

Beverly Deepe

38, Vo Tanh; Saigon

Air--second of a three-part series

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(This is the second of a three-part series on past and present developments in Khe Sanh).

KHE SANH, SOUTH VIETNAM, JUNE 12--A ~~W~~ veteran American Army officer explained, "As we flew over Khe Sanh, I couldn't believe my eyes. The bomb craters were everywhere. It looked like a moonscape. I've never seen anything to equal it."

American Air Force pilots who remembered ~~Khe Sanh~~ the Khe Sanh ^{AREA} valley last fall as a "Shendandoah Valley type of thing untouched by the war" now talk of its red pockmarks gorged out by ^{966,000} ~~400,000~~ tons of bombs during the 77-day siege of Khe Sanh. "Now, it's just been beat to hell," one ^{Pilot} explained. We've dropped so many bombs it is difficult for me to get an ~~B~~ eight-digit coordinate to give my exact position on the grid system of the map. Even the streams ~~we~~ became re-routed because of the bomb craters, especially north of Hills 881 and 861. "And, some Air Force pilots, only half-jokingly, re-numbered Hill 471 to ^{became} Hill 469, denoting their assumption they had gouged two meters off of its peak.

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The magnitude of the air operation—called Operation Niagara—^{BECAME} because so massive it befoggles the human mind. During the 77-day siege period, 96,000 tons of bombers were dropped from 27,000 sortie runs—one plane on one ~~in~~ airstrike mission. This averages 400 fighter-bomber sorties a day dropping 13,000 tons ~~days~~ daily.—most of it concentrated in a 25 square mile area around Khe Sanh. The 77-day total was roughly equivalent in tonnage to five atomic bombs of Hiroshima vintage. It was 33 per cent greater than all American bombs ~~di~~ delivered in Europe during 1942 and 1943 combined. While the ~~B-52~~ eight-engine B-52 bombing raids were not innovations around Khe Sanh, it was the first time the strategic bombers were used on such a sustained basis for the tactical support~~er~~ of American troops. The sheer weight of American bombing around Khe Sanh has ~~lead~~ some air ~~proponen~~ advocates to ~~asse~~ assert, "Khe Sanh will probably go ~~down~~ down as the first major ground action won entirely or almost entirely by airpower. There ~~has~~ never has been anything like it in the history of warfare...." While many concede that Khe Sanh would have been lost without fighter and supply aircraft, some are more cautious in ^{declaring} asserting that airpower virtually won the battle.

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Was American firepower--air plus artillery--decisive in convincing the North Vietnamese to call off a ground assault on Khe Sanh, or in forcing them to withdraw partially? "Some of NVA prisoners and captured documents spoke of the weight of bombs and artillery," one informed source explained. "If these are typical and if there's any authenticity in them, then it would follow the air and artillery bombardment to an extent never seen before had a tremendous effect. But, was it the reason they didn't attack? I don't know. None of us will probably know for a long time and even then we won't know definitely. Hanoi will probably come up with some face-saving reason like we distracted your troops and then did something else'."

How many NVA were killed in the air and artillery bombardment? Again, the source said, "I don't know. You can use the General Westmoreland formula based on the number of secondary explosions witnessed by airmen and then say one or two NVA were killed in each secondary. Or you can calculate maybe three or four more were hurt. But, we do know there were roughly 5,000 second explosions around Khe Sanh spotted by American aerial observers, pilots or ground troops. Maybe we can say there were three casual casualties--one killed and two wounded--for each explosion of supplies. That's 15,000 people--or more than an NVA division. You can play this numbers game forever. I don't know."

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~~But,~~ ^{presenting} captured NVA prisoners and documents do ~~present~~ ^{present} some glimmers into the life of the Communist troops who felt the weight of bombs! suggests it was a tiring, if not ghoulis, experience.

One captured document describes the beginning of the Khe Sanh siege and subsequent Communist activities. The dairy-notebook, ^{was} believed to belong Nguyen Quoc Cuong, who was thought to be a platoon commander. Selected excerpts from his notes--some written in Chinese characters--follows:

January 21--enemy aircraft (helos, jets and B-52's) covered the sky. Our unit is still in position waiting for the enemy. At what time the enemy will arrive is unknown....

January 21--mission is to evacuate the wounded and dead. The enemy are not all killed. They still hold tight positions in their trenches and bunkers (son-of-bitches). So we did not win this battle. But, our unit has learned a good lesson.

January 22--attack the Hoc and Ku Bac areas with 12 units. The enemy was defeated. The defeated enemy was a brave unit.

