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KHE SANH, SOUTH VIETNAM, OCTOBER 9--The American Marines returned to once-besieged Khe Sanh combat base with mixed emotions.

The generals were jubilant. Commanding the return to the ~~base~~ base abandoned 92 days before, Maj. Gen. ^{Raymond} Ray Davis said the ground operation into and around ~~the~~ Khe Sanh symbolized "the major shift in the relative power between the Allies and the North Vietnamese" operating along the demilitarized zone.

"The Marines have been squeezed into a smaller area," the ^{SAN} commander of the Third Marine Division--which now operates along the western two-thirds of the 40-mile-line. "And this has increased our combat power many fold." In addition, the general said the Marines "have just thrown the last of their (North Vietnamese) elements back across the Ben Hai". The Ben Hai river runs through the middle of the six-mile-wide DMZ, which separates North and South Vietnam.

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khesanh 2 (normass/deepe)

Other generals talked of how the new and successful Marine tactics of increased mobility and flexibility had blocked Communist movements around Khe Sanh with much more effectiveness than when 6,000 Marines were once besieged there for 77 days beginning January 21.

But, middle-echelon staff officers were cynical—and they may have reflected in a ~~nutshell~~ ^{nutshell} the over-riding significance of the return to Khe Sanh.

"The Marines are being used as a political pawn to dramatize how good the situation is up here before the American election," one officer grumbled. "This whole Khe Sanh operation is political. "There's not enough ~~North~~ NVA (North Vietnamese Army) ground troops around Khe Sanh to worry about. They should let the Marines do what they're designed to do—get the NVA. Stick around—things will be alot more interesting after this gee-whiz Khe Sanh deal ~~if~~ ^{now} is over."

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khesanh 3 (normass/deepe)

Intelligence sources had assessed that a North Vietnamese battalion—highly fragmented into small units—was operating around Khe Sanh as a screening force to protect Communist trails and transshipment movements into the area. Other sources talked of more lucrative targets for ^{marine} operations—where up to five North Vietnamese battalions were thought to be ~~mass~~ concentrated.

There were not many of the "old hands" left who had endured the agonizingly ~~eleven~~ 77-day siege of Khe Sanh that began on January 21. One, [^]~~however still along the DMZ,~~ however, was ^a~~the~~ Navy doctor who had helped treat ~~the 2500~~ two thousand wounded ^{marine} and evacuate the 250 dead sustained during the siege. Sitting in a sunny, comfortable bunker west of Khe Sanh, the doctor reminisced:

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khesanh 4 (normass/deopo)

"There was a time durin--t during the siege when I wondered if I'd get out alive. I still can't believe the whole thing. I kept a diary-- and now I wonder why I wrote down ~~2~~ some of those things."

The younger troopers who had arrived in Vietnam after the harrowing days of Kho Sanh had ~~passed~~ were either blasé or else apprehensive about returning to base.

Cpl. Bruce Miller, a 20-year-old native from Dallas, explained: "Most of us have forgotten about Kho Sanh. Many feel the Marines ~~are~~ should not have pulled out of it because it gives 'Charlie' (the Communists) more ground to fight in."

Standing in a helicopter landing zone waiting to be lifted into the operational area, he continued:

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khesanh 5 (normass/deepe)

"I don't mind going into ~~the~~—but I'm not happy about it. I'd rather stay back—I have 52 days left (in Vietnam). The other troops are worried too. We're losing too many men over here. Our y/unit hasn't been hit too bad, but my brother-in-law is in another regiment and it has been hit pretty hard all the time."

1/ Lt. Jack Hart, a ~~26-year-old~~ 26-year-old platoon leader from Atlanta, Ga., with a unit about to be helicopter into the Khe Sanh area explained:

"Some people are looking forward to returning to the Khe Sanh area—but some aren't. They're afraid of 'incoming' rounds from that artillery the NVA might still have in Laos. Intelligence showed alot up there (in the Co Rae mountains of Laos) last month, but our ~~re v~~ I made a visual reconnaissance of the area and it showed nothing."

