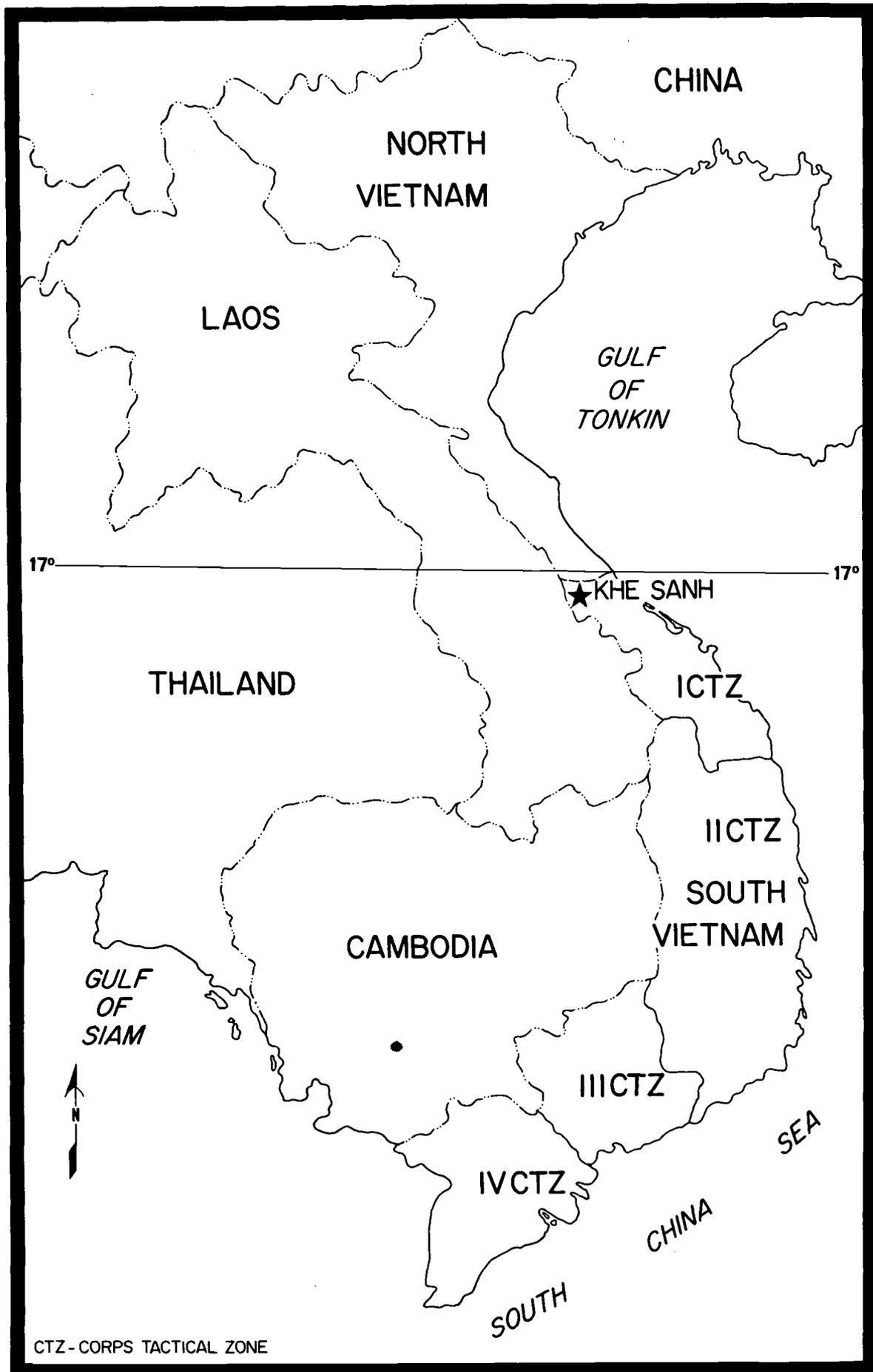


THE BATTLE FOR KHE SANH



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D.C.



CTZ - CORPS TACTICAL ZONE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

THE BATTLE FOR KHE SANH

By

Captain Moyers S. Shore II, USMC



PCN 19000411000

HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U. S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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Oblique aerial photograph of the Khe Sanh Combat Base
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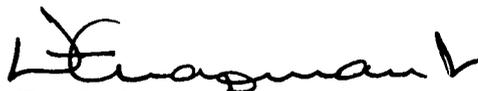
PROLOGUE

It is with pleasure that the Marine Corps presents this account of the Battle for Khe Sanh which stands as one of the most crucial and bitterly contested struggles in the Vietnam War. Throughout the existence of our Corps, thousands of men have been called upon to further the cause of freedom on scores of battlefields around the globe. At Khe Sanh, a new generation of Marines, aided by their gallant U. S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and South Vietnamese counterparts, admirably upheld this tradition and wrote a thrilling new chapter in the history of armed conflict.

The two senior U. S. commanders in Vietnam who supervised the defense--General William C. Westmoreland, USA, and Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., USMC--have contributed immeasurably to the production of this work and have also provided their astute summaries of the operation which appear in the following pages. I heartily endorse their statements as well as the approach and conclusions of this history.

In addition, I am grateful to the individuals and agencies of all the Services who have provided valuable assistance through written comments and personal interviews which are reflected in the text. In particular, I wish to extend our appreciation to Mr. David D. Duncan, a veteran combat photographer who has graciously consented to our use of the brilliant pictures he took during an eight-day visit to the combat base. These truly professional shots graphically depict the face of the siege and enhance the narrative.

The sum total of these contributions, I feel, is an objective, readable account of this important battle which honors the valiant American and South Vietnamese troops who held Khe Sanh. I can think of no more fitting tribute to these men--both living and dead--than to simply relate the events as they happened. This, then, is their story.



L. F. CHAPMAN, JR.
General, U.S. Marine Corps
Commandant of the Marine Corps

REVIEWED AND APPROVED 28 May 1969

FOREWORD

As the commander of the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, during the battle of Khe Sanh, I welcome publication by the U. S. Marine Corps of this historical study. The Marines' heroic defense of the Khe Sanh area against numerically superior North Vietnamese forces stands out among the many battles fought to defend the Republic of Vietnam against Communist aggression.

The enemy's primary objective of his 1968 TET Offensive was to seize power in South Vietnam by creating a general uprising and causing the defection of major elements of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam. In conjunction with this, the enemy apparently expected to seize by military action large portions of the northern two provinces lying just south of the Demilitarized Zone and there to set up a "liberation government." The virtually unpopulated Khe Sanh Plateau, which lay astride the enemy's principal avenue of approach from his large base areas in Laos, was obviously an initial objective of the North Vietnamese Army. Its seizure would have created a serious threat to our forces defending the northern area and would have cleared the way for the enemy's advance to Quang Tri City and the heavily populated coastal region. There is also little doubt that the enemy hoped at Khe Sanh to attain a climactic victory, such as he had done in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, in the expectation that this would produce a psychological shock and erode American morale.

My subordinate commanders and I were particularly sensitive to heavy fighting in the populated areas, since this would result in substantial destruction to the towns and villages and cause unnecessary suffering by the civilian population. We wanted to avoid this situation to the greatest extent possible by denying the enemy freedom of movement through the Khe Sanh area and into the coastal region. At that time we did not have sufficient troops, helicopters, or logistical support in the northern provinces to accomplish this entirely through mobile operations, and competing requirements for troops and resources did not permit immediate reinforcement from other areas of South Vietnam. The situation was further complicated by long periods of fog and low cloud ceilings during January, February, and March, which made helicopter operations difficult and hazardous.

To maintain our presence on the Khe Sanh Plateau, our only choice at the time was to secure the airstrip we had built on the plateau since this facility was essential as the forward terminus of our supply line. From here we could maintain our military presence in the area and, through the use of our firepower, make it costly for large enemy forces to advance while we awaited the end of the bad weather of the northeast monsoon and constituted the forces and logistics necessary to strike out on offensive operations.

Another factor favoring the decision to hold Khe Sanh was the enemy's determination to take it. Our defense of the area would tie down large numbers of North Vietnamese troops which otherwise could move against the vulnerable populated areas whose security was the heart of the Vietnamese pacification program. Our decision to defend also held the prospect of causing the enemy to concentrate his force and thereby provide us a singular opportunity to bring our firepower to bear on him with minimum restrictions. Had we withdrawn to fight the enemy's force of over two divisions in the heavily populated coastal area, the use of our firepower would have been severely restricted because of our precautionary measures to avoid civilian casualties and minimize damage to civilian property.

Based on my decision to hold the Khe Sanh Plateau, Lieutenant General Cushman's and Lieutenant General Lam's first task was to reinforce the area with sufficient strength to prevent the enemy from overrunning it, but at the same time to commit no more force than could be supplied by air. While the battle of Khe Sanh was being fought, emphasis was placed on the buildup in the northern provinces of the necessary troops, helicopters, and logistic support for mobile offensive operations to open Highway 9 and move onto the plateau when the weather cleared at the end of March.

This report provides a detailed and graphic account of events as they unfolded. It centers about the 26th Marine Regiment, the main defenders of the Khe Sanh area, who tenaciously and magnificently held off the enemy during the two-and-one-half-month siege. Yet the battle of Khe Sanh was an inter-Service and international operation. Consequently, appropriate coverage is given to the contributions of the U. S. Army, Navy, and Air Force, and to South Vietnamese regular and irregular military units, all of whom contributed to the defense of the area and to the destruction of the enemy. As Marine artillery from within the fortified positions pounded the enemy, Army

artillery located to the east provided heavy, long-range fire support. Fighter aircraft from the Marines, Air Force, and Navy provided continuous close air support, while B-52 bombers of the Strategic Air Command dealt decisive blows around-the-clock to enemy forces within striking distance of our positions and against enemy supply areas. Further, Marine and Air Force airlift together with Army parachute riggers logistically sustained the defenders during the siege despite heavy enemy antiaircraft fire.

In early April, when the weather cleared and the troop and logistic buildup was completed, a combined force of U. S. Army U. S. Marine, and Republic of Vietnam units, coordinated by the U. S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), maneuvered to link up with the 26th Marines and rout the remaining enemy elements. Meanwhile, U. S. Marine Corps engineers expeditiously opened Highway 9 to the plateau. The crushing defeat suffered by the North Vietnamese Army during the siege cost the Communists untold casualties, shattered two of their best divisions, and frustrated their dream of a second Dien Bien Phu.

The battle of Khe Sanh is but one facet of the long and complicated war in South Vietnam. It is one in which the aggressive nature of North Vietnam, the resolute determination of our fighting forces, and the local defeat of the armed enemy can all be clearly seen.



W. C. WESTMORELAND

General, United States Army

PREFACE

In the extreme northwestern corner of South Vietnam there stands a monument to the free world. Unlike those which commemorate the victories of past wars, this one was not built on marble or bronze but the sacrifices of men who fought and died at a remote outpost to halt the spread of Communism. This is the story of those men--the defenders of Khe Sanh--and the epic 77-day struggle which not only denied the North Vietnamese Army a much needed victory but reaffirmed to the world the intention of the United States to hold the line in Southeast Asia. In addition to having been a contest of men and machines, this was the test of a nation's will.

As a history, this work is not intended to prove any point, but rather to record objectively the series of events which came to be called the Battle of Khe Sanh. These events spanned a period from April 1967 to April 1968. The rationale for the buildup along the Demilitarized Zone and the commitment to hold the small garrison is presented as a logical extension of the three-pronged strategy then employed throughout I Corps and the rest of South Vietnam; this balanced campaign included pacification programs, counter guerrilla activity, and large unit offensive sweeps. Although isolated, the Khe Sanh Combat Base was a vital link in the northern defenses which screened the Allied counterinsurgency efforts in the densely populated coastal plains from invasion by regular divisions from North Vietnam. Pro obstructing this attempted invasion, American and South Vietnamese forces at Khe Sanh provided a shield for their contemporaries who were waging a war for the hearts and minds of the people in the cities, villages, and hamlets farther to the south. In the process, a reinforced regiment--the 26th Marines--supported by massive firepower provided by the Marine and Navy air arms, the U. S. Air Force and Marine and Army artillery, defended this base and mangled two crack North Vietnamese Army divisions, further illustrating to Hanoi the futility of its war of aggression.

Later, after the encirclement was broken and additional U.S. forces became available, the Allies were able to shift emphasis from the fixed defense to fast-moving offensive operations to control this vital area astride the enemy's invasion route. In these operations, our troops thrust out to strike the enemy whenever he appeared in this critical region. This

shift in tactics in the spring of 1968 was made possible by favorable weather, the buildup of troops, helicopters, and logistics that had taken place during the winter of 1967-68. An additional factor was the construction of a secure forward base across the mountains to the east of Khe Sanh, from which these operations could be supported. The Khe Sanh Combat Base then lost the importance it had earlier and was dismantled after its supplies were drawn down, since it was no longer needed. The strategy of containing the North Vietnamese Army along the border remained the same; but revised tactics were now possible.

But in 1967 and early 1968, neither troops nor helicopters, logistics nor the forward base were available to support the more aggressive tactics. The enemy lunged into the area in force, and he had to be stopped. The KSCB with its airstrip was the pivotal point in the area from which Allied firepower could be directed and which the enemy could not ignore. It was here that the 26th Marines made their stand.

This study also provides insight into the mechanics of the battle from the highest echelon of command to the smallest unit. In addition, appropriate coverage is provided to the supporting arms and the mammoth logistics effort which spelled the difference between victory and defeat. While this is basically a story about Marines, it notes the valiant contributions of U. S. Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel, as well as the South Vietnamese.

The account is based on records of the U. S. Marine Corps, selected records of other Services, and appropriate published works. The comments of and interviews with key participants have been incorporated into the text. Although this monograph has been cleared for publication by the Department of Defense, most of the documents cited retain a security classification.

R. E. Cushman, Jr.

R. E. CUSHMAN, JR.
Lieutenant General, U. S. Marine Corps
Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force

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The Battle for Khe Sanh

by

Captain Moyers S. Shore II, USMC

INTRODUCTION

"Attention to Colors." The order having been given, Captain William H. Dabney, a product of the Virginia Military Institute, snapped to attention, faced the jerry-rigged flag-pole, and saluted, as did every other man in Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines. The ceremony might well have been at any one of a hundred military installations around the world except for a few glaring irregularities. The parade ground was a battle-scarred hilltop to the west of Khe Sanh and the men in the formation stood half submerged in trenches or foxholes. Instead of crisply starched utilities, razor sharp creases, and gleaming brass, these Marines sported scraggly beards, ragged trousers, and rotted helmet liner straps. The only man in the company who could play a bugle, Second Lieutenant Owen S. Matthews, lifted the pock-marked instrument to his lips and spat out a choppy version of "To the Colors" while two enlisted men raced to the RC-292 radio antenna which served as the flag-pole and gingerly attached the Stars and Stripes. As the mast with its shredded banner came upright, the Marines could hear the ominous "thunk," "thunk," "thunk," to the southwest of their position which meant that North Vietnamese 120mm mortar rounds had left their tubes. They also knew that in 21 seconds those "thunks" would be replaced by much louder, closer sounds but no one budged until Old Glory waved high over the hill.

When Lieutenant Matthews sharply cut off the last note of his piece, Company I disappeared; men dropped into trenches, dived headlong into foxholes, or scrambled into bunkers. The area which moments before had been bristling with humanity was suddenly a ghost town. Seconds later explosions walked across the hilltop spewing black smoke, dirt, and debris into the air. Rocks, splinters, and spent shell fragments rained on the flattened Marines but, as usual, no one was hurt. As quickly as the attack came, it was over. While the smoke lazily drifted away, a much smaller banner rose from the Marines' positions. A pole adorned with a pair of red, silk panties--Maggie's Drawers

--was waved back and forth above one trenchline to inform the enemy that he had missed again. A few men stood up and jeered or cursed at the distant gunners; others simply saluted with an appropriate obscene gesture. The daily flag-raising ceremony on Hill 881 South was over.

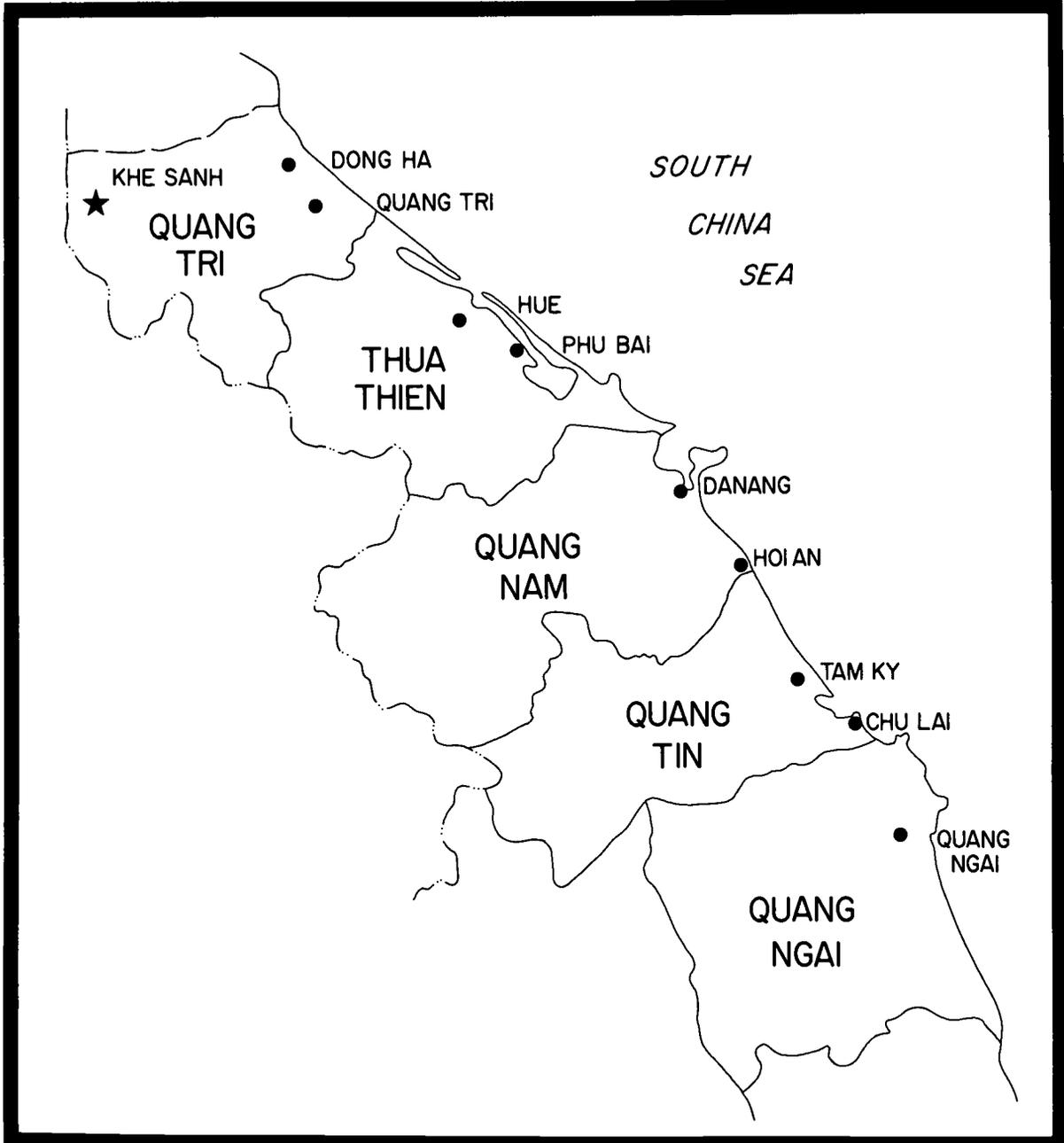
This episode was just one obscure incident which coupled with hundreds of others made up the battle for Khe Sanh. The ceremony carried with it no particular political overtones but was intended solely as an open show of defiance toward the Communists as well as a morale booster for the troops. The jaunty courage, quiet determination, and macabre humor of the men on Hill 881S exemplified the spirit of the U. S. and South Vietnamese defenders who not only defied the enemy but, in a classic 77-day struggle, destroyed him. At the same time, the fighting around the isolated combat base touched off a passionate controversy in the United States and the battle, therefore, warrants close scrutiny. For proper perspective, however, one first needs to have a basic understanding of the series of events which thrust Khe Sanh into the limelight. In effect, the destiny of the combatants was unknowingly determined almost three years earlier at a place called Red Beach near Da Nang.

PART I

BACKGROUND

When the lead elements of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, slogged ashore at Da Nang on 8 March 1965, Communist political and military aspirations in South Vietnam received a severe jolt. The buildup of organized American combat units had begun. In May 1965, the 9th MEB was succeeded by the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) which was comprised of the 3d Marine Division, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and, within a year, the 1st Marine Division. The Commanding General, III MAF was given responsibility for U. S. operations in I Corps Tactical Zone which incorporated the five northern provinces and, on 5 June 1965, Major General Lewis W. Walt assumed that role. (See Map 1). Major units of the U. S. Army moved into other portions of South Vietnam and the entire American effort came under the control of the Commander, U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (ComUSMACV), General William C. Westmoreland.(1)

The Marines, in conjunction with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), set about to wrest control of the populace in I Corps from the Viet Cong and help reassert the authority of the central government. The Allies launched an aggressive campaign designed to root out the enemy's source of strength--the local guerrilla. Allied battalion- and regimental-sized units screened this effort by seeking out and engaging Viet Cong main forces and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) elements. Smaller Marine and ARVN units went after the isolated guerrilla bands which preyed on the Vietnamese peasants. Thousands of fire team-, squad-, and platoon-sized actions took a heavy toll of the enemy and the Viet Cong were gradually pushed out of the populated areas. Whenever a village or hamlet was secured, civic action teams moved in to fill the vacuum and began the long, tedious process of erasing the effects of prolonged Communist domination. Progress was slow. Within a year, however, the area under Government security had grown to more than 1,600 square miles and encompassed nearly half a million people. As government influence extended deeper into the countryside, the security, health, economic well-being, and educational prospects of the peasants were constantly improved. There was an ever increasing number of enemy defectors and intelligence reports from, heretofore, unsympathetic villagers. By mid-1966,



MAPI

I CORPS TACTICAL ZONE

K.W.White

Allied military operations and pacification programs were slowly but seriously eroding the enemy's elaborate infrastructure and his hold over the people.(2)

It soon became apparent to the leaders in the North that, unless they took some bold action, ten years of preparation and their master plan for conquest of South Vietnam would go down the drain. From the Communists' standpoint, the crucial matter was not the volume of casualties they sustained, but the survival of the guerrilla infrastructure in South Vietnam. In spite of their disregard for human life, the North Vietnamese did not wish to counter the American military steamroller in the populated coastal plain of I Corps. There, the relatively open terrain favored the overwhelming power of the Marines' supporting arms. The enemy troops would have extended supply lines, their movement could be more easily detected, and they would be further away from sanctuaries in Laos and North Vietnam. In addition, when the propaganda-conscious NVA suffered a defeat, it would be witnessed by the local populace and thus shatter the myth of Communist invincibility.

