

# All Eyes on Khe Sanh

By John T. Correll

**T**he forward combat base at Khe Sanh in January 1968 was rough and temporary, a fortified sprawl of trenches and sandbag bunkers with a concertina wire perimeter and an airstrip running down the back side.

It was in a mountain valley in a remote corner of South Vietnam, just below the Demilitarized Zone and eight miles from the Laos border.

The principal garrison was four US Marine Corps battalions, there at the insistence of Military Assistance Command Vietnam. The marines had been at Khe Sanh in varying strength since 1966, but they did not share MACV's assessment of its importance.

"When you're at Khe Sanh, you're not really anywhere," said Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Lowell E. English in 1966. "It's far away from everything. You could lose it and you haven't lost a damn thing."

The main advocate for holding Khe Sanh was Gen. William C. Westmore-

land, MACV commander, who persuaded President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Joint Chiefs of Staff of its value. Westmoreland believed in the importance of Khe Sanh, but he was also using the marines as bait to lure the North Vietnamese into a decisive set-piece battle.

Such a battle seemed in prospect Jan. 21 when the North Vietnamese Army attacked Khe Sanh. It was the precursor of the Tet offensive and the concurrent strikes on more than 100 population centers and military installations all over South Vietnam.

For the next 77 days, Khe Sanh held the attention of the world as the longest battle of the Vietnam War unfolded there. No event during Tet stimulated more news coverage. Khe Sanh was the subject of fully 25 percent of all Vietnam film reports on network TV evening news in February and March.

Johnson kept a scale model of Khe Sanh in the White House situation room. "The

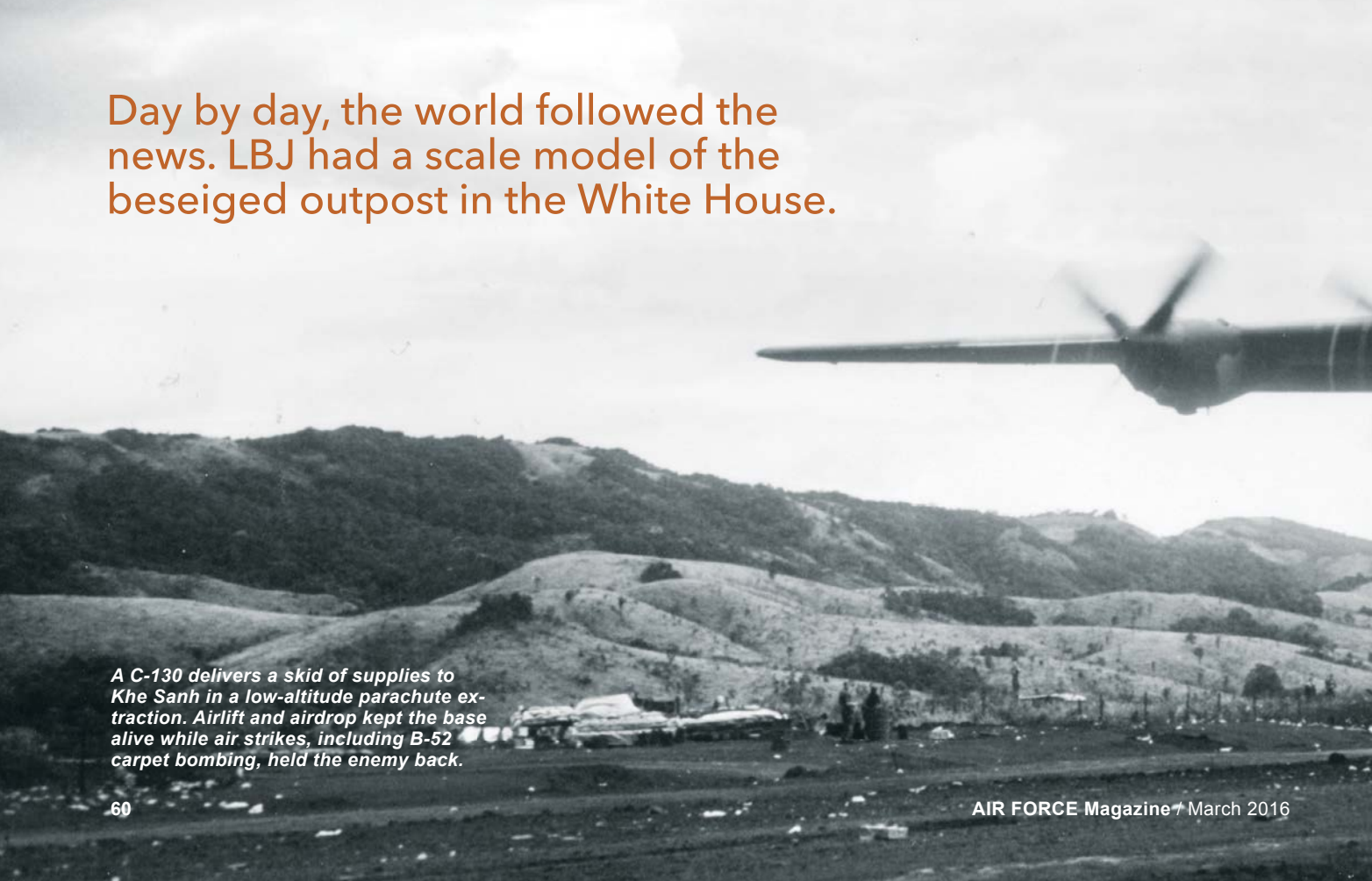
eyes of the nation and the eyes of the entire world—the eyes of all of history itself—are on that little, brave band of defenders who hold the pass at Khe Sanh," he said.

