patrol. It was a reconnaissance patrol. It was not supposed to have been a combat patrol."*¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 399.

Intelligence available to Lownds from the MUSCLE SHOALS sensor array identified that a significant PAVN build-up was occurring along Route 9 near the old French Fort, and east of Hill 881 South. By computing the time taken for the various troop deployments to pass the sensors, the Marines were able to determine direction of march, and the number of troops employed. On the 29th February, estimates provided to Lownds indicated that a regiment on PAVN troops was heading towards the eastern sector of the Combat Base. In response to this, the FSCC (Fire Support Coordination Centre) directed fire-missions and air strikes on the anticipated marshalling and attack routes of the PAVN forces. Mini and Micro ARC Lights, artillery, TPQ strikes and tactical strikes by B52 bombers are believed to have decimated the majority of the PAVN troops prior to them reaching the line of departure for the assault against the Combat Base (see Map 17 for details of B-52 strike zones).

Map 17: ARC Light Strike zones around KSCB.¹³¹



¹³¹ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 408.

When the assault did come at 9.30pm on the 29th February, it was from a battalion from the 304 PAVN Division, and was directed against the eastern sector of the combat base, held by the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion. Defensive fires from the ARVN Rangers, Marines and air strikes beat back the assault without the PAVN breaching the outer wire. Subsequent assaults at 11.30pm and 3.15am on the 1st March met a similar fate. A review of the lines the morning after the assault identified 78 dead PAVN troops. Estimates of the casualties from the bombing of the approach routes added a further PAVN Regiment (approximately 500 troops) to this tally. It is clear that the pre-emptive strikes seriously disrupted a significant attempt on the part of the PAVN to breach the defences of the combat base.

The effectiveness of the air strikes in disrupting the PAVN assaults is demonstrated by the following translation of a diary captured from a PAVN soldier en route to Khe Sanh TAOR. "*[...]any aircraft hover in the sky. They are continuously flying overhead both day and night, including L.19 airplanes and helicopters. I have no cigarettes and I have run out of tobacco. I long to smoke but the present circumstances do not allow me to smoke. Our group is Doan (Group) 926 which has suffered 300 desertions while [en]route to Khe Sanh. Fear of the fierceness of enemy B52 raids was the main cause of the desertions.*"¹³² The widespread destruction caused by the B52 raids included both material and the morale of the PAVN troops, adversely impacting on the quality of the troops deployed against the Marines at Khe Sanh. This was the last major attempt on the part of the PAVN to over-run the defences of KSCB.

¹³² COMUSMACV (CDEC): *Department of Defence Intelligence Information Report 6 027 955 68*. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 6.

Section twelve: Offensive action begins

With the defeat of the February PAVN offensive and the threat of imminent assault of the combat base reduced, General Cushman directed a change in tactics by the Marines and ARVN Rangers: as they initiated limited local offensive operations in order to secure the area immediately surrounding the combat base. A further significant event was the initial indication of a re-deployment of the PAVN troops out of the Khe Sanh TAOR, to support PAVN operations in and around the city of Hue.

On the 8th March 37th ARVN Rangers conducted a sweep east of the airstrip and encountered a significant NVA force dug-in a trench line. The Rangers assaulted the position, killing 26 NVA soldiers.

A report prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency dated 13th March 1968 identified for the first time that the NVA were seeking to alter the force structure in the Khe Sanh TAOR, whilst still providing sufficient capability to disrupt major offensive action on the part of the Marines. *"The most significant redeployments of enemy forces in the northernmost South Vietnam during the past two weeks involves the shift of major elements of the North Vietnamese 320th Division from the central Demilitarized Zone into the central lowlands of Quang Tri Province and the southward movement of additional forces from the 324B Division to join a heavy enemy build-up near Hue[...]. Two battalions of the 325th Division's 29 Regiment have redeployed from the Khe Sanh area to Hue[...] additional North Vietnamese artillery units have recently moved down to positions west of the base."*¹³³ These redeployments on the part of the NVA imply a change in tactics to one of

¹³³ Central Intelligence Agency *"The Continuing Communist Military Threat in Northern South Vietnam"* 13 March 1968, Directorate of Intelligence. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 3.

containment of the Marines, with the forces re-deployed to assist with the on-going Tet Offensive in the south.

On the 24th March a Marine patrol from 1/9 position at the Rock Quarry encountered a strong PAVN position 1,500 meters northwest of the position. In the ensuing four hour battle the Marines killed 31 PAVN troops, however a Marine UH-1E supporting the action was shot down by PAVN ground fire. The Marines suffered five killed and a further six wounded in this encounter.

The largest single encounter of this period of offensive action occurred on the 30th March and was an assault into the same NVA complex from which the Marines were ambushed on the 25th February. There were still, however, 25 Marines left unaccounted for after the ambush of the Jacques patrol, and this provided a prime motivator on the part of the Marines for the follow-up assault.

B Company 1/26 Battalion, under the command of Captain Pipes, was tasked with the destruction of a trench and bunker complex 300 meters outside of the perimeter manned by the troops of the 8th Battalion 55th PAVN Regiment and the recovery of the bodies from the ambush on the Jacques patrol. As opposed to the previous B Company engagement, this assault was specifically planned as an assault on the PAVN positions, and as such was meticulously planned with the appropriate supporting arms coordinated from the FSCC. Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J McEwan (who replaced Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson on the 1st March as 1/26 Commander) and the operations officer Major Charles E Davis III, planned the assault in conjunction with Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly, 1st Battalion 13th Marine Artillery Regiment.

The plan called for B Company to advance supported by a rolling *Box Barrage* from nine battalions on Marine artillery. The primary box protecting the advancing Marines was to be provided by 1/13 Artillery from KSCB, whilst the secondary box was to be provided by Army 175mm artillery from Camp Carroll, and TPQ-10 controlled air strikes, and would target the known PAVN controlled high ground adjacent to the B Company objective. The secondary box was designed to open and close over the terrain, rolling forwarded than collapsing back to the primary box.

2nd Platoon from B Company secured the jump-off point at 6am on the morning of the 30th March with no opposition. The jump-off was across the access road running from Route 9 to FOB – 3, with a CIDG unit from FOB – 3 providing flank protection. At 7.50am Pipes called for preparatory fires to commence. The Marines jumped off at 8am with Pipes leading B Company towards the objective. B Company advanced 75 meters behind the primary box which provided both frontal and flank protection from interference from the PAVN during the initial assault. Close air-support tasked to assist the assault was called off as heavy fog prevented visual identification of the objective. Four - 106mm recoilless rifles and five - 0.5-calibre and M60 machine guns provided direct overhead fire-support for the advancing Marines.

The PAVN position was a crescent shaped defensive line of heavily fortified bunkers, trenches and fighting holes 100 meters south-east of the road, and stretching 700 meters in length. The defensive line stretched from the base of Hill 471, to a road leading to an abandoned coffee plantation. As B Company approached the PAVN defensive line, Pipes called for the supporting fires to be shifted to provide a blocking barrage, which would prevent PAVN reinforcements from supporting the 8th Battalion PAVN, and from mounting any counter-attack onto the Marines. B Company conducted a bayonet charge into the PAVN trench line supported by a squad providing a base of fire, destroying bunkers with satchel charges, fragmentation

grenades and flame-throwers, whilst the trench lines were cleared with bayonet's and the M16's. Upon consolidation of the position the Marines counted 115 PAVN bodies whilst incurring nine Marines KIA. The only effective PAVN opposition to the assault was approximately 100 mortar rounds; one of these struck the B Company command post wounding Pipes in the chest. Pipes, however, called in pre-planned retaliatory strikes onto the likely positions and continued to manage the B Company assault.

When the command for the withdrawal was received, B Company had only secured two of the bodies of Jacques ill-fated patrol, with the remaining bodies recovered at a later date. As with the assault, the withdrawal of the Marines was covered by the "box" barrage controlled by the FSCC. Some sporadic PAVN shellfire was received by the retreating Marines, the only casualty being a PAVN prisoner taken during the B Company assault.

For the successful assault, Westmoreland awarded Pipes and B Company a Meritorious Unit Commendation with the citation reading: *"Officers and men of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Regiment United States Marine Corps, deserve the highest praise for aggressive patrol action north of Khe Sanh on 30 March. Heavy casualties inflicted on a bunkered and entrenched enemy force indicated typical Marine esprit de corps and professionalism."*¹³⁴

The assault by B Company marked the end of the offensive action undertaken by the Marines under Operation Scotland I, which was officially terminated at 8am on 31st March 1968. The operational control of 26th Marines and the Khe Sanh combat base was transferred to that of the United States Army 1st Air Cavalry Division (The Air Cav) under the command of Major General John J Tolsen. With the demise of

¹³⁴ Pisor R (1982) *The End of the Line – the Siege of Khe Sanh*. W W Norton & Company Inc. New York. Page 245.

Operation Scotland, Operation Pegasus was initiated on the 1st April 1968 to undertake the opening of Route 9 from Dong Ha and the relief of the Marines besieged at Khe Sanh combat base.

As March drew to a close the situation within the Khe Sanh TAOR had drawn to a virtual stalemate. The Marines, although harassed by PAVN mortar and artillery fire, were relatively secure within their positions: their air-bridge supply line remained open and they processed sufficient men and materials to protect their perimeter defences. However, apart from local offensive action, they lacked sufficient resources to drive the PAVN from their hill positions or to conduct a road opening operation whilst still securing the airfield and the hill outposts. From the PAVN perspective they had the 26th Marines effectively sealed within their positions. However, due to the effectiveness of the organic fire-power of the 26th Marines, along with the tactical air-strikes, B52 ARC Light and long range artillery fire-missions, they could not mass formations of troops in sufficient numbers to mount an effective assault on a Marine position. Giap appears to have recognised this fact and had begun to withdraw troops away from the Khe Sanh TAOR in an attempt to place further pressure on American and ARVN forces in and around the city of Hue. This reduction in manpower had the effect of changing the mission of the PAVN troops around Khe Sanh combat base from an offensive posture with the goal of reduction of the defences to one of containment of the Marines within the perimeter

Over the period of Operation Scotland I (1st November 1967 – 31st March 1968) the Marines incurred 205 killed in action, 852 wounded and requiring medical evacuation, with a further 816 with minor wounds who were treated and returned to the lines. The total casualties incurred by the PAVN has never been fully established; of those killed within the perimeter of the defences 1,602 bodies were counted. However, it has

been estimated that total casualties could have numbered as many as 15,000¹³⁵ (due to the PAVN tendency to carry away their dead, and the significant number of deaths attributed to air and artillery strikes in the surrounding hills that were unable to be positively accounted for). Not included in the Marine totals are those casualties suffered by the Special Forces, most significantly after the fall of Lang Vei.

The Marines and MACV used the lessons learnt from Dien Bien Phu and applied them to the siege of Khe Sanh.

- Although the supply lines were tenuous, the PAVN did not disrupt them for long periods, allowing the Marines to receive sufficient supplies of POL¹³⁶, food and ammunition to maintain the combat battalions within the perimeter.
- The PAVN did not occupy the surrounding hills, therefore PAVN AAA could not disrupt supply flights or close air support operations around the combat base.
- Although there were similarities in the levels of organic firepower deployed at Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu, the PAVN were never allowed to silence the Marine guns of 1/13 Artillery. The Marines also had access to external artillery support from the Rockpile and Camp Carroll that added weight to the Marine counter-battery fire. The Marines, however, never managed to silence the PAVN artillery due to the excellent camouflage and concealment techniques utilised by the PAVN.
- The Marines had excellent close air support that could target the PAVN positions round the clock and in all types of weather conditions.
- The Marines were well dug in and received sufficient supplies of construction material to build defences. The soil conditions surrounding Khe Sanh also

¹³⁵ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC Page 131

¹³⁶ Petroleum, Oil, Lubricants.

assisted in the construction of the defences, unlike Dien Bien Phu, where poor soil cohesion and drainage prevented adequate bunker construction.

- The Marines limited patrolling, however, they possessed sufficient Airborne Forward Air Controllers and sensors to identify impending PAVN assaults.
- Despite having half the number of troops as the French at Dien Bien Phu, the quality, professionalism and firepower of the 1/26 Marines made up for the deficiency in numbers.
- The leadership and aggressiveness of the Marines ensured morale and cohesiveness of the formations was maintained despite the fact that the 1/26 was under siege from a superior number of PAVN forces.

Section thirteen: Operation Pegasus

With the blunting of the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive, and the opening of the lines of communication between Hue and Dong Ha, Westmoreland could now turn his attention to the relief of the Marines at Khe Sanh. Known as Operation Pegasus, or Lam Son 207 to the ARVN, planning for the operation began initially in late January with the transfer of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airborne) from Bong Son II Corps, to Phu Bai I Corps on the 22nd January 1968. General Cushman directed General Tolson to initiate planning for the relief of Khe Sanh. Planning was, however, disrupted by the North Vietnamese initiating the Tet Offensive with the 1st Cavalry Division required to be deployed around the city of Hue in order to blunt the North Vietnamese offensive.

Pressure on the United States and ARVN forces diminished as MACV's counteroffensive drove the PAVN/VC from the populated areas, so Cushman directed Tolson to resume planning for the relief of the Khe Sanh combat base. In planning the relief of Khe Sanh, Tolson's mission was three-fold.

1. To eradicate all PAVN/VC forces within the Pegasus area of operations.
2. To open the road between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh.
3. To relieve the Marines besieged at Khe Sanh combat base.

To achieve this mission Tolson had at his disposal in excess of 30,000 troops, 300 helicopters and 148 air-transportable artillery pieces. Those formations under the operational control of Tolson included:

- 1st Cavalry Division (Airborne) – 1st Air Cav.
- 1st Marine Regiment
- 26th Marine Regiment

- 3rd ARVN Airborne Task Force.

Before the Pegasus offensive could begin, Tolson had to secure his line of communications and logistics support. The key to this was the construction of an airfield and logistics depot capable of accepting C-7 Caribou and C123 transport aircraft. The site selected for the construction of the base was at Ca Lu and was to be designated Landing Zone (LZ) Stud. The section of Route 9 between the Rockpile and Ca Lu had to be secured, to allow the transportation of the necessary POL, construction materials and equipment to the site for stockpiling prior to construction of the base. The securing of the lines of communication was completed by elements of the 3rd Marine Division. The construction of the base was completed in eight days by a joint task force of the 11th Engineer Battalion; Fleet Marine Force, 8th Engineer Battalion; 1st Air Cav, and Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 5. With the completion of LZ Stud, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry (1/9 CavSqd) commenced operation in preparation for Operation Pegasus. 1/9 CavSqd was tasked with the following missions:

- Locate and destroy PAVN AAA positions.
- Acquire intelligence on PAVN positions and defences.
- Locate and prepare suitable landing zones for the upcoming offensive.

In order to achieve this mission 1/9 CavSqd completed airmobile operations radiating out from LZ Stud, calling in tactical air-strikes, B52 Arc Light and artillery fire missions from 105mm and 8-inch guns emplaced at Ca Lu.

The planning for the offensive had not gone unnoticed in Saigon or in I Corps with reporters well aware of the impending operation. Westmoreland himself indicated that with the blunting of the Tet Offensive, the relief of Khe Sanh would be the next objective. *"It was time, he decided, to lift the siege of Khe Sanh. To avoid controversy in the press however, and to avoid further bruising of the Marine egos, he was careful*

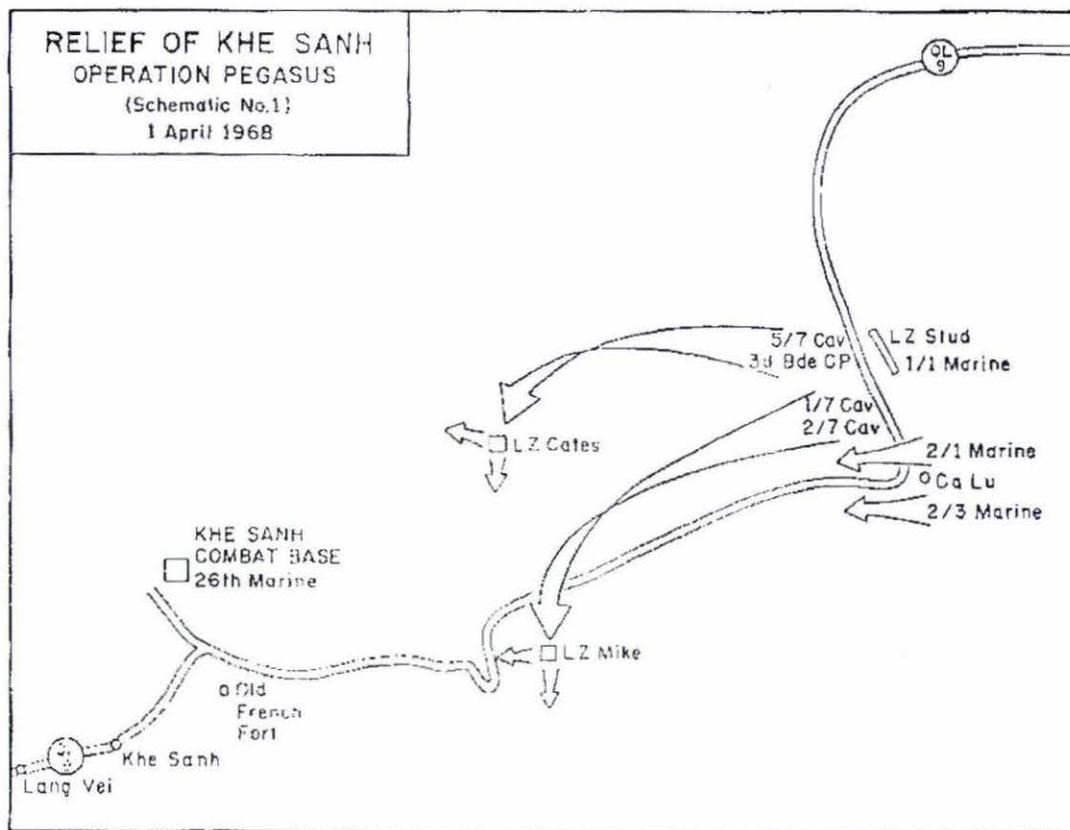
to point out in public statements that it would" not be a relief in the sense of a rescue[...] But relief in the sense of opening ground contact and eliminating the enemy with mobile operations."¹³⁷ Reporters returning from the field with the 1st Air Cav had also indicated that they had been made aware of the exact details of the impending operation, rather than via general media comment from Westmoreland at his daily briefing sessions. What, if any, effect this awareness of the impending offensive would have, would be identified in the following days.

