

Khe Sanh Relief

By

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Introduction

This narrative is not about me, or about my platoon, or my division or the Marines at Khe Sanh—it's about all of those who honorably served their country and who risked their lives, limbs, and psyches for an ungrateful populace deceived with lies and misinformation by those with social, political, and personal agendas. Contrary to what Walter Cronkite said, the U.S. forces won the Tet Offensive of 1968, but his misrepresentations demoralized an entire nation. You know the rest of the story. Perhaps this account from General Tolson and from my diary and recollection will shed some light on at least one major, positive operation in Viet Nam. Remember Khe Sanh.

In 1968, I was an infantry Lieutenant with the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). The 1st Air Cav, as we called ourselves, was the only airmobile division and the first full Army Division deployed to Viet Nam. It was a new concept for the Army—deployment of light infantry troops, their artillery fire support, supplies, and equipment--primarily by helicopter. We had mobility and firepower that the other Army units simply did not have.

The following information is from LTG Tolson's "Airmobility 1961-1971" in Viet Nam Studies and from excerpts of a diary I kept and from my memory.

BACKGROUND

General Westmoreland and the Marines who manned Khe Sanh carried out a campaign to (1) block North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam by way of the Demilitarized Zone, that divided the two Vietnams and (2) build up a base area which would serve as a jumping off point for a proposed American advance (that was never authorized) into the panhandle region of Laos in order to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Located some fifteen miles south of the Demilitarized Zone and barely seven miles from the eastern frontier of Laos, the Khe Sanh base was almost completely surrounded by towering ridges and stood 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. The base itself was laid out on a flat laterite plateau. It was shaped somewhat like an irregular rectangle and covered an area approximately one mile long and one-half mile wide. A key feature of the base was a 3,900 foot aluminum mat runway which during favorable weather conditions could accommodate fixed-wing aircraft up to C-130 transports.

The North Vietnamese built up forces in the area to confront the Americans in order to tie

them down while their Tet Offensive in 1968 was carried out throughout South Vietnam in their ill-fated attempt to win the war with one knock-out punch. President Johnson and his advisors were terrified for weeks that the siege of Khe Sanh would be the prelude to a full-scale assault on the Marine Combat Base at Khe Sanh comparable to General Giap's 1954 Viet Minh victory over the French at a similar base at Dien Bien Phu. President Johnson had a table mockup of Khe Sanh and he obsessed over the fate of the firebase.

Although the feared full-scale assault never materialized, largely due to the extremely intensive American bombing of the NVA positions around Khe Sanh and its satellite bases, American casualties were high, the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei was overrun, and aerial resupply of the Combat Base was endangered by intense shelling which forced the Air Force to devise methods of dropping pallets with supplies from the cargo aircraft which were skimming the runway without landing.

In early 1968, Press correspondents dramatized the situation by repeatedly telling the public that Khe Sanh was likely to be a "very rough business with heartbreaking American casualties." The impending battle was viewed as a major test of strength between the U. S. and North Vietnam, with heavy political and psychological overtones. My parents sent me newspaper clippings about the Marines at Khe Sanh, and I thought that if there were a place on earth that was close to being HELL—it was Khe Sanh.

PLANNING OPERATION PEGASUS

On March 2, General Tolson, Commander of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) went to DA Nang to present his plan for the relief of Khe Sanh to General Cushman, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force. General Abrams, Deputy Commander, U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, also attended the briefing. The plan was approved in concept and provisional troop allocations were made.

The mission of Operation PEGASUS was three-fold: 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.

To accomplish the mission, the 1st Cavalry Division would be augmented by the following non-divisional units: 1st Marine Regiment, 26th Marine Regiment, III Army of the Republic of Vietnam Airborne Task Force, and the 37th Army of the Republic of Vietnam operational control.

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.

During the planning, it became evident that the construction of an airstrip in the vicinity of Ca Lu known as landing zone STUD had to be ready well before D-day (April 1, 1968). Also, it was necessary to upgrade Highway Nine between the "Rock Pile" and Ca Lu to allow prestocking of supplies at landing zone STUD.

