

AIR CAVALRY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OPERATION PEGASUS

© 2012, by Colonel [Joseph E. Abodeely](#), USA (Ret)

AIR CAVALRY

Air cavalry as a concept was innovative. As executed by air cavalry units, it was phenomenal. The 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam was the quintessential air cavalry organization which operated effectively using traditional principles of cavalry, but the mode of transportation was helicopters instead of horses.¹ **Air cavalry was light infantry deployed by helicopters.** In order to better understand the concept of air cavalry and its potential for the future, it is important to fully understand US Army basic fighting doctrine and the mission of the infantry. The US Army's basic fighting doctrine since the early 1980s is called AirLand Battle which involves stronger Interservice integration.² The mission of the infantry is to close with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver to defeat or capture him, or to repel his assault by fire, close combat, and counterattack.³ Only close combat between ground forces gains the decision in battle. Infantry rifle forces (infantry, airborne, air assault, light, and ranger) have a key role in close combat situations.⁴

MANEUVER

The infantry must maneuver as part of its mission whether on foot, horse, vehicle, parachuting from an aircraft, or by helicopter. Maneuver is one of the nine principles of war. It places the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power. It is used to exploit successes, to preserve freedom of action, and to reduce vulnerability. It continually presents new problems for the enemy by rendering his actions ineffective, eventually leading to defeat. At all levels of war, successful application of maneuver requires agility of thought, plans, operations, and organizations. At the operational level, maneuver is the means by which the commander determines where and when to fight by setting the terms of battle, declining battle, or acting to take advantage of tactical actions.⁵

1ST CAVALRY DIVISION (AIRMOBILE)

¹ Shelby L. Stanton, *The 1st Cav in Vietnam: Anatomy of a Division* (Ballantine Publishing Group, 1987), p. 1.

² FM 100-5, Operations (June 1993), p. v.

³ FM 7-8, Rifle Platoon and Squad Doctrine (22 April 1992), para. 1-1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ FM 100-5, Operations, p. 2-4. 2-5.

The 1st Cavalry Division was the first “air cavalry” division in the Army. During the Vietnam War, the official mission of the 1st Air Cavalry Division was to provide reconnaissance for larger field force commands, participate in stability operations, and provide security and control over the population and resources in the assigned area. While airmobile operations used helicopters to fly over difficult terrain and maneuver behind enemy defenses to air assault into targeted objectives, the 1st Air Cav (as it was often called) was most successful in the traditional cavalry role. **The division excelled in missions to reconnoiter, screen, delay, and conduct raids over wide terrain.**⁶

AIR CAVALRY TACTICS AND EQUIPMENT

The “combat air assault” was the zenith of the attack phase of “air mobility”. Once the enemy was located and contact was made, air cavalry troops could be deployed by helicopters from less critical situations and could be quickly concentrated at the point of battle. Instant radio communications enabled commanders who were often in their “command and control” helicopters to monitor scout ship transmissions and to direct responsive air landings in the midst of the most fluid combat situations. As the infantrymen deployed from the helicopters with rifles and machineguns blazing, gunships patrolled overhead providing close-in covering fire with rockets and machineguns. Rapid helicopter airlift of howitzers and ordinance assured that infantry fighting for remote and isolated landing zones would have sustained artillery fire support. Enemy opposition was stunned and overwhelmed by this swiftly executed initial aerial onslaught—this gave the 1st Air Cav an immediate reputation for tactical success.⁷

The maneuverability of the 1st Air Cav was as a result of its helicopters assigned directly to the division. The UH series Iroquois helicopters, called “Hueys” by the light infantry (who called themselves “sky troopers”), provided the majority of the unit’s helicopter transport and gunship capability.⁸ The Hueys transported food, water, ammunition, personnel, and “medivaced” the wounded and dead. Prior to the Cobra AH-1 gunships, the Hueys were fitted with machineguns, Gatling guns, and 2.75 inch rocket pods. The gunships were ARA (aerial rocket artillery) for the infantry. When the Cobras replaced the Hueys as gunships, they often operated with OH-6 light observation helicopters (LOHs) in “hunter-killer” teams to search and destroy the enemy.

