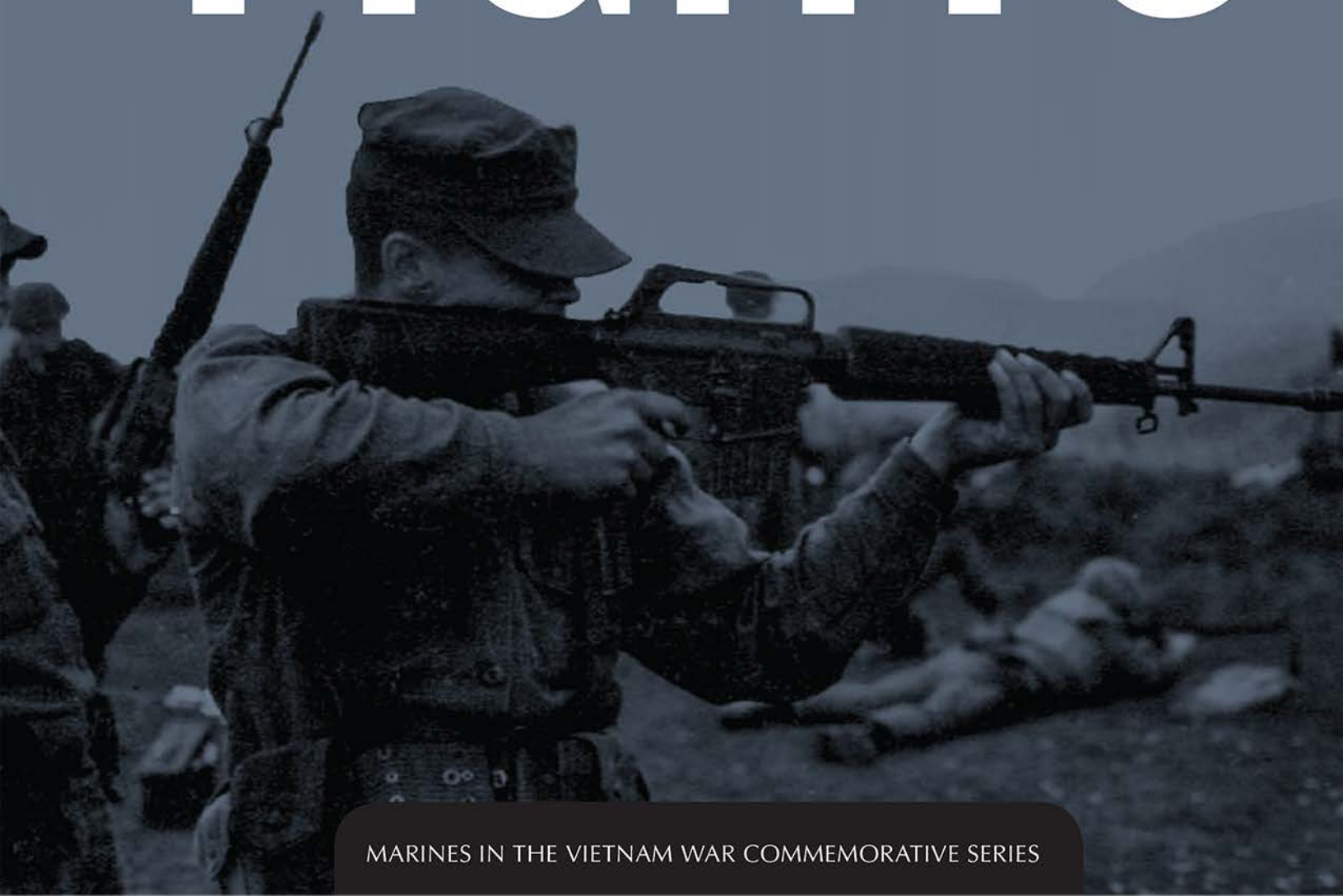


HILL

THE FIRST BATTLE OF KHE SANH, 1967

FIGHTS



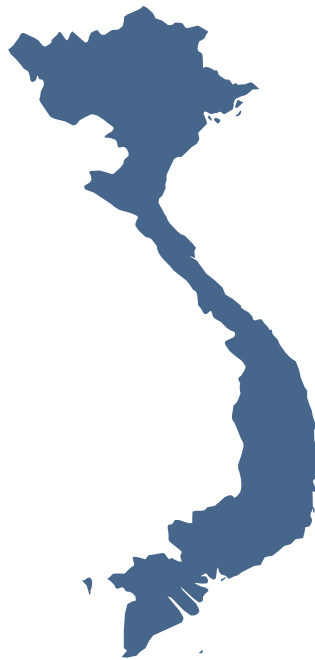
MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

HILL FIGHTS

THE FIRST BATTLE OF KHE SANH

1967

COLONEL ROD ANDREW JR., U.S. MARINE CORPS RESERVE



MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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In the spring of 1967, some of the most vicious and bloody fighting of the Vietnam War occurred in the remote northwestern corner of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), or South Vietnam. Khe Sanh lies in the mountainous northwest corner of Quang Tri Province. As an otherwise insignificant village that few people from the outside world had ever heard of, Khe Sanh's location astride Route 9 near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North and South Vietnam and just 10 kilometers east of the Laotian border made it strategically significant to American military planners and their North Vietnamese foes. Later, in 1968, the legendary siege of Khe Sanh, partly coinciding with the larger Communist Tet Offensive, would make this small village a household name among Americans and a well-known heroic chapter in the history of the U.S. Marine Corps.

This narrative does not tell the story of the 1968 siege, but rather describes the equally heroic, brutal, and bloody fighting that took place around Khe Sanh during the preceding year. In the spring of 1967, various units from 3d Marine Division (3d MarDiv) fought a number of ferocious battles with elements of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), some of the best-trained and most motivated troops of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.* These fierce clashes, erupting

suddenly in steep mountainous terrain at close range and resulting in heavy casualties on both sides, included some of the most desperate fighting of the Vietnam War. In Marine Corps lore, they were known as the "Hill Fights" or the "First Battle of Khe Sanh."

The relative obscurity of the Hill Fights in comparison to the 1968 siege of Khe Sanh is unfortunate for several reasons. First, individual Marines and small-unit leaders acquitted themselves valiantly in the Hill Fights and their efforts should not be overlooked. The valor of Marine infantrymen at Khe Sanh was matched only by that of the aircraft crews who supported them. Also, the Hill Fights illustrated several trends that characterized the experience of the U.S. Marine Corps in Vietnam. Effective close air support and other fire support coordination were hallmarks of the Hill Fights and undoubtedly saved countless American lives. The fighting around Khe Sanh also highlighted the tenacity of the North Vietnamese soldier and his skills in concealment and in building fortifications.

Additionally, the operational decisions made by senior Marine officers in relation to Khe Sanh illustrated the strategic difficulties and dilemmas they faced along the DMZ. The growing presence and aggressiveness of the NVA in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam threatened to undo the growing success the Marines were having in pacification and counterinsurgency efforts in the lowland villages, which

*The more proper term for the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). However, in daily parlance, members of the U.S. military commonly used NVA.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A800223

Aerial view of the mountainous terrain surrounding the Khe Sanh combat base. Low, thick clouds often covered the landscape, particularly during the monsoon season from October to February.

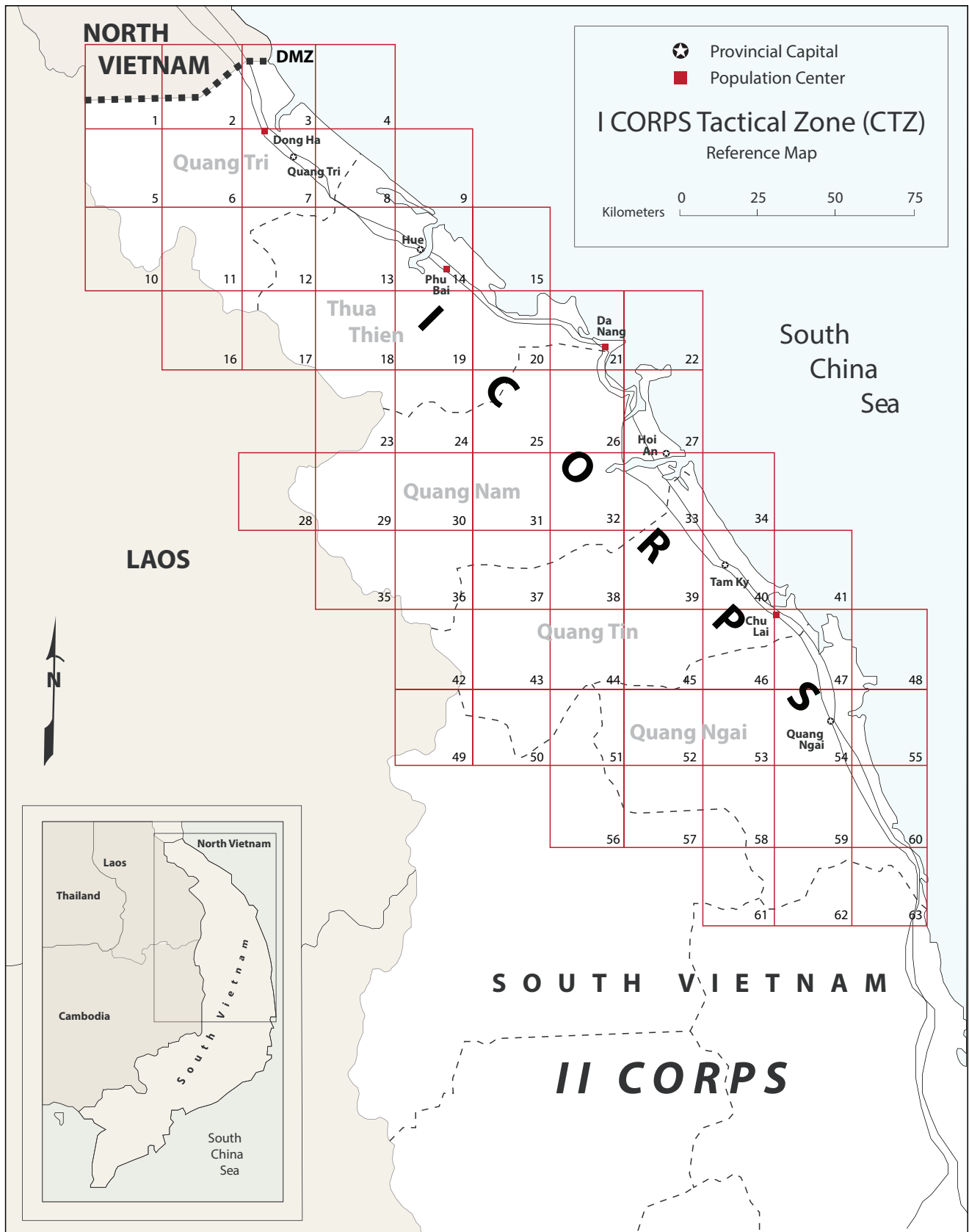
is where most senior Marines thought the primary American focus should be. Senior Marine officers, decorated veterans of battles with the Japanese, North Koreans, and Chinese earlier in their careers, were not averse to slugging it out with their Vietnamese foes in conventional fights. Younger Marines also were willing to fight a conventional enemy they could see rather than chase the ephemeral Viet Cong guerrillas who often avoided battle. Marine commanders believed, though, that Vietnam represented a different kind of war. They would give battle to the enemy's regular forces, the NVA, when the opportunity arose, but victory would ultimately come through winning the trust of the population and defeating the insurgency in the countryside.

Profound tension existed between the Marines' counterinsurgency strategy and the conventional war of attrition against enemy main-force units favored by U.S. Army General William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam. This played out initially in Marine leaders downplaying the size and importance of NVA units near Khe Sanh, while Westmoreland and his staff at U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), in Saigon remained heavily focused on that threat. Additionally, Khe

Sanh illustrated how thinly stretched Marine forces were in the I Corps sector, the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam that Westmoreland had assigned to the Marines. The remote location of Khe Sanh, the difficulty of keeping it supplied, the need to protect more populated areas, and the emphasis on counterinsurgency efforts in those areas initially resulted in minimal Marine combat power being assigned to the area. Marines who did serve there in late 1966 and the first four months of 1967 often found themselves fighting enemy forces of surprising strength and tenacity, and felt hard pressed to accomplish their mission with the forces at hand. Over time, senior Marine leaders would realize that large NVA forces were indeed in the Khe Sanh area and were determined to overrun it.

By the last week of April 1967, 3d MarDiv was able to deploy more than two full infantry battalions to the Khe Sanh area and disrupt Communist plans for a major NVA offensive against Khe Sanh. In late April and early May, the Marines won a convincing tactical victory and dissuaded the North Vietnamese from further attempts to capture the base there for another nine months. The Marines proved, as they did so often in Vietnam, that it was difficult to prevent American infantrymen with supporting arms from taking and holding ground when they were determined to do so. Their efforts secured a strategically important area and set the stage for the famous siege that would occur the following year. In the process, 168 Marines were killed in the Hill Fights between 24 April and 13 May 1967. If the previous fighting between 1 February and 23 April is included, the number of Marines who gave their lives at Khe Sanh rises to 198. They and their comrades wrote a valiant, if less well-known, chapter in Marine Corps history.*

*Casualty figures in secondary sources on the Hill Fights contradict those found in the situation reports sent from Khe Sanh to 3d MarDiv headquarters every six hours between 24 April and 13 May 1967. The most trusted secondary source states that "reported enemy casualties in the action from 24 April through 11 May stood at 940 confirmed killed . . . 155 Marines died and another 425 suffered wounds." However, the Khe Sanh situation reports, as well as the 3d MarDiv Command Chronology for May 1967, record U.S. casualties from 24 April to 13 May as 168 killed in action (KIA), 436 wounded, and 2 missing; additionally, it reports enemy losses at 807 KIA (confirmed), 611 KIA (probable), and 6 captured. Between 1 February and 23 April, the Americans lost 30 killed and 144 wounded at Khe Sanh, with a reported 58 enemy KIA (confirmed) and 63 KIA (probable). Thus, between 1 February and 13 May, 198 Americans were killed at Khe Sanh, and the Marines believed they could confirm the death of 865 NVA soldiers during that same period.



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

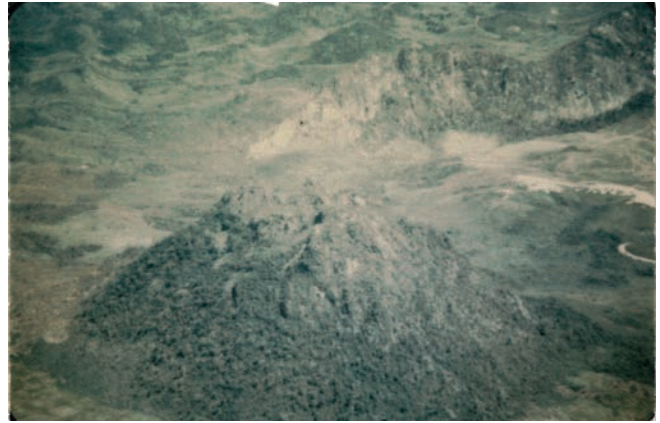
Background and Strategic Debate

For much of the Vietnam War, U.S. Marine forces were responsible for the five northernmost provinces in South Vietnam: Quang Tri, Thu Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai.* This northern sector of the country made up the I Corps Tactical Zone, a region generally referred to as “I Corps.” Khe Sanh was the most northwesterly settlement of any size in Quang Tri Province. When U.S. Marines established bases and outposts in the northern portion of South Vietnam in 1965 and 1966, they initially paid little attention to Khe Sanh due to its remote location far from the population centers closer to the coast. Khe Sanh was near the western end of Route 9, the only east-west road traversing the northern part of the country. This road, which would not have qualified as such to most Americans, began at the village of Dong Ha. The French, the former colonial power in Vietnam, had paved the 12-kilometer section of the road between Dong Ha and Cam Lo. West of Cam Lo, Route 9 was little more than a cart path until it reached a jagged peak the Marines called the “Rockpile.” Someone travelling west on the road would find that it jogged south after reaching the Rockpile, then resumed a westerly course. For the last 18 kilometers, the traveler on Route 9 would have to navigate steep descents, sharp turns, cliffs, and unsafe bridges as the route deteriorated into a jungle path and climbed into mountainous terrain. Khe Sanh sits 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the western border, though the winding road makes the journey 15 kilometers, and less than 25 kilometers (15 miles) south of the DMZ.

A team of U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers had been at Khe Sanh since 1962 and had recruited small militia units of Bru tribesmen to help patrol the mountains around the Ho Chi Minh Trail.** This amalgamation of Special Forces soldiers and Bru tribesmen was called a Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). In 1964, the Special Forces team had moved to a long, narrow plateau about three kilometers north of the village, on top of which was an airstrip running east and west. When Marines arrived in 1966, they expanded

*Responsibility for Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces would later be transferred away from the Marines.

**The Bru were one of 40 such aboriginal tribes inhabiting the central highlands of Vietnam and making up the Montagnard population. Hundreds of these tribesmen fought and died alongside U.S. forces during this conflict.



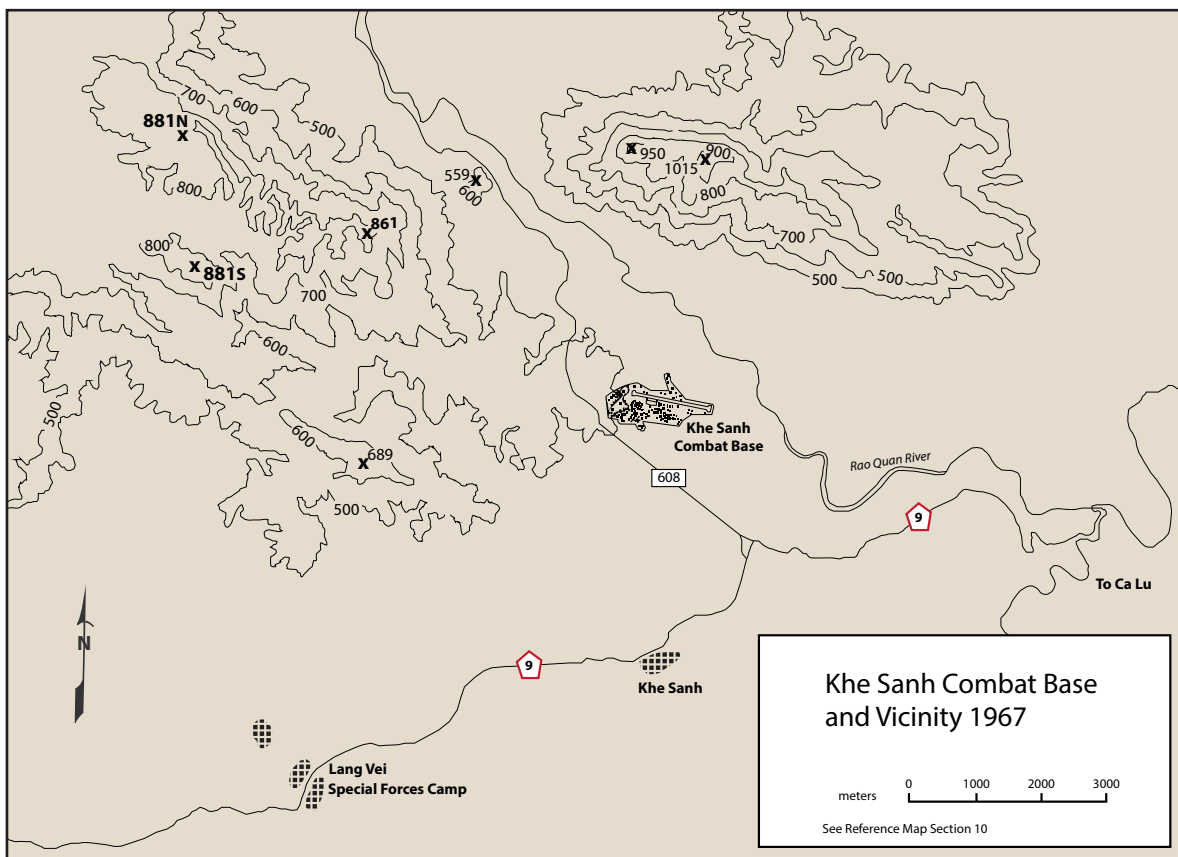
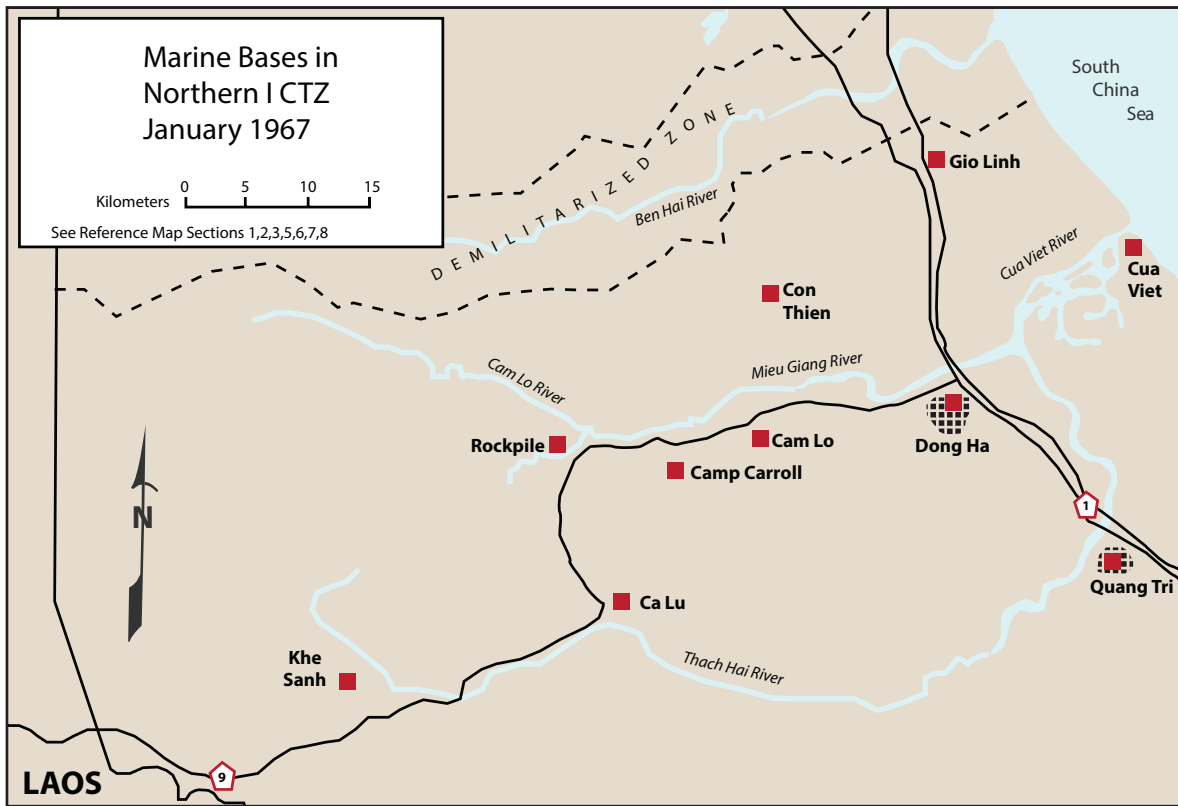
Defense Department (Marine Corps) A191691

Aerial view of the Rockpile, east of Khe Sanh.

and fortified the base. After that point, this base, not the village itself, was what Marines were usually referring to when they used the term *Khe Sanh*. To the north and west of the base, several hills only a few kilometers away provided excellent observation of the Khe Sanh plateau for whoever occupied them, whether they were enemy or friendly troops. Most of the heavy fighting around Khe Sanh would occur on three of those hills—Hill 861, Hill 881 South (881S), and Hill 881 North (881N). The terrain throughout the area was rugged, often steep, and covered with jungle vegetation including tree canopy, bamboo thickets, and dense elephant grass.

During 1965 and 1966, the Marines in I Corps had fought a number of battles at the battalion and regimental level with Viet Cong and NVA forces, resulting in tactical victories for the Marines. Additionally, smaller Marine units regularly conducted sweeps, patrols, and ambushes to gain control over rural areas. Senior Marine officers, however, believed that permanent, meaningful success in Vietnam would result primarily from efforts at “pacification.” These Marine leaders included Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, commander of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), and Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, commander of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac). Prior Marine Corps experiences combatting insurgencies in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua earlier in the century and the influence of the Marine Corps’ *Small Wars Manual* influenced officers to believe that the real war lay within the villages.

Several American and South Vietnamese programs aimed to carry out the pacification strategy. Since August 1965, III



Defense Department (Marine Corps)



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A416479

LtGen Victor H. Krulak (left), commanding general of FMFPac, visits with Gen Leonard F. Chapman Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, on 10 May 1968. Gen Krulak believed that success in Vietnam would ultimately result from a “spreading inkblot” strategy of pacification rather than primarily through conventional warfare and attrition.

