BAIT

THE BATTLE OF KHAM DUC SPECIAL FORCES CAMP

James D. McLeroy

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James D. McLeroy dedicates this book to the memory of
Special Forces Master Sergeant M. C. Windley,
SOG One-Zero, dedicated Bac Si, fearless warrior
and to
Dr. Mary Lou Sherbon,
loving sister of a Vietnam warrior
and special friend of many others.

* * * *

Gregory W. Sanders dedicates this book to the memory of
Army First Lieutenant Dale Reising,
Advisory Team 92, MACV,
who gave his life for his country
in Go Cong Province, South Vietnam
on May 29, 1970
and
Professor Gordon Bakken,
California State University, Fullerton,
whose legacy lives on in his students

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PROLOGUE

The only visible remains of Kham Duc Special Forces camp were the battered concrete base and jagged steel stump of the flagpole. Knee-high grass hid the half-buried foundations of its buildings, and the only traces of its long airstrip were scattered patches of asphalt in a broad field of weeds.

Standing on the base of the old flagpole, I stared at the low hills on the northeast and southwest ends of the airstrip, then west at the jungle-covered hill looming over the valley. My gaze drifted eastward past the new town where the squalid little village used to be, past the overgrown airstrip, past the hidden camp site, past the river gulch behind it to the taller hills overlooking the valley on the other side of the river.

The last time I saw that valley, it looked like a war movie. Once I lived and nearly died there, and for me it is a valley of ghosts. They are the ghosts of many hundreds of North Vietnamese Army soldiers we killed there and the ghosts of almost two-hundred Vietnamese civilians —the women, children, and old men of that village—killed by those NVA soldiers. As I surveyed the peaceful scene in June 1998, memories of the way it looked thirty years before in May 1968 slowly drifted back in a lurid collage of sights, sounds, and sensations:

—A desperate voice in the night, shouting on the radio over the noise of firing, begging for air support to save his surrounded company before it was overrun by an NVA battalion…

—Flashes of firing and explosions in the darkness, where small squads on isolated hilltop outposts were being overrun and killed…

—The throbbing whine of a piston-engine plane, trailing smoke, straining to climb high enough for the pilot to bail out before it burned up and plunged to earth…

—Planes, large and small, and helicopters, large and small, crashing and burning…

—The shrieking howl of scores of jet fighter-bombers streaking by so low and close that I could glimpse the pilots' helmets…

—The shattering blasts of high explosive bombs; the crackling ripple of cluster bombs; the rasping growl of automatic aircraft cannons and multi-barreled aircraft machine guns…

—Enemy bodies hurled through the air like rag dolls from a bomb hit on an anti-aircraft gun…

—The pitiful face of a doomed NVA soldier, wide-eyed and ashen with fear, stumbling toward me like a robot through a maelstrom of bullets and shrapnel, as his comrades were falling all around him, knowing that his wasted life was measured in seconds…

—The chilling sound of Special Forces commandos, determined to fight to the death against the onrushing horde of enemy soldiers, saying terse goodbyes to each other…

—The thunderous boom and mushroom cloud of the camp's exploding ammunition dump and the roar of black rubber fuel bladders along the airstrip erupting in huge, red fireballs…

—Flashes of sheet lightning in a dark, towering rain cloud moving slowly toward us, threatening to envelop us and cancel our air support, the only thing keeping us alive…

I thought then that I would never return to that haunted valley. When I finally did thirty years later, it was with a U.S. military casualty recovery team searching for the scattered remains of long-abandoned American soldiers and Marines. More U.S. missing-in-action cases resulted from the battle of Kham Duc Special Forces camp and a temporary camp site called Ngok Tavak than from any other battle in the seven years of major U.S. combat in the Vietnam War.

As soon as I returned to Kham Duc, I began to sense a deep, vague awareness that some important part of me had never fully left that morbid killing ground – and probably never will.

—James D. McLeroy
May 12, 2018

* * * *

Vietnam veterans are often heard to say, "I spent the first four decades after coming home trying to forget the war and the last few years trying to remember it." My experience is no different. Like so many others, I found that some memories recalled after a lapse of forty years are painful, even of events that didn't directly bear on my tour of duty.

Strangely enough, I returned to Kham Duc in April, 2006 not because I was there in July 1970, when the area was temporarily reoccupied, but in search of answers to lingering questions about a battle that was fought there more than two years before. When we rounded the bend in the new highway through the Central Highlands and entered the short, narrow valley, the air was heavy with the specter of the missing American soldiers abandoned there on Mother's Day, May 12, 1968, just as I remembered it in 1970.