The airmobile division depended on the twin-rotor CH-47 Chinook—the principal Army air cargo transport helicopter—to airlift its essential artillery and heavier supplies to support the sky troopers wherever they went. The Chinooks could carry either 44 troops or ten thousand pounds of cargo. It was common for sky troopers to see Chinooks carry a 105 mm artillery piece or a sling load of supplies or a large rubber bladder containing fuel. The Chinook’s importance

⁶ Stanton, *The 1st Cav*, p. 46.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. p. 29

was stated in the division motto, “If you can’t carry it in a Chinook, you’re better off without it.”⁹

The Chinook is still in service in modern warfare. In Afghanistan, the Chinook can fly missions in the thin air at the altitudes of mission requirements where Blackhawk helicopters’ lift capability is more challenged. This is a technological challenge for the Army of the future.

AIR CAVALRY SUCCESS IN VIETNAM

The airmobile division entered combat in 1965 in the Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam’s western border against North Vietnamese Army regulars, and the “air cavalry” concept was first tested here. The campaign, which began on 27 October 1965, was called a series of operational code words (LONG BEACH, SILVER BAYONET, GREEN HOUSE), but became historically designated after the main Ia Drang Valley west of Plei Me.¹⁰

During a month of sustained action, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) sought out, located, and met regular NVA in combat and won some of the fiercest Vietnam battles. Helicopter-delivered infantry dominated the zone of operations, setting the future pace of wartime air mobility and validating the revolutionary role of aerial cavalry.¹¹

The Ia Drang Valley campaign was the first division size air assault victory, and suspected doctrinal truths about Airmobility operations were verified—they had to be characterized by careful planning and followed by deliberate, bold, and violent execution.

Although the division could helicopter troops throughout the battle zone, regardless of terrain restrictions, faster than any other organization in the Army, and decisively engage distant enemy units by vertical air assault, this flexible striking power placed a very high premium on thorough preparation and the availability of sufficient reserves.¹²

Despite the significant problems and high cost, the division’s Ia Drang Valley campaign prevented an initial NVA victory over the Special Forces Camp Plei Me and remains a magnificent military success.¹³ The Ia Drang campaign taught the 1st Air Cavalry many lessons which proved valuable in subsequent operations.

OTHER AIR CAVALRY SUCCESSES

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 50.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 64.

¹² Ibid. p. 64-65.

¹³ Ibid.

The 1st Cavalry continued to have successes in airmobile operations—the 1966 costal campaign of **sustained pursuit** (offensive action against a retreating enemy)¹⁴; the 1967 costal campaign of **clearing operations** (finding and destroying NVA/VC and implementing **pacification programs**)¹⁵; **cavalry screen** (protecting Saigon)¹⁶; **cavalry exploitation** (Cambodian invasion)¹⁷; and **cavalry raids** (Khe Sanh and A Shau)¹⁸. But the most dramatic success was at Khe Sanh.

WHAT HAPPENED TO AIR CAVALRY AND WHY

Interservice rivalry between the **Air Force** and the Army occurred at the inception of the concept of the air cavalry division. In the initial testing by the 11th Air Assault Division (Test), various aircraft were used. The Air Force was very displeased with the Army's use of the larger fixed-winged Caribou transport and Mohawk reconnaissance aircraft, which the division and the air transport brigade considered essential. Major General Harry Kinnard, who commanded the test air cavalry division, caused a major Interservice dispute between the Army and the Air Force when he attempted to put machine guns on the OV1 Mohawk, a high-performance aircraft designed to seek out and provide immediate intelligence on the enemy regardless of terrain or weather conditions. The Army gave up the division's twenty-four armed Mohawks and the CV2 Caribou transport planes. Ultimately, after successful testing and favorable recommendations, on 15 June 1965, Defense Secretary McNamara approved the incorporation of an airmobile division into the Army force structure with the designation of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).¹⁹

After Vietnam, the “threat” was the Soviet Army armored and mechanized divisions attacking across the Fulda Gap in Europe. The Army reorganized the 1st Cavalry as a triple capability (TRICAP) division in 1971, combining armor, airmobile, and air cavalry brigades. The TRICAP experiment became bogged down in **bureaucratic ineptitude**, and by August, 1980, the 1st Cavalry was transformed into a heavy armored division.²⁰ The post-Vietnam War curtailed airmobile capabilities—this was reflected in the 1976 edition of FM 100-5, *Operations*, and the concept of active defense. This doctrine emphasized “airpower thinking on close air

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 69.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 91.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 151.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 173.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 134.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 36.