January 23-24--The enemy haven't returned to recover their bodies. Have been waiting for three days for their return. Only planes fly over the sky. I led the platoon into the Khe Sanh fort compound (Editor's note: an old French fort near Route 9) and picked up captured loot....In the village among the captured loot, there is rice wine which is very strong. Only one glass of this wine makes us drunk. We did not have much time, but we still enjoy canned meat and candy found in the village.

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January 25--we have been waiting for three days.

January 27--Today, time is getting close. Three more days and we attack.

My family at home is gathered together to celebrate the attack. We are still in position ^{HWA. + N9} awaiting the attack order. According to an evaluation by 8/3, the enemy can reinforce with a cavalry division. The battle is going to be bad, but we must defeat them. Ho Chi Minh's new (lunary) new year speech is a true ideal, "Go ^{on} advance; victory will come to us." ...

January 27--The enemy brought in troops and planes and attacked over 20 times. But our troops still held their positions--these events will be written in the memory of C-12.

January 28--TET--mother should think of me and love me very much. Planes disturb us greatly. All day long we wait for the enemy.

January 29--...A B-17 plan has been flying overhead all day, so we had to stay in the trenches.

~~January 30--~~ Tet is over...(and) all we can do is stay in the trenches and sleep....

February 1--last night, air and artillery strikes last all night long. They fired artillery like fireworks....According to the NLF NLF (the Viet Viet Cong Southern-borne Viet Cong), today ~~battl~~'s battles are all being fought all over the place. But those NLF people I don't know about. There has been seven kinds of enemy aircraft striking heavier all day.

February 2--Today, no planes in the sky...Only waiting for a C-130 to arrive and then we'll shoot it. 1200 hours, had victory information from down South. It filled my body like flies in the sky. Hue city has already been liberated and we occupy the rad station. At Danang, we are still in battle. I think the war will soon be over and

Interrogations of prisoners also reflected a sizeable impact of from American firepower. One American intelligence officer summed it up this way:

"One prisoner said his regiment replaced one that had been 90 per cent wiped out by B-52's. He didn't know for sure whether this was true, but that was the rumor in his regiment. He said everyone was worried about the B-52's...Another prisoner said his unit was very, very afraid of the B-52's and that morale was bad because of them. More than anything else, the B-52's seemed to terrify them.

"We captured one letter written by an NVA trooper saying 'the filthy B-52's have been striking at us again'. Other POW's said many troops suffered from bleeding noses and ears and maybe also internal damage caused by the concussion waves of the B-52's. Also, American ground troops which swept the area and are continuing to sweep the outlying hills found a number of mass graves of dead NVA and there was visible evidence of the B-52's causing damage to supply caches."

During the siege, it became an exception, rather than the rule, when low-flying pilots reported catching a large number of the NVA in the open and wiping them out with airstrikes. It did happen occasionally. One forward air controller recalled: flying the low-altitude spotter planes, recalled: "One day, my roommate and I were flying in separate planes. He radioed me: 'we've got the NVA in the open!' I looked down and radioed back, 'No, I think they're Marines. They have helmets on.' He said he'd go snoop down and check. As he descended, the NVA waved at him--and when he was low in range, they started shooting at him. He got hit, but still pulled up and called in the fighters to get most of them."

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But, one forward air controller, described his targeting missions as a "frustrating experience." He was Capt. Gerald L. Harrington, 28, of Sm Sumter, South Carolina. He probably flew more FAC missions over Khe Sanh than any other pilot. "I knew that area as well as I ^{he} knew my wife," He explained. He had been assigned to the DMZ area last September, then assigned to the "Tallyho" missions over North Vietnam, then, in January, again ordered into the Khe Sanh area.

"Every day, I went up there and put bombs in on the ^{we're} NVN NVA--and the next day they're still in there digging trenches," he explained. "It appeared at one time we were actually dropping bombs on them and helping them dig trenches at the same time. They would simply dig through our bomb craters and keep on going--our bombs didn't seem to slow them down at all....They were digging trenches like moles. When we dropped a bomb in one trench, it didn't stop them. We usually ^{dropped} dropped at the terminal end of the trenchline too, where they put their covered bunkers. The next day, I'd see they went right on through our bomb crater. It was very frustrating....After awhile, the area became so bombed up that the NVA just walked through the bomb craters and I could see ^{the} footprints in the holes ^{the} or if the bomb crater had cut a road, I could see the tracks around the crater."

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He continued, "It was easy to find targets. I had the biggest surprise. Once I didn't go up (in the FAC plane) for three days, and after that pause pause, it was unbelievable what I saw. ~~if~~ The trails looked like thousands of troops had moved into the area--and they made no attempt at all at camouflage. They knew we knew--and they had so many troops they didn't care. To find the targets, the first thing you look for is troops movement, the second is billeting and bivouack areas, things like like mashed down grasses, like Indian Scouts watched for. Sometimes they camouflaged their trenchlines and I could tell the camouflage from foliage from the real foliage. If I had doubts I'd drop down and take a look. Sometimes we'd known knock down the trees with our bombs and then I'd go down and see what was under them."