To divert the NVA attention away from the impending offensive, Task Force KILO comprising of 2/4 Marines: 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry; 3/1 ARVN Regiment launched a diversionary assault from Dong Ha northwards towards Gio Linh, which was approximately three kilometres from the DMZ on 30th March 1968. In conjunction with this, airmobile units of the 101st Airborne Division conducted a reconnaissance in force throughout the Task Force KILO TAOR in order to convince the PAVN that this was a major allied assault and draw attention away from the forces marshalling at LZ Stud.

D-Day for Operation Pegasus was the 1st April 1968 with 2/1 and 2/3 (refer Map 18) Marines providing the spearhead of the assault. Initially, it had been planned for the 1st Air Cav to spearhead the assault, however, low lying fog had delayed their departure. At 7am hours 2/1 Marines assaulted north from LZ Stud, with 2/3 Marines sweeping in a southerly direction with the aim of securing the flanks of the road, to allow the combat engineers of the 11th Engineer Battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Victor Perry to commence road-clearing operations along Route 9. PAVN opposition was light and both battalions achieved their objectives.

¹³⁷ Zaffiri S (1994), *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C Westmoreland*. William Morrow and Company Inc New York. Page 319.

Map 18: Operation Pegasus 1st April 1968¹³⁸.



With the weather clearing later in the day 3rd Brigade, Air Cav airlifted to a position midway between Ca Lu and KSCB. From this location 1st and 2nd CavSqd, 7th Cavalry conducted airmobile assault onto Hill 248, that would become known as Landing Zone Mike and was seven and half kilometres east of KSCB. Three kilometres to the north, 5/7 Cavalry air-assaulted onto the southern slope of Dong Chio Mountain and established Landing Zone Cates. This position was crucial as it provided an over-watch position onto sections of Route 9 and allowed the deployment of 105mm Howitzers of the 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery that could cover the approach of the combat engineers as well as further air-mobile operations.

¹³⁸ Lieutenant General Willard Pearson (1975). *War in the Northern Provinces Vietnam 1966-68*. Department of the Army Washington D.C. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 84.

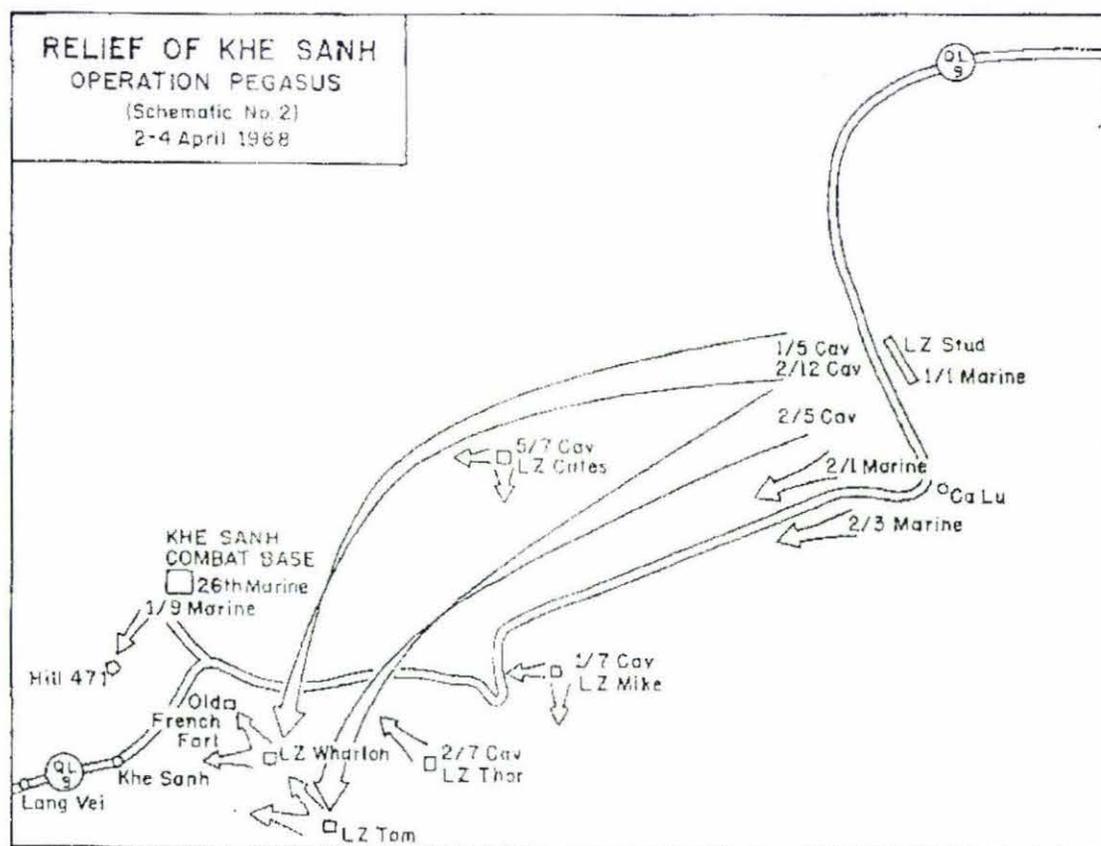
Overnight the 1st Air Cav consolidated its positions, with the airmobile operations to resume the following morning. 2nd Brigade conducted air-assaults into two objectives: LZ Tom by 2/5 Cavalry, six kilometres to the east of KSCB, and LZ Wharton by 1/5 and 2/12 Cavalry eight and a half kilometres from KSCB. In conjunction with the air-mobile operations, 3rd Brigade, 1st Marines and 11th Engineer Battalion continued with road clearing operations along Route 9 reconstructing the road to allow passage of heavy vehicles and repairing or rebuilding bridges that had been destroyed.

The offensive resumed on the 4th April (refer Map 19) with the 1/5 CavSqd resuming the attack northeast with an assault on the old French fort. The fort was a key position as it controlled the junction of Route 9 and the road to the KSCB. In coordination with this, the Marines of KSCB entered Operation Pegasus when three companies of Marines from the 1/9 from the Rock Quarry assaulted Hill 471, two and a half kilometres south of the combat base. Bravo company 1/9 was charged with defending the Rock Quarry positions whilst the remaining companies conducted the assault. This assault was designed to engage major elements of the 304th PAVN Division on both flanks between two advancing formations. The initial plan was for 1/9 to advance under the cover of a short artillery preparation, however, due to heavy defensive fires from the PAVN, close air support and artillery fire was required to reduce the PAVN bunkers. Hill 471 was finally secured at 4pm with 30 NVA killed in the assault. There was little time for the 1/9 to secure the positions before the PAVN began heavy shelling of the positions with rockets, artillery and mortar fire. At 3.30am illumination rounds identified an assault by troops of the 7th Battalion 66th PAVN Regiment. Although the PAVN pushed forward the assault vigorously, they were unable to breach the Marine lines, leaving 148 dead scattered over the hillside. The Marines were relieved on 6th April, with the control of Hill 471 turned over to the 2/12 Cavalry, which was airlifted in from LZ Wharton. 1/9 Marines moved out to occupy Dong Dang mountain, known as Hill 689, four and a half kilometres to the

northwest. The only opposition to this move was friendly fire from the artillery of the 3rd ARVN Airborne Task Force, there were, however, no casualties from this fire.

5/7 Cavalry was airlifted into a position 500 meters to the north of the Blue Sector wire of the combat base. This provided a blocking force against any PAVN movement and completed the encirclement of the combat base by the relief force. Further clearing operations were completed by the 1/26, with G Company advancing from Hill 558 to a ridgeline approximately two kilometres to the west. A strong PAVN position was uncovered, requiring two days of fighting by the Marines and supporting arms to clear the ridgeline.

Map 19: Operation Pegasus 2nd – 4th April 1968¹³⁹

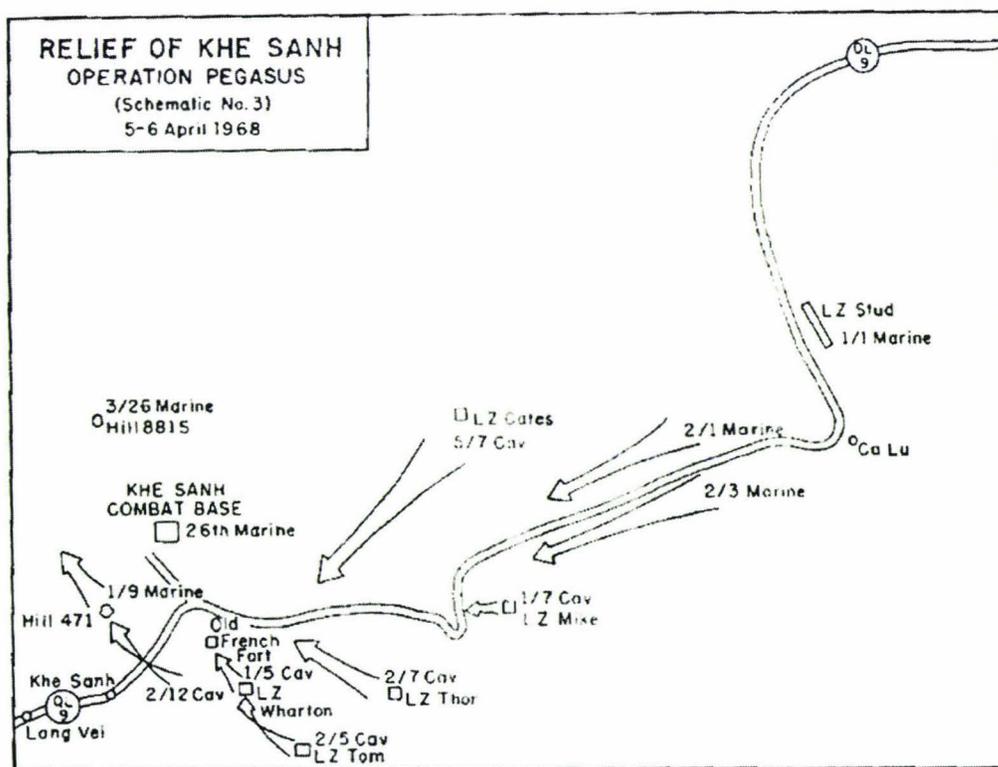


¹³⁹ Lieutenant General Willard Pearson (1975). *War in the Northern Provinces Vietnam 1966-68*. Department of the Army Washington D.C. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 86.

In order to block escape of the retreating PAVN forces towards the Laotian border, Tolson directed the 3rd ARVN Airborne Task Force to be deployed on the 7th April to a position 2 kilometres southeast of KSCB known as LZ Snake, this move encountered little PAVN resistance. However, the following morning, the PAVN assaulted the position but were easily repulsed by the ARVN forces.

The first external troops to be airlifted into the combat base to “relieve” the 1/26 Marines occurred at 1.50pm 6th April (refer Map 20) when a company from the 3rd ARVN Airborne Task Force was airlifted into KSCB and linked up with the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion. This move appears to have been symbolic, to provide the South Vietnamese government with the positive propaganda of being the first troops to relieve the besieged Marines of KSCB.

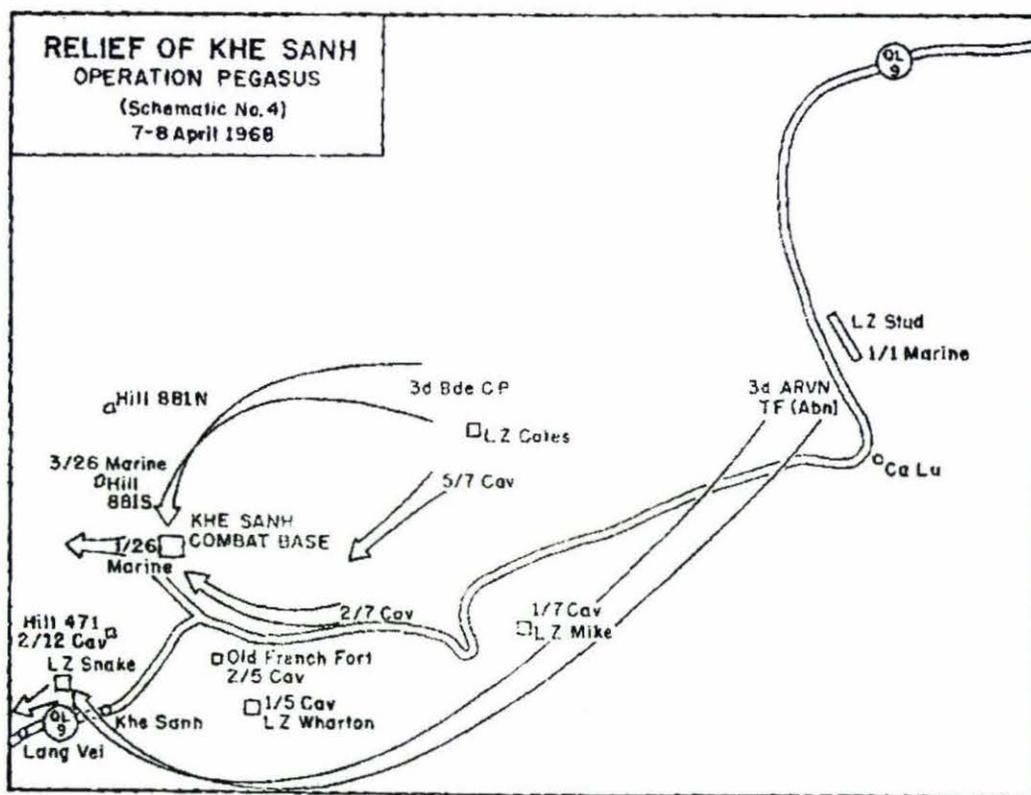
Map 20: Operation Pegasus 5th – 6th April 1968¹⁴⁰



¹⁴⁰ Lieutenant General Willard Pearson (1975). *War in the Northern Provinces Vietnam 1966-68*. Department of the Army Washington D.C. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 87.

The official relief did not occur until 8am 8th April (refer Map 21) when the Command Post of the 3rd Brigade; 1st Cavalry Division (Airborne) was airlifted into KSCB with the responsibility for the defence of the perimeter transferred to it. The road opening operation was completed later that day when 2/7 CavSqd successfully traversed the road to KSCB. Repairs to Route 9 were not, however, completed until the 11th April. The 11th Engineer Battalion had been vital to the success of the road opening operation and the relief of KSCB: 14 Kilometres of road had to be repaired, nine bridges replaced, and 17 bypasses completed over a period of 11 days.

Map 21: Operation Pegasus 7th – 8th April 1968¹⁴¹



With the PAVN forces withdrawing from the KSCB TAOR, Tolson was directed to withdraw elements of the 1st Air Cav back to Quang Tri to prepare for further operations within the A Shau Valley.

¹⁴¹ Lieutenant General Willard Pearson (1975). *War in the Northern Provinces Vietnam 1966-68*. Department of the Army Washington D.C. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 88.

Westmoreland had initially thought about continuing the offensive towards the Laotian border, however, with the PAVN withdrawing from KSCB, resources were required elsewhere. The 1st Brigade and 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion were airlifted from KSCB to Quang Tri. The tenure of Colonel Lownds also came to an end, with command of the 26th Marines being transferred to Colonel Bruce Meyers on 12th April.

Ironically, the last engagement for the Marines at KSCB was conducted on the territory that triggered the siege: Hill 881 North. Upon assuming command of 26th Marines, Colonel Meyers sought to remove the NVA presence from the last significant position overlooking the combat base. Hill 881 North had been a constant source of PAVN rocket mortar and anti-aircraft fire since the beginning of the siege. It was now time to resolve this problem. On the night of the 13th April 3/26, less a security element for 881 South, moved into a lie-up position on the forward slope of 881 North. At 8am on the morning of the 14th April Meyers initiated the assault with preparatory fire from every weapon available to him; 1/13 artillery from KSCB, 175mm from the Rockpile and 155mm and 8-inch guns of the 1st Air Cav from LZ Stud. Direct fire-support was also provided by the security element with mortars, 106mm Recoilless Rifles, 105mm Howitzers and 0.5 calibre machine guns onto any PAVN position that was providing opposition to the assault. Lastly, close air-support was provided with iron bombs and napalm to reduce the PAVN bunkers and trench line. The Marines advanced behind the barrage, destroyed the PAVN positions and occupied the hill. Marine casualties were considered light at six killed and 19 wounded. The PAVN, however, suffered badly due to the heavy Marine bombardment leaving 106 killed and two prisoners on the hill.

With the securing of Hill 881 North, Operation Pegasus was terminated. The Marines had been relieved after 77 days surrounded by the NVA. The Marines, however, did not necessarily feel they needed to be relieved. This can be best summed up by a quote from Colonel Lownds at the time of the link-up with the 1st Air Cav: *"I've been at Khe Sanh for nine months.... and if they keep me supplied, I could stay another nine months."*¹⁴² Operation Pegasus had cost the PAVN 1304 killed, with a further 21 captured and a significant amount of material destroyed. These figures do not take into account those casualties inflicted by the B52 Arc Light strikes. Allied casualties were relatively light, with 140 killed and 873 wounded.