²⁰ Kevin J. Dougherty, *The Evolution of Air Assault*, JFQ, (Summer 1999), p. 56.

support and anti-armor roles to the detriment of more flexible and independent applications”.²¹ Both the **Air Force** and the **armor branch of the Army** minimized the role of the concept of air cavalry. That was the demise of “air cavalry”. Aviation becoming a separate branch of the Army contributed to an attitude of independence rather than a sense of belonging to “air cavalry”.

Probably the most visceral Interservice rivalry has existed between the Army and the **Marines**. The Vietnam War was primarily a land war, and it was the U.S. Army that determined the operations, tactics, and most of the strategy employed in Vietnam. Its emphasis was on conventional operations committing ground forces to counter the perceived threat. The one big exception was the 1st Air Cavalry Division which brought a radically innovative dynamic dimension to warfare for all the reasons previously stated.

Senior Marine commanders placed less emphasis on search and destroy operations than did Army commanders because the Marines viewed large units of enemy forces as the secondary threat to the security of South Vietnam. They believed that the real target in Vietnam should not be the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army (NVA) but the Vietnamese people. Only with the support of the civilian population could the enemy operate in sufficiently close proximity to populated areas. By winning over the allegiance of the Vietnamese to the Government of Viet Nam (GVN), large enemy formations posed no threat if they could not operate in populated areas.²²

These senior Marine commanders either did not acknowledge or know that the **Army engaged in extensive pacification programs**. The Army had Mobile Advisory Teams (MATs) which were a key feature of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). CORDS was a counterinsurgency effort that had been initiated within MACV in late 1967 under General Westmoreland and involved “pacification”—increasing village security while at the same time promoting rural development and the improvement of living conditions in the villages.²³ The 1st Air Cavalry Division was also involved in the pacification program. In 1966, as part of its clearing operations in the coastal campaign, the 1st Air Cav began the campaign for military control of Binh Dinh Province’s coastal plains, narrow valleys, and rugged mountains. In 1967, the division emphasized pacification as part of clearing operations as MACV (Military Advisory Command Vietnam) wanted to eliminate the VC infrastructure and tax-collection system. President Johnson’s special ambassador for pacification believed that divisions could also provide security duty.²⁴ Thus, Marines’ assertions that the Army failed to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Peter Brush, "Uncommon Ground: Interservice Rivalry in I Corps", in *Vietnam*, Vol. 12, No. 3, October, 1999, pp. 22-28.

²³ Terry T. Turner, *Mobile Advisory Teams in Vietnam, On Point*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Spring 2011), p. 35

²⁴ Stanton, *The 1st Cav*, p. 91.

implement pacification programs are incorrect especially in light of some of the specific missions of the 1st Air Cav. In short, the Marine commanders' assessments were wrong.

But some **Marines' most egregious affront** aimed at the 1st Air Cavalry's operation to relieve Khe Sanh Combat Base are claims that OPERATION PEGASUS was unnecessary as they were **not under siege** or that OPERATION PEGASUS had **no significance**. The Marines' heroic defense of Khe Sanh does not justify ignoring or minimizing the brilliant planning and bold execution of the relief Khe Sanh by the 1st Air Cav. No other unit in Vietnam had the training, experience, equipment, tactics, and elan to accomplish that mission in only eight days. Perhaps hubris, Interservice rivalry, competition for funds, sheer ignorance, or the malaise from the Vietnam War caused the abolishment of the most successful Army division during the war.