The operation to reoccupy the area was a "walk in the sun," as the grunts used to say about an easy patrol, compared to the combat there and at Ngok Tavak from May 10 through 12, 1968. Those who were there in 1970, when the site of the former Special Forces camp was temporarily reoccupied, felt a kind of vindication, Most of them had no knowledge of the many Americans still missing in action from the 1968 battle. I did.

Before flying to Kham Duc from the Americal Division base camp at Chu Lai on July 12, 1970 to perform a very minor mission, I learned of the abandoned bodies of those poor souls. In my private thoughts, I believed the Army betrayed those men and their families, who were left to grieve with no bodies to bury and a lifetime of unanswered questions about their fate.

Decades later retired Major General A. E. Milloy, the Americal Division commander in 1970, told me that nearly all those U.S. missing-in-action cases were killed in an onslaught in which they didn't stand a chance. In an unusual departure from his normal gentlemanly manner, he spared no unkind words for those officers he felt were responsible, including General William Westmoreland.

Such a harsh condemnation coming from General Milloy was

unexpected, because I knew his reputation. He was as aggressive a senior commander as ever served in South Vietnam, but he did not tolerate recklessness, especially with the lives of those he commanded. He was an up-from-the-enlisted ranks soldier's general, who knew first-hand from World War II and Korean War combat the kind of missions that unnecessarily waste the lives of American soldiers. His comments gave me a new perspective on the Kham Duc missing-in-action cases. Reconciling what happened there in May 1968 was ultimately a question of accountability.

As we drove through the north end of the valley onto the remains of the old airstrip, my mind was heavy with the thoughts of those who were left behind there. I thought, too, of the more than a thousand enemy soldiers, many of them fresh from North Vietnam, some still boys, who were wasted in a battle over that innocuous little camp. I wept for all of them, friend and foe alike. I resolved to document the story of how and why one of the most intense battles of the Vietnam War occurred and who was responsible for its outcome. I owed it to them all, I thought.

—Gregory W. Sanders
May 12, 2018

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* * * *

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PREFACE

"…their [U.S.] Dien Bien Phu is still to come, and it will come…."
—PAVN Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap[1]

One of the least known and most misunderstood battles in the American Phase (1965 to 1972) of the Second Indochina War (1959 to 1975) is the battle of Kham Duc-Ngok Tavak from May 10 to 12, 1968. Kham Duc, a remote U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) camp near the Laotian border of the Republic of Viet Nam, and Ngok Tavak, a temporary patrol base five miles south of it, were attacked by two reinforced regiments (three to four thousand troops) of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Like the still misunderstood war of which it was a part, the battle is a prime example of the difference between superficial appearance and the underlying reality.

This is the only history of the battle published by authors with both in-depth knowledge of it and personal combat experience in it. One lived at Kham Duc and led an elite group of U.S. and indigenous Special Forces troops in the battle. The other witnessed a detailed analysis of the battle at the Americal Division headquarters prior to a six-week, two-battalion operation at and around Kham Duc in 1970. Both are former Army officers with masters degrees in history.

We independently researched this battle for more than ten years in all the primary and secondary sources, including the few Vietnamese sources. We independently revisited Kham Duc, interviewed many direct and indirect battle veterans, and read the interview transcripts and statements of other battle participants, including former NVA officers. Our unique combination of personal experience in the battle and in-depth research into all aspects of it is the justification for our correction of the factual omissions and our contradiction of the factual misinterpre-

tations and/or nonfactual statements in all the other published accounts of it.[2]

The relevant facts of the battle that we personally experienced and/or learned from many primary sources are contrary to all the orthodox versions of it. Kham Duc did not “fall” and was not “overrun.” It also was not "an American defeat,”[3] “an embarrassing defeat,”[4] “a major defeat for the U.S. military,”[5] “one of the most serious [U.S.] defeats,”[6] “a [U.S.] battle debacle,”[7] “an unequivocal [U.S.] debacle,”[8] a [U.S.] “disaster,”[9] “a decisive North Vietnamese and Viet Cong victory,”[10] “a total North Vietnamese victory,”[11] “a Khe Sanh in reverse,”[12] “the high point for Hanoi” in 1968,[13] “one of the great [US] disasters of the war,”[14] or proof of a combat “stalemate" between U.S. and NVA/VC forces.[15]

