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38, Vo Tanh, Saigon

Diversion--third of a three-part series

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

KHE SANH, SOUTH VIETNAM, JUNE 13--Clothbound, granulated land mines, resembling square, olive-green powderpuffs and sunburnt, triangular Ritz crackers, were seeded amidst electronic sensors around Khe Sanh, as they have been for sometime along the seabord side of the "McNamara Line."

Portable radar sets, four feet high, were staked out around Khe Sanh and monitored by ground surveillance teams; they are now being funneled out to other units in Vietnam--and may possibly be used in Thailand Thailand.

"People-sniffers" were employed to detect chemicals emitted by human bodies, and then electronically magnified them onto measuring dials. Starlight-scopes, resembling elongated, old old-fashioned binoculars, were issued to low-flying forward air controllers in mid March; they instruments magnified moonlight so the navigators could take a good look at potential targets in the darkness. Scores of reconnaissance aircraft flow over Khe Sanh--some carrying i metal-detecting infra-red cameras, some carrying black-and-white films and some employing color photography--which distinguished between natural natural jungle and day-old camouflage. From these "recce" returns, a ma miniature Khe Sanh was built in a sandbox in Saigon, where American generals deduced where the North Vietnamese were most likely to concentrate their supplies, troops and equipment. Fighters aircraft began accompanying transports in order to "pickle" instantly any Communist that presented itself by firing.

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None

Detection

SIEGE

None of these exotic devices were innovations in the ~~use~~ <sup>use</sup> of Khe Sanh; all had been employed singularly in Vietnam, but in less concentrated dosages. Mass deployment of them reflected the thinking of ~~Americ~~ American commanders that target selection—or detecting the NVA—<sup>S</sup> was more significant than simply dropping overwhelming tonnages of bombings into the jungle wilderness.

The mechanics of the sophisticated devices are veiled behind top-secret military classification; the specific results accruing from the accuracy of them seems ~~to~~ masked not only behind military security, but also behind the difficulties in assessing their contributions to ~~the~~ lifting the Khe Sanh siege. Clearly though, the confidence of senior American commanders did not rest on these "secret weapons" to pivot the battle of Khe Sanh.

"We remained confident simply because we knew Marines were Marines," one informed source explained. "We knew <sup>that</sup> what had to be done, the Marines were going to do it."

In general, assessments of the value of these devices ~~was~~ were mixed. Some, such as the portable radar sets, gave "good results" in detecting NVA movements within limited distances, one source reported. But, others, including some American generals, believe the <sup>d</sup> gadgetry is generally <sup>B</sup> overated. One source explained:

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"Frankly, we can't get over-enthused with these gadgets. They're all aids, but they're no ~~substitute~~ substitute for eyewitnesses, either American patrols or Communist prisoners. We need all these means of gathering intelligence, but you can't just sit back and look at electronic devices."

Another explained: "I know, some think the 'people-sniffer' is a big thing. I got a briefing on it in the U. S.--the briefer said we'd fly out with this gadget and it would sniff out the enemy and then we'd fire artillery in there and the sniffer would end the war for us. But, actually, on the battlefield, it isn't ~~even~~ even the beginning of an answer."

Another said: "Don't tell me about those electronic sensors forming the McNamara line. An NVA regiment came across the DMZ, straight through the McNamara line and stopped us cold during the Tet offensive."

Another said: "Frankly, no one knew how many NVA were around Khe Sanh most of the time. We kept getting these 'wave of the hand' intelligence briefings; the briefer would wave his hand over a big chunk of the ~~map~~ map around Khe Sanh and tell us that's where the enemy was. But, to be really effective, the ~~int~~ intelligence has to <sup>Locate the enemy with the</sup> be down to a couple of grid squares--down to several thousand meters."

Critics of these electronic devices--and of the overall ~~official~~ publicized view that the NVA were "bombed out of the hills" expressed the belief that the Communists used Khe Sanh as a strategic diversion, while their actual objective was the Tet military offensive against the Vietnamese cities.

