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RIDE TO THE RESCUE

A joint U.S. and South Vietnamese push broke the siege at Khe Sanh.

BY JOHN PRADOS


JANUARY 1968. BEFORE TET.

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, his Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), and every level of the U.S. and South Vietnamese hierarchies were obsessed with an outpost – a combat base, really – up near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separated South Vietnam from North Vietnam. There, a handful of Marine rifle battalions, some pacification specialists of a combined action company, Green Berets leading a force of Montagnards, and operators of the shadowy MACV Special Operations Group were holding onto a set of hill positions ringed by the North Vietnamese army.

On Jan. 21, the enemy opened a sustained artillery barrage that gravely damaged the combat base, destroying its main ammunition dump. Under that cover North Vietnamese troops advanced against Hill 861, one of the strongpoints, and the village of Khe Sanh. They failed in the hills but captured the village. From that day on, the combat base struggled under siege, constantly shelled and repeatedly threatened with new ground attacks. Marines now did the “Khe Sanh shuffle,” darting from bunker to trench to evade the North Vietnamese gunners.

The Americans were obliged to supply Khe Sanh by air. Only one road connected the combat base to MACV positions in the lowlands, and the enemy had cut that months earlier. Now the North Vietnamese closed in to besiege Khe Sanh. MACV’s inability to utilize Route 9, the road that paralleled the DMZ, weighed ever heavier with every airplane or helicopter damaged or destroyed on the dangerous resupply missions. Within days, Westmoreland would be diverted to putting out the fires of the Tet Offensive, but he laid the groundwork for an overland rescue operation beforehand.

On Jan. 25, the MACV chief created a forward headquarters in the military region covering Khe Sanh and put his deputy, Lt. Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, in charge of it. Westmoreland also called in



U.S. soldiers jump from a helicopter during Operation Pegasus, an overland relief expedition that eventually broke through to Marines trapped at Khe Sanh.

Photo by Larry Burrows/Time Magazine. The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images

Maj. Gen. John J. Tolson, leading the Cav, the vaunted 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), then in the process of deploying to that same region. "Westy" asked Tolson to begin planning a relief expedition. This contingency became a fixture in MACV thinking; once Tet had begun and Westmoreland and Washington traded cables on reinforcing South Vietnam, he used Khe Sanh's relief as one of his justifications for more troops.

With Tet, Tolson's Cav became embroiled in the furious fighting around Hue. Marines and South Vietnamese troops famously fought within the city, but the Cav operated against North Vietnamese supply lines to the west.

As extra reinforcements arrived, 1st Cavalry units were shifted north to the Quang Tri-Dong Ha area, where Route 9 originates at the latter town. The division's 3rd Brigade, which had borne the brunt of the fight outside Hue, rested and took over base security duties.

On March 2, the generals gathered at Da Nang for a command conference. Hashing out strategy were Abrams, Tolson, Robert Cushman (the Marine three-star leading III Marine Amphibious Force, or III MAF, the regional headquarters), and Rathvon M. Tompkins, the Marine two-star who led the 3rd Marine Division. Tompkins recalled Abrams speculating on the Cav taking over security in the coastal zone and the 3rd Marine Division attacking west to Khe Sanh. Tompkins got to his feet and declared this the finest idea he had ever heard, and he claims Tolson supported it, having "no more desire to go to Khe Sanh than a cat does (to have) hip pockets."

That doesn't square with Tolson's account of 1st Cavalry Division planning or Westmoreland's previous orders. The brass at this meeting listened as Cav staff detailed an offensive scheme. It became known as Operation Pegasus, after the winged horse of mythology. It did have Cav units protecting the coastal area, but Tolson's 3rd Brigade became key to the operation, and Abrams in fact gave the Cav honcho operational control of the entire offensive. Westmoreland joined them March 10, when he approved the plans. He stipulated that the South Vietnamese army (ARVN) needed to have a role in the operation as well.