Sometimes, he, like other FAC pilots were called assigned to estimate the "bomb damage assessment" (BDA) following a B-52 raid. The pilots of the small, two-seat planes generall ha generally had to wait thirty minutes after the raids before the dust settled d enough for them to take a good look at the target area.

"If you've seen the World War II pictures of London and Berlin--a B-52 raid gives you the same impression, except they're not in the cities. If our intelligence reports are accurate enough, then the B-52 gives ~~good~~ overwhelming results. But, sometimes, our intelle intelligence isn't as accurate as we'd like."

He continued: "I'd like to say I saw 1000 NVA out in the open and they wee all disappeared in a bombing raid--but it was nothing like that. Most of the times I never estimated a bodycount. on the 400 missions I flew around Khe Sanh. But, I frequently listed destruction such as bunkers, getting secondary explosions, trenchlines or road cuts.

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"I made only BDA following a B-52 raid near the Co Roc mountain in Laos. Frankly, I couldn't see it had done any damage at all. I just estimated that 85% of the bombs were on target and there was negligible bomb damage because of smoke and foliage. Of 400 missions over Khe Sanh, I can't recall an outstanding bomb damage assessment, though some of the other FAC's reported seeing catching the NVA out in the open." He said one of the problems in assessing damage caused by a B-52 raid was the bombing power was so concentrated and "destructive" if it did eliminate a valuable target, it would disintegrate and FAC pilots wouldn't even be able to know that it had been ~~hit~~.
NOT seen ever EXISTED.

The FAC pilots directed one of the three types of bombing missions over Khe Sanh—
WHICH
the tactical fighters who needed good weather to visually drop their bombs, sometimes right next to the American Marine trenchlines. About 40 per cent of all sorties over Khe Sanh were by this means.

The second type of bombing was called ground-controlled radar bombing. The Air Force codename for it is "combat skyspot." The Marine Corps name is "TPQ-10."
FLYING
This system was used largely at night, by the B-52 bombers four to eight miles above the target, and by regular fighter aircraft during the many days of heavy cloud cover and fog over Khe Sanh. Using wire mesh radar reflectors and electronic beacons, the ground-controllers directed the aircraft over the target, gave the pilots plane crews a countdown of 5-4-3-2-1 and then "mark", which signalled when the bomb-loads were dropped. *No Closer THAN 1000 METRES THAN LINE LINES.* (Radar scope electronics built into the B-52 bombers was considered too risky to use since the terrain features around Khe Sanh looked much like hills in the general area). However, ~~mark~~ on several occasions during the siege of Khe Sanh, the ground-controlling apparatus was knocked out for short durations—which eliminate complete assurance this system ~~would~~ could have been employed ~~be counted on~~ at all times.
*By Communist gunf
EMPLOYED*

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This "Skyspot" system is used extensively by the U. S. Air Force in its North Vietnam bombing raids, but informed sources say ^{it is used} with far less accuracy than around Khe Sanh because ~~bombing on target~~ chances of bombing on target diminish the further the plane travels from the ground-based radar ~~mechanism~~, mechanisms.

The third type of bombing was exemplified by the A6 Intruder, a two-man, sub-sonic, all-weather attack aircraft, which ~~too~~ ^{is} boasts of an "integrated attack-navigation system" ^{is this translates as} which means computerized bombing from "little black boxes" within the individual aircraft, rather than depending on ~~ground-controlled~~ radar.

^{was} The plane, one of the ~~most so~~ newest and most sophisticated in the aviation field, ~~is~~ the Grumman ~~version~~ competitor to the TFX; when the Air Force rejected it, the Navy and Marines bought it. ~~One~~ Several nights during the dark siege-nights

at Khe Sanh, General Tompkins called the superior Marine Headquarters in Danang and requested the ~~Marine squadron of~~ ~~with~~ entire Marine squadron of Intruders to be kept on all-night alert. If the NVA had ~~assaulted~~ assaulted the

Khe Sanh during bad weather, and had succeeded in ~~keepint~~ ^{AND} keeping the ground radar ^{closest to MARINE} controls knocked out, the Marine ~~squadron of intruders~~ and Navy squadrons of

Intruders would have provided the most accurate bombing around the base camp.

^{at the Combat Base.}

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(Hank: You'll probably either want to edit the NVA diary, or separate it and use it as a box or something. I've included it ~~it~~ almost in its entirety because it is the only first-hand evidence I could get on the NVA reactions at Khe Sanh).