

UNITED STATES ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL

Fort Benning, Georgia 31905

7 April 1972

THE BATTLE FOR KHE SANH: AN ANALYSIS OF
GENERAL WILLIAM C. WESTMORELAND'S DECISION IN
JANUARY 1968 TO REINFORCE AND DEFEND THE KHE SANH
COMBAT BASE (RESEARCH).

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview. On 30 January 1968, while North Vietnamese military forces throughout South Vietnam launched their TET Offensive to seize power in South Vietnam, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces surrounding the Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB) initiated offensive actions which they hoped would result in a climactic victory over the allied defenders of the base. During the ensuing 77-day "siege," one reinforced regiment of U.S. Marines, with the aid of massive combat and logistical support, defended the base and destroyed two crack NVA divisions. (7:VI-VII)

B. Scope. The period from 20 April 1967 (when a Marine regimental headquarters was established at the KSCB) until 8 April 1968 (when the relief force reached the KSCB) is the concern of this monograph. I shall review the offensive actions initiated by the North Vietnamese forces on and around the Khe Sanh Plateau during this period which influenced the decision to reinforce and defend the KSCB during the TET Offensive of 1968. I shall also review the combat resources available to General Westmoreland at the time of his decision to see how these resources influenced his decision. I shall review the results of the so-called "siege."

C. Objective. I shall examine the decision made by General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. Army, to reinforce and defend the KSCB to determine whether or not that decision was correct.

D. Method of Development. I shall develop this monograph using the chronological method.

II. BODY

The Khe Sanh Plateau, in Western Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam, has been described by the late Doctor Bernard B. Fall as the fulcrum for "two rice baskets on opposite ends of a carrying pole." The area has numerous hills and provides a natural infiltration route from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. Mountain trails are covered by tree canopies, bamboo thickets, and elephant grass. (7:6)

There are two main avenues of approach to this area. (Appendixes A and B) The first, the western access, follows Route 9 from the Laotian border, through Lang Vei to Khe Sanh. The second, the northwest access, follows a valley formed by the Rao Quan River running between Dong Tri Mountain and Hill 861. Dong Tri Mountain and Hills 881 North and South dominate these avenues of approach. In early 1967 less than a battalion of U.S. Marines and an Army Special Forces Team operated in this area. (7:8)

The KSCB was on a plateau south of Dong Tri Mountain. It had an airstrip which could accommodate helicopters and fixed-wing transport aircraft. The American and South Vietnamese units at the KSCB and its adjacent outposts were the only obstructions on the North Vietnamese invasion route into the two northern provinces of South Vietnam. Without the presence of allied forces on the plateau, the North Vietnamese could have outflanked the allied forces holding the line just south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Helicopter resources, troop strength, and logistical bases were not adequate at this time to adopt a mobile defense. Therefore, in April 1967, the troops at the KSCB maintained a relatively static defense. Control of the area was exercised through the use of patrols, artillery, and air interdiction, and occasional tactical operations to thwart enemy infiltration through the area. (8:1)

On 20 April 1967, the Khe Sanh area of operations became the responsibility of the 3d Marine Regiment which was conducting Operation PRAIRIE IV in that area. Four days later a patrol operating near Hill 861 prematurely triggered an elaborate NVA offensive. The North Vietnamese had planned an assault on the KSCB. This assault was part of a larger plan designed to capture Dong Ha, Quang Tri City, and ultimately Hue-Phu Bai. The North Vietnamese had deployed a regiment in the hills surrounding the KSCB. They planned to initiate attacks against the Marine fire-support bases south of the eastern DMZ, and against the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. Having isolated the combat base from its fire support and reinforcements, the plan was to mount a regimental-sized ground attack to seize the Khe Sanh airfield. (7:11)

Having discovered so large a North Vietnamese force near the combat base, the 3d Marine Regiment launched an attack into the surrounding hills. On 5 May 1967, the final objective was secured. The "Hill Fights" ended with the badly mauled 325C NVA Division retreating to avoid further contact with the Marines. The first major attempt by the NVA to take the KSCB had been thwarted. (7:16)

