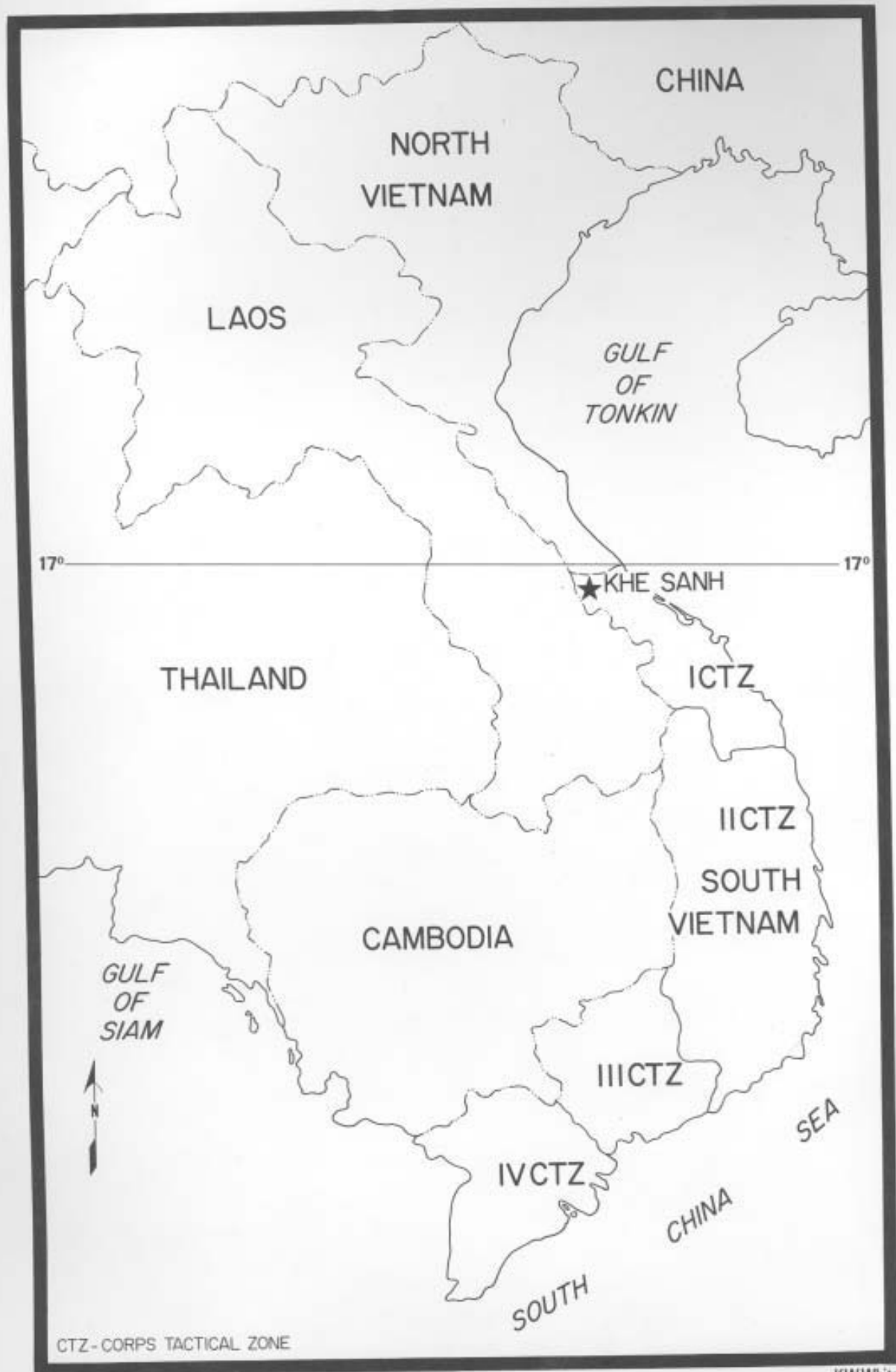


The Battle for Khe Sanh

JOHN C. DONNELL



**HISTORICAL BRANCH, G-3 DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D.C.**



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SOUTHEAST ASIA

KW.White

THE BATTLE FOR KHE SANH

by

Captain Moyers S. Shore II, USMC



Historical Branch, G-3 Division
Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps
Washington, D. C. 20380

1969



Oblique aerial photograph of the Khe Sanh Combat Base
(United Press International Photo by Kyoichi Sawada)

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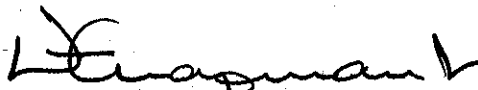
PROLOGUE

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.