All those negative evaluations of the battle are based on the erroneous assumption that it was an unsuccessful attempt to defend the camp.[16] In fact, it was a successful effort to inflict mass attrition on a major North Vietnamese Army force with minimum U.S. losses by voluntarily abandoning an anachronistic little trip wire border camp serving as passive bait for the attack. Kham Duc, like Khe Sanh, was an example of Westmoreland’s “lure and destroy” defensive attrition tactics that complemented his "search and destroy" offensive attrition tactics. The battle was another major (although strategically meaningless) tactical victory for Westmoreland’s operational strategy of mass enemy attrition and a major tactical defeat for two NVA regiments because of a universal military fact. Massed airborne firepower attacking in ideal flying conditions is always tactically superior to massed infantry repeatedly exposed to such attacks with inadequate air defenses.

More than a hundred combat aircraft launched a hastily improvised counterattack on the NVA attackers in three days of ideal weather for visual flight. The more the NVA troops massed to attack in clear daylight, the more they were annihilated by concentrated air firepower. The air counterattack continued for two days after the attack during the scattered retreat of the ravaged NVA survivors.

The NVA casualties at Kham Duc and Ngok Tavak are not recorded or are still a state secret of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, but a rea-

sonable estimate of them can be made. Two full-strength NVA infantry regiments had 5,000 troops: 3,600 combat troops and 1,400 combat support and logistics troops.[17] Troop losses of fifty percent or more were common in all the large NVA and VC human-wave infantry attacks.[18]

Even if only half of the NVA troops at or near Kham Duc and Ngok Tavak were killed or mortally wounded from three days of air attacks and ground fire plus two days of unrestricted carpet bombing, the two NVA regiments probably lost between 1,500 and 2,000 troops. Total U.S. Army, Air Force, and Marine fatalities at, near, or as a direct result of Kham Duc and Ngok Tavak were forty-six men.[19]

Many of the 112 wounded U.S. soldiers and Marines did not require hospitalization, and some of those who did soon recovered and returned to their units. Almost all seriously wounded U.S. troops were quickly evacuated to modern hospitals and almost all of them survived. Most seriously wounded NVA troops in that and all other battles against U.S. combined-arms forces did not survive.[20]

The battle began on the night of May 9-10, 1968 with a mortar and rocket barrage on the Kham Duc SF camp. Simultaneously, the temporary camp site at Ngok Tavak was attacked by an NVA battalion that penetrated it, but did not overrun it. On May 10, the survivors of Ngok Tavak abandoned it, escaped, and were rescued by Marine helicopters. The bombardment of the Kham Duc SF camp continued sporadically on May 10 and 11, while a reinforced U.S. infantry battalion arrived and deployed around its airstrip.

In the early morning darkness of May 12, NVA troops overran four of the camp's hilltop outposts. Later that morning, multi-company units of the two NVA regiments launched two mass attacks against U.S. troop positions around the airstrip. Both attacks were shattered by an almost unprecedented concentration of air firepower. That afternoon, the last ground attack was a multi-company assault on the SF camp's most vulnerable perimeter. As the last U.S. reinforcements were being evacuated by air, the NVA attack on the SF camp was annihilated by a napalm strike dangerously close to the SF trench line.

Twelve aircraft were shot down during the three-day battle, including a C-130 transport plane carrying 183 civilians from the nearby village. It

exploded and burned, killing all aboard. More than 1,000 people –military and civilian, U.S. and Vietnamese – were evacuated by air, but thirty-seven Americans, living and dead, were left behind at Kham Duc and Ngok Tavak. Only four survived. Three of them were rescued a few days later, but the fourth endured five hellish years as a prisoner of his sadistic Viet Cong (VC) and NVA captors.

Despite their appalling losses, the NVA attack on Kham Duc was both a tactical and a strategic failure for seven reasons: 1) it failed to penetrate the camp or the airstrip, while U.S. troops were there; 2) it failed to lure any large U.S. military unit from a populated area; 3) it failed to attract any major media attention; 4) it failed to kill or capture enough U.S. or allied troops for a useful propaganda film; 5) it failed to capture any source of food or civilian forced labor; 6) it failed to enable the NVA to occupy the site, as long as U.S. combat forces were active in I Corps; and 7) it failed to enable the NVA to use the road south of the camp any more or any differently than they did before the battle, as long as U.S. forces were active in I Corps.[21]