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khesanh # 6 (normass/deepe)

Even senior commanders are mystified as to what has happened to the potent 130 ~~mm~~ millimeter field artillery the Communist had buried in the sides of the Co Rao ^{MOUNTAINS} ~~Mountains~~ in Laos. Some officers believe the artillery pieces are now being shuttled around to unknown gunpositions in Laos-- but others fear the ~~2u~~ tubes are being towed further south, even into South Vietnam proper, where they would not be immune from Allied ground forces. The last time the American officers know that the Communist artillery in Laos has been fired was July 6--on the day ~~the last of the 6,000~~ ^{the last of the 6,000} ~~the~~ ^{the} Marines "de-activated" or abandoned the Khe Sanh base.

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khesanh 7 (normass/deepe)

The return to Khe Sanh began October 4, when in a well-coordinated, 45-minute helicopter shuttling operation, Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion of the 4th Marines was landed several hundred yards from the northern end of the old Khe Sanh runway. Their landing zone had been--during the ~~66~~ 77-day siege period--the bunkering position of the 1st Battalion of the 9th Marines on a finger-like knob directly overlooking the combat base. The troopers of this unit--responsible for securing and moving ~~air-dropped~~ air-dropped supplies from the drop zone at the end of the runway--had convinced themselves they had heard Communists tunneling under their hill-knob with shovels swaddled in burlap sacks. The Communists never did blow up the hill and Marine positions, but when Kilo Company landed there last week, the knob was hardly recognizable because of the Marines' demolition and bulldozer work as they departed.

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khesanh 8 (normass/deepe)

Kilo Company had also been the last company out of the Khe Sanh area during the evacuation ~~last July~~ in July. Gunny ~~Sergeant~~ ^{H. 10's} Sergeant Raymond Hatchell, 38, of Florence, S. C. remembered well ~~their~~ departure from Hill 471, 500 yards away from the garbage dump road of the Khe Sanh combat base.

"Just as we were leaving, I was awfully busy," the senior sergeant in the company explained. "About 5 p.m. we got a radio message that we were to hold on Hill 471 that night. Then the helicopters came in and said that we'd have to evacuate that ^{Hill} ~~Hill~~ on five minutes ~~notiv~~ notice. When the NVA saw all the activity that we were getting ready to move out, they started mortaring us. They threw in 40 or 50 mortars on us and I had to move the company 400 meters away from there so the helicopters could come in. Then we were ~~take out~~ flown out. That's how we left Khe Sanh."

Last week, though, Kilo company landed unopposed on the position ~~at~~ "With not one shot being fired" and was followed by Marine engineers, who with "back-hoe" machines dug out circular indentations for the Marine and Vietnamese artillery ~~that followed~~ and trenchlines ~~for the~~ and ~~bunker~~ bunkering positions for the Marine troopers.

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khesanh 9 (normass/deepe)

This position ~~was~~ was codenamed "Nanking Fire Support Base" and was actually a prelude to the infantry operation the next day, ~~with the artillery~~ ^{was} It had been necessary to move the artillery forward in order that the ground ~~troops~~ troops would consistently during the operation be moving under the umbrella of indirect fire support; Kilo company was ~~the~~ necessary to protect the artillery position from ^{COMMUNIST} ground attacks. The ground operation that followed the next day was called the "~~Nak~~ "Nanking Action" because only ~~green~~ infantry units from the ~~4th~~ 4th Marine Regiment were ~~into~~ involved-- and in the 1920s, ^{AND 3031} the 4th Marines were based in China. This bit of historical nostalgia did not mean much to the young Marines, however; ^{one} on ~~charts~~ an official chart, one youngster had spelled it "Nan King." ^{The operation} "He probably thought it was the name of ~~some one~~ someone's girl friend," and elderly ~~ser~~ ~~warrant~~ warrant officer explained. "You never can tell what these young Marines think about."

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kchsanh 10 (normass/deepe)

Through-out the first day, Nanking had no contact with the Communists; one Marine was seriously wounded, however, by accidentally stepping on ~~an American~~ ^{an} anti-personnel mine.