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 and air, artillery, and B-52 Arc Light strikes. The 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry operated from landing zone STUD in gradually increasing concentric circles up to the Khe Sanh area, working all the time with air-cover from the 7th Air Force or the 1st Marine Air Wing. 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.

OPERATION PEGASUS

At 0700 on April 1, 1968 the attack phase of Operation PEGASUS commenced as two battalions of the 1st Marine Regiment attacked west from Ca Lu along Highway Nine. 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 also air assaulted into the same landing zone to expand and develop the position. My platoon was 2nd Platoon, D Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).

My diary entry:

Monday, April 1

0817 We are waiting to be picked up to go to LZ Ca Lu. From there we go to LZ Thor. Thor hasn't been decided definitely yet. The terrain there is thick and mountainous. We air assaulted to the top of this mountain. It is jungle and grassy. I jumped from the chopper and hurt my arm. At 2100 I could see bomb strikes off in the distance as the sky lit up and the ground shook.

The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry air assaulted into an area north of Highway Nine, approximately opposite landing zone MIKE still 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 bad weather notwithstanding, everything was in place prior to darkness.

The bad weather of D-day was to haunt the 1st Cavalry throughout Operation PEGASUS. Few airmobile moves were 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. Airmobile operations had their limitations.

On April 2, 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.

Tuesday, April 2

1000 The sun is out. We're on a high mountain top surrounded by a river on three sides. Today, D Company (mine) is to air assault to a new location to set up there. We just got a log (logistic) ship with food and water. It was nice sleeping last night.

My comment about the "nice sleeping" referred to the weather. Our sleeping gear was a poncho liner and maybe an air mattress, if a trooper wanted to carry it.

1720 D Company led the air assault to where we are now. My platoon led a ground movement. We found a sight for a 50 cal. anti-aircraft gun. Also some of my platoon found some ammo and grenades (NVA). How we are waiting to see where we'll set up. We're hot and tired.

We often did not carry our "butt packs", but our web gear, C-rations, fragmentation and smoke grenades, ammunition, M-16s, M-60s, M-79s, LAWs (light anti-tank weapons), PRC-25s (radios), and a 90 millimeter recoilless rifle weighted us down enough. Sometimes we wore our flak vests, but we avoided doing so whenever we could. My point man that day was a guy we called "Hippy". He was a lanky guy and had a peace symbol on his helmet, but he was an excellent point man—the first guy in order of movement as we moved through "Indian country". He found the sight and an NVA helmet and a bag of raw opium. The NVA used opium for medicinal purposes and perhaps to prepare themselves for sapper (suicide) attacks. I told Hippy to take the bag back to turn it in. I never checked to see if he did.

General Tolson ordered an acceleration of the tempo when the results of D-day attacks gave clear evidence that the enemy was unprepared. The initial thrusts met less enemy resistance than expected. There were now six air cavalry battalions and supporting artillery deep in enemy territory.

General Tolson wanted to get the 26th Marine Regiment out of their static defense position as soon as feasible; so, on April 3, he ordered Colonel Lownds to make 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 killing thirty of the enemy. On the same day, the 2d Brigade of the Cavalry Division assaulted one battalion into an old French fort south of Khe Sanh. Initial contact resulted in four enemy killed. The remaining uncommitted brigade was moved into marshalling areas.

Wednesday, April 3

0953 We are sitting in the jungle right now. 3rd Platoon hit some NVA a little while ago. They got one of their men KIA. The S-3 carried him back on his shoulders and then three of my men took the KIA to the rear. We're waiting for artillery to come in. There are huge bomb craters all around. I can hear the choppers circling the area now. There are trees, high grass, and ferns all around.