Khe Sanh was surrounded. The only way in or out was by air. The garrison was sustained through the siege by airlift and airdrop and the NVA—which outnumbered the marines by more than four to one—came under devastating counterattack by air strikes, including carpet bombing by Air Force B-52s.

On Feb. 9, the *New York Times* reported, "High military officials said yesterday that the United States was prepared to defend Khe Sanh at all costs."

Khe Sanh not only held; it was also a resounding defeat for the North Vietnamese. They failed to take the base and sustained far greater casualties than they inflicted. However, the tactical US victory occurred in the context of the strategic calamity of Tet when US commitment to the Vietnam War disintegrated.

Day by day, the world followed the news. LBJ had a scale model of the besieged outpost in the White House.



A C-130 delivers a skid of supplies to Khe Sanh in a low-altitude parachute extraction. Airlift and airdrop kept the base alive while air strikes, including B-52 carpet bombing, held the enemy back.

*Khe Sanh was the Newsweek cover story on March 18. The siege generated more press coverage in the United States than any other aspect of the Tet offensive.*

By March, Johnson had dropped his candidacy for reelection, halted the bombing of North Vietnam, and opened negotiations to seek a peaceful settlement to the war. By summer, the United States had abandoned Khe Sanh, redeployed the forces, and closed the base.

In an interview 20 years later, Westmoreland was asked which of his decisions he was proudest. "The decision to hold Khe Sanh," he said.

#### GIAP AND HIS LEGEND

Everybody on the US side—including Westmoreland—was certain that Khe Sanh and Tet were the handiwork of North Vietnam's great military hero, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, and that he was attempting to repeat his famous victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu. He was reported to be present at Khe Sanh, personally directing the battle.

In fact, Giap had been shunted aside. He opposed the Tet strategy and was not



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even in Vietnam when the operation began. He returned in February 1968 from his self-imposed exile in eastern Europe but remained on the sidelines.

The driving force behind the Tet offensive was Le Duan, first secretary of the Vietnamese Communist party, who had managed to marginalize both Giap and the aging North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. He recruited Gen. Van Tien Dung to implement his strategy.

Le Duan's plan was called GO-GU (General Offensive-General Uprising) and anticipated that dramatic large-scale attacks would spark a mass uprising to overthrow the South Vietnamese regime in Saigon. It supplanted the strategy of Ho and Giap, which emphasized a protracted struggle.

"It remains unclear whether Hanoi intended Khe Sanh as a diversion to pave the way for Tet, or if the countrywide attacks were supposed to preoccupy the allies while Khe Sanh was overrun," said Vietnam War historian John Prados.