MAF had been committed to the Combined Action Program (CAP), in which one squad of Marine infantrymen and two squads of men from a Vietnamese village formed a “combined action platoon.” These units were responsible for the security of their respective villages; additionally, they facilitated the training of the villagers for their own self-defense, denying resources and manpower from the villages to the Viet Cong, establishing civic action programs that improved the quality of life, and weakening the Communist guerrillas’ hold over the population. The growth of CAP in I Corps paralleled that of the new Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program, carried

out principally by the South Vietnamese government and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). In CORDS, South Vietnamese troops established physical security in hamlets and villages and then worked with the village chiefs to improve the quality of life. By late 1966 and early 1967, General Krulak and other III MAF leaders saw much of the Marines’ role in I Corps as providing a tactical screen behind which counterinsurgency and civic action operations could proceed. Finally, Marine forces in I Corps continued to carry out their own civic action programs, providing advice and assistance for construction projects, schools, medical care, and resettlement of refugees, and to secure local support



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A190185

A Bru village located about 1,500 meters south of the Khe Sanh airstrip. Ethnically and linguistically distinct from the Vietnamese, the Bru were generally supportive of U.S. efforts in Vietnam.

for the government's cause. Pacification efforts in I Corps were beginning to show positive results and likely influenced the Communist government of North Vietnam to send the NVA's *324B Division* across the DMZ in mid-1966.*

The Marines' approach to fighting the war, however, consistently clashed with General Westmoreland's, whose thinking was perhaps influenced by his own Service's experiences fighting large-scale conventional forces in the world wars and in Korea. In 1965 and 1966, for example, Marine leaders had favored an "enclave" strategy, by which Marine units would secure and pacify an area, gradually extending the expanse of U.S. and government control like a "spreading ink blot." Westmoreland did not completely discount the importance of the Marines' pacification efforts but, in comparison to the Corps, he placed more emphasis on a search-and-destroy approach in which U.S. units would leave their bases and enclaves to locate and defeat large Viet Cong and NVA units in a war of firepower and attrition. Marine leaders, especially in the case of Khe Sanh, originally chafed

under Westmoreland's pressure to put more emphasis on these types of operations than on CAP.

As early as May 1966, evidence showed that the enemy's *324B Division* had entered the northeastern portion of Quang Tri Province. American reconnaissance aircraft reported a large enemy presence there, after several attacks on ARVN forces, as well as information from a North Vietnamese prisoner. Since the Marines in that area had little contact with the enemy, General Walt and 3d MarDiv commander Major General Wood B. Kyle were skeptical of a large NVA presence. That changed on 28 June 1966, when a heavy mortar attack on the base at Cam Lo caused seven friendly casualties.** Several clashes occurred between Marines and the NVA in eastern Quang Tri as the 3d MarDiv launched multibattalion operations dubbed Operation Hastings in July and Operation Prairie in August, followed by heavy fighting northwest of Cam Lo in February 1967.***

While it eventually was undeniable that NVA forces had crossed the DMZ in significant force in 1966, Westmoreland and the Marines interpreted that information differently because of their conflicting approaches to fighting the war. It is clear that General Krulak, General Walt, and General Kyle regarded the NVA incursion as a bothersome distraction to the primary mission of pacification. The North Vietnamese, they assumed, had taken that step to induce III MAF to commit significant combat power to neutralize the NVA threat, thereby interfering with the CORDS program. And while Marine leaders were alert to the enemy's presence in the eastern part of the province, they were at first relatively unconcerned about it in the west around Khe Sanh.

Westmoreland, in contrast, believed that in addition to the *324B Division*, there were two more NVA divisions—the *304th* and *341st Divisions*—just across the DMZ ready to advance into Quang Tri Province by September. He feared they would slip around the western flank of Marine defenses at the Rockpile and Dong Ha and "open a corridor" in the mountainous northwest corner of the province bordering Laos and North Vietnam. If the NVA captured Khe

*The fact that senior Marine officers saw their role by late 1966 as largely that of providing a screen behind which pacification efforts could flourish is clear from a recorded briefing for LtGen Krulak provided by the 3d MarDiv staff on 8 March 1967. The same language is used in the 3d MarDiv Command Chronology for April 1967.

**The term *friendly* refers to incidents involving Americans or allies mistakenly targeted as a result of misidentification or error.

***Operation Hastings began as a search-and-destroy mission to counter NVA actions across the DMZ. Operation Prairie was a continuation of that mission.

Sanh, they would have use of Route 9 as an avenue to out-flank allied positions farther east. Conversely, Westmoreland thought there would be several advantages to the Marines sending a battalion to Khe Sanh. Such a presence would prevent the enemy's use of Route 9, provide a base for reconnaissance teams monitoring enemy movement along the Laotian border, facilitate an operation to launch an attack into Laos to "cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail" once approved by Washington, and allow the Marines to "get to know the area and to gain confidence fighting there if required." Finally, Westmoreland felt that holding Khe Sanh could provide an opportunity for American forces "to fight large North Vietnamese Army units without delivery of our fires (artillery and tactical air) being complicated by the proximity of civilian population." In other words, Westmoreland saw Khe Sanh as a place where the Americans could apply all their firepower and win a decisive conventional battle against the NVA. In his mind, the NVA forces in Quang Tri Province were not a distraction to the "real war" in the villages; instead, their destruction actually represented the quickest way to win the war.

Senior Marine leaders questioned not only Westmoreland's focus on a conventional strategy, but also his premise that the North Vietnamese would give the Americans an opportunity to destroy them in open battle along the DMZ and the Laotian border. Brigadier General Lowell E. English, assistant division commander of 3d MarDiv, expressed this feeling as late as January 1967. By that time, there had been several fights in northern Quang Tri Province in which the Marines had inflicted serious losses on NVA forces. English noted that, every time the enemy had appeared in large units, he had been "clobbered" by Marine artillery and aircraft. "I don't believe he's that stupid," said English, "that he's going to come down in regimental strength or divisional strength, and give you the opportunity to annihilate him."

General Krulak tried to dissuade Westmoreland from ordering more troops to Khe Sanh. In a conversation after an official briefing in mid-September, he argued that because of the mountainous terrain, at least two battalions would be required if Khe Sanh were to be held and that an infantry presence also would require helicopter assets because of the difficulty of resupplying the base overland. Finally, and most importantly, sending Marines to Khe Sanh would leave insufficient manpower to carry out the pacification program



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

Official U.S. Marine Corps portrait of BGen Lowell E. English.

in the coastal areas of the province where most of the population lived—the mission Krulak felt was by far the most critical. Other Marine officers continued to agree that Khe Sanh was simply not that important. It was so remote that its loss would not enable the enemy to disrupt the Marines' larger mission in the I Corps area. In the words of General English, "when you're at Khe Sanh, you're not any place really. . . . You could lose it and you wouldn't have lost a damn thing."

Arrival of 1st Battalion, 3d Marines

Over the course of the next year, the attitude of senior Marine officers about the insignificance of Khe Sanh would change.



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

Official U.S. Marine Corps portrait of Col Peter A. Wickwire. As a major, he commanded 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, and was promoted to lieutenant colonel shortly after the battalion's arrival at Khe Sanh in late 1966.

For the time being, General Walt decided to appease Westmoreland's desire to send a Marine infantry battalion there. If the enemy really was going to try to take Khe Sanh, and General Westmoreland really wanted it to be held, its remote location would require more than a company to defend it. As even General English later noted, once a decision was made to hold Khe Sanh, "you better not put less than a battalion there, with artillery." The final catalyst for this decision was an intelligence report on 26 September 1966 that located an NVA troop concentration and base camp just 14 kilometers northeast of Khe Sanh. Soon after, orders went out that would transport Major Peter A. Wickwire's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, to Khe Sanh on 30 September via Lockheed

KC-130 Hercules aircraft.^{*} Even then, the decision was a reluctant one. As III MAF G-3 Operations Officer Colonel John R. Chaisson explained: "had we not [put a battalion at Khe Sanh], we would have been directed to put it out there . . . we put it out just to retain that little prestige . . . of doing it on your own volition rather than doing it with a shoe in your tail."

When Wickwire's battalion arrived on 30 September, his Marines immediately got to work liaising with U.S. Special Forces and ARVN forces, strengthening the defenses of the base and patrolling the area around it. Their mission was to determine the strength of the enemy presence in the area and to prevent any interdiction of the airstrip. Thus, for the first several weeks, the Marines of 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, patrolled the area outside the Khe Sanh base up to a distance of six kilometers, slightly more than the range of the enemy's 120mm mortars. Later, they would send squad-, platoon-, and occasionally company-size patrols as far out as 15 kilometers, the farthest distance at which they could still receive artillery support from 155mm howitzers. This support was provided by Battery B, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, which began arriving in Khe Sanh on 2 October.

Wickwire's mission of providing protection for all friendly forces in the Khe Sanh area was complicated by a lack of unity of command, a situation that persisted through the end of the hill fights. The Khe Sanh garrison consisted of the Army Special Forces soldiers and Bru tribesmen of the CIDG; a detachment of the Studies and Observations Group (SOG) that reported to USMACV headquarters in Saigon; a U.S. Air Force air reconnaissance detachment; elements of the Marines' 3d Reconnaissance Battalion; a team of U.S. Navy Construction Battalion (Seabees) sailors; and intelligence personnel from another U.S. government agency whose exact mission remained a mystery to the Marines.^{**} By early February 1967, there was also a Marine-led CAP company working alongside villagers within Khe Sanh itself, though these Marines would not directly take part in the

^{*}Throughout most of this work, the longer, formal style of designating Marine Corps units will be used, such as Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. Note that "9th Marines" or "3d Marines" in Marine Corps parlance refers to the 9th Marine Regiment or the 3d Marine Regiment.

^{**}Initially named the USMACV-Special Operations Group, SOG later became the Studies and Observations Group, an elite military unit that carried out some of the most dangerous and covert operations of the Vietnam War.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A193282

Marines from Combined Action Platoon Oscar-3 enter Tum Plang, a Bru village in the vicinity of the Khe Sanh combat base in September 1967.

Hill Fights north of the combat base. The senior officer at Khe Sanh was a Marine throughout most of this period, but he had no authority over personnel from other Services or agencies, and often their patrols and activities interfered with each other. Because of the lack of communication, Wickwire's Marines occasionally fired on Bru patrols, believing them to be the enemy. On another occasion, they refrained from firing because they believed the men they spotted might be allies. They later learned that no friendly patrols had been in the area. After that incident, Marine officers announced that their men would fire on any troops whose presence they could not account for.

The 1st Battalion's contact with the enemy was sporadic, relatively rare, and never significant in terms of duration or the size of the enemy force. There was plenty of evidence, however, of NVA presence. Marines on patrols received and returned fire and often found newly constructed base camps and trails, discarded enemy gear, and even an abandoned field

hospital. They took a handful of prisoners and followed the blood trails of wounded enemy soldiers. Still, it was impossible to determine whether there were large enemy forces lurking in the mountain valleys and dense foliage or whether they were small isolated patrols. Unable to provide definitive information on that question, 1st Battalion found its original 30-day stay at Khe Sanh extended into early February 1967. Meanwhile, the Special Forces team relocated to Lang Vei, about five kilometers west of the village of Khe Sanh.

Throughout October, November, and December 1966 and January 1967, the Marines lost 1 man KIA and 27 wounded, while claiming 15 confirmed kills of NVA soldiers. At times though, it seemed that their most implacable foe was not the NVA but the weather. The monsoon season struck in mid-October and did not fully abandon its assault on either the Marines or the NVA around Khe Sanh until at least February. Though the temperature never dropped below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, the cold was made much worse by

constant rain and strong northerly winds of 20–25 miles per hour with occasional gusts up to 45 miles per hour. Arriving in Khe Sanh without winter clothing, the Marines were caught physically and mentally unprepared for the onslaught. The men were literally never dry and rarely warm, especially while on patrols that lasted for days. Their clothing and web gear could not be cleaned or dried, and it disintegrated quickly.* As one Marine wrote to his parents, “We take showers in the rain everyday and rinse our clothes out. Our clothes never seem to dry and one set is already rotted off me.” This particular Marine wrote home repeatedly, asking his parents to send him fresh socks and a raincoat. After only minimal use, roads within and outside the base became “bottomless,” in Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire’s words, throwing mud into fan belts, engines, and brakes. Streams and rivers became impassable. Because the men found it impossible to stay dry and clean, cuts from elephant grass and leech bites became infected and developed into cellulitis, a serious bacterial skin infection. Constant cold, wet weather led to upper respiratory infections. Because of Khe Sanh’s remote location, the Marines essentially lived in the field for more than four months. There was no secure base area, no movies, no beer rations, and, at the most, one hot meal a day. For the first six or eight weeks, all the meals were C-rations. Still, Wickwire noted in January that his men had become acclimated to the conditions and withstood them well. Morale remained high, and indeed one of the most serious threats to it was the lack of hostile contact in proportion to all the “hard work” the Marines were putting into finding the enemy.

The experience of 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, differed from that of other units that would participate in the hill fights in the following spring and summer due to the presence of the monsoons. In some ways, though, the seasonal weather accentuated aspects of the Khe Sanh fight that were true year round. For example, the bad weather actually highlighted the extent to which it was vital to keep the airstrip open. The monsoons transformed the Route 9 ground supply route from unreliable to utterly impassable, meaning that Khe Sanh was even more indefensible without fixed-wing

*Marines used the term *web gear* to refer to their cartridge belt and suspenders that were attached to it and draped over the back and shoulders, as well as the individual equipment items that could be attached to the belt or suspenders, such as canteen and ammunition pouches.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A189915

A key road on the Khe Sanh combat base in November 1967. Though this picture was taken approximately one year after 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, occupied Khe Sanh, it illustrates road conditions at the combat base during monsoon season.

air support for resupply. However, the rain, fog, and mist led to long periods in which flights to Khe Sanh were also impossible. As a result, a 15-day store of supplies, which was considered the accepted minimum, was never maintained, and at times the battalion’s supply of some items dwindled to one day at most. Also, the ruggedness of the terrain and the frequent difficulty of supplying advanced patrol bases by vehicle meant that the infantrymen in the hills around Khe Sanh were mostly dependent on helicopters for resupply and medevacs. Helicopters also became the preferred way of taking one squad or platoon out of the field and replacing it with another. The Sikorsky UH-34 Seahorse helicopter was often used, but its inability to hover made it incapable of evacuating casualties in several cases. The Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter, Wickwire noted, was much more capable in that role.

On 26–27 January 1967, another contact with NVA forces illustrated both the Marines’ reliance on helicopters and the growing presence of the enemy. On the morning of 26 January, a patrol from 3d Reconnaissance Battalion consisting of six men and one dog was inserted by helicopter at a position on the western side of the Laotian border, 20 kilometers northwest of the Khe Sanh base. Around 1630 that day, the patrol, led by Gunnery Sergeant Gordon B. Hopkins, was atop a 2,300-foot hill and surrounded by a force of approximately 150 NVA soldiers. During the next 16 hours, Marine



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A189649

A KC-130 makes an airdrop over the Khe Sanh combat base on 23 October 1967. Resupply by fixed-wing aircraft was vital to the survival of the base, particularly during monsoon season when the only road into Khe Sanh was impassable.

aircrews made repeated attempts to evacuate the beleaguered patrol and, failing that, to land a reaction force of infantrymen to reinforce the reconnaissance Marines. At around 1800 on the twenty-sixth, two UH-34 Seahorses tried to land to extract the patrol. Despite supporting fire from Bell UH-1E Huey gunships circling overhead, both helicopters were damaged so badly by enemy fire that they had to abandon the attempt and return to Khe Sanh. Shortly thereafter, a CH-46 piloted by Captain Joseph G. Roman landed just 25 meters from the Marine patrol's perimeter. However, NVA soldiers poured so much machine-gun fire into the helicopter that it was unable to lift off. Captain Roman and his crew abandoned the aircraft and joined Gunnery Sergeant



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A800186

The view looking out from Hill 86 north of the Khe Sanh combat base toward the Co Roc mountain range in Laos to the west. In these mountains to the west, GySgt Gordon B. Hopkins's patrol from 3d Reconnaissance Battalion was attacked by enemy forces.

Hopkins and his patrol. A second CH-46 piloted by Captain Harold J. Campbell Jr. crash-landed nearby about 25 minutes later. The Sea Knight carried a reaction force of 17 infantrymen. The helicopter caught fire, but all the Marines were able to escape, as well as salvage the aircraft's two .50-caliber machine guns. Eventually the crew and the infantry Marines also made their way into the perimeter, which now held a total of 31 Marines and two .50-caliber machine guns.

Throughout the night, the hard-pressed collection of reconnaissance Marines, infantry Marines, pilots, and air crewmen battled NVA troops at hand-grenade range and called in air strikes by fixed-wing aircraft. At least two dozen sorties by McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II aircraft helped keep the enemy at bay, and a U.S. Air Force Douglas AC-47 Spooky airship (a.k.a. "Puff, the Magic Dragon") also circled overhead, providing flares and 7.62mm fire from its miniguns. Meanwhile, the two Army M107 175mm long-range, self-propelled guns located at Camp Carroll near Cam Lo moved west to the Rockpile to support the besieged Marines in Laos. At 0200, two UH-34s attempted a medevac. Only one pilot was able to land. Due to the high elevation, his aircraft could carry only two of the most seriously wounded Marines. Casualties continued to mount. At around 0615, the NVA made another determined attack on

Captain Joseph G. Roman

Silver Star Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Captain Joseph Gerald Roman, United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Pilot with Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron TWO HUNDRED SIXTY-FIVE (HMM-265), Marine Aircraft Group Sixteen, FIRST Marine Aircraft Wing, in connection with combat operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam on 26 and 27 January 1967. When a six man Marine reconnaissance team was surrounded by a force of approximately 150 North Vietnamese Army Regulars near Khe Sanh, Captain Roman launched as Flight leader of a section of two CH-46A transport helicopters with the mission of inserting a thirty man reaction force to relieve the beleaguered unit. Upon arriving over the area, it was decided to return the reaction force to Khe Sanh and prepare for immediate extraction of the reconnaissance team because of rapidly deteriorating weather conditions, approaching darkness and increased fire in the zone. Returning to the pickup zone, Captain Roman approached the landing area under intense enemy fire and upon landing, his helicopter sustained several hits, causing the flight control hydraulic systems to fail and igniting a fire in the cabin section. Observing the enemy approaching his aircraft, he ordered his crew to abandon the flaming wreckage and guided the dazed and injured men to the reconnaissance team's position. There, with a force of only ten men, three of whom were wounded, he established a hasty defense to withstand the inevitable enemy assault. As the enemy charged up the ridge toward his position, the fire in his downed helicopter ignited the ammunition still on board, inflicting numerous casualties on the North Vietnamese and causing them to retreat in confusion. Reacting instantly, Captain Roman quickly expanded his defensive



perimeter and relayed his tactical situation to the UH-1E gunships and his wingman, orbiting overhead. It was decided to attempt an insertion as extraction of the reconnaissance team appeared impossible. While his wingman returned to Khe Sanh to embark the reaction force, Captain Roman called for air support, including flare ships, and artillery cover. As his wingman returned with a seventeen man reaction force and attempted a landing, his aircraft sustained hits which caused it to crash land near the reconnaissance team's position. The crew and reinforcements quickly abandoned the helicopter and moved to the besieged Marines' position where they assisted in man-

ning the defensive perimeter. During the night, he skillfully directed the air attacks, pinpointing enemy targets by sound when fog and clouds obscured the explosions. When two of his men required immediate medical evacuation, he guided an evacuation helicopter into the darkened zone by radio. Subsequently, the enemy launched a grenade attack on the Marines' position and Captain Roman was wounded by fragments from grenades which exploded within

the perimeter. Disregarding his painful wounds, he continued to direct the air strikes on them. The enemy then launched a second fanatical assault and he courageously adjusted the air strikes to within fifty meters of his own men, successfully repulsing the North Vietnamese force. With the arrival of daylight, Captain Roman requested immediate retractions of the Marines, which was subsequently completed without further incident. His daring and heroic actions in leading the small Marine force in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds undoubtedly saved the lives of his men and inspired them to withstand the determined enemy. By his exceptional leadership, resolute determination, uncommon courage and inspiring devotion to duty, Captain Roman upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.

the southern side of the perimeter, charging and tossing grenades. Private First Class Steve A. Srsen stood up and shouted “Grenades!” so that other Marines would take cover. The grenades wounded four Marines, including Srsen, who was treated for his wounds and then asked to be sent back into the fight. When another grenade landed near him half an hour later, Srsen pushed another Marine away from it. This action saved the other Marine but resulted in Srsen being wounded again, taking the full force of the grenade’s blast. He would soon die of his wounds and posthumously receive the Navy Cross. Finally, shortly after 0900 on 27 January, helicopters were able to extract all the remaining Marines.

A similar, though slightly smaller, action occurred on 17 January when a seven-man patrol from 3d Reconnaissance Battalion collided with 50–70 NVA troops. A platoon-size reaction force from 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, arrived to assist the reconnaissance Marines. The action resulted in the death of several NVA soldiers, the wounding of several Marines, and the heroic death of Corporal Michael J. Scanlon of 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. Soon after spotting the enemy formation, Scanlon gave the rest of the team time to deploy by moving to a defensive position, warning the rest of his patrol of an imminent attack, and killing four soldiers in the enemy column. Though soon wounded, he continued to

fight aggressively. When a grenade landed within the patrol’s perimeter, he attempted to cover it with his body to protect his fellow Marines and was mortally wounded.

A Reduced Garrison and More Contacts

Despite the numerous enemy contacts made by 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, and elements of 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, there was still no conclusive proof that the NVA occupied the hilly jungle terrain north of Khe Sanh in regimental or division strength. Wickwire felt that more troops were needed in Khe Sanh to accomplish the mission he had been given, but his superiors instead decided to reduce the Marine presence there. The fighting in the eastern part of Quang Tri Province was heavier, and there was the continued desire to apply as many troops as possible to the pacification mission. In January 1967, General English noted that the tactical areas of responsibility (TAORs) for Marine units in the northernmost areas of Vietnam were expanding, and there simply were not enough troops to cover them adequately. This came out at the same briefing in which the general had commented that, if the Americans decided to hold Khe Sanh, it would be foolish to do so with “less than a battalion” of infantry along with supporting artillery. Less than a month later, Marine commanders were forced to violate

Private First Class Steve A. Srsen

Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Navy Cross (Posthumously) to Private First Class Steve Albert Srsen, United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism as a Rifleman while serving with Company A, First Battalion, Third Marines, THIRD Marine Division (Reinforced), Fleet Marine Force, in the Republic of Vietnam on 27 January 1967. Private First Class Srsen was with the First Platoon, Company A, when it was engaged in action as a reaction force assigned to link up with a reconnaissance patrol. Early the next morning following the linkup, Private First Class Srsen’s squad came under heavy small-arms fire and grenade attack. When an enemy grenade landed in his squad’s position, Private First Class



Srsen warned three other members of the squad, allowing them to take cover and escape injury. Wounded in his right side and leg from the grenade, Private First Class Srsen, after being treated by a Corpsman requested permission to return to his position in the perimeter. Approximately thirty minutes later another enemy grenade landed close to another Marine and Private First Class Srsen gallantly pushed him to the ground, thereby saving his life. Mortally wounded by the exploding grenade, Private First Class Srsen, by his dauntless courage and grave concern for another had risked his life to save that of a fellow Marine, thereby upholding the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.

Corporal Michael J. Scanlon

Silver Star Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Silver Star (Posthumously) to Corporal Michael J. Scanlon, United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Rifleman with Detachment, Third Force Reconnaissance Battalion, THIRD Marine Division, during operations against the enemy in Vietnam. On the night of 17 January 1967, Corporal Scanlon, as a member of a seven-man reconnaissance patrol, was flown by helicopter deep into enemy-controlled territory, with the mission of locating enemy infiltration routes. Throughout the night, the Marines heard sounds of enemy activity. At dawn on 18 January, the patrol moved to an observation point where a numerically superior North Vietnamese Army patrol of approximately forty men was sighted moving toward their position. Assigned the responsibility of providing security for the patrol's flank, Corporal Scanlon quickly moved to his defensive position where he was observed by the approaching enemy. Demonstrating exceptional



presence of mind, he warned his companions and immediately opened fire at the lead man of the North Vietnamese unit. His continued to bring effective fire to bear on the advancing enemy although wounded twice as the North Vietnamese moved to within fifteen meters of his position.

Exhibiting exemplary courage and aggressive fighting spirit despite his painful wounds and the intense enemy fire directed at him, Corporal Scanlon maintained his position and halted the enemy's attempts to dislodge the patrol's flank security. When an enemy hand grenade landed within the patrol's defensive perimeter Corporal Scanlon, with complete disregard for his own safety, valiantly attempted to recover the grenade but was mortally wounded. By his extraordinary courage, bold initiative, and selfless devotion to duty, Corporal Scanlon undoubtedly saved the lives of several Marines, inspired all those who observed him and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.

this logic. When 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, was withdrawn from Khe Sanh on 1–2 February 1967, it was replaced not by another battalion but by a single rifle company.

Captain Michael W. Sayers's Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, replaced 1st Battalion, 3d Marines. Marine forces also included a 45-man platoon of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. In terms of artillery, Battery I, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, replaced Battery B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, on 26 January. The senior officer present (SOP), Colonel Thomas A. Horne, coordinated all Marine Corps activities at Khe Sanh and relayed reports to higher headquarters. Essentially though, Captain Sayers had a reinforced company to accomplish the same mission Lieutenant

Colonel Wickwire had pursued with an entire battalion: protecting the airstrip by patrolling out to a distance of 15 kilometers. Initially, damp weather and fog inhibited patrolling and reconnaissance operations, but there were enough contacts to indicate increased enemy activity. More reconnaissance patrols were attacked by NVA units and extracted by helicopters while under fire.