If the Marines could not be smashed, and the Communists had tried several times, they had to be diverted or thinned out. The answer to the enemy's dilemma lay along the 17th Parallel. Gradually, they massed large troop concentrations within the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), in Laos, and in the southern panhandle of North Vietnam; in short, they were opening a new front. Nguyen Van Mai, a high Communist official in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, predicted: "We will entice the Americans closer to the North Vietnamese border and...bleed them without mercy." That remained to be seen.(3)

In response to the enemy buildup along the DMZ throughout the summer and fall of 1966, General Walt shifted Marine units further north. The 3d Marine Division Headquarters moved from Da Nang to Phu Bai, and a Division Forward Command Post (CP) continued to Dong Ha so that it could respond rapidly to developments along the DMZ. In turn the 1st Marine Division Headquarters moved from Chu Lai to Da Nang and took control of operations in central and southern I Corps. For specific, short-term operations, the division commanders frequently delegated authority to a task force headquarters. The task force was a semipermanent organization composed of temporarily assigned units under one commander, usually a general officer. Because of the fluid, fast-moving type of warfare peculiar to Vietnam, the individual battalion became a key element and went where it was needed the

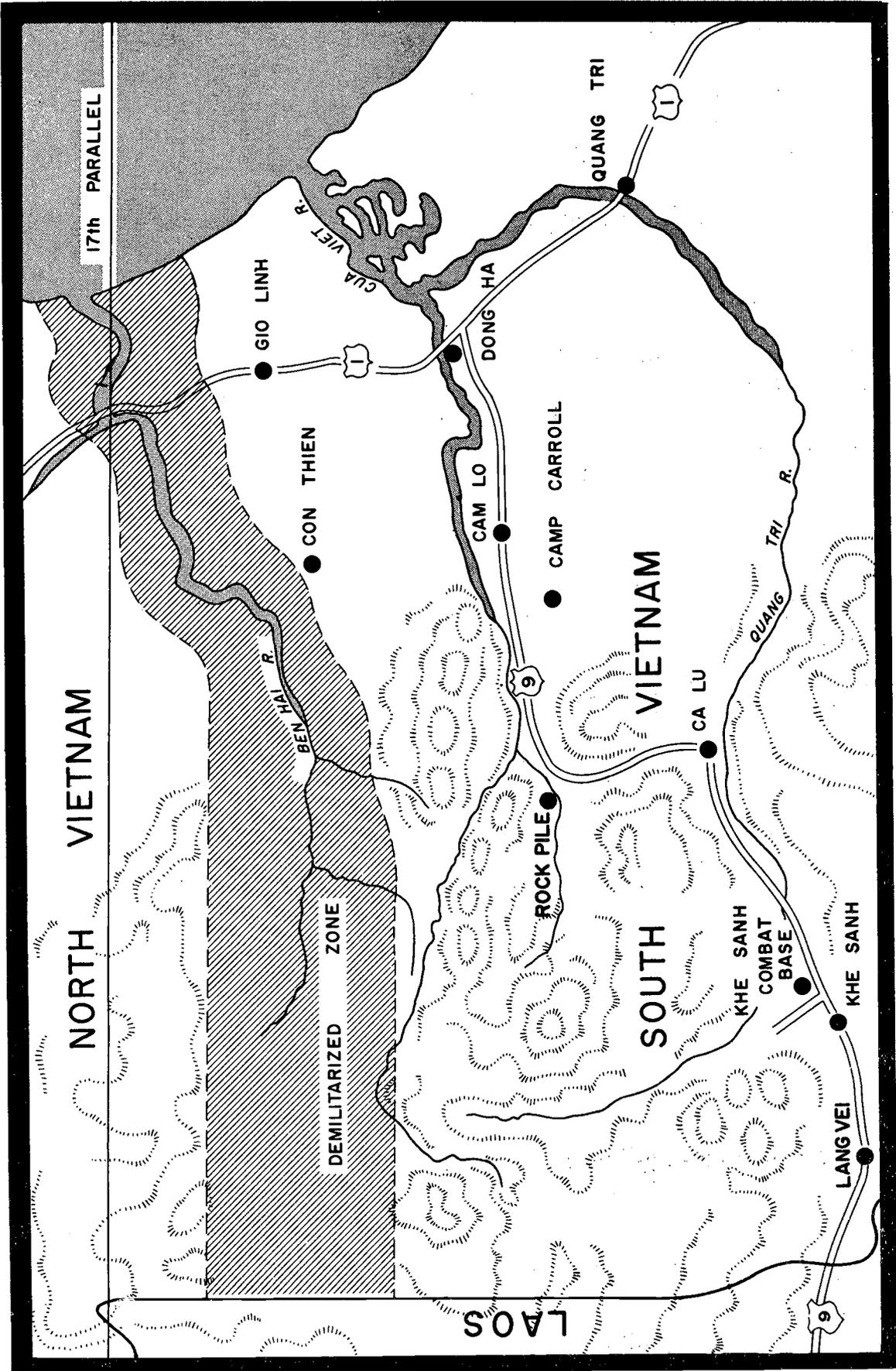
most. It might operate under a task force headquarters or a regiment other than its own parent unit. For example, it would not be uncommon for the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines to be attached to the 3d Marines while the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines was a part of another command. Commitments were met with units that were the most readily available at the time.(4)

With the buildup of American troops in Quang Tri province, there logically followed the buildup of installations. Dong Ha was the largest since it served as the brain and nervous system of the entire area. Eight miles to the southwest was Camp J. J. Carroll, a large artillery base. The Marine units there were reinforced by several batteries of U. S. Army 175mm guns which had the capability of firing into North Vietnam. Located at the base of a jagged mountain ten miles west of Camp Carroll was another artillery base--the Rockpile. This facility also had 175mm guns and extended the range of American artillery support almost to the Laotian border. In addition, the Marines built a series of strongpoints paralleling and just south of the DMZ. Gio Linh and Con Thien were the two largest sites. (See Map 2).

During the remainder of 1966 and in the first quarter of 1967, the intensity of fighting in the eastern DMZ area increased. Each time the enemy troops made a foray across the DMZ, the Marines met and defeated them. By 31 March 1967, the NVA had lost 3,492 confirmed killed in action (KIA) in the northern operations while the Marines had suffered 541 killed. For the Communists, it appeared that direct assaults across the DMZ were proving too costly--even by their standards.(5)

The Khe Sanh Plateau, in western Quang Tri Province, provided the NVA with an excellent alternative. The late Doctor Bernard B. Fall compared the whole of Vietnam to "two rice baskets on opposite ends of a carrying pole." Such being the case, Khe Sanh is located at the pole's fulcrum in the heart of the rugged Annamite Range. Studded with piedmont-type hills, this area provides a natural infiltration route. Most of the mountain trails are hidden by tree canopies up to 60 feet in height, dense elephant grass, and bamboo thickets. Concealment from reconnaissance aircraft is good, and the heavy jungle undergrowth limits ground observation to five meters in most places. Dong Tri Mountain (1,015 meters high), the highest peak in the region, along with Hill 861 and Hills 881 North and South dominate the two main avenues of approach.(*). One of these,

(*) The number indicates the height of the hill in meters.



E. L. WILSON

NORTHERN QUANG TRI PROVINCE

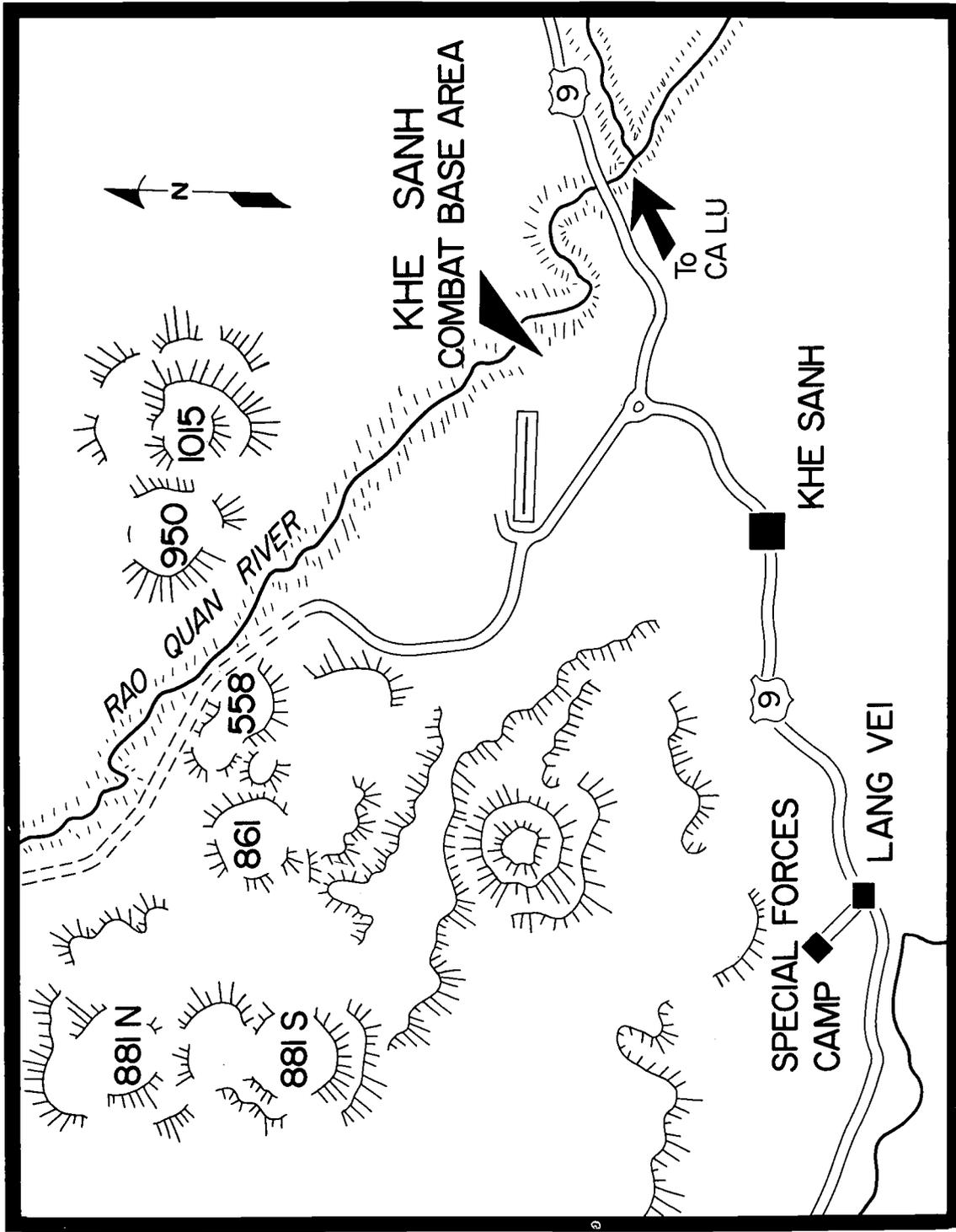
MAP 2

the western access, runs along Route 9 from the Laotian border, through the village of Lang Vei to Khe Sanh. The other is a small valley to the northwest, formed by the Rao Quan River, which runs between Dong Tri Mountain and Hill 861. (See Map 3). Another key terrain feature is Hill 558 which is located squarely in the center of the northwestern approach. The only stumbling block to the NVA in early 1967 was a handful of Marines, U. S. Army Special Forces advisors, and South Vietnamese irregulars. (6) (See Map 3).

The "Green Berets" were the first American troops in the area when, in August 1962, they established a Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) at the same site which later became the Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB). The first Marine unit of any size to visit the area was the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (1/1) which, in April 1966, was participating in Operation VIRGINIA. In early October 1966, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, which was taking part in Operation PRAIRIE, moved into the base and the CIDG camp was relocated near Lang Vei, 9,000 meters to the southwest where it continued surveillance and counterinfiltration operations. The battalion remained at Khe Sanh with no significant contacts until February 1967 when it was replaced by a single company, E/2/9.(*). In mid-March 1967, Company E became engaged in a heavy action near Hill 861 and Company B, 1/9 moved in to reinforce. After a successful conclusion of the operation, E/2/9 returned to Phu Bai, and B/1/9 remained as the resident defense company.

The KSCB sat atop a plateau in the shadow of Dong Tri Mountain and overlooked a tributary of the Quang Tri River. The base had a small dirt airstrip, which had been surfaced by a U. S. Navy Mobile Construction Battalion (Seabees) in the summer of 1966; the field could accommodate helicopters and fixed-wing transport aircraft. Organic artillery support was provided by Battery F, 2/12 (105mm), reinforced by two 155mm howitzers and two 4.2-inch mortars. The Khe Sanh area of operations was also within range of the 175mm guns of the U. S. Army's 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery at Camp Carroll and the Rockpile. In addition to B/1/9 and the CIDG, there was a Marine Combined Action Company (CAC) and a Regional Forces company located in the village of Khe Sanh, approximately 3,500 meters

(*) The designation E/2/9 stands for Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. This type of designation will be used periodically for other Marine units throughout the text.



KW/White

MAP 3

KHE SANH VALLEY

south of the base. (*)

All these units sat astride the northwest-southeast axis of Route 9 and had the mission of denying the NVA a year-round route into eastern Quang Tri Province. The garrison at Khe Sanh and the adjacent outposts commanded the approaches from the west which led to Dong Ha and Quang Tri City. Had this strategic plateau not been in the hands of the Americans, the North Vietnamese would have had an unobstructed invasion route into the two northern provinces and could have outflanked the Allied forces holding the line south of the DMZ. At that time, the Americans did not possess the helicopter resources, troop strength, or logistical bases in this northern area to adopt a completely mobile type of defense. Therefore, the troops at the KSCB maintained a relatively static defense with emphasis on patrolling, artillery and air interdiction, and occasional reconnaissance in force operations to stifle infiltration through the Khe Sanh Plateau. In the event a major enemy threat developed, General Walt could rapidly reinforce the combat base by air. (7)

On 20 April 1967, the combat assets at KSCB were passed to the operational control of the 3d Marines which had just commenced Operation PRAIRIE IV. The Khe Sanh area of operations was not included as a part of PRAIRIE IV but was the responsibility of the 3d Marines since that regiment was in the best position to oversee the base and reinforce if the need arose. The need arose very soon. (8)

On 24 April 1967, a patrol from Company B, 1/9 became heavily engaged with an enemy force of unknown size north of Hill 861 and in the process prematurely triggered an elaborate

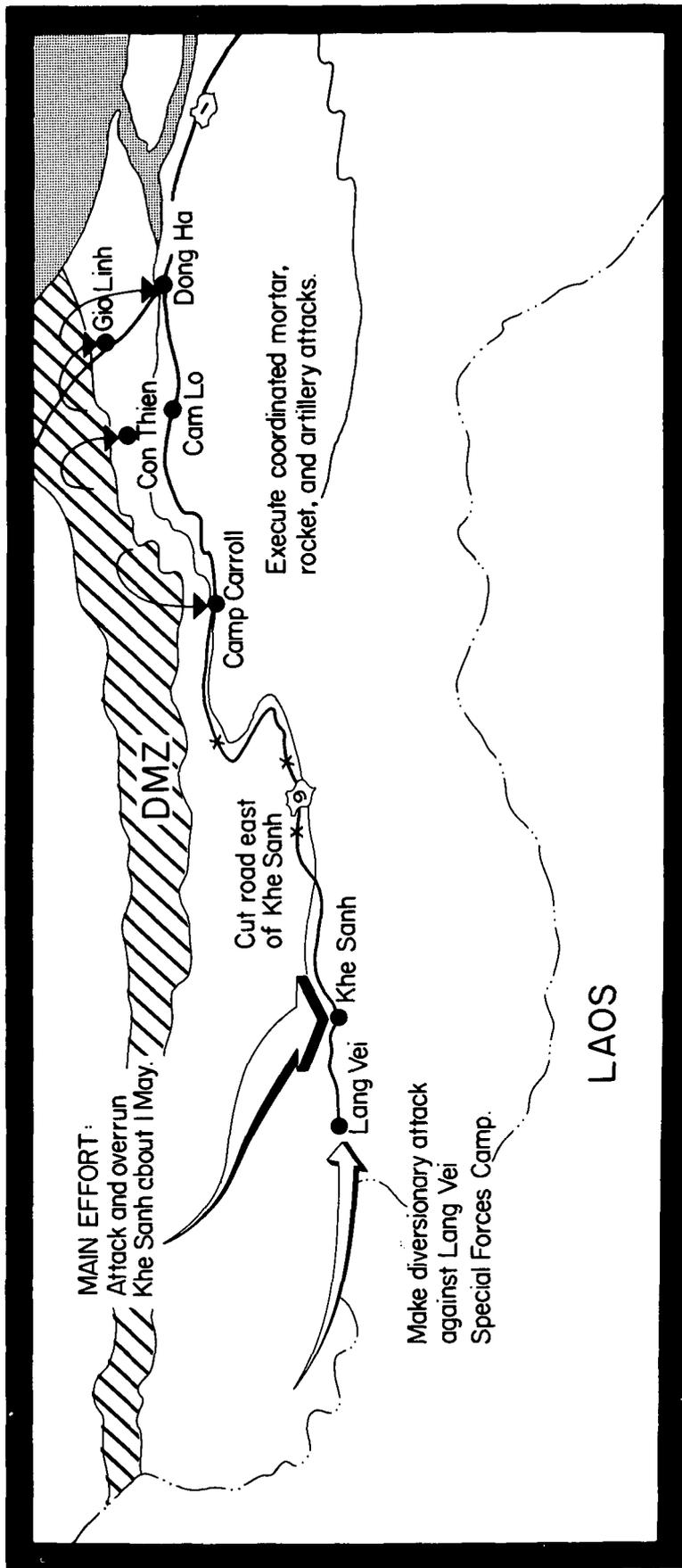
(*) The Combined Action Program was designed to increase the ability of the local Vietnamese militia units to defend their own villages. These units, referred to as Popular Forces, were reinforced by groups of Marines who lived, worked, and conducted operations with their Vietnamese counterparts. A Combined Action Company was an organization controlling several Marine squads which served with different Combined Action Platoons. Combined Action Company Oscar (CACO) was the unit operating in the Khe Sanh area. A Regional Forces company was comprised of local South Vietnamese soldiers along with their American and ARVN advisors who were under the operational control of the Vietnamese Province Chief.

North Vietnamese offensive designed to overrun Khe Sanh. What later became known as the "Hill Fights" had begun. In retrospect, it appears that the drive toward Khe Sanh was but one prong of the enemy's winter-spring offensive, the ultimate objective of which was the capture of Dong Ha, Quang Tri City, and eventually, Hue-Phu Bai.(*). That portion of the enemy plan which pertained to Khe Sanh involved the isolation of the base by artillery attacks on the Marine fire support bases in the eastern DMZ area (e.g., Camp Carroll, Con Thien, Gio Linh, etc.). These were closely coordinated with attacks by fire on the logistical and helicopter installations at Dong Ha and Phu Bai. Demolition teams cut Route 9 between Khe Sanh and Cam Lo to prevent overland reinforcement and, later, a secondary attack was launched against the camp at Lang Vei, which was manned by Vietnamese CIDG personnel and U. S. Army Special Forces advisors. Under cover of heavy fog and low overcast which shrouded Khe Sanh for several weeks, the North Vietnamese moved a regiment into the Hill 881/861 complex and constructed a maze of heavily reinforced bunkers and gun positions from which they intended to provide direct fire against the KSCB in support of their assault troops. All of these efforts were ancillary to the main thrust--a regimental-sized ground attack--from the 325C NVA Division which would sweep in from the west and seize the airfield.(**)(9) (See Map 4).

The job of stopping the NVA was given to Colonel John P. Lanigan and his 3d Marines. Although he probably did not know it when he arrived at Khe Sanh, this assignment would not be unlike one which 22 years before had earned him a Silver Star on Okinawa. Both involved pushing a fanatical enemy force off a hill.

(*) The III MAF and enemy operations during the period of the NVA/VC winter-spring offensive (1966-1967) will be the subject of a separate monograph prepared by the Historical Branch.

(**) The diversionary attacks were all launched apparently on schedule. On 27 and 28 April, the previously mentioned Marine fire support and supply bases were hit by some 1,200 rocket, artillery, and mortar rounds. Route 9 was cut in several places. The Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei was attacked and severely mauled on 4 May. Only the main effort was detected and subsequently thwarted.