Although the plans for the relief operations did appear to be public knowledge via media involvement, and comment from Westmoreland regarding future operations, there were insufficient NVA forces to combat the mobile warfare of the 1st Air Cav, and the firepower of the Allied forces. Giap also assisted by withdrawing forces from the KSCB TAOR to assist with operations further in the south reducing available units to resist Operation Pegasus. It is also clear that from late March the Marines at KSCB were not under any significant PAVN pressure. The early assaults had inflicted significant casualties on the PAVN, and Allied airpower was both preventing further PAVN attacks, whilst maintaining the air-bridge to the combat base. It was therefore only a matter of time before Westmoreland would commence the road opening operation, the key determining factor to this would be the defeat of the PAVN/VC further south to allow men and material to be diverted to the operation. When questioned as to Westmoreland's actions, Captain William Dabney commented, *"The forces were not available earlier. I think your take on Westy's attitude is likely correct. We had a handle on Khe Sanh by then. The chief thing Pegasus accomplished was*

¹⁴² Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC. Page 137.

to open the road. Without the road we could not retrograde the material and heavy weapons (tanks, etc.) when we closed the base."¹⁴³

The North Vietnamese seemed to underestimate of the ability of the Marines to maintain the integrity of the combat base whilst surrounded, and overestimate their own ability to conduct open warfare against a modern well-equipped opposition. Published in the "Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam 1954–1975" the following comment was made on the failure of the March assaults by the PAVN. "We had somewhat underestimated the capabilities and reactions of the enemy and had set our goals too high. Our plans for military attacks was too simplistic and our arrangements for carrying out and coordinating combat operations by our forces for coordination between battlefields and military attack and the mass uprising were disjointed. Our soldiers' morale had been very high when they set off for battle, but because we had made only one-sided preparations, only looking at the possibilities of victory and failing to prepare for adversity, when the battle did not progress favourably for our side and when we suffered casualties, rightist thoughts, pessimism, and hesitancy appeared among our forces."¹⁴⁴

The closure of the saga for the 26th Marine Regiment occurred on the 18th April 1968 with its withdrawal from KSCB to Camp Carroll and Dong Ha. The 1st Marine Regiment, under the command of Colonel Hughes assumed the role as defender of KSCB. Despite the significant casualties suffered by the PAVN during operation Scotland I and Pegasus, intelligence reported that there were still 12 battalions of PAVN in the KSCB TAOR. Although there were significant PAVN elements present, the 1st Marines did not suffer any of the attacks that their predecessors had to withstand. For their part in the siege, the 26th Marines and supporting units were

¹⁴³ Capitan Willaim Dabney. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 20th January 2006

¹⁴⁴ Military History Institute of Vietnam (2002). Victory in Vietnam – The Official History of the Peoples Army of Vietnam, 1954 – 1975. University Press of Kansas. Page 224.

awarded the Presidential Unit Citation on 23rd May 1968 from the then out-going President Johnson.

Section fourteen: Supporting Arms

There can be no doubt that the defence of the Khe Sanh combat base was achieved through the extensive use of aircraft and artillery delivered ordnance. However, to achieve the maximum effectiveness of this support, a coordinated management plan and structure was required. The key to the management of the supporting arms was the 1/13 Artillery Fire Support Coordination Centre (FSCC) under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly.

The FSCC was an integral part of the 1/26 Marines Regimental Staff, as it planned and executed all artillery fire-missions and air strikes within the Khe Sanh TAOR. To support the needs of the troops the FSCC was split into two elements. The 1/13 Fire Direction Centre (FDC) commanded by Captain Salmon, and the Khe Sanh Direct Air Support Centre (DASC) commanded by Major Goddard.

The FDC was the central element of the 1/13 Artillery, as it received all requests for artillery fire missions from the forward Marine positions and converted them into the necessary numerical data for the 1/13 batteries. To assist in the computation of the information the FDC utilised a Field Artillery Digital Automatic Computer (FADAC). At the disposal of the FDC were a total of 46 pieces of artillery consisting of 16 175mm guns stationed at Camp Carroll and the Rockpile, six 155mm guns, 18 105mm¹⁴⁵ guns and six 4.2-inch mortars positioned in and around Khe Sanh.

A key task of the 1/13 was to provide defensive fire for the Marine units stationed at Khe Sanh. This would traditionally take the form of: Firstly, defensive artillery boxes in response to a PAVN assault on a Marine position. Secondly, Harassment and

¹⁴⁵ Three 105mm guns were stationed on Hill 881S with India Company.

Interdiction Fire (H&I) against suspected PAVN concentrations, identified by means such as airborne reconnaissance or indication received by the multitude of sensors deployed around likely infiltration and concentration routes. Thirdly, a rolling barrage to support advancing Marines. The box barrage was utilised extensively in the early stages of the siege when PAVN troops were actively assaulting the hill outposts. The barrage consisted of the following: The FSCC directed a primary box over the advancing NVA troops. Three sides of the box were static and provided by three batteries of the 1/13 Artillery. The fourth side of the box, closest to the Marine lines was provided by the fourth battery of 1/13 Artillery and rolled in and out of the box. This tactic ensured that all of the immediately attacking PAVN were subject to the barrage. The FSCC provided a secondary artillery box from the Army 175mm guns at the Rockpile and Camp Carroll. The 175mm guns targeted two sides of the box, 500m from the primary box, with the end of the box closed off with air strikes. The use of the primary and secondary box allowed the FSCC to target both the attacking troops plus the reserve formations.

Although the Marine ammunition storage was destroyed in the opening stage of the siege, immediate re-supply prevented any long-term adverse impact on the ability of 1/13 to action requests for support. In accordance with the instruction to Westmoreland, for daily updates as to the situation at Khe Sanh, President Johnson was continually apprised of the supply situation. For example, the report dated 11th February 1968 stated *"The Khe Sanh dump or supply point status reported as a number of days on hand on February 11 is as follows: Class I: Rations, 10 days on hand; Class III: Aviation fuel, 12 days on hand; jet fuel, 4 days on hand; motor fuel, 6 days on hand and diesel fuel, 6 days on hand; Class V: ammunition, 60mm and high explosive, 12 days on hand; 81mm, 17 days on hand; 90mm, 94 days on hand; 4.2 inch shells, 36 days on hand; 105mm, 10 days on hand and 155mm, 25 days on*

hand.”¹⁴⁶ For the Marines on the ground there was also no shortage of supporting fire. Captain William Dabney commented, “[O]nce we recovered from the first-day ammo dump blow-up, there was always plenty of ammunition. I sometimes fired arty and mortars randomly simply because I’d gotten more than I could safely store.”¹⁴⁷

The close coordination between the FSCC and the Marine forward artillery observers allowed the FDC to deliver 158,891¹⁴⁸ rounds in direct support of the 1/26 Marines, with fire missions usually actioned within 40 seconds of the request being received from the Marines.

A key tactical error on the part of the attacking PAVN troops was that they did not effectively target the static Marine artillery. In the siege of Dien Bien Phu the French artillery was effectively targeted with counter-battery fire and silenced for long periods allowing the assaulting troops to advance un-hindered. The reverse was true with Khe Sanh. Over the course of the siege only four guns were destroyed, three on the airbase and a 105mm on 881 South. Although the Marines could not locate and destroy the PAVN heavy artillery at Coc Roc due to effective camouflage, Marine guns targeted attacking PAVN troops and responded to PAVN artillery at a rate of 10 shells outgoing at PAVN positions to every one incoming PAVN round.

The DASC, which arrived at KSCB on 19th January was initially charged (although this role was later altered) with the responsibility of managing all Marine, Navy and Air Force close air operations within the Khe Sanh TAOR. The Marines were a combined operations formation with air, land and sea capabilities and therefore shared a strong bond between the air-ground team, so it sought to ensure that it maintained effective control over all close air support to meet the needs of the troops

¹⁴⁶ *Memo Wheeler to Johnson CM-3001-68*. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

¹⁴⁷ Captain Willaim Dabney. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 20th January 2006

¹⁴⁸ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC
Pg 107

on the ground. On receipt of a request for air-support, the DASC liaised with the Tactical Air Direction Centre of the 1st Marine Air Wing (1st MAW), with the required resources allocated to meet the Air Tasking Order (ATO). If there were insufficient resources available from 1st MAW, then other services such as the Air Force or Navy would be approached to assist. Once the aircraft arrived within the Khe Sanh TAOR, the DASC, assisted by a C-130 Airborne Command and Control Centre (ABCCC) aircraft would manage the strike. For close air support operations, the DASC would decide, based on resource availability whether to hand the control of the aircraft over to either a Marine or Air Force Forward Air Controller embedded with the ground troops, or an Tactical Air Controller (Airborne) to manage the strike on the PAVN position. There were seven TAC(A) assigned to the 26th Marines, flying a variety of O1-E Birdog aircraft; or UH-1E helicopters, with five TAC(A)s continually overhead during daylight hours. The TAC(A)s would identify and mark the target with smoke rockets, and then correct the strike aircrafts approach to ensure the target was successfully destroyed. Upon completion of the strike the TAC(A) would complete a Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) run over the target to confirm destruction, this information would then be passed onto the departing aircraft for post flight debriefing.

On 16th January was a unit arrived at KSCB that would prove to be the most influential in the defence of the combat base, Air Support Radar Team – Bravo (ASRT-B) from the Marine Air Support Squadron. ASRT-B arrived with a TPQ-10 radar capable of directing all-weather strikes on PAVN positions. The TPQ-10 was housed in a heavily fortified bunker to protect the radar and its operators from incoming PAVN shellfire. The TPQ-10 emitted a thin radar beam that locked onto the incoming aircraft. Data including the coordinates of the target, wind velocities and the weapons ballistic characteristics were then programmed into a computer that identified the correct drop point for the weapons from the aircraft. The ground controller would then correct the flight-path of the incoming aircraft until it had reach

the designated drop point. Upon reaching the drop point, the DASC would direct the pilot of the aircraft to release the weapons.

Suitably equipped A-4, A-6 and B-52 aircraft would perform the TPQ strikes from an altitude of 14,000 feet. The accuracy of the radar directed strikes allowed the bombs to be delivered close to the Marine positions, the separation from the target would be calculated as a factor of the weight of the bomb in meters. For example, a 250-pound bomb could be dropped 250 meters from Marine positions, however a 500-pound bomb could be dropped no closer than 500 meters. Due to the dangers of night-time close air support, the majority of the TPQ strikes were conducted at night. To ensure the accuracy of the TPQ-10, calibration drops were completed twice weekly on a known reference point. The TPQ controlled strikes allowed the Marines to effectively negate the poor weather (the *Crachin*).

The large number of available aircraft allowed the Marines to control the battlefield, and to compensate for their numerical disadvantage when attacked by the PAVN. Paul Knight, Kilo Company Forward Air Controller on Hill 861 commented, *"Close air support was not a problem in obtaining. In fact there were many times that I had been handed flights and I had already hit every available target so we would just start picking targets that were unconfirmed to run the strikes against. Like shooting cans on a rock for target practice. In a few times that we did call for air on a specific target, and the flight wasn't on station, they would scramble out of Da Nang or an aircraft carrier in the China Sea. It took longer to actually order the flight than it took them to get to us. I would guess that once they were scrambled out of Da Nang till they came on station was no more than 15 minutes. Once they were airborne[e] and on station they had to drop the ordnance that they were carrying as they wouldn't have enough*

*fuel to return to their base fully loaded. Not only that but the pilots didn't want to land carrying a full load either!"*¹⁴⁹

Paul Knight also emphasised the diversity of the aircraft available to the Marines for close air support operations. He commented that *"F 4s, F 105s, (mostly the F 4s), Huey Gunships with Rocket pods and Dual gunners, O-1 Bird [D]ogs where the observer would stick an M-16 out the side window and once or twice a small bomber run by the Australian Air Force don't remember much about them and didn't recognise the aircraft but their call sign was "Canberra"¹⁵⁰. They did their own thing on predetermined targets so I had no radio contact with them directly but I could monitor the voice traffic on the strike frequency."*¹⁵¹

The close air support did not only destroy the PAVN physically, it had a significant adverse mental affect on the PAVN troops on the receiving end of the bombardment. Captain William Dabney commented, *"A PAVN sergeant stumbled into our lines one day. Big guy, not wounded. We stripped him and began interrogating him. He was cooperative until a Phantom jet flew close overhead, at which point, standing in our trench, he defecated down his legs. He could not thereafter stop shaking for several hours. He was psychologically destroyed. He told us that all his troops were in the same shape if not worse."*¹⁵²

Another task for which the TPQ-10 was not originally designed for, however was adapted to undertake, was the radar-assisted delivery of supplies. In much the same way as guiding of the attack aircraft, the supply flight would be guided to the delivery

¹⁴⁹ Paul Knight Forward Air Controller Hill 861. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 18th January 2006.

¹⁵⁰ It is likely that these were RAAF Canberra Bombers of Number 2 Squadron RAAF. Tasked from Phan Rang Airforce Base.

¹⁵¹ Paul Knight Forward Air Controller Hill 861. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 19th January 2006.

¹⁵² Capitan Willaim Dabney. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 19th January 2006

point by the DASC, then given the release order for the supplies to be dropped. The only disadvantage of the use of the TPQ for this role is that it was diverted away from the important task of directing the close air support sorties.

Khe Sanh Re-supply flights.¹⁵³



Crucial to the on-going survival of the Marines was maintaining the air-bridge between Dong Ha and the combat base. With the cutting of the overland supply line via Route 9, the airfield at the combat base became crucially important to allow the air-delivery of necessary supplies, personnel and the evacuation of the wounded. The Marines at KSCB and the surrounding hill outposts required 185 tons of ammunition, POL, food and medical supplies per day to ensure survival of KSCB.

The air-transport role for the Marines at KSCB was undertaken by a number of formations, with differing air-transport capabilities to meet the ever-changing needs of the Marines. Heavy lift into KSCB was completed by the C-130s from Marine Aerial Refueller Squadron 153, United States Air Force 834th Air Division and C-123s from the 315th Air Commando Wing. Helicopter lift from the airfield to the outlying positions was provided by UH-34, CH-46 and UH-1E's from Marine Air Group 36 (MAG 36), with CH-53 helicopters provided from Marine Air Group 16 (MAG 16).

¹⁵³ Photo's courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

The airstrip at Khe Sanh provided significant challenges to the pilots for the transport squadrons. Notwithstanding the poor weather conditions generated by the *Crachin* limiting available time to re-supply to 40% of daylight hours, PAVN AAA weapons were positioned on the flight-path, and in the hills surrounding the various hill outposts making the delivery of necessary supplies a hazardous undertaking. In order to avoid the AAA C-130/C-123 crews would initiate the approach at high level then complete a rapid descent to the Khe Sanh runway, and, upon, landing complete a high-speed taxi to the hardened shelters for unloading of the supplies, and embarkation of passengers departing the combat base. The aircraft were vulnerable to AAA at all times during the descent and landing. Once landed however they were also subjected to intense mortar and shellfire when taxiing and unloading. On 10th February a C-130 from Marine Aerial Refueller Transport Squadron 152 was hit by machine gun fire on approach, setting alight fuel bladders carried in the aircraft hold. The aircraft crashed off the runway and caught fire, killing 6 of the crew. As a result of this crash all C-130 landings were suspended, with only the less vulnerable C-123 aircraft permitted to land on the airstrip due to their steeper descent capabilities and shorter landing run, making them less vulnerable to AAA.

Due to the restrictions placed on landings of the C-130 aircraft, alternative means were required to deliver bulk supplies to the combat base. There were three options available to the air transport squadrons. Due to the adverse weather conditions the most frequent method was via a parachute drop utilising a Container Delivery System (CDS) from a C-130. This method required close coordination between the pilot and the Marine Air Traffic Controller Unit (MATU) on the airfield. The pilot would commence an instrument approach run along the axis of the runway at approximately 500ft, upon reaching a specific marker point at the eastern end of the runway, a timed approach would be commenced of between 20 – 30 seconds, depending on the wind speed. At the appropriate timed interval the pilot would push the aircraft nose up and the supplies would be pushed from the rear ramp of the aircraft.

The second most common method utilised was the Low Altitude Parachute Extraction System (LAPES). For this method the pilot was required to complete a normal approach run from the east, holding 5 feet above the runway. A parachute pack was deployed from the rear cargo doors, which was then electronically opened as the pilot applied the throttle to lift the aircraft away from the runway with the pallets of supplies pulled from the aircraft via the deployed parachute. The pilot then executed a high-angle westerly ascent to avoid the PAVN AAA.

The third method of delivery was known as the Ground Proximity Extraction System (GPES). This system relied on the use of an arrestor hook deployed from the palletted load, the pilot would commence his approach run along the axis of the airfield and attempt to snag an arrestor wire stretched across the airfield. Upon engagement with the wire by the arrestor hook, the load would be dragged from the aircraft and the pilot would commence the same high-angle westerly ascent.

Upon delivery of the supplies to the combat base there was the need to distribute it to the hilltop outposts. Due to the small size of the perimeter, parachute drops were not feasible, so it was up to the helicopters of MAG 16 and MAG 36 to distribute the supplies. The necessary supplies were delivered either from the combat base, or airlifted directly from Dong Ha to the hilltop outposts. Due to the close proximity of the PAVN, the incoming helicopters were subjected to intense AAA on approach and departure from the outpost, upon landing they were then subjected to PAVN mortar fire.

Destroyed C-123 Khe Sanh airfield.¹⁵⁴



Ammunition re-supply to the hill outposts was the priority, so troops on these outposts lacked food and water, subsisting on combat rations. *“We were given a blank check as far as ordnance was concerned. Any area outside of the wire was considered a Free Fire Zone. The only thing we were short on was food and water.”*

¹⁵⁵ Due to the proximity of the NVA positions on Hill 881 North, supply missions to Hill 881 South were particularly hazardous with five helicopters being shot down on and around the hill when completing re-supply missions.