Then, on 25 February, a hard fight erupted no more than three kilometers from the airstrip. Second Lieutenant John M. Kramer's 2d Platoon was patrolling west of the airstrip when its 1st Squad, led by Sergeant Donald E. Harper Jr., collided with the enemy. As they patrolled, Harper's squad members had spotted several enemy soldiers, who later



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A193264

Marines from Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, patrolling through elephant grass near Hill 861. This photo was taken several months after the Hill Fights.

fled. When Harper's first fireteam, led by Corporal Steven Wright, reached the top of a low hill, they suddenly found themselves within point-blank range of three enemy soldiers sitting on the ground. Both sides were surprised by the encounter, but the Marines fired first with a shotgun and an M60 7.62mm machine gun, killing one man and severely wounding the other two. The leader of the second fireteam wounded another enemy soldier several yards to the right. The squad then began receiving heavy fire from 50 yards away on the reverse slope of the hill. The incoming fire was so intense that Harper quickly concluded he was facing a superior force. He withdrew to the bottom of the hill, reported to Captain Sayers, and requested artillery fire on the top of the hill. After the fire mission, Sayers ordered Harper to reoccupy the top of the hill and retrieve the enemy soldier's body.

Upon reaching the crest with five men, Harper searched the body before his men began to drag it back, when they

received fire from their front and flank. Harper withdrew again and requested more artillery, then advanced a third time. By this time, the enemy had emplaced a machine gun and the fire was even more intense. Captain Sayers ordered two squads from 1st Platoon, led by First Lieutenant David L. Mellon, to join Harper and take the hill. As the three squads advanced, they were hit not only by machine-gun fire but also mortars, which killed one Marine, Staff Sergeant Kendell D. Cutbirth, and wounded 8–10 others, including Lieutenant Mellon.

Despite his painful wounds, Mellon was able to contact an airborne air controller and request air support.* Moments later, two F-4 Phantom's with 500-pound bombs came screaming in overhead and dropped their load on the enemy on the reverse slope. After two more passes, the enemy force was devastated and its survivors scattered. Meanwhile, Captain Sayers had ordered Lieutenant Kramer to take his other two squads to Harper's support. By the time these Marines could advance through the thick elephant grass 8–10 feet high, the action was over and medevac operations were in progress. Lieutenant Mellon delayed his own medevac until Kramer arrived so he could explain the situation. Late that afternoon and the next day, searches of the area turned up 10 dead NVA soldiers, an 82mm mortar, several mortar base plates, hundreds of mortar rounds, binoculars, rifles, a pistol, and more than 20 enemy packs, indicating that the NVA had taken such serious casualties during the encounter that they were required to flee so rapidly that they had left a large amount of gear and ordnance. Company B had lost 1 man killed and 11 wounded.**

There would be no firefights this serious for another three weeks. However, the action of 25 February foreshadowed the intensity of the battles that would follow in the spring. Moreover, there were other signs of increased enemy activity in the Khe Sanh area. On the night of 2 March, the NVA fired more than 90 82mm mortar rounds at the Khe Sanh base, killing 2 Marines, wounding 17, and destroying three helicopters. This was an opportunistic strike, taking

*Common military terminology would refer to this individual as a forward air controller (airborne) or FAC(A).

**Accounts of this action differ in some details. Those presented here are based heavily on the interviews 2dLt Kramer and Sgt Harper completed just three days after the fight.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188623

MajGen Michael P. Ryan (center) in 1967. Earlier in the year, Ryan, as a brigadier general, served as assistant division commander of 3d MarDiv.

advantage of the confusion from perhaps an even more serious tragedy that had occurred earlier the same evening. Two U.S. Air Force aircraft had mistakenly bombed the village of Lang Vei, killing 112 villagers, wounding 213, and destroying 140 buildings. The Marines immediately sent helicopters, trucks, and a Lockheed Martin KC-130 aircraft from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) to help evacuate the casualties, while Marines and Special Forces soldiers did what they could to alleviate the suffering. On 4–5 March, small groups of NVA soldiers probed the perimeter around the Khe Sanh airfield but were driven off.

Besides these high-profile incidents, smaller contacts occurred almost daily, and Captain Sayers felt he needed far more men to accomplish his mission. He was able to express this desire in person to Brigadier General Michael P. Ryan, the new assistant division commander of 3d MarDiv, when Ryan visited Khe Sanh. On 7 March, 3d MarDiv responded

by strengthening the Khe Sanh garrison with another company, Captain William B. Terrill's Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines.

Captain Terrill's men immediately took over half of the TAOR from Company B and began patrols, making contact on several occasions. On 16 March, Company E's 1st Platoon found itself in a vicious engagement with the enemy. The platoon, led by Staff Sergeant Spencer F. Olsen, had set out the previous evening on a patrol toward Hill 861. Hearing sounds in the brush just before reaching the crest of the hill, the platoon had halted and established a perimeter for the night. The next morning, 1st Squad secured the top of the hill and 3d and 2d Squads continued slowly down the reverse slope, with 3d Squad taking the point.

At about 1000, Sergeant Donald P. Lord's 3d Squad suddenly received heavy fire from two directions at close range. The fusillade immediately killed the leader of the point

fireteam, Lance Corporal Julian A. McKee, and wounded three others. The Marines of 3d Squad returned fire, and Corporal John K. Middleton's 2d Squad rushed down the hill to reinforce them. First Squad, led by Sergeant Stephen P. Bodie, was ordered to leave its position on the hill and assist as well. The NVA ceased firing and the Marines began carrying their casualties back to the top of Hill 861, hoping to reach the opposite slope. The landing zone on the opposite slope was the only suitable location nearby for a helicopter medevac. As the Marines carried their wounded comrades, however, they received fire again, this time from the rear and right flank. Even worse, the NVA had gained the summit of the hill just evacuated by 1st Squad and began lobbing grenades and firing AK47 assault rifles at the Marines below. Realizing that he was nearly surrounded and rapidly taking more casualties, Staff Sergeant Olsen called for artillery and a napalm strike on top of the hill. Impacting no more than 50 meters away, the napalm attack was far closer to friendly forces than normal.*

The napalm strike was right on target, however, and eliminated the NVA threat from the top of the hill. It also destroyed enough vegetation to make the summit of the hill a more suitable place to land helicopters. The flames, however, travelled down the hill toward the Marines, and Sergeant Bodie and other Marines rushed forward to extinguish the fires before wounded Marines lying in the brush could be burned. Meanwhile, Captain Sayers ordered Second Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell to rush toward Hill 861 with two squads from his 2d Platoon, Company B, to assist 1st Platoon, Company E. The Company B Marines had been patrolling somewhere between 1,500 and 3,500 meters east of Hill 861.** To make better time, they dropped their packs and pushed up the east side of the hill. A third squad boarded a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter so that it could be inserted on the southeastern slope of the hill.

*Modern military terminology would refer to this situation as *danger close*.

**Some sources claim that 2d Platoon, Company B, had been operating 1,500 meters east of Hill 861. Capt Terrill claimed in an interview that the distance was actually 3,500 meters, a very long distance for the platoon to traverse in time to help 1st Platoon, Company E, clear the landing zone. Also, additional documents identify 2dLt Gatlin J. Howell as the commander of 2d Platoon, Company B, while another claims it was actually 2dLt Kramer, the officer who had led that platoon in the action the preceding month, and states that Kramer was wounded while leading the platoon up Hill 861.

By 1600, the landing zone had been cleared and three CH-46's were on station to evacuate the wounded and dead Marines. The first helicopter landed, was loaded with casualties, and managed to get away safely. As the second touched down, enemy mortar shells impacted on the side of the hill, causing more casualties.

The dilemma now faced by the two platoon commanders was how to get their wounded evacuated when the enemy obviously had their mortars zeroed in on the hilltop. The situation was made worse when the CH-46 transporting the last squad of 2d Platoon, Company B, crashed near its intended landing zone, injuring every man aboard and leaving more casualties to be treated and flown out. The platoon commanders, Staff Sergeant Olsen and Lieutenant Gatlin, knew they needed to carry the wounded men to the safer landing zone below the crest of the hill; by this point, however, there were not enough able-bodied Marines remaining to accomplish the task. With few options remaining and determined to evacuate their wounded comrades, the Marines called artillery fire on suspected enemy mortar sites and requested the third helicopter to come in. As it approached, more enemy mortar rounds landed, forcing the CH-46 to break off and causing yet more casualties. One of them was Hospitalman Third Class Francis A. Benoit, USN, who had multiple shrapnel wounds that he had not taken time to treat so he could tend to his Marines first. Though he had been slated to be evacuated on the previous flight, Benoit refused, giving his place to a wounded Marine. As he helped a casualty into the third helicopter, he was killed by shrapnel from an incoming round. Both Sergeant Bodie and Corporal Middleton remembered the carnage at the scene. "There was a big mess," Middleton recalled, "wounded and dead bodies strewn all over the hill."

Around 1900, Captain Terrill and his 2d Platoon flew into a landing zone south of Hill 861 and began working their way up to the remnants of the other two platoons. By 2100, all the wounded Marines had been evacuated and the able-bodied ones spent the entire night carrying weapons, gear, and the bodies of their fallen comrades down the hill to the landing zone. Terrill had to provide security for the wrecked helicopter until it could be extracted at 1100 on the eighteenth, and then, with the reinforcement of a platoon from Company B, he spent two days sweeping the area north



Defense Department, courtesy of GySgt B. L. Owens

Helicopters were vital for resupply and casualty evacuation in Vietnam, particularly at Khe Sanh. They also were the primary means by which Marines in I Corps could be quickly reinforced. Here, just weeks after the conclusion of the Hill Fights, Marines from 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, dash to a waiting Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter at Dong Ha to reinforce Marines from 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, battling NVA forces at Con Thien.

and west of Hill 861. He found little sign of the NVA and believed that, “had there been more troops available on the evening of the 16th,” he and the Marines with him would have been more successful in finding and defeating NVA forces attempting to break contact. As it was, the enemy had plenty of time to get away and take their gear and weapons with them.

The results of the fight on 16 March were sobering, illustrating how dependent the Marines were on helicopter support for quick reinforcements and medevacs. They also highlighted the NVA’s ability to keep large units well

concealed in the dense terrain around Khe Sanh until the moment they chose to attack, as well as the enemy’s skill in taking advantage of American techniques of casualty evacuation to inflict even more casualties. Perhaps due in part to the enemy’s ability to withdraw unmolested, the Marines could confirm the death of only 11 NVA soldiers, while they had lost 19 KIA and 59 wounded.

Though 3d MarDiv had sent a second rifle company to Khe Sanh on 7 March and was fully aware of the bloody fight on 16 March, Lieutenant General Walt still believed that the enemy’s primary goal was to disrupt the CORDS

program in the villages. On the morning of 19 March, Walt met with General Westmoreland and several other senior officers at the USMACV headquarters in Saigon. Walt argued his point in separate private meetings with General Earle G. Wheeler, USA, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Westmoreland. Walt pointed to recent attacks on South Vietnamese Popular Force troops, CORDS teams, and South Vietnamese district headquarters. The employment of NVA main forces, he claimed, was the enemy's "secondary effort." Wheeler privately told Walt that he agreed with him, while Westmoreland appeared not to contradict him directly. Later, however, members of Westmoreland's staff told Walt that Westmoreland had commented the day prior that U.S. forces "might have to sacrifice their support of the RD [CORDS] effort in order to have troops enough to clear out base areas and fight the NVA and main forces."

Walt left the 19 March meeting knowing he had not convinced Westmoreland. As he wrote Lieutenant General Krulak and Marine Corps Commandant General Wallace M. Greene Jr., "I am still convinced he does not understand the importance of the RD [CORDS] effort in winning this war." Less than a month later, another high-level exchange illustrated that Westmoreland was still seeking a big-battle showdown with the NVA near Khe Sanh. Krulak forwarded to Walt a copy of an exchange between Westmoreland and the U.S. ambassador to Laos, William H. Sullivan. The ambassador knew that the North Vietnamese had been moving supplies and equipment down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and storing it just inside the Laotian border west of Khe Sanh or moving it into the northwest portions of South Vietnam. He believed that the enemy was planning to "emulate Dien Bien Phu," the decisive defeat Communist forces had inflicted on a surrounded and besieged French force in 1954. Sullivan believed that the most logical place for the NVA to attempt this would be Khe Sanh. He reminded Westmoreland that the NVA

may be already tunneling in against potential air attack. They can make their preparations quite undisturbed because they control the hills and the countryside. . . . They will assume that the Marines at Da Nang will attempt to relieve Khe Sanh and that the Marines will therefore move in reinforcements as fast as they can. But these . . . will be susceptible to ambush and

destruction piecemeal. In short, I would assume that they will use the bait of a besieged Khe Sanh to draw more and more of your Marines into the totally inhospitable territory of western Quang Tri [Province.]

Sullivan suggested that Westmoreland consider "pull[ing] your Marines and ARVN temporarily out of Khe Sanh in order to deprive them of the bait for their trap." Then Westmoreland could evacuate "friendly villagers" and begin a massive campaign of spraying the hills around Khe Sanh with defoliant and conducting raids by Boeing B-52 Stratofortress bombers.

Westmoreland's response indicated that he shared the ambassador's conviction that the Communists were planning a major attack in western Quang Tri. At times, both before and after the fighting at Khe Sanh, Westmoreland would opine that the North Vietnamese were planning or had attempted "another Dien Bien Phu." However, he believed that existing contingency plans and a decisive response would enable American forces to hold Khe Sanh. The area was too important to give up, he explained, as "the CIDG base at Lang Vei and the USMC base at Khe Sanh serve as integral patrol bases for our surveillance activities in the northwest." Besides, an attack on Khe Sanh would provide a welcome opportunity to inflict heavy losses on the enemy: "Experience has shown that the enemy has suffered his greatest losses when he has chosen to mass for attack against our defensive positions, or when we have managed to engage his forces in open combat." This desire to inflict massive casualties on the enemy's conventional forces coincided with Westmoreland's larger strategy for winning the war. Only a few days after this exchange with Ambassador Sullivan, Westmoreland told a group of reporters, "We'll just go on bleeding them until Hanoi wakes up to the fact that they have bled their country to the point of national disaster for generations. Then they will have to reassess their position."

If there was "bait" at Khe Sanh, the largest chunk consisted of the two Marine rifle companies there: Captain Sayers's Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and, for a time, Captain Terrill's Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. If Sayers hoped the battle on 16 March would convince his superiors to send him more firepower, he was only partially satisfied. On 27 March, he received more support from



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A801029

Gens Westmoreland, Walt, Hochmuth, and Ryan talking to different ARVNs at CoBi-Thanh Tan after Operation Swanee on 3 May 1967.

Brigadier General Ryan, now designated as commander of 3d MarDiv (Forward) at Dong Ha. Engineers had finally opened the road from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh, and a huge convoy of 68 vehicles arrived that day. The opening of Route 9 to Khe Sanh and the 3d MarDiv's use of it to bolster Khe Sanh's defenses was an important event signifying growing Marine control over Quang Tri Province; additionally, it suggested that in the future the Khe Sanh base might not be totally dependent on air support. Sayers received a section of tanks and two light sections of truck-mounted heavy weapons, including dual 40mm automatic cannons and quad .50-caliber machine guns. There was also a section of M50 Ontos vehicles. The Ontos was a self-propelled, partially armored vehicle that carried six 106mm recoilless rifles. Though originally designed as an antitank gun, Marines in Vietnam had found the Ontos to be a very effective antipersonnel weapon. This Ontos section was part of Company A,

3d Antitank Battalion, and was commanded by First Lieutenant Philip H. Sauer. On the very day that Sayers received these welcome additions in firepower, however, he lost the support of Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines—Captain Terrill's unit returned to Dong Ha to rebuild after its losses from the fighting on the sixteenth.

It was doubtful, though, that Khe Sanh could hold out against the force that the enemy conceivably could have brought against it. Intelligence reports in early April indicated that two NVA regiments were moving in the area northwest of Khe Sanh, potentially some 3,000 men. Several reconnaissance patrols reported large enemy units northwest of Khe Sanh moving toward the base. By the last week of April, the *18th Regiment* of the *325C Division* and perhaps other elements of that division were dug into the hills northwest of Khe Sanh and planning a major attack on the base. There were still less than 1,000 allied personnel in the



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A189652

An M50 Ontos with its six 106mm recoilless rifles at Khe Sanh in October 1967.

Khe Sanh area, including Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines; Battery I, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines (soon to be replaced by Captain Glen Golden's Battery F, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines); the Marine reconnaissance company; the reinforcements that arrived previously on 27 March; the Special Forces at Lang Vei; the Marines' CAP Company Oscar, located between the village of Khe Sanh and the combat base; and a U.S. Air Force contingent responsible for directing reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam and Laos. Moreover, the fighting strength of the allied Khe Sanh area forces was weakened by the lack of unity of command. The newly arrived Marine SOP, Lieutenant Colonel James H. Reeder, had no jurisdiction whatsoever over the various Army and Air Force elements at Khe Sanh and Lang Vei. This virtually ensured a lack of coordination that would become a serious problem during the upcoming battle

of April and May. Finally, the withdrawal of Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, suggests that the 3d MarDiv staff were still not fully convinced of the enemy's strength around Khe Sanh.

In the relative lull following the fight of 16 March, Marines at Khe Sanh, and indeed throughout the division, had trained with the new M16 rifle, the replacement for the M14. The new weapon was lighter and had a more rapid rate of fire than the M14. Its 5.56mm round was lighter than the M14's 7.62mm ammunition, allowing Marines to carry more rounds. In the upcoming battles, however, Marine infantrymen would find serious problems with their new rifles.

For now, the enemy still seemed to avoid large engagements with the Marines. The next major contact did not occur until 30 March, and it was the result of another Marine patrol northwest of Hill 861. Staff Sergeant Alfredo V.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A369882

On 21 February 1967, MajGen Herman Nickerson Jr. talks with one of the few Marines of 1st MarDiv to have been issued one of the new M16 rifles. Marines of 3d MarDiv serving near Khe Sanh would begin receiving M16s at about the same time.

Reyes's 3d Platoon of Company B was patrolling in the area when it discovered a recently abandoned NVA base camp, which appeared capable of accommodating a company-size force. There was a covered sleeping area large enough to shelter 50 men, as well as approximately two dozen bunkers. Third Platoon's point man, Private First Class Thomas F. Ryan, found several large pots of rice boiling over campfires, indicating that the enemy had quickly melted into the jungle upon the Marine patrol's approach. Staff Sergeant Reyes was gathering documents from the bunkers when enemy mortar rounds began slamming into the camp. Over a period of 15 minutes, the enemy "walked" some 85 rounds back and forth across their position. Reyes and his men took cover in the bunkers and contacted a FAC(A), who was able to locate the enemy mortars and attack them with two F-4 Phantoms armed with 500-pound bombs. Nevertheless, another

40 rounds fired from two other mortars landed in the position. When the airborne controller informed Reyes that he could see an entire company of NVA soldiers headed toward him, Reyes wisely withdrew his platoon and fortunately suffered no casualties.

On 20 April, the Marine forces at Khe Sanh ceased to come under the direct operational control of 3d MarDiv; instead, the division passed control of Khe Sanh down to 3d Marines. This occurred on the same day that the division launched a two-regiment search-and-destroy operation in Quang Tri Province known as Operation Prairie IV. In the east, two battalions from 9th Marines would operate in the piedmont area around Quang Tri City. In the northwest portion of the area of operations, north of Camp Carroll and the Rockpile, 3d Marines would operate with two battalions. The area of operations for Prairie IV did not include



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188590

From left: LtGen Henry W. Buse Jr., deputy chief of staff for Plans and Programs Office, Headquarters Marine Corps; BGen Michael P. Ryan; and MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth confer during a meeting at Camp Carroll on 31 March 1967. Though there was much to consider on the progress of the war in I Corps, it is likely that Khe Sanh was discussed. In 1968, LtGen Buse would succeed LtGen Krulak as commanding general of FMFPac.

Khe Sanh. As a Marine Corps historian explains, Khe Sanh “was a territorial appendage, attached for control purposes to the 3d Marines because that regiment was in the best position to oversee the base and reinforce it if the need arose.” At the same time these arrangements were made, it was also decided that Captain Sayers’s Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, would be replaced by Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, led by Captain Bayliss L. Spivey Jr. The relief was supposed to take place on 29 April, just days after Company K’s planned arrival on 25 April.

The Beginning of the Hill Fights

The heaviest combat around Khe Sanh occurred between 24 April and 11 May 1967, and this fighting is usually

referred to as the Hill Fights. The magnitude of the fighting in terms of friendly troops engaged and casualties on both sides dwarfed the smaller-scale but sometimes equally fierce engagements of 1966 and the first three months of 1967. As the fighting developed, General Walt and his staff reconstructed what the enemy had hoped to accomplish.

The enemy had indeed hoped to overrun Khe Sanh near the end of April or early May and planned to accomplish this in the same way Communist forces had overrun the French base at Dien Bieh Phu in 1954, much as Westmoreland suspected. There would be a buildup of men and supplies and occupation of key terrain near the base, followed by coordinated attacks against supporting facilities, such as airfields, and lines of communication to the base. The enemy had in fact been infiltrating the hills north of Khe Sanh with large elements of the *325C Division*, and there were other NVA troops in northern Quang Tri Province. The NVA hoped to destroy transport helicopters based near the coast on which the Khe Sanh garrison depended so heavily for supplies. In a further attempt to isolate the base and cut it off from friendly support, the enemy would attack key bases along Route 9—Camp Carroll, Con Thien, Dong Ha, and Gio Linh. These attacks would be diversions and also would reduce those garrisons’ ability to provide fire and logistical support to Khe Sanh. There also would be a diversionary attack on the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. Finally, regimental-size elements based in the Hills 881 and 861 complex would launch the main attack and overrun Khe Sanh itself.

Walt and his staff believed that the fighting of 24 April occurred only days before the *325C Division* planned to execute its main attack on Khe Sanh. The NVA, however, apparently launched most of its diversionary attacks on schedule. The Marine bases along Route 9 received heavy rocket, mortar, and artillery attacks on 27–28 April and the route itself was cut at several places. The Lang Vei Special Forces Camp, as will be seen, suffered a massive enemy attack on 4 May. But any regimental- or division-size attack on Khe Sanh was thwarted as the Marines patrolled in the hills north of it on the twenty-fourth.

The battle of 24 April opened much as the earlier ones had—with a platoon-size Marine patrol running into unexpectedly heavy resistance just north or west of the base. It did not result from III MAF deliberately seeking a large-scale



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Action at Khe Sanh on 24 April.

battle at Khe Sanh; in fact, senior Marine officers near the DMZ were primarily focused on Operation Prairie IV to the east of Khe Sanh, which was in its fifth day. Likewise, senior officers in the NVA's *325C Division* would have probably preferred to postpone any serious engagement near Khe Sanh. As Marines patrolled northwest of the base on the twenty-fourth, however, they ran into a surprisingly large enemy force. The NVA soldiers chose to give battle, and the Marines reacted forcefully.

The action commenced in the morning, as the 1st and 3d Platoons of Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, swept a complex of caves northwest of Hill 861. These platoons were already outside the base, located north and east of the hill, when they set out that morning. To support this sweep, Sayers ordered the bulk of his 2d Platoon, led by Second

Lieutenant Thomas G. King, to depart the base and advance to Hill 700 as a covering force for the other two platoons. King led two of his rifle squads and 10 men from the company's 81mm mortar section up Hill 700 that morning. His column also included a forward observer for the mortars and First Lieutenant Sauer, the Ontos section leader, who wanted to accompany the platoon and assist with establishing an observation post for the mortars forward observer.

King arrived at his predesignated position on Hill 700, had the mortar tube emplaced, and dispatched a five-man team led by Lieutenant Sauer to establish an observation post on the crest of Hill 861 from which fire missions could be directed in support of the 1st and 3d Platoons. At a point about 300 meters below the summit of Hill 861, the observation post team was ambushed and the point man was killed.

Receiving a radio message that the team was under heavy fire, King instructed the team to withdraw so that he could direct mortar fire onto the ambush site. As the team attempted to withdraw, Lieutenant Sauer bravely stood and tried to cover it with fire from his .45-caliber pistol. Sauer was killed as the remaining three Marines ran through heavy fire. The bullets flew so thickly that only the forward observer, Private First Class William Marks, returned to Lieutenant King's position alive. As Marks stumbled into his fellow Marines, he breathlessly reported, "They're all dead. The other four. All dead." This tragic event signified the onset of the First Battle of Khe Sanh.

Before Marks returned to his position, Lieutenant King had lost radio contact with the observation post team and had sent a rifle squad to investigate. These men found the bodies of two Marines, but were forced back due to heavy automatic weapons fire. Shortly afterward, Captain Sayers and a radio operator flew to King's position. King now ordered a third ascent, this time leading the squad of nine Marines himself. King's contingent retrieved two of the bodies; according to an official Marine Corps history, the other two bodies had been decapitated by the enemy and burned. King's squad received no enemy fire, but he felt certain it was still a dangerous place due to the unnatural quiet—there were "no bugs making noise," he recalled. Receiving permission to return downhill, King reached an area where a helicopter could land and requested a pickup for the two bodies and the gear that had been retrieved. As soon as the wheel of the UH-34 Seahorse helicopter touched the ground, he reported, the "whole treeline on top of Hill 861, which extends for about . . . 300 meters, opened up" with heavy automatic weapons fire. The helicopter received 35 bullet holes, but escaped with its load intact. King later reported that the reason for its safe departure was that the two UH-1E Huey helicopters accompanying the transport craft poured heavy fire into the treeline, and they "just tore the daylight out of that place."