The Kham Duc SF camp had only two functions: basic training for indigenous militia recruits and occasional launches of top-secret reconnaissance-commando teams into Laos. After the camp was abandoned, both functions were replaced elsewhere with no major tactical loss.[22] In 1970, a reinforced U.S. Army battalion and a reinforced South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) battalion occupied the Kham Duc valley and patrolled around it for six weeks partly to prove that they could always do so at will.[23]

Kham Duc had the potential of being almost as strategic for the NVA on May 12, 1968 as Dien Bien Phu was for the Viet Minh on May 7, 1954. On that date the Communist-led Viet Minh army captured a large French base near the remote Laotian border of North Vietnam. With massive technical, logistics, and artillery assistance from his Chinese allies, the Viet Minh commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, timed the final assault of his troops for the day before the beginning of the Geneva conference to negotiate the end of the First Indochina War against the French (1946 to 1954).[24]

The capture of Dien Bien Phu did not tactically defeat all the French forces in Indochina, but it strategically defeated the French government

in France. By critically demoralizing the war-weary French public, the filmed fall of Dien Bien Phu caused the Socialist French government to withdraw its forces from Tonkin (northern Vietnam) and eventually from the rest of Indochina: Annam (central Vietnam), Cochin China (southern Vietnam), Cambodia, and Laos.

We do NOT claim that the North Vietnamese Politburo attempted to make Kham Duc a U.S. Dien Bien Phu. We found no direct documentary or testamentary evidence of that intent, but the official history of the PAVN 2nd Division strongly suggests it, Among its many other nonfactual distortions and fantasies, its fictional account of Kham Duc's defenses is clearly based on the French defenses at Dien Bien Phu, and its fictional account of the NVA attack on Kham Duc is a virtual copy of the Viet Minh attack on Dien Bien Phu.[25]

We also do NOT compare Kham Duc to Dien Bien Phu in terms of the size or strategic effect of the two battles. We only argue that the NVA capture of Kham Duc could have had a strategic impact on the war in that critical month and year. President Johnson's awareness of its strategic potential is evidenced by the fact that on May 12, 1968 GEN Westmoreland personally sent a warning telex about the battle to GEN Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who immediately sent it to the National Security Council. The National Security Advisor, Dr. Walt Rostow, immediately sent it to President Johnson at the LBJ ranch in Texas while the battle was still undecided. Johnson mentioned it indirectly in his memoirs.[26]

If more than 1,000 U.S. and allied troops had been killed or captured at Kham Duc, a humiliating propaganda film of their capture and death would been made by the NVA film crew sent from North Vietnam for that purpose.[27] The film would have been given to the television news journalists among the 1,300 reporters from thirty-nine nations then in Paris for the start of negotiations for ending the U.S. role in the war. It would have been sensationally and repeatedly broadcast on U.S. and international television.

The emotional impact of such a film on most Americans would have been similar in strength, but opposite in effect, to the emotional impact of Dien Bien Phu on most of the French population. It likely would have

had a catalytic effect on LBJ's hyper-macho personality and his militant anti-Communist ideology near the bitter end of his long political career.[28]

The co-authors realize that the use of the term "bait" to describe Kham Duc's role in the battle is controversial and requires clarification. In Westmoreland's book he called Khe Sanh a place to "lure" NVA troops to their death.[29] As both a noun and a verb "bait" is a synonym for "lure," but its neutral dictionary definition is different from its negative emotional connotation. For most Americans the idea of using U.S. troops as live bait to attract a larger enemy force is morally outrageous.

As a verb, "to bait" implies a deliberate action by an actor with a motive for the action. That is NOT the meaning of the word as applied to U.S. actions at Kham Duc. In 1968, the use of. U.S. troops as bait in the active sense of baiting a trap was not an acknowledged tactic;[30] the term "bait" was not used in any formal military planning;[31] and no military unit or installation was ever officially designated as bait.[32] But as a noun, bait is as bait does.[33] Anything can serve as passive bait, even if that was neither its original nor its primary function.[34]

In Vietnam there were many NVA and VC attacks on isolated SF camps. Westmoreland did NOT actively plan to use those camps as bait for such attacks, but in his "strategy-of- tactics" such attacks were not entirely unwelcome, because they concentrated the normally elusive VC and NVA troops for mass attrition by U.S. firepower.[35] The role of SF border camps as passive bait for Westmoreland's defensive tactics was merely the result of their previous location in conspicuously vulnerable places for completely different reasons.