MAP 4

KW White

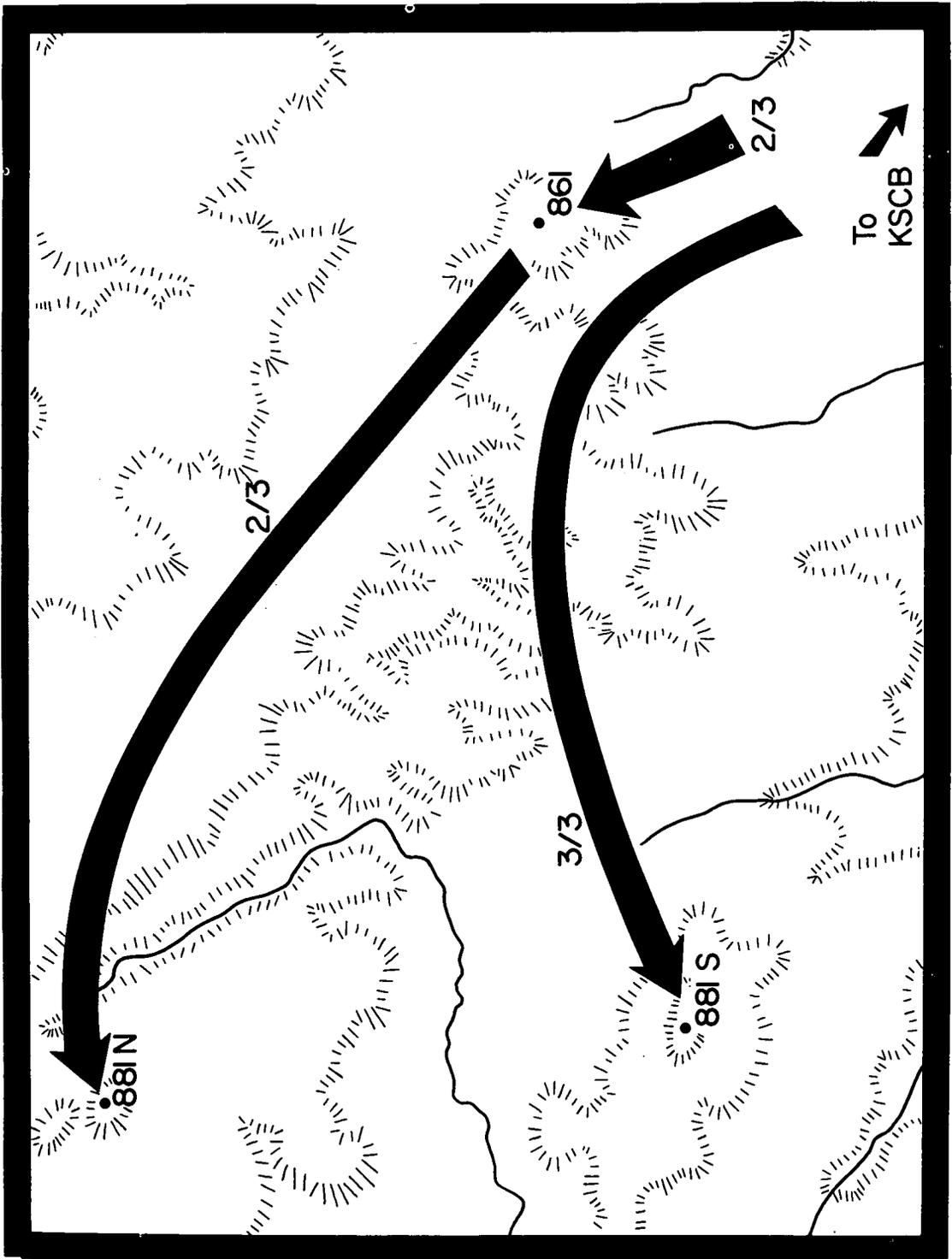
THE ENEMY PLAN

On 25 April, the lead elements of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Gary Wilder, arrived at Khe Sanh. The following day, 2/3, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Earl R. De Long, which was taking part in Operation BEACON STAR east of Quang Tri City was airlifted to the combat base. On the 27th, a fresh artillery battery, B/1/12, arrived and reinforced F/2/12; by the end of the day, the two units had been reorganized into an artillery group with one battery in direct support of each battalion.(10)

Late in the afternoon of the 28th, the Marine infantrymen were ready to drive the enemy from the hill masses. These hills formed a near-perfect right triangle with Hill 881 North (N) at the apex and the other two at the base. Hill 861 was the closest to the combat base, some 5,000 meters northwest of the airstrip. Hill 881 South (S) was approximately 3,000 meters west of 861 and 2,000 meters south of 881N.

The concept of operations entailed a two-battalion (2/3 and 3/3) assault for which Hill 861 was designated Objective 1; Hill 881S was Objective 2 and Hill 881N was Objective 3. From its position south of Hill 861, 2/3 would assault and seize Objective 1 on 28 April. The 3d Battalion would follow in trace of 2/3 and, after the first objective was taken, 3/3 would wheel to the west, secure the terrain between Hills 861 and 881S, then assault Objective 2 from a northeasterly direction. Coordinated with the 3/3 attack, 2/3 would consolidate its objective then move out toward Hill 881N to screen the right flank of the 3d Battalion and reinforce if necessary. When Objectives 1 and 2 were secured, 3/3 would move to the northwest and support 2/3 while it assaulted Objective 3. (See Map 5).

After extremely heavy preparatory artillery fires and massive air strikes, the 3d Marines kicked off the attack. On the 28th, 2/3 assaulted and seized Hill 861 in the face of sporadic resistance. Most of the enemy troops had been literally blown from their positions by heavy close air support strikes of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. The operation continued with a thrust against Hill 881S by 3/3. This area was the scene of extremely bitter fighting for several days, because, by this time, the NVA regiment which was originally slated for the attack on the airfield had been thrown into the hill battles in a vain effort to stop the Marines. After tons of artillery shells and aerial bombs had been employed against the hill, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's battalion bulled its way to the summit and, on 2 May, secured the objective. In the meantime,



KW/White

MAP 5

CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS DURING HILL FIGHTS



Marines of Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines inch their way toward the summit of Hill 881N during the Hill fights. (USMC Photo A189161)



Close air support strikes of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and massive artillery fires paved the way for infantry assaults. (USMC Photo A421953)

Lieutenant Colonel De Long's battalion pushed along the ridge-line leading from Hill 861 to 881N. After smashing a determined NVA counterattack on 3 May, the 2d Battalion battered its way to the crest of Hill 881N and secured the final objective on the afternoon of the 5th. The three hills belonged to the Marines.(11)

The supporting arms had done a good job, for the top of each hill looked like the surface of the moon. The color of the summit had changed from a vivid green to a dull, ugly brown. All of the lush vegetation had been blasted away, leaving in its place a mass of churned-up dirt and splintered trees. Hundreds of craters dotted the landscape serving as mute witnesses to the terrible pounding that the enemy had taken. What the NVA learned during the operation was something the Marine Corps had espoused for years--that bombs and shells were cheaper than blood.

Thus, the "Hill Fights" ended and the first major attempt by the NVA to take Khe Sanh was thwarted. All intelligence reports indicated that the badly mauled 325C NVA Division had pulled back to lick its wounds, ending the immediate threat in western Quang Tri Province. With the pressure relieved for the time being, General Walt began scaling down his forces at Khe Sanh, because the next phase of the enemy's winter/spring offensive involved a drive through the coastal plain toward Dong Ha.

From 11-13 May, 1/26 moved into the combat base and the adjacent hills to relieve the 3d Marines. By the evening of the 12th, 2/3 had been airlifted to Dong Ha and one artillery battery, B/1/12, was pulled out by convoy. The following day, 3/3 also returned to Dong Ha by truck. In the meantime, Company A, 1/26, was helilifted to Hill 881S while Company C took up positions on Hill 861. Company B, 1/26, and a skeleton headquarters of the 26th Marines arrived and remained at the base, as did a fresh artillery battery, A/1/13. At 1500 on 13 May, Colonel John J. Padley, Commanding Officer of the 26th Marines, Forward, relieved Colonel Lanigan as the Senior Officer Present at Khe Sanh.(12)

In his analysis of the operation, Colonel Lanigan reported that his men had been engaged in a conventional infantry battle against a well-trained, highly-disciplined, and well-entrenched enemy force. In the past, the NVA had used phantom tactics when engaging U. S. forces--not so at Khe Sanh. The maze of bunker

complexes served as a grim reminder of their determination to stay and fight. They openly challenged the Americans to push them off the hills, and the 3d Marines rose to the occasion. The fierce resistance was overcome by aggressive infantry assaults in coordination with artillery and close air support, which according to Colonel Lanigan was the most accurate and devastating he had witnessed in three wars.

The Communists had anticipated a blood letting and they received one. From 24 April through 12 May 1967, the NVA lost 940 confirmed killed.(*). Even for the North Vietnamese, this was a massive defeat which could not be easily absorbed. But the leaders in Hanoi were committed to a course of action which traded human lives for strategic expediency. Just like the monsoon rains, the enemy would come again.(13)

(*) Marine losses were 155 killed and 425 wounded.

PART II

THE LULL BETWEEN THE STORMS

With the departure of the 3d Marines, a relative calm prevailed at Khe Sanh for the remainder of the year. Although occasional encounters and sightings indicated that the Communists still had an interest in the area, there was a marked decrease in large unit contacts and the tempo of operations slackened to a preinvasion pace. Such was not the case in other portions of Quang Tri Province.

During the summer and fall of 1967, the center of activity shifted to the eastern DMZ area. After being battered and thrown for a loss on their end sweep, the Communists concentrated on the middle of the line again. With an estimated 37 battalions poised along the border, the NVA constituted a genuine threat to the northernmost province. At times as many as eight Marine battalions were shuttled into the area for short-term operations and three or four were there full time, but the enemy's intensified campaign created a demand for more troops. As a result, General Westmoreland was forced to make major force realignments throughout South Vietnam to satisfy the troop requirements in I Corps.(14)

General Westmoreland drew the bulk of these reinforcements from areas in Vietnam which, at the time, were under less pressure than the five northern provinces. During April and May 1967, Task Force OREGON, comprised of nine U. S. Army battalions from II and III Corps, moved into the Chu Lai-Duc Pho region and was placed under the operational control of General Walt. By the end of May, five battalions of the 5th and 7th Marines at Chu Lai had been released for service further north. Two of these units moved into the Nui Loc Son Basin northwest of Tam Ky to conduct offensive operations and support the sagging Vietnamese Revolutionary Development efforts. The other three settled in the Da Nang tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) and in turn released two Marine battalions, 1/1 and 2/1, which moved to Thua Thien and Quang Tri provinces.

In addition to his in-country assets, General Westmoreland also called on Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief, Pacific, for reinforcements. Besides the two Special Landing Forces afloat with the U. S. Seventh Fleet, the Pacific Command

maintained a Marine Battalion Landing Team (BLT 3/4) as an amphibious reserve on Okinawa. (*) (15) Actually, this unit was part of the BLT rotation system whereby battalions were periodically shuttled out of Vietnam for retraining and refurbishing in Okinawa before assignment to the SLF. ComUSMACV needed the unit and got it. On 15 May, 3/4 began an airlift from Okinawa to Dong Ha by Air Force and Marine C-130 aircraft and within 31 hours the 1,233-man force was in-country. After the re-alignment of units in I Corps was complete, there was a net increase of four USMC battalions in the DMZ area making a total of seven. Additionally, the SLFs, cruising off the Vietnamese coast, provided two more battalions which could be landed quickly and added to the III MAF inventory. SLF Alpha (BLT 1/3 and HMM-362) was placed on 24-hour alert to come ashore and SLF Bravo (BLT 2/3 and HMM-164) was given a 96-hour reaction time. (16)

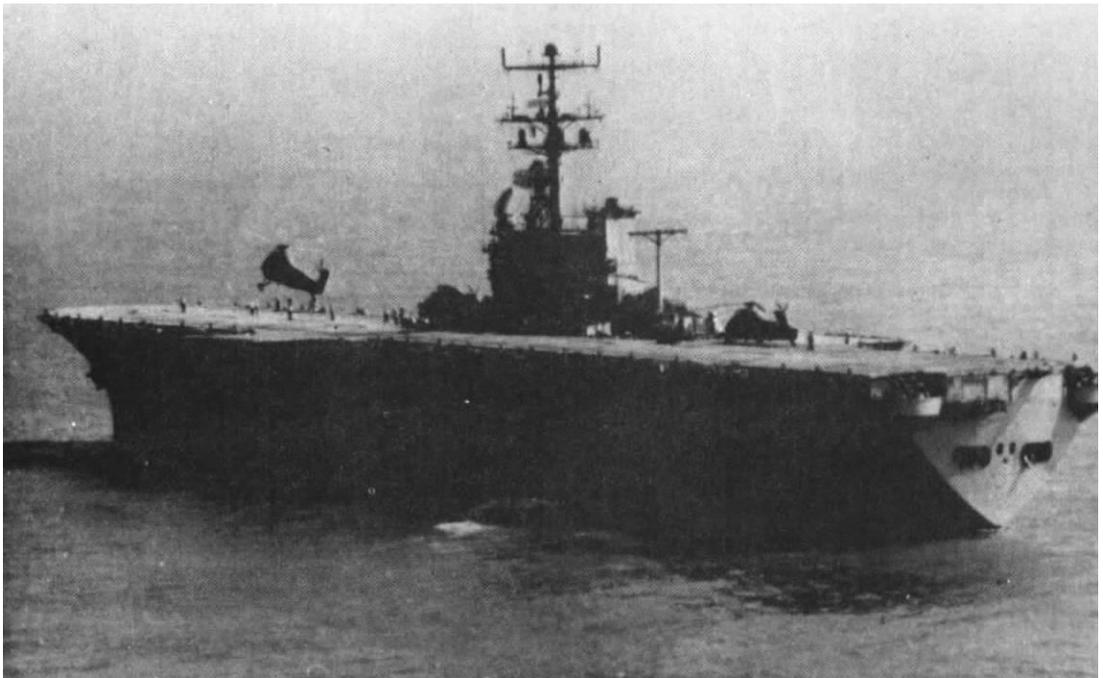
During the second half of 1967, the enemy offensive south of the DMZ was a bloody repetition of the previous year's effort. With more courage than good sense, the NVA streamed across the DMZ throughout the summer only to be met and systematically chewed up in one engagement after another. In July, the enemy, supported by his long-range artillery along the Ben Hai, mounted a major thrust against the 9th Marines near the strongpoint of Con Thien. Reinforced by SLFs Alpha and Bravo, the 9th Marines countered with Operation BUFFALO and, between the 2d and 14th of July, killed 1,290 NVA. Marine losses were 159 dead and 345 wounded. (17)

After this crushing defeat, the NVA shifted its emphasis from direct infantry assaults to attacks by fire. Utilizing

(*) The two Special Landing Forces of the Seventh Fleet are each comprised of a Marine Battalion Landing Team and a Marine helicopter squadron, and provide ComUSMACV/CG, III MAF with a highly-flexible, amphibious striking force for operations along the South Vietnam littoral. During the amphibious operation, operational control of the SLF remains with the Amphibious Task Force Commander designated by Commander, Seventh Fleet. This relationship may persist throughout the operation if coordination with forces ashore does not dictate otherwise. When the Special Landing Force is firmly established ashore, operational control may be passed to CG, III MAF who, in turn, may shift this control to the division in whose area the SLF is operating. Under such circumstances, operational control of the helicopter squadron is passed by CG III MAF to the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.



Action near the DMZ was characterized by hard fighting in rugged terrain. A Marine of 3/4 moves forward during Operation PRAIRIE. (USMC Photo A187904)



Marine Battalion Landing Teams aboard U. S. Seventh Fleet shipping augmented III MAF forces. USS Iwo Jima stands off South Vietnamese coast. (USMC Photo A650016)

long-range rockets and artillery pieces tucked away in caves and treelines along the DMZ, the enemy regularly shelled Marine fire support and logistical bases from Cam Lo to Cua Viet. One of the most destructive attacks was against Dong Ha where, on 3 September, 41 enemy artillery rounds hit the base and touched off a series of spectacular explosions which lasted for over four hours. Several helicopters were damaged but, more important, a fuel farm and a huge stockpile of ammunition went up in smoke. Thousands of gallons of fuel and tons of ammunition were destroyed. The enormous column of smoke from the exploding dumps rose above 12,000 feet and was visible as far south as Hue-Phu Bai.(18)

The preponderance of enemy fire, however, was directed against Con Thien. That small strongpoint, never garrisoned by more than a reinforced battalion, was situated atop Hill 158, 10 miles northwest of Dong Ha and, from their small perch, the Marines had a commanding view of any activity in the area. In addition, from one to three battalions were always in the immediate vicinity and deployed so that they could outflank any major enemy force which tried to attack the strongpoint. Con Thien also anchored the western end of "the barrier," a 600-meter-wide trace which extended eastward some eight miles to Gio Linh. This strip was part of an anti-infiltration system and had been bulldozed flat to aid in visual detection.(*)(19)

Because of its strategic importance, Con Thien became the scene of heavy fighting. The base itself was subjected to several ground attacks, plus an almost incessant artillery bombardment which, at its peak, reached 1,233 rounds in one 24-hour period. Most of the NVA and Marine casualties, however, were sustained by maneuver elements in the surrounding area. Operation KINGFISHER, which succeeded BUFFALO, continued around Con Thien and by 31 October, when it was superseded by two new operations, had accounted for 1,117 enemy dead. Marine losses were 340 killed.(**)(20)

(*) The system was an anti-infiltration barrier just south of the DMZ. Obstacles were used to channelize the enemy. Strongpoints, such as Con Thien, served as patrol bases and fire support bases.

(**) In addition to the action near the DMZ, there was one other area in I Corps that was a hub of activity. The Nui Loc Son Basin, a rice rich coastal plain between Hoi An and Tam Ky, was the operating area of the 2d NVA Division. Between April and

While heavy fighting raged elsewhere, action around Khe Sanh continued to be light and sporadic. Immediately after its arrival on 13 May, Colonel Padley's undermanned 26th Marines commenced Operation CROCKETT.(*)(21) The mission was to occupy key terrain, deny the enemy access into vital areas, conduct reconnaissance-in-force operations to destroy any elements within the TAOR, and provide security for the base and adjacent outposts. Colonel Padley was to support the Vietnamese irregular forces with his organic artillery as well as coordinate the efforts of the American advisors to those units. He also had the responsibility of maintaining small reconnaissance teams for long-range surveillance.(22)

To accomplish his mission, the colonel had one infantry battalion, 1/26, a skeleton headquarters, and an artillery group under the control of 1/13. The 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James B. Wilkinson, maintained one rifle company on Hill 881S and one on 861; a security detachment on Hill 950 to protect a communication relay site; a rifle company and the Headquarters and Service Company (H&S Co) for base security; and one company in reserve. The units on the hill outposts patrolled continuously within a 4,000-meter radius of their positions. Reconnaissance teams were inserted further out, primarily to the north and northwest. Whenever evidence revealed enemy activity in an area, company-sized search and destroy sweeps were conducted. Although intelligence reports indicated that the three regiments of the 325C NVA Division (i.e. 95C, 101D, and 29th) were still in the Khe Sanh TAOR, there were few contacts during the opening weeks of the operation.(23)

October 1967, Marine, U. S. Army, and ARVN troops conducted 13 major operations (including 3 SLF landings) in this region and killed 5,395 enemy soldiers. By the end of the year, the 2d NVA Division was temporarily rendered useless as a fighting unit.

(*) The official designation of the unit at Khe Sanh was Regimental Landing Team 26 (Forward) which consisted of one battalion and a lightly staffed headquarters. The other two battalions were in-country but under the operational control of other units. The rest of the headquarters, RLT-26 (Rear), remained at Camp Schwab, Okinawa as a pipeline for replacements. RLT-26 (Forward) was under the operational control of the 3d MarDiv and the administrative control of the 9th MAB. Any further mention of the 26th Marines will refer only to RLT-26 (Forward).