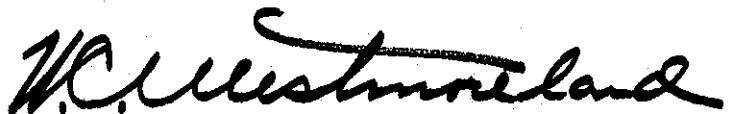
Based on my decision to hold the Khe Sanh Plateau, Lieutenant General Cushman's and Lieutenant General Lam's first task was to reinforce the area with sufficient strength to prevent the enemy from overrunning it, but at the same time to commit no more force than could be supplied by air. While the battle 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. By 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,



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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

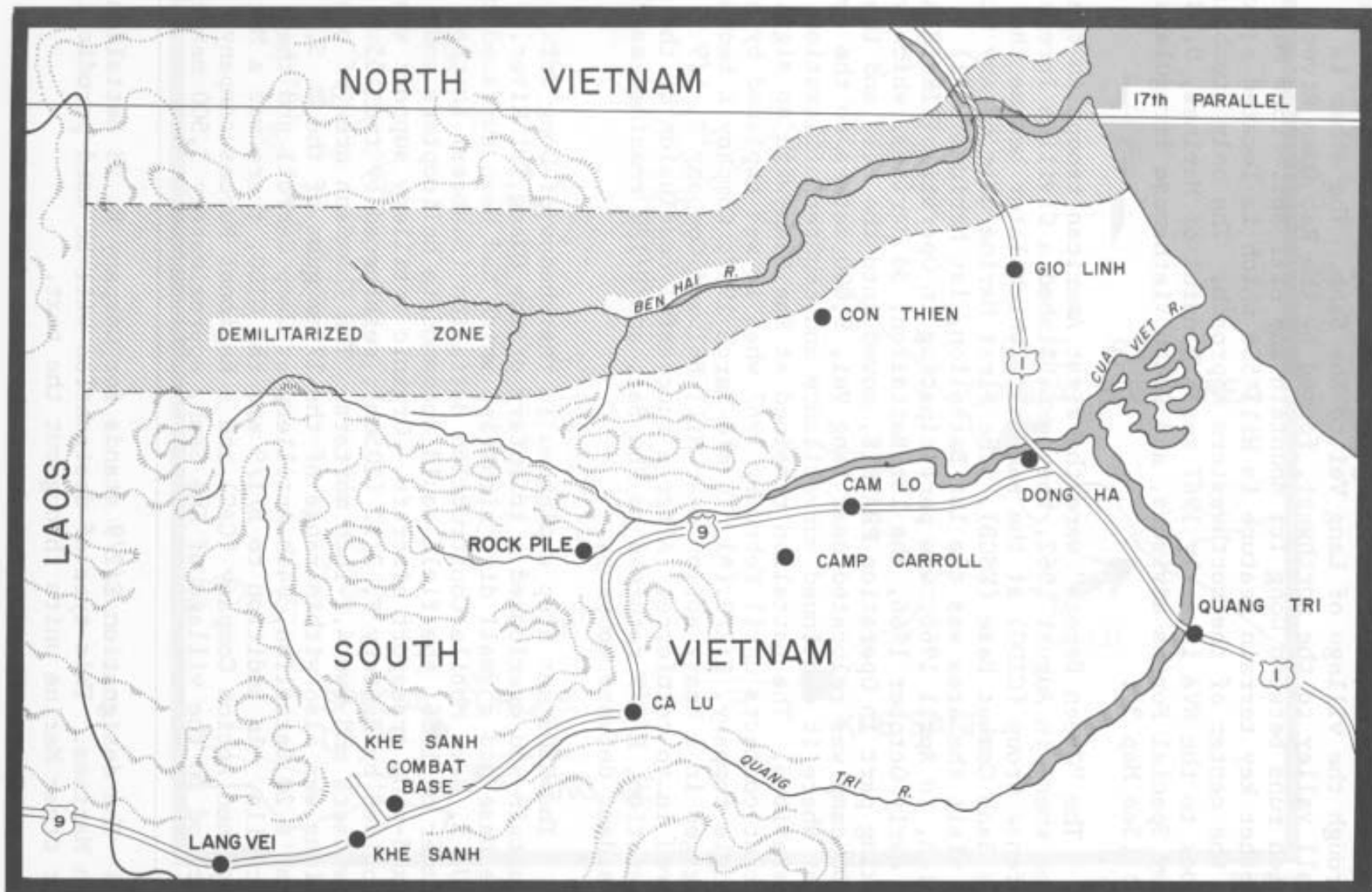
most. It might operate under a task force headquarters or a regiment other than its own parent unit. For example, it would not be uncommon for the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines to be attached to the 3d Marines while the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines was a part of another command. Commitments were met with units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