As the day progressed, the mortar crew with King on Hill 700 continued to fire missions in support of the two platoons on the opposite side of Hill 861. At least some of the mortar fire was accurate and deadly. Late in the day, Captain Sayers led the 2d Platoon back to the Khe Sanh base. With the NVA apparently occupying Hill 861 just a few hundred meters away in company strength, and having received



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A patrol of Marines returning to their "hooches" on Hill 861 near the Khe Sanh combat base in September 1967. At the time of the Hill Fights five months earlier, this Marine base camp on Hill 861 did not yet exist.

enemy 12.7mm rounds from the rear earlier in the day, neither Sayers nor King felt it was wise to leave the understrength 2d Platoon on Hill 700 overnight.

While Lieutenant King and his men coped with their situation on the south side of Hill 861, the other two platoons of Company B on the northern side of the hill had an even more trying ordeal. First Platoon, led by Second Lieutenant James D. Carter Jr., and 3d Platoon, led by Staff Sergeant Reyes, began their sweep at around 0530, moving uphill in the direction of Hill 861. It was not long before the nature of the terrain separated the two units by a distance of a few hundred meters. Soon, a Marine near the rear of the 1st Platoon column, in 3d Squad, passed word up the column that he had spotted five enemy soldiers, one of them being carried on a stretcher. Lieutenant Carter ordered the platoon to halt, as the NVA soldiers had not yet noticed the Marines and were approaching. At a range of about 50 meters, one of the enemy soldiers spotted a Marine and began firing. First Platoon returned fire, and then eight or nine men moved forward to investigate. They found two dead NVA soldiers; however, another enemy soldier who was not yet dead threw a grenade, killing Corporal James G. Pomerleau, the leader of 1st Squad.

Lance Corporal Dana C. Darnell

Navy Cross Citation

The Navy Cross is awarded to Lance Corporal Dana C. Darnell, United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism as a 60mm Mortar Ammunition Carrier attached to Company B, First Battalion, Ninth Marines, Third Marine Division in the Republic of Vietnam on 24 April 1967. Company B was engaged in a search and destroy operation against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in Quang Tri Province. Lance Corporal Darnell's platoon was entering a clearing, when it was ambushed by North Vietnamese Army Forces, using heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire. As the ambush was sprung, the mortar gunner was knocked unconscious while seeking cover. Exhibiting sound judgment and extraordinary calmness in the face of intense enemy fire, Lance Corporal Darnell retrieved the mortar. Due to the urgency of the situation, he was unable to set the mortar up properly. Holding it between his legs and steadying it



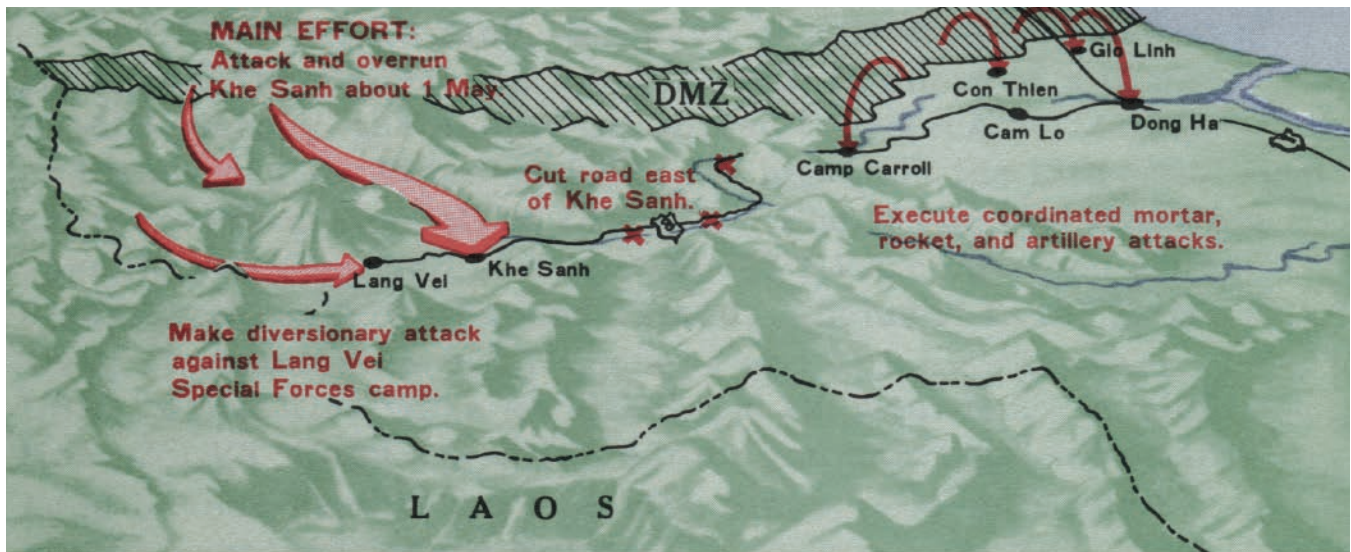
with his hands, he began firing the mortar from a position exposed to the enemy fire and delivered accurate fire into the enemy positions. When he had exhausted all of his ammunition, he moved from man to man, collecting mortar ammunition to keep his mortar in action. He repeated this selfless performance many times, until the enemy fire was silenced. At this time, the platoon was ordered to withdraw from the clearing. Lance Corporal Darnell was dragging two wounded Marines from the clearing when he was temporarily blinded by enemy fire, which knocked dirt and rock fragments into his eyes. He refused to be evacuated and within an hour was again assisting in the care of the wounded. By his outstanding courage, exceptional fortitude and valiant fighting spirit he served to inspire all who observed him and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

About this time in the morning, Captain Sayers contacted Lieutenant Carter and Staff Sergeant Reyes and ordered a change of mission. Because of the NVA contact made by Lieutenant King's 2d Platoon on Hill 861, Sayers thought he had an opportunity to strike the enemy from two opposite directions. He ordered 1st and 3d Platoons to abandon their sweep of the cave complex and instead advance southeast directly toward the summit of Hill 861.

After advancing some 300 meters from the site of its last contact, 1st Platoon was crossing an open area, when they received intense machine-gun and small-arms fire from the right flank. As Marines dove for cover and attempted to return fire, the heroism of one man, Lance Corporal Dana C. Darnell, stood out. Darnell was an ammunition carrier for the 60mm mortar section. The gunner for Darnell's section was knocked unconscious before he could set up the mortar. Without time to set it up properly, Darnell placed the base of the tube in a helmet between his legs and steadied it with his bare hands. As the rounds quickly heated the tube, another Marine urinated on it so that Darnell would not burn his

hands. Darnell expended all his ammunition, but the other mortarmen in the column could not bring their rounds to him due to the heavy fire and lack of cover. Darnell, therefore, went to them. At least three times, Darnell ran across open terrain under intense enemy fire to gather mortar rounds and bring them back to his tube so that he could fire them. More men were wounded or killed when Lieutenant Carter ordered the Marines to move, two at a time, out of the open area to cover. Darnell dragged two wounded comrades to safety until an enemy mortar round blew dirt and gravel into his eyes, temporarily blinding him. Instead of allowing himself to be evacuated, he used precious drinking water from his canteen to cleanse his eyes, and within an hour was back assisting the wounded. For these actions, Darnell was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross, as he would be killed in action two days later.

At the same time that 1st Platoon was caught in the open and Lance Corporal Darnell was responding with mortar fire, 3d Platoon, about 400 meters behind 1st Platoon, was also hit and six of its Marines were wounded. Later, the



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The NVA plan of attack for 24 April.

platoon would suffer more casualties when an F-4 mistook it for an NVA unit and dropped a pair of 250-pound bombs, killing six Marines and wounding a dozen more. Both Carter's and Reyes's platoons were now burdened, indeed almost immobilized, by the duty to care for their own wounded and dead. There were so many bodies to carry that the men were exhausted as they tried to reach suitable landing zones for helicopters to pick them up. The helicopters received such heavy mortar attacks as they landed that only three men could be evacuated before Carter had to "wave them off." He moved the platoon to another site that he thought would be safer, but the results were nearly identical. Third Platoon's experience was very similar, particularly as Staff Sergeant Reyes tried to evacuate his casualties. That night, both platoons dug in with most of their wounded and dead still with them. In a single day of fighting, Company B had lost 12 Marines killed, 17 wounded, and 2 missing. Confirmed enemy losses were five NVA dead; also one NVA soldier was captured when he wandered too close to the lines of 3d Platoon. A large proportion of the American casualties had been suffered as the Marines tried to load their wounded comrades onto helicopters. The NVA had perfected their tactic of targeting likely landing zones with mortar fire, timing it so that the rounds impacted just as the helicopters touched down. For the Marines, it was a cultural impossibility to leave their

wounded behind or to delay their evacuation and they felt nearly as strongly about their dead. The NVA took advantage of this Marine tradition and of the fact that helicopters were virtually the only way to evacuate casualties from the rugged terrain around Khe Sanh.

On a tactical level, then, one could conclude that the Marines had received the worst of the fight on 24 April. General Walt concluded, however, that the actions of Company B had forced the NVA to reveal their hand. The enemy, he thought, was staging men and supplies for a major attack on Khe Sanh in the coming days. The second step in their plan was to isolate Khe Sanh by destroying transport helicopters near the base and cutting Route 9 at key places. Then, as the actual attack on Khe Sanh commenced, the enemy would also create diversions and inhibit American ability to reinforce the base by striking other Marine strongholds, such as Camp Carroll and Dong Ha, with supporting arms. Actual subsequent attacks on Route 9 and the other Marine bases in Quang Tri Province on 27–28 April suggested that Walt's assessment was generally correct, and this interpretation of enemy plans has appeared in official Marine accounts of the battle ever since.

What is certainly clear is that Walt and his staff recognized the real fight was now at Khe Sanh. No one questioned the significance of the threat there any longer, and Operation

Prairie IV, taking place farther east, was about to be overshadowed by the determination to strike the NVA in the hills north of Khe Sanh.*

This determination was reflected from Captain Sayers's level all the way up to the regimental and division level on the night of the twenty-fourth. At the company level, Sayers decided the next morning that he would take the bulk of 2d Platoon (about 22 men), along with more ammunition and medical supplies, to the northern side of Hill 861 to reinforce his other two rifle platoons. With him would be the 2d Platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Leon R. Burns. At higher levels, it was decided that Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, would deploy to Khe Sanh as originally scheduled on the twenty-fifth and move directly into the fight rather than spend four days getting oriented to their new location. Fortunately, liaison personnel from Company K were already at the base making arrangements for a smooth arrival and transition. Moreover, the entire 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, not just Company K, would now be making the move to Khe Sanh.

Well before the arrival of Company K and the command group of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Captain Sayers and his 2d Platoon departed the base in two helicopters to join the rest his company. The helicopters were able to evacuate a few of the more critically wounded from the 1st Platoon and then the 3d Platoon positions before heavy incoming fire drove them off. At least some of this burden was lifted, but Company B Marines still had a number of wounded and dead bodies to carry with them. Much of that day, 25 April, was spent trying to get helicopters in to evacuate the casualties. Around late afternoon, the three platoons of Company B started moving up Hill 861 in hopes of eventually linking up with Company K the next day. They had moved about 800 meters before the thick fog and darkness forced Sayers's men to halt at around 2130. The fog was so thick, remembered Staff Sergeant Burns, that "I couldn't have seen Ho Chi Minh himself if he had been walking right behind me." Company B, therefore, set up defensive perimeters and ambush locations for the night. At around 0500 the next morning, the enemy began a heavy bombardment of the Khe



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Crew members of Battery E, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, fire an M101 105mm howitzer round at Viet Cong troops in South Vietnam. These howitzers made up the majority of artillery pieces firing in support of Marine infantry during the Khe Sanh Hill Fights.

Sanh base with recoilless rifles, 82mm mortars, and rockets. These weapons were located on the eastern slope of Hill 881S, perhaps only 400 meters away from Company B. They were close enough that the Company B Marines could see the muzzle blast of the recoilless rifles through the fog and could hear the mortars. Captain Sayers called in an artillery fire mission, and adjusted the rounds by sound. Thanks to holes in the fog and the use of 105mm illumination rounds from the howitzers, the Marines were able to verify the destruction of the recoilless rifles, and the fire ceased. Fortunately, the fog seemed to have decreased the accuracy of the enemy fire on the Khe Sanh base, as most of the 100 rounds landed just outside the perimeter. Staff Sergeant Burns, for one, concluded that Captain Sayers's fire mission "probably saved a few lives." It certainly reassured the Marines of Company B.

While Company B had been regrouping on the twenty-fifth and evacuating casualties on the north side of Hill 861, Company K had arrived by helicopter at the Khe Sanh airstrip to join the fight. Heavy fog had delayed their departure until just after 1100. Lieutenant Colonel Gary Wilder, the battalion commander of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, also arrived that morning with his command group. Wilder was

*Operation Prairie IV began on 20 April as a search-and-destroy operation involving four Marine battalions.

given operational control over Captain Sayers's Company B. Another new arrival to Khe Sanh that day was the 3d Marines regimental commander, Colonel John P. Lanigan. On 20 April, 3d MarDiv had transferred operational control of Marine units at Khe Sanh to 3d Marines, and now Colonel Lanigan was on site and ready to oversee a major operation to root out the NVA from the hills around the base. The assistant division commander, Brigadier General Ryan, also visited on the twenty-fifth.

Shortly after landing, Company K, as well as Lieutenant Colonel Wilder and his battalion command group, started moving northwest to assist Company B. Unfortunately, their communications with Captain Sayers were poor since Company B did not have the codes or radio frequencies for 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Sayers was convinced that the enemy could monitor his transmissions and would only send coded messages to his rear command post at Khe Sanh, which in turn would have to decode them and somehow transmit them to 3d Battalion, who in turn attempted to forward them to Company K. These communications difficulties were never satisfactorily solved during the next several days of fighting, and throughout the day and night of the twenty-fifth, Wilder did not have a good fix on Sayers's position north of the hill. Despite all these complications, Company K was able to move out from the Khe Sanh base toward Hill 861 by 1200, with the howitzers of Battery F providing preparatory fires on the objective.

By 1600, Company K had advanced to within 500 meters of the crest of Hill 861. Artillery and air-delivered preparatory fires now were sporadic due to frequent check fires. Spivey, however, as well as Wilder, felt that the NVA had now absorbed enough pounding that the Marines would meet little resistance as they made the last push up the hill. Captain Spivey deployed his platoons for the final assault. The hilly, broken terrain dictated an attack along two separate axes. First Platoon would advance along a ridgeline directly south of the summit, and Spivey and his command group would colocate with those Marines. Third Platoon advanced along another ridgeline that approached the summit from the east. Second Platoon, numerically the weakest because one of its squads was detached to another unit, would be the reserve. It was in a central position to support the attack, but the three platoons did not have physical contact because of



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Col John P. Lanigan, commanding officer of 3d Marines during the Hill Fights.

the terrain. Around 1615 or 1630, the final assault kicked off, with both 1st and 3d Platoons advancing cautiously.

At 1705, the leading squad of 1st Platoon ran into a withering, constant hail of machine-gun bullets about 300 meters from the crest. The NVA gunners had good fields of fire and raked the platoon with grazing fire from bunkers. Several experienced noncommissioned officers (NCOs) remembered that it was the heaviest fire they had ever encountered in Vietnam, and the platoon immediately began taking casualties. The platoon commander, Staff Sergeant Charles R. Shoemaker, attempted to move his squads out of the kill zone. Using folds in the terrain, he assigned one squad as a base of fire and attempted to advance with the other one. The Marines were able to deliver effective fire on the bunkers with M79 40mm grenade launchers, rifles, and M72 light antitank weapons (LAWs). They advanced for another 200



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Col Gary Wilder pictured in 1971. As a lieutenant colonel, Wilder served as battalion commander of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, during the Hill Fights.

meters, but by 1730, 1st Platoon was left with only 10 men still able to fight, having lost 15 killed and approximately 15 wounded. Clearly, the platoon could not continue the assault. Only 100 meters away from the enemy bunkers, it could not even be safely extracted from its exposed position before dark, though the able-bodied Marines were able to drag their wounded comrades to safer locations. Captain Spivey, therefore, brought up 2d Platoon, his reserve, which arrived at about 1830 and, under cover of darkness, retrieved all but four of 1st Platoon's dead. Casualties had been sustained in this evacuation effort, and the remaining four bodies were so close to the enemy bunkers that Captain Spivey decided to make no further effort to retrieve them.

Thus, Company K's 1st Platoon had been decimated in a frontal assault on a well-fortified and well-armed enemy force that was skilled in the use of automatic weapons. The

preparatory fires had not weakened the position nearly as much as Spivey and Wilder had believed, and the terrain had limited Captain Spivey's options. Third Platoon, advancing by a more roundabout approach on the eastern ridge, had never been able to find a position from which it could effectively support 1st Platoon's assault.

That night, all three platoons of Company K dug in and maintained their positions, with 1st and 2d Platoons receiving sporadic fire. Like the Company B Marines, Company K observed the enemy mortars and recoilless rifles on the eastern slope of Hill 881S, and also called in fire missions that they believed were very effective. At one point, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder took control of the missions.

Besides directing fire missions, Wilder had plenty of time that night to consider the tactical situation. Company K had one of its platoons decimated, and most of the company was in an exposed position just under the muzzles of NVA machine guns. Company K as a whole, however, still had plenty of fight left in it, especially the relatively unscathed 3d Platoon. The situation of Company B on the other side of the hill concerned Wilder even more. He knew that company was in a difficult predicament, but he still did not know exactly where it was. That meant that he had to be very cautious in his use of supporting arms on Hill 861 lest he direct fire onto those Marines north of the summit. On the positive side, Wilder knew that he was about to receive another rifle company—Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Moreover, Wilder's previous experience with the enemy persuaded him that the NVA company on the hill would be gone by the next morning. In every previous fight he had seen, the enemy might offer serious resistance for a time, but would then withdraw before the Americans could bring all their firepower to bear. He, therefore, had Company K maintain its position on the hill—help was on the way.

Captain Spivey, likewise, had not given up his determination to take the hill. Spivey and the members of 3d Platoon believed that, so far, the platoon remained undetected. Spivey thought that, by advancing on the summit from the east and northeast, 3d Platoon could gain the summit before encountering heavy resistance. Third Platoon moved out at first light, and was eventually able to spread out into a 150-meter-long front as it advanced through tall elephant grass. About 0800, elements of the platoon reported that they could see some of



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Aerial view of Hill 881S in 1967, roughly around the time of the Hill Fights.

the enemy positions and could hear voices—they were close to an enemy listening post. Shortly thereafter, they received heavy fire and began taking casualties. One Marine, even as he fell, fired his weapon and killed the two NVA soldiers in the listening post. The platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Curtis L. Frisbee, was wounded in the right arm and face, but continued to lead the attack. Despite his leadership, the attack faltered as so many Marines went down that the platoon could not continue. Frisbee reported the situation to Captain Spivey, who concluded that he “didn’t have the horsepower to take that hill without sustaining more casualties than I thought it was worth.”

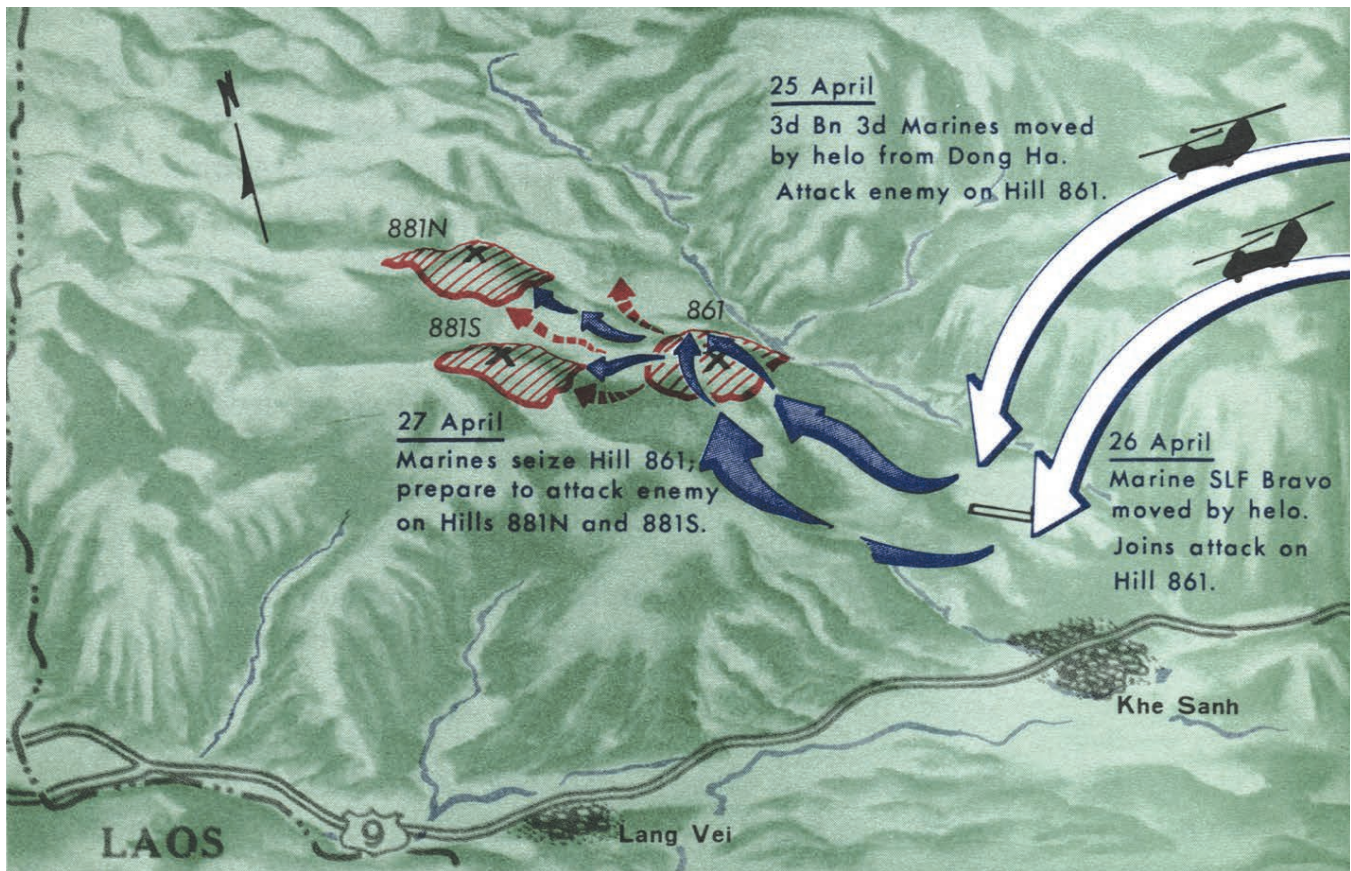
Lieutenant Colonel Wilder agreed, and the two officers turned their attention to getting Company K and its casualties off the hill. Third Platoon withdrew to a landing zone where helicopters quickly evacuated its wounded. Meanwhile, UH-1 Huey gunships arrived at about 1030, and their fire was very effective at suppressing the enemy machine guns. By leapfrogging about 25 meters at a time under covering fire from the Hueys, 1st and 2d Platoons were able to get their equipment, all of their wounded, and most of their dead to another secure landing zone. The able-bodied remnants

of the company made it back to the 3d Battalion command post near the base of the hill later in the day. Along the way, they made contact with elements of Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, that had been sent to their support.

Captain Spivey’s Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had lost 19 men killed, 42 wounded, and 4 missing and presumed dead. One of the wounded later died of his wounds. With all those losses—48 percent of the company’s strength before the battle—he and his stunned Marines were frustrated at their inability to take the hill. The leadership of the company, however, refused to let their Marines dwell on the losses. At the base of the hill, Spivey got to work with his officers and staff NCOs, accounting for each man, evacuating casualties, and organizing for the final march back to the base. Observing the sullen demeanor of the survivors in his decimated platoon, Staff Sergeant Shoemaker stood up and barked orders: “Let’s go. Stand tall. Square yourself away. You’re still Marines. Get your gear together. I want everyone ready to move out in five minutes. Five minutes. Let’s go.”

As Captain Spivey’s Company K was making its way down the hill on 26 April, Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, was working its way up. Led by the experienced and hard-charging Captain Jerrald E. Giles, the reinforcing company had been serving as 3d MarDiv’s company-size reaction force for several months. Giles’s Marines had been manning the perimeter at Camp Carroll when he received word on the afternoon of the twenty-fifth that the company would be flying immediately to Khe Sanh. By 1800 that same day, Giles and his Company K were disembarking from CH-46 Sea Knights at Khe Sanh, and immediately moved outside the perimeter to set up a night bivouac site. It was now under the operational control of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Wilder planned for its Marines to help extricate the other two companies from Hill 861 the next day.