We know that comprehensive knowledge of any large and complex battle is impossible, and that many veterans of this battle know some facts about it that we cannot know. For the same reason, most veterans of the battle do not fully understand what did and did not happen there

before, during, and after it. Some of them insist on believing certain things about it or their role in it that are nonfactual. Others refuse to believe certain things about it or their role in it that are factual.[36]

We also acknowledge that perfect objectivity in our narrative and analysis of this battle is impossible, despite our firm commitment to objectivity as an ideal. Some degree of subjectivity is inevitable in the

narrative and analysis of any event in which one of the authors was an active participant. Nevertheless, pending future revisions with new data or new interpretations of our data, we believe this is the most factually accurate narrative and most comprehensive analysis currently possible of the battle of Kham Duc-Ngok Tavak from May 10 to 12, 1968.

N.B.—Most numbers referring to dimensions and time and most numbers ending in zero should be read as if preceded by "approximately, roughly, about, around, some, estimated," etc. to avoid excessive repetition of such numerical qualifiers.

NOTES

1. Giap's answer to a question by an admiring foreign journalist on whether the American War would end with the defeat of U.S. forces in another large, decisive battle like Dien Bien Phu. – Fallaci, Oriana; *Interview With History*; Houghton Mifflin; Boston, MA; 1976; p. 85.

2. All the published accounts of the Kham Duc battle contain factual errors, material omissions, and/or factual misinterpretations. In 1971, an eight-page magazine article on Ngok Tavak was published by the Australian officer (White) commanding the SF and Marine troops there. In 1976, an 87-page monograph on Kham Duc was published by an Air Force officer (Gropman). A 1983 book on tactical airlift in Vietnam (Bowers) has five pages on Kham Duc. A 1984 book on Australian forces in Vietnam (McNeill) has eight pages on Ngok Tavak. A 1985 book on Army Special Forces in Vietnam (Stanton) has four pages on Kham Duc. A 1989 book on tactical air support in Vietnam (Mrozek) has two pages on Kham Duc. A 1990 book on the Vietnam War (Morrison) has five pages on Kham Duc. A 1993 book on Vietnam after Tet 1968 (Spector) has ten pages on Kham Duc. A 1994 book on Air Commandos (Chinnery) has five pages on Kham Duc. A 1995 historical atlas of the Vietnam War (Summers) has one page of text on Kham Duc and a map of it. A 1997 book on Marines in Vietnam (Shulimson) has three pages on Kham Duc and Ngok Tavak. A 1999 book on the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Prados) has five pages on Kham Duc. A 2000 book on air power in the Vietnam War (Nalty) has eight pages on Kham Duc. A 2008 book on Ngok Tavak (Davies) is a partly fictionalized account. A 2011 book on SOG (Gillespie) has two pages on Kham Duc, and a 2011 autobiography (Warner) has five pages on Kham Duc. There is also a grossly nonfactual Wikipedia article on the battle.

3. Spector, Ronald; *After Tet*; The Free Press, NY; 1993; p. 175.

4. Davies, Bruce; *Ngok Tavak*; Allen & Unwin; Crows Nest NSW, Australia; 2008; p. 118.

5. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Kham_Duc, accessed on May 12, 2015.

6. Gillespie, Robert; *Black Ops, Vietnam*; Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD; 2011; p. 149.

7. Davies, op. cit., p. xvii.

8. Spector, op. cit., p. 176.

9. Stanton, Shelby; *Green Berets At War*; Presidio Press, Novato, CA; 1985; p. 161.

10. Wikipedia article, op. cit.

11. Stanton, op. cit., p. 165. Chinnery, Philip; *Air Commando*; St. Martin, NY; 1994; p. 211.

12. Spector, op. cit., pp. 166, 175.

13. Prados, John; *The Blood Road*; John Wiley, NY; 1999; p. 281.

14. Nolan, Keith; *House To House*; Zenith Press; St. Paul, MN; 2006; p. 22.

15. Spector, op. cit., p. x. From mid-1965 to mid-1968, the war was a political stalemate, but it was never a combat stalemate. The U.S. and NVA combat forces were never tactically equal. That widespread misperception is due to the ambiguous use of the word "stalemate." During the LBJ administration U.S. ground forces were not allowed to attack the NVA forces in Laos and the DRV. By the end of 1972, however, U.S. and ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) forces had defeated both the VC forces and the regular NVA forces in the RVN. By 1973, the war was effectively won in South Vietnam, until the massive NVA invasion of 1975, two years after all U.S. combat troops had been withdrawn.

16. Mrozek, Donald; *Air Power and the Ground War In Vietnam*; Pergamon-Brassey's; McLean, VA; 1989; p. 85: "At Kham Duc…the position was…not held."