MAP 2

NORTHERN QUANG TRI PROVINCE

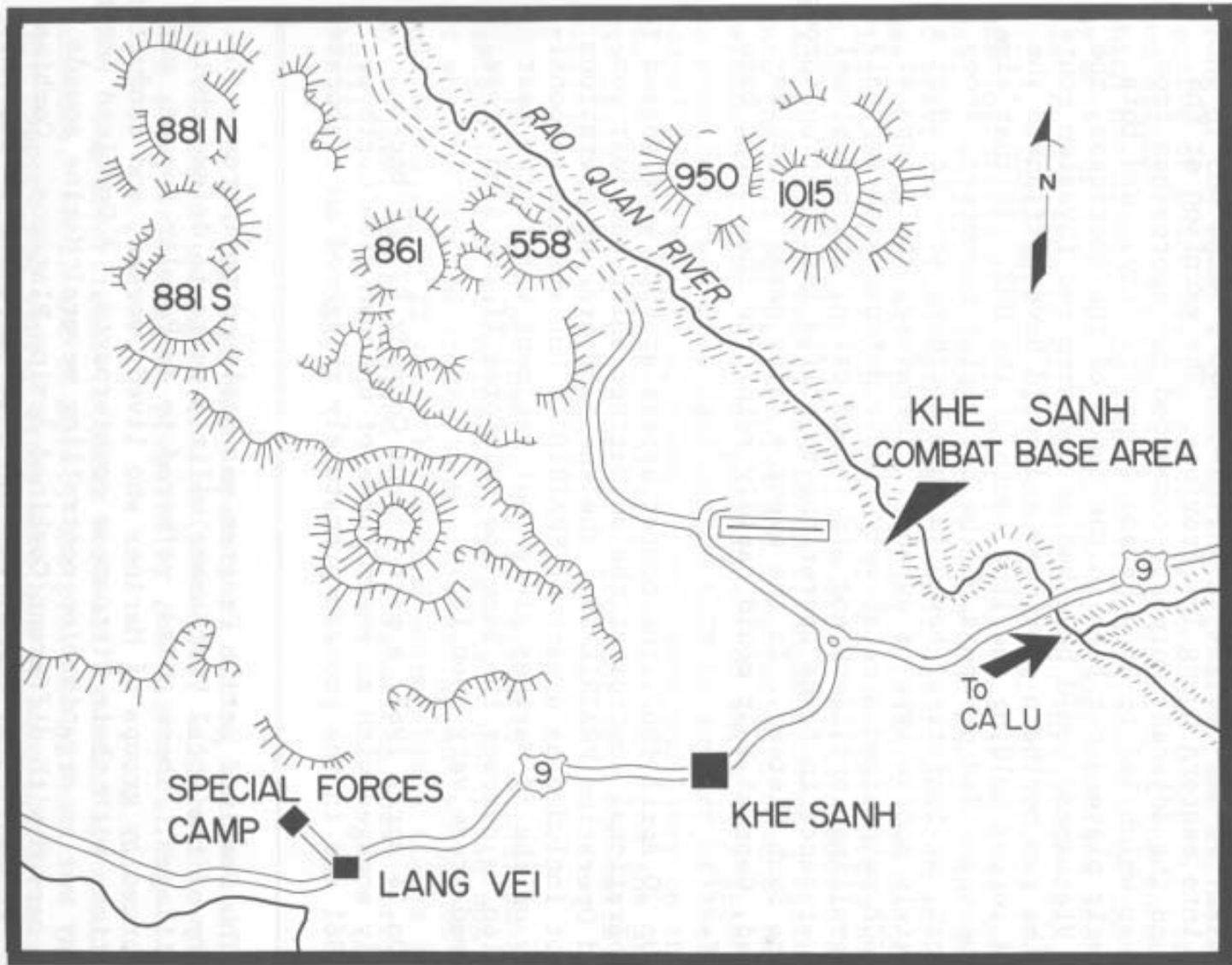
E.L. WILSON

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.