KHE SANH AND AIR CAVALRY TACTICS IN OPERATION PEGASUS

The enemy's primary objective in the *Tet* offensive in early 1968 was to seize power in South Vietnam and cause the defection of major elements of the Vietnamese armed forces. The enemy apparently also expected to seize by military action large portions of the northern two provinces and to set up a "Liberation Government." Khe Sanh's seizure would have created a serious threat to US forces in the northern area and cleared the way for the enemy's advance to Quang Tri City and the heavily populated region. General Westmoreland stated, "There is also little doubt that the enemy hoped at Khe Sanh to obtain a climacteric victory such as he had done in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu in the expectation that this would produce a psychological shock and erode American morale."²⁵

Khe Sanh was located fifteen miles south of the Demilitarized Zone and about seven miles from the eastern frontier of Laos. The Khe Sanh base functioned primarily as a support facility for surveillance units watching the demilitarized zone and probing the outer reaches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in nearby Laos. Khe Sanh was in the center of four valley corridors leading through the mountains to the north and northwest of the base. To the south, Khe Sanh overlooked Highway Nine, the only east-west road in the Northern Province to join Laos and the coastal regions. A 3,900 foot aluminum mat runway which during favorable weather conditions could accommodate fixed-wing aircraft up to C-130 transports was a key feature at Khe Sanh.²⁶

In the first weeks of 1968 signs of an impending enemy attack at Khe Sanh continued to mount. As many as four North Vietnamese divisions were identified just north of the Demilitarized Zone. Two of these divisions, the 325th C and the 304th, were thought to be concentrated in the northwestern edge of Quang Tri Province with elements already in position in the hills surrounding Khe Sanh. There were also numerous indications that the enemy was

²⁵ John J. Tolson, *Airmobility, 1961-1971*, Vietnam Studies (Washington: Department of the Army, 1973, p. 165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

moving up many batteries of artillery in the southern half of the Demilitarized Zone as well as in areas close to the Laos border--all well within range of the Khe Sanh Combat Base.²⁷

Convinced that the enemy would strike a massive blow soon on Khe Sanh, the American command moved swiftly to strengthen its forces in the area. The 5th Marine Regiment was hastily redeployed from the Da Nang area north to the vicinity of Hue and the U. S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was displaced to the Northern provinces along with two brigades of the 101st Airborne Division. Beginning in mid-January, the combat base at Khe Sanh was consecutively reinforced by the 2d Battalion of the 26th Marines, the 1st Battalion of the 9th Marines, and finally the 37th South Vietnamese Ranger Battalion, bringing the troop level at the base to a little less than 6,000 men. Concurrent with the buildup of the allied forces in the vicinity of the Demilitarized Zone, B-52 bombers began to systematically pattern bomb suspected enemy locations near Khe Sanh and tactical fighter bombers stepped up attacks in North Vietnam's Southern panhandle. East of Khe Sanh, U. S. Army heavy artillery was assembled at the "Rock Pile" and at Camp Carroll to provide long range fire support to the Khe Sanh base on a quick reaction basis.²⁸

In the early morning hours of 21 January the enemy had made his long-awaited move against Khe Sanh. The main base was hit by withering artillery, rocket and mortar fire and probing efforts against outlying defensive positions to the north and northwest. South of the base the enemy attempted to overrun the villages of Khe Sanh and Huong Hoa, but were beaten back by Marine and South Vietnamese defenders. In this initial action, enemy fire destroyed virtually all of the base ammunition stock as well as a substantial portion of the fuel supplies. In addition, the all-important air strip was severely damaged forcing a temporary suspension of flights into the area.²⁹

From these beginnings, the battle lines at Khe Sanh were tightly drawn around the main base and its adjacent mountain strongholds. For the next 66 days world-wide attention would remain riveted on Khe Sanh where the enemy seemed to be challenging the United States to a set battle on a scale not attempted since the great communist victory at Dien Bien Phu.

LTG (then MG) Tolson, the 1st Cavalry Division commander, was tasked with defining and executing OPERATION PEGASUS, which had a three-fold mission: One, to relieve the Khe Sanh Combat Base; two, to open Highway Nine from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh; and, three, to destroy the enemy forces within the area of operations.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid. p.166.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 167.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 166.

Although Marines and ARVNs (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) augmented the airmobile division, it was the operational planning and maneuverability of the air cavalry that dominated the execution of the three-fold mission of PEGASUS. The following excerpts of OPERATION PEGASUS are taken from **LTG Tolson's report on Airmobility, 1961 to 1971**.