Toward the end of May and throughout June, however, activity picked up. On 21 May, elements of Company A, 1/26, clashed sharply with a reinforced enemy company; 25 NVA and 2 Marines were killed. The same day, the Lang Vei CIDG camp was attacked by an enemy platoon. On 6 June, the radio relay site on Hill 950 was hit by an NVA force of unknown size and the combat base was mortared. The following morning a patrol from Company B, 1/26, engaged another enemy company approximately 2,000 meters northwest of Hill 881S. A platoon from Company A was helilifted to the scene and the two Marine units killed 66 NVA while losing 18 men. Due to the increasing number of contacts, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Kurt L. Hoch, was transferred to the operational control of its parent unit and arrived at Khe Sanh on 13 June. Two weeks later, the newly arrived unit got a crack at the NVA when Companies I and L engaged two enemy companies 5,000 meters southwest of the base and, along with air and artillery, killed 35.(24)

Operation CROCKETT continued as a two-battalion effort until 16 July when it terminated. The cumulative casualty figures were 204 enemy KIA (confirmed), 52 Marines KIA, and 255 Marines wounded. The following day, operations continued under a new name--ARDMORE. The name was changed; the mission, the units, and the TAOR remained basically the same. But again the fighting tapered off. Except for occasional contacts by reconnaissance teams and patrols, July and August were quiet.(25)

On 12 August, Colonel David E. Lownds relieved Colonel Padley as the commanding officer of the 26th Marines. At this time the 3d Marine Division was deployed from the area north of Da Nang to the DMZ and from the South China Sea to the Laotian border. In order to maintain the initiative, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., who had relieved General Walt as CG, III MAF in June, drew down on certain units to provide sufficient infantry strength for other operations. Except for several small engagements Khe Sanh had remained relatively quiet; therefore, on the day after Colonel Lownds assumed command, the regiment was whittled down by two companies when K and L, 3/26, were transferred to the 9th Marines for Operation KINGFISHER. Three weeks later, the rest of 3/26 was also withdrawn and, as far as Marine units were concerned, Colonel Lownds found himself "not so much a regimental commander as the supervisor of a battalion commander." The colonel, however, was still responsible for coordinating the efforts of all the other Allied units (CACO, CIDG, RF, etc) in the Khe Sanh TAOR.(26)



Colonel John J. Padley turns over the colors and the 26th Marines to Colonel David E. Lownds on 12 August 1967. (Photo courtesy Colonel David E. Lownds)

As Operation ARDMORE dragged on, the Marines at Khe Sanh concentrated on improving the combat base. The men were kept busy constructing bunkers and trenches both inside the perimeter and on the hill outposts. On the hills, this proved to be no small task as was pointed out by the 1/26 battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson:

The monsoon rains had little effect on 881, but when the first torrential rains of the season hit 861 the results were disastrous. The trenchline which encircled the hill washed away completely on one side of the position and caved in on another side. Some bunkers collapsed while others were so weakened they had to be completely rebuilt. Because of the poor soil and the steepness of the terrain, the new bunkers were built almost completely above ground. To provide drainage, twenty-seven 55 gallon steel drums, with the tops and bottoms removed, were installed in the sides of the trenches around 861 so water would not stand in the trenches. (Culvert material was not available.) All bunker materials, as well as other supplies, were delivered to the hills by helicopter. Attempts were made to obtain logs for fighting positions and bunkers in the canopied jungle flanking the hills. This idea was not successful. The trees close to 881 and 861 were so filled with shrapnel from the battles the previous spring that the engineers did not want to ruin their chain saws on the metal....In spite of the shortages, Marines of 1/26 worked extremely hard until every Marine on 881(S) and 861 had overhead cover.(27)

Another bit of foresight which was to prove a God-send in the succeeding months was the decision by higher headquarters to improve the airstrip. The original runway had been a dirt strip on top of which the U. S. Navy Seabees had laid aluminum matting. The 3,900-foot strip, however, did not have a rock base and as a result of the heavy monsoon rains, mud formed under the matting causing it to buckle in several places. Upon direction, Colonel Lownds closed the field on 17 August. His men located a hill 1,500 meters southwest of the perimeter which served as a quarry. Three 15-ton rock crushers, along with other heavy equipment, were hauled in and the Marine and Seabee working parties started the repairs. During September and October, U. S. Air Force C-130s of the 315th Air Division (under the operational control of the 834th Air Division) delivered 2,350 tons of matting, asphalt, and other construction material

to the base by paradrops and a special low-altitude extraction system. (See page 76) While the field was shut down, resupply missions were handled by helicopters and C-7 "Caribou" which could land on short segments of the strip. Work continued until 27 October when the field was reopened to C-123 aircraft and later, to C-130s.(28)

On 31 October, Operation ARDMORE came to an uneventful conclusion. The absence of any major engagements was mirrored in the casualty figures which showed that in three and a half months, 113 NVA and 10 Marines were killed. The next day, 1 November, the 26th Marines commenced another operation, new in name only--SCOTLAND I. Again the mission and units remained the same, and while the area of operations was altered slightly, SCOTLAND I was basically just an extension of ARDMORE.(29)

One incident in November which was to have a tremendous effect on the future of the combat base was the arrival of Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins at Phu Bai as the new Commanding General, 3d Marine Division. General Tompkins took over from Brigadier General Louis Metzger who had been serving as the Acting Division Commander following the death of Major General Bruno Hochmuth in a helicopter crash on 14 November. In addition to being an extremely able commander, General Tompkins possessed a peppery yet gentlemanly quality which, in the gloom that later shrouded Khe Sanh, often lifted the spirits of his subordinates. His numerous inspection trips, even to the most isolated units, provided the division commander with a first-hand knowledge of the tactical situation in northern I Corps which would never have been gained by simply sitting behind a desk. When the heavy fighting broke out at Khe Sanh, the general visited the combat base almost daily. Few people were to influence the coming battle more than General Tompkins or have as many close calls.(30)

During December, there was another surge of enemy activity. Reconnaissance teams reported large groups of NVA moving into the area and, this time, they were not passing through; they were staying. There was an increased number of contacts between Marine patrols and enemy units. The companies on Hills 881S and 861 began receiving more and more sniper fire. Not only the hill outposts, but the combat base itself, received numerous probes along the perimeter. In some cases, the defensive wire was cut and replaced in such a manner that the break was hard to detect. The situation warranted action, and again General Cushman directed 3/26 to rejoin the regiment. On 13 December,

the 3d Battalion, under its new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman (who assumed command 21 August), was airlifted back to Khe Sanh and the 26th Marines.(31)

On the 21st, the newly-arrived Marines saddled up and took to the field. This was the first time that Colonel Lownds had been able to commit a battalion-sized force since 3/26 had left Khe Sanh in August. Lieutenant Colonel Alderman's unit was helilifted to 881S where it conducted a sweep toward Hill 918, some 5,100 meters to the west, and then returned to the combat base by the way of Hill 689. The 3d Battalion made no contact with the enemy during the five-day operation but the effort proved to be extremely valuable. First of all, the men of 3/26 became familiar with the terrain to the west and south of Hill 881S--a position which was later occupied by elements of the 3d Battalion. The Marines located the best avenues of approach to the hill, as well as probable sites for the enemy's supporting weapons. Secondly, and most important, the unit turned up evidence (fresh foxholes, well-used trails, caches, etc.) which indicated that the NVA was moving into the area in force. These signs further strengthened the battalion and regimental commanders' belief that "things were picking up," and the confrontation which many predicted would come was not far off. Captain Richard D. Camp, the company commander of L/3/26 put it a little more bluntly: "I can smell.../the enemy/."(32)



General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, talks with his son, First Lieutenant Walton F. Chapman, during the General's visit to Khe Sanh in January 1968. Lieutenant Chapman served with the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines and spent a good portion of the siege on Hill 950. (USMC Photo A190283)

PART III

THE BUILDUP AND THE OPENING ROUND

With the beginning of the new year, Khe Sanh again became the focal point of enemy activity in I Corps. All evidence pointed to a North Vietnamese offensive similar to the one in 1967, only on a much larger scale. From various intelligence sources, the III MAF, 3d Marine Division, and 26th Marines Headquarters learned that NVA units, which usually came down the "Santa Fe Trail" and skirted the combat base outside of artillery range, were moving into the Khe Sanh area and staying. (*) (33) At first, the reports showed the influx of individual regiments, then a division headquarters; finally a front headquarters was established indicating that at least two NVA divisions were in the vicinity. In fact, the 325C NVA Division had moved back into the region north of Hill 881N while a newcomer to the area, the 304th NVA Division, had crossed over from Laos and established positions southwest of the base. The 304th was an elite home guard division from Hanoi which had been a participant at Dien Bien Phu. (**) (34) The entire force included six infantry regiments, two artillery regiments, an unknown number of tanks, plus miscellaneous support and service units. Gradually, the enemy shifted his emphasis from reconnaissance and harassment to actual probes and began exerting more and more pressure on Allied outposts and patrols. One incident which reinforced the belief that something big was in the wind occurred on 2 January near a Marine listening post just outside the main perimeter. (35)

(*) The Santa Fe Trail is a branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail which closely parallels the South Vietnam/Laos border.

(**) In addition, one regiment of the 324th Division was located in the central DMZ some 10-15 miles from Khe Sanh and maintained a resupply role. In the early stages of the siege, the presence of the 320th Division was confirmed north of the Rockpile within easy reinforcing distance of Khe Sanh; thus, General Westmoreland and General Cushman were initially faced with the possibility that Khe Sanh would be attacked by three divisions plus a regiment. General Tompkins, however, kept constant pressure on these additional enemy units and alleviated their threat.

The post was located approximately 400 meters from the western end of the airstrip and north of where the Company L, 3/26 lines tied in with those of 1/26. At 2030, a sentry dog was alerted by movement outside the perimeter and a few minutes later the Marines manning the post reported that six unidentified persons were approaching the defensive wire. Oddly enough, the nocturnal visitors were not crawling or attempting to hide their presence; they were walking around as if they owned the place. A squad from L/3/26, headed by Second Lieutenant Nile B. Buffington, was dispatched to investigate. Earlier in the day the squad had rehearsed the proper procedure for relieving the listening post and had received a briefing on fire discipline. The training was shortly put to good use.

Lieutenant Buffington saw that the six men were dressed like Marines and, while no friendly patrols were reported in the area, he challenged the strangers in clear English to be sure. There was no reply. A second challenge was issued and, this time, the lieutenant saw one of the men make a motion as if going for a hand grenade. The Marines opened fire and quickly cut down five of the six intruders. One enemy soldier died with his finger inserted in the pin of a grenade. The awesome hitting power of the M-16 rifle was quite evident since all five men were apparently dead by the time they hit the ground. The lone survivor was wounded but managed to escape after retrieving some papers from a mapcase which was on one of the bodies. Using a sentry dog, the Marines followed a trail of blood to the southwest but gave up the hunt in the darkness. The direction the enemy soldier was heading led the Marines to believe that his unit was located beyond the rock quarry.

The importance of the contact was not realized until later when intelligence personnel discovered that all five of the enemy dead were officers including an NVA regimental commander, operations officer, and communications officer. The fact that the North Vietnamese would commit such key men to a highly dangerous, personal reconnaissance indicated that Khe Sanh was back at the top of the Communists' priority list.(36)

This series of events did not go unnoticed at higher headquarters. General Cushman saw that Colonel Lownds had more on his hands than could be handled by two battalions and directed that 2/26 be transferred to the operational control of its parent unit. On 16 January, 2/26, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Francis J. Heath, Jr., landed at the Khe Sanh Combat Base; its arrival marked the first time that the three battalions of the

26th Marines had operated together in combat since Iwo Jima. The rapid deployment of Lieutenant Colonel Heath's unit was another example of the speed with which large number of troops could be committed to battle. The regimental commander knew that he would be getting reinforcements but he did not know exactly when they would arrive; he was informed by telephone just as the lead transports were entering the landing pattern. The question that then arose was: "Where could the newcomers do the most good?"(37)

Outside of the combat base itself, there were several areas which were vital. The most critical points were the hill outposts, because both General Tompkins and Colonel Lownds were well aware of what had happened at Dien Bien Phu when the Viet Minh owned the mountains and the French owned the valley. It was essential that the hills around Khe Sanh remain in the hands of the Marines. Shortly after its arrival in mid-December 1967, 3/26 had relieved 1/26 of most of this responsibility. Company I, 3/26, along with a three-gun detachment of 105mm howitzers from Battery C, 1/13, was situated atop Hill 881S; Company K, 3/26, with two 4.2-inch mortars, was entrenched on Hill 861; and the 2d Platoon, A/1/26 defended the radio-relay site on Hill 950. This arrangement still left the NVA with an excellent avenue of approach through the Rao Quan Valley which runs between Hills 861 and 950. The regimental commander decided to plug that gap with the newly arrived 2d Battalion.(38)

At 1400 the day it arrived, Company F, 2/26, conducted a tactical march to Hill 558--a small knob which sat squarely in the middle of the northwestern approach. The rest of the battalion spent the night in an assembly area approximately 1,300 meters west of the airstrip. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Heath moved his three remaining companies and the CP group overland to join Company F. Once the Marines were dug in, the perimeter completely encompassed Hill 558 and blocked enemy movement through the Rao Quan Valley.(39)

Even with 2/26 in position, there was still a flaw in the northern screen. The line of sight between K/3/26, on Hill 861, and 2/26 was masked by a ridgeline which extended from the summit of 861 to the northeast. This stretch of high ground prevented the two units from supporting each other by fire and created a corridor through which the North Vietnamese could maneuver to flank either Marine outpost. About a week after his arrival on Hill 558, Captain Earle G. Breeding was ordered to take his company, E/2/26, and occupy the finger at a point approximately 400-500

meters northeast of K/3/26. From this new vantage point, dubbed Hill 861A, Company E blocked the ridgeline and was in a good position to protect the flank of 2/26. Because of its proximity to K/3/26, Company E, 2/26, was later transferred to the operational control of the 3d Battalion. Although these units did not form one continuous defensive line, they did occupy the key terrain which overlooked the valley floor.(40)

With the primary avenue of approach blocked, Colonel Lownds utilized his remaining assets to provide base security and conduct an occasional search and destroy mission. The 1st Battalion was given the lion's share of the perimeter to defend with lines that extended around three sides of the airstrip. Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson's Marines occupied positions that paralleled the runway to the north (Blue Sector), crossed the eastern end of the strip, and continued back to the west along the southern boundary of the base (Grey Sector). The southwestern portion of the compound was manned by Forward Operating Base-3 (FOB-3), a conglomeration of indigenous personnel and American advisors under the direct control of a U. S. Army Special Forces commander. FOB-3 tied in with 1/26 on the east and L/3/26 on the west. Company L, 3/26, was responsible for the northwestern section (Red Sector) of the base and was thinly spread over approximately 3,000 meters of perimeter. The remaining company from the 3d Battalion, M/3/26, was held in reserve until 19 January when two platoons and a command group were helilifted to 881S. Even though it held a portion of the perimeter, Company D, 1/26 became the reserve and the remaining platoon from M/3/26 also remained at the base as a reaction force.(*)(41)

In addition to his infantry units, the regimental commander had an impressive array of artillery and armor. Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly's 1/13 provided direct support for the 26th Marines with one 4.2-inch mortar battery, three 105mm howitzer batteries, and one provisional 155mm howitzer battery (towed). The 175mm guns of the U. S. Army's 2d Battalion, 94th

(*) On the 21st, a platoon from A/1/26 reinforced K/3/26 on Hill 861 and a second platoon from Company A later followed suit. Throughout most of the siege the line up on the hill outpost remained as follows: Hill 881S--Company I, 3/26 plus two platoons and a command group from Company M 3/26; Hill 861--Company K, 3/26 plus two platoons from Company A, 1/26; Hill 861A--Company E, 2/26; Hill 558--2/26 (minus the one company on 861A); Hill 950--one platoon from 1/26.

Artillery at Camp Carroll and the Rockpile were in general support. Five 90mm tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion, which had been moved to Khe Sanh before Route 9 was cut, were attached to the 26th Marines along with two Ontos platoons from the 3d Antitank Battalion.(*). These highly mobile tracked vehicles could be rapidly mustered at any threatened point so Colonel Lownds generally held his armor in the southwestern portion of the compound as a back-up for L/3/26 and FOB-3. All told, the Khe Sanh defenders could count on fire support from 46 artillery pieces of varied calibers, 5 90mm tank guns, and 92 single or Ontos-mounted 106mm recoilless rifles. With an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 North Vietnamese lurking in the surrounding hills, the Marines would need it all.(42)

Ironically, the incidents which heralded the beginning of full-scale hostilities in 1968 occurred in the same general area as the encounter which touched off the heavy fighting in 1967. On 19 January 1968, the 3d Platoon, I/3/26 was patrolling along a ridgeline 700 meters southwest of Hill 881N where, two days before, a Marine reconnaissance team had been ambushed. The team leader and radioman were killed and, while the bodies had been recovered, the radio and a coded frequency card were missing. The 3d Platoon was scouring the ambush site for these items when it was taken under fire by an estimated 25 NVA troops. The Marines returned fire, then broke contact while friendly artillery plastered the enemy positions.

The next morning, Company I, commanded by Captain William H. Dabney, returned to the scene in force. The captain actually had two missions: first, to try and make contact with the enemy, and, second, to insert another reconnaissance team in the vicinity of the ambush site. Two platoons and a command group from Company M, 3/26, commanded by Captain John J. Gilece, Jr. were helilifted to 881S and manned the perimeter while Company I moved out to the north(**). The terrain between 881S and its northern twin dropped off into a deep ravine and then sloped gradually upward to the crest of 881N. The southern face of 881N had two parallel

(*) The Ontos is a lightly armored tracked vehicle armed with six 106mm recoilless rifles. Originally designed as a tank killer, it is primarily used in Vietnam to support the infantry.

(**) Captain Gilece was wounded by sniper fire and on 1 February, First Lieutenant John T. Esslinger, the executive officer, assumed command.



Five M-48 tanks of the 3d Tank Battalion lent the weight of their 90mm guns to the defense of the combat base. (USMC Photo A190384)



Two Ontos platoons of the 3d Antitank Battalion were on hand at Khe Sanh. The Ontos sports six 106mm recoilless rifles with coaxially mounted .50 caliber spotting rifles. (USMC Photo A369169)

ridgelines about 500 meters apart which ran up the hill and provided the company with excellent avenues of approach. These two fingers were dotted with a series of small knobs which Captain Dabney had designated as intermediate objectives.

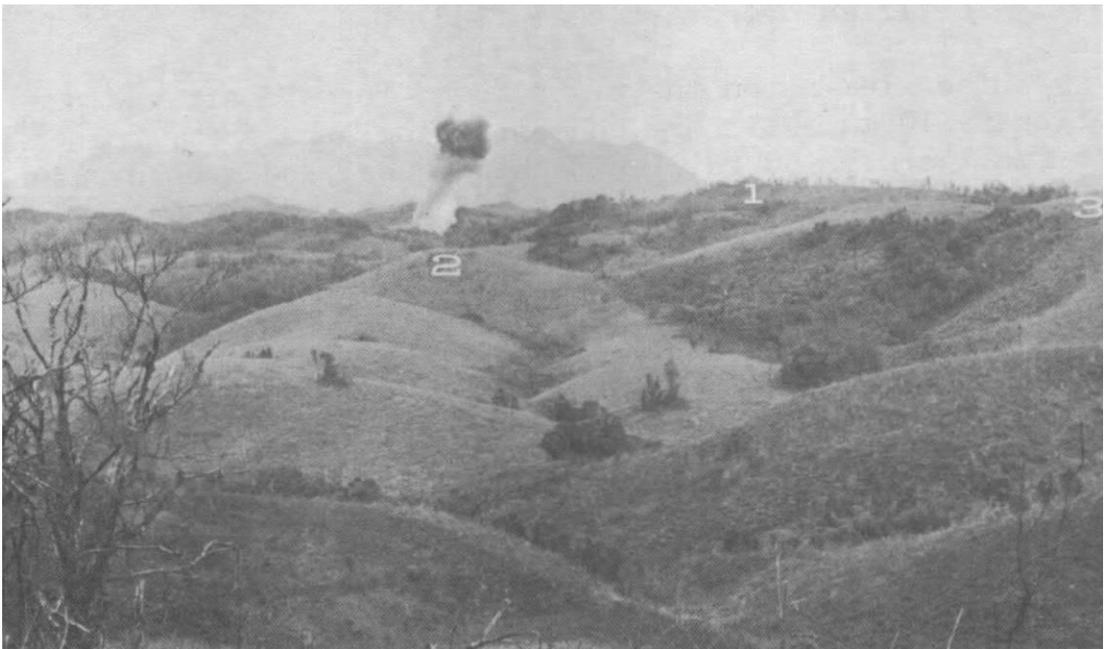
The Marines moved out at 0500 proceeding along two axes with the 1st and 2d Platoons on the left ridgeline and the 3d Platoon on the right. The ground fog was so thick that the men groped along at a snail's pace probing to their front with extended rifles much the same way a blind man uses a walking cane. For that reason, Captain Dabney had placed Second Lieutenant Harry F. Fromme's 1st Platoon and Second Lieutenant Thomas D. Brindley's 3d Platoon in the lead because both units had patrolled this area frequently and the commanders knew the terrain like the back of their hands. In spite of this, by 0900 the entire force had covered only a few hundred meters but then the fog began to lift enabling the Marines to move out at a brisker pace. The company swept out of the draw at the northern base of 881S, secured its first intermediate objective without incident, and then advanced toward a stretch of high ground which was punctuated by four innocent-looking little hills. These formed an east-west line which ran perpendicular to and bisected the Marines' intended route of march. As it turned out this area was occupied by elements of an NVA battalion and each mound was a link in a heavily-fortified defensive chain.(43)

As the element on the right moved forward after a precautionary 105mm artillery concentration, the enemy opened up with small arms, .50 caliber machine guns, and grenade launchers (RPGs). The resistance was so stiff that Captain Dabney ordered Lieutenant Brindley to hold up his advance and call for more artillery while the force on the left pushed forward far enough to place flanking fire on the NVA position. The 1st and 2d Platoons, however, fared no better; volleys of machine gun fire from the other enemy-owned hills cut through the Marine ranks like giant scythes and, in less than 30 seconds, 20 men were out of action, most with severe leg wounds. Caught in a cross fire, the captain ordered Fromme to hold up and evacuate his wounded. Again, Lieutenant Brindley's men on the right surged forward in the wake of 155mm prep fires. The assault, as described by one observer, was like a "page out of the life of Chesty Puller."(*)

(*) Lieutenant General Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, a legendary figure in Marine Corps history, is the only Marine to have won the Navy Cross five times.



The ambush of a Marine reconnaissance team near 881N on 17 January 1968 was the prelude to the opening battle three days later. (USMC Photo A188243)



A view of Hill 881N (1) from its southern twin. Action on 20 January took place on ridgelines (2) and (3). (Photo courtesy Major William H. Dabney)

Brindley was everywhere; he moved from flank to flank slapping his men on the back and urging them on. The lieutenant led his platoon up the slope and was the first man on top of the hill but, for him, the assault ended there--he was cut down by a sniper bullet and died within minutes.(*)

During the advance, the recon team, which had volunteered to join the attack, veered off to the right into a small draw and became separated from the rest of the platoon. When the enemy troops were finally driven off the hill, they fled to the east and inadvertently smashed headlong into the isolated team. After a brief but savage fight, the North Vietnamese over-ran the team and made good their escape; most of the recon Marines were seriously wounded and lay exposed to direct fire from the enemy on the easternmost hill. Several other men in the 3d Platoon were hit during the wild charge and by the time the objective had been taken, the radioman--a corporal--discovered that he was the senior man in the platoon. He quickly reported that fact to Captain Dabney.