Westmoreland himself was in no doubt. "I believed then, and I continue to believe that the 'General Uprising' was in reality a feint, a secondary attack," he said in 1993. Westmoreland was aware of Giap's stated opposition to the plan but in his memoirs dismissed it as "camouflage, a planned deception."

Khe Sanh was compared constantly to Dien Bien Phu. "As the enemy build-up at Khe Sanh developed, almost every mail from the United States brought me letters warning that I was inviting another Dien Bien Phu and urging me to abandon Khe Sanh," Westmoreland said.

There were definite similarities. In 1954, the Viet Minh army commanded by Giap laid siege for 56 days to Dien Bien Phu, a French army outpost in a remote mountain valley. Land access was cut off and Giap's artillery bombarded the base relentlessly.

However, there were differences. Whereas Giap controlled the hills at Dien Bien Phu, the marines occupied the key hills around Khe Sanh. The biggest difference was airpower: airlift, airdrop, close air support, and heavy bombing.

At Dien Bien Phu, Giap's artillery closed the airstrip. At Khe Sanh, airplanes and helicopters continued to land during the siege. French bombers did little damage in 1954, but the air strikes at Khe Sanh, especially those by the B-52s, were enormously effective.

### THE FOGGY MOUNTAIN TOP

Khe Sanh was supposed to be the far western end of the "McNamara Line," a string of strong points and barriers across Vietnam below the DMZ ordered by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in 1966. The project was never completed.

The marines went to Khe Sanh in October 1966 and increased their presence during a series of attacks and challenges in 1967. There had been no land access to the base since August 1967 when the North Vietnamese cut National Route 9, a glorified name for the one-lane dirt road that ran through Khe Sanh village. A side road branched off toward the combat base.

The base was situated on a plateau, about four miles wide, with rugged mountains and densely vegetated jungle on all sides. The sole source of drinking water was a

stream that ran parallel with the perimeter, but was about 150 yards outside.

At the beginning of 1968, the main complement at the combat base was four Marine battalions that also occupied five hills—designated by their height in meters—to the north and west. The Long Vei Special Forces camp, several miles away, was defended by four companies of Montagnard irregulars and 24 US Army advisors.

In addition, the Special Forces and a battalion of South Vietnamese rangers had their own compound, FOB-3, along the south side of the main base and were further deployed around the eastern end. The marines distrusted indigenous forces and would not allow the Vietnamese inside their lines. The Special Forces were not particularly welcome either.

Strength estimates for the battle and siege vary, but the matchup was about 7,000 defenders—6,000 marines plus the indigenous troops—against a North Vietnamese Army attacking force of some 30,000.

The airstrip, built by the Seabees, was 3,895 feet long and made of pierced steel planking. The runway overshot the base perimeter on the eastern end by 150 yards, with machine guns covering the exposed extension.

Air Force twin-engine C-123 transports did not need the entire runway to land. They could turn off onto a parking ramp, but the four-engine C-130 turboprops had to go all the way to the end and taxi back, tracked by mortar shells all the way.

Nearby, a deep ravine dropped to lower elevations, forming a channel through

***Artillery bombardment was relentless, but the marines, in their trenches and fortified bunkers, took relatively few casualties. They responded effectively with their own artillery, armor, and rifle fire.***

USAF photo



which moist air rose, creating fog and mist. The sun seldom burned through until late morning, so the airfield was usually below minimum conditions for landing until then. Fog obscured the view again in the late afternoon.

The fog was a factor for artillery and mortar batteries as well, but spotters could see well enough to direct their barrages as soon as the overcast began to dissipate.

The Marines had heavy artillery at Khe Sanh, as well as five tanks they could move around for best advantage. There were marine guns on the hilltops, plus additional artillery support from Camp Carroll, 14 miles to the east but still within range.

## THE SIEGE BEGINS

The Battle of Khe Sanh began half an hour after midnight on Jan. 21, with a rocket and infantry assault on Hill 861, northwest of Khe Sanh. It was a limited action, easily thrown back, and a prelude to the main event, an attack on Khe Sanh combat base at 5:30 a.m.

