



A Perspective on Khe Sanh

by Gen Carl E. Mundy, Jr.

*On 2 July the
Commandant spoke
at the dedication of a
monument in
Arlington Cemetery
commemorating
those who served at
Khe Sanh a quarter
of a century ago.
Here are his
remarks . . .*

Everyone here has their own set of powerful memories about Khe Sanh—memories both good and bad. I'd like to begin by sharing one of my memories with you. I remember the green beauty of the plateau in June 1967 when I first saw it, and how it was eventually destroyed by artillery, airstrikes, and our fields of fire.

It has been 25 years since we fought and won the battle of Khe Sanh, and now it is time to dedicate our monument to that battle. In any war, there are a few battles that are truly decisive—fights that have strategic importance, that can end a war if lost or let it continue if won. In World War II, the Normandy invasion was such a fight; in Korea, Chosin Reservoir; for the French in Vietnam, it was Dien Bien Phu; and for us, it was the victory at Khe Sanh. For those on the ground and in the air over Khe Sanh, it was certainly a decisive battle, but then all battles are decisive when someone is doing his best to kill you. What we did there . . . was to purchase 7 years of freedom for South Vietnam, and if the final result of that war was not what we wanted, it does not reflect on what happened at Khe Sanh.

There were certainly other battles that were equally hard fought—Con Thien, for example—but the effects of losing Con Thien would have been tactical. We would have adjusted, compensated, and continued.

I'm not sure that would have happened if we lost at Khe Sanh. Only Khe Sanh had strategic importance as a single battle in that war, particularly after the media back in the States began to emphasize the parallels to Dien Bien Phu. Certainly for Gen Giap and the North Vietnamese, it was an opportunity

to repeat their strategic victory at Dien Bien Phu. They well knew that if they could create a "decisive victory," to use Ho Chi Minh's words, then it would be hard for us to continue the fight. They did their level best to win, bringing in against us among others the elite 304th Division, a Guards formation that fought at Dien Bien Phu—all told, outnumbering us on the ground by more than four to one. They pointed this formidable machine that had worked so well at Dien Bien Phu directly at Khe Sanh, at the 26th Marines on the ground around that airstrip and on the rugged hills surrounding it.

The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was defeated in the hill fights of 1967 when we first occupied Khe Sanh in force . . . and in siege of 1968, when we defended it. They lost for many reasons—our powerful air support, mobility, logistics, and the superior planning and leadership of MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins and Col David E. Lownds—but I think you can boil all that away and come to the basic reason: We took the measure of the NVA's fighting men. They were good, but we outfought them, face to face, eye to eye, on the ground.

Our victory at Khe Sanh was the result of thousands of individual actions—individual acts expressed through teamwork, not just of Marines but of all Services, Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well—that gave us the edge we needed to win. Everyone's actions—the actions of everyone standing here today, of every Khe Sanh veteran who could not be here today, and of those who paid the ultimate price—were important to the outcome of the battle, to the final team effort.



Smoke from an airstrike rises from the North Vietnamese rocket and mortar positions on Hill 881 North. In the foreground is a bunker on Hill 881 South.

Your legacy, your actions, your heritage is very much alive in the Marine Corps of today. Marines of today speak and talk of you with the awe they once reserved for Marines who went in on the assault waves at Tarawa, or those cold, frozen warriors at Chosin. Khe Sanh has become part of our Corps' rich legacy of courage and your actions there have not been forgotten by our modern Marines . . .

There are many heroes of that battle, some buried close to where we stand today, and just across the green hillside is the Henderson Hall Memorial Gymnasium, named for Cpl Terry Smith, killed on Hill 881S, fighting with Mike 3/26 . . . looking out for his fellow Marines. And there are many, many more. The simple fact is that everyone at Khe Sanh was a hero, because survival there required a daily act of heroism. And survival meant more than simple personal survival, it meant taking care of your buddies, and carrying out the mission. You don't need me to tell you about the depth of those feelings. The

fact that you are all here today is testimony to it. As our monument says, "We are eternally bonded." That says it all.

And now, today, we place our marker, our bit of history, bought with our sweat and blood, and the loss of comrades, where it so richly deserves to be, here at Arlington, on a beautiful hillside, surrounded by the heroes of the United States.

Long after we are gone, it will remind people of what we did, a quarter of a century ago, in the shadow of Dong Tri Mountain, in a good and brave cause . . . I believe that so long as this Republic lives, and as long as its citizens honor their fighting men and women, our fight, the good fight, the hard fight at Khe Sanh will never be forgotten . . .

I'm glad I could be here with you today. Semper Fidelis.

US  MC

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