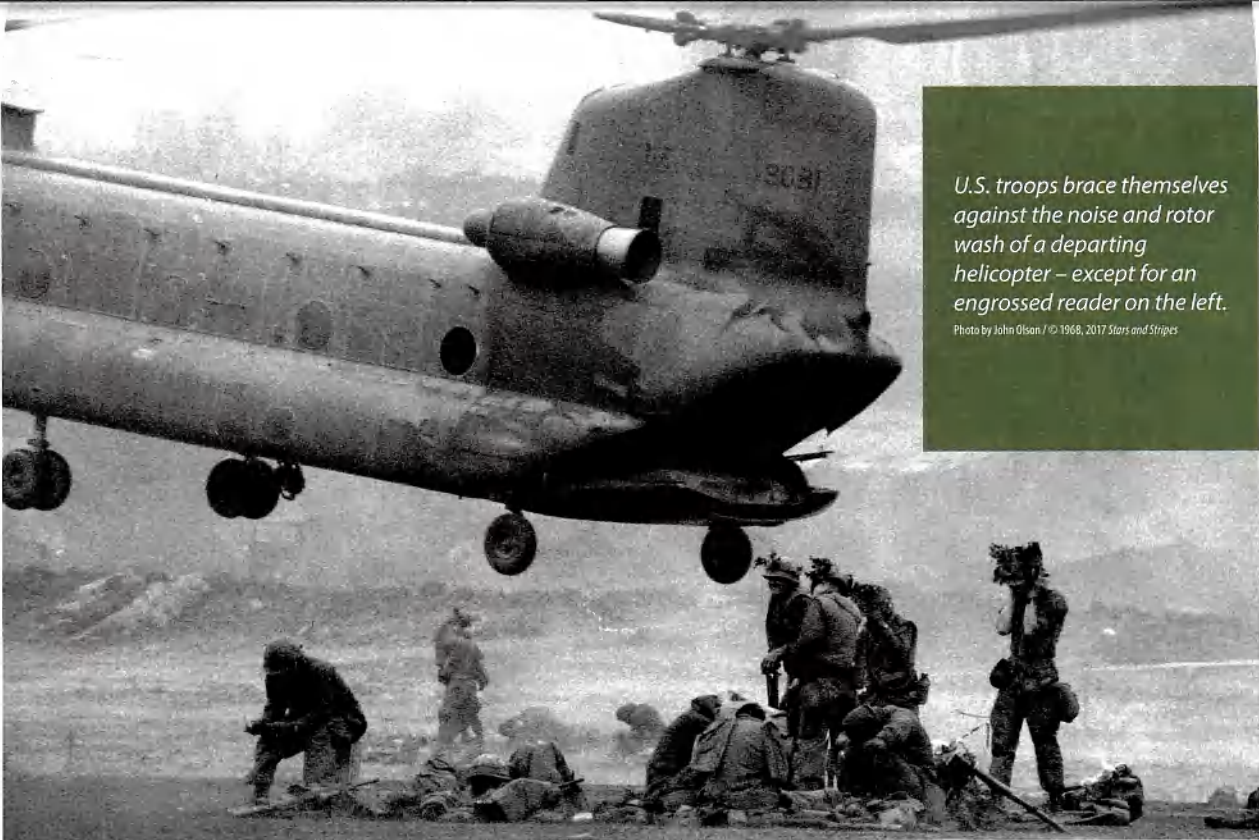
As preparations continued, Khe Sanh seemed more and more threatened. A satellite Special Forces camp at Lang Vei was overrun Feb. 7. The next night brought an assault at a close-in position of the base defenses. A Marine C-130 transport, destroyed on the airstrip Feb. 10, led to a halt of landings beginning two days later. The high point

of artillery bombardments of the combat base came Feb. 23, when 1,300 rounds slammed it. On the last night of February, just before the Pegasus planners convened, Khe Sanh's artillery and air support broke up a North Vietnamese assault force that might have been as big as a regiment.

The combat base definitely looked to be in trouble. But Pegasus could not simply be launched out of the blue. To sustain an overland offensive, Route 9 had to be restored and improved out to the Rockpile, a Marine position in the foothills to the east. Bridges needed to be strengthened and more construction material stockpiled for the road out to Khe Sanh. The Cav needed a well-provisioned landing zone as a springboard for its 3rd Brigade, which would lead the charge. Ca Lu, a hilltop village at a bend of Route 9, was selected for the launch point. It would be called Landing Zone (LZ) Stud. Marine Engineer Battalion 11 and Navy Seabees (Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 5) did the hard work on preparations. The start of Pegasus, originally timed for March 13, was pushed back to April 1. On March 26, operating from LZ Stud, the Cav's "Headhunter" scouts – Lt. Col. Richard W. Diller's 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry – began their reconnaissance flights toward Khe Sanh. The Headhunters prepped new LZs for combat assaults by finding suitable clearings and calling in aircraft to expand them using huge "Daisy Cutter" bombs.

As a final touch on March 30, a Marine rifle battalion, a Cav squadron and a pair of ARVN infantry battalions began a diversionary attack on the coastal plain, from Gio Linh toward the DMZ. The North Vietnamese do not appear to have been fooled. The last actual attack at Khe Sanh took place the day before, and U.S. intelligence reporting already indicated the enemy's withdrawal from the vicinity of the combat base.

Pegasus jumped off at 7 a.m. April 1. It was the biggest III MAF offensive of the war, with 29,000 troops – 14 battalions with 300 choppers and 148 artillery pieces. Tolson had arrived at LZ Stud the previous day. The Cav was noted for its dynamic operational techniques, with an almost instant ability to redirect forces and firepower in response to new discoveries and changing conditions. Indeed, Capt. Joseph W. Kinzer – senior adviser to the ARVN 3rd Airborne Task Force, the participating South Vietnamese brigade – felt he learned more in a week interacting with the Cav than he had in the preceding six months. Despite that dynamism, Pegasus began with an old-fashioned ground advance conducted in the



U.S. troops brace themselves against the noise and rotor wash of a departing helicopter – except for an engrossed reader on the left.

Photo by John Olson / © 1968, 2017 Stars and Stripes

traditional manner: the weather had closed in and the choppers could not fly.