The airstrip, bunkers, and trenches were hit by massive artillery, mortar, and rocket fire. "Within minutes of the opening salvo, enemy shells hit the base's ammunition supply point," the official Marine history of the battle said. "More than 1,500 tons of ammunition began exploding. At 1000, a large quantity of C-4 [plastic explosive] and other explosives went up with a tremendous blast, rocking the entire combat base."

The siege at Khe Sanh was already 10 days old when the Tet offensive opened on the night of Jan. 30-31, the beginning

of the Lunar New Year holiday. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong struck in locations from the DMZ in the north to the Mekong Delta in the south.

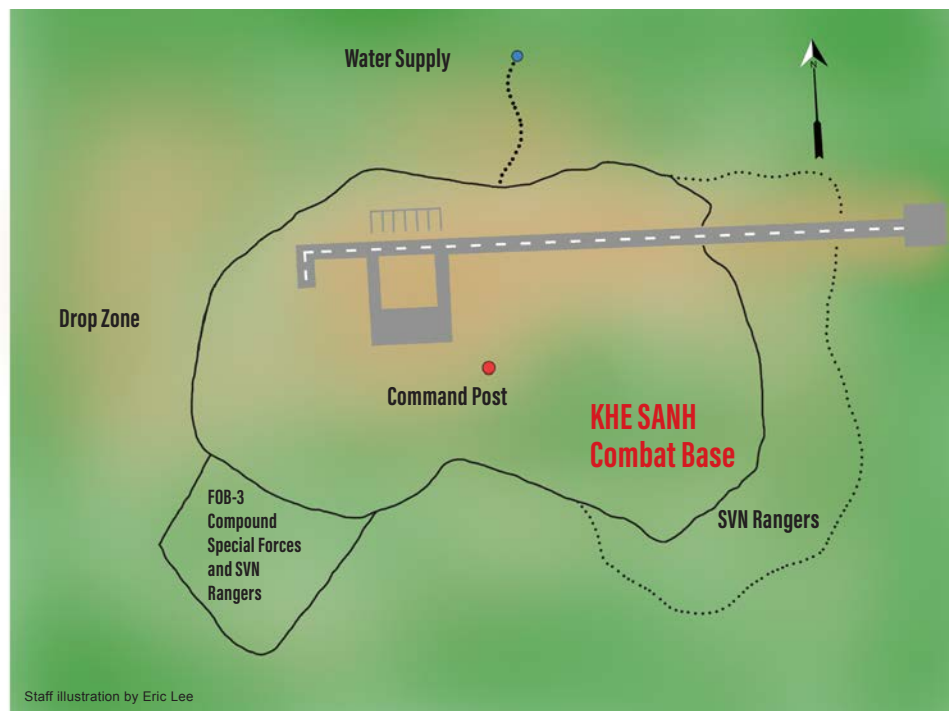
It undercut assurances by Westmoreland, given in a speech two months previously, that the enemy was "certainly losing" and that his hopes were "bankrupt." Further damage ensued when the *New York Times* reported that Westmoreland was asking for 206,000 more troops—in addition to the 510,000 he already had—and that tactical nuclear weapons had been considered for the defense of Khe Sanh.

Meanwhile, Westmoreland was having more trouble with the Marines. The independent-minded Marines were an uneasy fit in the joint command structure. In particular, they chafed under the control of Westmoreland and his staff who ran MACV with a near-total

Army perspective. MACV regarded the Marines as ill-suited for anything except "over-the-beach operations" and thought their defensive preparations at Khe Sanh were inadequate.