With the relief of pressure at Khe Sanh, Lieutenant General Walt (commanding general, III Marine Amphibious Force) began shifting forces from the KSCB to the coastal plains near Dong Ha to meet the anticipated NVA threat to capture Dong Ha. On 13 May 1967, the 26th Marine Regiment (minus two battalions) relieved the 3d Marine Regiment at the KSCB. (7:16)

During the summer and fall of 1967, the center of North Vietnamese activity shifted from Khe Sanh to the eastern DMZ area. The North Vietnamese deployed an estimated 37 battalions along the border between North and South Vietnam. This posed a genuine threat to the northern provinces of South Vietnam. (7:18)

Throughout this period, the preponderance of North Vietnamese artillery fires were directed at Con Thien, situated 10 miles northwest of Dong Ha. Action around Khe Sanh continued to be light. Although the 325C NVA Division was believed to be near the Khe Sanh Plateau, allied contact with NVA units was sporadic. (7:22)

On 17 August 1967, the airfield at the KSCB was closed for repairs. The original runway of dirt turned to mud during the monsoon weather. It was improved with rocks, asphalt, and matting. On 27 October 1967, the field was reopened. It was then capable of supporting aircraft throughout the monsoon season. This was to be a key factor in the success of the massive logistics effort which was to support the combat base in the early months of 1968. (7:26)

During December 1967, there was a surge of NVA unit activity around the KSCB. Reconnaissance teams reported large groups of North Vietnamese soldiers moving into the area. These forces were not passing through; they were staying. The hill outposts and the combat base itself were the targets of numerous small-unit attacks. (7:26)

As a result of this increase in activity, Lieutenant General Cushman (who had relieved Lieutenant General Walt) directed that the 3d Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment be transported by helicopter to Khe Sanh. On 13 December 1967, as the battalion moved to defensive positions on the hills surrounding the KSCB, the Marines turned up fresh foxholes, well-used trails, and caches which indicated that the North Vietnamese were moving into the area in force. (1:1)

All available intelligence pointed to a North Vietnamese offensive like the one in 1967, only on a much larger scale. NVA units which normally bypassed the KSCB were moving into the area and staying. Intelligence summaries from the III Marine Amphibious Force, and from 3d Marine Division, first showed the arrival of individual regiments, then a division headquarters, and finally a front headquarters indicating that at least two NVA divisions were operating in the area. It was known that the 325C NVA Division had moved back into the area near Hill 881 North and that the 304th NVA Division had taken up positions southwest of the base. The 304th NVA Division was an elite home guard from Hanoi which had been at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Additionally, one regiment of the 324th NVA Division was in the central DMZ 10-15 miles from Khe Sanh. The 320th NVA Division could quickly reinforce these units. Therefore, in January 1968, General Westmoreland and Lieutenant General Cushman faced the possibility that Khe Sanh could be attacked by three NVA divisions plus an NVA regiment. (3:1)

On 2 January 1968, a squad of Marines killed five North Vietnamese soldiers near the perimeter of the KSCB. The significance of their action was that all five were officers including an NVA regimental commander, an operations officer, and a communications officer. For the North Vietnamese to risk such key men to make a personal reconnaissance could only have meant that the KSCB was of prime importance to them. (7:30)

Lieutenant General Cushman subsequently ordered the 2d Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment to the KSCB. This brought the Marine strength at Khe Sanh and the surrounding hills on 16 January 1968, to one reinforced regiment. (7:31)

North Vietnamese ground assaults and artillery and rocket attacks on the KSCB and the surrounding hill outposts increased in number and ferocity between 16 and 21 January. Additionally, on 21 January, an NVA battalion attacked and partially overran Khe Sanh village. A Combined Action Company (CAC) and a South Vietnamese Regional Forces (RF) company repulsed this attack. A second attack that afternoon was also successfully countered. Due to the large number of North Vietnamese troops near Khe Sanh village, however, the CAC and RF companies were withdrawn to the relative safety of the combat base. (7:44)