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This school of thought is also based on evidence, although not conclusive, and from this, ~~xxxxx~~ deductions were made piecing together the Communist strategy. These sources <sup>MAINTAIN</sup> say that, based on captured documents as early as June last year, the Hanoi high command mapped out its grand strategy for the Communist drive into the cities. Hanoi then ~~press~~ persuaded the Moscow-bloc countries to support their masterplan with sophisticated weaponry. Evidence: material captured in the Ashau Valley--franging from canned Hungarian goulash to Soviet trucks, tracked vehicles, field artillery pieces, and Bulgarian medicines.

By the fall of 1967, the Communists were building elaborate road networks ~~to~~ throughout Laos and into the Ashau Valley, leading to Hue, designed to transport their escalating heavy weaponry--and to create a high-speed system for logistics and troop movements. Evidence: the increased Communist emphasis on road networks, including those ~~an~~ fragments of an asphalt one forty miles north of Saigon.

"Everything the Communists did from mid-1967 had to fit into his plan to hit the cities, I figure," one source explained. "And Khe Sanh had to ~~fit~~ fit into that strategy too. Unless Khe Sanh ~~was~~ was an extremely easy target to take, it was ~~a~~ diversionary for the Communists. But, to be a credible diversion, he had to create a real and serious threat around Khe Sanh and there's no question but what ~~there~~ there was a real threat there. But, the enemy created that threat to draw friendly forces away from the coast. His main objective was Hue and his secondary one was Quang Tri city. If one accepts this view, then the Marines assessed the ~~se~~ situation well and were very wise in deciding to hold Khe Sanh with only 6,000 men, without ~~any~~ major reinforcements. The NVA put heavy pressure on Khe Sanh--and then star pulling them out, transporting them down his high-speed highway in January

These sources then look at what intelligence officers called the "enemy order of battle"--what NVA units were "confirmed" ~~to~~ or "believed" probable" at a <sup>a</sup> given location at a <sup>a</sup> given time. Confirmation is based on at least two items of separate, first-hand evidence--such as two prisoners, or a prisoner and a captured document. There is still considerable disagreement <sup>within military channels</sup> on what NVA units <sup>HAD</sup> surrounded Khe Sanh ~~was~~ at a given time. ~~Marine~~ Marine officers at Khe Sanh during the siege, and other commanders now, consistently maintain two ~~enemy divisions~~ NVA divisions--the 304th and ~~325C~~ <sup>325C</sup> had surrounded the combat base until mid-March. <sup>BUT</sup> Even among Marine field commanders there is disagreement on whether ~~the~~ all Communist units withdrew from the Khe Sanh area in March <sup>and have subsequently slipped back into the area.</sup>

However, ~~the~~ the U. S. Army field commanders <sup>OPERATING</sup> involved in the northern provinces hold a different view. The Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division in early February was rushed towards Hue to reinforce the Marines battling at least a Communist division there. The 1st Cavalry was stopped ~~at~~ several miles from the Hue imperial citadel in the village of La Chau, one of the showplace <sup>a</sup> pacification projects in the ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> Vietnam. For two weeks, from February 3 to 15, the sky-troopers battled Communists in the village, while intelligence officers were perplexed as to which NVA units they were fighting. Finally, on February 21, the intelligence officers had "confirmed" through prisoners and documents the units: 29th Regiment of the 325C Division and 24th Regiment (sometimes ~~numbered~~ <sup>also</sup> numbered 57) of 30<sup>4</sup>th Division--two regiments that before had been presumed besieging Khe Sanh.

The 1st Cav elements cabled this information to its division ~~headquarters~~ headquarters; the division replied it "completely discounted" the information because the two regiments ~~were in~~ <sup>AROUND</sup> Khe Sanh. One staff officer retorted, "But I'm eyeballing the prisoner now and I interrogated him while rocket rounds were coming in. I've got prisoners to show those regiments are in La Chau--what's your evidence they're in Khe Sanh?" By late February, however, General Creighton ~~Abrahms~~ <sup>IS</sup> Abrahms, then representing General Westmoreland in the <sup>N</sup>norther provinces, accepted the ~~is~~ "proof" that the two regiments were outside of Hue, instead of around Khe Sanh. Other prisoners captured later around Khe Sanh when the siege was broken also said part of their divisions had deployed for Hue in early January.