The delivery of supplies to Khe Sanh via the CDS method had its own inherent dangers. The drop zone was outside of the perimeter fence and required the Marines to conduct a sweep operation every morning to ensure there were no booby-traps or

¹⁵⁴ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

¹⁵⁵ Paul Knight Forward Air Controller Hill 861. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 18th January 2006.

PAVN waiting in ambush for the troops collecting the supplies. The collection of supplies also took on average 45 minutes, providing they landed within the drop zone. This process could take several hours if the pallets went astray leaving the Marines vulnerable to PAVN intervention whilst outside of the wire. When the supplies could not be recovered in time, they would have to be destroyed to prevent them falling into the hands of the PAVN.

In response to the re-supply difficulties, Generals Cushman and Anderson (1st Marine Air Wing Commander) developed the concept of the Super Gaggle whereby a swarm of helicopters supported by close-air support aircraft would descend on a hill-top position as part of a coordinated re-supply mission. Colonel Bonner and Lieutenant Colonels White and Richard from the 1st Marine Air Wing Headquarters planned the details of the concept. The plan called for 12 A-4s providing close air support, one TA-4 as FAC, twelve CH-46s for supply delivery and four UH-1E gunships for close air support and Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR). Upon arrival at the hill-top out-post the following would occur: Firstly, four A-4s armed with napalm and bombs would target known PAVN positions. Secondly, two A-4s armed with tear gas would target PAVN AAA positions. Thirdly, just prior to the helicopter run, two A-4s would lay a smoke screen on the helicopter avenue of approach. Fourthly, the helicopters would commence the descent with four A-4 utilising rockets, bombs and cannon to target any active PAVN AAA positions. The Marines on the outposts would add to the weight of fire by shooting randomly into the surrounding jungle, and utilising smoke grenades to create a smoke screen around the perimeter. If any PAVN position was not suppressed with the weight of Marine firepower, the UH-1E gunships would follow up the supply delivery, targeting any visible PAVN position. The Super Gaggle proved to be an effective tactic as only two further CH-46 helicopters were lost due to PAVN AAA.

In order to provide a quicker turn-around time for a tactical strike on a massed PAVN troop formation or position, the FSCC developed a tactic called a Mini-Arc light that could be deployed more rapidly than the existing B-52 Arc Light strikes. A target block of a 500 by 1000 metre-square was plotted, with two A-6 aircraft each armed with 28 500-pound bombs conducting a TPQ strike down the centre of the block. Thirty seconds earlier the 175mm guns from the Rockpile and Camp Carroll fired 60 rounds down one half of the block, with the batteries of the 1/13 unleashing 200 155mm, 105mm and 4.2-inch rounds on the other half of the block. The FSCC had to plan the fire-mission to ensure that all bombs and artillery shells struck the box at the same time destroying anything within the block instantly. A reduced version known as a Micro-Arc light was deployed against a 500 by 500 metre square was also utilised. This was more flexible as it utilised any aircraft on strike with an optimum bomb load of 12 –16 500-pound bombs with 30 rounds from the 175mm guns and 100 rounds from the 1/13 battery guns. The advantage of the Micro-Arc Light is that it took only 10 minutes for the FSCC to plan, whereas the Mini-Arc light required 45 minutes to plan and was therefore less flexible in a rapidly changing tactical environment.

Despite the reliance by the Marines on air delivered supplies, the PAVN did not appear to conduct a concerted operation to disrupt the delivery of supplies. Although the airfield was mortared and shelled daily, and incoming aircraft were subjected to fire from machine guns of up to 0.50 calibre, it does not appear that the PAVN sought to deploy weapons of larger calibre, such as 37mm quick-firing anti aircraft weapons which were available in the north. If the PAVN sought to destroy the Marines, cutting the air bridge would have been a logical tactic to undertake, and would have been consistent with the tactics utilised by Giap at Dien Bien Phu. With the close proximity of the Ho Chi Minh trail it would have been relatively straightforward for the PAVN to pre-position such weapons in anticipation of the attack on KSCB, and then deploy them in support of the infantry attacks on the hill outposts. The Marines stationed at Khe Sanh also believed it was surprising that the NVA did not commit larger and

more effective AAA to the siege of KSCB. John Kaheny commented, *"There were no reports of SAMs¹⁵⁶ or heavy AA that I am aware of. Why such assets were not deployed is a mystery to me."*¹⁵⁷ Matthew Walsh was stationed on Hill 861A: *"I only saw shelling and small arms used. I remember a sniper and a mortar team that worked the slopes of 861. They opened up on any Helicopter landing on our hill."*¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Captain William Dabney commented, *"We spotted a couple of twin 50s, but we never saw any radar directed 37mm (which they had up north)[...] Some observations here: first, their AA guns were easy to spot because the Russian/Chinese powder produced a bright muzzle flash; second[,] they rarely had AA guns in the open, but rather in caves. They thus usually interdicted only landing zones at fixed positions, or the base runway. They rarely fired at passing aircraft because they could not traverse from a cave and they were easy to spot and destroy if they were in the open. On 881s, our most common counterfire was 0.50 cal guns (we got them from downed helos), our most effective was the 106mm recoilless rifles. Indirect fire like arty or mortars was useless against a cave."*¹⁵⁹

Although there was no evidence of heavier AAA weapons around Khe Sanh, there were intelligence indications that more effective weapons could be deployed within the Khe Sanh TAOR. A memo from General Wheeler to President Johnson stated that *"A rallier (defector) taken at Khe Sanh gave information on the following order of attack[:] (1) Lang Vei; (2) Con Thien; (3) Khe Sanh. He also stated that that he had seen near Thanh Hoa several weeks ago about 20 missiles on PT-76 Amphibious Tank chassis (the PT-76 was used at Lang Vei). General Westmoreland indicated these could be FROG missiles and that this could be the big surprise which Soviet*

¹⁵⁶ Surface to Air Missile.

¹⁵⁷ Colonel John M Kaheny, Assistant Operations Officer 1st Battalion 26 Marines. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 16th January 2006

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Walsh, E Company 2/26 Marines Hill 861A. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 19th January 2006

¹⁵⁹ Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 19th January 2006

*correspondent in Hanoi wrote about recently. Other possibilities for the big surprise, in General Westmoreland's view could be the use of SA-2 missiles near the DMZ, air strikes in the DMZ area by IL-28s, and MIG attacks against B-52s. General Westmoreland and his commanders are alert to all of these possibilities and taking appropriate measures.*¹⁶⁰

Without the disruption of the air-bridge, the air transport squadrons delivered 8,120 tons via 496 parachute drops, 52 LAPES deliveries and 15 GPES deliveries. 4,130 tons were delivered by 273 C-130 flights, 179 C-123 flights and eight C-7A flights. In conjunction with the deliveries, 1,574 passengers, including 306 wounded, were airlifted from KSCB.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ *Memo Wheeler to Johnson CM-3001-68*. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

¹⁶¹ Prados J and Stubbe R.W (1991), *Valley of Decision. The Siege of Khe Sanh*. Naval Institute Press Annapolis Page 329.

Section fifteen: Operation Niagara II

A crucial tool in Westmoreland's arsenal for the destruction of the PAVN was the 7th Air Force under the command of General William Momyer. With the imminent PAVN assault on the Marines at Khe Sanh, Westmoreland directed Momyer to commence planning a SLAM-type (Seek, Locate, Annihilate and Monitor) operation in and around the Khe Sanh TAOR known as Operation Niagara II (see Map 22 for Operation Niagara II TAOR). Westmoreland directed that “[i]n order to meet the threat in the Quang Tri–Thua Tien area, I have directed my Deputy Comdr Air, Gen Momyer, to develop a plan to concentrate all available air resources (SLAM-type Operation). The direct support of Marine units by the MAW¹⁶² is not affected by this plan.”¹⁶³ Furthermore, Westmoreland stressed the importance of the unified command and control of Operation Niagara II. “Until further notice, it is directed that III MAF make available to 7th AF all tactical bomber sorties not required for the direct air support of Marine units. These sorties will be initially committed to the Niagara operation. I wish to stress the absolute necessity for coordination of all elements of the command to bring our firepower against the enemy in the most effective manner.”¹⁶⁴

Detailed planning for the operation commenced in Saigon on 9th January, with Momyer stressing, “I want to emphasize the urgency of the plan... You have authority to draw on whatever staff assistance is needed. Marines must be brought in as the plan develops. It must be our best effort to support their defences at Khe Sanh.”¹⁶⁵

Despite the willingness to include the Marines, Momyer encountered opposition from Cushman as he sought to establish a single air manager that would coordinate and

¹⁶² Marine Air Wing

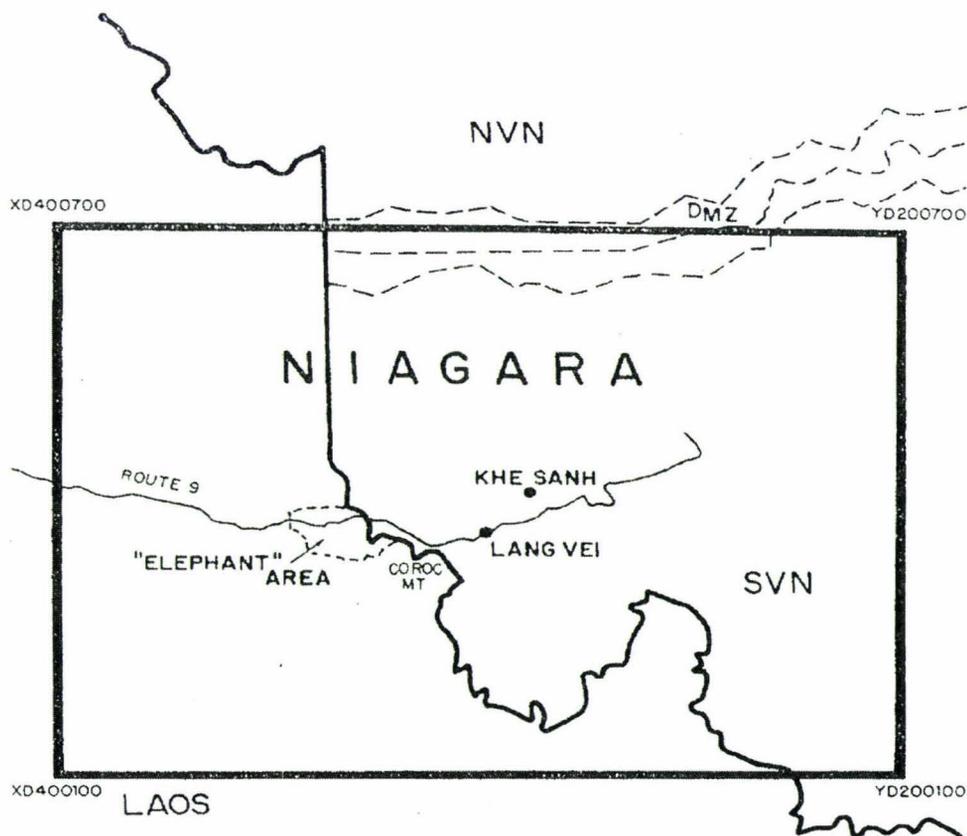
¹⁶³ Trest – W A “Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara) 22 January – 31 March. HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 6.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid page 7.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid page 6

control the movement and targeting of all aircraft within the Niagara area of operation (see Map 22). Cushman argued that by placing the III MAF aircraft under the control of 7th AF the crucial Marine Air/Ground team would be broken, preventing the 26th Marines from receiving the optimal and timely level of support to meet their tactical needs. Therefore, all Marine aircraft should remain under the control of the DASC at Khe Sanh. Momyer's argument was that in order to ensure the effective utilisation of all resources to meet the goals of Operation Niagara, it should be the role of the 7th Air Force to allocate the resources. Westmoreland sought the support of Admiral Sharp to direct Cushman to follow the direction of MACV and place all III MAF aircraft under the control of 7th Air Force. Sharp however declined the request as he believed it would adversely impact on the Marine/Air Force relationship.

Map 22: Operation Niagara II TAOR.¹⁶⁶



¹⁶⁶ Trest – W A "Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara) 22 January – 31 March. HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 6.

Momyer therefore had to settle for a less than satisfactory approach to the management of the air-battle in the Niagara II area of operation. (The Niagara TAOR was split up into five zones for which differing rules of engagement were established.) Air strikes were coordinated via a C-130 Airborne Command and Control Centre (ABCCC), codenamed Hillsboro that would orbit the Niagara TAOR. It had been agreed between III MAF and 7th AF that all flights, with the exception of those Marine aircraft under direct FAC control supporting troops on the ground, would check in and out with the ABCCC. The ABCCC would then coordinate all strikes with the DASC at Khe Sanh with any Marine flights not allocated to close air-support required to contact the ABCCC for allocation to targets.

The zones were allocated in the following manner (see Map 23):

Zone Alpha: Restricted fire area coordinated and controlled by the Marine FSCC/DASC with air support directed by a Forward Air Controller (FAC) or via TPQ-10.

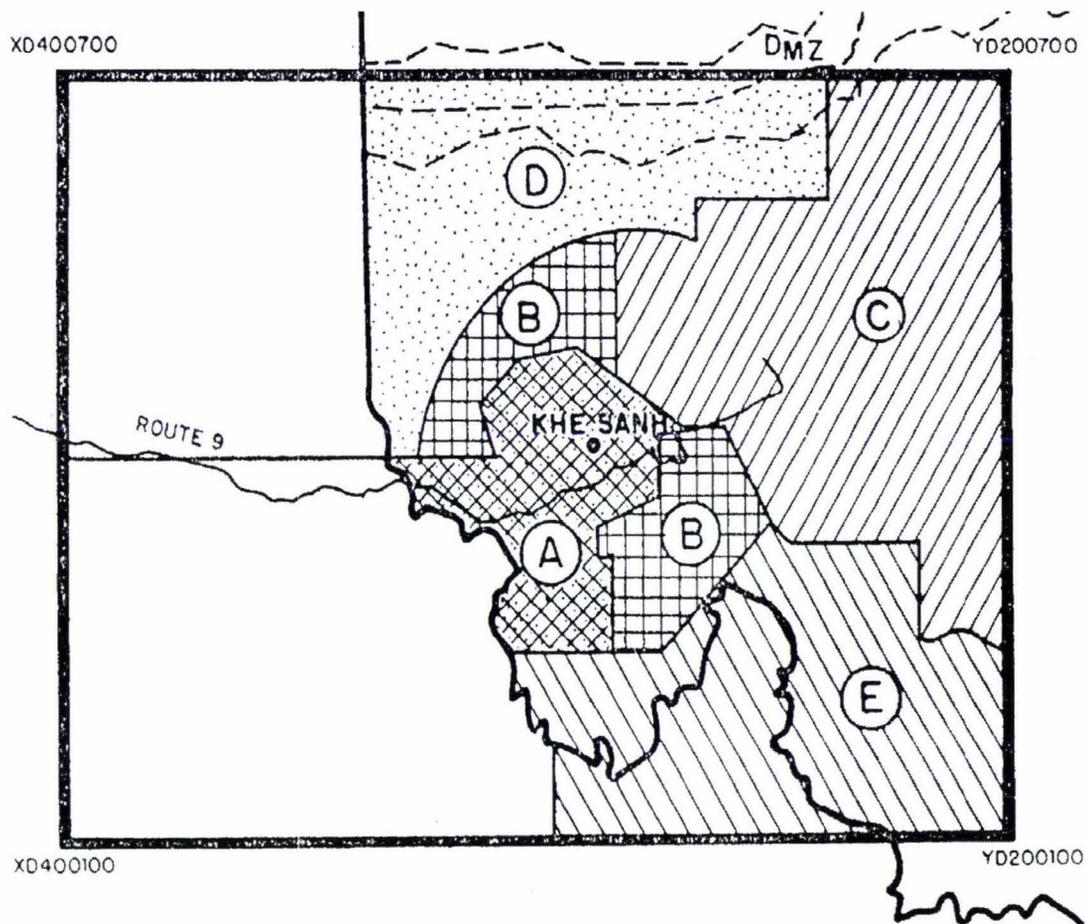
Zone Bravo: Controlled area in which all flights are controlled by the Marine FSCC/DASC at Khe Sanh. However, visual strikes could be executed upon clearance from the FSCC/DASC.

Zone Charlie: Restricted fire area controlled by the Marine FSCC/DASC located at Dong Ha. All strikes were to be made under the control of a FAC, or via TPQ or MSQ¹⁶⁷

Zones Delta and Echo: Free fire zone with all strikes planned and executed by the 7th Air force

¹⁶⁷AN-MSQ-77. Radar Bomb Directing Central. All weather bombing radar aid distributed through-out southern Vietnam.

Map 23: Operation Niagara II air-strike zones around Khe Sanh.



168

With the Marines undertaking independent control of their close air-support missions, this led to command and control problems for the ABCCC and Momyer with complaints from the ABCCC that there were periods of congestion over the battlefield, or FACs stating that for periods of time they did not have aircraft to allocate to a target, or a weapons load did not suit the target.

¹⁶⁸ Trest – W A “Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara) 22 January – 31 March. HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 78.



Specific complaints from the 7th AF FACs regarding the coordination of Niagara strikes included:

- *“ABCCC was not kept informed on the amount of air activity in the Alpha and Bravo sectors of Niagara to include the FACs. This contributed to a distorted picture of the overall air situation.*
- *FACs also reported isolated instances of transport aircraft flying through areas where they were directing air strikes in the Alpha and Bravo zones.*

¹⁶⁹ Photo sequence courtesy of Jacob Krygoski.