The difficult saga continued for Company B on 26 April, the same day that Spivey’s Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, withdrew from Hill 861. Captain Sayers was now attempting to skirt around to the west and southwest of Hill 861 and return to Khe Sanh. Meanwhile, one of the platoons of Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, was dispatched to the west side of the hill to reinforce and assist Company B. At one point, the platoon advised Company B that



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Action at Khe Sanh on 25–27 April.

they would throw a yellow smoke grenade to help Company B find them and link up. Staff Sergeant Donny W. Richie, platoon sergeant for 1st Platoon, Company B, reported that soon afterward, Company B Marines observed yellow smoke. The Company K platoon, however, had not yet thrown a grenade. This incident reinforced the suspicion among Company B leaders that the enemy was monitoring their transmissions.

Later in the day, Company B ran into yet another enemy ambush and received more casualties. On two occasions, the company tried to evacuate those casualties by helicopter with the same results—enemy mortar rounds in the landing zone were so accurate that more Marines were wounded and few casualties could be taken out. It seemed that Company B was losing more Marines than it was saving with its attempts to evacuate the wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder told Sayers that he would simply have to carry his wounded out and leave the dead behind. Sayers responded

that, by this point, he did not have enough able-bodied men to carry the wounded. He was virtually immobilized, resupply was impossible, and the batteries in his radios were dying. The beleaguered captain contemplated his last stand. Sayers determined that he would move into the fog, settle into a defensive position, and “fight until it was over.” Fortunately, it did not come to that, thanks in part to Marine artillery. Sayers later gratefully recalled the artillery support he received from Captain Golden’s Battery F:

Captain Glen Golden found me in the fog by walking artillery rounds to me. (Once in the fog I could only make an educated guess as to my exact position.) Artillery put a “ring of steel” around my defensive position that was so tight we were taking dirt from the impact. It was the most professional and accurate piece of artillery work that I have ever seen. No doubt it saved our lives.

Around 1900, Captain Giles's Company K Marines finally found Company B, to the great relief of the latter. The combined force now had sufficient manpower to carry the wounded and dead off Hill 861, but it was a grueling and grisly ordeal. Under the cover of fog, darkness, and artillery rounds from Battery F, the Marines were able to avoid any more enemy ambushes as they made slow progress in their journey off the hill. Four men carried each litter, which were makeshift stretchers made from sticks and ponchos. The rain, mud, and the darkness caused the litter bearers to slip and fall, and several times the column halted as a bloated body rolled out of its poncho and down the hill. Marines recovered the bodies but, Sayers recalled, "identification was difficult and KIA tags were lost." Throughout the ordeal, Sayers could not be positive that he had everyone. The Marines trudged wearily through the night until they reached the 3d Battalion's command post near the base of Hill 861 at 0500 on the twenty-seventh. Helicopters arrived to take the salvaged equipment and casualties back to the base, and then trucks were available to transport the able-bodied men. The battered remnants of Company B refused this offer, proudly insisting that they would march back. Once in Khe Sanh, the company leaders were finally able to reconcile the company roster with the evacuation lists—Captain Sayers could finally say with certainty that they had not left one of their Marine comrades in the hills.

Reinforcements

The intense fighting and heavy losses sustained around Khe Sanh convinced the leadership of 3d Marines and 3d MarDiv to commit even more combat power to the remote outpost in the hills. The presence of large enemy forces with machine guns and mortars indicated that they indeed intended to make a major effort to take Khe Sanh. Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth, commanding general of 3d MarDiv, and Colonel Lanigan, commander of 3d Marines, withdrew the two most bloodied companies and replaced them with several more. On 27 April, Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, depleted by heavy casualties, were pulled out of the fight for much-needed rest and rebuilding. Colonel Lanigan replaced them the same day by giving Lieutenant Colonel Wilder and his 3d Battalion command group operational control over Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d

Marines, and Company M, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Thus, 3d Battalion now consisted of Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, and the two new Company Ms from 3d and 9th Marines.

The day before, even as Company B had been fighting for its life west of Hill 861, General Hochmuth had decided to reinforce the 3d Marines garrison at Khe Sanh with another battalion. Second Battalion, 3d Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Earl R. DeLong, had previously been designated as the Special Landing Force battalion, thus acting as a floating reserve at sea for the division.* On 22 April, the battalion had been committed to Operation Beacon Star, a search-and-destroy operation 28 kilometers north of the coastal city of Hue. On the twenty-sixth, however, even as Beacon Star was still in progress, Hochmuth had 2d Battalion withdrawn by helicopter to Phu Bai and then transported by fixed-wing aircraft to Khe Sanh. The battalion arrived at the hilltop base the same day, and by 1600, it was moving toward Hill 861, taking up positions east of 3d Battalion. The newly arrived battalion consisted of Companies E, G, and H, with Company F temporarily designated as a regimental reserve and assigned to perimeter security at the Khe Sanh combat base. Third Marines now had seven rifle companies—two reinforced battalions—at Khe Sanh.

Additionally, the artillery battery that had been attached to 2d Battalion—Battery B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines—came along as well. Now there were two batteries—Battery F and Battery B—armed with a total of six 105mm howitzers, two towed 155mm howitzers, and two 4.2-inch mortars. Four U.S. Army 175mm guns at nearby Camp Carroll also were prepared to provide long-range support. Moreover, aircraft from 1st MAF were about to deliver massive air support to the fight at Khe Sanh.

Attack on the Hills

While all this firepower was being assembled, the Marines made plans for a new attack against the formidable NVA forces in the hills. Colonel Lanigan passed down broad outlines for a two-battalion operation and allowed the two

*The Special Landing Force in the Vietnam War typically consisted of a Marine infantry battalion, with attachments and helicopter support, afloat with the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet. It was used as a readily deployable tactical reserve.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A370041

A CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter airlifts a 12,000-pound 155mm howitzer from Duc Pho on the southern coast of Vietnam, where it was supporting the 7th Marines to Quang Ngai on 30 March 1967.

battalion commanders, Lieutenant Colonels Wilder and DeLong, and their staffs to work out the details. Planners designated Hill 861 as objective one, while Hill 881S would be objective two and Hill 881N identified as objective three. Late on the afternoon of 28 April, the newly arrived 2d Battalion would seize objective one with 3d Battalion following behind. Then 3d Battalion was to turn west and seize the terrain between Hill 861 and Hill 881S, and later assault the latter hill, for objective two. Meanwhile, 2d Battalion would consolidate objective one and then move toward objective three, while screening the right flank of 3d Battalion. Finally, 3d Battalion would seize objective three.

None of these attacks would take place until American artillery and air had spent the better part of two days pounding Hill 861 and the surrounding area. During 27–28 April, the two Marine batteries and the U.S. Army 175mm guns farther east fired more than 2,000 rounds of preparatory fire on the area north of Khe Sanh. Even more impressive was the 518,700 pounds of ordnance dropped on the target area by 1st MAW aircraft. As aircraft arrived on station, FACs had them orbit over the area in a large holding pattern, beginning at the higher altitudes and gradually working their way down as preceding flights attacked the target and then returned to base. FACs took great care to



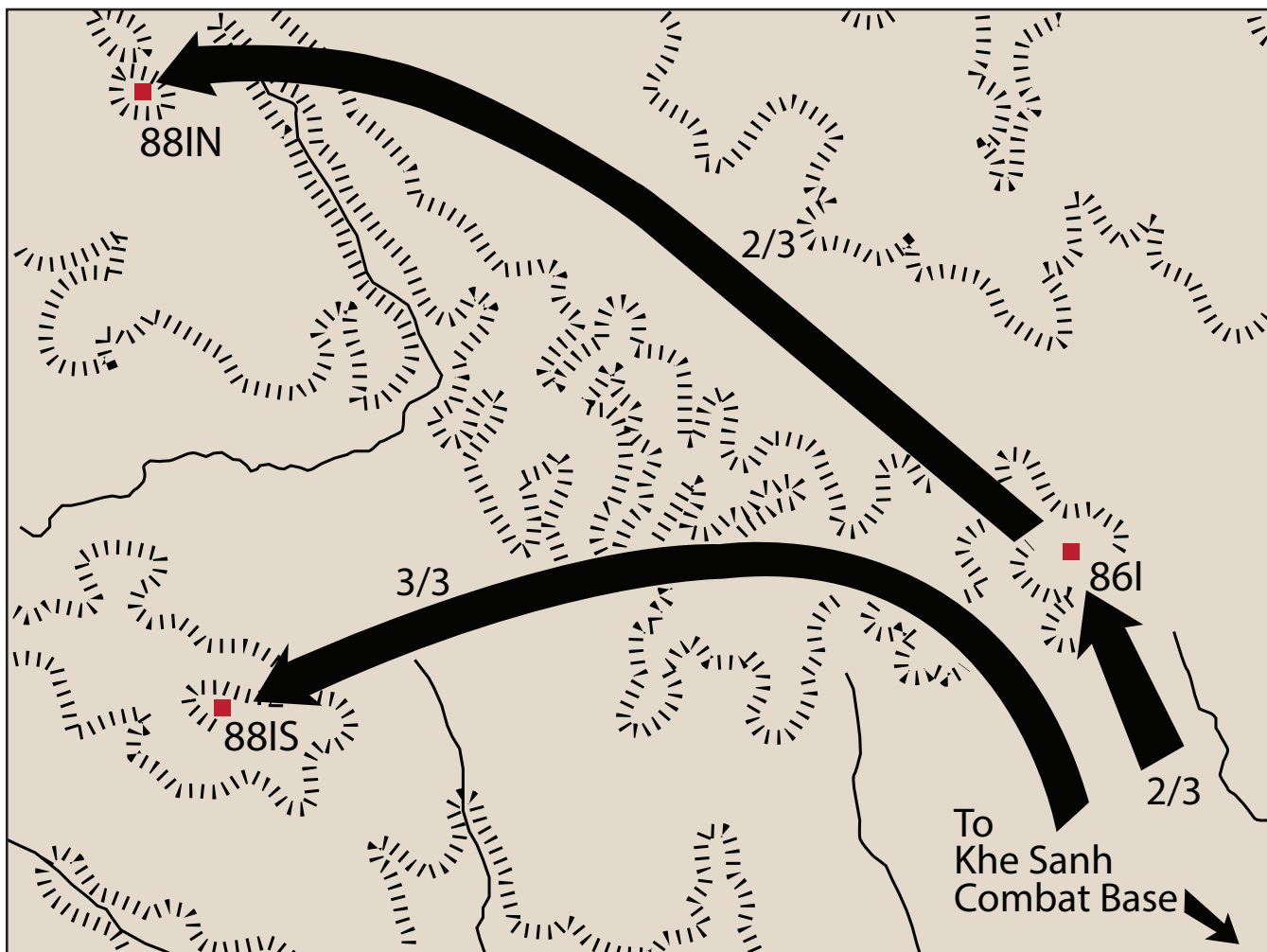
Defense Department (Marine Corps) A189526

An M107 175mm self-propelled gun from the U.S. Army's Battery B, 8th Battalion, 4th Artillery, in position on Hill 65 in support of Marine units in the vicinity.

maximize the damage done to the enemy's extremely well-constructed bunkers. Even 500-pound bombs could not destroy these durable structures; napalm also was ineffective because of the thick tree canopy, which caused the chemical to burn out in the treetops. Instead, aircraft made low runs armed with 250- and 500-pound "snakeye" bombs to strip the trees and heavy foliage from the hill.* With the foliage reduced and the bunkers more exposed, other aircraft attacked with 750-, 1,000-, and 2,000-pound bombs.

On 28 April, just after noon, 2d Battalion stepped off in its attack on Hill 861 with two companies abreast. The only resistance came from sporadic mortar fire, and the Marines consolidated their position on the hill by 1600 without taking any casualties. In the process, they found yet more evidence of a tough, disciplined, and numerous foe. The odor of dead bodies indicated that the bombardment of the hill by American artillery and air had been deadly. Nevertheless, the enemy's abandonment of the hill had been an orderly one, not a rout. The NVA soldiers had left behind no equipment or anything else with intelligence value. The Marines also got a closer look at what their brethren from other units

*Snakeye bombs were general-purpose aircraft bombs with fin retardation to allow them to fall behind the aircraft rather than just beneath it at low altitude, thus giving the aircraft time to avoid damage from the explosion.



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

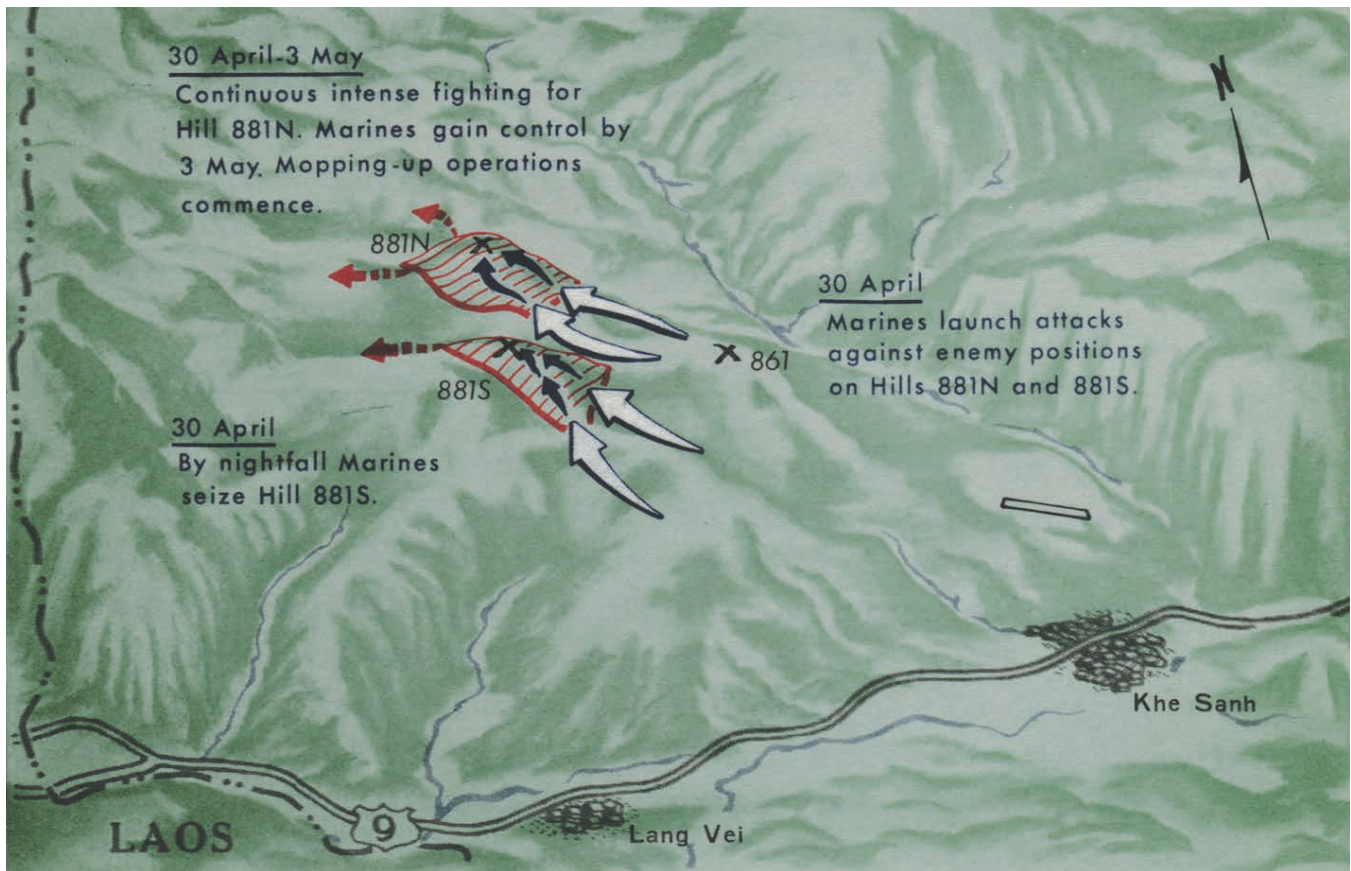
Plan of attack by 2d and 3d Battalions on 28–29 April.

had been up against during the previous days—25 well-camouflaged bunkers and more than 400 fighting holes, strongly fortified and mutually supporting.

With U.S. Marines finally in control of Hill 861, 3d Marines continued its offensive against the NVA on the other hills the next day, 29 April. Third Battalion began the assault on Hill 881S, with 9th Marines' Company M at the head of the column followed by 3d Marines' Company M. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's plan was first to secure an intermediate objective, a hill mass about 700 meters east of Hill 881S. At 1120, 9th Marines' Company M deployed to engage an enemy platoon in a small draw, dispersing it with its own fire and that of artillery and air. Meanwhile,

3d Marines' Company M bypassed the firefight by moving around it to the south; at 1915, they secured the intermediate objective.

Around nightfall, 3d Marines' Company M made at least two sightings of enemy soldiers. Some were attempting to emplace mortars on Hill 881S, while others were hidden in bunkers on a smaller hill about 300 meters away between the Marines and Hill 881S. The artillery forward observer, First Lieutenant David G. Rogers, called in artillery with one battery firing on Hill 881S and another firing on the smaller, closer hill. Shortly after 2000 that night, Marines at a listening post observed an enemy unit, perhaps as large as a company, advancing toward 3d Marines' Company M's perimeter.



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

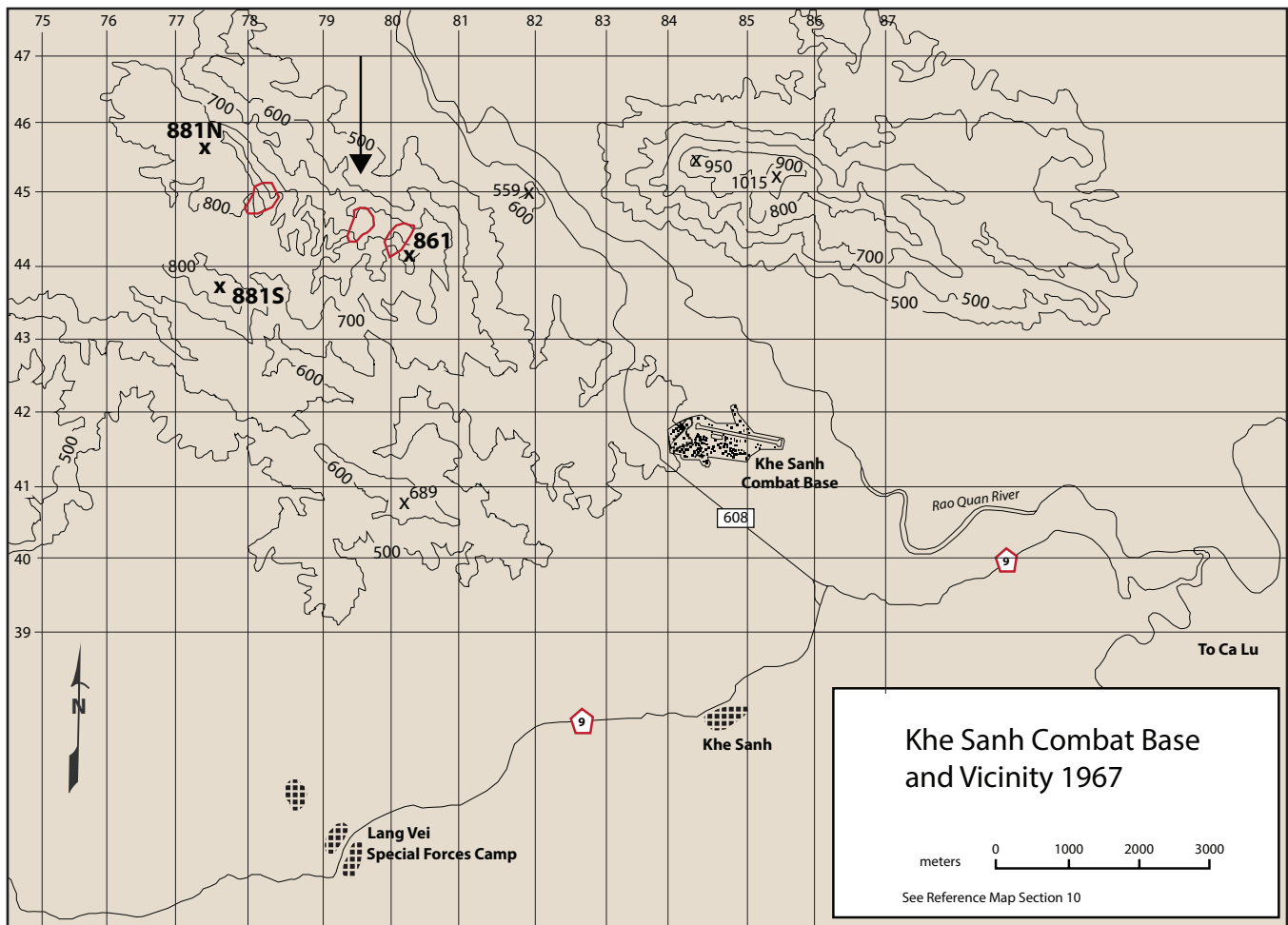
Action at Khe Sanh on 30 April–3 May.

More artillery was called in; as the rounds struck the location where the enemy troops had been observed, the Marines could hear the screams of wounded enemy soldiers. Marine artillery continued to bombard the two hills through most of the night. The next morning, Marines searched the area and found five dead NVA soldiers, a wounded man who was killed as he tried to escape, and another wounded man who was captured.

The third day of the operation, 30 April, began with 2d Battalion advancing northwest from Hill 861 to Hill 881N and screening the right flank of 3d Battalion as the latter unit assaulted Hill 881S. In preparation for the attack, the Marines continued to pound Hill 881S with supporting arms. Thirty-three sorties of aircraft added 250 2,000-pound bombs to the 1,300 rounds of artillery that the enemy positions had received the night before. The aircraft dropped their bombs directly on the target, but observers estimated that

the trees and heavy foliage over the bunkers decreased the effectiveness of the attacks by about 50 percent. The restricted terrain and lack of easy approaches to the summit made it impossible for Lieutenant Colonel Wilder to employ the favored technique of assaulting with two companies abreast and one in reserve. Instead, 3d Marines' Company M had to make the final assault on the hill alone with 9th Marines' Companies K and M in reserve.

The commander of 3d Marines' Company M, Captain Raymond H. Bennett, devised his plan for attacking and securing Hill 881S. The highest parts of the hill stretched in an east-west direction. First Platoon, led by Second Lieutenant Billy D. Crews, would lead the way and secure a position near the summit of the hill. Second Platoon, led by Second Lieutenant Joseph R. Mitchell Jr., would advance behind and to the left of Crews' platoon and come up on his left flank. Then 3d Platoon, led by Second Lieutenant Norman D.



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

Houser, would secure the right flank and the western end of the hill. Lieutenant Crews' 1st Platoon reported only moderate resistance as it worked its way south and southwest toward the top of Hill 881S. At around 1025, Crews reached the summit of the hill, formed his platoon into a defensive perimeter, and initially reported only light contact. Lieutenant Mitchell's 2d Platoon was not far behind and would join 1st Platoon shortly afterward.

The initial success of Lieutenant Crews' and Mitchell's platoons had been deceptive. By means of strict fire discipline and excellent camouflage, the enemy had led 3d Marines' Company M into a trap. Though they did not yet know it, its Marines were now in the midst of an entire battalion of the NVA's *18th Regiment, 325C Division*. Lieutenant Rogers

recalled that no more than five enemy bunkers were visible on the hillside. Due to recent clashes with the enemy in the area and on Hill 881S, in particular the day before, the Marines were certainly aware of an enemy presence on the hill. They soon were stunned, however, at the strength of that presence. The Marines would find that there were actually dozens of bunkers, so well constructed that they were impervious to any bombs or artillery shells that were not direct hits. The bunkers were so well concealed that even the most careful observer could not possibly spot them until he was less than 30–40 yards away. There were also hundreds of fighting holes concealed in the brush, and the enemy had expertly cleared lanes of fire for machine guns and zeroed mortars on the most likely avenues of approach. Thus, while



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A800216

An NVA bunker on a finger of Hill 881S. Ten to 15 feet away from the bunker is a large crater made during the battles of April 1967, but the bunker remains intact. Taken in October 1967 by LCdr Ray W. Stubbe, a Navy chaplain attached to 26th Marines, who notes that the bunker is “constructed low, and with bamboo in the overhead.”

the Marines had advanced up the hill, they had unknowingly bypassed enemy bunkers and fighting holes and were now in a kill zone.

Suddenly, the NVA struck with heavy machine gun, sniper, and mortar fire. The Marines returned fire but took casualties immediately. Determined to assist, Lieutenant Mitchell brought his platoon up on 1st Platoon’s left flank, but both platoons were soon in the same predicament. With no cover other than tall grass, shrubs, and a few isolated trees and shellholes, both platoons were taking fire from all directions, often from ranges of less than 100 meters. They were unable to move forward or backward. The Marines fought back fiercely. One Marine, for instance, fired round after round from his M79 grenade launcher into enemy bunkers, neutralizing at least four of them. Another man stood up in the tall grass with his M60 machine gun and discharged an entire belt of ammunition, only to be gravely wounded by an enemy round as soon as the belt was empty. One of his fellow Marines crawled through a hail of bullets to aid the wounded Marine and retrieve the weapon. Lance Corporal James H. Whisenant advanced on his own initiative into an

exposed position from which he could destroy a bunker with his M72 LAW rocket launcher. After destroying the bunker, he advanced farther into open ground and killed the NVA soldiers inside. While doing so, Whisenant was killed by a burst from a NVA machine gun. Throughout the platoons’ positions, Marines bravely moved through heavy enemy fire to return fire, to call in supporting arms, and to assist wounded comrades. Eventually, Lieutenant Houser’s 3d Platoon also arrived, taking up a position to the right of 1st Platoon.