17. Rottman, Gordon; *North Vietnamese Army Soldier, 1958-75*; Osprey Publishing, Oxford, UK; 2009; p. 11.18. "After Action Report Elk Canyon I," Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry, 196th Brigade [undated]; attached maps and charts dated September 19, 1970.

18. Ibid., p. 54.

19. See Chapter VII, Aftermath, note 19 for their names.

20. A former CG of the 2nd NVA Division stated that they had no organic hospital and very few qualified doctors. – PAVN LTG Nguyen Huy Chuong in *Su Doan 2, Tap 1* [Second Division,Volume 1], Dang Uy va Chu Huy [2nd Division Party Committee and Division Headquarters], Da Nang Publishing House; Da Nang, Socialist Republic of Viet Nam; 1989; p.89; translated by Merle Pribbenow. Their wounded troops had to be hand-carried through jungle-covered mountains to crowded, unsanitary field hospitals, where medical equipment, supplies, and skilled surgeons were always scarce and often inadequate. In such conditions most severely wounded men died from hypovolemic shock, septic shock, or disease in or on the way to those

primitive hospitals. – Dr. Le Cao Dai in Appy, Christian; *Patriots*; Viking; NY; 2003; pp. 13-140. "The most severely wounded people died at the front before they could be evacuated to our field hospital." – Dr. Le Cao Dai in Zumwalt, James; *Bare Feet, Iron Will*; Fortis Publishing; Jacksonville, FL; 2020; p. 40. "… our logistics forces, who were farther from the Americans, took greater losses than the combat units …." [due to B-52 carpet bombing in remote areas] – PAVN GEN Nguyen Xuan Hoang quoted in Curry, Cecil; *Victory At Any Cost*; Brassey's; Washington, D.C.; 1997; p. 257.

21. Ironically, in June 1998 McLeroy saw a large billboard at the northwest entrance of Kham Duc town with a Soviet-style painting proclaiming it the site of a great victory of the heroic People's Army. On May 12, 2013 Sanders saw a large, concrete monument on a hillside near the northwest entrance to the town marking the 45th anniversary of the glorious PAVN victory at Kham Duc.

22. After the evacuation of Kham Duc, SOG established a new launch site in I Corps, first at Mai Loc then at Quang Tri. It also increased the use of its launch sites at the Dak Pek SF camp in northern II Corps and Nakhon Phanom (NKP) air base in Thailand. At those sites the weather for visual flight was far more reliable than at Kham Duc. From NKP, Air Force HH-53E helicopters could reach any place in SOG's authorized operating area in Laos. The basic training program for CIDG recruits in I Corps was continued at Ha Thanh SF camp in Quang Ngai Province.

23. "After Action Report Elk Canyon I," Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry, 196th Brigade [undated]; attached maps and charts dated September 19, 1970.

24. Chen, King C., V*ietnam and China, 1938-1954*; Princeton University Press; Princeton, NJ; 1968; p. 305.

25. It claims that Kham Duc had ten fortified "strongpoints" and that the NVA attack first "peeled away" the five outer ones, then destroyed the five inner ones with artillery fire. In fact, Kham Duc had no strongpoints, and the NVA had no artillery there. It claims the 2nd PAVN Division defeated the 196th Light Infantry Brigade at Kham Duc. In fact, two-thirds of the 196th LIB was not there, and one-third of the 2nd PAVN Division was not there. It claims that the survivors of Kham Duc fled on foot toward Thuong Duc. In fact, only four U.S. soldiers fled on foot, and three of them were later rescued. All other troops and civilians were evacuated by aircraft, and none of them went to Thuong Duc. – *Su Doan 2*, op. cit., pp. 110-116.

26. Telex message from Westmoreland to ADM Sharp in Hawaii, GEN Wheeler in Washington, and LTG Goodpaster in Paris; May 12, 1968. – Westmoreland Papers, MAC 6210 and 6222, U.S. Army Center for Military History; Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC. Telex message from Bromley Smith, NSC, to Walt Rostow, NSC, forwarded to LBJ ranch, May 12, 1968: "Reports from Saigon re Estimate of Enemy Intentions in Kham Duc Area". – LBJ Library, Austin, TX; National Security Files (NSF); Vietnam Country File, box 67, folder 2A (5), I Corps and DMZ, 5/68-11/68, documents 110 and 111. Johnson, Lyndon; *The*

Vantage Point; Holt, Rinehart, and Winston; NY; 1971; p. 508

27. The leader of the PAVN film team at Kham Duc was Nguyen Van Huu, and his cameramen were Le Viet The and Le Kim Nguyen.– Message from CDR JTF-FA Honolulu, HI, J2 to SECDEF Washington, D.C., SUBJ/Research and Investigation Team (RIT) Report of Interview of Mr. Nguyen Van Huu, 30 June, 1995.