Col. Stanley S. Hughes with his 1st Marine Infantry Regiment made up the overland component of the attack. Hughes arrayed the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines on the north side of Route 9, and the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines south of the road. The 11th Engineers followed, lifting mines and restoring the thoroughfare. The Marines crossed the line of departure precisely on time.

“It was jungle, the worst kind you can find,” observes Wayne T. Haaland, a platoon commander with Hotel Company, 2/1. “It was almost impossible to walk from objective to objective. The terrain was so rough and the growth, the underbrush, so thick that we had to use helicopter(s).” Signs of enemy presence were numerous, but few were encountered.

The Cav got started when the weather cleared the afternoon of the first day. But “cleared” is a relative term. Only occasionally were airmobile ops possible before afternoon. Equally problematic, “good” weather came to be any time when the cloud ceiling rose to 500 feet or more. At that altitude a North Vietnamese gunner could see a chopper at a distance of a mile and a half or so.

Col. Hubert S. Campbell, leading the 3rd Brigade, catapulted his 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry into LZ Mike, forward of where the Marines were. Lt. Joseph E. Abodeely, leading the 2nd Platoon of

D Company, recalls thick jungle and mountainous terrain. He hurt his arm jumping from the chopper. It was typical of Cav tactics that the LZ was chosen at the very last moment, practically with the choppers in motion. Abodeely remembers they air-assaulted the top of a mountain, circled by a river on three sides. That made for little enemy threat and a good night’s sleep, but there was little to do except lift out to a new LZ the next day. Abodeely’s platoon captured a 12.7mm anti-aircraft gun there.

Tolson sought to accelerate Pegasus by committing Col. Joseph C. McDonough’s 2nd Brigade earlier than planned. Most choppered into an LZ not far from Khe Sanh. Soon they were attacking the feature known as the Old French Fort. Lt. Col. Robert Runkle, leading 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry against the French fort, was killed, becoming the most senior officer casualty of Pegasus. An estimated enemy battalion held on to the position for the next two days, and the Cav fed in an additional formation – 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry – to overwhelm the defenses. Tolson also had the Marine garrison get into the fight, sallying to the south to take Hill 471, which offered a panoramic view of Khe Sanh combat base. The unit that accomplished that feat was the storied “Walking Dead,” 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. Once in place, they had to beat off a battalion-size North Vietnamese counterattack.

Marine Lance Cpl. Eddie Windham of the 11th Engineer Battalion prepares to destroy enemy anti-tank mines and artillery shells found along Route 9 during Operation Pegasus. USMC History Division



By then, April 4, Lt. Col. Roscoe Robinson's 2/7 Cavalry were at LZ Thor and facing enemy mortars and artillery. Ten or 11 men in Abodeely's platoon alone got minor shrapnel wounds. The platoon encountered a couple of dead GIs as they pulled back into the perimeter. A medevac chopper was shot down. When North Vietnamese artillery shells proved to be duds, the troopers worried these might be chemical or nerve agents instead. But the North Vietnamese did not employ such weapons in this war. GIs got another scare when a rumor swept the battalion that they were going to be ordered to walk into Khe Sanh. That proved true, and the worst firefight yet happened when 2/7 tried to make its way down Route 9. Robinson's two lead companies recoiled after encountering heavy resistance. The North Vietnamese, too, left behind 83 dead.

Suddenly everyone was in motion. Abodeely thought of a race to the rescue. Marine official historian Jack Shulimson saw it as a three-ring circus. The Cav's 3rd Brigade and the 1st Marines kept up the pressure along Route 9. Its 1st Brigade joined the fight, opening LZ Snake southeast of the former Lang Vei Special Forces camp. The 2nd Brigade choppered its 2/12 Cavalry onto Hill 471 to relieve the Walking Dead. Those Marines moved on to Hill 552, which had been a North Vietnamese hotbed. The 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines broke out of its strongpoint on Hill 558 and went for Hill 700.

Tolson thought carefully about the mechanics of the relief and had decided he did not like the optics of cavalrymen arriving first at Khe Sanh combat base. Instead he arranged for the ARVN 8th Airborne Battalion to air-assault into the sector of the base held by the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion. The Old French Fort fell to 2/5 Cavalry on April 7. D Company of 2/7, with Abodeely's platoon, walked into Khe Sanh on Route 9 on April 8. The engineers completed the road connection on April 10.

Tolson had planned dozens of additional operations to clear the area around the combat base, but instead the Cav was immediately recalled for a thrust into the A Shau Valley. The division had suffered 41 or 59 dead (there are discrepancies), 207 or 251 wounded and five missing. Marines lost 51 killed and 459 wounded. Of the ARVN, 33 were killed in action and 187 wounded. The body count for the North Vietnamese stood at 1,304 with 24 men captured. Significant amounts of food, equipment and documents were captured as well. The Cavalry – and the Marines – had ridden to the rescue.

As we mark so many 50th anniversaries of the Vietnam conflict, the Battle of Khe Sanh is often mentioned, Operation Pegasus almost never. Let this serve to bring brave Marines and GIs back to mind once more. 🌿

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