Even after ~~leaving~~ ^{leaving} the Khe Sanh area in July, Kilo company had roved ~~around and~~ ^{around} patrolled around the Khe ~~Sanh~~ abandoned remains of the base--at one time, it bivouacked directly across the river from the base. The company commander, ~~Stanley E. Thomas~~ ^{Returning Here.} Capt. Sidney E. Thomas, 31, said, "There's no problem for us ~~returning to Khe Sanh~~. I don't feel I ever left Khe Sanh. We've been patrolling southeast of here. We've been in a mobile posture and know the area well, so we have no fear in returning."

Capt. Thomas had assumed his ^{Company} command of the ~~company~~ ^{in April} while it was in Khe Sanh; ~~after departing in July~~ ^{and since then,} the company moved to other patrol bases, ~~at Fox Trot Ridge,~~ ^{had} had been sent to assist a sister company in heavy contact, had found Communist base camps, and had ~~once~~ ^{on JUNE 18} been assaulted on ~~June 18th~~ ^{on} along his frontlines ~~on June 18~~ by the Communists ~~attacking~~ ^{attacking} uphill. Kilo lost 20 ~~and~~ killed and 20 wounded; the Communists left 70 dead behind. Since April, the company has suffered 30 killed and 75 wounded.--roughly 75 per cent battle casualties in six months. "We've had our share of casualties," the captain said softly.

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khesanh 11 (normass/deepe)

^{at NANK. HQ}
One trooper with ~~the~~ artillery unit had also been in Khe Sanh in ~~June~~ June--after the siege was lifted on April 1, but before it was evacuated on July 6. He was Sgt. Alan Bollings, 21, of ~~Birmingham~~ Birmingham, Ala, a section chief for the 105 millimeter ~~how~~ howitzers.

"I was glad to come ~~back up~~ back up here again," he said. "I like it up here. There's alot better weather, scenery and gunpositions up here. I was a little suprised in a way. I thought the airstrip had been taken up--but it still looks the same as ~~at~~ always.

"When I was here in June we were still taking alot of incoming. I remember we were positioned on the southern end of the runway and we were lowering ^{ed} our guns so we could fire point blank into a treeline 2500 meters away. ~~Sinc~~ After we left Khe Sanh, we began moving from one fire support base to another. Coming back to Khe Sanh is just like another operation. We have to be over here for such a long time it's just like moving into ^{FIRE SUPPORT BASE} ~~landing~~ Hawk or Cates."

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khesanh 12 (normass/deepe)

The next day—the Marines called it D-Day—other elements of the 4th Marines were heli-lifted at 10 a.m. into two landing zone areas north and south of Highway ⁹1, near the old Special Forces camp of Lang Vei—some 8000 meters to the west of Khe Sanh. Their missions was to begin a sweeping and ~~as~~ extensive searching action ~~towr~~ towards Khe Sanh and the Nanking fire support base. These elements landed without opposition—and have had only sporadic contact to ~~at~~ date.

The Lang Vei Special Forces camp had been overrun on February 7th—when Khe Sanh was under siege and when ^{other} ~~the~~ Allied units were ^{tied down} ~~focused on~~ the battle of Hue during the Tet offensive. The camp was overrun with the introduction of Soviet-made PT-76 armored vehicles—the first used in the ~~war~~ war. Intelligence reports had previously mentioned Communist armor in the area—but the Special Forces had not laid out anti-tank ~~the~~ mines on their perimeter, they were unable to stop the advance of the ^{metal} ~~well-protected~~ ~~map~~ mobile pillboxes and the camp fell in a hectic battle.

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khesanh 13 (normass/deepe)

On D-Day plus ^{FW Clement} ~~1~~ a battalion of the 1st Vietnamese Army Division was helidropped without opposition onto Hill 881 South--the scene of vicious fighting northwest of Khe Sanh in mid-1967. Heavy radar-controlled air bombardments preceded the Vietnamese heli-lift in an area where American helicopters had spotted Communists in heavily bunkered and ~~cam~~ camouflaged positions.

Since then, the 2500 Allied ground troops continue to search the and sweep the ~~d~~ area with only ~~spot~~ light contact from the Communists.

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