28. Hershman, Jablow; *Power Beyond Reason*; Barricade Books, Fort Lee, NJ; 2002; pp. 12-20.

29. Westmoreland, William; *A Soldier Reports*; Doubleday; Garden City, NY; 1976; p. 348.

30. "...the [base] was...bait for the enemy – a lure to attract [him] to a seemingly easy target. Then all available combat power was brought to bear...." – 1969 MACV Command History, Annex G: "The Defense of Fire Support Base Crook."

31. In answer to a question by President Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk stated: "…in that sense Khe Sanh is bait." – Barrett, David; *Uncertain Warriors*; University of Kansas Press; Lawrence, KS; 1993; p. 599.

32. In the 1967 battle of Ap Gu near the Cambodian border of III Corps a battalion CO, LTC Alexander Haig, said of his battalion's role: "We were put in as bait…." – Appy, Christian (ed.); *Patriots*; Viking Penguin, NY; 2003; p. 399.

33. "…we were… used as bait to see what was there." – Brennan, Matthew; *Brennan's War*; Presidio Press; Novato, CA; 1985; p. 51. His Chapter 4 is titled "BAIT."

34. In July 1966 two troops of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry were used as bait for an ambush by a Viet Cong main force regiment. – Stanton, Shelby; *The Rise & [sic] Fall of an American Army*; Presidio Press; Novato, CA; 1985; pp. 105-106.

35. An SF veteran of the 1970 battle of Dak Pek SF camp believed the SF camps were "…bait to…concentrate [the enemy]…so we could hit him with overwhelming firepower." – Wade, Leigh; *Assault On Dak Pek*; Ivy Books, NY; 1998; p. 102.

36. Some believe they were on the last plane out of Kham Duc. In fact, the last C-123 had only three passengers, and the last C-130 carried only Vietnamese civilians and SOG troops. Some believe they saw an NVA flag on one of the hilltops. In fact, there were no flags there. Some believe they saw a U.S. soldier hanging naked upside down in a tree on a hilltop outpost. In fact, none of the aircraft crews flying over and around the hilltops saw anyone hanging in a tree. Some claim to have performed impossible feats of valor (assuming they were even there). One man who evidently was there before or during the battle claims to have performed deeds of valor that would have been impossible to conceal, yet no one saw him do any of them. One man thinks he saw Westmoreland there on May 12. In fact, no U.S. general was there on May 12, although we were surprised to learn that two Army major generals were briefly there on May 10.

CHAPTER I

DRV STRATEGY

"Orthodox armies are the…principal power…."

—Mao Tse-tung[1]

At different times and places the Second Indochina War (1959 to 1975) in South Vietnam had some of the characteristics of a revolution, an insurgency, a guerrilla war, and a civil war. Primarily, however, it was an incremental invasion of South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) supported by their indigenous Viet Cong (VC) subordinates.

At first, the invasion was covert and indirect, but it gradually became increasingly overt and direct.[2] Both the NVA and the VC were controlled by the Political Bureau (Politburo) of the Lao Dong [Workers] Party in Hanoi, the capital of the Leninist police state euphemistically named the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV).

By 1967, Ho Chi Minh, the President of the DRV, was an aged and ailing figurehead, whose only power was the prestige of his name as the founding father of the nation in 1945. The *de facto* leader and chief strategist was Le Duan, First Secretary of the ruling Lao Dong Party from 1960 until his death in 1986.

Le Duan was not a charismatic dictator. He was a Machiavellian manipulator, who ruled the DRV collectively through its multilayered committee system. The most important one was the Subcommittee for Military Affairs (SMA) of the Politburo's Central Military Party Commission. Both the five-man SMA and the eleven-man Politburo were indirectly controlled by Le Duan.