The situation of all three platoons, however, was desperate. Casualties were mounting quickly, including among the lieutenants. Lieutenant Mitchell, wounded once by shrapnel, continued to fight until he was struck again and killed. After the battle had raged for at least an hour, Lieutenant Crews was blown into the air by a mortar round and, after slamming into a tree trunk, landed 10 feet from his original position. With broken ribs and shrapnel in his forearms, face, and neck, the lieutenant gradually regained consciousness and returned to the fight. To make matters worse, the Marines’ new M16 5.56mm rifles often jammed as they tried to engage attacking NVA soldiers at close range. Moreover, Marines found it nearly impossible to carry wounded and dead Marines back down the hill, as deadly enemy fire from bypassed bunkers and fighting holes blocked the way.

The volume of fire and reports from the hill convinced Lieutenant Colonel Wilder that 3d Marines’ Company M needed help and that it must be withdrawn. Huey gunships, fixed-wing aircraft, and artillery attacked enemy troops on the hill, sometimes within 50 meters of the Marines. Wilder also ordered 9th Marines’ Company K up the hill to provide support and to help 3d Marines’ Company M disengage. While successful in this mission, Company K suffered heavy casualties as well. To help the two companies withdraw from the hill and carry out their wounded, Marine air and artillery blanketed it with high-explosive and smoke rounds. By the end of the day, both companies were consolidating in the vicinity of the “intermediate objective” that had been secured the day before.

The 30 April fight on Hill 881S cost the Marines 44 men killed and 109 wounded in a period of about eight hours. Twenty-seven of those killed and 51 of the wounded belonged to 3d Marines’ Company M; with such heavy losses, that company was rendered temporarily ineffective.

The decimated company returned to Khe Sanh and was flown to Dong Ha to be rebuilt; Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, the regimental reserve, moved forward to take its place. While Marine losses were significant, approximately 163 NVA soldiers were killed that day on Hill 881S.

Hill 881 North

As 3d Battalion fought for Hill 881S on 30 April, 2d Battalion moved west and northwest from its positions on Hill 861 in its mission to screen 3d Battalion's right flank and secure positions from which a final assault could be made on Hill 881N. Company E, 2d Battalion, moved west into the low ground between Hills 881S and 881N and on the right flank of 3d Battalion. The plan was for Company E to occupy a small knoll about 800 meters southeast of Hill 881N. On Company E's right, Company H would advance in a westerly direction to attack and hold the position where 9th Marines' Company M had enemy contact the previous evening. Company G was held in reserve on Hill 861.

Company E encountered resistance and sustained casualties in its advance. There were intense firefights in this sector, and at least six men were wounded. These included two of the platoon commanders and the company commander, Captain Alfred E. Lyon, who, like many Marines in the Hill Fights, refused evacuation. Two Marines were killed. By the end of the day, however, the company had killed or driven off the enemy and secured the knoll that was its objective, finding a large number of empty bunkers and fighting holes that indicated the enemy had been there in strength.

While Company E had not had an easy day, the resistance that Company H met was far more severe. At around 0800, the company was descending a deep draw near the location of 9th Marines' Company M's earlier firefight. Third Platoon was advancing in column on the right, with 2d Platoon to its left and 1st Platoon taking up positions at the top of the draw to provide supporting fire for the other two platoons. Suddenly, the lead platoons came under extremely heavy fire from very close range. Just as 3d Battalion was about to discover on Hill 881S later that day, the enemy bunkers were so well camouflaged that they were nearly possible to identify until it was too late. The 3d Platoon's point fireteam was no more than 15 meters away from the closest bunker when the firing began. Rifle and machine-gun fire from two NVA



Defense Department (Marine Corps) 195152

The opening to an NVA bunker on Hill 881S.

platoons, including that of a .50-caliber machine gun, ripped into the two Marine platoons. The Marines returned fire as best they could and maneuvered to destroy the .50-caliber gun, but dozens of Marines were killed or wounded within minutes.

Company H's experienced commander, Captain Raymond C. Madonna, quickly concluded that his men, relatively exposed and without cover, had no chance in this unequal fight. He informed battalion headquarters that his company had run into "a real buzz saw" and was withdrawing so that air and artillery could attack the enemy bunkers. Under cover of these attacks, Company H was able to disengage; though its losses had been severe with 9 dead and 43 wounded, almost half of the company's strength. Third Platoon had lost 30 of the 33 men with whom it had entered the fight, suffering 4 dead and 26 wounded. The 2d Platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Bruce E. Griesmer, had been seriously wounded and evacuated. The company executive officer, First Lieutenant David S. Hackett, was killed as he

charged forward to direct the fire of a nearby M60 machine gun on an enemy bunker and to assist Lieutenant Griesmer. Only 1st Platoon was still relatively intact.

Marine aircraft and artillery fired on the area where Company H had been engaged for several more hours before Captain James P. Sheehan's Company G moved out to assault it. Company G began its advance at around 1700 and the platoons were in their assault positions by 1800, ready to advance with two squads in each platoon on line and a third in reserve. Because of Company H's experience, the Marines of Company G were under no illusions as to what they were about to face. Still, one young squad leader thought it was "somewhat surprising" to see the enemy bunkers still intact after the heavy bombing the area had received. All the vegetation had been "blown away," leaving only stubble and debris from trees, yet the bunkers remained relatively undamaged.

Staff Sergeant Ruben Santos, platoon sergeant of 1st Platoon, remembered that the enemy started firing once his Marines came within a range of 25 meters. Marines fell, but Company G responded fiercely. Corporal John P. Hayes recalled that only the pure aggressiveness of the assault squads made it possible to take the position. As the Marines were within range, Santos found that the best way to assault the bunkers was with a liberal use of hand grenades. Once enough had been thrown, one squad would charge in line formation and overrun the position, shooting into the bunkers and throwing grenades inside.

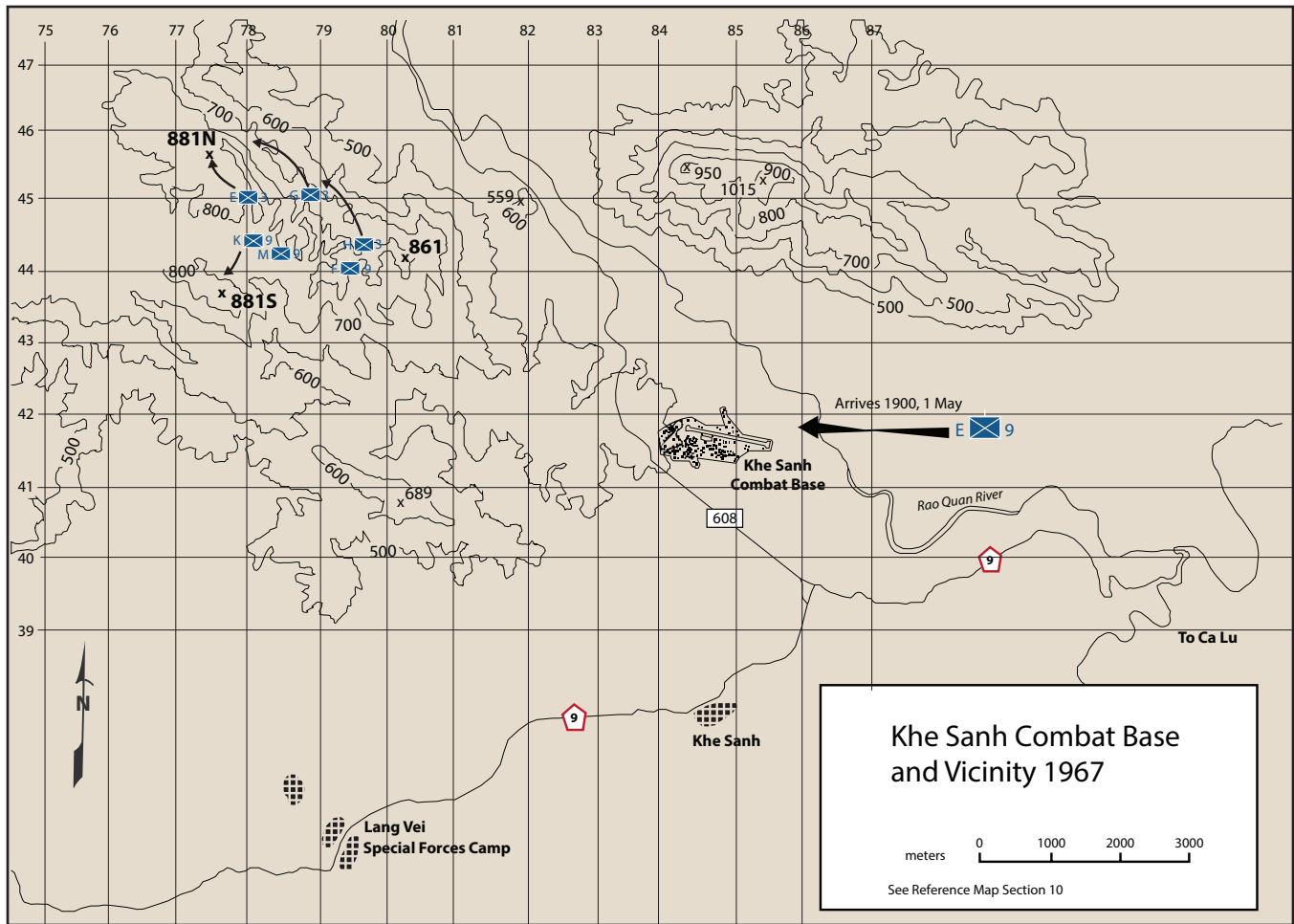
The Marines could not suppress a grudging respect for the enemy's tenacity. In assaulting one bunker, the Marines tossed in three grenades to kill the two suspected NVA soldiers inside. One of the enemy soldiers was killed, but the Marines discovered later that the other had sat on one of the grenades, which "blew his rear end off," but did not kill him. As a Marine began to enter the bunker to clear it, the surviving NVA soldier grabbed his leg, pulled him in the bunker and shot him, with the bullets going through the Marine's body, killing him, and wounding two other men behind him. Staff Sergeant Santos threw tear gas grenades into the bunker in an unsuccessful attempt to drive the man out or make him surrender. Finally, the Marines threw more fragmentation grenades and killed him. As Santos said, there was no way of getting an NVA soldier out of his bunker "unless you drug him out and he was dead."

Besides the stubborn defense of the enemy, another factor that had to be overcome was the unreliability of the M16 rifle. Corporal Hayes reported that one of his men, Lance Corporal William J. Roldan, was crouched in front of an enemy bunker for a time and "appeared to be having trouble with his weapon." Roldan was "in a kneeling position working on his weapon and was in one position long enough [that] a sniper" could get a bead on him. As soon as the Marine stood up, he was killed.

Still, by pure determination, and with the earlier help of supporting arms, the Marines prevailed. By the end of the day, Company E was less than 1,000 meters southeast from objective three, the summit of Hill 881N. On its right, Company G had overrun the enemy bunker complex and continued its advance until it was located east of Company E and about 1,500 meters southeast of objective three.

Renewed Attacks on Hills 881 North and South

The two battalions and regimental headquarters at Khe Sanh spent the day and night of 1 May preparing to resume the offensive the next day. Third Battalion remained in place with its companies located in the vicinity of the intermediate objective northeast of Hill 881S. Third Marines' Company M had now flown out of Khe Sanh and its place in the 3d Battalion lines was filled by Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. The other two companies still assigned to 3d Battalion were 3d Battalion, 9th Marines' Companies K and M. Slightly to the north, 2d Battalion remained south and east of Hill 881N and patrolled areas where there had been previous contact. Colonel Lanigan was determined that they would not do so, however, until "after a heavy air and arty prep." Companies E and G did most of this patrol work and remained closer to Hill 881N; Company H, still recovering from the "buzz saw" it had collided with the previous day, stayed near the battalion command post and reorganized. Additionally, both battalions prepared for the next day's assault by bringing up their M40 106mm recoilless rifles. These were mounted on "Mules," the nickname for the Willys-Overland M274 truck, a small, rough-terrain vehicle primarily used for resupply. The 106mm recoilless rifles mounted on the Mules were primarily antitank weapons, but were also useful for destroying bunkers. Higher headquarters also acted to reconstitute the regimental reserve at Khe Sanh



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

since 9th Marines' Company F had been taken out of that role and put directly under the control of 3d Battalion near Hill 881S. Major General Hochmuth, the new division commander of 3d MarDiv, assigned the new regimental reserve duty to Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, which arrived at the Khe Sanh base at around 1900. Thus, Captain Terrill's Company E, veterans of the earlier Khe Sanh fighting in March, were back again.

Colonel Lanigan and the two battalion commanders were determined that the Marines would ultimately secure Hills 881S and 881N, but they would not send their troops against the enemy-controlled hillsides again without a massive preparation of the objectives by Marine artillery and aircraft. While the rifle companies and battalions reorganized and were resupplied, artillery and aircraft continued to bombard enemy positions in and around Hills 881S and 881N, as well

as likely routes of resupply and reinforcement leading to the hills from the north and west. More than 166 aircraft sorties from 1st MAW attacked the hills; these attacks included 130 2,000-pound bombs and a total of more than 650,000 pounds of ordnance. This massive air assault was augmented by 1,445 artillery rounds. The Marine infantrymen were not passive bystanders during this shelling. Forward and aerial observers directed these missions and reported confirmed and probable kills of enemy soldiers, and the infantry's own organic mortars added to the fire, which was so intense that one NVA platoon, driven to desperation, abandoned its bunkers and ran down Hill 881S. As they fled, they came under withering fire from aircraft and from 3d Battalion's mortars and small arms. Pilots from 3d MAW reported that their air attacks alone killed 140 enemy soldiers on 1 May. The Marine infantry, however, was not left unscathed. In each

battalion, two Marines were wounded by flying debris caused by the air strikes. Early in the morning, 3d Marines' Company E was struck by 18–20 enemy mortar rounds, which killed 3 Marines and wounded 16. The Marines responded with countermortar fire until the incoming ceased.*

On 2 May, 3d Battalion was ready to proceed with the final conquest of Hill 881S. After four more hours of preparation of the objective by artillery, 9th Marines' Companies K and M began the assault. This time, it seemed that the NVA had finally been convinced by the day's previous bombardment to concede Hill 881S to the Marines, who received only sniper fire. By 1420, the hill was secured, and the two assault companies and Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's command post occupied it and dug in. There also was an opportunity for the Marines to see what they had been up against just two days prior. While the recent bombing and artillery shells had left the top of the hill almost completely denuded of vegetation and virtually unrecognizable to the Marines who had been there, many of the enemy's fortifications remained intact. There had been approximately 250 enemy bunkers on the hill. They had been well camouflaged, but also extremely well constructed. The smaller ones were covered by two layers of logs and up to five feet of dirt, while the largest ones had roofs covered by four to eight layers of logs and four feet of dirt. Many had small storage shelves, bamboo mat floors, and simple drainage systems.

The fortifications were strong enough that as many as 75 of them were still intact even after a day and a half of constant, heavy bombing. Lieutenant Rogers, the artillery forward observer for 3d Marines' Company M (subsequently transferred to 9th Marines' Company M), asserted that 105mm and 155mm artillery rounds could do little to no damage to the structures. He believed that 8-inch artillery rounds would have been effective, but there were no howitzers of that caliber at Khe Sanh; only the larger bombs that could be dropped by fixed-wing aircraft had been able to

*The intense shellings of Hill 881S on 1 May have been called "nearly unprecedented in their intensity and duration" at that point in the Vietnam War. Nine months after the battle, Marines would return to the hill to build their own bunker complex, and combat engineers would try to cut down the few remaining trees. Their efforts were thwarted because the trees were so full of metal shrapnel from the previous bombardment that chain saws were useless. Marines digging into the red clay often struck masses of putrefied flesh, the remains of enemy soldiers who had been buried by the devastating air and artillery assault of 1 May 1967.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) 194155

A well-concealed NVA bunker on Hill 881S.

seriously weaken the enemy's fortifications. Amazingly, the NVA had been able to build and man these elaborate defenses while Marine infantry and reconnaissance units had been patrolling the area for months before the battles of April and May 1967. Just as surprising, the NVA had left virtually none of their equipment or dead bodies on the hill. Only much later would Marines discover an elaborate tunnel system that allowed the enemy to withdraw from the hill in relative safety. What the enemy had left was the bodies of Marines who had not been removed amidst the chaos and carnage of 30 April. The NVA had taken care to prominently display three of the corpses in a humiliating fashion.

As 3d Battalion completed the conquest of Hill 881S, 2d Battalion resumed its attack on objective three—Hill 881N. Unknown to the Marines, the *325C Division* had withdrawn the battered remnants of its *18th Regiment* from the hill to base camps in Laos, replacing them with elements of its *95C Regiment*. Companies E and G of 2d Battalion began their assault at 1015, with Company E approaching the objective from the south and Company G from the east.

Company H was in a central position from which it could support either unit. The area of objective three also had sustained heavy prep fires that morning, including about 1,400 artillery rounds. Nevertheless, Company G ran into heavy resistance sometime after 1400 that afternoon. About 600 meters east-northeast of the summit, the squads from 3d Platoon deployed into line formation and descended a draw. On the far side of the draw, there was a knob with a clearing, and behind that, a wooded area, and 3d Platoon was ordered to secure the knob. Corporal Robert E. Torter's 1st Squad was on the left, 2d Squad was on the right, and 3d Squad followed behind. As Torter's squad entered the woods, two NVA soldiers stood and began to run, but Torter's men killed them with rifle fire. Torter ordered his men to reload their magazines, and shortly afterward, both his squad and 2d Squad were hit by heavy automatic-weapons and small-arms fire. The initial burst killed a radioman and one of the squad's team leaders. Torter had his men assault, but reported that out of the nine riflemen making the assault, six of their rifles jammed almost immediately. This, he reported matter-of-factly, "slowed down our assault quite a bit, as the enemy was able to pick off quite a few of my men."

Within minutes, 10 of Torter's 13 men lay dead or wounded, as Captain Sheehan attempted to bring 60mm mortar rounds onto the enemy positions. Second Squad provided some supporting fire, but it had sustained casualties as well. The Marines of both squads risked their lives attempting to reach their wounded comrades and evacuate them, as the fire was extremely intense. Some of the injured were carried out, but Torter did not have enough able-bodied men to carry off all of them, and some Marines in the company sustained wounds even as they tried to rescue the others. Captain Sheehan ordered the company to withdraw so that he could blast the area with artillery, then return to the position and rescue the wounded. Under cover of artillery fire, the company returned to the position. Still receiving machine-gun and mortar fire, Marines from 3d Platoon and 2d Platoon were able to get within 10–15 meters of the wounded men, but they appeared to be dead. An artillery fire mission called in by Company G silenced the enemy mortars, but 2d Platoon sustained at least two additional casualties in the rescue attempt, including a squad leader killed and a fireteam leader wounded. Unwilling to lose any more men in an attempt to retrieve the dead, Captain Sheehan again ordered

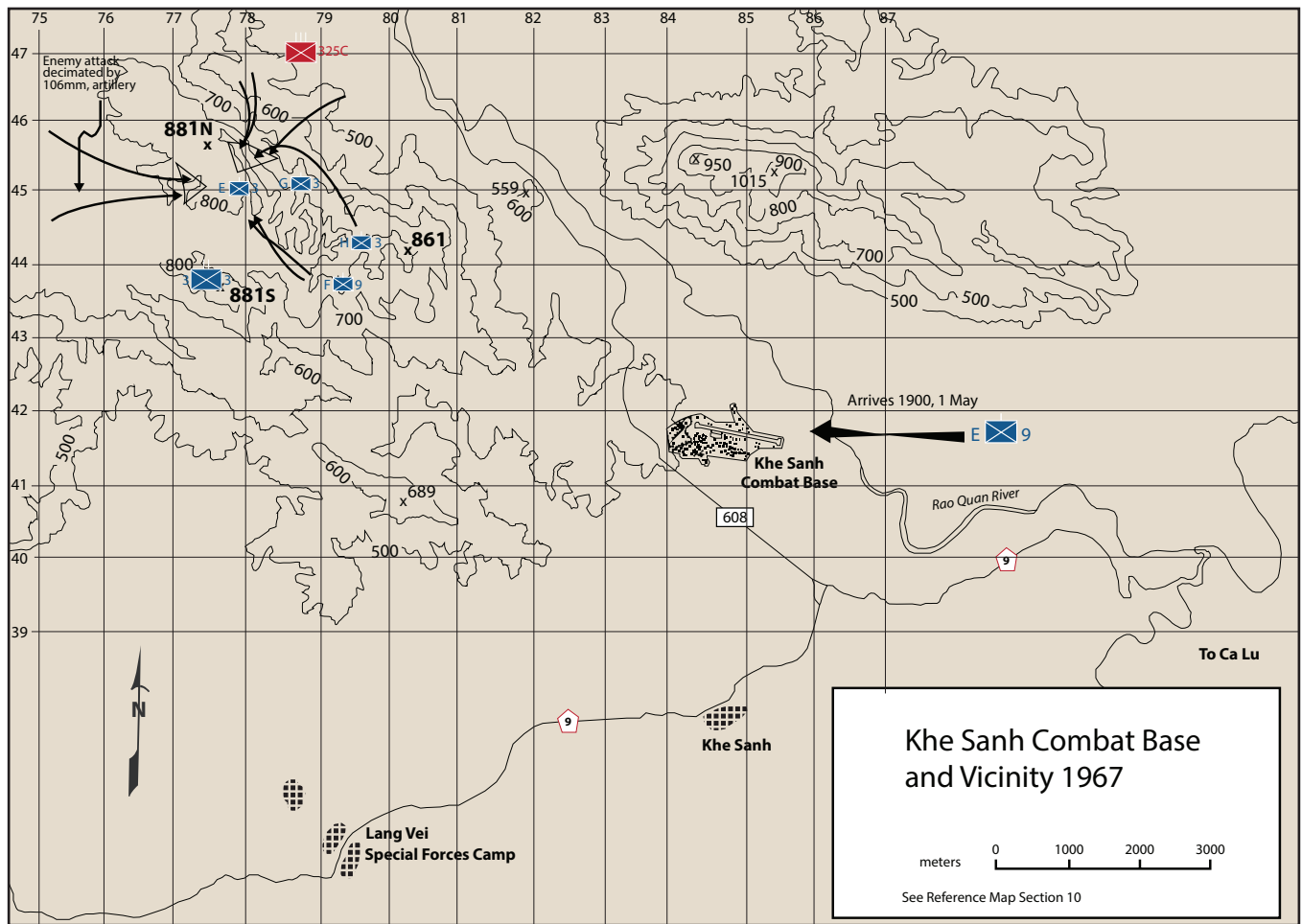
his men to withdraw to a clearing about 600 meters to the rear. Company H, which had moved forward to support Company G, had also received an enemy mortar attack.

While Company G was in the midst of this fight, Company E had pushed up the steep terrain to the top of Hill 881N. Captain Lyon felt sure there was a very strong NVA presence beyond the summit, however, and was reluctant to remain in place without additional support.* Shortly after Lyon's Marines reached the hilltop and took in the fantastic views, the entire area was struck by a sudden, violent thunderstorm. Winds gusted up to 40 miles per hour. The rain was so heavy that visibility was reduced to a few feet, making coordination and communication both impossible and dangerous to communicate on radios with antennas. Unable to coordinate with the other two companies or even observe artillery missions, Captain Lyon believed it would be prudent to withdraw, continue to pound the objective with artillery, and then to participate in a final assault along with the rest of the battalion the next morning in more manageable weather that allowed for the employment of all supporting arms. Lieutenant Colonel DeLong agreed and pulled his companies back to more defensible positions. As Company E withdrew from the summit, the storm pelted Company G, which was then withdrawing after its failed attempt to retrieve the bodies from the wooded knoll. The heavy rain, in fact, provided cover and concealment for Company G's withdrawal. For both companies, however, the heavy rain resulted in a miserable night for the soaked and shivering Marines.

Enemy Night Attack, 3 May

The regiment's plans for 3 May were for 3d Battalion to continue patrolling in the vicinity of Hill 881S and for 2d Battalion to resume its assault on objective three. Second Battalion's plans were disrupted, however, by a major enemy counterattack that night. Company E had established its night perimeter on a small hill about 500 meters south of Hill 881N. Perhaps reasoning that Company G had been repulsed the previous day, at least two NVA companies made Company E their target.

*Subsequent events would prove the captain right about the strong enemy presence.



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

Plan of attack for 3 May.

Company E's Marines, soaked and exhausted, were on 50 percent alert in their fighting holes and abandoned enemy bunkers, with half of the company sleeping and the other half on watch. At 0415, at least two Marines—Captain Lyon and Sergeant Billy Joe Like—issued challenges to forms they saw in the dark. Those challenges were met by enemy small-arms and machine-gun fire, followed immediately by mortars. Scores of NVA soldiers, approaching mainly from the northeast, swarmed over Company E's position, and a bitter hand-to-hand fight ensued. Marines and NVA soldiers killed each other at point-blank range with rifles, grenades, and bayonets.