The company commander saw that the enemy defense hinged on the center hill which the 3d Platoon had just taken. If he could consolidate that objective, Dabney would have a vantage point from which to support, by fire, assaults on the other three NVA positions. Second Lieutenant Richard M. Foley, the Company I Executive Officer, had moved up to take command of the 3d Platoon and he reported that while the unit had firm possession of the hill, there were not enough men left to evacuate the casualties. In addition, he could not locate the recon team and his ammunition was running low. Dabney, therefore, ordered Lieutenant Fromme's 1st Platoon to remain in place and support the left flank of the 3d Platoon by fire. With Second Lieutenant Michael H. Thomas' 2d Platoon which had been in reserve on the left, the company commander pulled back to the south, hooked around to the east and joined Foley's unit on its objective. The officers tried to evacuate the wounded and reorganize but this attempt was complicated by the fact that one half of the hastily formed perimeter was being pelted by .50 caliber machine gun and sniper fire from the enemy's easternmost position.

At this point, there were two acts of extraordinary heroism. Lieutenant Thomas, who was crouched in a crater alongside the company commander, was informed of the wounded recon Marines who

(*) Lieutenant Brindley was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

lay in the open at the eastern base of the hill. Even though it was courting certain death to do so, Thomas jumped out of the hole without hesitation and started down the hill. He had only gotten a few steps when an enemy sniper shot him through the head killing him instantly.(*). In spite of what happened to the lieutenant, Sergeant Daniel G. Jessup quickly followed his lead. While the NVA hammered away at the exposed slope with continuous machine gun and sniper fire, the sergeant slithered over the crest and crawled down the hill to locate the recon unit. Once at the bottom, he found the team in a small saddle which was covered with elephant grass; two of the Marines were dead and five were seriously wounded. Jessup hoisted one of the wounded men onto his back and made the return trip up the fire-swept slope. Gathering up a handful of Marines, the sergeant returned and supervised the evacuation of the entire team. When all the dead and wounded had been retrieved, Jessup zig-zagged down the hill a third time to gather up weapons and insure that no one had been left behind. For his calm courage and devotion to his comrades, Sergeant Jessup was later awarded the Silver Star.

The heavy fighting raged throughout the afternoon. Lieutenant Colonel Alderman, his operations officer, Major Matthew P. Caulfield, and representatives of the Fire Support Coordination Center (FSCC) flew from Khe Sanh to Hill 881S by helicopter so they could personally oversee the battle. During the action, Company I drew heavy support from the recoilless rifles, mortars, and 105mm howitzers on Hill 881S, as well as the batteries at Khe Sanh. In addition, Marine jets armed with 500-pound bombs streaked in and literally blew the top off of the easternmost enemy hill, while other fighter/bombers completely smothered one NVA counterattack with napalm. A CH-46 helicopter from Marine Aircraft Group 36 was shot down while attempting to evacuate casualties but another Sea Knight swooped in and picked up the pilot and copilot. The crew chief had jumped from the blazing chopper while it was still airborne and broke his leg; he was rescued by Lieutenant Fromme's men. This, however, was the only highlight for the North Vietnamese because Company I had cracked the center of their defense and, under the savage air and artillery bombardment, the rest of the line was beginning to crumble.(46)

Lieutenant Colonel Alderman realized that his men were gaining the advantage and requested reinforcements with which

(*). For his actions throughout the battle, Lieutenant Thomas was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

to exploit the situation. Colonel Lownds, however, denied the request and directed the 3/26 commander to pull Company I back to Hill 881S immediately. 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. It wasn't until later that they learned why they had been halted just when victory was in sight.)(*)(47)

Colonel Lownds' decision to break off the battle was not born out of faintheartedness, but was based on a valuable piece of intelligence that he received earlier in the afternoon. That intelligence came in the form of a NVA first lieutenant who was the commanding officer of the 14th Antiaircraft Company, 95C Regiment, 325C NVA Division; at 1400, he appeared off the eastern end of the runway with an AK-47 rifle in one hand and a white flag in the other. Under the covering guns of two Ontos, a fire team from the 2d Platoon, Company B, 1/26, took the young man in tow and, after Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson had questioned him briefly, the lieutenant was hustled off to the regimental intelligence section for interrogation. The lieutenant had no compunction about talking and gave the Marines a detailed description of the forthcoming Communist offensive. As it turned out, the accuracy of the account was surpassed only by its timeliness, because the first series of attacks was scheduled for that very night--against Hills 861 and 881S. At the time Colonel Lownds received this news, Company I was heavily engaged 1,000 meters north of its defensive perimeter and he definitely did not want Captain Dabney and his men to be caught away from their fortified outpost when the NVA struck. Consequently, Lieutenant Colonel Alderman's request for reinforcements to press his advantage was denied.(48)

When the first enemy rounds began falling on Hill 861 shortly after midnight, Marines all along the front were in bunkers and trenches--waiting. The heavy mortar barrage lasted

(*) NVA casualties were obviously much greater than 103 dead because the Marines counted only those bodies found during the withdrawal.

about 30 minutes and was supplemented by RPG, small arms, and automatic weapons fire. This was followed by approximately 300 NVA troops who assaulted Hill 861. The van of the attacking force was made up of sapper teams that rushed forward with Bangalore torpedoes and satchel charges to breach the defensive wire. Assault troops then poured through the gaps but were met and, in most sectors, stopped cold by interlocking bands of grazing machine gun fire.

In spite of the defensive fire, enemy soldiers penetrated the K/3/26 lines on the southwestern side of the hill and overran the helo landing zone. The Company K perimeter encompassed a saddle, thus the crest of 861 was actually two hills; the landing zone was on the lower one and the company CP was perched atop a steep rise to the northeast. Before the enemy could exploit the penetration, the Marines counterattacked down the trenchline and pinched off the salient. After vicious hand-to-hand fighting, the men of Company K isolated the pocket and wiped out the North Vietnamese. Had the enemy been able to flood the breach with his reserves, the situation might have become extremely critical. When the fighting subsided, 47 NVA bodies were strewn over the hilltop while four Marines died holding their ground. (*) (49)

During the attack on 861, the 3d Battalion command group remained on Hill 881S because bad weather prevented Lieutenant Colonel Alderman and his operations officer from returning to the combat base. (**)(50) Major Caulfield contacted the Company K command post by radio and found out that the fighting was indeed heavy. The company commander, Captain Norman J. Jasper, Jr., had been hit three times and was out of action; the executive officer, First Lieutenant Jerry N. Saulsbury, was running the show. The company gunnery sergeant was dead, the first sergeant was badly wounded, and the radio operator had been blinded by powder burns. Major Caulfield later recalled that the young Marine remained at his post for almost two hours before being

(*) Many more North Vietnamese died that night than were found. The stench from the bodies decaying in the jungle around the hill became so strong that the men of K/3/26 were forced to wear their gas masks for several days.

(**) Throughout the night, Lieutenant Colonel Alderman supervised defensive operations from 881S and was assisted by an alternate battalion command group at the base which was headed by the 3/26 Executive Officer, Major Joseph M. Loughran, Jr.

relieved and was "as calm, cool, and collected as a telephone operator in New York City," even though he could not see a thing.(51)

Some men on the hill had a rather unusual way of keeping their spirits up during the fight as First Sergeant Stephen L. Goddard discovered. The first sergeant had been hit in the neck and was pinching an artery shut with his fingers to keep from bleeding to death. As he moved around the perimeter, the Top heard a sound that simply had no place on a battlefield--somebody was singing. After tracing the sound to a mortar pit, Goddard peered into the emplacement and found the gunners bellowing out one stanza after another as they dropped rounds into the tubes. The "ammo humpers" were also singing as they broke open boxes of ammunition and passed the rounds to the gunners. Naturally, the name of the song was "The Marines Hymn."(52)

One decisive factor in this battle was that Hill 881S was not attacked. Company I did not receive a single mortar round and the reprieve left the Marines free to lend unhindered support to their comrades on 861. The bulk of this fire came from the Company I 81mm mortar section. Since Lieutenant Colonel Alderman and Major Caulfield were concerned about the possibility of their position being attacked, they were careful not to deplete their ammunition. Major Caulfield personally authorized the expenditure of every 20-round lot so he knew exactly how many mortar rounds went out that night--680. The mortar tubes became so hot that the Marines had to use their precious drinking water to keep them cool enough to fire; after the water, the men used fruit juice. When the juice ran out, they urinated on the tubes. The spirited support of Company I and its attached elements played a big part in blunting the attack.(53)

There are two plausible explanations for the enemy's failure to coordinate the attack on Hill 861 with one on 881S. Lieutenant Colonel Alderman and Major Caulfield felt that Captain Dabney's fight on the afternoon of 20 January had crippled the NVA battalion which was slated for the attack on Hill 881S and disrupted the enemy's entire schedule. On the other hand, Company I had emerged from the engagement with relatively light casualties and was in fighting trim on the morning of the 21st. Another possibility was the manner in which Colonel Lownds utilized artillery and aircraft. The regimental commander did not use his supporting arms to break up the attack directly; he left that job up to the defenders themselves. Instead, the

colonel called in massive air and artillery concentrations on points where the enemy would more than likely marshal his reserves. Much of the credit belong to Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly's batteries at the base. One infantry officer on Hill 881S, who observed the fire, described the Marine artillery as "absolutely and positively superb." Throughout the battle, the North Vietnamese assault commander was heard frantically screaming for his reserves--he never received an answer. The fact that the initial attack on 861 was not followed up by another effort lent credence to the theory that the backup force was being cut to pieces to the rear while the assault troops were dying on the wire.(54)

The Marines did not have long to gloat over their victory because at 0530 on the 21st the KSCB was subjected to an intense barrage. Hundreds of 82mm mortar rounds, artillery shells, and 122mm rockets slammed into the compound as Marines dived into bunkers and trenches.(*)(55) Damage at "ground zero" was extensive: several helicopters were destroyed, trucks and tents were riddled, one messhall was flattened, and fuel storage areas were set ablaze. Colonel Lownds' quarters were demolished but, fortunately, the regimental commander was not in his hut at the time. One of the first incoming rounds found its mark scoring a direct hit on the largest ammunition dump, which was situated near the eastern end of the runway. The dump erupted in a series of blinding explosions which rocked the base and belched thousands of burning artillery and mortar rounds into the air. Many of these maverick projectiles exploded on impact and added to the devastation. Thousands of rounds were destroyed and much of this ammunition "cooked off" in the flames for the next 48 hours. In addition, one enemy round hit a cache of tear gas (CS) releasing clouds of the pungent vapor which saturated the entire base.(56)

The main ammunition dump was just inside the perimeter manned by Company B, 1/26, and the 2d Platoon, commanded by

(*) On Hill 881S, Captain Dabney watched several hundred 122mm rockets lift off from the southern slope of 881N--a scant 300 meters beyond the farthest point of his advance the day before. The enemy defensive positions between the two hills were obviously designed to protect these launching sites. At the combat base, the barrage did not catch the Marines completely by surprise; the regimental intelligence section had warned that an enemy attack was imminent and the entire base was on Red Alert.

Second Lieutenant John W. Dillon, was in the hotseat throughout the attack. The unit occupied a trenchline which, at places, passed as close as 30 meters to the dump. In spite of the proximity of the "blast furnace," Lieutenant Dillon's men stayed in their positions, answered with their own mortars, and braced for the ground attack which never came. Throughout the ordeal, the 2d Platoon lines became an impact area for all sizes of duds from the dump which literally filled the trenchline with unexploded ordnance. In addition, the men were pelted by tiny slivers of steel from the exploding antipersonnel ammunition which became embedded in their flak jackets, clothing, and bare flesh.(57)

The fire raging in the main dump also hampered the rest of the 1st Battalion. The 81mm mortar platoon fired hundreds of rounds in retaliation but the ammo carriers had to crawl to and from the pits because of the exploding ammunition. Captain Kenneth W. Pipes, commanding officer of Company B, had to displace his command post three times when each position became untenable. Neither was the battalion CP exempt; at about 1000, a large quantity of C-4 plastic explosives in the blazing dump was touched off and the resulting shock waves cracked the timbers holding up the roof of Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson's command bunker. As the roof settled, several members of the staff were knocked to the floor. For a moment it appeared that the entire overhead would collapse but after sinking about a foot, the cracked timbers held. With a sigh of relief, the men inside quickly shored up the roof and went about their duties.(58)

The sudden onslaught produced a number of heroes, most of whom went unnoticed. Members of Force Logistics Group Bravo, and other personnel permanently stationed at the ammunition dump, charged into the inferno with fire extinguishers and shovels to fight the blaze. Motor transport drivers darted from the safety of their bunkers to move trucks and other vehicles into revetments. Artillerymen quickly manned their guns and began returning fire. The executive officer of 1/13, Major Ronald W. Campbell, ignored the heavy barrage and raced from one shell hole to another analyzing the craters and collecting fragments so that he could determine the caliber of the enemy weapons as well as the direction from which they were being fired. Much of the counterbattery fire was a direct result of his efforts.(59)

Three other artillerymen from Battery C, 1/13, performed an equally heroic feat in the midst of the intense shelling. When the dump exploded, the C/1/13 positions, like those of 1/26,

were showered with hundreds of hot duds which presented a grave danger to the battery. The battery commander, Captain William J. O'Connor, the executive officer, First Lieutenant William L. Everhart, and the supply sergeant, Sergeant Ronnie D. Whiteknight, immediately began picking up the burning rounds and carrying them to a hole approximately 50 meters behind the gun pits. For three hours, these Marines carried out between 75 and 100 duds and disposed of them, knowing that any second one might explode. When the searing clouds of tear gas swept over the battery, many gunners were cut off from their gas masks. Lieutenant Everhart and Sergeant Whiteknight quickly gathered up as many masks as they could carry and distributed them to the men in the gun positions. The "cannon cockers" donned the masks and kept their howitzers in action throughout the attack.(60)

By this time, most of 1/13 had ceased firing counterbattery missions and was supporting the defense force at Khe Sanh Village. An hour after the KSCB came under attack, the Combined Action Company (CACO) and a South Vietnamese Regional Forces (RF) company stationed in the village were hit by elements of the 304th NVA Division. The enemy troops breached the defensive wire, penetrated the compound, and seized the dispensary. Heavy street fighting ensued and, at 0810, the defenders finally drove the enemy force from the village. Later that afternoon, two NVA companies again assaulted the village but, this time, artillery and strike aircraft broke up the attack. Upon request of the defenders, Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly's battalion fired over 1,000 artillery rounds with variable time fuzes which resulted in airbursts over the defensive wire. During the action, a single Marine A-6A "Intruder" knifed through the ground fire and killed about 100 of the attackers. Those enemy soldiers who persisted were taken care of by close-in defensive fires and, when the fighting subsided, an American advisor counted 123 North Vietnamese bodies on or around the barbed wire.(61)

Following the second attack, Colonel Lownds decided to withdraw these isolated units to the confines of the KSCB. The village, which was the seat of the Huong Hoa District Headquarters, was not an ideal defensive position. The Allies were hampered by restricted fields of fire and there was a temple just outside the village which overlooked the perimeter. Most important, a regiment of the 304th NVA Division was operating in the immediate vicinity. The colonel decided that he would rather evacuate the village while he could, instead of waiting until its occupants were surrounded and fighting for their lives. Helicopters flew in and picked up the Marines and U. S. Army advisors; the Vietnamese troops and officials of the local government moved overland.

Upon arrival, the CACO and RF companies, which totaled about 250 men, took up positions in the southwestern sector of the base and were absorbed by FOB-3.(*)(62)

There was one other encounter on the 21st. At 1950, the 2d Platoon, L/3/26, reported 25-30 enemy soldiers crawling toward the wire bordering Red Sector. The Marines opened fire and, within an hour, killed 14 North Vietnamese. Remnants of the attacking force were seen dragging dead and wounded comrades from the battlefield. Cumulative friendly casualties for the day, including those incurred on Hill 861, were 9 killed, 37 wounded and evacuated (Medevaced), plus 38 wounded but returned to duty.(63)

When the events of the 21st were flashed to the world via the news media, many self-appointed experts in the United States began to speak out concerning the feasibility of maintaining the garrison at Khe Sanh. Those who opposed the planned defense felt that the Marines had been able to remain there only at the pleasure of the NVA. They pointed out that, in the preceding months, the installation had been of little concern to the North Vietnamese because it was ineffective as a deterrent to infiltration. The undermanned 26th Marines could not occupy the perimeter, man the hill outposts, and simultaneously conduct the constant, large-unit sweeps necessary to control the area. Therefore, the enemy could simply skirt the base and ignore it. A build-up, however, would make the prize worthwhile for the NVA, which badly needed a crushing victory over the Americans for propaganda purposes. By concentrating forces at Khe Sanh, the theory went, the Allies would be playing into the enemy's hands because the base was isolated and, with Route 9 interdicted, had to be completely supplied by air. Fearing that Khe Sanh would become an American Dien Bien Phu, the critics favored a pull-out.

In Vietnam, where the decision was being made, there was little disagreement. The two key figures, General Westmoreland and General Cushman, "after discussing all aspects of the situation, were in complete agreement from the start."(64) There were several reasons they decided to hold Khe Sanh at that time. The base and adjacent outposts commanded the Khe Sanh Plateau and the main avenue of approach into eastern Quang Tri

(*) The Huong Hoa District Headquarters operated from within the KSCB throughout the siege.



General William C. Westmoreland,
ComUSMACV (Photo courtesy Office of
the Chief of Staff, U. S. Army)



Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman,
Jr., CG, III MAF (USMC Photo A190016)

Province. While the installation was not 100 percent effective as a deterrent to infiltration, it was a solid block to enemy invasion and motorized supply from the west. Had the Allies possessed greater strength in the northern provinces, they might have achieved the same ends with large and frequent airmobile assaults--a concept which General Cushman had advocated for some time. In January 1968, he had neither the helicopter resources, the troops, nor the logistical bases for such operations. The weather was another critical factor because the poor visibility and low overcasts attendant to the monsoon season made helicopter operations hazardous to say the least. Even if the III MAF commander had the materiel and manpower for such large airmobile assaults, the weather precluded any such effort before March or April. Until that time, the job of sealing off Route 9 would have to be left up to the 26th Marines.(65)

An additional consideration for holding the base was the rare and valuable opportunity to engage and destroy an, heretofore, elusive foe. Up to this time, there was hardly a commander in Vietnam who, at one time or another, had not been frustrated in his attempts to box in the slippery NVA and VC units. At Khe Sanh, the enemy showed no desire to hit and run but rather to stand and fight; it was a good idea to oblige him. In effect, the 26th Marines would fix the enemy in position around the base while Allied air and artillery battered him into senselessness. Furthermore, the defense was envisioned as a classic example of economy of force. Although there was conjecture that the NVA was trying to draw American units to the DMZ area, the fact remained that two crack NVA divisions, which otherwise might have participated in the later attacks on Hue and Quang Tri City, were tied down far from the vital internal organs of South Vietnam by one reinforced Marine regiment.(66)

Thus, with only two choices available--withdraw or reinforce --ComUSMACV chose the latter. In his "Report On The War In Vietnam," General Westmoreland stated:

The question was whether we could afford the troops to reinforce, keep them supplied by air, and defeat an enemy far superior in numbers as we waited for the weather to clear, build forward bases, and made preparations for an overland relief expedition. I believed we could do all of those things. With the concurrence of the III Marine Amphibious Force Commander, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., I made the decision to reinforce and hold the area while destroying the enemy with our massive firepower.

and to prepare for offensive operations when the weather became favorable.

General Westmoreland reported his decision to Washington and more troops began to pour into the combat base.(67)

On 22 January, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John F. Mitchell, was transferred to the operational control of the 26th Marines and arrived at 1900 the same day. Ever since the three high ranking NVA officers were killed outside Red Sector, General Tompkins and Colonel Lownds were concerned over the unhealthy interest that the North Vietnamese were showing in the western perimeter. When 1/9 arrived, the colonel directed the battalion commander to establish defensive positions at the rock quarry, 1,500 meters southwest of the strip. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell moved his unit overland and set up a kidney-shaped perimeter around the quarry with his CP perched atop a hill. In addition, he dispatched a platoon from Company A approximately 500 meters further west to set up a combat outpost on a small knob. The 1/9 lines curved near, but did not tie in with, those of L/3/26; the small gap, however, could easily be covered by fire. The western approach was firmly blocked.(68) (See Map 6).

General Tompkins and Colonel Lownds also discussed plans for the opposite side of the compound. This approach would have been the most difficult for the North Vietnamese to negotiate because the terrain east of the runway dropped off sharply to the river below. This steep grade, however, was heavily wooded and provided the enemy with excellent concealment. The NVA troops, masters at the art of camouflage, could have maneuvered dangerously close to the Marine lines before being detected.