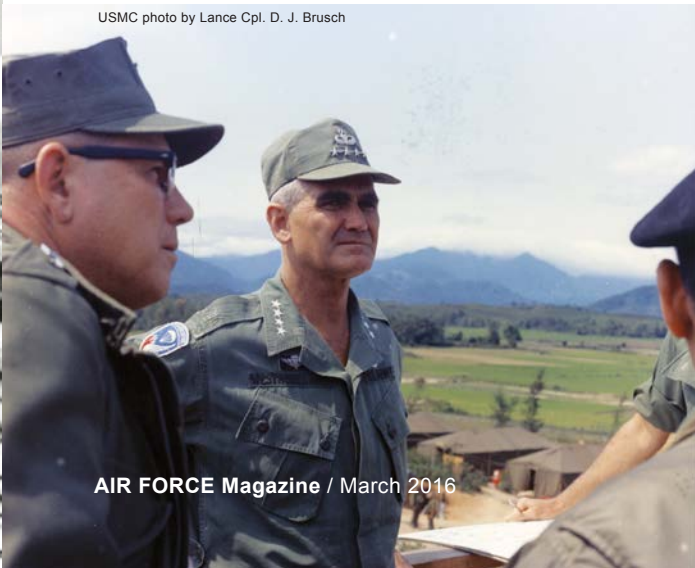
In later years, Westmoreland denied repeatedly that he had clashed with the marines, but shortly after Tet began, he sent a cable to Army Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, saying "the military professionalism of the Marines falls far short of the standards demanded by our armed forces."

Westmoreland lost confidence in them altogether after the fall of the Lang Vei Special Forces camp the night of Feb. 7. The NVA, using PT-76 Soviet tanks in battle for the first time, overran the camp, killing or wounding almost 300 of the 487 defenders. The contingency plan committed the marines at the combat base to reinforce Lang Vei if required.



**Below: The biggest champion of the stand at Khe Sanh was Westmoreland. Below right: National Security Advisor Walt Rostow (far right) briefs President Johnson (second from left) on developments at Khe Sanh, using a scale model.**

USMC photo by Lance Cpl. D. J. Brusch



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White House photo by Yoichi Okamoto





When called upon, they did not come, regarding the situation as too hazardous and the chances of success as too low.

On Feb. 9, Westmoreland established “MACV Forward” at Phu Bai, commanded by his deputy, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams Jr., in charge of both Army and Marine forces in the northern part of the country.

The Marines took it as “a slap in the face” and were not altogether mollified in March when MACV Forward was dissolved and its assets converted to form the Provisional Corps Vietnam, subordinate to the III Marine Amphibious Force.

The North Vietnamese scored one of their few triumphs of the battle Feb. 10 when they hit a Marine KC-130, laden with fuel for the base, on its final approach. It burst into flames as it rolled down the runway and exploded. The wreckage was pushed off to the side, where it became the standard backdrop for filmed television reports from Khe Sanh.

After that, C-130s were prohibited from landing. The C-123s, a poorer target because they used less runway, continued to come and go, but they carried only a third as much cargo as the C-130s.

Even so, more than half of the deliveries were made by parachute drop from an altitude of a few hundred feet. (By contrast, the French at Dien Bien Phu airdropped their deliveries from 10,000 feet and more than half of them fell into enemy hands.)

The drop zone at Khe Sanh was just beyond the western end of the runway, protected by a forward detachment of dug-in marines. A few bundles fell long or wide of the drop zone, but 99.5 percent fell within the boundaries and were recovered.

During the siege, Air Force airlifters flew 1,120 sorties over and into Khe Sanh, including regular landings to deliver passengers and bring out the wounded.

Operation Niagara—the concentrated effort to disrupt the NVA attack by airpower—began Jan. 22. Over the course of the siege, Air Force, Marine, and Navy tactical aircraft averaged 300 strike sorties a day, but the heavy damage was inflicted by the B-52s, which flew about 35 sorties a day.

Each three-ship cell of B-52s carpet-bombed a 1.2-mile strip, which created havoc among the besiegers. About 15,000 NVA and Viet Cong troops were killed, most of them by airpower. “The thing that broke their backs was basically the fire of the B-52s,” Westmoreland said.

The marines expressed their appreciation for the B-52 strikes but regarded airpower at Khe Sanh as a “supporting arm.”