The brunt of the assault fell initially on 2d Platoon in the northeastern sector of the company's position. The platoon commander, Second Lieutenant James R. Cannon,

maneuvered through the chaos, attempting to direct the defense. He radioed Captain Lyon that he would need support if he were to hold the position. Cannon gave one of his squad leaders permission to detonate M18 claymore anti-personnel mines along the platoon's front, which resulted in screams from wounded NVA soldiers. Captain Lyon had already called for mortar fire, and within 10 minutes of the first attack, he ordered 1st Platoon to send one squad from the southwestern side of the perimeter to the 2d Platoon sector to help seal the penetration. First Lieutenant Frank M. Izenour Jr. responded by leading one of his squads in that direction, but immediately took heavy losses from two enemy machine guns. Izenour reported that more support was needed, but Captain Lyon did not want to further weaken the rest of the perimeter by sending other squads.

He, therefore, sent 11 combat engineers who were attached to the company. The engineers and the men from Lieutenant Izenour's squad who had not been wounded found positions on the left side of the enemy's penetration and fired into the enemy's right flank. These actions helped stall the enemy's attack, but 2d Platoon still needed assistance. Most of its Marines were either dead or wounded.

Lieutenant Cannon had also asked Captain Lyon to request artillery and a flare ship to help him defend his position. An Air Force AC-47 Spooky could discharge parachute flares with a candlepower of two million, virtually turning "night into day." It also could fire an extremely heavy and dense pattern of 7.62mm rounds from its miniguns, making it a formidable close air support weapon. Captain Lyon had already requested the flare ship, which also meant that he had to deny his lieutenant's request for artillery, as the latter would be dangerous to "Puff" flying directly over the target area.

"Puff's" flares lit up the night, and the illumination provided an incredible sight to the 3d Battalion Marines farther south on Hill 881S. Approximately 200 enemy soldiers were approaching Company E's position from the west. Quickly, 3d Battalion reoriented its 106mm recoilless rifles and fired more than 100 rounds into the flank of the NVA unit. This broke up the enemy attack, and then artillery decimated the NVA formation as it withdrew.

By the time daylight came to Hill 881N, the tide of battle had turned in the Marines' favor. Supporting arms, flare ships, and determined fighting had blunted the enemy's penetration of Company E's position, although the fight was ongoing and there were still many NVA soldiers to be rooted out. Before dawn, Colonel Lanigan returned 3d Marines' Company F, which had been under the temporary control of 3d Battalion, to its own 2d Battalion so that it could send reinforcements to the beleaguered Company E. A platoon from Company F flew via helicopters, landed at 0745 in a landing zone just outside Company E's perimeter, and quickly attacked the southern side of the enemy penetration. Lieutenant Colonel DeLong also ordered Company H to assist. Company H moved west and northwest along a ridgeline and then struck the enemy force from the northeast at its rear. As Company H's Marines closed on the enemy, they found a large number of NVA soldiers in spider holes and bunkers in

a deep gully located between themselves and Company E.* Here, they were able to exact a measure of revenge for the heavy losses they had suffered the day prior. The NVA soldiers were surprised by the appearance of a Marine company from the rear, and the Company H Marines moved into the gully, attacking with deadly efficiency. Advancing from hole to hole, they killed the NVA soldiers with rifles, grenades, and pistols. Soon, the platoons from Company F and Company H finally closed the gap in Company E's lines.

Company H and survivors of 2d Platoon, Company E, continued to advance to reclaim the area penetrated by the enemy attackers. The Marines discovered that every single man in 1st and 2d Squads of 2d Platoon, Company E, was dead. The number of enemy dead in those squads' sectors approached 80. The positions in which several Marines were found testified to the gallantry of their fight. Some were found in a death grip with a dead NVA soldier. One bunker contained the body of the radioman, Private First Class John R. Meuse, who had been wounded early in the fight and refused evacuation. This allowed him to hold his position for several more hours and continue to radio information to his platoon commander, Lieutenant Cannon. The lieutenant found Meuse the next day, still clutching his radio handset and with five dead NVA soldiers piled at the bunker's entrance.

As the laborious and dangerous task of clearing continued, Marines engaged in more bitter, close-quarter fighting as the remaining NVA soldiers fought virtually to the last man. By 1500 that afternoon, higher headquarters received a report that the last bunker was cleared. The battle resulted in 27 Marines KIA and 84 wounded. The NVA left behind 137 of their dead but likely dragged away many more, as was their custom. The Marines captured three enemy soldiers and a large cache of equipment and weapons.

The bitter fight of 3 May highlighted the peculiar strengths of the opposing forces, and had great impact on the ultimate outcome of the Khe Sanh Hill Fights. Capitalizing on their skills in infiltration and night movement, the determined NVA force had initially achieved some measure of surprise. The aggressiveness and determination of the

*A spider hole is a rough, shallow indentation typically just deep enough to conceal a person for ambush or protection.

North Vietnamese, however, was matched by that of Marines who refused to concede defeat. Additionally, superior American firepower and tactical mobility provided by helicopters also helped turn the tide against what was initially a superior enemy force. During the course of the battle, the Marines skillfully coordinated the use of artillery, a flare ship, mortars, fixed-wing air strikes, and transport helicopters. In the end, the North Vietnamese had managed to delay, but not prevent, the Marines' ultimate seizure of Hill 881N. Moreover, the enemy's losses seriously weakened his ability to continue the fight for Khe Sanh. Not only had his attempt to take the Marine base failed, but this counterattack was the last serious resistance the Marines would face in the area of Hills 861, 881S, and 881N.

Both 2d and 3d Battalions spent the day conducting air strikes on bunkers and tunnel complexes in the areas around Hills 881S and 881N. Third Battalion collected abandoned enemy ammunition, weapons, and documents around Hill 881S and even found an "underground mess hall." Instead of resuming the assault on Hill 881N, 2d Battalion prepared for another night fight. Prisoners taken that morning and the night before reported that the enemy was planning another attack that night. Lieutenant Colonel DeLong drew his battalion into a tight perimeter on the south slope of the hill and prepared to meet it. During the night, helicopters delivered concertina wire, trip flares, and claymore mines. With their defensive capabilities strengthened by this equipment and by the return of Company F to 2d Battalion's control, the Marines organized for another determined assault. They were far more prepared than the relatively isolated Company E had been the night before. Wisely, the enemy did not test them again.*

Attack on Lang Vei

Instead, the enemy struck the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei that night and inflicted a grievous blow on the soldiers and their Bru allies. At around 0345 on the morning of 4 May, enemy mortar rounds and heavy small-arms fire ripped

into the area. After a bombardment that lasted 10–15 minutes and included some 250 mortar rounds, a company-size force assaulted the position. Armed with satchel charges, they penetrated the position and inflicted massive casualties. Both the commanding officer and executive officer of the Special Forces detachment were killed, and two more U.S. Army soldiers were wounded. Casualties among the Bru in the CIDG were devastating: 20 were killed, 34 wounded, and 39 went missing. The allied force could claim no more than seven confirmed kills among their attackers. Perhaps the only thing that prevented complete annihilation of the garrison was timely air support as well as assistance from the Marine base seven kilometers away at Khe Sanh. Situation reports indicated that an AC-47 Spooky flare ship and two helicopters (probably UH-1 Hueys) were launched shortly after 0400. The Marines at Khe Sanh's main base fired preplanned artillery concentrations around Lang Vei, and sent medevac helicopters and a ground reaction force to secure a landing zone for them. The fight at Lang Vei had no immediate impact on the Marines' battle in the hills farther north, though it was certainly a tactical victory for the Communist forces. It was initially planned to be a diversion for the main NVA assault on Khe Sanh, the initiative that the Marines had preempted on 24 April.

As daylight returned to the Lang Vei and Khe Sanh areas, 2d Battalion continued to sweep the area around Hill 881S. Third Battalion prepared for its final assault on Hill 881N, reorganizing during the first part of the day and then moving into assault positions in the afternoon. Marine aircraft and artillery blasted the hill with 105mm rounds, napalm, and 250- and 500-pound bombs. Meanwhile, 3d MarDiv took several other steps to strengthen forces around Khe Sanh and prepare for further action. In light of the defeat suffered by the Special Forces detachment at Lang Vei, the division sent Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, to Khe Sanh to shore up the southwestern flank of the allied forces in the area. Company C also would be prepared to provide security for artillery moving forward from the main base at Khe Sanh. After the capture of Hill 881N, Battery F, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, would be expected to move its 105mm howitzers to a location two kilometers west to better support the infantry. Its two 4.2-inch mortars would displace to Hill 881S. Finally, plans were made to helolift two 106mm recoilless rifles from Khe Sanh to Hill 861.

*Second Battalion suffered several casualties from friendly fire on 4 May. One Marine from Company H was wounded by American mortar fire, and two from Company E were wounded by shrapnel from a close air support mission. Misdirected artillery fire killed one Marine from Company G and wounded nine others, resulting in an investigation.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188642

Marines of Weapons Platoon, Headquarters, and Service Company, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, fire an M40 106mm recoilless rifle near Hill 881N on 1 May 1967.

Final Conquest of Hill 881 North

On 5 May, 2d Battalion finally completed its conquest of Hill 881N. Companies E, F, and G jumped off in the attack at 0850, meeting resistance that began as “sporadic,” but was later reported as increasing to “moderate.” Determined to rely on fire support and minimize casualties, the rifle companies paused in their assault so that aircraft and artillery could work over the hill once more. Then, with Company E acting as a base of fire, Companies F and G advanced on the summit from different directions, securing it at 1445. Two Marines were wounded and none killed during 2d Battalion’s assault. All three of the major hills around Khe Sanh were now in Marine hands.

One of the stranger incidents of the Hill Fights also occurred on 5 May. At around 0720, an aerial observer in a UH-1 Huey spotted a lone NVA soldier about a kilometer east of the summit of Hill 881N waving a white flag. In the first known surrender of a Communist soldier to an aircraft in Vietnam, the helicopter landed so that the prisoner could be taken on board. He was taken to the base at Khe Sanh and interrogated. Later that afternoon, just after 2d Battalion secured Hill 881N, American psychological operations, or psy ops, personnel tried to make use of this prisoner. A Helio U-10 Super Courier, a small utility aircraft, flew over the 881N area broadcasting messages designed to persuade enemy soldiers to give up the fight. One of the messages was

a recorded appeal from the prisoner, asking his former comrades to surrender to the Americans.

Mopping Up

During the next several days, the Marines of 2d and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, strengthened their hold on the hills of Khe Sanh, patrolling out to a radius of 1,000 meters from the summits of Hills 881S and 881N, then to a radius of 1,500 meters and beyond. There were occasional fleeting contacts with the enemy, mostly fleeing stragglers or pockets of NVA soldiers still holding out in bunkers. Two Marines belonging to Company H, 2d Battalion, were wounded by a booby trap when patrolling Hill 881N. The Marines fired on the enemy force's remnants with infantry weapons, artillery, and aircraft, resulting in several dozen more enemy deaths. The patrols found abundant evidence of the enemy's former strength and eventual defeat in the area. The Marines discovered hundreds of abandoned fighting holes and bunkers and large quantities of weapons, ammunition, and equipment. They also found dozens, perhaps scores, of bodies—unfortunate victims of American firepower left behind by their comrades. Officers forwarded the numbers of enemy corpses found up the chain of command, and generally the Marines became accustomed to these macabre discoveries. One finding, however, was an interesting enough demonstration of American firepower that it received special mention in reports all the way up to III MAF headquarters. On 7 May, Company M, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, uncovered a dead NVA soldier who had been killed by a “bomb blast [and] burned to death in bunker.” Company M Marines found documents on the charred corpse and forwarded them to headquarters. Though plenty of remains of dead NVA soldiers had been located, this corpse apparently made a deep impression on the Marines who found it. The discovery of former enemy positions and dead soldiers illustrated two things. First, there could no longer be any doubt that the NVA had occupied the hills around Khe Sanh in at least regimental, perhaps division strength, and that they had been preparing for a major assault in the area. Second, American firepower and the hard fighting of Marine infantry had devastated this enemy force.

Yet, these patrols of the former battlefield also revealed the price that the Marines had paid for this victory. Occasionally, Marines found the bodies of their own comrades

from the fight on 30 April in which 3d Battalion had briefly seized and then been driven from the summit of Hill 881S, and those from the night fight of Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, on 3 May. These discoveries were more sobering, and resulted in a number of names being moved from the missing list to the KIA column. Another particularly chilling discovery was made by personnel aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Princeton* (LPH 5). On 3 May, 3d Battalion Marines had found one of their dead comrades and put him in a body bag to be evacuated to the *Princeton*. The Marine had an open head wound into which enemy soldiers had inserted a grenade with a string attached. The booby trapping of this body was done so cleverly that the dead Marine's comrades did not notice it. Personnel aboard ship fortunately discovered the grenade before it did any damage and performed the grim task of disarming it.

The Khe Sanh Hill Fights were not quite over though. Colonel Lanigan, commander of 3d Marines, was intent on consolidating control over the Khe Sanh area with infantry foot patrols and with reconnaissance teams inserted by helicopter. Lanigan and 3d MarDiv headquarters also wanted to confirm the extent to which the enemy's *325C Division* had withdrawn. On 8 May, both 2d and 3d Battalions were given orders to extend their “search and clear operations with primary emphasis to the west.” The infantrymen were to patrol west to the 74 grid line on the north/south coordinates of the grid, about 3,500 meters west of the summits of Hills 881N and 881S, but also within the supporting range of Battery F's 105mm howitzers. The purpose was “to determine the extent of enemy withdrawal from the area.” Meanwhile, two reconnaissance teams were to be inserted three to five kilometers north and west beyond the extent of the infantry battalion's foot patrols. The mission of these reconnaissance Marines was “to determine the extent, if any, of enemy activity build-up, and movement in the area.” Reconnaissance teams also were patrolling to the southeast to interdict enemy approaches to the base from that direction.

In obedience to these orders, Captain Merle G. Sorenson's Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, sent two platoons to the northwest in the direction of Hill 778 on 9 May and then to Hill 803. Captain Sorenson, whose custom it was to accompany the largest element of his company on patrols, went with these two platoons. For Sorenson, this meant that



Marine Corps Art Collection

The Gates of Hell by Ned Conlon. An F-8E Crusader of Marine All-Weather Fighter Squadron 235 in close air support of Marines during the Hill Fights northeast of Khe Sanh in 1967.

it was his third consecutive day going out on patrol. Advancing parallel and about a kilometer south of Company F were two platoons from Company E, now commanded by First Lieutenant John P. Adinolfi after Captain Lyon had been wounded days earlier.

Company F's 1st and 3d Platoons struggled through the rugged, hilly terrain and had difficulty reaching their checkpoints on schedule. While negotiating ravines and ridges, 3d Platoon, led by Second Lieutenant Patrick G. Carroll, soon found itself in a battle for survival. About midday, the platoon was advancing down the steep southwestern side of Hill 778. To its left loomed the final objective—Hill 803. At around 1300, Lieutenant Carroll spotted NVA soldiers circling around the flank and rear of his platoon and attempting to gain control of a ridge above and behind him.

Recognizing the danger, Carroll immediately ordered his squads to assault to prevent this maneuver, but the platoon took heavy casualties over the next several minutes. Once again, enraged Marines found themselves at a disadvantage as their M16s jammed and could not be cleared. Fighting among the ridges, ravines, and steep slopes, the Marines and NVA soldiers exchanged small-arms and automatic weapons fire and grenades at point-blank range; at times, the fighting was hand-to-hand. Second Lieutenant Jack Schworm's 1st Platoon heard the firing and soon joined the fight as well.

Poor communications, probably due to the rugged terrain, hindered the Marines' efforts. The platoons had limited communications with each other or with their company commander. Company F's artillery forward observer, Second Lieutenant Terry M. Weber, was unable to contact the fire support coordination center to get support; eventually, he was able to relay his fire mission request through Company E. The FAC with Company F also had difficulty, although Company F did receive two "dry runs" by Vought F-8 Crusaders that had expended their bombs elsewhere.

Hampered by malfunctioning rifles and poor communications, Company F fought fiercely, but casualties mounted. Lieutenant Carroll was wounded twice and continued to fight until a third wound left his leg so badly damaged that he could no longer walk and could barely crawl; Captain Sorenson was badly wounded as well. Several Marines observed NVA soldiers overrunning positions where wounded Marines lay, and saw the enemy methodically shooting and stabbing their wounded comrades.

Fortunately, help was on the way. Soon after the fight began, Lieutenant Colonel DeLong diverted the two Company E platoons from their patrol route and sent them north to Company F's aid. DeLong and his command group moved forward by helicopter to a position just a kilometer south of Company F. With them were several mortar crews, a 106mm recoilless rifle crew, and a platoon from Company H to provide fire support for their beleaguered comrades. This rapid, forceful response by other elements of 2d Battalion turned the tide of battle less than half an hour after it began. For the next hour thereafter, the NVA executed a fighting withdrawal, which turned into a rout once the Marines were finally able to direct fire from mortars, artillery, and UH-1E Huey gunships onto the enemy.

Thanks to these supporting arms and the aggressive response of DeLong and other officers and enlisted Marines in Companies F and E, the Marines could claim victory in this fight. The cost, however, was high. Twenty-four Marines were killed and 19 wounded, mostly in the opening minutes of the battle. The Marines claimed 25 confirmed kills among the NVA and 35 probable kills. Helicopters soon arrived to extract the four platoons that had borne the brunt of the battle. Meanwhile, Marines from Company E made a discovery that possibly explained why the enemy decided to fight for this location. Near the spot where the battle began, the Marines found piles of bloody NVA web gear, or individual equipment, and 203 freshly filled graves. Lieutenant Cannon of Company E, the second American to see these graves, guessed that the enemy did not want the Marines to find their burial site. The discovery did not help 2d Battalion win the engagement, but officers at higher headquarters added 203 to the number of confirmed enemy kills at Khe Sanh and subtracted the same number from probable kills.

Even after this, the fight of 9 May was not completely over. At around 1620, the 2d Battalion command group and crew-served weapons teams at Lieutenant Colonel DeLong's position received small-arms fire from the direction of the previous battle site. In response, a rifle squad from Company E advanced uphill toward it, killing six enemy soldiers as it went. The infantrymen then withdrew, and the 106mm recoilless rifles and mortars blasted the position from which the fire had come.

Surrounded Reconnaissance Patrol, 9–10 May

While Marine infantrymen were slugging it out with NVA forces in the hills immediately outside Khe Sanh, reconnaissance units continued their work closer to the Laotian border and the DMZ to determine enemy strength and intentions in the area. On the evening of 9 May, a seven-man reconnaissance patrol from 1st Platoon, Company A, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, was inserted 13 kilometers northwest of Khe Sanh (about six kilometers north of Hill 881N) to observe suspected enemy infiltration routes and report on enemy buildups. The patrol had not been on the ground long before it found a total of 16 well-constructed enemy bunkers and assorted equipment—clearly it had landed near to or in the midst of a much larger enemy unit. After reporting



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A193268 and A800211

Top: Hill 950 to the left and Hill 1016 to its right. Bottom: Hill 881S from the air, showing both parts of the hill outpost with Hills 950 and 1015 in the background.

this information, the patrol received orders to leave its current location, find some high ground, and establish a defensive position.

By midnight, the seven reconnaissance Marines were in a fight for their lives. The Marines were dug in and concealed on a small hill when 30–50 NVA soldiers walked up to and through their position. Hoping to avoid detection, the Marines held their fire. However, when two enemy soldiers finally spotted the Marines and unslung their rifles, they were killed by Private First Class Steven D. Lopez. A vicious

firefight ensued and several other Marines became casualties almost immediately. Sergeant James N. Tycz moved about the position, directing fire, shouting directions, and calling in artillery fire. Later, Sergeant Tycz picked up an enemy grenade that had just landed next to a seriously wounded Marine. Tycz threw the grenade back at the enemy, but it exploded as it left his hand, leaving him mortally wounded. Soon, only three men were left alive—Lopez (wounded), Lance Corporal Clarence R. Carlson (wounded), and Private First Class Carl Friery, who was wounded and unconscious throughout the rest of the battle. Private First Class Lopez, only 18 years old and on his third patrol, took over the job of directing artillery and air strikes. He and Carlson each killed several enemy soldiers with their own weapons, and at one point had to move about the position under enemy fire to retrieve ammunition from their dead comrades when their own supply ran out.

At 0245, there was an attempt to extract the patrol's survivors with two CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters. This endeavor failed due to the extremely heavy volume of enemy ground fire, and one of the pilots, Captain Paul T. Looney, was killed as a result. As the night wore on, the situation became even more desperate. Lopez continued to call in air strikes and artillery rounds to the edge of, and on top of, his own position. At one point, while lying in the grass, he found himself face to face with a very young looking NVA soldier. Lopez fired and the man fell dead where he lay; Lopez would continue to fight the rest of the night with his enemy's corpse next to him.

A second attempt to rescue the three survivors was made just after first light. Fixed-wing aircraft and UH-1 Hueys made multiple strikes in an effort to "box" the area around the patrol, or deliver so much firepower on it that it would be impossible for the enemy to prevent the pickup by the two CH-46s. This attempt also failed. Just as discouraging to Lopez was the fact that Lance Corporal Carlson, the only other conscious Marine, was hit by a 12.7mm heavy machine gun round. Lopez believed it was a stray round from the UH-1 Huey that had provided fire support during the extraction attempt. Regardless of the source of the round, Lopez thought for some time that Carlson was dead and that he was the only Marine left alive. Still, he continued to call in fire missions. Shortly after 0900, there was an attempt

to insert another reconnaissance team as a reaction force to aid Lopez. This effort also failed.

As another extraction was organized, Lopez asked that a Huey, not a Sea Knight, be sent this time. Lopez thought that the UH-1 could come in faster and provide enough of its own deadly fire that the enemy would be suppressed long enough to get him and his comrades out. As it turned out, the third rescue effort was quite a display of airmanship. The pilot of the Huey assigned to pick up the survivors was Major Charles A. Reynolds. Reynolds' helicopter was unarmed, but he carried two full crews on it, so that even if one member was killed or wounded, the mission could continue. As he flew toward the pickup point, he was accompanied by two other Hueys providing covering fire, and fixed-wing aircraft dropped bombs and napalm around the landing zone as close as they dared to the Marines on the ground. Swooping in low and fast, as if he were simply providing fire along with the other Hueys, Reynolds changed his approach at the last minute and tried to land. With enemy rounds and fire from the napalm all around him, he aborted this first attempt, and then the second. Finally, Reynolds was able to land, embark the three wounded Marines, and escape through smoke, nearby napalm flames, and a hail of enemy fire. Upon inspection during their return to base, Lopez and Carlson had only 20 rounds of ammunition remaining between them. At the end of the fight, three reconnaissance Marines were wounded and four were dead, in addition to the deceased pilot, Captain Looney. Seven helicopter crewmen also were wounded. At least 15 NVA soldiers were certainly killed, and the Marines estimated another 20 probable enemy deaths.* Sergeant Tycz and Private First Class Lopez received the Navy Cross for this action. Silver Stars were awarded to Lance Corporal Carlson; Captain Looney, the

*Official reports by officers at Khe Sanh concluded that there were 7 confirmed NVA kills in this action and 20 probable ones. However, in an interview conducted the very day he was rescued, a clearly exhausted but alert PFC Lopez testified that he had killed at least six NVA and Carlson at least another six. He also stated that he counted 15 dead enemy bodies at one point in the fight. Sources also contradict each other on the number of failed extraction attempts that were made and the times at which they were made. A message from Khe Sanh to 3d MarDiv headquarters sent on the afternoon of 10 May states that three unsuccessful attempts were made and that the successful attempt was made at 1145. However, interviews of Lopez and his company commander, Capt Alfred T. Crosby, state that there were two unsuccessful attempts and that the successful attempt occurred earlier.

Private First Class Steven D. Lopez

Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Corporal [then Private First Class] Steven D. Lopez, United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism while serving as a Radio Operator with the First Platoon, Company A, Third Reconnaissance Battalion, THIRD Marine Division (Reinforced), Fleet Marine Force, near Khe Sanh, Republic of Vietnam, on 9 and 10 May 1967. Corporal Lopez was a member of a seven man reconnaissance patrol deep in enemy controlled territory. The patrol discovered numerous enemy bunkers and equipment and radioed the valuable intelligence information back. Towards evening they withdrew to high ground and established a night defense. Shortly after midnight, a North Vietnamese unit of approximately 50 men was heard moving toward their position. Several enemy troops walked into their position and started to unslung their weapons and Corporal Lopez quickly killed them with an accurate burst of automatic weapons fire. The enemy immediately began delivering a heavy volume of small arms fire into their perimeter. As the fire fight continued, numerous casualties were inflicted until only Corporal Lopez, who was wounded in the side, and another Marine were able to deliver fire on the enemy. Although wounded, he assumed the task of directing artillery on enemy positions around the patrol.