- *Two targeting systems in the area created confusion. Frequently one control agency was hindered in assisting the other control agency in conducting strikes against lucrative targets because it was involved with its own targets.*
- *Further, the application of two targeting systems could conceivably result in a duplication of the strike effort, while allowing the status of other targets to remain active.”¹⁷⁰*

The opening of the Tet Offensive and the corresponding increase in demand on the 7th AF resources, this emphasised the need for a single air manager to allocate the resources across the battlefield. In order to meet the needs of the commanders on the ground for close air support during Tet, Westmoreland issued the following priority for the tasking of targets:

- *“Adjust to meet live targets as first priority.*
- *Carrier forces to be directed against the enemy headquarters in Niagara and in support of Khe Sanh.*
- *Thailand-based forces to be applied against Laos LOCS¹⁷¹ (1) and in support of Khe Sanh (2).*
- *SVN-based 7AF resources to provide emergency support Pleiku and other Corps areas (1) and Khe Sanh (2).*
- *Marines forces: (1) Khe Sanh, (2) Camp Carroll, and (3) emergency support.”¹⁷²*

To meet these needs Momyer again stressed the importance of the need for a single air manager to Westmoreland. In response Westmoreland again approached Sharp

¹⁷⁰ Trest – W A “*Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara) 22 January – 31 March*. HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 83.

¹⁷¹ Lines of Communication.

¹⁷² Ibid Page 24

in February with the request that all Marine aircraft resources are allocated to the control of Momyer as the single air manager. *"This time Admiral Sharp accepted Momyer's reasoning. When Westmoreland asked to appoint a single manager for Air Force and Marine Corps tactical aviation, the admiral approved, justifying his decision on the grounds that the northern provinces of South Vietnam no longer formed a Marine Sector. Westmoreland had moved Army forces northward and established the equivalent of a corps headquarters to control them."*¹⁷³ On 7th March Momyer was appointed the single air manager for the Niagara II TAOR, however this appointment did not become effective until 22nd March and therefore with the impending relief of KSCB did not allow the benefits of this change to be fully realised. The lessons learnt from the single air manager concept were however utilised on an ongoing basis throughout the remainder of the Vietnam War.

In order to effectively utilise the intelligence obtained for targeting purposes, Momyer established a Niagara Intelligence Control Centre (ICC) at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. This centre was tasked with *"to locate, identify, confirm and nominate for attack tactical targets in the Niagara area, assess the affects of attacks against these targets and determine reattack requirements."*¹⁷⁴ In order to process the significant amount of targeting data, they had to draw on personnel from a number of commands to assist in target identification, planning and post-strike Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA). In all 213 staff made up the ICC and were drawn from 7th AF, MACV, Philippines, Hawaii and CONUS¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ *"Command and Control of Air Operations in the Vietnam War"* (1991) Naval Historical Center Washington DC. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 44.

¹⁷⁴ Trest – W A *"Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara) 22 January – 31 March"*. HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 46.

¹⁷⁵ Continental United States.

Target information was developed from three primary sources. Firstly, HUMINT;¹⁷⁶ which included prisoner interrogation, reconnaissance patrols and local tribal sources. Secondly; airborne delivered electronic, seismic and acoustic sensors that had been delivered as part of MUSCLES SHOALS programme in and around Khe Sanh. Thirdly; airborne photographic reconnaissance flights conducted by 7th AF and the Marines. During the month of February adverse weather conditions prevented full use of photographic reconnaissance. However, as the weather cleared and flights increased, the Niagara ICC lacked sufficient photographic interpreters to process all of the film, delaying the production of targeting data. Upon collation of the target information, the ICC fed this into a Niagara Target List that identified all targets, including strike history of the target, follow-up BDA and reconnaissance coverage. This data-file was updated on a daily basis and transmitted to the 26th Marines, 1st MAW and 7th AF for inclusion in the Air Tasking Orders (ATOs) for that day's air strikes. To ensure effective allocation of all air-resources throughout Vietnam, the Niagara Target list was also included in the in-country target database. At its peak the ICC was identifying 300 targets per day, with an average target list of 150 per day.

As the NVA pressure on Khe Sanh increased, so to did the necessity to deliver an increased volume of air-support to the Marines. B-52 Arc Light strikes had been completed prior to the initiation of Niagara. However, they lacked the flexibility to meet the tactical needs of the Marines and 7th AF. In response to this 7th AF developed a concept codenamed BUGLE NOTE, which enabled the B-52s to respond with greater flexibility. The Niagara II TAOR was divided into one kilometre by two kilometre grids, which could be effectively targeted by a cell of three B-52 bombers. A cell of B-52 bombers would depart either Anderson Air Force Base in Guam, or U-Tapao in Thailand for a for an Initial Point (IP) outside of the Niagara

¹⁷⁶ Human Intelligence

TAOR. Upon reaching the IP, the MSQ-77 radar bombing aid would lead them to the specific target box with each aircraft delivering up to 120 500-lb bombs onto the target. BUGLE NOTE ensured that there was a B-52 cell available every one and a half hours within the Niagara II TAOR to provide tactical support to the Marines.

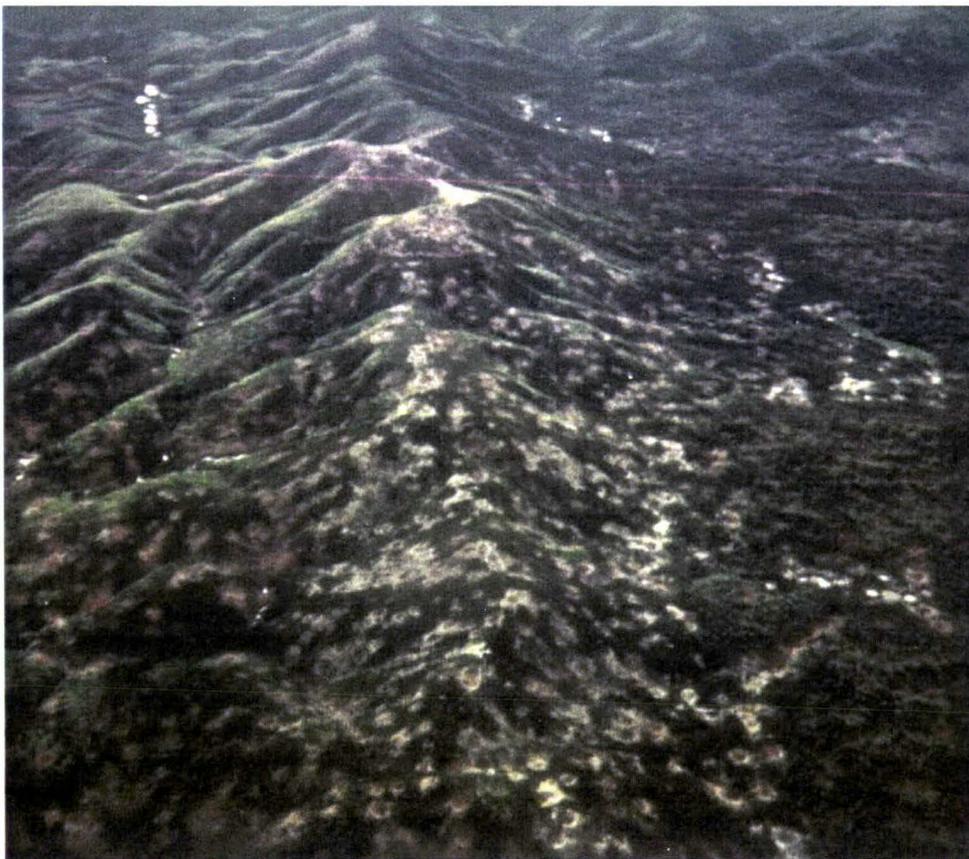
The predictable nature of the B-52 operations did, however, create the risk of the North Vietnamese Air Force attempting to intercept the B-52 raids. Admiral Sharp identified that *"the cyclic nature of the operation conducted under BUGLE NOTE would permit the enemy to arrive at rather accurate estimates of the time the B-52s would be in the vulnerable area. Thus, the enemy would have an increased potential to exploit his capability to launch a MIG attack against the B-52s."*¹⁷⁷ MACV also identified the potential risk of potential intervention by the North Vietnamese Air Force, *"... has the capability to attack in the Khe Sanh area with 120 jet fighters and [eight] light bombers. To date, the North Vietnamese tactical jet aircraft have not been known to range any further south than Thanh Hoa. The enemy has the capability of launching hit and run raids in the Khe Sanh area and of providing some limited air support to his ground forces there. With his present forces, however, he lacks the ability of sustaining his air presence in the Khe Sanh area or of gaining air superiority."*¹⁷⁸ Despite the risk of interception by the North Vietnamese Air Force, there was no attempt to intercept the B-52 Arc Light strikes, or utilise airpower to strike at the Marines in and around Khe Sanh. This can be attributed to the relatively small numbers of aircraft within the North Vietnamese Air Force inventory compared to the overwhelming air-superiority of the 1st MAW and 7th AF.

¹⁷⁷ Trest – W A *"Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara) 22 January – 31 March*. HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 68

¹⁷⁸ *"Study of the comparisons between the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the analogous Khe Sanh situation"*. Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam March 1968. P Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.Page B-10-1

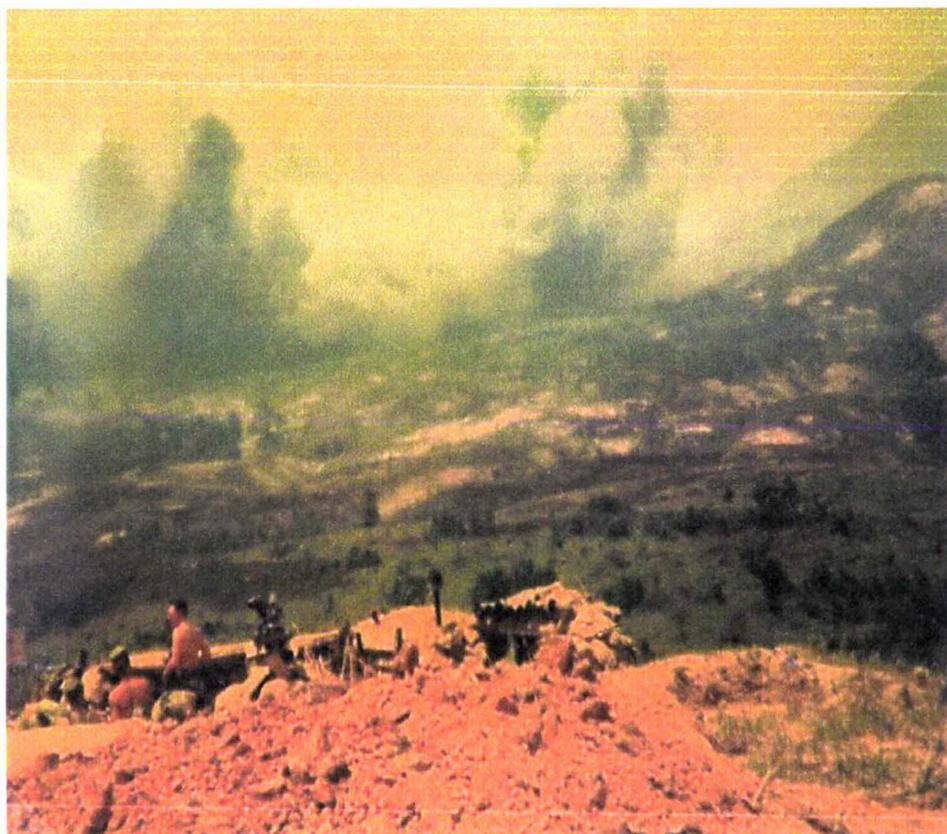
The greatest impact on the ability of the 1st MAW and 7th AF to deliver close air-support was the adverse weather conditions. Throughout January and February low cloud disrupted close air-support strikes. However, all weather capability of the A-6 and B-52 aircraft allowed bombing mission to continue using TPQ/MSQ radar bombing aids. Captain William Dabney commented that the “*weather was essentially neutral. Yes[,] during prolonged overcast, they could move at will in the valleys, but then, they could do that at night anytime. Yes, our CAS was inhibited by marginal WX, but not entirely, since neither the B-52s nor the A-6Bs were WX-limited, and with an Air-Support Radar at Khe Sanh to guide them, they were fantastically accurate.*”¹⁷⁹

Aftermath of a B-52 strike.¹⁸⁰



¹⁷⁹ Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 19th January 2006.

¹⁸⁰ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski



Colonel John Kaheny also commented that “[t]he weather obviously affected close are support and resupply[...] U.S. airpower such as the B-52’s and A-6 aircraft were all weather capable and could drop bombs in zero visibility from high altitude. This capability was much [underappreciated] by the American media and[,] to their detriment, the NVA.”¹⁸²

The Niagara ICC identified 2,047 targets for strike by the 7th Air Force and the 1st MAW. From the period of the 22nd January to 31st March, targets attacked totalled 978 or 48% of the total targets identified. The targets destroyed can be broken down into the following criteria.

¹⁸¹ Photo courtesy of Jacob Krygoski

¹⁸² Colonel John M Kaheny, Assistant Operations Officer 1st Battalion 26th Marines. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 16th January 2006

<u>Type:</u>	<u>Targets</u>	<u>Fragged</u>	<u>Struck</u>	<u>Deleted</u>	<u>Active</u> ¹⁸³
Logistics	318	490	169	261	57
LOCS	84	74	19	81	3
Truck Parks	55	60	15	20	35
Weapons	566	663	291	389	177
Troops	547	617	253	420	127
CCC ¹⁸⁴	46	61	24	31	15
Bunkers	427	414	205	230	197
MISC.	4	2	2	3	1

Total ordnance expended by the 7th Air Force over this period amount to:

AMMO	NAPALM	FLARES	ANTI-MAT	INC-CLUST	ANTI-
PER ¹⁸⁵					
744,000	1,263	576	315	500	579
FRAG-CLUST	SMOKE	ROCKET	SPIKE	GLVB-30	250-lb
64	118	1,390	8	794	21,621
750-lb	1000	2000	3000	BULL-PUP	
15,362	120	33	30	20	

¹⁸³ Trest – W A “Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara) 22 January – 31 March. HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 123

¹⁸⁴ Command Control and Communications

Total tactical air support sorties of Operation Niagara II can be broken down into the following:

7 th Air Force:	9,684
Strategic Air Command:	2,567
United States Navy:	5,167
United States Marine Corp:	6,329
Total TAC Sorties:	23,747 ¹⁸⁶

Tons of ordnance delivered in the defences of the Marines at Khe Sanh:

- Ordnance delivered by air: 96,000 tons
- Ordnance delivered by artillery: 3,600 tons.

The ordnance delivered via Operation Niagara II was crucial in the defence of the Marines at Khe Sanh. With the Marine and Army guns delivering only 3.6% of total defensive tonnage. The organic weapons available to the 26th Marines were sufficient to meet the immediate defensive needs of the Marines. However, insufficient to destroy the numbers of PAVN required to meet Westmoreland's tactical objective of inflicting a major defeat on the PAVN. Although the 1st MAW provided close air support, they did not possess sufficient aircraft to provide coverage for the full Operation Niagara II TAOR. Close air support by the Marines would have met the immediate needs within the vicinity of Khe Sanh, however, there were insufficient resources to also interdict the PAVN lines of communication. Without the interdiction of the supplies lines the PAVN could have continued to stock-pile resources within the Khe Sanh TAOR, this would have allowed the PAVN to continue to degrade the

¹⁸⁵ Ibid Page 124

¹⁸⁶ Trest – W A "Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara) 22 January – 31 March. HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.Page 112 – 114.

Marine defences in and around Khe Sanh leading to an increased number of casualties, and potentially the loss of hill outposts. With the reduction of the hill outposts and the installation of PAVN AAA defences it would have been difficult for the Marines to maintain the air-bridge for the delivery of their crucial supplies. Without the air-bridge, Khe Sanh combat base could not have been held.

Section sixteen: Closure of Khe Sanh combat base

As with all elements of the siege of Khe Sanh there is debate as to who gave the order to close the combat base on the 17th June 1968, and the rationale behind the decision. Moyer's account of the battle recorded that, "*Prior to leaving his post as ComUSMACV on 11 June, General Westmoreland visited PCV Headquarters in I Corps and approved the recommendations of Generals Cushman and Rosson to raze the KSCB and withdraw all Allied forces to the Ca Lu area. While General Westmoreland made the decision prior to his departure, he did not close the base at that time, because mopping-up operations were still being conducted around Khe Sanh.... He left the choice concerning the optimum time to dismantle the installation up to his successor, General Abrams.*"¹⁸⁷ Pisor differed slightly in his account of the decision by Westmoreland to close the base: "*He reviewed the final plans for the shutting down the combat base, and agreed with Generals Rosson and Cushman that it should be razed promptly. But, he added, they must wait until after June 11 and let the new commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General Creighton W. Abrams*¹⁸⁸, *choose the "optimum time" for closing the base.*"¹⁸⁹ These accounts differ markedly from the Zaffiri biography on the life of Westmoreland. "*Westmoreland was surprised by Abram's decision to close the base[...] Westmoreland claimed that he did not know much about the closing.*"¹⁹⁰

Despite the uncertainty about who made the final decision to close the base, there was no doubt that General Creighton Adams viewed the base as no longer necessary and chose to utilise alternative strategies to combat the PAVN in northern

¹⁸⁷ Shore, M S (2001), *The Battle for Khe Sanh*. Government Reprints Press Washington DC Pg 149.

¹⁸⁸ Westmoreland had been promoted to Commander of the United States Army.

¹⁸⁹ Pisor R (1982) *The End of the Line – the Siege of Khe Sanh*. W W Norton & Company Inc. New York. Page 256.

¹⁹⁰ Zaffiri S (1994), *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C Westmoreland*. William Morrow and Company Inc New York. Page 325.