Our company was moving through dense jungle, and 3rd platoon was the point platoon on this advance. They made contact with the NVA, and we could hear the firefight up ahead of us through the jungle. The vegetation was thick and the soft, rich dirt had been upturned by the bomb explosions. The gigantic craters made great pre-dug foxholes. I recall that the person killed in action was a popular young NCO in his platoon. The story was that he went to retrieve an enemy RPD (light machinegun) and was killed. The S-3 (operations officer) brought him back and placed him on the ground near my position. Before he set the dead soldier down the body started regurgitating—the involuntary action of the body after death. I had never seen that before.

1808 We moved to this hill 242. NVA mortared us. We had 10 or 11 WIA. NVA have us surrounded now. One platoon from another company tried to bring us food and water but got pinned down. I hope we make it through the night. We dug in and made overhead cover.

Hill 242 was thick jungle not far from Route Nine. We set up a company-size perimeter, and because we wanted to get resupplies from log ships, we started clearing a LZ. We were in a combination of jungle and forest, so we had to clear trees. We wrapped “det cord” (detonation cord which burns at thousands of feet per second) around some of the smaller trees and blew them in two, but there were too many trees. We were unsuccessful in the LZ construction.

The NVA surrounded us in the jungle but apparently did not have the force or will to attack us directly. One of the other units took a mule (small flat-bed utility vehicle) and tried to bring us supplies along the road. They were ambushed—some KIA. We didn't get the food or water except for rain water we gathered on our ponchos.

We got mortared that day, and we made fortifications with trees and overhead cover. About 10 or 11 of my men got minor wounds from shrapnel, and they were extracted from our perimeter by a jungle penetrator—it's like a heavy plumb-bob dropped through heavy jungle canopy that a person can sit on and be lifted to the helicopter.

The platoon sergeant and I were checking our section of the perimeter when we heard that distinctive clank of the bolt of an AK-47 being pulled back from outside our perimeter. I yelled, "Get down"; and we pan-caked to the ground as the automatic weapons fire started chopping the leaves above which fell down on us. Prior to our mission to go to Khe Sanh, the platoon got two brand new M-60 machineguns for gunners. One young Black troop took great care of his M-60 as they could sometimes jam when you most needed them. When that AK opened up, the troop started pumping M-60 fire into the jungle in the area of the sound of the enemy fire, and that M-60 just kept spewing fire for what seemed like an inordinate amount of time and never jammed once. He probably saved my life.

Thursday, April 4

1540 Last night we received more mortar and artillery fire. We are now back at the guns.

My platoon had five PRC-25 radios. Some entire companies had only two, but I wanted my five radios. Two RTOs were near me constantly, and that night I heard the Company commander get on the radio and state that it appeared that there were artillery rounds which landed in our perimeter but did not explode. He said that they could be "duds" or chemical agents. I stayed awake all night thinking I might die from a nerve agent, but it didn't happen. We moved back to a position where the 105 howitzers had been brought in by Chinooks.

1800 I have my platoon in position on the perimeter. As we came back today we picked up a couple of the dead and wounded who tried to get us supplies yesterday. When we got back here we saw more dead and wounded. The 2nd Platoon leader of C Company was killed. One medivac chopper was shot up. The NVA here are dangerous. I don't like this area. I hope we all get out alive. I got a card from (an old girlfriend) today which cheered me up. We didn't have any food or water all day yesterday and for most of today. Everyone is tired.

After a while, I got almost numb to the idea that I was mortal and could be killed at any time. I had been scared before but always did my best to hide it as I was the platoon "leader". In my view, if anyone has ever been in real combat and he tells you he never was scared—he's a damned liar. My mind could keep me somewhat detached although I saw the dead and wounded, but when I saw the 2nd Platoon leader of C Company killed, I personalized this as I was the 2nd Platoon leader of D Company. It bothered me, and my sense of invincibility deteriorated.

On April 5, the 2d Brigade continued its attack on the old French fort meeting heavy enemy resistance. Enemy troops attacked the Marines on Hill 471, but the Marines repulsed the attack and killed 122 of the enemy. 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.