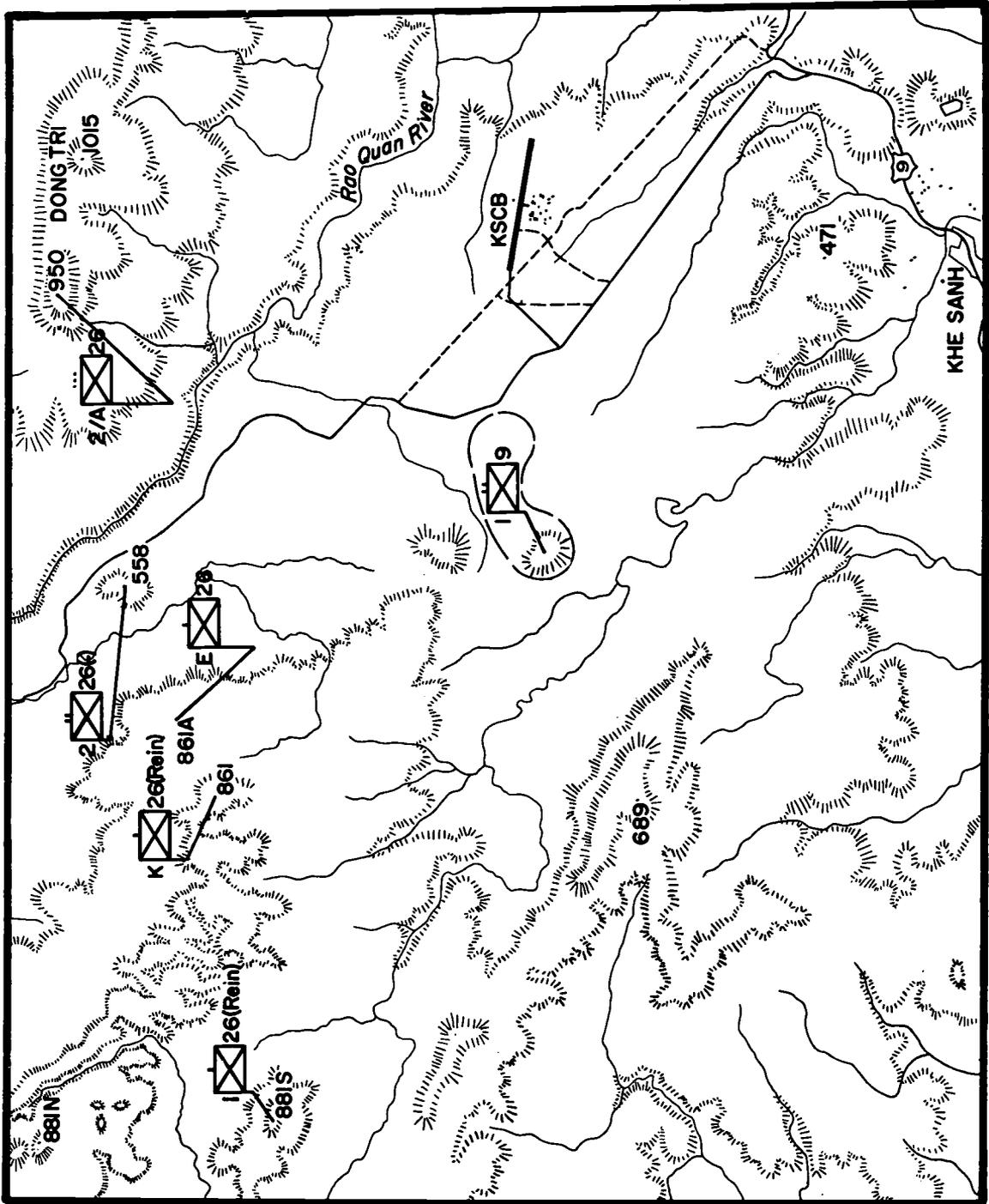
The main reason for concern, however, was the testimony of the cooperative NVA lieutenant who had surrendered on the 20th. According to the lieutenant, the eastern avenue of approach was the key with which the Communists hoped to unlock the Khe Sanh defenses. First, the NVA intended to attack and seize Hills 861 and 881S, both of which would serve as fire support bases. From these commanding positions, the enemy would push into the valley and apply pressure along the northern and western portion of the Marines' perimeter. These efforts, however, were simply a diversion to conceal the main thrust--a regimental ground attack from the opposite quarter. An assault regiment from the 304th Division would skirt the base to the south, hook around to the east, and attack paralleling the runway through the 1/26 lines.



Two key figures in the defense of Khe Sanh: Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins (L), CG, 3d MarDiv, and Colonel David E. Lownds (R), CO, 26th Marines. (Photo courtesy Colonel David E. Lownds)



General Tompkins (L) made helicopter trips into Khe Sanh almost daily in spite of heavy enemy fire. (Photo courtesy David D. Duncan)



MAP 6

LOCATION OF OUTPOSTS

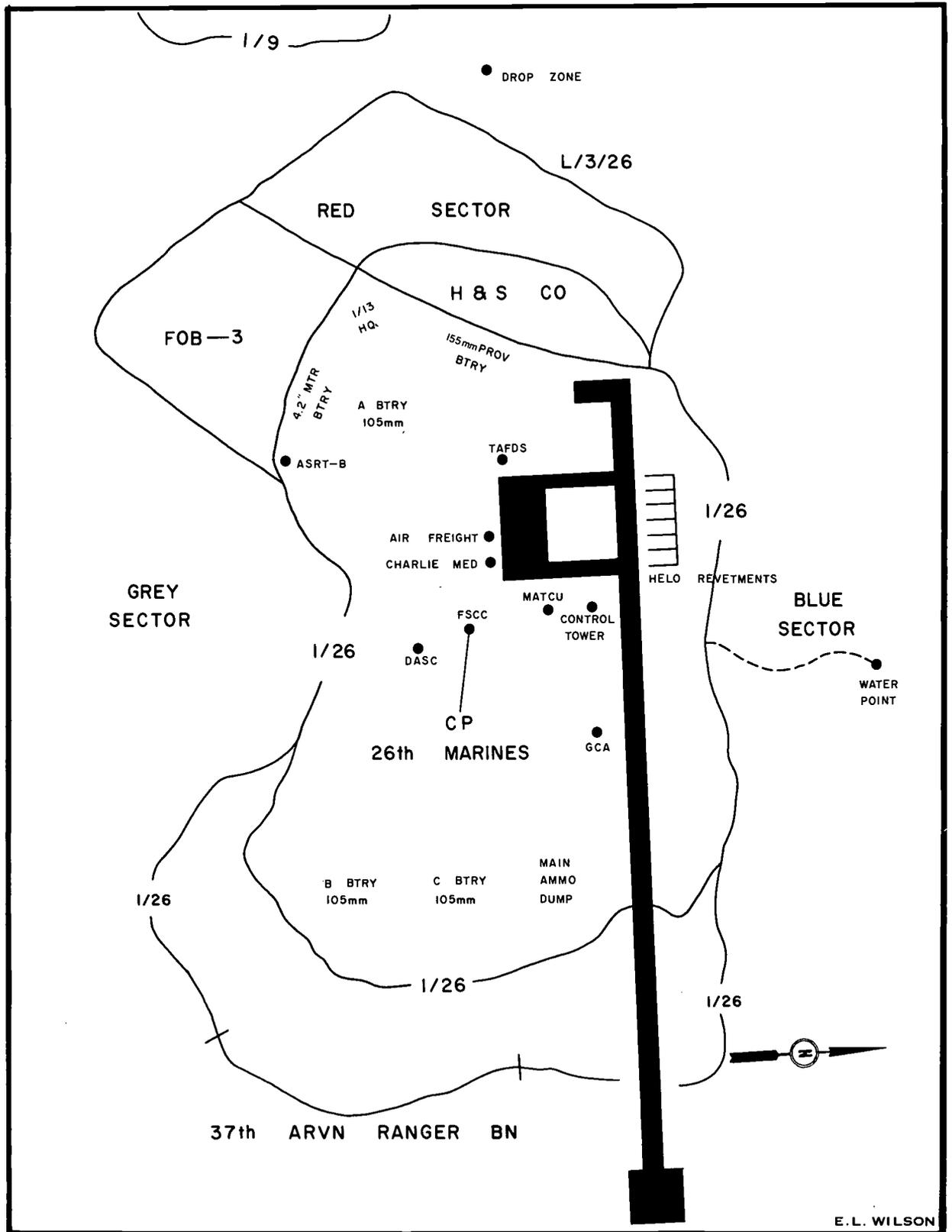
E. L. WILSON

Once the compound was penetrated, the North Vietnamese anticipated that the entire Marine defense system would collapse.(69)

On 27 January, the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion, the fifth and final battalion allotted for Khe Sanh, arrived.(*)(70) Understandably, Colonel Lownds moved the ARVN unit into the eastern portion of the perimeter to reinforce the 1st Battalion. Actually, the Marines were backing-up the South Vietnamese because the Ranger Battalion occupied trenches some 200 meters outside the 1/26 lines. Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson's men had already prepared these defensive positions for the new arrivals. The new trenchline extended from the northeast corner of Blue Sector, looped across the runway, paralleled the inner trenchline of 1/26, and tied back in with the Marine lines on the southeastern corner of Grey Sector. (See Map 7) The only gap was where the runway extended through the ARVN lines; this section was covered by two Ontos. At night, the gap was sealed off with strands of German Tape--a new type of razor-sharp barbed wire which was extremely difficult to breach. The North Vietnamese would now have to penetrate two lines of defense if they approached from the east.(71)

As January drew to a close, the situation at Khe Sanh could be summed up in three words--enemy attack imminent. As a result of rumblings of a large-scale Communist offensive throughout South Vietnam, the scheduled Vietnamese Lunar New Year (TET) ceasefire was cancelled in I Corps and the 26th Marines braced for the inevitable. While they waited, they filled sandbags, dug deeper trenches, reinforced bunkers, conducted local security patrols, and, in general, established a pattern which would remain unbroken for the next two months. The NVA also established a routine as enemy gunners daily shelled the base and hill outposts while assault units probed for a soft spot. Thus the two adversaries faced each other like boxers in a championship bout; one danced around nimbly throwing jabs while the second stood fast waiting to score the counterpunch that would end the fight.(72)

(*) ARVN battalions were considerably smaller than Marine battalions and the 37th Ranger was no exception. Even by Vietnamese standards, the unit was undermanned; it had 318 men when it arrived.



E. L. WILSON

MAP 7

KHE SANH COMBAT BASE

PART IV

THE "SO-CALLED" SIEGE BEGINS

When the Communists launched their TET Offensive on 30 January, they struck in force almost everywhere in South Vietnam except Khe Sanh. Their prime targets were not military installations but the major population centers--36 provincial capitals, 64 district capitals, and 5 autonomous cities. The leaders in Hanoi were apparently becoming dissatisfied with their attempts to win in the South by a protracted war of attrition and decided on one massive stroke to tip the scales in their favor. Consequently, the enemy unleashed some 62,000 troops, many of whom infiltrated the cities disguised as civilians, in hopes that they could foster a public uprising against the central government and encourage mass defections among the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. Virtually all available VC main and local force units were thrown into the initial attacks. With the exception of Hue and Da Nang, NVA units were generally committed a few days later to reinforce the assault troops.(73)

The sudden onslaught initially achieved surprise but, in the final analysis, the overall military effort failed miserably. Allied forces reacted quickly and drove the invaders from the cities and towns, killing approximately 32,000 (as of 11 February) hard-core guerrillas and North Vietnamese soldiers in the process. Many Viet Cong units, with no other orders than to take their initial objectives and hold until reinforcements arrived, were wiped out completely. Ironically, these elite cadres were the backbone of the guerrilla infrastructure in the South which the Communists, up to that point, had tried so hard to preserve. In Saigon and Hue, die-hard remnants held out for several weeks but, for the most part, the attacks were crushed within a few days. The general uprising and mass desertions never materialized; on the contrary, the offensive tended to galvanize the South Vietnamese.(74)

Even though he paid an exorbitant price, the enemy did achieve certain gains. If the Communists' goal was to create sensational headlines which would stun the American people--they succeeded. To the strategists in Hanoi, an important byproduct of any military operation was the associated political ramifications in the United States; namely, how much pressure would certain factions put on their leaders to disengage from the struggle in

South Vietnam. To the delight of the Communists, no doubt, the TET Offensive had a tremendous psychological impact in the U. S. and, as usual, the response of the dissidents was vociferous. Much of the reaction was completely out of proportion to the actual military situation but it had a definite demoralizing effect on the American public--the long-range implications of which are still undetermined.(75)

Another casualty of these nation-wide attacks was the pacification program in rural communities. When the Allies pulled back to clear the cities, they temporarily abandoned portions of the countryside to the enemy. Upon return, they found that progress in the so-called "battle for the hearts and minds of the people" had received a temporary set back.(76)

To achieve these ends, however, the enemy troops brought senseless destruction to Vietnamese cities and heaped more suffering upon an already war-weary populace. Thousands of innocent civilians were killed and hundreds of thousands made homeless--mostly in Saigon/Cholon and Hue. Four days after the initial attacks, the central government formed the Central Recovery Committee which, with U. S. assistance, launched Project RECOVERY to help alleviate the misery of the people. Had this program not been implemented, the Communists might have come much closer to achieving their goal of overthrowing the government. In addition to the destruction in the cities, the enemy violated a sacred religious holiday and, what's worse, actually desecrated a national shrine by turning the majestic Hue Citadel into a bloody battlefield. For these acts, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese earned the deep-seated hatred of many South Vietnamese who in the past had been, at best, neutral.(77)

Whether or not Khe Sanh was, in fact, the ultimate enemy objective or merely a diversion for the TET Offensive has not yet been established with certainty. The U. S. command in Saigon believed that the Communists' goal was to create a general uprising, precipitate mass defections in the RVN armed forces, and then seize power. The concentration of NVA regular forces in the northern two provinces was primarily to support this overall objective but it was also possible that the enemy had a secondary aspiration of shearing off and seizing the Quang Tri-Thua Thien area should his primary effort fail. Thus Khe Sanh was envisioned as an integral part of the master plan, or as General Westmoreland called it "an option play."

Subsequent events tended to vindicate that evaluation. Since

the initial nation-wide attacks had been conducted primarily by Viet Cong guerrillas and main force units, the NVA regular forces remained relatively unscathed and, with two of the four North Vietnamese divisions known to be in I Corps poised around the 26th Marines, there was little doubt as to where the next blow would fall. Furthermore, the enemy's extensive preparations around the base reinforced the belief that this effort was a major offensive and not just a feint. Before investing the garrison, the North Vietnamese dug positions for their long-range artillery pieces. Later, they emplaced countless smaller supporting weapons, established numerous supply depots, and began the ant-like construction of their intricate siege-works. This intensive build-up continued long after most of the fighting associated with the TET Offensive was over.(78)

The enemy had much to gain by taking Khe Sanh. If they could seize any portion of Quang Tri Province, the Communists would have a much stronger bargaining position at any future conference table. In addition, the spectre of Dien Bien Phu which was constantly raised in the American press undoubtedly led the enemy to believe that the coming battle could not only prove successful but decisive. If the garrison fell, the defeat might well turn out to be the coup de grace to American participation in the war. At first, the Marines anticipated a major pitched battle, similar to the one in 1967, but the enemy continued to bide his time and the battle at Khe Sanh settled into one of supporting arms.(79)

At Khe Sanh, the periodic showers of enemy artillery shells were, quite naturally, a major source of concern to General Tompkins and Colonel Lownds and they placed a high priority on the construction of stout fortifications. Understandably, not every newcomer to Khe Sanh immediately moved into a thick bunker or a six-foot trench with overhead cover. The colonel had spent most of his tour with a one-battalion regiment and had prepared positions for that battalion; then, almost overnight, his command swelled to five battalions. The new units simply had to build their own bunkers as quickly as they could.(80)

The regimental commander placed a minimum requirement on his subordinates of providing overhead cover for the troops that would stop, at least, an 82mm mortar round. The FSCC determined that one strip of runway matting and two or three layers of sandbags would fill the requirement. The average bunker usually started as an 8x8 foot dugout with one 6x6 inch timber inserted in each corner and the center for support. The overhead consisted of planks, a strip of runway matting, sandbags, loose dirt,



Marines at the combat base run for cover when warning of enemy rocket or artillery attack is sounded. (USMC Photo A190245)



Machine gunners lie on top of trench cover while they search for enemy movement. (USMC Photo A190929)

and more sandbags. Some enterprising Marines piled on more loose dirt, then took discarded 105mm casings and drove them into the top of the bunker like nails. These casings often caused pre-detonation of the heavier-caliber rounds. The combat engineers attached to the 26th Marines could build one of these bunkers in three or four days; the average infantrymen took longer. Overhead cover for the trenchlines consisted of a strip of matting placed across the top of the trench at intervals and reinforced with sandbags. The defenders could stand up in the trench during periods of inactivity and duck under the matting when enemy rounds started to fall.(81)

The Marines were also faced with another question concerning their defenses: "How large an artillery round could you defend against and still remain within the realm of practicality?" Since the 26th Marines was supplied solely by air, building material was a prime consideration. Matting and sandbags were easy enough to come by but lumber was at a premium. Fortifications which could withstand a hit from an 82mm mortar were a must because the North Vietnamese had an ample supply of these weapons but the base was also being pounded, to a lesser degree, by heavier-caliber guns. With the material available to the 26th Marines, it was virtually impossible to construct a shelter that was thick enough or deep enough to stop the heavy stuff.(82)

This fact was borne out when Colonel Lownds decided to build a new regimental CP bunker. The engineers supplied the specifications for an overhead that would withstand a 122mm rocket; to be on the safe side, the colonel doubled the thickness of the roof. The day before the CP was to be occupied, a 152mm round landed squarely on top of the bunker and penetrated both layers.(83)

The massing of enemy artillery made the hill outposts that much more important. Had they been able to knock the Marines from those summits, the North Vietnamese would have been able to fire right down the throats of the base defenders and make their position untenable. As it was, the companies on Hills 881S, 861, 861A, and 558 not only denied the enemy an unobstructed firing platform from which to pound the installation, they also served as the eyes for the rest of the regiment in the valley which was relatively blind to enemy movement. For observation purposes, Hill 881S was the most strategically located and a discussion of the enemy's heavy weaponry will point out why.

While the 60mm and 82mm mortars were scattered around in proximity of the combat base (roughly within a 2,000-3,000 meter

radius), the NVA rocket sites and artillery pieces were located well to the west, southwest, and northwest, outside of friendly counterbattery range. One particularly awesome and effective weapon was the Soviet-built 122mm rocket, the ballistic characteristics of which had a lot to do with the way the North Vietnamese employed it. When fired, the projectile was fairly accurate in deflection but, because it was powered by a propellant, the biggest margin of error was in range. Consequently, the North Vietnamese preferred to position their launching sites so the gunners could track along the long axis of a given target; thus, longs and shorts would land "in the ballpark." The KSCB hugged the airstrip and was roughly in the shape of a rectangle with the long axis running east and west. This made the optimum firing positions for the 122mm rocket either to the east or west of the base on line with the runway. There was really only one logical choice because the eastern site would have placed the rockets within range of the Americans' 175s and extended the enemy's supply lines from Laos. To the west, Hills 881S or 861 would have been ideal locations because in clear weather those vantage points provided an excellent view of Khe Sanh and were almost directly on line with the airstrip. Unfortunately for the NVA, the Marines had squatters' rights on those pieces of real estate and were rather hostile to claim jumpers. As an alternative, the North Vietnamese decided on 881N but this choice had one drawback since the line of sight between that northern peak and the combat base was masked by the top of Hill 861. Nevertheless, the enemy emplaced hundreds of launching sites along its slopes and throughout the siege approximately 5,000 122mm rockets rained on Khe Sanh from 881N.(84)

Because of their greater range, the enemy's 130mm and 152mm artillery batteries were located even further to the west. These guns were cleverly concealed in two main firing positions. One was on Co Roc Mountain which was southwest of where Route 9 crossed the Laotian border; the other area was 305, so called because it was on a bearing of 305 degrees (west-northwest) from Hill 881S at a range of about 10,000 meters. While the heavy caliber artillery rounds which periodically ripped into the base were usually referred to as originating from Co Roc, 305 was the source of about 60-70 percent of this fire, probably because it was adjacent to a main supply artery. Both sites were vulnerable only to air attack and were extremely difficult to pinpoint because of the enemy's masterful job of camouflage, his cautious employment, and the extreme distance from friendly observation posts. The NVA gunners fired only a few rounds every hour so that continuous muzzle flashes did not betray their positions and, after each round, quickly scurried out to cover the guns with protective

nets and screens. Some pieces, mounted on tracks, were wheeled out of caves in Co Roc Mountain, fired, and returned immediately. Though never used in as great a quantity as the rockets and mortars, these shells wreaked havoc at Khe Sanh because there was very little that they could not penetrate; even duds went about four feet into the ground.(85)

The 3/26 elements on Hill 881S were a constant thorn in the enemy's side because the men on that most isolated of the Marine outposts could observe all three of the main NVA firing positions --881N, 305, and Co Roc. When rockets lifted off of 881N or the guns at Co Roc lashed out, the men of Company I could see the flashes and provided advance warning to the base. Whenever possible they directed retaliatory air strikes on the offenders.(*). Whenever the enemy artillery at 305 opened up, the muzzle flashes were hard to see because of the distance and the everpresent dust from air strikes, but the rounds made a loud rustling noise as they arched directly over 881S on the way to Khe Sanh. When the Marines heard the rounds streak overhead, they passed a warning to the base over the 3d Battalion tactical radio net, provided the net was not clogged with other traffic. The message was short and to the point: "Arty, Arty, Co Roc" or "Arty, Arty, 305."(86)

At the base the Marines had devised a crude but effective early warning system for such attacks. Motor transport personnel had mounted a horn from a two-and-a-half ton truck in the top of a tree and the lead wires were attached to two beer can lids. When a message was received from 881S, a Marine, who monitored the radio, pressed the two lids together and the blaring horn gave advanced warning of the incoming artillery rounds. The radio operator relayed the message over the regimental net and then dived into a hole. Men in the open usually had from five to eighteen seconds to find cover or just hit the deck before "all hell broke loose." When poor visibility obscured the view between 881S and the base, the radio operator usually picked himself up, dusted off, and jokingly passed a three-word message to Company I which indicated that the rounds had arrived on schedule--"Roger India...Splash."(87)

(*) One Marine, Corporal Robert J. Arrota, using a PRC-41 UHF radio which put him in direct contact with the attack pilots, personally controlled over 200 air strikes without the aid of a Tactical Air Controller (Airborne); his peers gave him the title of "The Mightiest Corporal In The World."



A Marine forward observer keeps a watchful eye on enemy trenches.
(USMC Photo A190933)



"Arty, Arty, Co Roc" was the title of a popular folksong in 3/26.
(Photo courtesy David D. Duncan)



Colors over Hill 881S. (Photo courtesy Major William H. Dabney)



Water on Hill 881S was scarce and beards flourished. 2dLt Richard M. Foley, XO of India, 3/26. (Photo courtesy Major William H. Dabney)

The fact that Company I on 881S was the fly in the enemy's ointment was no secret, especially to the enemy. As a result, North Vietnamese gunners made the Marines' existence there a veritable nightmare. Although no official tally of incoming rounds was recorded, Captain Dabney's position took a much more severe pounding than any of the other hill outposts. Volume, however, was only part of the story because the incoming was almost always the heavier stuff. The hill received little 60mm or 82mm mortar fire but a deluge of 120mm mortar and 100mm artillery rounds. There was also a smattering of 152mm shells from Co Roc. The shelling was the heaviest when helicopters made resupply runs.