As a result of these attacks, many people in the United States began to speak out against maintaining a garrison at Khe Sanh. They stated that the North Vietnamese had allowed the Marines to remain there because the installation had been ineffective as a deterrent to North Vietnamese infiltration. The understrength Marine regiment had not been able to man the combat base and the hill outposts as well as conduct the continuous large-unit sweeps needed to control the plateau. The North Vietnamese had simply bypassed the base and ignored it. An increase in forces at Khe Sanh, the critics argued, would give the North Vietnamese an opportunity to win a badly needed victory. They believed the KSCB and its outposts could not be supplied completely by aircraft. The critics feared that Khe Sanh would be for the Americans what Dien Bien Phu had been for the French. (7:45)

General Westmoreland discussed the situation with Lieutenant General Cushman. With the complete agreement of Lieutenant General Cushman, General Westmoreland decided to hold Khe Sanh. His reasons were several. First, the KSCB and its outposts commanded the Khe Sanh Plateau and the avenues of approach into eastern Quang Tri Province. Although the base had not been able to stop all infiltration by the North Vietnamese, it stood in the path of a main NVA invasion route. Large-scale airmobile operations could have achieved the same results, but in January 1968 the allies had neither the troops, helicopter resources, nor the logistical bases to support such operations. Additionally, the monsoon season precluded any such helicopter operations before March or April 1968. (2:1)

General Westmoreland had an additional reason for holding the KSCB. It provided him with a rare opportunity to engage NVA units in decisive combat. If the NVA divisions surrounding Khe Sanh could be fixed in place by the 26th Marine Regiment, allied aircraft and artillery could be brought to bear in defeating the North Vietnamese. Additionally, one regiment of Marines would be employed in a classic example of economy of force. Three NVA divisions plus one NVA regiment would be held in place, thereby denying their use elsewhere in South Vietnam. (8:2)

In his Report on the War in Vietnam, General Westmoreland made the following statement:

The question was whether we could afford the troops to reinforce, keep them supplied by air, and defeat an enemy far superior in numbers as we waited for the weather to clear, built forward bases, and made preparations for an overland relief expedition.

I believed we could do all of those things. With the concurrence of the III Marine Amphibious Force Commander, Lieutenant General (sic) Robert E. Cushman, Jr., I made the decision to reinforce and hold the area while destroying the enemy with our massive firepower and to prepare for offensive operations when the weather became favorable. (6:163)

Two additional battalions were subsequently directed to transfer to the control of the 26th Marine Regiment. These battalions were the 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, and the 37th Army of the Republic of Vietnam Ranger Battalion. Both of these units were in positions in and around the KSCB by 27 January 1968. (9:1)

On 30 January 1968, North Vietnamese military forces in South Vietnam launched their TET Offensive against 36 provincial capitals, 64 district capitals, and five autonomous cities. (6:168) Intelligence sources indicated that the North Vietnamese expected to seize the northern two provinces of South Vietnam and to set up a "liberation government." The unpopulated Khe Sanh Plateau, which commanded the avenues of approach from the NVA base camps in Laos into this area was a prime objective of the North Vietnamese. If they could control the plateau, they would have a clear path to advance on Quang Tri City and the heavily populated coastal region. (7:VI)

These indications were analyzed by General Westmoreland as additional reasons to hold the KSCB. He reasoned that the NVA divisions engaged at Khe Sanh would otherwise move into the towns and villages of the coastal region. Heavy fighting would then be necessary to defeat these forces with resultant destruction to the towns and villages and additional suffering for the civilian population. (7:VI)

Throughout February and early March, North Vietnamese activity around the KSCB consisted of frequent probing attacks and constant artillery, rocket, and mortar attacks. The extent of the North Vietnamese effort was depicted on 23 February when approximately 1300 artillery and mortar rounds of varied calibers impacted at the KSCB. (7:184) Of significance here is the fact the Marines occupied the hills which surrounded the combat base itself. As a result, the North Vietnamese were unable to subject the Americans at Khe Sanh to the direct artillery fires to which they had subjected the French at Dien Bien Phu. (7:57)