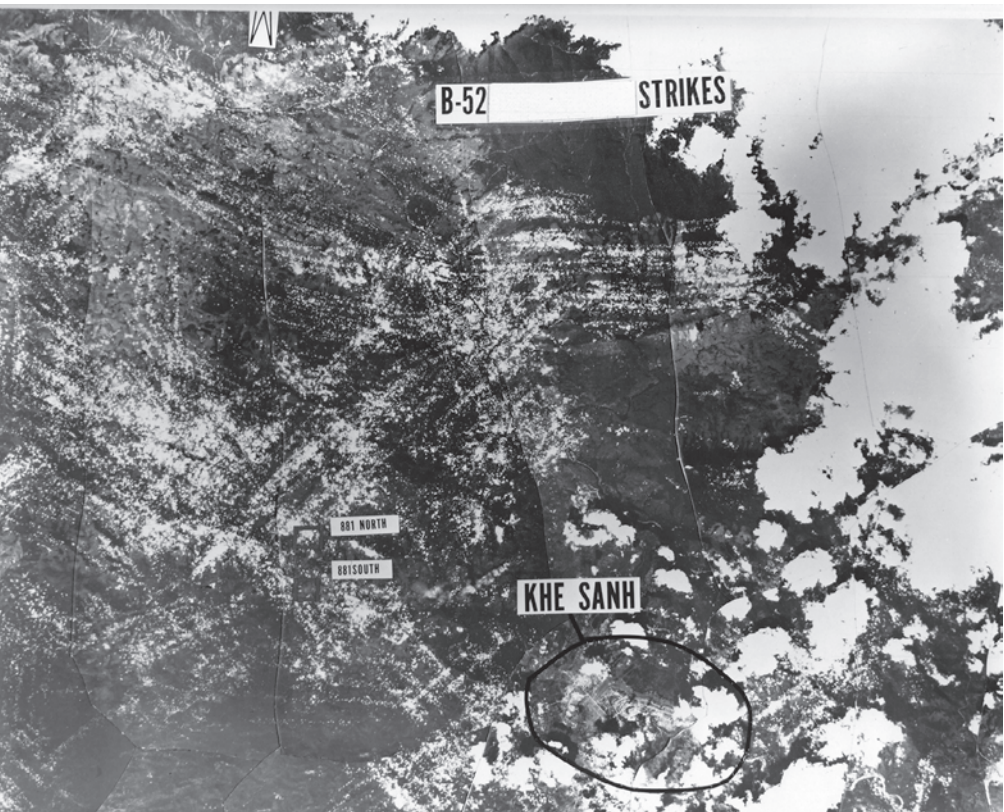
## 77 DAYS

“By the end of February, the Americans and the South Vietnamese had erected some 510 bunkers, dug miles of trenchline, and laid hundreds of minefields and trip flares,” said Marine Corps historian Capt. Moyers S. Shore II. “Each sector was guarded by a maze of double-apron, tanglefoot, and concertina barbed wire obstacles.”

The enemy shelling was constant. The worst day was Feb. 23, when 1,307 rounds landed on Khe Sanh combat base. According to *Detroit News* correspondent Robert Pisor, enemy rockets and shells left the camp looking like “a shanty slum.”

As the days passed, clutter accumulated and many accounts mention the proliferation of rats. There were rat-killing contests, and according to *Time* magazine, one sergeant killed 34 rats to establish a base record.

Sharpshooters and snipers were effective on both sides. NVA marksmen had rifles and scopes comparable to those of



**Nothing hurt the North Vietnamese attack force more than carpet bombing by Air Force B-52s. The stripes of white dots seen above aren't street lights—they are the damage from B-52 bomb runs.**

## THE “SUPPORTING ARM”

Airplanes and helicopters were the favorite targets of the North Vietnamese gunners, so they got in and out as quickly as they could.

“The aircraft landed in the assault configuration,” said Air Force Maj. Gen. Burl W. McLaughlin, commander of the MACV airlift division. “At touchdown, the loadmaster opened the ramp and door and upon reaching the offload area, pushed the pallets out while the aircraft continued taxiing slowly. Passengers scampered aboard the aircraft. Three minutes from touchdown to gear up was average; several times it took only 55 seconds.”

From then on, the C-130s made their deliveries by low-level extraction and parachute drop. With the Low-Altitude Parachute Extraction System (LAPES), the aircraft skimmed in a few feet above the runway, the cargo door open, and released a roller-mounted cargo pallet that was yanked out by a blossoming parachute.