Quang Tri Province. Firstly' with the significant defeat of the PAVN/VC during the Tet Offensive, there were additional air-mobile resources that could be utilised in I Corps. The 101st Airborne Division and the 1st Cavalry Division (Airborne) possessed significant helicopter resources that allowed Abrams to conduct a highly mobile form of warfare. Upon identification and fixing of a PAVN formation, an air-mobile force would be air lifted into the locality to destroy the PAVN force. Secondly, Abrams agreed with Cushman in that the low-lying populated areas should be secured to cut the PAVN off from their sympathisers, and curtail their ability to tax the locals for supplies. Thirdly, maintaining the Marines at Khe Sanh had been a significant logistics burden. With the opening of LZ Stud, Abrams could continue to dominate the Khe Sanh TAOR. However, with shorter, more easily securable supply lines that were outside of the range of the PAVN heavy artillery in Laos. Fourthly, the PAVN supply route had now by-passed Khe Sanh, stretching further into the south of the country from Laos. This negated the argument that the combat base was required to block PAVN infiltration routes through the Khe Sanh Plateau.

There can, however, be no doubt that closing of KSCB created a significant propaganda victory for the North Vietnamese (after the resources in which MAVC had deployed in order to hold the combat base). *"In late June and early July, the retreat of US troops from Khe Sanh was carried out at the cost of great sacrifices. On July 6, UPI noted that the "Viet Cong" caused great difficulties to the Americans till the last day."*¹⁹¹ It was also recorded that, *"under the increasing pressure of the People's Liberation Armed Forces in northern Quang Tri Province, the U.S. Marines on June 26 had to withdraw from their base in Khe Sanh... Since the siege on Khe Sanh base began on January 20 last, the P.L.A.F. in the area have wiped out 15,000 enemy troops among them 11,700 GIs and took prisoner hundred[s] of U.S. and*

¹⁹¹ Ton Vy (1968), *On the Tri Thien Front*. Vietnam Studies Number 20. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>. Page 145

*puppet troops.*¹⁹² Furthermore, the significance of the withdrawal of the Marines from Khe Sanh was highlighted in 'The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954 – 1975' which stated that the retreat "from Khe Sanh represented a serious military and political failure for the American imperialists. This failure demonstrated the impotence of their strategically defensive posture, increased internal contradictions within U.S. ruling circles and increased U.S. domestic and international opposition to the war of aggression in Vietnam."¹⁹³

From the perspective of the Marines at Khe Sanh there is also disagreement as to whether the closure of the base was the appropriate decision. Captain William Dabney commented that "I believe that the air mobility ploy was nothing more than an *ex post facto* justification."¹⁹⁴ Whereas Colonel John Kaheny's view was that "the U.S. Army had moved north with their extensive helicopter assets. [T]he game had changed. In addition the Marines were receiving large numbers of CH 46 and CH 60 helicopters replacing the obsolete CH 34. With those air assets[,] maintaining KSCB would require and unnecessary logistical pull."¹⁹⁵ Paul Knight believed more firmly that there was an ongoing need for the base. *We fought hard for that combat base and it still held the strategic importance that it had prior to the siege.*¹⁹⁶

Despite some views that the combat should have been held, the correct decision was made to withdraw and utilise air-mobility to disrupt the ability of the PAVN to operate within the KSCB TAOR. From the outset there were insufficient Marines stationed at KSCB to adequately control the terrain. They were subjected to continuous PAVN

¹⁹² U.S. had to abandon Khe Sanh. Solidarity with Vietnam July 1968. Retrieved from Texas State University Vietnam Project Database <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/index.htm>.

¹⁹³ Military History Institute of Vietnam (2002). Victory in Vietnam – The Official History of the Peoples Army of Vietnam, 1954 – 1975. University Press of Kansas. Page 230.

¹⁹⁴ Colonel John M Kaheny, Assistant Operations Officer 1st Battalion 26 Marines. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 16th January 2006

¹⁹⁵ Captain William H Dabney I Company Commander Hill 881 South. Personal e-mail correspondence with author. 19th January 2006

¹⁹⁶ Paul Knight Forward Air Controller Hill 861. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 18th January 2006

attack and harassment activities, with Marine operations restricted by the terrain and the requirement to hold a sufficient number of reserves in place to secure the combat base and hill top outposts. The terrain also suited infiltration; this made it difficult for the Marines to undertake their role of disrupting infiltration into the south. With greater mobility, Abrams could influence a larger area with a reduced number of troops. The removal of the Khe Sanh garrison also removed a formation of troops that had been fixed in place by MACV in an essentially defensive posture, allowing the PAVN to choose the time and place for any future assault against the garrison. Finally, the supply route to Khe Sanh combat base was tenuous at best. The shortening of the supply lines would free additional troops from road clearing and security to be utilised in a more effective role against the PAVN.

Section seventeen: Was Khe Sanh a victory for the Marines?

Was Colonel Kaheny correct in his assertions that the “NVA were too smart and professional to dedicate two and a half of their best infantry divisions, regiments of heavy artillery and air defence assets plus a huge logistical chain in order [to] tie down one regiment of Marines”?¹⁹⁷ There can be no doubt that the PAVN committed a significant amount of resources in the siege of Khe Sanh, however it is questionable that the over-running of the combat base was the prime motivator for the siege.

The troop build-up with the Quang Tri Province was designed to draw United States and ARVN forces away from the populated areas prior to the Tet Offensive, and was an tactical failure on the part of Westmoreland and MACV. There were sufficient indicators to identify that a major countrywide offensive was developing with the populated areas being the centre of gravity of the PAVN offensive. With the majority of the MACV manoeuvre battalions located in the northern portion of Quang Tri Province, Giap had a greater likelihood of success in overrunning the populated areas in the south and meeting the goal of the significant political victory as outlined in Resolution 13. Concentration of manoeuvre battalions would also assist in restricting their movement on the part of MACV when redistributing troops to oppose the Tet Offensive. Troop movements would be limited to supply lines that were interdicted by PAVN/VC forces, requiring these to be secured prior to movement along them. Those forces that were located in the south would initially be tied to defensive posture. This allowed the more flexible PAVN/VC to choose when and where to attack, utilising fewer resources to tie down a larger number of MACV

¹⁹⁷ Colonel John M Kaheny, Assistant Operations Officer 1st Battalion 26 Marines. Personal e-mail correspondence with author 16th January 2006.

troops, creating the perception in some towns and cities that the scale of the PAVN/VC assault was larger than it actually was.

As described in '*The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam of Vietnam, 1954 – 1975*' it was identified that the goal of the PAVN assault was to draw MACV forces away from the southern regions. "*Our forces at Khe Sanh successfully fulfilled their mission of drawing in and tying down a large enemy force (which at its largest totalled 32 battalions, 26 of which were American, representing one quarter of all the U.S. combat battalions in South Vietnam) and coordinated their operations properly with other battlefields throughout South Vietnam, thereby contributing to our strategically significant victory in 1968.*"¹⁹⁸

Despite the propaganda from the North Vietnamese, there was no intention to create another Dien Bien Phu at Khe Sanh. This can be established in a number of ways. Firstly, the tactics employed by the PAVN were essentially designed to draw MACV resources to Khe Sanh, and then contain them within the Plateau, utilising MACV resources that could be used in the south to contain the Tet Offensive. Secondly, although there were significant assaults on the hilltop outposts in January and February, if Giap had been determined to overrun the Marines, he would have concentrated his forces and firepower and reduced a hilltop outpost, then moved onto the next outpost once the position had been consolidated as per the tactics employed at Dien Bien Phu. Thirdly, although some siege-works were completed, trench building was not a concerted effort designed to breach the defences of the combat base, nor was there an attempt by Giap to utilise *hugging* tactics to negate the air superiority of MACV. Fourthly, the admission on the part of the North Vietnamese that there was never an attempt to create another Dien Bien Phu. "*North*

¹⁹⁸ Military History Institute of Vietnam (2002). *Victory in Vietnam – The Official History of the Peoples Army of Vietnam, 1954 – 1975*. University Press of Kansas. Page 230.

*Vietnamese Communists also did not plan to re-stage another Dien Bien Phu at Khe Sanh. The Lich Su Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam noted that it was the Americans who were worried that Khe Sanh would be the second Dien Bien Phu[...] objective of Khe Sanh[...] draw out and to confine and hold up the enemy in one location.*¹⁹⁹ The Dien Bien Phu perception was created in the media, and was utilised by North Vietnamese propaganda services as part of their political war.

When PAVN/VC forces began to suffer reverses in and around Hue during the Tet Offensive, forces were withdrawn from Khe Sanh to assist in the offensive actions in Hue. This indicates that Giap did not view Khe Sanh as a centre of gravity for the offensive. Resources could and were diverted to assist Giap in meeting the goals of the larger offensive, with Khe Sanh being relegated to a secondary front. When pressure from Operation Pegasus increased, the PAVN withdrew back to their sanctuaries in Laos and North Vietnam to preserve their forces. When MACV pressure subsided, they were able to re-deploy the refitted formations. In the aftermath of Pegasus MACV intelligence determined that there still 12 PAVN battalions operating in and around Khe Sanh, the same number that was active prior to Operation Pegasus.

The PAVN assault on Khe Sanh was also a proving ground for the on-going development of their regular army in the use of artillery and tanks in the face of a defence conducted by a professional opposition. The skills obtained here would be utilised by the PAVN in the prosecution of the war to overthrow the government in the south. *"[T]he main force divisions participating in the this campaign honed their skills in many different tactics, such as massed combined-arms combat operations, siege and encroachment operations, attacks by fire aimed at inflicting attrition on enemy*

¹⁹⁹ Ang Cheng Guan (2002). *The Vietnam War from the other side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective*. RoutledgeCurzon London United Kingdom. Page 130.

forces, etc."²⁰⁰ For the first time during the war the PAVN utilised tanks in an attack on a fortified position in conjunction with artillery and infantry assaults. Lang Vei was a turning point in the way the PAVN conducted the war, it confirmed that the PAVN was developing into a professional army capable on conducting open warfare with MACV.

The Marines, however, did not succumb to the attributes identified by Colonel Argo in his report to Westmoreland.

- Although they forfeited the initiative to the PAVN, supporting firepower compensated for this.
- The superior MACV supply organisation ensured that supply problems did not develop.
- Professionalism of the Marines and excellent command and control did not allow the Marines to become demoralised.

There can also however be no doubt that Khe Sanh was a victory for the 26th Marine Regiment in withstanding 77 days of continual shelling and the threat of PAVN assault. The 26th Marines and their supporting arms inflicted significant men and material losses on the PAVN, whilst limiting the numbers of casualties incurred in defence of the combat base. In the long run, however, the reverses suffered by the PAVN were not permanent, as the formations involved in the siege of Khe Sanh were able to re-fit and re-arm after learning a valuable lesson in combined arms tactics.

²⁰⁰ Military History Institute of Vietnam (2002). *Victory in Vietnam – The Official History of the Peoples Army of Vietnam, 1954 – 1975*. University Press of Kansas. Page 230

Appendix one: Marine order of battle: 20th January to 1st April 1968.

26th Marines

- 1st Battalion
- 2nd Battalion
- 3rd Battalion

Attached and Supporting Units

- 1st Battalion, 9th Marines
- 1st Battalion, 13th Marines
- 1st Provisional Howitzer Battery
- Detachment, 1st Searchlight Battery, 12th Marines
- Detachment, 3rd Engineer Battalion
- Company B, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion
- Company A, 3rd Antitank Battalion
- Company A, 3rd Shore Party Battalion
- Detachment, H&S Company, 3rd Shore Party Battalion
- 2nd Clearing Platoon, Company C, 3rd Medical Battalion
- Otter Platoon, H&S Company, 3rd Motor Transport Battalion
- Detachment, Company B, 9th Motor transport Battalion
- Detachment, Company A, 9th Motor transport Battalion
- Detachment, SU#1, 1st Radio Battalion
- Detachment, 3rd Dental Company
- Detachment, Headquarters Company, Headquarters Battalion, 3rd Marine Division.

- Combined Action Company O (CAC Oscar), 3rd Combined Action Group, III MAF
- Detachment, Comm Company, Headquarters Battalion, 3rd Marine Division
- Detachment, 5th Comm Battalion
- Detachment, 7th Comm Battalion
- Detachment, Force Logistics Command.
- Sub-Team # 1, 17th Interrogator-Translator Team
- Company B, 3rd Tank Battalion, 3rd Marine Division
- Detachment 01, Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron, Marine Aircraft Group –16
- Detachment 01, Marine Observation Squadron, Marine Aircraft Group –16
- Detachment 2, Air Support Squadron, Marine Air Control Group –18
- Detachment, Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron - 36, Marine Aircraft Group –36
- Detachment, Marine Air Traffic Control Unit - 62, Marine Aircraft Group –16

United States Navy

- Detachment B, Construction Battalion, Mobile Unit –301
- Detachment, Mobile Construction Battalion – 10
- Detachment, Mobile Construction Battalion – 53
- Detachment, Mobile Construction Battalion – 5

United States Army

- Detachment, A-101, 5th Special Forces Group

- Detachment, 44th Artillery
- Detachment, 65th Artillery
- Detachment, 238th Counter-Mortar Radar Unit, 108 Field Artillery Group
- Detachment, 1st Platoon (Smoke), 25th Chemical Company

United States Air Force

- Detachment, (Operating Location AJ), 15th Aerial Port Squadron, 366th Combat Support Group
- Detachment, 366th Transport Squadron, 366th Combat Support Group
- Detachment, 903rd Aero Medical Evacuation Squadron
- Detachment A, 834th Air Division

Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN)

- 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion

Appendix one: Research questionnaires completed by members of the 26th

Marine Regiment:

Name: Anthony Bartleson

Unit: C/1/13

Period of service at Khe Sanh: December
67

Where was your unit located? (e.g. Hill 881s, 558): Hill
881s

What was your overall opinion of the conduct of the Khe Sanh campaign?

From a letter from the joint Chiefs to President Johnson in September 67 the NVA did just what the United States wanted them to do. By attacking us in Khe Sanh they allowed the United States to bear its full power on them.

There was the view that Khe Sanh was just a diversion for the larger Tet offensive, do you agree/disagree? I disagree, The NVA thought that if they attacked the US and South Vietnam, the people would ban with them and overthrow the Souths Government. They were right that the United States people would not have the stomach for the large casualties.

There was a fear in the US that Khe Sanh was another Dien Bien Phu, was this view shared at KSCB? No, we had 2 B52s over us every 45 min. They took a real beating

If the Vietnamese forces had taken a portion of the high ground over-looking KSCB e.g. 881s, do you think the air-bridge could be maintained? If they had taken 881s would not have helped them anymore than them holding 881n. The air power was more than they could deal with.

Did you believe the KSCB was designed to block infiltration routes of the Vietnamese forces, or were there insufficient troops to maintain the static defences as well as project influence? The area was to large to control with the limited troops. KSCB was bait at the end. In the beginning it was a forward post to run sweep operations from, after it was found that the NVA would try to over run the position to make a statement of power like they did with the French.

How did the weather affect combat operations? Supply was near impossible however B52s operated at such high altitudes that it did not effect

them. _____

There is controversy surrounding the decision not to attempt to relieve Lang Vei due to the threat of ambush. Did you agree with this decision at the time, and do you still agree in hindsight? We were out numbered so to leave the fortifications would have been suicide.

Apart from the initial threats to KSCB in early January/February, there were no further serious attempts to dislodge the Marines from KSCB. Do you think this was due to the view of Vietnamese forces that they had fixed the Marines in place, or they had been soundly beaten and lacked sufficient resources to threaten the base? The latter

The base was closed with the view that there were sufficient resources after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces to allow MACV to dominate the region via air-mobility. Did you agree that this was a suitable alternative to KSCB?

Again the area was too large to be controlled by the amount of troops, air-mobility was just a band aid, unless you could leave troops in place and take complete control it was a waste of time. Given the recent events in Iraq and the events in Vietnam troops on the ground in a Civil War is an act of stupidity. It is a no win situation. Unless you are willing to attack the Head and kill it you have no chance of winning. The only thing that would have won the Vietnam War was a full attack on North Vietnam.

What was the level of Vietnamese anti-air activity? There is the view that it was limited to 0.5 Cal/small arms, and shelling of the landing zones - is this correct? The only time I saw air craft get shot down was when they were trying to land or were low enough that they could be shot down by their 51 cal. Machine guns.

If there was not the level of tactical air support, could KSCB have realistically been held in the face of Vietnamese ground assaults?

No

Any other thoughts you wish to add? If the United States would have continued the Attack with ground troops to the north across the DMZ and a amphibious assault on Hanoi, the war would have ended by 1970 with a much different outcome. Cut off the head and the body will die.

Thank you for taking the time participating in this questionnaire.

It would be appreciated if you can e-mail the completed questionnaire to:

paul.w.vowell@exxonmobil.com



William Dabney
<indiasix@directway.co
m>

To paul.w.vowell@exxonmobil.com

cc

bcc

19/01/06 16:29

Subject Re: Khe Sanh

History:

☞ This message has been replied to.

William H. "Bill" Dabney

3d BN, 26th Mar

Nov '67-Apr '68

At base and on patrol, to 26Dec67, thereafter on B81S

(returned to Khe Sanh Feb/Apr71 for Lam Son 719)

Overall opinion

Defense was adequate for threat, but prep of defenses was poor. Intelligence was good about overall threat, but too many fingers in pie - intel agencies tended to want to dictate tactics to commander on ground. Outlying outposts were vulnerable to DBP-type isolation/reduction tactics, although availability of massive fire support assets mitigated threat - if we suspected or weren't sure, we bombed it.

On a strategic level, defense was pointless. PAVN came and went at it wished, and had unlimited maneuver room west of Khe Sanh. We couldn't bomb it all. More specifically, Khe Sanh existed to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Interdicting a trail that ran for 500 miles through triple-canopy jungle was an exercise in futility.

Read the article "The Next Stop Is Saigon" on the website.

Khe Sanh as a diversion

Disagree. They committed too many assets for a diversion.