During February and March the North Vietnamese attacked with companies, battalions, and regiments in numerous attempts to defeat the Marines on the hill outposts and at the combat base itself. Each time they attacked, the Marines employed massive artillery and aircraft support to assist in defeating the NVA units. Over 100,000 tons of bombs and 150,000 artillery rounds were employed against the NVA positions. (7:145)

While the Marines were defeating the enemy in close combat, General Westmoreland insured that the NVA base camps received constant pounding by B-52 Stratofortresses which

carried a 27-ton payload of 500- and 750-pound bombs each. North Vietnamese troop concentrations, marshalling points, supply depots, and bunker sites were subjected to an average of eight such strikes every 24 hours. (7:102)

Aircraft were continuously available to attack North Vietnamese concentrations. During inclement weather, ground-controlled radar bombing was employed in attacking the North Vietnamese from the air despite poor visibility. (7:103) In total, over 21,000 fixed-wing tactical sorties were flown in support of the KSCB. (7:131)

In addition to massive artillery and aircraft support, the Marines at Khe Sanh were supported by a mammoth logistics effort. U.S. Air Force (USAF) planes and U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) helicopters delivered over 17,000 tons of cargo to the KSCB and its outposts. As a result, the defenders of KSCB had adequate supplies throughout the "siege." (7:79)

In early March, propaganda broadcasts of Radio Hanoi shifted from "We will crush Khe Sanh" to "Ho Chi Minh would be unhappy if we wasted our time on only 6,000 Marines." Radio Hanoi also stated that 20,000 North Vietnamese had "tied down" the 26th Marine Regiment. (7:126) The "siege" appeared to be close to an end.

In mid-March, mountain tribesmen began reporting that elements of the 325C NVA Division and 304th NVA Division were pulling out toward Laos. However, the North Vietnamese still retained sufficient forces near Khe Sanh to maintain pressure on the allied forces there. (7:126)

By the end of March, General Westmoreland had sufficient troops, helicopters, and logistical bases to launch an operation designed to relieve the KSCB, reopen Route 9 from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh, and destroy any NVA elements within the area of operation. (7:133) Operation PEGASUS, as it was called, commenced on 1 April 1968 and succeeded in relieving the 26th Marine Regiment at Khe Sanh on 8 April 1968. (7:137)

Cumulative allied casualties during the "siege" of the KSCB were 205 killed in action (KIA), 852 evacuated due to wounds, and 816 wounded but not evacuated. North Vietnamese dead were estimated between 10,000 and 15,000. Two crack NVA divisions had been destroyed at Khe Sanh. (7:131)

An editorial in the 9 June 1968, Washington Star made the following statement:

To be sure, Khe Sanh will be a subject of controversy for a long time, but this much about it is indisputable: It has won a large place in the history of the Vietnam War as an inspiring example of American and allied valor. One day, in fact, the victory over the siege may be judged a decisive turning point that finally convinced the enemy he could not win. (7:151)

III. ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

General Westmoreland's decision to reinforce and hold the KSCB was based on careful consideration of all factors bearing on the situation. His rationale for deciding to reinforce and hold rather than to withdraw can be analyzed in light of the Principles of War.

The fact that the KSCB stood in the path of major infiltration routes from North Vietnam and Laos into the northern provinces of South Vietnam was well known by General Westmoreland. The North Vietnamese had tried in earnest to control this area for over one year. They had failed in their first attempt to seize the KSCB in April 1967. Continued attacks throughout 1967 and early 1968 indicated that control of the Khe Sanh Plateau was still a major NVA objective. By denying them access to this region, General Westmoreland was upholding the principle of "objective." This principle was further upheld by his seizure of the opportunity to engage three NVA divisions plus one NVA regiment in decisive combat.