MAP3

KHE SANH VALLEY

KW.White

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

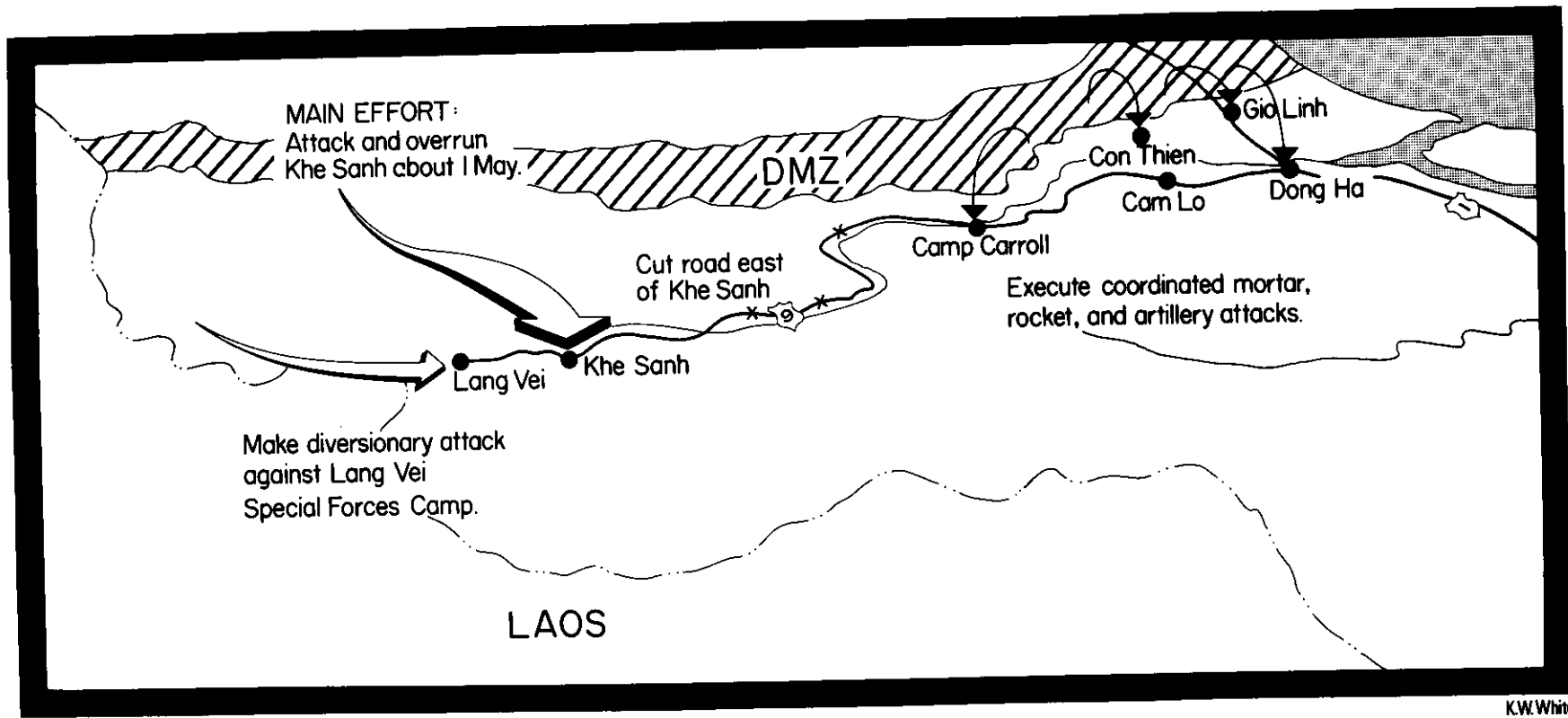
(*) The Combined Action Program was designed to increase the ability of the local Vietnamese militia units to defend their own villages. These units, referred to as Popular Forces, were reinforced by groups of Marines who lived, worked, and conducted operations with their Vietnamese counterparts. A Combined 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.