The basic concept of Operation PEGASUS was as follows: The 1st Marine Regiment with two battalions would launch a ground attack west toward Khe Sanh while the 3d Brigade would lead the 1st Cavalry air assault. On D+1 and D+2 all elements would continue to attack west toward Khe Sanh; and, on the following day, the 2d Brigade of the Cavalry would land three battalions southeast of Khe Sanh and attack northwest. The 26th Marine Regiment, which was holding Khe Sanh, would attack south to secure Hill 471. On D+4, the 1st Brigade would air assault just south of Khe Sanh and attack north. The following day the 3d Army of the Republic of Vietnam Airborne Task Force would air assault southwest of Khe Sanh and attack toward Lang Vei Special Forces Camp. Linkup was planned at the end of seven days.

It became evident during the planning that the construction of an airstrip in the vicinity of Ca Lu would be a key factor for the entire operation. This airstrip, which became known as landing zone STUD, had to be ready well before D-day (1 April 1968). Also, it was necessary to upgrade Highway Nine between the "Rock Pile" and Ca Lu to allow pre-stocking of supplies at landing zone STUD.

Having established a forward base of operations, the second key element to the success of this plan was the closely integrated reconnaissance and fire support effort of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry.

The Cavalry Squadron was almost the only means available to pinpoint enemy locations, antiaircraft positions, and strong points that the division would try to avoid in the initial assaults. The squadron was also responsible for the selection of critical landing zones. Their information proved to be timely and accurate.

During the initial surveillance efforts it became evident that the enemy had established positions designed to delay or stop any attempt to reinforce or relieve Khe Sanh. Positions were identified on key terrain features both north and south of Highway Nine. As part of the reconnaissance by fire, known or suspected enemy antiaircraft positions and troop concentrations were sought out and destroyed either by organic fire or tactical air. Landing zones were selected and preparations of the landing zones for future use were accomplished by tactical air using specially fused bombs and B-52 Arc Light strikes. During this phase of the operation, the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry developed targets for 632 sorties of tactical air, 49 sorties for the specially fused bombs, and twelve B-52 Arc Light strikes. The thoroughness of the battlefield preparation was demonstrated during the initial assaults of the 1st Cavalry Division, for no aircraft were lost due to antiaircraft fire or enemy artillery.

Certainly the enemy knew we were in the area. Our own reporters let the whole world know the situation as they saw it, and the arm-chair strategist could ponder the problem each evening in front of his color TV. However, the inherent capabilities of the airmobile division presented the enemy with a bewildering number of possible thrusts that he would have to counter, all the way to the Laotian border. Also, there would be a major diversionary attack in the vicinity of the DMZ on D-1. The initiative was ours.

At 0700 on 1 April 1968 the attack phase of Operation PEGASUS commenced as two battalions of the 1st Marine Regiment attacked west from Ca Lu along Highway Nine. The 11th Marine Engineers followed right on their heels. At the same time, the 3d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry was airlifted by Chinooks and Hueys into landing zone STUD in preparation for an air assault into two objective areas further west. Weather delayed the attack until 1300, when the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, air assaulted into landing zone MIKE located on prominent ground south of Highway Nine and well forward of the Marine attack. The 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry went into the same landing zone to expand and develop the position. The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry air assaulted into an area north of Highway Nine approximately opposite landing zone MIKE.

These two objectives had been chosen after careful reconnaissance by the Cavalry Squadron indicated no major enemy defenses. Though almost halfway to Khe Sanh, they were within range of supporting artillery. Both landing zones were secured and no significant enemy resistance was encountered. A battery of 105-mm howitzers was airlifted into each landing zone and 3d Brigade headquarters moved into the northern landing zone, landing zone CATES. Bad weather notwithstanding, everything was in place prior to darkness. The major accomplishment of D-day was the professional manner in which this tremendously complex operation, with all its split-second timing and coordination, had to be delayed several hours yet was completed as planned.

The bad weather of D-day was to haunt the 1st Cavalry throughout Operation PEGASUS. Seldom were airmobile moves feasible much before 1300. "Good weather" was considered to be any condition when the ceiling was above 500 feet and slant range visibility was more than a mile and a half. The bad weather further proved the soundness of establishing landing zone STUD as the springboard for the assaults. Troops, ammo and supplies could be assembled there ready to go whenever the weather to the west opened up.