Realizing that large-scale airmobile operations could have achieved the same results, General Westmoreland was also keenly aware of his lack of adequate troops, helicopter resources, and logistical bases to conduct such an operation. In light of this, his decision to hold was in accord with the principle of "economy of force." Three divisions plus one regiment of North Vietnamese were to be held in place by one reinforced regiment of Marines.

The principle of "mass" was a cornerstone of General Westmoreland's plan to implement his decision. He employed massive air strikes and artillery fire against the North Vietnamese troops and installations surrounding the KSCB. In excess of 100,000 tons of bombs and 150,000 artillery rounds were employed against the NVA positions.

X The principles of "offensive" and "maneuver" were upheld by General Westmoreland's long-range plan to relieve the garrison at the KSCB and to employ airmobile forces to decisively engage the North Vietnamese. With this in mind, he maintained a static defense at Khe Sanh until April 1968 when he had the required resources to switch to a fast-moving offense.

General Westmoreland ensured that aircraft, artillery, and logistical support for the garrison were continuous and sufficient to sustain the defenders. His personal attention and direction to the allied forces were in keeping with the principle of "unity of command."

Of prime importance to the successful defense of the KSCB was the fact that the hills surrounding the combat base were controlled by the Marines. This adhered to the principle of "security" which the French had violated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

The war in Vietnam has been called a war for "the hearts and minds of the people." By engaging the North Vietnamese on the unpopulated Khe Sanh Plateau, General

Westmoreland precluded combat in the towns and cities of the coastal regions. Unnecessary suffering by the civilian population of ^{SOUTH} Vietnam was avoided.

At the time of his decision, General Westmoreland was accused of playing into the hands of the North Vietnamese. His critics stated that Khe Sanh would become for the Americans what Dien Bien Phu had been for the French. History has shown that this criticism was not correct.

Contrary to the predictions of many critics, the numerical superiority of the North Vietnamese was more than made up for by the intelligent use of American air and artillery fire support. Over 100,000 tons of bombs and 150,000 artillery rounds were delivered on the North Vietnamese during the "siege."

The ability to keep the KSCB and its outposts resupplied was a major factor in the successful completion of General Westmoreland's plan. The airlift was successful despite intense North Vietnamese antiaircraft fire and the monsoon weather. The 17,000 tons of supplies airlifted to the garrison provided the Marines with the ammunition and supplies needed to repulse each NVA attack.

General Westmoreland was successful in getting NVA units to stand and fight at Khe Sanh. The extremely lucrative target presented by the massed NVA divisions surrounding the KSCB allowed General Westmoreland to battle a heretofore elusive enemy. Conservative estimates have placed the ratio of NVA dead to allied dead at 50 to 1.