<sup>(MAY GEN. R. M. TOMPKINS)</sup> Tompkins, commanding general of the Third Marine Division <sup>PERHAPS ALL</sup> along ~~the~~ the DMZ during the Khe Sanh siege and <sup>NOW PROMOTED TO</sup> ~~later~~ currently deputy commanding general of ~~the~~ the senior Marine command headquarters, ~~in Danang~~ said at a press conference in Danang on May 24 ~~that~~ it was "absolutely <sup>FIGHTING NEAR</sup> incorrect" that elements of the two divisions were actually ~~in~~ Hue. "Until mid-March, both divisions were around Khe Sanh).

By late February, only four of the six NVA ~~regiments~~ <sup>BELIEVED</sup> infantry regiments were ~~still~~ poised around Khe Sanh. All sources tend to agree that by mid-March no specific date is available from any--the remaining two <sup>REGIMENTS</sup> divisions of 325C Division deployed southwards. ~~the~~ Prisoners from this division were captured in the Ashau Valley operation and later near Kontum and Dak To. Intelligence sources said they have yet to <sup>SEIZE</sup> ~~find~~ a prisoner ~~of~~ of enough <sup>RAW</sup> ~~amount~~ to explain why the two regiments moved south.

This left, then, two regiments of the 304th Division around Khe Sanh-- and there is still disagreement whether these actually ever withdrew from the greater Khe Sanh <sup>pe</sup> area, although they did evade contact with the 1st AirCavalry and Marine units <sup>IN EARLY</sup> ~~after~~ April. Some of these units <sup>RED</sup> left their hill positions in something close to a rout, leaving behind weapons and supplies over large areas as they fled the 1st Air Cav. <sup>EVADED</sup>

But by ~~mid~~ mid-March, four or five days of extensive treetop helicopter reconnaissance identified <sup>THE PRESENCE OF</sup> not more ~~to~~ than nine Communist infantry battalions around Khe Sanh (three ~~battl~~ battalions to a regiment); <sup>FORM</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>IN</sup> actually contact during Operation Pegasus, American units made contact with and identified only seven battalions--three from the 66th Regiment and three from the 9th Regiment, plus one sapper battalion.

~~These~~ Intelligence discrepancies still continue today. The Marines still list all three regiments of the 304th Division around Khe Sanh, as well as the 68th Artillery Regiment and "possibly" a regiment of the 308th Division. But, the Army headquarters in the northern ~~to~~ provinces lists the 24th Regiment--which the 1st Cavalry fought at La Chau--as "location unknown." Certainly no one has annihilated it," one source explained.

A footnote: Some Air Force officers who participated directly in the the Khe Sanh air war during the siege, and ground officers who inspected the Communist bunkers once the siege ~~was~~ lifted, believe the NVA neutralized much of the effectiveness of American firepower with sturdy shovels, barely bigger than a child's ~~toy~~ sandbox toy.

An Air Force officer explained: "The type of bunkers the Communists are using is ~~a~~ very difficult to rout them out of. ~~Even~~ Even with a direct hit on their ~~zigzag~~ zigzag trenchlines, they're ~~still~~ still like ~~rats~~ <sup>RATS</sup> buried in a hole."

A staff officer who had inspected the Communist trenchlines: "The B-52 raids could have put bombs on top of them and annihilated them, but our intelligence isn't that good. Looking at their bunkers, I think even with a <sup>Bomb</sup> direct hit in the opening, someone could have lived through a tactical air strike. In fact, I ~~the~~ think the Communists were dug in will enough at Khe Sanh to survive a tactical nuclear strike."