

Beverly A. Deepe

38, Vo Tanh, Saigon

Khe Sanh—first of a three part series

Page 1

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

KHE SANH? SOUTH VIETNAM, JUNE 11—"The world caved in on Khe Sanh" at 5 a.m. on January 21, a staff officer there recalled when a small-scale Communist indirect weapons barrage touched off the U. S. Marine ammunition dump. Like a mid-winter blizzard, American artillery and mortar rounds flew through the air, descending on the American Marines who nosedived from their ^{above-ground} ~~hard-back~~ ~~above-ground~~ ^{huts} hooches into shallow trenchlines. The 77-day siege of Khe Sanh had begun--and soon ~~it~~ was exploding into worldwide headlines, especially when General William C. Westmoreland called the Communist countrywide Tet offensive a diversion for a massive assault on ~~Khe Sanh~~ the ~~for~~ four-square-mile outpost.

--more

The Communist bombardment ^{came as} ~~was~~ no surprise to the Marines. Five weeks before, ^{had disclosed} in early December, Marine intelligence showed "Charles" (the ~~Comm~~ Communists) ^{was} ~~were~~ building up. "The whole intelligence community was getting electric information; ^{talking} agents started ~~talks~~ and we could feel the pressure in Khe Sanh," one staff officer explained. On December 13, the Third ~~Reg~~ Battalion of the 26th Marine Regiment was helicoptered on a moment's notice to reinforce Khe Sanh--the troops arrived with ~~fla~~ flak jackets and fixed bayonets--~~s~~ much to the amusement of the Marines sitting around the camp sunbathing. The reinforcements gave the commanders "the legs" to for more active patrolling; more and more contact with "Charles" resulted and soon the Marines verified the presence of what was believed to ~~be~~ be two divisions "up tight" around Khe Sanh. One Communist division was 325C, an old-time unit along the demilitarized zone, and the second was a new arrival, the 304th Division, an elite unit that had been in the battle of Dien Bien Phu 14 y ^{had there} ears before and ~~earned~~ the nickname of "The Iron Division."

Then, ~~on sun-up~~ at sun-up on January 20, the first North Vietnamese Army (NVA) defector, a lieutenant commanding an anti-air-craft company, walked into Khe Sanh over the east end of the runway, waving a white flag. He gave the Marines their best ^{Some of} ~~intellig~~ intelligence to date, ^{the} revealed the Communist battle plan to ~~overrun~~ ^{the} attack the hill positions and then ~~attack~~ Khe Sanh, and told the Marines that ~~the~~ 325C Division was deployed ~~in the north and~~ ^{the} west of Khe ~~Sanh~~ the base, especially in the 881 and 861 hill complex, and that the 304th Division was also present in the hills to the South.

Deeps

Khe Sanh--page 3

The intelligence report on the Communist lieutenant was immediately flown to Maj. Gen. Rathbon McClure Tompkins, the commanding general of the Third Marine Division, headquartered in Dong Ha, which defends the demilitarized zone from Khe Sanh to ~~the~~ the seacoast. The distinguished, highly-decorated South Carolinian judged the intelligence report to be accurate, ~~we~~ "since we had alot to gain and nothing to lose." It was the general who was soon to become the pivotal tactical commander; he laid out his battle strategy and defense plan for Khe ~~Sanh~~ Sanh and none of his superiors--from General Westmoreland even to rumors of President Lyndon Johnson--telephoned "the old ~~ad~~ ^{dad}" to change his orders. It was he who, like ^{HIS} ~~him~~ subordinate Marines and Western pressmen, made the hectic air journey to Khe Sanh regularly--three times a week--and one day he recalled his helicopter was under machinegun fire as it approached Khe ~~Sanh~~ Sanh. He shrank to the floor of the 'chopper and tried to remember whether the tank mines next to him were live or inert; he decided it did not matter and handed machinegun ammo to the doorgunner.