IV. EFFECTS

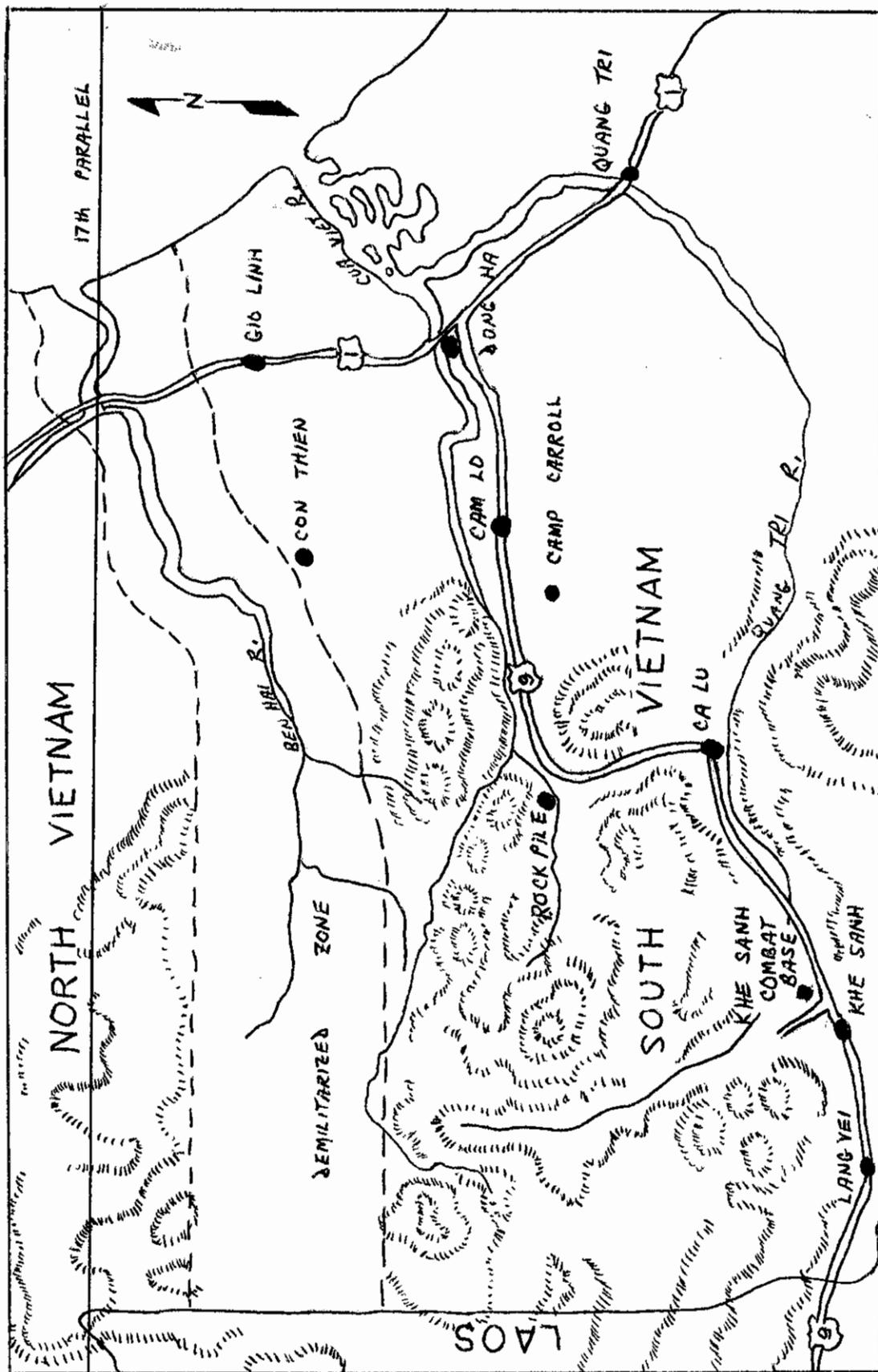
The North Vietnamese had been defeated in their first major attempt to seize the Khe Sanh Plateau in April 1967. NVA activities around the KSCB throughout the remainder of 1967 increased in tempo giving credence to the belief that they still considered the area a prime objective. By January 1968, when the North Vietnamese struck throughout South Vietnam in an attempt to gain control of the South Vietnamese government, there were three NVA divisions plus one NVA regiment surrounding the KSCB. General Westmoreland had to decide whether to reinforce and defend the KSCB or to withdraw.

I believe that General Westmoreland accurately considered the resources at his command and all factors bearing on the situation. He then made the correct decision to reinforce and defend. History has shown that this decision resulted in a major allied victory over the North Vietnamese.



