

Saigon; June 13

Dear Hank:

The Khe Sanh situation is still such that I couldn't find clear-cut answers to any of the questions you posed your cable. Generally speaking, I think I interviewed most of the people in the northern provinces who would be informed on the subject. My basic approach in interviewing, which I used a lot in the past, was to try to play the four services--Army, Marine, Air Force and Navy--off against each other, i. e. to use one to check or ~~the~~ tattle-tale on the other; and also to check one echelon ~~again~~ against another within the service most involved in the action, in this case the Marines. Before leaving Saigon, I requested through Marine press channels to have interviews set up for me with the Intelligence and Operations Officers first at the Danang level, and then at the Dong Ha (division) level and then at Khe Sanh. Unfortunately, the press officers kept giving me appointments to see the Marine generals involved--but not their staff officers. I suspect the Marines were covering up a great deal, but, I think the Army intelligence officer ~~is~~ spilled most of the beans.

Sources interviewed were:

1. General Tompkins, the division commander during the Khe Sanh siege. Three days before I arrived in Danang, he held a press conference, for direct attribution, on Khe Sanh. I listened to that tape and quoted him by name from that in certain places. I also had a non-attributable background briefing with him, which turned up some good material. I've used a lot of his thinking in the first article, but attributed it only to informed sources. It seems clear to me though, that there were no 2 NVA divisions around Khe Sanh through mid-March, as he said officially.
2. Col. Dick, the chief of staff at Third Marine Division at Dong Ha. He wasn't very helpful or articulate and I didn't use his thinking in the piece.
3. General Hoffman, who has replaced Col. Lownds as commander at Khe Sanh. I haven't quoted him by name, but he's the source for the present situation around Khe Sanh in article 1.
4. By accident, I met one of the Khe Sanh battalion commanders I had interviewed in March in Khe Sanh. He is now working with the ground surveillance teams, which I mention, but all of this is so classified I couldn't get any details. His assistant now is the former intelligence officer to Lownds, ~~whom~~ whom I interviewed in Khe Sanh. Both of them ^{SAY} the view the NVA did not attack because of U. S. firepower. But, the intelligence officer conceded "I got into a lot of trouble about Khe Sanh," on the his staff judgments.
5. On the Air force side, I talked with the commander for all the Khe Sanh flights at the central control center, the commander of a fight squadron component, the airlift commander, one forward air controller whom I can quote by name in the piece and went on a FAC mission over Khe Sanh with another one. While all were proponents of the firepower view, they had some interesting observations.

None of them would go so far as Clark Clifford in late March and say the airpower forced the NVA to withdraw--their answers were "We still don't know why Giap didn't attack or what he was up to--but we killed alot of NVA" etc. In fact, none of the sources in any service went as far Clarke Clifford in saying U. S. firepower forced the NVA to withdraw--except the two mentioned in item 4.

6. During my Danang trip, I also jumped up to the 7th Fleet. I talked with the admiral there and some of the pilots; they were outsiders in the Khe Sanh operation--doers, but not in command positions. But, they gave me a useful tip about the Intruders being the only plane that could have saved Khe Sanh if the ground-controlled radar had been knocked out during bad weather.

7. All of the above except the Navy, represents sort of a coalition of viewpoints the Clark Clifford viewpoint, with varying nuances...the Marine command, the Air Force. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ The opposition view was expressed by the intelligence officer of the 1st Cav Division, which got involved in Khe Sanh intelligence by mid-March, and then on the ground by April 1. He maintains he was in a better position to know about NVA strength around Khe Sanh than the Marines in Khe Sanh--because the First Cav was meeting some of these regiments in the battle for Hue etc. He is the source of most of the views quoted in article 3, the source of the diversion theory--which others also held in Saigon also held--and the push-pushing of the gagged. I've tried to take care not to identify him by position or by his unit, ~~xxxxxxxx~~ since I doubt that his view would be appreciated in official channels. He is very articulate, open and pro-press and I spent more than three hours talking with him. He was the only one who would go through the NVA order of battle, when the units moved out of Khe Sanh etc--the Marines kept fussing over these questions. I think he gave me some of the best detailed information and judgments--and as he said, he could be more objective ~~aba~~ about Khe Sanh than the Marines.

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