On D + 1 (2 April), the 1st Marine Regiment continued its ground attack along the axis of Highway Nine. Two Marine companies made limited air assaults to support the Regiment's momentum. The 3d Brigade air assaulted the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry into a new position further to the west while the other two battalions improved their positions. The 2d Brigade moved into marshalling areas in preparation for air assaults the next day, if called upon.

Our initial thrusts had met less enemy resistance than expected. As a consequence, the 2d Brigade was thrown into the attack a day earlier than the original schedule with three battalions moving into two new areas south and west of our earlier landing zones.

They received enemy artillery during the assaults, but secured their objectives without serious difficulty. We now had six air cavalry battalions and supporting artillery deep in enemy territory.

I was anxious to get the 26th Marine Regiment out of their static defense position as soon as feasible; so, on D+3, I ordered the Marines to conduct a battalion-size attack south from Khe Sanh to seize Hill 471, a strategic piece of terrain affording a commanding view of the base. Following a heavy artillery preparation, the Marines successfully seized the hill.

On D+4 (5 April), the 2d Brigade continued its attack on the old French fort meeting heavy enemy resistance. Enemy troops attacked the Marines on Hill 471 but were gallantly repulsed. The tempo of this battle was one of the heaviest during the operation. Units of the 1st Brigade entered the operation with the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, air assaulting into landing zone SNAPPER, due south of Khe Sanh and overlooking Highway Nine. The circle began to close around the enemy.

On D+5 (6 April), the 1st Marine Regiment continued its operations on the high ground north and south of Highway Nine, moving to the west toward Khe Sanh. The heaviest contact on that date occurred in the 3d Brigade's area of operation as the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry continued its drive west on Highway Nine. Enemy blocking along the highway offered stubborn resistance. In a day-long battle which ended when the enemy summarily abandoned his position and fled, the battalion had accounted for 83 enemy killed, one prisoner of war captured, and 121 individual and ten crew-served weapons captured. The troops of the 1st Cavalry Division were airlifted to Hill 471 relieving the Marines at this position. This was the first relief of the defenders of Khe Sanh. Two companies of troopers remained on the hill while two other companies initiated an attack to the south toward the Khe Sanh Hamlet.

The 1st Cavalry forces on landing zone SNAPPER were attacked by an enemy force utilizing mortars, hand grenades, and rocket launchers. The attack was a disaster for the enemy and twenty were killed. At 1320, the 84th Company of the Vietnamese 8th Airborne Battalion was airlifted by 1st Cavalry Division aircraft into the Khe Sanh Combat Base and linked up with elements of the 37th Ranger Battalion. The lift was conducted without incident and was marked as the official link-up in forces at Khe Sanh.

On 7 April the South Vietnamese III Airborne Task Force air assaulted three battalions into positions north of the road and east of Khe Sanh to block escape routes toward the Laotian border. Fighting throughout the area was sporadic as the enemy attempted to withdraw. American and South Vietnamese units began picking up significant quantities

of abandoned weapons and equipment. The old French fort which was the last known enemy strong point around Khe Sanh was completely secured.

At 0800 on 8 April the relief of Khe Sanh was effected and the 1st Cavalry Division became the new landlord. The 3d Brigade airlifted its command post into Khe Sanh and assumed the mission of securing the area. This was accomplished after the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry successfully cleared Highway Nine to the base and effected linkup with the 26th Marine Regiment. The 3d Brigade elements occupied high ground to the east and northeast of the base with no enemy contact. At this time it became increasingly evident, through lack of contact and the large amounts of new equipment being found indiscriminately abandoned on the battlefield, that the enemy had fled the area rather than face certain defeat. He was totally confused by the swift, bold, many-pronged attacks. Operations continued to the west.

On 9 April all 1st Marine Regiment objectives had been secured and Highway Nine was repaired and secured with only scattered incidents of enemy sniper fires. Enemy mortar, rocket and artillery fire into Khe Sanh became increasingly sporadic.

On the following day the 1st Battalion of the 12th Cavalry, under the 1st Brigade seized the old Lang Vei Special Forces Camp four miles west of Khe Sanh against light enemy resistance.