LAPES worked fairly well, but the Ground Proximity Extraction System was better. The C-130 swooped in low, trailing a cable with a hook on the end. It snagged a cable stretched along the ground, efficiently pulling the cargo pallet out the door.



the Americans. When the marines picked off one especially accurate shooter, his replacement was inept, expending up to 30 rounds a day without hitting anyone. The marines had him spotted but let him alone lest he be replaced by a better shooter.

Incredibly, the NVA never made any attempt to interrupt or contaminate the water supply, which was outside the base perimeter. Nor was there any serious effort to destroy the radio relay site on a hill defended by a single Marine platoon.

Operation Pegasus, to re-establish ground contact with Khe Sanh, began April 1. It was spearheaded by the Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division with substantial participation from the 1st Marine Division and the South Vietnamese army. Within a week, the operation had reached the Khe Sanh plateau.

There is disagreement about when the siege officially ended, but April 7 is generally recognized as the 77th and final day. For their part, the marines refer to it testily as the "so-called siege," and are even more insistent that they were not rescued by the Operation Pegasus relief force.

## THE OUTPOST ABANDONED

Casualty estimates for Khe Sanh vary. A credible compilation by John Prados figures the overall allied loss, including collateral actions, indigenous forces, and the relief effort, at 730 dead, 2,642 wounded, and seven missing. The official casualty count says 205 of those were marines. Guesses at the NVA loss range from 10,000 to almost 30,000, with the most likely number somewhere around 15,000.

Negotiations with North Vietnam began in Paris May 10. The United States was clearly headed for the exits. Fighting continued sporadically around Khe Sanh, but what was left of the main NVA force had scattered. North Vietnam did not again try a major offensive until the Easter Invasion of 1972 when most of the US forces had gone home. That initiative was foiled as well, primarily by US airpower.

Westmoreland's senior Army and Marine officers told him it was time to abandon Khe Sanh. In his memoirs, Westmoreland says that, given the developing political situation, he "agreed in principle" but "decided to leave the decision on Khe Sanh to my successor."

He was going back to the United States to be Army Chief of Staff and refused

to approve the evacuation of the base on his watch.

Westmoreland left Vietnam June 11 and the next day, the new MACV commander, Creighton Abrams, ordered Khe Sanh's closure.

Nothing would be left for the enemy. Convoys of trucks hauled away supplies, materials, and equipment. Work parties destroyed 800 bunkers and three miles of concertina wire. Sandbags were slit and spilled. The Seabees ripped up the runway. Vehicle hulks that could not be salvaged were cut up with torches and bulldozed

of battle and Khe Sanh has reverted to obscurity. Sometimes, American veterans endure the long bus ride from Hue or Da Nang to see it again.

There is a small museum where visitors can inspect a "restored" sandbag bunker and a trench. Displays include the wreckage of two American helicopters, a 155 mm howitzer, and the hulk of a tank. The museum caretakers do not disclose that the wreckage was brought in from elsewhere and that they filled the sandbags themselves. Souvenir sellers offer US dog tags and

Photo by Sgt. Jim M. Reed, USMC



**Aerial view of the west end of Khe Sanh taken by a helicopter squadron HMM-364 member on a supply flight to the base during the siege.**

into trenches. The ground was dusted with tear gas to discourage scavengers. Khe Sanh combat base was closed July 5 with evacuation completed July 6.

Of all of the retrospectives, none were more upbeat than Westmoreland's. "Khe Sanh will stand in history, I am convinced, as a classic example of how to defeat a numerically superior besieging force by coordinated application of firepower," he said in his memoirs.

With the passage of almost half a century, vegetation has grown over the scars

other "artifacts," most of them "recently forged by industrious villagers," according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

A vertical slab marker declares that during the battle, the NVA killed 112,000 enemy troops and shot down 197 US airplanes in driving the Americans from Khe Sanh in what amounted to "another Dien Bien Phu" for the United States.

Fifty years after it all happened, much about the history of the stand at Khe Sanh depends on who is telling the story. ✪

*John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent articles, "The Lost Art of Naming Operations" and "Command and Control Evolution," appeared in the February issue.*