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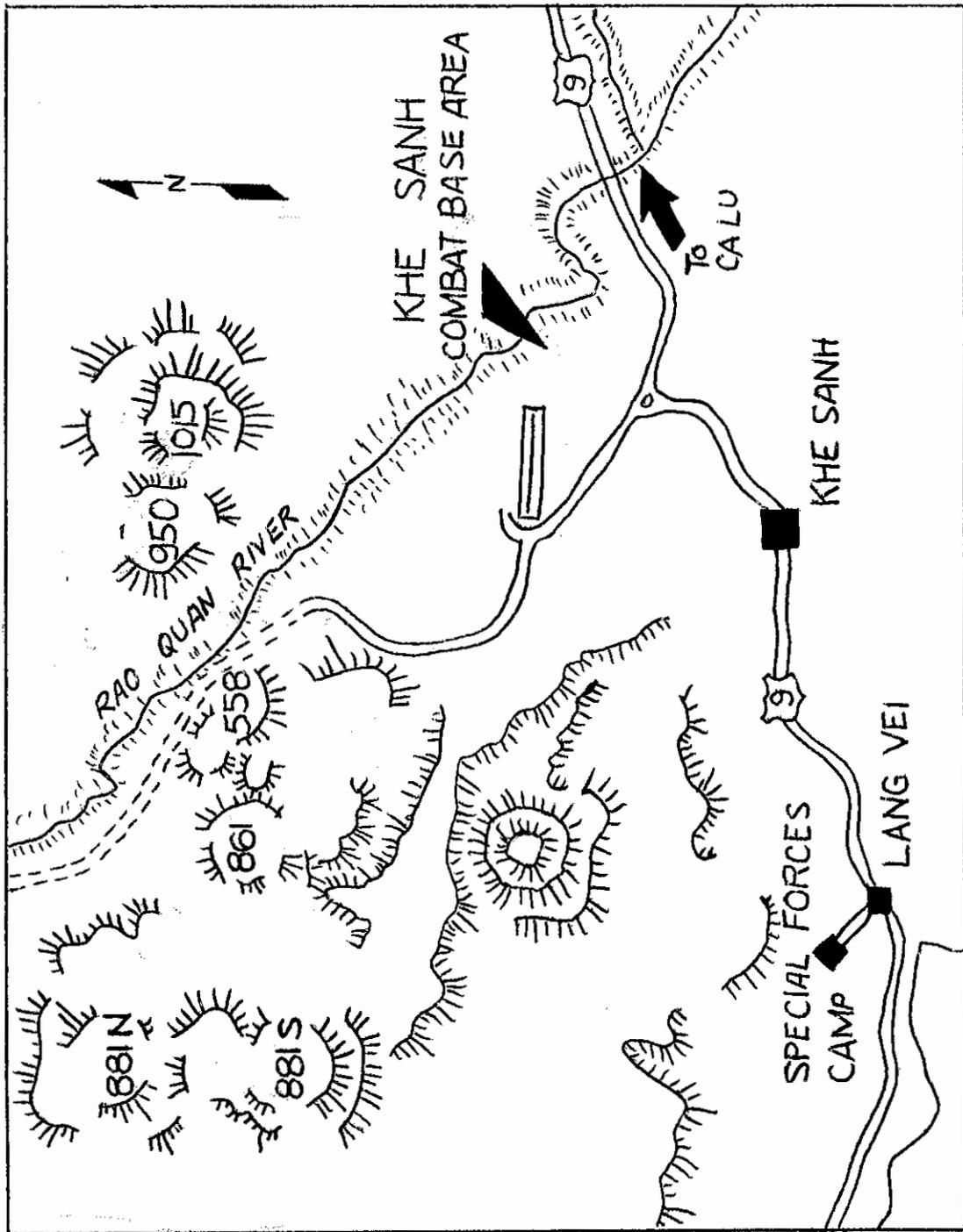
APPENDIX A - Map "A"--Northern Quang Tri Province



NORTHERN QUANG TRI PROVINCE

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX B - Map "B"--Khe Sanh Valley



KHE SANH VALLEY

(7:9)

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The message on his flak jacket sums up this Marine's feelings about Khe Sanh. More than 200 Marines lost their lives at Khe Sanh.



Above: U.S. Marines push toward Khe Sanh along Highway 9 on April 4 during Operation Pegasus. Pegasus, which began on April 1, finally relieved the forces at Khe Sanh on April 15. Below: Smoke from a North Vietnamese rocket and mortar.



Above: A Chicago policeman charges demonstrators in Chicago's Lincoln Park during the Democratic Convention in August, 1968. Below: Demonstrators use park benches to construct a barricade in Grant Park near the Conrad Hilton, headquarters for the Democratic Convention.