The firing position which plagued the Marines the most was located to the southwest of the hill in a U-shaped draw known as "the Horseshoe." There were at least two NVA 120mm mortars in this area which, in spite of an avalanche of American bombs and artillery shells, were either never knocked out or were frequently replaced. These tubes were registered on the hill and harassed Company I constantly. Anyone caught above ground when one of the 120s crashed into the perimeter was almost certain to become a casualty because the explosion produced an extremely large fragmentation pattern. Captain Dabney figured that it took one layer of runway matting, eight of sandbags, and one of either rocks or 105mm casings to prevent penetration of a 120mm with a quick fuze--nothing the Marines had on 881S could stop a round with a delayed fuze. Because of the shape of the hill, the summit was the only defensible terrain and thus provided the enemy with a compact target; this often resulted in multiple casualties when the big rounds landed within the perimeter. The only thing that the Marines had going for them was that they could frequently spot a tell-tale flash of an artillery piece or hear the "thunk" when a mortar round left the tube but the heavy shells took their toll. On Hill 881S alone, 40 Marines were killed throughout the siege and over 150 were wounded at least once.(88)

Considering the sheer weight of the bombardment, enemy shells caused a relatively small number of fatalities at the base. Besides the solid fortifications, there were two factors which kept casualties to a minimum. The first was the flak jacket--a specially designed nylon vest reinforced with overlapping fiberglass plates. The jacket would not stop a high-velocity bullet but it did protect a man's torso and most vital organs against shell fragments. The bulky vest was not particularly popular in hot weather when the Marines were on patrol but

in a static, defensive position the jacket was ideal. The second factor was the high quality of leadership at platoon and company level. Junior officers and staff noncommissioned officers (NCOs) constantly moved up and down the lines to supervise the younger, inexperienced Marines, many of whom had only recently arrived in Vietnam. The veteran staff NCOs, long known as the "backbone of the Corps," knew from experience that troops had to be kept busy. A man who was left to ponder his problems often developed a fatalistic attitude that could increase his reaction time and decrease his life time. The crusty NCOs did not put much stock in the old cliché: "If a round has your name on it, there's nothing you can do." Consequently, the Marines worked; they dug trenches, filled sandbags, ran for cover, and returned to fill more sandbags. Morale remained high and casualties, under the circumstances, were surprisingly low.(89)

Although the NVA encircled the KSCB and applied constant pressure, the defenders were never restricted entirely to the confines of the perimeter. The term "siege," in the strictest sense of the word, was somewhat of a misnomer because the Allies conducted a number of daily patrols, often as far as 500 meters from their own lines.(*)(90) These excursions were primarily for security and reconnaissance purposes since General Tompkins did not want his men engaged in a slugging match with the enemy outside the defensive wire. If the North Vietnamese were encountered, the Marines broke contact and withdrew, while supporting arms were employed.(91)

One vital area was the drop zone. When the weather turned bad in February, the KSCB was supplied primarily by parachute drops. Colonel Lownds set up his original zone inside the FOB-3 compound but later moved it several hundred meters west of Red Sector because he was afraid that the falling pallets might injure someone. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell's 1/9 was given responsibility for security of the drop zone and his patrols conducted daily sweeps along the periphery of the drop area to flush out enemy troops who might try to disrupt the collection of supplies. In addition, combat engineers swept through the zone each morning and cleared out any mines the enemy set in during the night. Thus the defenders at Khe Sanh were never

(*) Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell, whose battalion held the rock quarry perimeter, later commented that his troops patrolled out to 1,200 meters. The units at the base never went that far until the siege was lifted.

completely hemmed-in, but the regimental commander admitted that any expedition beyond sight of the base was an invitation to trouble.(92)

The Allies did more than prepare defenses and conduct patrols because the NVA launched three of its heaviest ground attacks during the first week in February. In the predawn hours of 5 February, the North Vietnamese lashed out at the Marine base and adjacent outposts with nearly 200 artillery rounds while a battalion from the 325C NVA Division assaulted Hill 861A. Colonel Lownds immediately placed all units on Red Alert and, within minutes, 1/13 was returning fire in support of E/2/26.

The fight on Hill 861A was extremely bitter. At 0305 the North Vietnamese opened up on Captain Breeding's positions with a tremendous 82mm mortar barrage. This was followed by continuous volleys of RPG rounds which knocked out several Marine crew-served weapons and shielded the advance of the NVA sappers and assault troops. The North Vietnamese blew lanes through the barbed wire along the northern perimeter and slammed into the Company E lines. Second Lieutenant Donald E. Shanley's 1st Platoon bore the brunt of the attack and reeled back to supplementary positions. Quickly the word filtered back to the company CP that the enemy was inside the wire and Captain Breeding ordered that all units employ tear gas in defense but the North Vietnamese were obviously "hopped up" on some type of narcotic and the searing fumes had very little effect. Following the initial assault there was a brief lull in the fighting. The NVA soldiers apparently felt that, having secured the northernmost trenchline, they owned the entire objective and stopped to sift through the Marine positions for souvenirs. Magazines and paperbacks were the most popular. Meanwhile, the temporary reversal only served to enrage the Marines. Following a shower of grenades, Lieutenant Shanley and his men charged back into their original positions and swarmed all over the surprised enemy troops.(93)

The counterattack quickly deteriorated into a melee that resembled a bloody, waterfront barroom brawl--a style of fighting not completely alien to most Marines. Because the darkness and ground fog drastically reduced visibility, hand-to-hand combat was a necessity. Using their knives, bayonets, rifle butts, and fists, the men of the 1st Platoon ripped into the hapless North Vietnamese with a vengeance. Captain Breeding, a veteran of the Korean conflict who had worked his way up through the ranks, admitted that, at first, he was concerned over how his younger, inexperienced Marines would react in their first fight. As it

turned out, they were magnificent. The captain saw one of his men come face to face with a North Vietnamese in the inky darkness; the young American all but decapitated his adversary with a crushing, round-house right to the face, then leaped on the flattened soldier and finished the job with a knife. Another man was jumped from behind by a North Vietnamese who grabbed him around the neck and was just about to slit his throat, when one of the Marine's buddies jabbed the muzzle of his M-16 between the two combatants. With his selector on full automatic, he fired off a full magazine; the burst tore huge chunks from the back of the embattled Marine's flak jacket but it also cut the North Vietnamese in half. Since the fighting was at such close quarters, both sides used hand grenades at extremely short-range. The Marines had the advantage because of their armored vests and they would throw a grenade, then turn away from the blast, hunch up, and absorb the fragments in their flak jackets and the backs of their legs. On several occasions, Captain Breeding's men used this technique and "blew away" enemy soldiers at less than 10 meters.(94)

No one engaged in the donnybrook was exactly sure just how long it lasted--all were too busy fighting to check their watches. More than likely, the enemy was inside the wire less than a half hour. During the fighting, Captain Breeding fed fire team-sized elements from the 2d and 3d Platoons into the fray from both flanks of the penetration. The newcomers appeared to be afraid that they might miss all the action and tore into the enemy as if they were making up for lost time. Even though the E/2/26 company commander was no newcomer to blood and gore, he was awed by the ferocity of the attack. Captain Breeding later said: "It was like watching a World War II movie. Charlie didn't know how to cope with it...we walked all over them."(95) Those dazed NVA soldiers who survived the vicious onslaught retreated into another meatgrinder; as they ran from the hill, they were blasted by recoilless rifle fire from 2/26 which was located on Hill 558.

At approximately 0610, the North Vietnamese officers rallied the battered remnants and tried again, but the second effort was also stopped cold. By this time, Captain Breeding, who was busier than the proverbial one-armed paper hanger, was assisting in the coordination of fire support from five separate sources (i.e. Hills 861A, 881S, 558, the KSCB, and the 175mm gun bases). The Marines of Captain Dabney's I/3/26, located on Hill 881S provided extremely effective and enthusiastic support throughout the attack. In three hours, Captain Dabney's men pumped out close to 1,100 rounds from only three 81mm mortars, and the tubes

became so hot that they actually glowed in the dark. (*) Again, the bulk of the heavy artillery fire, along with radar controlled bombing missions, was placed on the northern avenues leading to the hill positions. The enemy units, held in reserve, were thus shredded by the bombardment as they moved up to continue the attack. (96)

After the second assault fizzled out, the North Vietnamese withdrew, but enemy gunners shelled the base and outposts throughout the day. At 1430, replacements from 2/26 were helilifted to Hill 861A. Captain Breeding had lost seven men, most of whom were killed in the opening barrage, and another 35 were medevaced so the new arrivals brought E/2/26 back up to normal strength. On the other hand, the NVA suffered 109 known dead; many still remained in the 1st Platoon area where they had been shot, slashed, or bludgeoned to death. As near as Captain Breeding could tell, he did not lose a single man during the fierce hand-to-hand struggle; all American deaths were apparently the result of the enemy's mortar barrage and supporting fire. The Marines never knew how many other members of the 325C NVA Division had fallen as a result of the heavy artillery and air strikes but the number was undoubtedly high. All in all, it had been a bad day for the Communists. (97)

The North Vietnamese took their revenge in the early morning hours of 7 February; their victims were the defenders of the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. At 0042, an American advisor reported that the installation was under heavy attack by enemy tanks. This was the first time that the NVA had employed its armor in the south and, within 13 minutes, 9 PT-76 Soviet-built tanks churned through the defensive wire, rumbled over the anti-personnel minefields, and bulled their way into the heart of the compound. (**)(98) A battalion from the 66th Regiment, 304th NVA Division, equipped with satchel charges, tear gas, and flame-throwers, followed with an aggressive infantry assault that was coordinated with heavy attacks by fire on the 26th Marines. Colonel Lownds placed the base on Red Alert and the FSCC called in immediate artillery and air in support of the beleaguered

(*) The men of Company I used the same methods to cool the mortar tubes that they used during the attack against 861 on 21 January.

(**) The defenders later reported knocking out at least one and probably two tanks with rocket launchers.

Lang Vei garrison. Although the Marines responded quickly, the defensive fires had little effect because, by that time, the enemy had overrun the camp. (*) (99) The defenders who survived buttoned themselves up in bunkers and, at 0243, called for artillery fire to dust off their own positions. (100)

Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly's artillerymen responded with scores of deadly air bursts which peppered the target area with thousands of fragments. The 1/13 batteries fired over 300 rounds that morning and the vast fire superiority was echoed in the radio transmission of one Lang Vei defender who said: "We don't know what you're using but for God's sake keep it up." That was one of the last transmissions to Khe Sanh because, at 0310, the Marines lost communications with the camp. (101).

Part of Colonel Lownds' mission as coordinator of all friendly forces in the Khe Sanh area was to provide artillery support for Lang Vei and, if possible, to reinforce the camp in case of attack. Under the circumstances, a relief in strength was out of the question. In early January, when M/3/26 was in reserve, Lieutenant Colonel Alderman and Major Caulfield had conducted a personal reconnaissance of Route 9 between the KSCB and Lang Vei to determine the feasibility of moving a large unit overland. Their opinion was that any such attempt would be suicidal because the terrain bordering Route 9 was so well suited for an ambush it was an "NVA dream." Any column moving down the road, especially at night, would undoubtedly have been ambushed. (**)(102) If the Marines went directly over the mountains, they would have to hack through the dense growth and waste precious hours. (***)(103) A

(*) The 26th Marines FSCC had prepared extensive defensive fire plans for the Lang Vei Camp. In the early stages of the attack, the camp commander did not request artillery and later asked for only a few concentrations. He never asked for the entire schedule to be put into effect.

(**) Documents taken off a dead NVA officer later in the battle indicated that the enemy hoped that the attack on Lang Vei would draw the Marines out of Khe Sanh so he could destroy the relief column.

(***) In November 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson, on direction of the regimental commander, had sent a rifle company to determine possible direct routes through the jungle. The company commander, Captain John N. Raymond, reported that his unit, avoiding well-used trails to preclude ambush, had made the trip in about 19 hours.

large-scale heliborne effort was ruled out because the North Vietnamese apparently anticipated such a move and withdrew their tanks to the only landing zones near the camp which were suitable for such an operation. Even with tactical aircraft providing suppressive fire, a helo assault into the teeth of enemy armor was ill-advised. The most important factor, however, was that NVA units in the area greatly outnumbered any force Colonel Lownds could commit.(104)

Since a relief in force was undesirable, plans for a hit and run rescue attempt were quickly drawn up at General Cushman's headquarters. Once General Westmoreland had given the green light, Major General Norman J. Anderson, commanding the 1st MAW and Colonel Jonathan F. Ladd of the U. S. Army Special Forces, worked out the details. Two major points agreed upon were that the helicopters employed in the operation would be those which were not essential to the 26th Marines at the moment and that Marine fixed-wing support would be provided.(105)

As soon as it was light, the survivors of the Lang Vei garrison managed to break out of their bunkers and work their way to the site of an older camp some 400-500 meters to the east. Later that same day, a raiding party composed of 40 CIDG personnel and 10 U. S. Army Special Forces advisors from FOB-3 boarded Quang Tri-based MAG-36 helicopters and took off for Lang Vei. A flight of Huey gunships, led by Lieutenant Colonel William J. White, Commanding Officer of Marine Observation Squadron 6, as well as jet aircraft escorted the transport choppers. While the jets and Hueys covered their approach, the helicopters swooped into a small strip at the old camp and took on survivors, including 15 Americans. In spite of the heavy suppressive fire provided by the escorts, three transport helos suffered battle damage during the evacuation. One overloaded chopper, flown by Captain Robert J. Richards of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 262, had to make the return trip to Khe Sanh at treetop level because the excess weight prevented the pilot from gaining altitude.(106)

(*) On the return trip to the KSCB, Captain Richards flew over the outskirts of Khe Sanh Village. A NVA soldier suddenly stepped out of one hut and sprayed the low-flying chopper with a burst from his AK-47 assault rifle. The rounds ripped out part of Richards' instrument panel and one bullet zinged about two inches in front of his nose before passing through the top of the cockpit. A Marine gunner on the CH-46 quickly cut down

There was a large number of indigenous personnel--both military and civilian--who could not get out on the helicopters and had to move overland to Khe Sanh. A portion of these were members of the Laotian Volunteer Battalion 33 which on 23 January had been overrun at Ban Houei San, Laos (near the Laotian/South Vietnam border) by three NVA battalions. The remnants fled across the border and took refuge at Lang Vei and when the Special Forces camp fell, the Laotians continued their trek to the east with a host of other refugees. At 0800 on the 8th, about 3,000 approached the southern perimeter at Khe Sanh and requested admittance. Colonel Lownds, fearing that NVA infiltrators were in their midst, denied them entrance until each was searched and processed. This took place near the FOB-3 compound after which some of the refugees were evacuated. The Laotians were eventually returned to their own country.(107)

Also on the morning of 8 February, elements of the 101D Regiment, 325C Division launched the first daylight attack against the 26th Marines. At 0420, a reinforced battalion hit the 1st Platoon, A/1/9, which occupied Hill 64 some 500 meters west of the 1/9 perimeter. Following their usual pattern, the North Vietnamese tried to disrupt the Marines' artillery support with simultaneous bombardment of the base. To prevent friendly reinforcements from reaching the small hill the enemy also shelled the platoon's parent unit and, during the fight, some 350 mortar and artillery rounds fell on the 1/9 positions. The NVA assault troops launched a two-pronged attack against the northwestern and southwestern corners of the A/1/9 outpost and either blew the barbed wire with bangalore torpedoes or threw canvas on top of the obstacles and rolled over them. The enemy soldiers poured into the trenchline and attacked the bunkers with RPGs and satchel charges. They also emplaced machine guns at the edge of the penetrations and pinned down those Marines in the eastern half of the perimeter who were trying to cross over the hill and reinforce their comrades.(108)

The men in the northeastern sector, led by the platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Terence R. Roach, Jr., counterattacked

the North Vietnamese but the damage had already been done. Even though he was shaken by the experience, the pilot nursed his crippled bird back to the base and landed safely. Once on the ground, he quickly switched helicopters and returned to Lang Vei for another evacuation mission. For his actions during the day, Captain Richards was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

down the trenchline and became engaged in savage hand-to-hand fighting. While rallying his troops and directing fire from atop an exposed bunker, Lieutenant Roach was mortally wounded. From sheer weight of numbers, the North Vietnamese gradually pushed the Marines back until the enemy owned the western half of the outpost. At that point, neither side was able to press the advantage. Pre-registered mortar barrages from 1/9 and artillery fire from the KSCB had isolated the NVA assault units from any reinforcements but at the same time the depleted 1st Platoon was not strong enough to dislodge the enemy.(109)

One Marine had an extremely close call during the fight but lived to tell about it. On the northern side of the perimeter, Private First Class Michael A. Barry of the 1st Squad was engaged in a furious hand grenade duel with the NVA soldiers when a ChiCom grenade hit him on top of the helmet and landed at the young Marine's feet. PFC Barry quickly picked it up and drew back to throw but the grenade went off in his hand. Had it been an American M-26 grenade, the private would undoubtedly have been blown to bits but ChiCom grenades frequently produced an uneven frag pattern. In this case, the bulk of the blast went down and away from the Marine's body; Barry had the back of his right arm, his back, and his right leg peppered with metal fragments but he did not lose any fingers and continued to function for the rest of the battle.(110)

In another section of the trenchline, Lance Corporal Robert L. Wiley had an equally hair-raising experience. Wiley, a shell-shock victim, lay flat on his back in one of the bunkers which had been overrun by the enemy. His eardrums had burst, he was temporarily paralyzed and his glazed eyes were fixed in a corpse-like stare but the Marine was alive and fully aware of what was going on around him. Thinking that Wiley was dead, the North Vietnamese were only interested in rummaging through his personal effects for souvenirs. One NVA soldier found the Marine's wallet and took out several pictures including a snapshot of his family gathered around a Christmas tree. After pocketing their booty, the North Vietnamese moved on; Lance Corporal Wiley was later rescued by the relief column.(111)

At 0730, Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell committed a second platoon, headed by the Company A commander, Captain Henry J. M. Radcliffe, to the action. By 0900, the relief force had made its way to the eastern slope of the small hill and established contact with the trapped platoon. During the advance, Companies B and D, along with one section of tanks, delivered murderous

direct fire to the flanks and front of Captain Radcliffe's column, breaking up any attempt by the enemy to interdict the linkup. After several flights of strike aircraft had passed the reverse slope of the hill, the company commander led his combined forces in a frontal assault over the crest and, within 15 minutes, drove the North Vietnamese from the outpost. Automatic weapons chopped down many North Vietnamese as they fled from the hill. The battered remnants of the enemy force retreated to the west and, once in the open, were also taken under fire by the rest of the Marine battalion. In addition, the artillery batteries at KSCB contributed to the slaughter and, when the smoke cleared, 150 North Vietnamese were dead. Although the platoon lines were restored, Colonel Lownds decided to abandon the position and, at 1200, the two units withdrew with their casualties. Marine losses that morning on the outpost were 21 killed and 26 wounded; at the base, 5 were killed and 6 wounded.(112)

During the next two weeks, the NVA mounted no major ground attack but continued to apply pressure on the KSCB. There were daily clashes along the Marine lines but these were limited to small fire fights, sniping incidents, and probes against the wire. A decrease in activity along the various infiltration routes indicated that the enemy had completed his initial build-up and was busily consolidating positions from which to launch an all-out effort. The Allies continued to improve their defenses and by mid-February most units occupied positions with three or four layers of barbed wire, dense minefields, special detection devices, deep trenches, and mortar-proof bunkers. The battle reverted to a contest of supporting arms and the North Vietnamese stepped up their shelling of the base, especially with direct fire weapons. Attempts to silence the enemy guns were often frustrated because the Marines were fighting two battles during February--one with the NVA, the other with the weather.(113)

PART V

THE AIRLIFT

The weather at Khe Sanh throughout February could be characterized in one word--miserable. General Tompkins remarked that, for combat purposes, the weather was the worst that he'd ever seen. The northeast monsoons had long since spilled over into the Khe Sanh Valley and every morning the base was shrouded with ground fog and low scud layers which dissipated around 1000 or 1100. When the sun finally managed to burn through, the cloud ceiling retreated slightly but still hovered low enough to prevent the unrestricted use of airborne artillery spotters and strike aircraft. It was during these periods, when the overcast was between 100 and 500 feet, that enemy artillery, rocket, and mortar fire was the heaviest. The NVA forward observers, perched along the lower slopes of the surrounding hills, called in and adjusted barrages with little fear of retaliation against their own gun positions. Later in the afternoon, when the fog rolled in again and obscured the enemy's view, the incoming tapered off.(*)(114)

The Marines adjusted their schedule accordingly. They usually worked under the cover of the haze in the morning, went underground during the midday shelling, and returned to their duties later in the afternoon. While the extremely low cloud cover occasionally befriended the men at the base, it constantly plagued the pilots whose mission was to resupply the 26th Marines.

The job of transporting enough "bullets, beans, and bandages" to sustain the 6,680 Khe Sanh defenders fell to the C-130s of Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 152 and the U. S. Air Force 834th Air Division; the C-123s of the 315th Air Commando Wing; the UH-34, Ch-46, and UH-1E helicopters of Marine Aircraft Group 36 (MAG-36); and the CH-53 choppers of MAG-16(**)(115)

(*) The weather during February was bad for operations but not particularly uncomfortable. The mean temperature was 71 degrees, the average humidity was 92 percent, and an average weekly rainfall was .04 inches. The wind was out of the east with an average velocity of 6 miles per hour.