Khe Sanh another DBP

The view was not shared at Khe Sanh. If the PAVN thought they could pull it off, they had learned little about the USMC. A reporter at Khe Sanh asked a PFC the same question, pointing out that the French had surrendered at DBP. The Marine replied, "Yeah, but they were French. We're Marines!" Perhaps they could have taken it, but I cannot imagine their doing so without losing a division or two in the process. And again, the fire support coordination of the Marines was superb, and nothing the PAVN had could stop that rain of hot steel. To assault, they had to expose themselves, at which point they were dead meat. Overrunning a Marine infantry regiment is akin to assaulting an active volcano. You may get there, but you'll be consumed in the fires.

Air Bridge

Yes, it could have been maintained. Keep in mind that we never closed the Cadillac production line. We had virtually unlimited assets to commit had we needed them, for both resupply and reinforcement. The logistics capability of American forces is, for all practical purposes, unlimited. I might add that, had the PAVN taken B81S/B61, resupply of the base and casualty evacuation would have been more difficult, but their ability to prevent it would have been short-lived. We were quite capable, on a day's notice, of lowering both hills by 20 meters. Had they held them, we'd have done so. Their tenure would have been short.

Infiltration/Influence

I believe Gen Westmoreland thought Khe Sanh could at least inhibit their use of the HCM Trail. Perhaps, by its patrols and their target ID/designations, they did to some extent. But the country west of Khe

Sanh is similar for hundreds of miles to the west. The HCM could easily be moved. Also, it was like an ant trail - temporary interruptions had no lasting effect. There were insufficient troops to both defend and project for any distance. I add that was equally true when a four-division corps went west from Khe Sanh in '71. I was there.

WX

The weather was essentially neutral. Yes, during prolonged overcast, they could move at will in the valleys, but then, they could do that at night anytime. Yes, our CAS was inhibited by marginal WX, but not entirely, since neither the B-52s nor the A-6Bs were WX-limited, and with an Air Support Radar at Khe Sanh to guide them, they were fantastically accurate. The WX was an annoyance, but little more.

Lang Vei

Yes, yes.

The first issue is the existence of Lang Vei. The basic problem was that Gen Westmoreland commanded only MACV. He did not command RVN forces. That arrangement left the door open for all manner of entities to get their fingers in the pie, and they did. Over the years, there developed a plethora of agencies with intelligence functions, including Special Forces, CIDG, Phoenix, CIA, DIA, DCPG, among others. They had discrete chains of command via advisory commands, the American Ambassador, MACV, State, Defense, CIA, et al., all of them independent of, and usually uncoordinated with, the intelligence collection means of the commander on the ground where they operated.

What this meant at Khe Sanh was that CO 26thMar neither controlled nor could effectively coordinate with the forces at Lang Vei. They were "holier than thou" intel units. They came and went of their own choosing without so much as a "by your leave" to the tactical commander at Khe Sanh, they had no coordinated overall defensive plan for the four disparate units represented at Lang Vei (in two cases, they had discrete compounds at the position), and they had neither common communications means nor plans to coordinate the position's defense with Khe Sanh. The result - a "collection" of 50 Americans in 4 units without a common commander on indefensible terrain directly athwart the main PAVN avenue of approach to the base.

Arc light strikes were prohibited within 3 km of friendly troops.

Lang Vei was a bit over 6 km from the base defenses, which meant that B-52s could not bomb between Khe Sanh and the Laotian border along Rt. 9. From CO 26thMarines point of view, Lang Vei was simply in the way. I believe that he tried to get them moved back inside the base, without success. I also suspect he was glad to get rid of them. They may have served a limited purpose before the siege, but once the PAVN arrived in force, they could do nothing but button up and pray.

The fault lay not with the Lang Vei troops. It was systemic. There were innumerable "experts" in the US system with their own "war-winning" methods, and many of them managed to create their own "private" armies. Being essentially intelligence units, they were generally characterized by an overweening "hubris" about their own capabilities and little regard for the commander on the ground whom they supposedly served. Special Forces is but one example - even JFK thought they were neat. But the principle of Unity of Command is paramount in battle, and each and every one of those "special" units violated it routinely. (I attach a tale that illustrates the difficulty.)

So what do we have at Lang Vei? A weak, uncoordinated force ill-equipped for defensive warfare on an isolated position facing the onslaught of a PAVN corps reinforced with heavy artillery and armor! A force not under the operational control of the overall commander. A force of disparate elements with labyrinthine chains of command and no common commander. Should it have been there? No!

Could we have "rescued" it? Perhaps, but with the forces available, doubtful. It would have taken at least a battalion out of

the Khe Sanh lines. And to rescue 50 men? I'd guess we'd have taken 5 times that number of casualties in the attempt, even assuming it was successful. Col Lounds was absolutely correct in refusing to mount a rescue mission. Lang Vei was doomed the day the siege began, and most of us Marines, officer and enlisted, had accepted that. I stood on 981S and watched it fall. I could see the tank parked atop the bunker.

I also had 105 howitzers and plenty of ammunition with which to support them had they asked, but I had no call signs or frequencies and thus no way to coordinate fires.

The Army calls it the "Night of the Silver Stars", and the decorations flowed freely. But the men who really deserved them were the Marine helicopter pilots who flew in the next morning and rescued the remnants.

Lang Vei was a problem not of CO 26th Marines' making and not in his power to fix. In a (Marine) word, Lang Vei was a clusterfuck. My company gunnery sergeant once observed that watching the "special" units work was akin to watching a monkey fuck a football.

Dislodging the Marines

Their failure to take the hills was important to the outcome. But their taking of Lang Vei was probably critical. Massive fire support held Khe Sanh, and once Lang Vei was removed as an inhibitor of that fire support, they were doomed. Yes, they could attack by fire, and they could probe. But to assault they had to mass, and once they did so, we could destroy them. Those miserable wretches shivering in muddy trenches, hungry, without mail or medical support, never seemed to grasp that the pilots of those B-52s that terrorized them hourly flew home after each mission to sleep with their wives under clean sheets on Guam! Camouflage was useless, as was maneuver. We simply bombed everything - repeatedly. They could avoid the bombs only by moving in tight against the Marines, and that brought its own problems. A B-52 strike is an awesome thing to watch - up to 16 aircraft at 30,000ft. dropping 120x500lb bombs each. There were 2200 of those strikes within 20 km of Khe Sanh during the siege! Troops said "You can make a Christian out of anyone with a B-52!" You can. We once got a strike called on a 2 km long tree-line from which the PAVN had been firing rockets. They dropped at night. The next morning, both the tree line and the top ten meters of the ridge it was on were simply gone.

In other words, sir, making Fallujah disappear is not the problem.

Can do easy if you can get the civilians out of the way or, as in WW II, ignore them. At Khe Sanh, there were no civilians.

A PAVN sergeant stumbled into our lines one day. Big guy, not wounded. We stripped him and began interrogating him. He was cooperative until a Phantom jet flew by close overhead, at which point, standing in our trench, he defecated down his legs. He could not thereafter stop shaking for several hours. He was psychologically destroyed. He told us that all his troops were in the same shape, if not worse.

Alternative to KSCB

I believe that the "air mobility" ploy was nothing more than an ex post facto justification. Khe Sanh profoundly hurt LBJ politically, and he wanted it to go away.

If you want to understand the limitations of "air mobility" operations against the PAVN in the Khe Sanh area, read up on LS 719 (NOT the official history!) It was a catastrophe.

Anti-aircraft activity.

In my experience, you are correct. We spotted a couple of twin 50s, but we never saw any radar directed 37 mm fire (which they had up north) nor did we see any SAMs, which they used in the '72 Easter Offensive. Some observations here: first, their AA guns were easy to spot because the Russian/Chinese powder produced a bright muzzle flash; second, they rarely had AA guns in the open, but rather in caves. They thus usually interdicted only landing zones at fixed positions, or the base runway. They rarely fired at passing aircraft because they could

not traverse from a cave and they were easy to spot and destroy if they were in the open. On 881S, our most common counterfire was .50 cal guns (we got them out of downed helos), our most effective was 106 mm recoilless rifles. Indirect fire like arty or mortars was useless against a cave.

TacAir

Without TacAir (in which I include the B-52s), we'd have been hard-pressed to hold. But that's an idle question. Marines don't go anywhere without TacAir.

Read "The Next Stop Is Saigon".

The chief tactical limitation on the maneuver of US forces was their determination to evacuate all the wounded and recover the bodies of the dead. It meant we had to stop, sometimes for several hours, after each skirmish, which made exploitation of success impossible. The PAVN was not similarly inhibited, and so maneuvered much more freely under fire.

But their lack of effective communications for controlling supporting arms largely negated that advantage. We could, and did, exploit by fire. They could not.

Otherwise, standing by for questions.

Best and S/P. Bill



"John M. Kaheny"
<jmkaheny@cox.net>

To: "Paul Vowell" <paul.w.vowell@exxonmobil.com>
cc:
Subject: Khe Sanh Questionnaire

16/01/06 07:30

Name: John M. Kaheny, Col. USMCR Ret.

Unit: May to July 1967 Alpha Company 1st Bn 26th Marines, July 67 to April 68 H&S Company (Operations section) 1st Bn 26th Marines

Period of Service at Khe Sanh: May 11, 1967 to April 17, 1967

What was your overall opinion of the conduct of the Khe Sanh Campaign?

The battle for Khe Sanh actually began with the Hill Fights in April of 1967. It should be looked at in that context. The NVA clearly wanted to remove Khe Sanh as a support base for our surveillance and interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. They tried and failed twice. The second attempt resulted in the single most intense Regimental size operation ever conducted in war. Two and a half NVA Divisions were dedicated to destroying one Marine Division and failed due to the fighting skills of the US Marines, soldiers and sailors at the base and the deadly support of the U.S. Air Force. Success in the battle was delayed because of the sanctuary in Laos provided to the NVA. The relief operation conducted by both Marine and Army units had its difficulties but under the circumstance it was a welcomed success. Operation Pegasus was also limited by the Laotian sanctuary. The entire campaign was a complete defeat for the NVA.

There was the view that Khe Sanh was just a diversion for the larger Tet offensive, do you agree/disagree?

This proposition was a creation of the anti-war American press. As indicated above, the NVA were too smart and professional to dedicate two and a half of their best infantry divisions, regiments of heavy artillery and air defense assets plus a huge logistical chain in order tie down one regiment of Marines. It makes no sense to believe otherwise because that concept violates several principles of war. It is well known that the NVA tried several mass assaults on the base only to be destroyed by American fire support before their regiments could reach the line of departure.

There was a fear in the U.S. that Khe Sanh was another Dien Bien Phu, was this view shared at KSCB?

I am sure that some who served at KSCB, who had not studied the fall of Dien Bien Phu, might have held that view. In the combat operations center for 1st Bn 26th Marines, we had a copy of Bernard Fall's *Hell In A Small Place*. It was required reading. However, we were well aware of the strategic and tactical differences. First, we held the outlying hills, the French lost them or failed to defend them. Second, we had incredible air support that the NVA tried but could not stop. Third, we had sensor technology that gave us effective targeting information against infantry attack. Fourth, the combat assets (tanks, Ontos, dusters and artillery) supporting the base and the hills were exceptionally effective.

Did you believe the KSCB was designed to block infiltration routes of the Vietnamese forces, or were there insufficient troops to maintain the static defenses as well as project influence?

This is a complicated question and the answer requires an understanding of the roles of the various units at Khe Sanh. Initially the KSCB was set up to provide support for the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei and the top secret FOB 3 that SOG operated. The Marines role was to protect the base and run short range security patrols.

The Special Forces and SOG ran long range patrols and used air power to harass and interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail complex in Laos called the 'Santa Fe Trail' if I remember right. The Marine bulked up their forces during the Battle of the Hills and then during the siege but did not do extensive military operations until Pegasus after the siege. During the late summer and fall of 1967 only one battalion of infantry (1/26) operated out of KSCB. That was too small a force to do interdiction and protect the base. By operating out of Khe Sanh the Marines and Special Forces cause the NVA to avoid using Route 9 to the coast. There were other routes through the mountains but they were much more difficult to use.

How did the weather affect combat operations?

The weather obviously affected close air support and resupply. It also hampered short range visibility. It did not greatly impede long range patrols. U.S. airpower such as B-52's and A-1's aircraft were all weather capable and could drop bombs in zero visibility from high altitude. This capability was much under appreciated by the American media and to their detriment, the NVA.

There is controversy surrounding the decision not to attempt Lang Vei due to the threat of ambush. Did you agree with this decision at the time, and do you still agree in hindsight?

(I assume you mean by land from KSCB as their was a failed attempt to get them out by helicopter) I agreed then and I agree now. My former company, Alpha Company, led by the very capable and professional John Raymond, attempted to reach Lang Vei cross country well before the siege in order to test the feasibility of a relief operation. It could be done but it simply would take too long as the terrain on either side of Route 9 was extremely difficult to traverse, and this without enemy contact. Anyone who has walked through those ravines as I have would come to the same conclusion. The Special Forces commander was made aware of the problem but did not want to move the CIDG camp again. Any attempt to drive through Khe Sanh village on Route 9 to get to Lang Vei would have resulted in a large scale battle and put the entire defense of KSCB at risk. It would never have gotten there in time. It was heart breaking and I can still recall listening Lang Vei "Spunky Hanson" calling "Intrigue", 26th Marine Regiment on the radio that night.

Apart from the initial threats to KSCB in early January/February, there were no further serious attempts to dislodge the Marines from KSCB. Do you think this was due to the view of Vietnamese forces that they had fixed the Marines in place, or that they had been soundly beaten and lacked sufficient resources to threaten the base?

Clearly the NVA were beaten and beaten badly. The entire TET offensive failed and the VC infrastructure was destroyed. They could still fight from their sanctuaries but it would not be until the Easter Offensive of 1972 before they would even dare attack in large numbers. I was in the VN Army museum in Hanoi in 1999. There are plaques on the wall listing heroic individuals and units for each year of the conflict except 1967, 68,69. I asked a guide why and he simply said "We don't talk about those years." That about says it all

The base was closed with the view that there were sufficient resources after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces to allow MACV to dominate the region via air mobility. Did you agree that this was a suitable alternative to KSCB?

Yes, the U.S. Army had moved north and with their extensive helicopter assets the game had changed. In addition the Marines were receiving large numbers of CH 46 and CH 60 helicopters, replacing the obsolete CH 34. With those air assets maintaining KSCB would require an unnecessary logistical pull.

What was the level of Vietnamese anti-air activity? There is a view that it was limited to 50 cal/small arms and shelling of the landing zones-Is this correct?

Generally speaking yes. There were no reports of SAMs or heavy AA that I am aware of. Why such assets were not deployed is a mystery to me.

If there was not the level of tactical air support, could KSCB have realistically been held in the face of Vietnamese ground assaults?

If the Marines and soldiers had neither CAS nor logistical support it would not have been a pretty picture. Marines are tough, read about how we held Guadalcanal after the Navy deserted us on the beach in 1942. Clearly if we did not have overwhelming air support our tactics would have been different and the base probably never would have existed.

Any other thoughts you wish to add?

Yes, much of what has been written about the battle for Khe Sanh relies on the earlier press reports of the battle which were in my mind completely biased. It was all doom and gloom and we were all going to die. After we defeated the NVA soundly the press then tried the line that it didn't matter. My favorite quote from I believe a CBS war correspondent on TV went something like this: he is standing next to a destroyed C-127. "The North Vietnamese determine who lives and dies here". Peter Braestrup, author of the excellent *The Big Story* stated it quite well when he said in response: "If the NVA could decide who lived and died at Khe Sanh all the marines would be dead!". That about sums it up. I hope that this has been helpful. John M. Kaheny, San Diego, CA

Name: Paul Knight

Unit: KILO Company, Forward Air Controller, 3rd Battalion 26th Marines attached from H&S 3/26

Period of service at Khe Sanh: I was sent to Khe Sanh as my first duty station in August 1967 prior to the Battalion being deployed to Con Thien and then again when we were sent to Khe Sanh on December 13th 1967. KILO Company was sent to Hill 861 on 23 December 1967

Where was your unit located? (E.g. Hill 881s, 558): Hill 861

What was your overall opinion of the conduct of the Khe Sanh campaign? If we'd (the US Forces) had the same support level throughout Vietnam as we had in Khe Sanh, from the beginning of the conflict, the occupation of Vietnam would have been over by 1969. we were given a blank check as far as ordinance was concerned. Any area outside the wire was considered a Free Fire Zone. The only thing we were short on was food and water

There was the view that Khe Sanh was just a diversion for the larger Tet offensive, do you agree/disagree? I believe Giap played it both ways. He tied us up in Khe Sanh but still intended to launch the TET offensive in either case. Had they been able to overrun Khe Sanh that would have been a military victory but the TET offensive still proved to be a political victory as the allied forces were not expecting the entirety of South Vietnam to come under fire simultaneously

There was a fear in the US that Khe Sanh was another Dien Bien Phu, was this view shared at KSCB? Not at all. The only similarity was the geography

If the Vietnamese forces had taken a portion of the high ground over-looking KSCB e.g. 881s, do you think the air-bridge could be maintained? They may have been able to take the high ground but they could not have maintained it. We would have turned Hills 861 & 881 into hills 000 & 000

Did you believe the KSCB was designed to block infiltration routes of the Vietnamese forces, or were there insufficient troops to maintain the static defences as well as project influence? You can't block anything in that kind of terrain. Khe Sanh was simply a base of operations for a large force to operate out of and very strategically placed between Laos, the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the major population centres to the east.

How did the weather affect combat operations? The monsoons were probably the biggest X factor in the siege. The weather worked for both sides but you never knew what the ceilings or precipitation or the temperatures were going to be day to day or hour to hour. This forced both sides to have to be flexible in their planning. The two things we had going for us that didn't depend on weather factors were TPQ's (radar controlled air strikes) and the ARC Lites (B 52 sorties) and that was a HUGE advantage! It won the battle and saved many allied lives.