Highway Nine into the Khe Sanh Combat Base was officially opened on 11 April after the Marine engineers had worked day and night to complete their task. In eleven days the engineers had reconstructed over fourteen kilometers of road, repaired or replaced nine bridges, and constructed seventeen bypasses. Numerous sections of the road had to be cleared of landslides and craters.

I had scheduled more than 38 additional operations to extend our control of the Khe Sanh area but, without warning, on the morning of 10 April I received orders to make plans to extract the Division as soon as possible to prepare for an assault into the A Shau Valley. Advance units started pulling out on the 11th. Limited operations continued until 15 April when Operation PEGASUS was officially terminated.

There was great potential for the continued air assault operations that were abruptly brought to close. The enemy was vulnerable; he was abandoning his equipment; and, he was completely disorganized. The decision to expedite our withdrawal immediately upon completing our primary mission-the relief of Khe Sanh Combat Base-was predicated on a long-range forecast which predicted April as the last possible time for air assault operations in the A Shau Valley before the heavy monsoon rains.³¹

³¹ Ibid. pp. 170-178.

SIGNIFICANCE OF OPERATION PEGASUS

The most important **cavalry raid** in Vietnam was the 1st Cavalry Division's attack to reach the isolated Marine fortress at Khe Sanh.³² A **“raid” can be defined as a rapid attack into enemy territory to carry out a specific mission.** Without the intention of holding terrain, the raiding force promptly withdraws when its mission is accomplished. The 1st Air Cav accomplished its three-fold mission in only eight days, stayed a few days longer for repair of Route 9, and then deployed on another major raid into the famous A Shau Valley.

LTG Tolson's description of OPERATION PEGASUS showed that detailed planning and aggressive maneuver and execution made the operation successful. He further commented how PEGASUS was a “classic example of airmobile operations”.

*Operation PEGASUS-LAM SON 207A from its inception to its final extraction from the area of operations will long stand as a classic example of airmobile operations. The operation dramatically illustrated the speed and effectiveness with which a large force can be employed in combat using airmobile tactics and techniques. The enemy's repeated failure to quickly comprehend the quick reaction time and capabilities of the 1st Cavalry Division led to his defeat, forced withdrawal, and eventual rout from the battlefield. The enemy was helpless and confused, suffered great losses of men and equipment, and failed in his mission to block and delay the relief of Khe Sanh.*³³

Further significance of Operation PEGASUS was that it involved all the services. This Interservice integration was prescient as the AirLand Battle doctrine was adopted in the early 1980s. Tolson wrote:

*No summation of Operation PEGASUS would be complete without mention of the great team effort of all the Services-Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force. The operation was an ideal example of the synchronization of massive B-52 strikes, tactical air support and artillery firepower with ground maneuver. The South Vietnamese troops gave a splendid performance. The fact that we were able to co-ordinate all of these operations in a single headquarters was a commander's dream. There was no question of command or who was calling the signals.*³⁴

THE ARMY OF THE FUTURE NEEDS AIR CAVALRY

Since Vietnam, some Army thinkers have recognized that “The integration of infantry mobility and target acquisition capability with the speed, agility, and firepower of helicopters is a

³² Stanton, *The 1st Cav*, p.133.

³³ Tolson, *Airmobility, 1961-1971*, p. 179.

³⁴ Ibid.

potent combination; but the current force structure does not realize that potential. Nor does it capture the helicopter's air cavalry possibilities.”³⁵

General James Gavin, who commanded the 82nd Airborne Division during World War II, wrote an article in 1954 advocating the use of helicopters with armed soldiers to conduct long-range reconnaissance, rapid advance, and avoid obstacles. He said the Army needed a “cavalry arm”. General Hamilton Howze, director of Army aviation, was ordered by Secretary of Defense, McNamara, to implement “Airmobility”.³⁶ The Howze Board did so.

The Army created the 1st Cavalry Division, which proved valuable in Vietnam; and in June, 1968, the Army began to convert the 101st Airborne Division to an airmobile configuration. The next month the 1st Cavalry was redesignated the 1st Air Cavalry Division; and the 101st Airborne Division became the 101st Air Cavalry Division. This designation was brief; and in August, the units were renamed the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile).³⁷ One can see this subtle transition from “air cavalry” to “airmobile” to “air assault” which is what the 101st Air Assault Division typifies today.