Friday, April 5

1550 I got the word today that our battalion may walk to Khe Sanh tomorrow. This could be disastrous. We've incurred a lot of dead and wounded since we've been here. I hope to God we make it alive. I've had a lot of close calls and I'm getting scared again. Everyone is scared of this area. The NVA are numerous and good fighters. We're digging in again for tonight.

1720 Jets keep circling this hill. There are a lot of choppers in the air. Artillery kept pounding the surrounding area also. I hope the NVA move out. They ambush a lot here.

On April 6, 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. In a day-long battle which ended when the enemy summarily abandoned his position and fled, the battalion had 83 NVA killed, one POW 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.

General Tolson was aware that heavy enemy artillery had been dug deeply into the rocks of the Co Roc Mountains in Laos just west of Lang Vei and as units neared Khe Sanh he was concerned that these 152-mm guns could bring 1st Cavalry landing zones under fire at any time. U.S. policy forbade crossing the border and the heaviest aerial bombs could not dislodge these positions. Tolson knew that they remained a threat throughout PEGASUS.

The 1st Cavalry forces on landing zone SNAPPER were attacked by an enemy force using 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.

Saturday, April 6

1400 Well, we tried to walk from this LZ to Khe Sanh, but we had to come back as the two forward companies received effective fire. Now our company is supposed to air assault to 500 meters east of Khe Sanh. This is a glory push to see who can be the first to walk into Khe Sanh. I hope we make it. We have many reporters with us.

One of the aspects of the mission of Operation PEGASUS was to clear Route Nine from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh. Although 1st Cavalry units relieved Marines at Hill 471 and airlifted Vietnamese Airborne into KSCB, Route Nine still had to be cleared. It was common practice for commanders to rotate personnel or units as point elements, and on this day it was other units' turn to be ahead of D Company. We were last in order of movement on this day, and we thought we got a break. But the forward companies made contact with the NVA, and we were ordered to reverse our movement to go back to the road to be picked up by chopper to leapfrog over the two companies in contact to continue the mission to clear Route Nine. Now, we were point element, again.

On April 7 the South Vietnamese III Airborne Task Force air assaulted three battalions into positions north of the road and east of Khe Sanh to block NVA 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.

Sunday, April 7

1045 We air assaulted to an open area on a mountain top and received light sniper fire. We found a complex (NVA) with rockets, mortars-tube and ammo-AK-47s, and all sorts of material. I have a sharp AK-47 which I hope to keep. We are to go to Khe Sanh.

We air assaulted near the top of a mountain that seemed to be solid rock. As we were moving toward the crest, I heard bullets whistle overhead and noticed that the ground had no cover and was just too hard to dig in if we had to. We just kept moving toward the crest. The point squad radioed that they saw bunkers as they approached, so I had the platoon get in a line formation so all firepower would be to the front. The lead squad got to the bunkers and said there were no NVA. My platoon and the rest of the company occupied this area at a location near the intersection of Route Nine and the road which lead to Lang Vei. It had been a regimental size NVA complex with all kinds of weapons—mortars, machineguns, anti-aircraft guns, ZPU-4, AKs, RPDs, RPKs, RPGs, and commo wire linking bunkers surrounding the whole area. One of my guys found an old French bugle and put parachute cord on it to make a tassel. I got an AK-47 and a NVA bayonet and ammo pouch as souvenirs. I still have the items except the AK.

The area was also pock-marked with bomb craters courtesy of the U.S. Air Force. We found dead NVA in bunkers with blood coming out of their ears. I am surmising the bombing was the result of Arc Lights. The jet-jocks can brag about how sexy their fighters are, but I love B-52s.