(**) Organizationally, the USAF C-130s belonged to the 315th



Ground fog in the morning and late afternoon shrouded the base obscuring the view of both the enemy and the Marines. (Photo courtesy David D. Duncan)



The reduced visibility from fog and haze hampered air operations. Crews of Marine UH-1E gunships wait for ceiling to lift. (Photo courtesy David D. Duncan)

Even under ideal circumstances, the airlift would have been a massive undertaking. The difficulties, however, were compounded by the poor visibility which was below minimum for airfield operations 40 percent of the time and the heavy volume of anti-aircraft and artillery fire directed at the incoming transports. The NVA had moved several anti-aircraft units into the hills east of the airstrip forcing the C-130 Hercules, the C-123 Providers, and the helicopters to run the gauntlet during their final approach. Under cover of the heavy fog, some audacious NVA gun crews positioned their anti-aircraft weapons just off the eastern threshold of the runway and fired in the blind whenever they heard the drone of incoming planes. Several aircraft were hit while on GCA final and completely in the soup. (*) (116) Immediately after touchdown, the aircraft were subjected to intense mortar and rocket fire; in fact, the incoming was so closely synchronized with their arrival, the fixed-wing transports were nicknamed "mortar magnets" by the Marines. (117)

The key to survival for the pilots was a steep approach through the eastern corridor, a short roll-out, and a speedy turnaround after landing. A small ramp paralleled the western end of the strip which the transport crews used as an unloading point. After roll-out, the pilot turned off the runway onto the easternmost taxiway, then wheeled onto the ramp while the loadmasters shoved the pallets of supplies out the back. (**) All outgoing passengers were loaded on the double because the

Air Division but that unit did not operate in Vietnam. Five to seven aircraft from each of the 315th's squadrons were on temporary duty in Vietnam and were under the operational control of the 834th Air Division. The 315th Air Commando Wing and its C-123s were organizationally part of the 834th.

(*) One NVA gun crew came in too close for its own good. The 1/26 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson, dispatched a platoon from Company D to attack this position which was off the northeastern end of the airstrip. While the 81mm mortars of 1/26 provided support, the platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Daniel L. McGravey, and his men aggressively assaulted the position. During a brisk fire fight, they killed several North Vietnamese, captured the anti-aircraft weapon, and took the gunner prisoner.

(**) If a pilot made his approach from the west, which was not often the case, he had to taxi all the way back down the runway to the loading ramp.



View of airstrip at Khe Sanh facing east.
(Photo courtesy David D. Duncan)



U. S. Air Force C-130 about to touch down after approaching from the east. (Photo courtesy David D. Duncan)

planes rarely stopped rolling. The pilot completed the loop by turning back onto the runway via the western taxiway and took off in the opposite direction from which he landed. It was not uncommon for the entire circuit to be completed within three minutes; even then, the planes were tracked by exploding mortar rounds.(118)

On 10 February, a tragedy occurred which resulted in a drastic alteration of the unloading process. A Marine C-130, heavily laden with bladders of fuel for the 26th Marines, was making its approach to the field under intense fire. Just before the giant bird touched down, the cockpit and fuel bags were riddled by enemy bullets. With flames licking at one side, the stricken craft careened off the runway 3,100 feet from the approach end, spun around, and was rocked by several muffled explosions. The C-130 then began to burn furiously. Crash crews rushed to the plane and started spraying it with foam. The pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Henry Wildfang, and his copilot suffered minor burns as they scrambled out the overhead hatch in the cockpit. Fire fighters in specially designed heat suits dashed into the flaming debris and pulled several injured crewmen and passengers to safety--rescue attempts came too late for six others. One of those killed in the crash, Lieutenant Colonel Carl E. Peterson, the 1st MAW Engineer Officer, was a reserve officer who only a few months before had volunteered for active duty. As a result of this accident and damage sustained by other transports while on the ground, C-130 landings at Khe Sanh were suspended.(119)

With the field closed to C-130s, a U. S. Air Force innovation--the Low Altitude Parachute Extraction System or LAPES--was put into effect. This self-contained system, which had been used extensively during the renovation of the airstrip in the fall of 1967, enabled the aircraft to unload their cargo without landing. When making a LAPES run, the Hercules pilot made his approach from the east during which he opened the tail ramp and deployed a reefed cargo parachute. Prior to touchdown, he added just enough power to hold the aircraft about five feet above the ground. As the plane skimmed over the runway and approached the intended extraction point, the pilot electrically opened the streaming chute which was attached to the roller-mounted cargo pallets. The sudden jolt of the blossoming chute snatched the cargo from the rear hatch and the pallets came to a skidding halt on the runway. The pilot then jammed the throttles to the firewall, eased back on the yoke, and executed a high-angle, westerly pull-out to avoid ground fire while the Marines moved



Death of a Hercules. A C-130 of Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 152 burns after crashing at the base. (Photo courtesy David D. Duncan)



Crash crew at Khe Sanh pours foam on a burning CH-46 helicopter following an enemy artillery attack. (USMC Photo A190350)

onto the runway with forklifts and quickly gathered in the supplies. The system was quite ingenious and allowed the aircraft to pass through the V-ring in a matter of seconds.(*). Even though the airmen could not control the skidding pallets after release, some pilots perfected their individual technique and were able to place the cargo on a 25-meter square with consistency. On one occasion, however, an extraction chute malfunctioned and the cargo rocketed off the western end of the runway; the eight-ton pallet of lumber smashed into a messhall located near the end of the strip and crushed three Marines to death.(120)

Another technique--the Ground Proximity Extraction System or GPES--was also used but to a lesser degree than the LAPES. (15 GPES deliveries during the siege as compared to 52 LAPES.) Both utilized the low approach but with GPES the cargo was extracted by a hook extended from a boom at the rear of the aircraft. As the C-130 swooped low over the runway, the pilot tried to snag an arresting cable similar to the one used on aircraft carriers; only his hook was attached to the cargo bundles and not the plane. Upon engagement, the pallets were jerked from the rear hatch and came to a dead stop on the runway. With the GPES, the chance of a pallet skidding out of control or overturning was greatly reduced. The only problem that occurred was not with the system itself but with faulty installation. The Marines who initially emplaced the GPES were frequently chased away from their work by incoming mortar rounds and, as a result of the periodic interruptions, the cable was not anchored properly. The first C-130 that snagged the wire ripped the arresting gear out by the roots. After the initial bugs were remedied, the system worked so successfully that, on one pass, a load containing 30 dozen eggs was extracted without a single eggshell being cracked.(121)

Most of the time, however, the low overcast precluded the use of either extraction system and the preponderance of supplies was delivered by paradrops. This technique called for close air/ground coordination and the C-130 pilots relied on the Marine Air Traffic Control Unit (MATCU) at Khe Sanh to guide them in to the drop zones. The Marine ground controller lined the aircraft up on the long axis of the runway for a normal instrument approach and when the Hercules passed a certain point over the

(*) V-ring is a term used on the rifle range to describe the bull's-eye of a target.

eastern threshold of the field, the controller called "Ready, Ready, Mark." At "Mark," the pilot pushed a stop watch, activated his Doppler navigational system, turned to a predetermined heading and maintained an altitude of between 500 and 600 feet. The Doppler device indicated any deviation from the desired track to the drop zone, which was west of Red Sector, and the release point was calculated by using the stop watch--20 to 26 seconds from "Mark," depending on the winds. At the computed release point, the pilot pulled the C-130 into an 8-degree nose-up attitude and 16 parachute bundles, containing 15 tons of supplies, slid from the rear of the aircraft and floated through the overcast into the 300-meter-square drop zone. Under Visual Flight Rules (VFR), the average computed error for the drops was only 95 meters. Even when these missions were executed completely under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR), the average distance that the bundles landed from the intended impact point was 133 meters--well inside the drop zone. On a few occasions, however, the parachute bundles missed the zone and drifted far enough away from the base to preclude a safe recovery. In these rare instances, friendly artillery and air strikes were brought to bear on the wayward containers to keep them from falling into the hands of the enemy. During the siege, Air Force C-130 crews conducted a total of 496 paradrops at Khe Sanh.)(*)(122)

Although the paradrops were sufficient for bulk commodities such as rations and ammunition, there were certain items which had to be delivered or picked up personally. Medical supplies, special ammunition, and other delicate cargo would not withstand the jolt of a parachute landing. In addition, there were

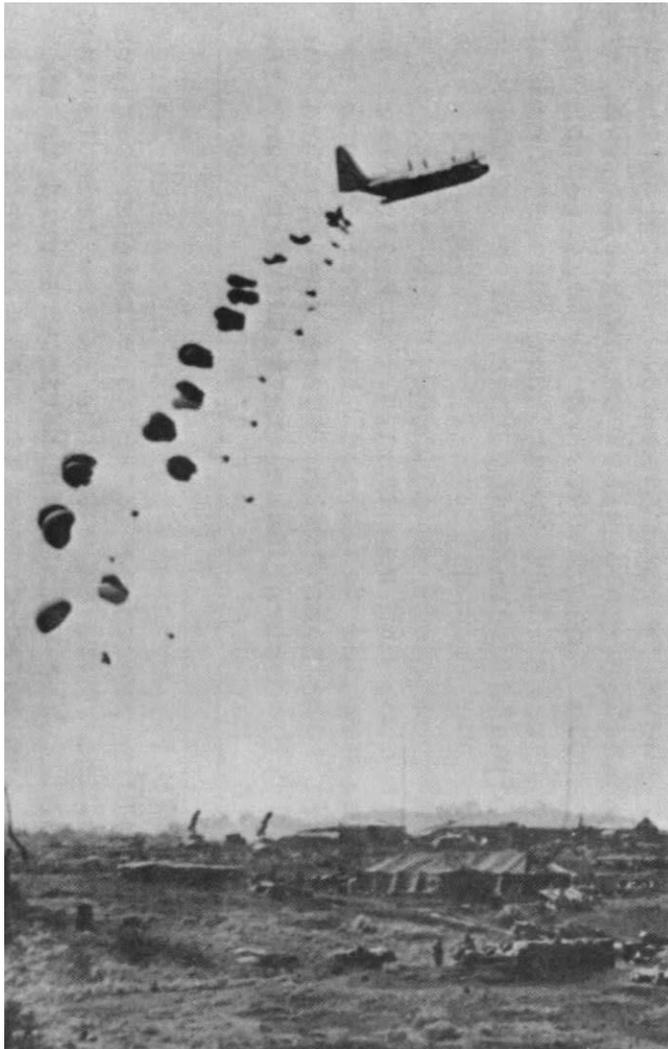
(*) Disparities in official records make it difficult to determine the exact tonnage delivered to Khe Sanh by air. The USAF Historical Division Liaison Office states that, of the 14,356 tons delivered during the siege, Air Force planes were responsible for 12,430 tons (8,120 tons by paradrop, LAPES and GPES; 4,310 by aircraft landing at the field). On the other hand, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing records show that Marine helicopters alone carried 4,661 tons of cargo. About three-fourths of the helicopter tonnage, however, was lifted directly from Dong Ha to the hill outposts and thus did not pass through the main base at Khe Sanh. Neither total includes the contributions made by Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 152; the records of that unit only indicate the tonnage transported throughout the whole of I Corps and do not break it down to the amount delivered to individual bases such as Khe Sanh.

replacements to be shuttled into the base and casualties to be evacuated. With the cancellation of all C-130 landings, this job was left up to the sturdy C-123 Providers of the 315th Air Commando Wing as well as MAG-36 and MAG-16 helicopters. The choppers could maneuver around areas of heavy ground fire, land, unload, take on medevacs, and depart very quickly but their payloads were limited. On the other hand, the C-123s had a larger cargo capacity but were restricted to a more rigid approach and provided better targets both in the pattern and on the ground. (*) (123) The Providers, however, required much less runway from which to operate than the C-130s and could land and take off using only 1,400 of the 3,900 foot strip. This saving feature enabled the pilots to make a steep approach, short roll-out, and rapid turnaround. The crews still had to undergo those frantic moments on the ground when the geysers of dirty-black smoke bracketed their aircraft. Nevertheless, the dauntless C-123 crews continued their perilous missions throughout the siege with great success. (124)

No discussion of the airlift would be complete without mention of the MAG-36 and MAG-16 helicopter pilots who flew in and out of Khe Sanh daily delivering supplies, delicate cargo, reinforcements, and evacuating casualties. The chopper crews were faced with the same problems that plagued the fixed-wing transports--low ceilings and enemy ground fire--but to a greater degree because of their slow speed and vulnerability. MAG-36 operated primarily from Quang Tri and Dong Ha, and was reinforced from the group's main base at Phu Bai. These valiant pilots and crewmen in their Huey gunships, CH-46 transports, and UH-34s flew long hours, day and night, in all kinds of weather to sustain the Marines in and around Khe Sanh. The CH-53s of Da Nang-based MAG-16, with their heavier payload, also made a sizeable contribution to this effort. (125)

The resupply of the hill outposts was a particularly hazardous aspect of the overall mission. Approximately 20 percent of Colonel Lownds' personnel occupied these redoubts and, for all practical purposes, were cut off from the rest of the garrison. The road north of the base was not secure and the perimeters atop the hills were too small and irregular for parachute drops; the only way that the isolated posts could be

(*) This resulted in another fiery crash on 6 March when a C-123 was shot down while on approach to the field and all aboard (43 USMC, 1 USN, and 4 USAF) were killed.



C-130 Hercules conducts paradrops west of Red Sector. (USMC Photo A190803)



A UH-34 of MAG-36 departs Khe Sanh on its way to the hill outposts. (Photo courtesy David D. Duncan)

sustained was by helicopter. When the dense monsoon clouds rolled into the valley, the mountain tops were the first to become submerged and, as the overcast lifted, the last to reappear. During February, several of the outposts were completely obscured for more than a week and resupply was impossible. During these periods, the North Vietnamese took advantage of the reduced visibility and emplaced heavy automatic weapons along the neighboring peaks and waited for the ceiling to lift which invariably heralded the arrival of helicopters. As a result, the UH-1Es, UH-34s, and CH-46s were subjected to a hail of enemy bullets during each mission.(126)

When the helicopters proceeded to the hills singly or in small groups, each mission was a hair-raising experience for both the chopper crews and the men on the ground. A good example of what often transpired during those frantic moments occurred early in the siege on Hill 881S when Captain Dabney called for a chopper to evacuate a badly wounded Marine. One corporal was assigned as a stretcher bearer because he had a badly impacted wisdom tooth and, once aboard, he could ride out on the helicopter and have the tooth extracted at the main base.(*). Because of the 120mm mortars located in the Horseshoe and the anti-aircraft guns which ringed the hill, the men on 881S had to employ a variety of diversions to keep the enemy gunners from getting the range of the incoming choppers. In this instance, they threw a smoke grenade a good distance away from the actual landing zone in hopes that the gunners would register on the smoke and the helicopter would be in and out before the North Vietnamese could readjust. This meant that the helo had about 19 seconds to get off the ground.(127)

The ruse did not come off as planned. The stretcher bearers had barely loaded the wounded man aboard the helicopter, a CH-46, when 120mm mortar rounds bracketed the aircraft and spurred the pilot to action. The helo lurched into the air and the sudden jolt rolled the corporal with the bad tooth over the

(*) Having the ambulatory cases serve as stretcher bearers was standard operating procedure on 881S. These men stayed on the chopper and did not have to make the return trip to their trenches under fire. When uninjured Marines served in this capacity there was the added danger that the helicopter would take off before they could debark and they would end up at Khe Sanh. In one instance after the siege was lifted, Captain Dabney spent a day at the combat base because he did not get off a medevac chopper fast enough.

edge of the tail ramp; he held on desperately for a few seconds but finally let go and fell about 20 feet to the ground. Cursing to himself, the young man limped back to his trench and waited for another chance.

Later that day, a UH-34 swooped in to pick up another casualty and the prospective dental patient quickly scrambled aboard. This trip also covered about 20 feet--10 feet up and 10 feet down--because the tail rotor of the UH-34 was literally sawed off by a burst from an enemy machine gun just after the bird became airborne. After the swirling craft came to rest, the passengers and the three-man crew quickly clamored out the hatch and dived into a nearby trench. A heavy mortar barrage ensued during which several more men were hit.

By the time another CH-46 arrived on the scene, the passenger list had grown to 14, including 10 casualties, the crew of the downed helo, and the original dental case. Because of the heavy concentration of enemy fire in the original zone, the Marines had blasted out another landing site on the opposite side of the hill. The chopper touched down and 13 of the 14 Marines boarded before the crew chief stated emphatically that the aircraft was full. As luck would have it, the young Marine with the swollen jaw was the 14th man. Thoroughly indignant, the three-time loser returned to his position and mumbled that he would rather suffer from a toothache than try and get off the hill by helicopter.(*)(128)

It was the consensus of both the ground commanders and pilots alike that the problem of getting helicopters to and from the hills was becoming critical. The technique then employed was resulting in casualties among both the air crews

(*) During the course of the battle, 881S became a small graveyard for helicopters; at least five were downed on or around the hill. Consequently, Company I gained a reputation among chopper crews which lasted long after the siege was over. When the 3d Battalion later departed Khe Sanh, Company I eventually moved to Hill 55 near Da Nang. One afternoon, while evacuating a wounded Marine, a CH-46 developed engine trouble and the pilot decided to shut down for repairs. Another flight was sent to pick up the wounded man and as the lead pilot approached he came up over the radio and asked his wingman where the landing zone was. The wingman replied: "Just look for the downed chopper, India /Company I// always marks their zones that way."

and the infantry units, as well as a rapid rise in the attrition of MAG-36 helicopters. The Huey gunships, though putting forth a valiant effort, did not possess the heavy volume of fire required to keep the approach lanes open. As a result, the 1st MAW adopted another system which provided more muscle.(129)

The solution was basically a page out of the Fleet Marine Force Manual for Helicopter Support Operations. All helicopter flights to the hill outposts were to be escorted by strike aircraft which would provide suppressive fire. The A-4 Skyhawks of Chu Lai-based MAG-12 were selected as the fixed-wing escorts and the little jet was perfect for the job. Affectionately referred to as "Scooters" by their pilots, the A-4 was a highly maneuverable attack aircraft; its accuracy, dependability, and varied ordnance load had made it the workhorse of Marine close air support for many years.

Generals Cushman and Anderson conceived the idea and the details were worked out by Colonel Joel B. Bonner, Lieutenant Colonel William J. White, and Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Carey at 1st MAW Headquarters. The operation went into effect on 24 February. Because of the large number of aircraft utilized in each mission--12 A-4s, 1 TA-4, 12 CH-46s, and 4 UH-1E gunships--the overall effort was nicknamed the Super Gaggle by its planners. The difficulty in execution was primarily one of coordination and control because of the various agencies (i.e. MAG-36, MAG-12, 3d MarDiv G-4, Dong Ha Logistics Support Area, and the units on the hill outposts) which were involved. Additional factors that had to be considered were departure weather, destination weather, and coordination of friendly artillery and air strikes around Khe Sanh. Lieutenant Colonel Carey, the 1st MAW Operations Officer and one of the planners, later described the mechanics of the Super Gaggle:

Success of the effort was predicated on timing, coordination, and often times luck. Luck, as used, refers to the ability to guess whether the weather would hold long enough to complete an effort once it got underway. The effort began with the TA-4 on station determining if sufficient ceiling existed for the "Scooters" of MAG-12 to provide sufficient suppressive fires to assure success... Once the TA-4 called all conditions go, an "H" hour was set and the Super Gaggle began. Twelve A-4s would launch from Chu Lai while simultaneously 100 miles to the north 12-16 helos would launch from the Quang Tri helo base and proceed to the Dong Ha LSA (Logistics Support Area) for supply pickup. The object was for all aircraft to arrive



After introduction of the Super Gaggle, CH-46 helicopters with their 4,000-pound external loads proceeded to the hill outposts in convoy. (USMC Photo A422061)



A-4 Skyhawks of Marine Aircraft Group-12 provided suppressive fire during resupply missions. (USMC Photo A421671)

in the objective area on a precise schedule. So the operation generally consisted as follows: (1) Softening up known enemy positions by four A-4s, generally armed with napalm and bombs; (2) Two A-4s armed with CS (tear gas) tanks saturate enemy anti-aircraft and automatic weapons positions; (3) 30-40 seconds prior to final run in by the helos two A-4s lay a smoke screen along selected avenues of approach....(4) While helos make final run into the target, four A-4s with bombs, rockets, and 20mm guns provide close-in fire suppression.... Once the helos commenced their descent the factors of weather, their 4,000-pound externally carried load, and the terrain would not permit a second chance. If an enemy gun was not suppressed there was no alternative for the helos but to continue. They (the transport pilots) were strengthened with the knowledge that following close on their heels were their gunships ready to pick them up if they survived being shot down. Fortunately, these tactics were so successful that during the entire period of the Super Gaggle only two CH-46s were downed enroute to the hill positions. The crews were rescued immediately by escorting Huey gunships.(*)(130)

These missions, however, looked much more orderly on paper than they did in the air and the operation lived up to its name. Only those who have experienced the hazards of monsoon flying can fully appreciate the veritable madhouse that often exists when large numbers of aircraft are confined to the restricted space beneath a low-hanging overcast. Coupled with this was the fact that the fluffy looking clouds around Khe Sanh housed mountains which ran up to 3,000 feet. No doubt, the aircrews involved in the Gaggle were mindful of the standard warning issued to fledgling aviators: "Keep your eyes out of the cockpit; a mid-air collision could ruin your whole day." Even though the missions were well-coordinated and executed with a high degree of professionalism, it often appeared that confusion reigned because planes were everywhere. A-4s bore in on the flanks of the approach lanes blasting enemy gun positions and spewing protective smoke; CH-46s groped through the haze trying to find the landing zones; the hornet-like UH-1E gunships darted in from the rear in case someone was shot down; and the lone

(*) For comparison, as many as 16 helicopters were utilized up to four times in one day during the Super Gaggle without a loss. Prior to the conception of this technique, as many as three choppers were shot down in one day around Khe Sanh.