The 101st has been steadily refining air assault. In October 1974, it dropped the parenthetical title of “airmobile” in favor of “air assault” and accepted the implied doctrinal change. That doctrine sought to fuse manpower, weapons, and aerial transport with **cavalry doctrine** while **air assault** integrated attack, transport, and observation aircraft with the fighting elements of the division. They are different from each other. The 101st Air Assault Division maintains organic helicopter assets and ensures continuous availability of aviation assets to meet unique tactical requirements, but it is **NOT an air cavalry division**.³⁸

The Howze Board urged three kinds of brigade-sized **air cavalry formations** organized to fight from a mounted position and perform the **traditional role of cavalry in exploitation, pursuit, counterattack, delay, and flank protection**. Ongoing helicopter modernization programs make a genuine air cavalry role a promising prospect to incorporate in all divisions. In addition, if the light infantry division assumes the role filled by the 101st Air Assault Division, the latter could be transformed into a true air cavalry division.³⁹ Since the 101st Air Assault division never really assumed the role of a true “air cavalry” division, it would be preferable to create a new, true air cavalry division as was done with the 1st Air Cavalry Division for Vietnam.

³⁵ Kevin J. Dougherty, *The Evolution of Air Assault*, (Summer 1999), p.51.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 53.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 56.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 57.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 58.

CONCLUSIONS

The future US military will be smaller, more technologically oriented, and have swift moving forces to perform their missions. Defense Secretary Gates said:

*The strategic rationale for swift-moving expeditionary forces, be they Army or Marines, airborne infantry or special operations, is self-evident given the likelihood of counterterrorism, rapid reaction, disaster response, or stability or security force assistance missions. But in my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the President to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should “have his head examined,” as General MacArthur so delicately put it.*⁴⁰

President Obama announced to the nation that the military will be reshaped over time with an emphasis on countering terrorism, maintaining a nuclear deterrent, protecting the U.S. homeland, and "deterring and defeating aggression by any potential adversary".⁴¹

An air cavalry division, properly trained and equipped, is essential for such missions.

The key to success for future military missions will be intelligent innovation in tactics, technology, planning, specialized training, and bold, aggressive, and intelligent leadership. It is an attitude; it is a spirit--just as it was in the 1st Air Cavalry. It is the concept, the tactics, aviation, leadership, and the elan which makes “air cavalry”, whether executed by Army Rangers, Navy SEALs, or Marine or Air Force special operations forces. The largest successful cavalry raid (e.g., helicopter transport of armed personnel to kill or capture the enemy) in US history was the 1st Air Cav’s relief of Khe Sanh. The most recent notorious, successful “cavalry raid” was the helicopter transport of armed personnel to kill or capture Osama bin Laden.

Special operation forces have acquired some notoriety for having performed some high profile operations, but the Army force structure needs to be revised to become more flexible and relevant for potential threats anywhere. Maneuver Enhancement Brigades attempt to provide some flexibility, but they are not “air cavalry” brigades. Future military planning should consider “air cavalry” units (division, brigades, etc.) composed of specially trained and equipped organizations, not out of nostalgia, but out of a sense of what is best for America’s national security interests and what is most mission-oriented.

⁴⁰ Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, *Speech*, West Point, NY, (February 25, 2011).

⁴¹ President Barak Obama, *Speech*, Pentagon (January 5, 2012).

About the author:

Joseph E. Abodeely, Colonel, USA (Ret) served with the 2/7 Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry Division, in Operation Pegasus and Operation Delaware (incursion into a Shau Valley). After Vietnam, he practiced criminal law as a trial attorney over 40 years (15 years as a state prosecutor and 25 years as a defense attorney in state, federal, and military courts). He served in the Arizona National Guard and Army Reserve as a JAG officer (legal officer for the MP Operations Agency at the Pentagon). His military education includes National Defense University National Security Management Course), Air University War College Associate Seminar Program, JAG Legal Aspects of Terrorism Course and International Law Course. He has been the CEO of the Arizona Military Museum since 1980. His publications include *Divisive Barbarity or Global Civilization* (contributing author of “Collective Security”); *Vietnam* “Breaking the Siege at Khe Sanh” (October 2010); *Straight Talk with Joe* <joeabo.com>