--more

^{had} Soon after he read the ^{Report on the} Communist lieutenants' words, and after the ^{had} siege began, General Tompkins outlined how he envisioned the battle of Khe Sanh would unravel. This outline seems now to have been the basis of the official American viewpoint at that time. He said he believed the battle of Khe Sanh would evolve in four phases; the first two phases belonged to the NVA; the last two to the Marines.

Phase 1—"The enemy reconnaissance phase"—"The enemy would bring troops in to scout out ~~of~~ our positions," he said, "and he would ~~be~~ get himself set to probe our positions." Since early January, the Marines had already witnessed this.

Phase 2—"The main battle by the enemy"—an all-out effort including "intensive and continuous bombardment of the base and the hill positions. I visualized the bombardment lasting at least 24 hours hours and then the assault units would try to reach our defenses and ~~re~~ fences."

Phase 3—"The Marines at Khe Sanh would "eject" the NVA, begin mopping up and

Phase 4—with reinforcements, the Allied forces would counter-attack.

"Until the enemy made his move we would hold our positions with four battalions," he explained. With his assessment of four Marine infantry battalions versus two NVA divisions, "we couldn't afford any adventures. I had given Col. (David) Lownds (commander at Khe Sanh) ^{orders} not to patrol more than 500 meters; otherwise they'd mousetrap our first patrol—and I'd be sending in battalions to extract the first unit. The enemy would ~~nick~~ ^{The Enemy} and nickel and dime us to death...I decided he'd have to come to us on the ground of our choosing"—at Khe Sanh itself.

Why didn't the battle unfold as he had predicted—and as his superiors ~~officially~~ publicly said they expected? To ascertain this ~~question~~ question, this correspondent talked with American officers of the four military services involved in the siege of Khe Sanh—the Air Force commanders, ^{and} forward air controllers and who directed the tactical air strikes, the Navy officers diverted from missions over North Vietnam to Khe Sanh, the Marine ~~command~~ field commanders and officers involved during the critical period and the ^{besieged Marines} ~~Army~~ staff officers whose units subsequently relieved the ground siege on April 1—the same day President Johnson reduced the bombing over North Vietnam as a prelude to the Paris peace talks.

The net conclusion of these sources at this time indicated ^{a definitive} that ~~the final~~ ^{THE KHE SANH} ~~history~~ of the Khe Sanh siege can not yet be written—that reading/history backwards is no easier than reading it in turbulent motion. For one thing, the facts about what the Hanoi High Command was thinking and doing at that time ~~is not~~ are ~~not~~ ^{may be} known; for another the battle of Khe Sanh ^{is} still evolving—with almost daily moderate-sized contact ^{the interpretation of} reported around the base. For another reason, ^{has} events have ^{Also, on} become politically controversial within the official military family. ^{Furthermore} On some specific points, military security precludes public knowledge at this time—^{its massive} and since the NVA never launched ^{will probably be} their mass ground assault on Khe Sanh, one of the most controversial questions debated in the future ^{Khe Sanh} is whether the Marines would have held out, as General Tompkins expected, or whether it would have become another Dien Bien Phu. While many sources had accepted General Tompkins outline of the first two phases, ^{in Phase Three} they ^{same} doubted his conclusion that the Marines—mainly because of poor bunkering—could ^{withstood} have held out against a sustained artillery barrage ^{synchro} synchronized with a massive ground assault.

Deepe

Khe Sanh--6

Three main points, however, do stand out from interviews with these first-hand military sources.

First, in early 1968, highly-placed American officials ~~had~~ knew there was a "real and serious" threat at Khe Sanh and believed ~~there~~ the Communists would try for a sensational victory as a prelude to their accepting to begin peace talks. This ~~was before the~~ view was held before the Tet offensive in late January, in which the Communists moved dramatically to assault more than 100 South Vietnamese cities, district and ~~provinc~~ provincial headquarters and military installations. The fear in the minds of official Americans was not simply that Khe Sanh would be a victory for the Communists—and enhance their political bargaining position during peace talks—but that they would capture a number of Marines. One informed source explained.