There is controversy surrounding the decision not to attempt to relieve Lang Vei due to the threat of ambush. Did you agree with this decision at the time, and do you still agree in hindsight? I didn't agree with it then and don't agree with it now. The Command knew that the NVA were choking the base from all sides. Lang Vei should have been evacuated in mid January when it became very obvious what was about to take place.

Apart from the initial threats to KSCB in early January/February, there were no further serious attempts to dislodge the Marines from KSCB. Do you think this was due to the view of Vietnamese forces that they had fixed the Marines in place, or they had been soundly beaten and lacked sufficient resources to threaten the base? We neutered the NVA from the beginning. The ARC Lites killed thousands of their troops and destroyed the majority of their supplies. I really don't think Giap anticipated our ability or desire to pour so much ordinance into that relatively small base in the mountains. Sitting on 861 we could observe most of the ARC Lites and the subsequent secondary explosions of their cached munitions. It was amazing.

The base was closed with the view that there were sufficient resources after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces to allow MACV to dominate the region via air-mobility. Did you agree that this was a suitable alternative to KSCB?

No. We fought hard for that combat base and it still held the strategic importance that it had prior to the Siege. Typical short sidedness of the "Brass".

What was the level of Vietnamese anti-air activity? There is the view that it was limited to 0.5 Cal/small arms and shelling of the landing zones - is this correct?

Yes it was fairly limited. They had some larger AA emplacements but I believe we only lost two jet aircraft to AA bursts. The rest of the air support was hit with either small arms or mortars / rockets.

If there was not the level of tactical air support, could KSCB have realistically been held in the face of Vietnamese ground assaults?

No. If we had not had the air power we would have been overrun just as the French in Dien Bien Phu.

Any other thoughts you wish to add? I was the forward air controller on 861 for the entire siege. With the exception of the assault on 861 on the 21st, there were no serious attempts to take either hill for the rest of the time we were there. They simply continued to try and pick us off one by one for 4 months. I believe they realized the futility of it much as a dog chasing a car...what would he do with it if he caught it?

Thank you for taking the time participating in this questionnaire.

It would be appreciated if you can e-mail the completed questionnaire to:

paul.w.vowell@exxonmobil.com

Name: Master Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence Edward McCartney, United States Marine Corps (Retired)

Unit: Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment—Rifleman, Private First Class (E-2) with six (6) months of military service.

Period of service at Khe Sanh: January 16 to April 18, 1968

Where was your unit located? (e.g. Hill 881s, 558): Hill 861-A

What was your overall opinion of the conduct of the Khe Sanh campaign? From a strategic standpoint, the U.S. Marine commanders—General Walt through Colonel Lownds—did an extraordinary job conducting the Khe Sanh campaign considering the problems they encountered from senior U.S. Army officers as well as politicians. The tactical commanders were exceptional men who all rose to the occasion.

There was the view that Khe Sanh was just a diversion for the larger Tet offensive, do you agree/disagree? I disagree, in retrospect I think Khe Sanh was an attempt by North Vietnam to replicate the psychological victory they earned at Dien Bien Phu. At the time I had a very uncharitable opinion, one I still hold, that senior U.S. commanders—specifically General Westmoreland—were using the Marines at Khe Sanh as “bait” to draw the enemy into a position where they could be engaged in a conventional war.

There was a fear in the U.S. that Khe Sanh was another Dien Bien Phu, was this view shared at KSCB? No, there was NO conversation among the men I served with about capture or surrender. In addition, since I was a very junior enlisted Marine, I can't say that I recall an conversation mentioning Dien Bien Phu; I'm not sure many of us were aware of it.

If the Vietnamese forces had taken a portion of the high ground over-looking KSCB e.g. 881s, do you think the air-bridge could be maintained? Difficult to say, it would have been possible but it would have been done with a great deal of difficulty and a considerable number of casualties.

Did you believe the KSCB was designed to block infiltration routes of the Vietnamese forces, or were there insufficient troops to maintain the static defences as well as project influence? While the base was likely intended to block infiltration routes, there were insufficient U.S. forces to block North Vietnamese infiltration and to maintain static positions necessary to protect the combat base.

How did the weather affect combat operations? The weather had a very significant impact on combat operations, even from an infantry standpoint, since it was frequently impossible to see 100 meters away, thus the enemy could easily have snuck up on us. In addition, the weather made resupply to the hilltop outposts extraordinarily difficult; since there was no water supply available on the hilltop outposts, the inclement weather made manning those positions extremely difficult.

There is controversy surrounding the decision not to attempt to relieve Lang Vei due to the threat of ambush. Did you agree with this decision at the time and do you still agree in hindsight? Yes, since I was on a hilltop outpost I was not aware of the situation at the time, but when I later learned of it I concurred and I still concur with that decision.

Apart from the initial threats to KSCB in early January/February, there were no further serious attempts to dislodge the Marines from KSCB. Do you think this was due to the view of Vietnamese forces that they had fixed the Marines in place, or they had been soundly beaten and lacked sufficient resources to threaten the base? I tend to believe that the North Vietnamese were soundly defeated and licking their wounds after the late January/early February battles—particularly after the attacks on Hill 861-A and Hill 64 in early February—thus they decided that trying to isolate and attrite U.S. forces with indirect fire weapons.

The base was closed with the view that there were sufficient resources after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces to allow MACV to dominate the region via air-mobility. Did you agree that this was a suitable alternative to KSCB?

It was a suitable alternative prior to the battle.

What was the level of Vietnamese anti-air activity? There is the view that it was limited to 0.5 Cal/small arms and shelling of the landing zones—is this correct?

From what I could tell, North Vietnamese anti-aircraft activity was limited to small arms and .50 calibre machine gun fire.

If there was not the level of tactical air support, could KSCB have realistically been held in the face of Vietnamese ground assaults?

Yes, the U.S. casualties would have been far worse, particularly since it would have been far more difficult if not impossible to take and hold the high ground; however, I believe the Khe Sanh Combat Base and the surrounding defensive positions would have held, even in the face of hand-to-hand combat.

Any other thoughts you wish to add? Remembering that the United States Armed Forces had been reorganized at the end of World War II—just twenty (20) years earlier—when the National Security Act of 1947 was enacted and considering the bruised egos and internecine rivalries that made that law necessary as well as followed that reorganization, and considering the U.S. Army debacle at the hands of the North Koreans in 1950, there can be little doubt that General Westmoreland was hoping for a North Vietnamese route of the U.S. Marines at Khe Sanh so that he could send U.S. Army cavalry units to “rescue the Marines” as well to pursue, engage and destroy large North Vietnamese Army units in a conventional warfare scenario.

Thank you for taking the time participating in this questionnaire.

It would be appreciated if you can e-mail the completed questionnaire to:

paul.w.vowell@exxonmobil.com

Name: Joseph A. Olszewski

Unit: Golf, 2/26

Period of service at Khe Sanh: January 16 to late February 1968

Where was your unit located? (e.g. Hill 881s, 558): Hill 558

What was your overall opinion of the conduct of the Khe Sanh campaign?

Initially, I was disappointed that the ground units were not allowed to undertake offensive operations. Even standard patrols ceased to exist by the end of January. We basically dug trench lines, built bunkers and waited for the enemy to attack. During February I understood the logic of using superior air power, but I had my doubts about how effective constant bombing of the surrounding terrain was. I was later shocked to learn that President Johnson and the Joint Chiefs of Staff even considered using nuclear weapons, if the situation became desperate.

There was the view that Khe Sanh was just a diversion for the larger Tet offensive, do you agree/disagree? Looking back now I disagree. The Communist forces were all over South Vietnam in large numbers and having us under siege had no impact on the strategic planning of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I later learned that General Westmoreland met with President Johnson during Tet and requested that we attack North Vietnam by sending the Third Marine Division across the DMZ, having Army Airborne troops land on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and using Vietnamese Marines to perform landings via the South China Sea. I've since learned that such an operation would have been successful and could have ended the war, as North Vietnam was poorly defended with Communist forces being stationed in South Vietnam in very large numbers. If the Siege was to be a diversion by the high ranking communist leaders, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff would have moved even more units to join us.

There was a fear in the US that Khe Sanh was another Dien Bien Phu, was this view shared at KSCB? I never heard my troops discussing such a comparison and we had complete confidence in our air and even naval support from U.S. Battleships that fired 16 inch guns forty miles to support us. Once you witness an air strike, you have tremendous confidence that any large enemy force will never over-run your position.

If the Vietnamese forces had taken a portion of the high ground over-looking KSCB e.g. 881s, do you think the air-bridge could be maintained? Hills 881 North and South were a long ways from the KSCB. I doubt that the "air bridge" would have been hurt if those hills were over-run as other hills – 861, 861 South, 558 and 1015 were even closer to the KSCB and could have supplied ample observation. Also, throughout January and February heavy fog conditions were present which limited observations of the hills and the KSCB. Thus, the "air bridge" from the 881s was of very little significance, in my opinion.

Did you believe the KSCB was designed to block infiltration routes of the Vietnamese forces, or were there insufficient troops to maintain the static defences as well as project influence? The KSCB was simply a base to supply recon teams to enter the Ho Chi Minh trail to track and determine where North Vietnamese units were headed. To effectively "block infiltration" would have required far more U.S. forces than were ever present at KSCB.

How did the weather affect combat operations? As I mentioned above, the fog was problematic in January and February. But, I do not recall any rain storms that would have hampered operations. Since patrols and large scale ground operations were never pursued past the end of January the weather was a non-factor.

There is controversy surrounding the decision not to attempt to relieve Lang Vei due to the threat of ambush. Did you agree with this decision at the time, and do you still agree in hindsight? I don't agree with the decision or even such an opinion, as supporting forces could have been flown in by helicopter to help defend Lang Vei. An ambush could have only taken place if a ground patrol from the KSCB or from one of the hills was sent to relieve Lang Vei. The

Lang Vei attack took place at night and to depart from one of the hills to even find Lang Vei would have been a tremendous effort. I was on Hill 558 that night and never knew about the attack until days later. That's how far Lang Vei was from Hill 558. It would have taken my platoon or rifle company hours to reach Lang Vei and I had never previously patrolled that location. I believe the "decision" had more to do with Army versus USMC and not the possibility of an ambush wiping out a reinforcing patrol.

Apart from the initial threats to KSCB in early January/February, there were no further serious attempts to dislodge the Marines from KSCB. Do you think this was due to the view of Vietnamese forces that they had fixed the Marines in place, or they had been soundly beaten and lacked sufficient resources to threaten the base? I think the North Vietnamese forces suffered so many casualties from U.S. air support that their numbers were simply insufficient for a large scale attack. Even if the ground forces were large enough, by late February their supplies would have also suffered from two months of usage and loss due to the constant bombings. I don't agree with the logic that we were "fixed in place", as the U.S. forces in Hue, Saigon and other major areas under attack during the Tet Offensive were sufficient to handle the situation. Thus, there was never a need to relocate the 26th Marines to other locations in South Vietnam to support other forces. I simply believe that the North Vietnamese had a grand plan to attack as many U.S. bases as possible and to do as much damage as possible to influence the U.S. news reporting. I further believe that they (the North Vietnamese planners) were 100% successful in reaching their objectives.

The base was closed with the view that there were sufficient resources after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces to allow MACV to dominate the region via air-mobility. Did you agree that this was a suitable alternative to KSCB?

I believe that after the Tet Offensive that President Johnson had made up his mind to begin withdrawing U.S. forces from South Vietnam. I believe General Westmoreland had previously approached Johnson to request another 200,000 U.S. troops to help force the war into North Vietnam (see my points above) and President Johnson simply said enough was enough. Since the KSCB was strung out so far, it made strategic sense to abandon it and begin the process of withdrawal.

What was the level of Vietnamese anti-air activity? There is the view that it was limited to 0.5 Cal/small arms, and shelling of the landing zones - is this correct? Since I was strictly on Hill 558, I never saw North Vietnamese anti-aircraft activity. On one occasion, I remember seeing puffs of smoke following F-4 fighter jets that were strafing Hill 861. I presume that was some sort of anti-aircraft fire, but I have no idea about the calibre or type of fire that was following the aircraft. No aircraft were hit. I do recall, however, seeing an F-4 falling out of the sky once near Lang Vei, but I believe the air craft simply "flamed out." I remember seeing the pilot parachuting down to the ground with one of his wing men flying circles around him.

If there was not the level of tactical air support, could KSCB have realistically been held in the face of Vietnamese ground assaults?

I seriously doubt it, given the numbers of North Vietnamese who were in the area. At the time, I was told 10,000 NVA were in the region, but now I'm reading articles by NVA officers claiming that the number was closer to 50,000. Those numbers were simply too large for 5,000 Marines and a few hundred South Vietnamese to defeat.

Any other thoughts you wish to add? I believe the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was totally wrong and only motivated by U.S. politicians who sought re-election. JFK, LBJ and even Richard Nixon wanted a victory to bandstand their second terms. They and their advisors should have known very well

that the South Vietnamese were simply incompetent.

Thank you for taking the time participating in this questionnaire.

It would be appreciated if you can e-mail the completed questionnaire to:

paul.w.vowell@exxonmobil.com

Name: Matthew R Walsh

Unit: Echo Co 2Bn 26 Marines

Period of service at Khe Sanh: We arrived in Khe Sanh Early Jan.68 and I served until WIA on 5 Mar68

Where was your unit located? (e.g. Hill 881s, 558): Hill 861A

What was your overall opinion of the conduct of the Khe Sanh campaign?

I guess overall we were used as needed. At the time it bothered many that we were being tied down to a defensive position. We were Marines, shock troops and used to being aggressive and on the offense.

There was the view that Khe Sanh was just a diversion for the larger Tet offensive, do you agree/disagree? I disagree. Based on the material and manpower that the Viets put into Khe Sanh, it seemed like an excessive waste for a diversion.

There was a fear in the US that Khe Sanh was another Dien Bien Phu, was this view shared at KSCB? I don't think this view was shared at all. Looking at the two situations they were very different. At Khe Sanh we held the high ground, had massive Artillery and Air support. Also potential relief ground troops were not that far away. Our morale was very high even on bad days, and most were looking towards a eventual fight to end the ongoing shelling.

If the Vietnamese forces had taken a portion of the high ground over-looking KSCB e.g. 881s, do you think the air-bridge could be maintained? I think that had the Viets taken any hill position they would not have been able to stop the air-bridge. The position in question would have been hammered and troops would have looked to retake it. Lose of a hill may have given the air effort a brief scare but I don't think the Viets would have been allowed to make a lot of use of the position.

Did you believe the KSCB was designed to block infiltration routes of the Vietnamese forces, or were there insufficient troops to maintain the static defences as well as project influence? By it's location the base was an effective

block of routes from Laos down the Rt 9 Corridor. Several years later this was a main route that the Vets were able to use because the base did not exist. I don't believe we ever had the troop strength to really project influence. This belief is based on the fact that during my tour our units were usually well below TO strength. At times we had trouble mounting two ambushes out of a single platoon with weapons attachments. If we had 20 -25 men in a platoon it was a lot. Also to project influence at KSCB we needed the troops to be able to conduct offensive ops in the area and into the staging areas along the Trail in Laos. At Khe Sanh I think we had the troops to dig in and hold on till more troops could be sent into the area. The rumor at the time was we were the bait for Giap and once he committed the 1st Cav and 101 Airborne would be deployed to make a counter stroke. This seemed to fall apart due to the Tet offensive.

How did the weather affect combat operations? While the fog and cloud cover made resupply and medivacs difficult it did not seem to hamper artillery and air support.

There is controversy surrounding the decision not to attempt to relieve Lang Vei due to the threat of ambush. Did you agree with this decision at the time, and do you still agree in hindsight? At the time we did not even know what was happening at Lang Vei. Two nights before we had been on the receiving end of an assault which breached our position and only ended after three hours of combat. We were still awaiting a followup. I think that the Col. had a very tough call to make about Lang Vei and he looked at the total picture. He probably would have liked to have sent a relief force out. Had he done so I think they would have been pinned down in the open and had a tough time of it. Then we would have been in the position of sending them help and getting in to a piecemeal battle which could have been a disaster. I think considering the options the right call was made.

Apart from the initial threats to KSCB in early January/February, there were no further serious attempts to dislodge the Marines from KSCB. Do you think this was due to the view of Vietnamese forces that they had fixed the Marines in place, or they had been soundly beaten and lacked sufficient resources to threaten the base?

I think that by March the Viets while still a threat had lost a lot of men and equipment. I think that they needed to score quick at Khe Sanh and the protracted pounding they took hurt them badly and kept them from overrunning the base and hills.

The base was closed with the view that there were sufficient resources after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces to allow MACV to dominate the region via air-mobility. Did you agree that this was a suitable alternative to KSCB?

I think that MACV and Westmoreland were so fixed on airmobility that it seemed as if we became an army of reacting to the Viet moves rather than stabilizing a region and expanding our zones of influence from those areas. The airmobile concept also allowed for MACV to get by on few troops as we eventually downsized our forces due to the political climate back home.

What was the level of Vietnamese anti-air activity? There is the view that it was limited to 0.5 Cal/small arms, and shelling of the landing zones - is this correct?

While I have read that they had some heavy anti air weapons, I only saw shelling and small arms used. I remember a sniper and a mortar team that worked the slopes of 861. They opened up on any Helicopter landing on our hill. I saw a sniper with a AK47 shot it out with several Phantoms flying cover for the coptors.

If there was not the level of tactical air support, could KSCB have realistically been held in the face of Vietnamese ground assaults?

I think that Air support was the deciding factor in the battle. Could we have held without it. I tend to think we could have, but it probably would have been touch and go. I think we would have held on but I don't think a lot of Marines would have walked out of Khe Sanh Valley and it would have been a real blood bath.

Any other thoughts you wish to add? _____

Thank you for taking the time participating in this questionnaire.

It would be appreciated if you can e-mail the completed questionnaire to:

paul.w.vowell@exxonmobil.com

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