MAP4

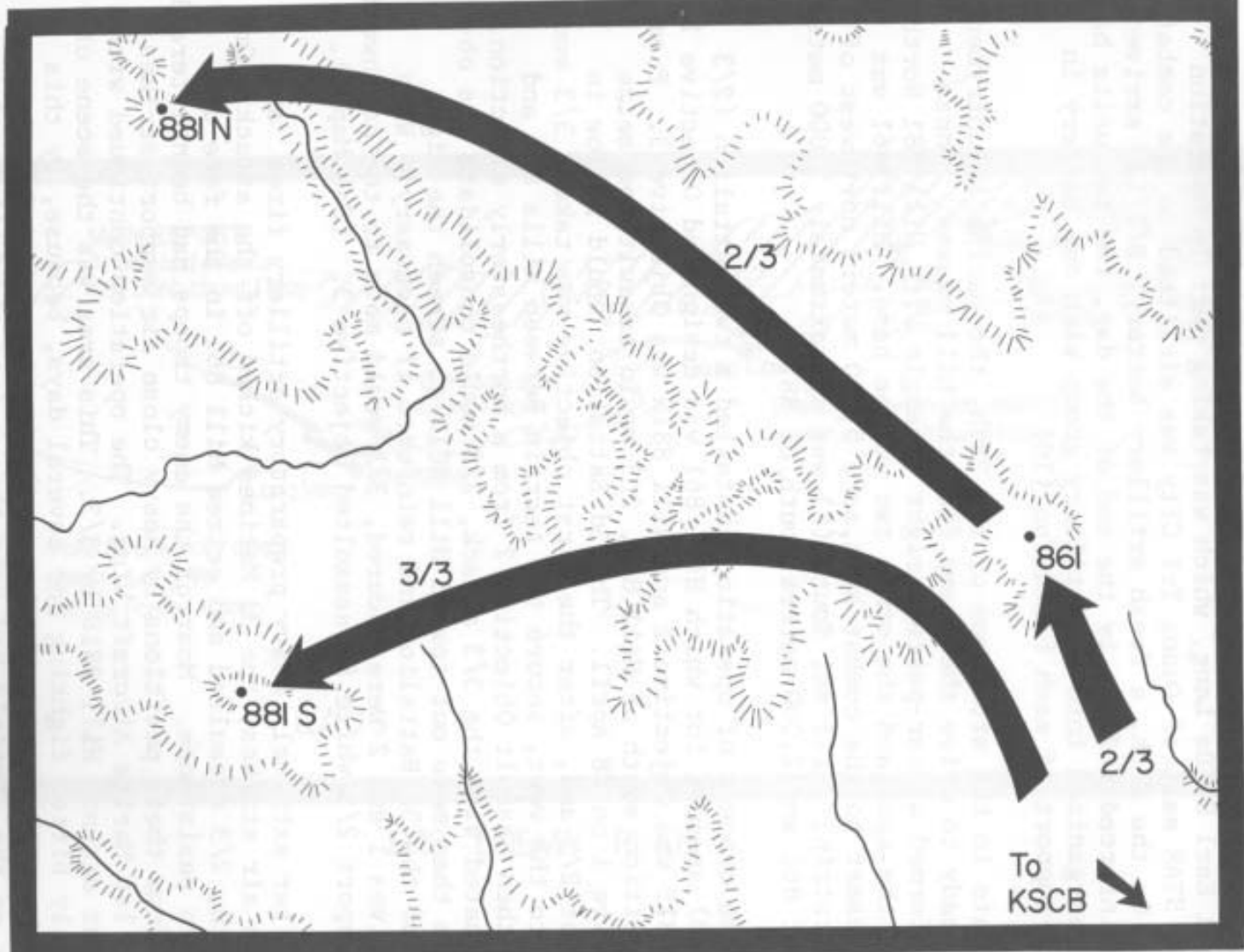
THE ENEMY PLAN

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,



MAP 5

CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS DURING HILL FIGHTS

KW White



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 paratroops 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 overran 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.