We were about two miles outside of Khe Sanh, and although this NVA bunker complex was abandoned—Route Nine to Khe Sanh still had to be cleared. My platoon was tasked to lead

the clearing action. We proceeded along the road, and I had my men straddle the road by 30 to 40 meters or so to act as flank security. We had to avoid the “toe poppers” (bomblets dropped by the Air Force), and we still did not know the status of the NVA. There were bunkers lining Route Nine all the way to the wire at Khe Sanh. We found “gook packs”, opium, weapons, etc.—but the NVA had vanished. We lead the movement to the Marine base and were ordered to stay outside the wire.

1700 We are at Khe Sanh camped outside the east entrance on Highway Nine.

At 0800 on April 8, 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 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry assumed the mission of securing the area. This was accomplished after the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry successfully cleared Highway Nine to the base and linked up with the 26th Marine Regiment. The 3d Brigade elements occupied high ground to the east and northeast of the base with no enemy contact.

Monday, April 8

1130 Today, D company was the first to walk into Khe Sanh on Highway Nine in two months. The Marines had been pinned in, but now they can move. My platoon was the first in. This place is bunkers and trenches. The in-coming artillery is deadly. I sent my AK-47 in with (one of my men) who I hope will take care of it for me. My men sent in their captured weapons yesterday, and they've been distributed out as trading material. This pisses me off, but I talked to the CO and maybe we can do something about it.

We all knew this was a big deal at the time because Khe Sanh was all over the press, and apparently a couple of guys from another platoon wanted a photo op. They shook hands through the wire, and I think I did, too, since I was there with my platoon. The next day my platoon was the first platoon to walk into Khe Sanh, and I blew the cavalry charge on the bugle. The Marine captain I reported to directed me to where my platoon was to provide security that night.

The *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* dated Monday, April 8, 1968 reported the event:

SAIGON (UPI)—Blowing “Charge!” on a captured Communist Bugle, American ground forces linked up with the long-surrounded Marine fort of Khe Sanh and then fanned out and killed at least 103 North Vietnamese in the hills on South Vietnam’s northern frontier, U.S. spokesmen said today...

At Khe Sanh, where round the clock Communist artillery fire had driven 6000 Marine defenders underground, the Leathernecks Sunday whooped it up as Army 1st Lt. Joe Abodeely’s unit walked the last two miles into the camp...

Abodeely, 24, of Tucson, Arizona and his platoon formed the 1st Air Cavalry spearhead of the 20,000-man Operation Pegasus drive that broke the Communist grip around Khe Sanh in a week-long drive that covered 12 miles of jungle, hills and minefields.

The lieutenant triumphantly blew on the bugle he found in a captured arms dump. Its notes echoed across the red dirt plateau. Abodeely's unit had landed by helicopter two miles from Khe Sanh and met no resistance the rest of the way. The helicopter leapfrog technique, plus a Marine road-clearing drive, formed the backbone of Pegasus...

CONCLUSION

The 1st Air Cavalry Division was truly an exceptional combat division. That is probably why it was called upon to break the 77 day long siege of Khe Sanh. It's nice that the press saw fit to put a Lieutenant's name as leading the operation, but I am not that unsophisticated or that arrogant as to not recognize that thousands of us made Operation Pegasus one of the positive high points in the Viet Nam war. Those Marines who defended Khe Sanh and fought their way out of the base, and those 1st Air Cav troopers who engaged the NVA and drove them away from Khe Sanh are the heroes of Khe Sanh.

General Tolson wrote on "Airmobility 1961-1971" in Viet Nam Studies:

...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.

Sun Tzu, a famous Chinese warlord 2500 years ago is reputed to have said:

Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.

And so it was.

In the end, the NVA was forced to withdraw and suffered tens of thousands of casualties. In a military sense, their campaign there was a failure. Yet, shortly afterwards, General Westmoreland was replaced by General Creighton Abrams who radically changed the American tactics in the war, and that summer, he decided to evacuate and dismantle Khe Sanh combat base where much American blood had been shed. This action was both ironic and iconic as it represented the frustrating nature of this war for the Americans who won every battle yet saw their South Vietnamese allies overrun and defeated in the end after America pulled out of Viet Nam.