"Everything we did (at Khe Sanh) was conditioned by the real fear at the highest levels (within the American officialdom) that 5,000 Marines would be killed or captured and that we wouldn't be able to get those prisoners back. Prisoners to Americans are a great concern and 2,000 to 3,000 American prisoners would be a great thing (for the ~~Comm~~ Communists) at the bargaining table."

--more

Second, the Allied commanders still do not have hard-fact, ~~or~~ first-hand evidence as to why the North Vietnamese Army did not launch their expected massive ground assault on the base—or why they partially withdrew. No North Vietnamese prisoner, defector or document of enough import has yet been seized to snatch a glimmer into Hanoi's ^{are} "grand strategy" about Khe Sanh, informed sources report. But, there is ample, although not conclusive evidence, to support two divergent, ~~but~~ although not necessarily contradictory, schools of thought within the military establishment.

The first school—the one often publicized—maintains that the 304th and 325C Divisions did not attack because of the great weight of American firepower; in short, "the enemy was bombed out of the hills," as one officer explained. This view is held by some Marine officers who fought at Khe Sanh and some senior Air Force officers who claim credit for their service's expertise and efficiency. Officially, and publicly, this view has been expounded by ~~senior~~ officers at the senior American headquarters in Saigon and by high-ranking American officials in Washington.

Their evidence: descriptions by some NVA prisoners, defectors and documents of the impact of American firepower.

Khe Sanh—8

The second school, more subtle, controversial and less publicized, maintains that the whole Khe Sanh affair in early 1968—although the Communists did pose a real and serious threat—was primarily a divi diversion; specifically, that Khe Sanh was the diversionary effort which allowed Communists troops in the northern provinces to charge into Hue and towards Quang Tri city; and more generally, that Khe Sanh was a symbol of the Communist border strategy, which sought to divert Allied command attention there, while, in fact, the Communists shifted their military effort into the populated heartland of government areas. Their evidence: captured prisoners and documents indicated at least two regiments from the suspected Communist divisions around Khe Sanh were actually fighting in Hue in February—rather than laying siege to Khe Sanh. These two schools of thought will be discussed in detail in subs the following two articles.

The third main point is the "battle of Khe Sanh" may bx still be evolving. There is still significant and regular contact around the base camp; there are still eight to ten Communist battalions—roughly the equivalent of an infantry division—around Khe Sanh. The Communists are known to be reinforcing the area, particularly on the Laotian flank, and are believed to have sent in at least one new regiment of the 308th Division. More sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons have been spotted in the area. The Communist artillery located in Laos, that continually pounded Khe Sanh during the se siege, is still there—and still pump pumping several hundred rounds a week into the base camp that now houses only 2000 Marines.

But, Khe Sanh has changed. The ~~siege is a~~ state of siege has been broken for the time being. The Marines are on the offensive. In effect, Khe Sanh has come full circle, becoming again a small operating base from which infantry battalions patrol the hills and attempt to keep open the only road, Route 9. This was the role of Khe Sanh in 1967, --before its siege days. Khe Sanh is no longer dependent on aircsupply--in fact, supply aircraft are rarely welcomed at Khe Sanh because they draw enemy fire--but significant ambushes of supply convoys and patrols occur along Route 9, where Marine units are positioned at 18 bridges and culverts to keep the road open.

Can there be another Khe Sanh? siege? Even those senior sources who believe in the tremendous deterrance of American firepower say yes. "The NVA are still around Khe Sanh and they're operating in multi- multi-battalion force," General Tompkins explained. Or as another informed source explained: "There can be another Khe Sanh (siege) anywhere along the DMZ. Con Thien could become one. It could happen anywhere if the Communists want to spend the manpower."

But, the Marines would probably use different tactics. They might be more will to consider withdrawing from another base operating base, rather than becoming besieged. When Indicative of this thinking was the decision high-level decision to destroy Khe Sanh when the siege was officially lifted on April 1. Khe Key officers knowledgeable in the lay out of the camp and skilled in demolitions were sent into Khe Sa the base camp "to blow Khe Sanh off the map," as one explained. But, at the last moment, with the Paris peace talks shaping up, the decision was rescinded because it "wasn't the right political moment to relinquish terrain," one source said.