Armed helicopters and flare ships arrived to add support to the besieged patrol. Wounded a second time, he still courageously directed supporting arms in dangerously close to his position as, on several occasions, the enemy was within 15 feet of his position. Two attempts to extract the patrol by helicopter failed, due to the intense enemy fire. Running low on ammunition, he moved among the bodies of his fallen comrades to retrieve ammunition and discovered one Marine seriously wounded. He moved him to a covered position and distributed the ammunition between himself and the other survivor. He once again called in air support so close that dirt from the exploding rockets and bombs showered them and was once again wounded when an enemy round grazed his head. A last desperate attempt was made for extraction by helicopter. Napalm, bombs, and rockets rocked the enemy's position as the three remaining members of the patrol were extracted. His steadfast determination and indomitable fighting spirit throughout the twelve hour ordeal were instrumental in inflicting numerous casualties on the enemy and saving the lives of several Marines. By his outstanding courage, bold initiative and selfless devotion to duty in the face of grave personal danger, Corporal Lopez upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

Sea Knight pilot who was killed; and Major Reynolds, the Huey pilot who made the successful pickup.

Aftermath

In the days following the Marines' seizure of Hill 881N, NVA troop sightings indicated that the *325C Division* was withdrawing north and west toward the DMZ and the Lao-tian border. More than 150 Marines had been killed and another 400 wounded in the vicious fighting around Khe Sanh since 24 April. Body counts were still being verified, but the Americans believed more than 800 NVA soldiers had been killed and estimated another 600 probable enemy deaths. The Marines and their brethren from the other

Services had badly mauled the *18th Regiment* and, temporarily at least, halted the infiltration of its parent unit, the *325C Division*, into the western reaches of Quang Tri Province. It seemed clear that the NVA north and west of Khe Sanh had suffered a serious tactical defeat.

Enemy activity around Khe Sanh did not end, however, after the Hill Fights, and neither did the American determination to hold the base. The 2d and 3d Battalions of 3d Marines were withdrawn from Khe Sanh between 11 and 13 May and replaced by 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. On 13 May, Colonel John J. Padley, commander of 26th Marines, formally assumed command at Khe Sanh from Colonel Langan and his 3d Marines. Temporarily, the Marine presence



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A193261

A CH-53 helicopter delivers M101 105mm howitzers belonging to Battery I, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, to a landing zone on Hill 881S in 1967 shortly after the Hill Fights. As 26th Marines consolidated outposts on the hills seized by 3d Marines during the Hill Fights, helicopter support continued to be vital to the defense of the area.

at Khe Sanh decreased from two infantry battalions to one. Enemy sightings and contacts picked up again in early June, however, and intelligence indicated that all three regiments of the *325C Division* were still in the triborder area—Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The 26th Marines now maintained company outposts on Hills 861 and 881S as well as the Khe Sanh base itself, as well as smaller detachments on Hill 950. The requirement, or the decision, to hold and patrol a larger area only magnified the defensive problem. On 13 June, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, reinforced its sister battalion at Khe Sanh. The 26th Marines would continue to battle its NVA foes around Khe Sanh, off and on, until the massive Communist siege of the hilltop base the following year.

Problems with the M16

One particularly distressing trend in the Khe Sanh fighting of 1967 was the performance of the recently issued M16 rifle. The Marines who fought around Khe Sanh at that time were not able to train and familiarize themselves with the new weapon. The M16 had obvious advantages over the M14 rifle that it replaced, including its lighter weight, much faster

rate of fire, and lighter ammunition that allowed troops to carry more rounds into combat. Infantrymen, however, complained often that the rifle jammed. The fighting around Khe Sanh brought the dissatisfaction with the M16 to a head. One Marine after another came forward to report that his rifle had jammed in the midst of a firefight or, worse, that he personally saw buddies killed while they struggled to clear blockages in the chamber of their rifle. Some of these bitter complaints were made in verbal comments to congressmen visiting the front lines or in a letter to a congressman, and were clearly exaggerated. Other accounts, however, were matter-of-fact statements made to field historians only days after the event and were corroborated by other eyewitnesses. Though the magnitude of the problem was difficult to quantify, it undoubtedly had a negative impact on Marines' morale, not to mention their confidence in the most important tool of their trade. The Marines' bitterness was probably exacerbated when senior officers and staff NCOs responded that there was nothing wrong with the rifle; in reality, Marines either had not been cleaning their rifles properly or had not received adequate training on them. Even General Walt and the Commandant, General Greene, publicly made these assertions, as did General Westmoreland in his memoirs nearly a decade later.

The problem led to a public outcry and intense congressional scrutiny. It turned out that the troops were right, but that the generals were partially right as well. The M16 required more careful, frequent, and thorough cleaning than the M14 to function properly. The requirement for cleanliness was so stringent, however, that it was often impossible to meet in field or combat conditions. Additionally, even when the rifle was cleaned perfectly, it often failed to properly eject spent cartridges, causing a jam when the next round was chambered. Part of the problem lay in the fact that microscopic "pits" formed in the chamber of the M16 after firing. This had not occurred in the M14, which had a chrome-plated chamber that minimized corrosion. More fundamentally, the powder in the 5.56mm round then in use caused a more rapid rate of fire than that for which the rifle was designed.* This resulted in the powder in each round failing

*The original weapon design was intended to fire 700–800 rounds per minute. The change in powder increased that rate to 1,000 rounds per minute.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A190131 and A190136

Top: Sgt P. Richardson of 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, demonstrates firing the M16 rifle from the hip at the Khe Sanh rifle range on the northern perimeter of the combat base in 1967. Bottom: PFC Krenzer of 3d Reconnaissance Battalion fires an M16 rifle from the standing "offhand" position at the Khe Sanh rifle range in 1967.

to burn fully, leaving behind a dirty residue that made the weapon more likely to malfunction.

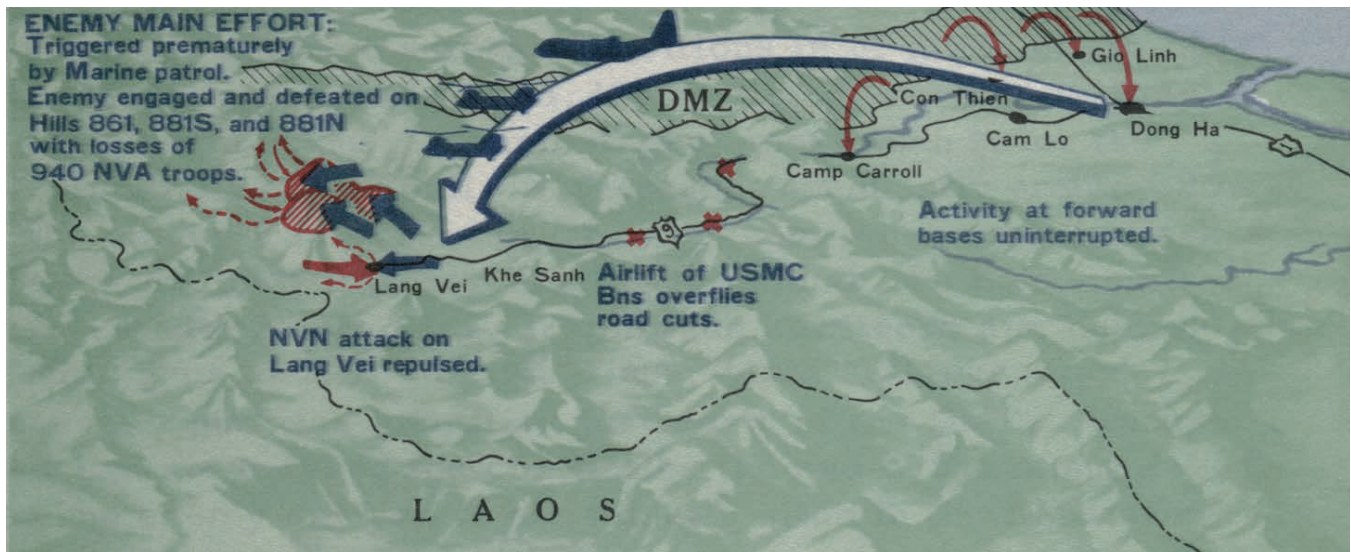
Within a few months of the Hill Fights, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps took action to fix the problems with the M16. The rifle was fitted with a new buffer group that slowed down the rate of fire and with chrome-plated chambers to reduce corrosion. These vital and urgent modifications and the replacement of the rifles that had already been issued placed a tremendous logistical strain on the III MAF, and

were still not quite complete by the end of 1967. By 1968, however, the M16 had become a much more reliable weapon.

Tactical and Strategic Implications

The Khe Sanh Hill Fights highlighted several tactical trends that generally held true whenever American troops faced Communist troops in Vietnam, particularly the NVA. The enemy showed himself to be extremely skilled in infiltration, concealment, and fortification. These strengths of the NVA soldier were pitted against the Americans' infantry fire-and-maneuver tactics and the strength of their supporting arms, particularly air and artillery. U.S. Marine infantry were skilled at using a base of fire, or firing element, while sending a maneuver element to close with the enemy. However, because of the numerical strength of the enemy at Khe Sanh, as well as his skill at concealing his positions and automatic weapons, those tactics would not have succeeded without the massive firepower provided by American supporting arms. The 1st MAF flew more than 1,100 sorties at Khe Sanh during the Hill Fights, expending more than 1,000 tons of munitions. Additionally, the U.S. Air Force directed 23 strikes by B-52 aircraft, and Marine and Army artillery pounded enemy positions in the area with more than 25,000 rounds. Even with all this firepower, NVA bunkers were so well constructed that, at first, air and artillery attacks on them did not achieve the desired results. Eventually, though, American firepower and the dogged determination of Marine infantrymen carried the day.

The First Battle of Khe Sanh also highlighted the importance of rotary-wing aircraft in the Vietnam War. Helicopters were even more vital for the Americans at Khe Sanh, where the rugged terrain made vehicle transport generally impracticable and even foot transportation difficult. Helicopters were indispensable for rapid resupply, tactical insertion of reconnaissance patrols and reinforcements to units in contact, and medevacs. The Marines were so dependent on helicopters in this battle, in fact, that NVA troops were able to turn this dependence to their advantage. Using cover and concealment to strike first against patrolling Marine units, they could inflict initial casualties, perhaps without fully giving away their positions. Then, rather than close with the well-armed and aggressive Marines, they would wait until helicopters arrived to take out the wounded, seeking



Defense Department (Marine Corps)

Military actions in Vietnam between 28 April and 12 May.

the opportunity to inflict more casualties. When they had pinpointed the location of landing zones, the NVA could direct accurate and deadly fire from mortars and automatic weapons as the Marines attempted to evacuate their stricken comrades and receive supplies. The frequent inability of the Marines to actually see the enemy made this tactic even more effective. The Americans soon countered by blanketing the area around the landing zone with supporting arms as the medevac helicopters arrived. This action was somewhat effective and inflicted NVA casualties, but helicopter operations supporting Marine infantry in contact with the enemy remained a dangerous and sometimes fatal endeavor. The courage and skill of pilots and helicopter crewmen in a “hot” landing zone, and the desperate courage of Marines on the ground determined to get their wounded comrades onto the medevac helicopters, became signature features of the American experience in Vietnam.

At the operational level, there is little reason to doubt the interpretation of senior Marine leaders on how the Hill Fights fit into a larger enemy plan. During and immediately after the battle, senior officers at the regimental, division, and Marine amphibious force level concluded that the NVA had planned a determined attempt to overwhelm American forces at Khe Sanh, as Westmoreland originally suspected. This determination manifested in the enemy’s patient efforts

over weeks and months to infiltrate troops into the area in at least regimental strength. While assembling large numbers of troops in the area, the enemy temporarily deployed them in base camps and strongly fortified bunkers built to last, and built field hospitals as well. Rather than avoid battle as they had in the past when the Americans brought airpower and artillery to bear, by 24 April, the NVA soldiers held fast against incredible firepower and dared the Marines to push them off the hills. Senior Marine officers believed that other enemy actions at the time were meant to support the attack on Khe Sanh. The enemy, they concluded, was attempting to cut off Route 9 east of Khe Sanh to isolate the garrison. Meanwhile, a diversionary attack was planned on the U.S. Army Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. About the same time, mortar, rocket, and artillery attacks struck Dong Ha, Gio Linh, Con Thien, and Camp Carroll designed, the Marines thought, as additional diversions and to freeze Marine units in place so that they would not be sent to Khe Sanh’s relief. Marine leaders determined that these endeavors were meant to support the main effort—a large attack on Khe Sanh to take place on or about 1 May. However, aggressive Marine patrolling resulted in the battle of 24 April, the subsequent arrival of two Marine battalions, and the determined Marine attack on the hills northwest of the base, which preempted the planned NVA assault on Khe Sanh.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188991

Gen Westmoreland (right) visits the Marines' I Corps headquarters on 10–11 August 1967 and is shown here speaking with Gen Wallace M. Greene Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps (left). In the background is LtGen Robert E. Cushman Jr., who replaced LtGen Walt as commander of III MAF on 1 June 1967. By mid-1967, senior Marine leaders agreed with Westmoreland that Khe Sanh was important, but many still differed with him on why it was important in the overall strategic approach to fighting the war.

Communist Vietnamese sources on the war are still relatively inaccessible and often propagandistic, but they give little reason to doubt this interpretation. Even the most regarded official Vietnamese history of the war translated into English does not mention the fighting at Khe Sanh in 1967.

In the strategic debate between General Westmoreland and such Marine officers as Krulak, Walt, and others, the

USMACV commander certainly had been right about one thing: the NVA was in northern Quang Tri Province, and the Khe Sanh area in particular, in significant strength. Eventually, the Marine generals agreed with that assessment, and would have also agreed that Westmoreland's concern that the enemy might make a determined attempt to overwhelm the remote base in the mountains had been prescient. On 7 May,



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A193248

A Marine attached to Company D, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, cleans his weapon in a 81mm mortar position on Hill 861 less than three months after the conclusion of the Hill Fights.

Lieutenant General Krulak stated in a situation report that “the destruction of the base and forces at Khe Sanh probably has been an enemy objective of long standing.”

Assuming, however, that the North Vietnamese had indeed planned a determined and coordinated effort to capture Khe Sanh, what was the larger strategic significance of that effort? It seems that Marine leaders came to agree with Westmoreland that Khe Sanh was important after all. Lieutenant General Krulak referred to the “critical nature” of the Khe Sanh base in his 7 May situation report. Similar terminology was used in 1969 by Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman Jr., who replaced Lieutenant General Walt as

commander of III MAF only weeks after the conclusion of the Hill Fights. Cushman referred to Khe Sanh as a “vital link in the northern defenses.” Thus, it seems that the Hill Fights resulted in a new American consensus on Khe Sanh’s importance and a determination to hold it. No longer would senior Marine officers leave a single rifle company to defend it or claim that, if one lost Khe Sanh, “you wouldn’t have lost a damn thing.” This new attitude toward the hilltop base set the stage for the massive and legendary siege of Khe Sanh in 1968.

What General Westmoreland and Marine leaders never fully agreed on was *why* Khe Sanh was important. By 1969,

Westmoreland would comment on the importance of holding Khe Sanh so that NVA forces could not sweep into the populated areas farther east and threaten the civilian population and the pacification program. In his memoirs published in 1976, however, Westmoreland revealed that his basic view on the importance of Khe Sanh had not fundamentally changed. Though Westmoreland was more flexible in his approach to fighting the war than is often realized, he was relatively more inclined than the Marines to view the Vietnam War as a conventional struggle. To him, Khe Sanh was a key outpost that anchored the left flank of the American line in the north; provided a base for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering near the DMZ and Laotian border, a base from which he hoped someday to launch a major drive into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail; and the opportunity to destroy enemy conventional forces with American firepower should they ever attempt to overwhelm the base.

Marine leaders, however, did not allow the Khe Sanh fighting to distract their focus away from pacification and counterinsurgency efforts. In FMFPac's monthly report to USMACV for April 1967, Krulak's headquarters reported that the heavy conventional fighting in I Corps that month, including Khe Sanh, had caused the CORDS program to suffer, but that the "Combined Action program continued to develop satisfactorily." Even after the larger and even bloodier conventional fight at Khe Sanh in 1968, Lieutenant General Cushman thought the significance of the battle lay in protecting pacification efforts in the villages. When Cushman noted in 1969 that Khe Sanh was a "vital link in the northern defenses," he claimed its importance lay in the fact that those defenses "screened the Allied counterinsurgency efforts in the densely populated coastal plain." By preventing an enemy invasion of the coastal plain, "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." To many senior Marine officers, this focus on counterinsurgency remained the key to victory in Vietnam.

Discussions on strategy can become abstract and conjectural, but what was demonstrable and undeniable was the raw courage displayed, and the suffering endured, by the fighters on both sides at Khe Sanh. The Marines saw that NVA soldiers, like themselves, could withstand great hardship and

continue to fight. When well dug in and determined to stand their ground, NVA units could endure massive air and artillery bombardments and continue to function.

Great credit also belongs to the Marines who refused to quit until they routed, blasted, or drove those same NVA soldiers out of their bunkers and off the hills around Khe Sanh. Battling harsh terrain and weather and withering enemy fire, Marine infantrymen and the U.S. Navy medical corpsmen with them refused to give up and often sacrificed their lives for their comrades. Marine cannoneers provided timely and reliable 24-hour support, while pilots and aircrews risked their lives to evacuate the wounded and help the infantry to stay in the fight.

The pace of operations did not slacken after the Hill Fights, of course, and there was only limited time for Marine officers to reflect on the courage and character their men had displayed. Just after the fight for Hill 881S, Captain Raymond H. Bennett, commander of Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, spoke to reporters from *Stars and Stripes*. The paper quoted Captain Bennett as saying, "the most impressive thing I saw is the actions of the American youngster. The same long-haired kid that loves rock and roll music . . . comes through with flying colors when the chips are down."

Perhaps, however, the conduct and character of the Marines in the Khe Sanh Hill Fights was best summed up more than six months later by another young officer who had witnessed the carnage first hand. Captain David G. Rogers had been a lieutenant and a forward observer attached to Captain Bennett's Company M during its assault on Hill 881S on 30 April. Now back in the United States and reflecting on the experience to a Marine interviewer, Rogers swore he would never forget the sight of Marines carrying their wounded comrades down the hill at the end of the day. Rogers said,

I learned to respect the individual Marine, the 18, 19, 20-year old, more in this particular battle than at any other time that I've been in the Marine Corps. He was given his job, he went up in the face of danger, in the face of just being blown away more or less, and he went up and he did his job. To see the faces of Marines dragging back their dead buddies or wounded buddies, you could see how close the Marines really were with each other. It was true brotherhood, and I was really proud at the conduct of the Marines.

Sources

Though several unit after action reports on the Hill Fights are no longer extant, enough surviving sources exist to reconstruct the fighting with reasonable accuracy. Regrettably, the command chronologies for 3d Marine Regiment and the battalions that fought at Khe Sanh or contributed infantry companies to the battle contain almost no relevant information. One minor exception can be found in those from the Battalion Landing Team 2d Battalion, 3d Marines (BLT 2/3), from 13 April to 12 May 1967. The regimental and battalion command chronologies sometimes reference separate, special after action reports for the Khe Sanh fighting that were apparently prepared but no longer exist. Likewise, the command chronologies for 3d MarDiv and III MAF for April 1967 offer limited usefulness. These sources can be found in the National Archives in Washington, DC, or at the Gen Alfred M. Gray Research Center (GRC), Marine Corps University (MCU), Quantico, VA.

The most useful surviving primary sources are the situation reports prepared by the SOP, or senior officer present, at Khe Sanh, and the personal interviews conducted with the participants by Marine Corps field historians during or shortly after the battle. The situation reports, along with “plan summaries,” were sent every six hours from Khe Sanh to the 3d Marines’ regimental headquarters, which then forwarded them to 3d MarDiv. Spanning the period from 30 April

to 13 May 1967, the documents cover the fighting in great detail, including grid locations for individual units down to the company level. These situation reports can be accessed online in the Virtual Vietnam Archive, Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University.

As for personal interviews, Marine Corps University holds the audio recordings of dozens of men who served at Khe Sanh from late 1966 to mid-1967. The most useful include those of BGen Lowell E. English, BGen John R. Chaisson, Col T. M. Horne, LtCol Peter A. Wickwire, Maj Glenn Golden, Maj Richard C. Ossenfort, Capt Alfred T. Crosby, Capt David G. Rogers, Capt Joseph G. Roman, Capt Bayliss L. Spivey Jr., Capt William B. Terrill, U.S. Navy Lt T. L. Folkerth, 2dLt Thomas G. King, 2dLt John M. Kramer, 2dLt Terry M. Weber, SSgt Leon R. Burns, SSgt Donny W. Richey, SSgt Ruben Santos, Sgt Stephen P. Bodie, Sgt Donald E. Harper Jr., Sgt Milton D. Norwood, Sgt Harry W. Stier Jr., Cpl Michael A. Brown, Cpl John P. Hayes, Cpl John K. Middleton, Cpl Robert E. Torter, LCpl Donald A. Clark, LCpl Larry W. Umstead, and PFC Steven D. Lopez. Particularly revealing as to the strategic views of senior Marine Corps officers is the interview of BGen English conducted on 9 January 1967 and the extended briefing provided to LtGen Victor H. Krulak, commanding general of III MAF, by the staff of 3d MarDiv on 8 March 1967.

Other useful primary sources include FMFPac, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam, April 1967,” Record Group 127, National Archives; LtGen Walt to Gen Greene and LtGen Krulak, 19 March 1967, Personnel/Exclusive—Outgoing, 26 August 1965–8 May 1967, Virtual Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University; Gen William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1976); and Gen William C. Westmoreland, comments on draft manuscript, 27 May 1978, Vietnam Comment File, GRC, MCU. For the experiences of 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, from September 1966 to January 1967, see 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, Command Chronologies, September 1966, October 1966, November 1966, December 1966, and January 1967, Record Group 127, National Archives. The trials of the individual Marine infantryman during this period are vividly portrayed in the memoir of Rodger Jacobs, *Stained with the Mud of Khe Sanh: A Marine’s Letters from Vietnam, 1966–1967* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2013). Jacobs was an infantryman in Company A, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, and spent the months of October and November 1966 at Khe Sanh. This work also made use of official citations for Marines and sailors who received the Navy Cross, Silver Star, and other medals.

A large number of contemporary periodical articles covered the controversy over the M16 rifle. See, for example, *New York Times* articles for 27 May 1967, 1 June 1967, 8 June 1967, 27 August 1967, 28 August 1967, 20 October 1967, 25 October 1967, 4 May 1968, 2 November 1971, 5 February 1972; *Time* articles for 9 June 1967, 8 September 1967; the *Wall Street Journal* article for 19 October 1967; and *Washington Post* articles for 27 May 1967, 5 September 1967, 19 October 1967, 25 October 1967, 25 November 1971.

The two most useful secondary sources on the Hill Fights are Maj Gary L. Telfer (USMC), LtCol Lane Rogers (USMC), and V. Keith Fleming Jr., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1984); and Edward F. Murphy, *The Hill Fights: The First Battle of Khe Sanh* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003). Besides the above titles, other official Marine Corps secondary sources include LtCol Shawn P. Callahan, *Close Air Support and the Battle for Khe Sanh*, Occasional Paper (Quantico, VA: History Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 2009);

Capt Moyers S. Shore II, *The Battle for Khe Sanh* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1969); Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1982); and BGen Edwin H. Simmons, “Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, 1967,” in *The Marines in Vietnam, 1957–1973: An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1985), 69–98.

Other popular histories besides Murphy’s *The Hill Fights* focus more on the siege of 1968 rather than the fighting that preceded it in 1966 and 1967. However, John Prados’ and Ray W. Stubbe’s *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991) is very useful. See also Ronald J. Drez and Douglas Brinkley, *Voices of Courage: The Battle for Khe Sanh, Vietnam* (New York: Bullfinch Press, 2005); and Ray W. Stubbe, *Battalion of Kings: A Tribute to Our Fallen Brothers Who Died because of the Battlefield at Khe Sanh, Vietnam*, 2d ed. (Wauwatosa, WI: Khe Sanh Veterans, Inc., 2008). Allan R. Millett’s *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1991) remains the standard scholarly overview of Marine Corps history and provides background and context for Marine Corps operations at Khe Sanh.

Original Communist sources virtually have nothing to say about Khe Sanh in the context of the 1967 fights. See, for example, Merle L. Pribbenow, trans., *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army in Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); and Khac Vien Nguyen, *American Failure* (Hanoi: Xunhasaba, 1968).

Recently, Gregory A. Daddis has challenged the orthodox criticism of Gen William C. Westmoreland as a strategist in *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Daddis provides a healthy corrective note to the common assumption that Westmoreland blindly pursued a narrowly conceived, conventional strategy of attrition in Vietnam. As the primary sources that inform the current study illustrate, however, Westmoreland eagerly sought a conventional victory against the NVA around Khe Sanh in late 1966 and 1967 while, comparatively speaking, senior Marine officers were far more focused on their pacification program.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CAP	Combined Action Platoon or Program
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
DMZ	demilitarized zone
FAC(A)	forward air controller (airborne)
FMFPac	Fleet Marine Force, Pacific
KIA	killed in action
LAW	light antitank weapons
MAW	Marine Aircraft Wing
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SOG	Special Operations Group or Studies and Observations Group
SOP	senior officer present
TAOR	tactical area of responsibility
USMACV	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

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Photo courtesy of the author

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