The other four members of the SMA were Le Duc Tho (Le Duan's deputy) and three NVA generals with overlapping offices in the Ministry of Defense: Vo Nguyen Giap, (Minister of Defense and Commander of the NVA), Nguyen Chi Thanh (senior Political Commissar of the VC forces in South Vietnam), and Van Tien Dung (Giap's deputy and Le Duan's protégé). The DRV's grand strategy in its sixteen-year quest to conquer the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) and establish NVA hegemony in Cambodia and Laos was controlled by the five men on that sub-committee, ndirectly dominated by the rhetorical power and militant zeal of Le Duan.[3]

Chinese influence in the First Indochina War (1946 to 1954) caused the DRV Politburo to initially adopt Mao Tse-tung's (aka Mao Zedong's) rural based, three-stage, protracted attrition model of Communist revolutionary warfare in the Second Indochina War.[4] The long-term, strategic goal of the Maoist model was always the third stage: a decisive military victory by large, conventional revolutionary forces over large, conventional regime forces.[5]

The first stage of the model from 1957 to 1961was terrorism and guerrilla warfare by local VC squads of five to ten troops and VC platoons of twenty to fifty toops. The second stage from 1962 to 1968 was short-term attacks on vulnerable targets by mobile, semi-conventional VC/ NVA companies of 100 to 200 troops and battalions of 300 to 500 VC/NVA troops. From 1969 to 1972, the second stage was small-scale, hit-and-run commando raids on vulnerable targets. The third stage from 1972 to 1975 was conventional, positional warfare by regiments of 1,000 to 3,000 NVA troops and divisions of 6,000 to 10,000 NVA troops.

When North and South Vietnam were divided by the Geneva Convention of 1954, some 90,000 Communist South Vietnamese "regroupees" moved north to the DRV. About 80,000 of them were Viet Minh veterans of the First Indochina War against the French. Between 5,000 and 10,000 former Viet Minh cadre in South Vietnam (RVN) were ordered by their commanders to bury their weapons and radios, live and work quietly in South Vietnam, and await future orders.[6]

Many South Vietnamese Communists who moved north to the DRV became regular soldiers in two NVA divisions composed exclusively of them. Some 4,500 others were trained as covert military and political

cadre. Their mission was to organize the Communist Viet Minh veterans in South Vietnam into guerrilla squads, platoons, and companies.

Other regroupees were trained as armed agitation-propaganda (agitprop) teams. Their mission was to recruit disaffected South Vietnamese civilians to serve as covert auxiliaries, indoctrinate them in Leninist ideology, and organize them in intelligence and logistics networks to support the main VC guerrilla forces.

In 1957, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), an extension of the Politburo, ordered some of the Communist Viet Minh veterans in South Vietnam to initiate a rural terror campaign to destabilize local governments and organize shadow Communist governments. To enforce total Communist control in the villages they threatened, intimidated, kidnapped, tortured, and assassinated thousands of village leaders and their families.[7]

In May 1959 the NVA's Transportation Group 559 began work on the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route, later called the Ho Chi Minh Trail, from North Vietnam through the jungles and mountains of eastern Laos. Protected by 12,000 NVA troops in Laos, they completed the first stage of the Trail in October 1959. By the end of 1960, 3,500 South Vietnamese regroupees trained as NVA cadre used it to infiltrate back into South Vietnam.[8]

In May 1961 500 senior and mid-level NVA officers left for South Vietnam on the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. The next month, they were followed by 400 regroupee junior NVA officers and senior NCOs. After all the regroupees had been sent back to South Vietnam, regular North Vietnamese Army troop units began to infiltrate it in increasingly large increments. By October of 1961, covert NVA cadre in South Vietnam had recruited and organized two new VC battalions.

In the spring of 1963, the first regular NVA battalion consisting of 600 cadre and enlisted men crossed the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and entered the Republic of Vietnam. By the end of 1963, 40,000 NVA troops were stationed in South Vietnam. Their mission was to augment the troop strength of VC platoons and companies, train them, and develop them into semi-conventional VC/NVA battalions and regiments. Company-size VC forces were organized at the district level, battalion-

size VC/NVA forces were organized at the province level, and regiment-size VC/NVA forces were organized at the regional level.

In the spring of 1964, a second NVA battalion and the entire NVA 325th Division moved south. By the end of 1964, 30,000 new VC troops had been recruited, trained, and organized in five VC regiments. In January 1965, main force NVA and VC units fought five regiment-level battles and two battalion-level battles. The war began to change from a VC/NVA insurgency covertly supported by the NVA to an incremental and increasingly overt NVA invasion of South Vietnam supported by their subordinate VC forces.

In the spring of 1965, Hanoi sent seven more NVA regiments to South Vietnam plus sapper, artillery, and other combat support battalions. In September 1965 the 9th VC Division was formed. Later that year two more VC regiments were organized, and in 1966 a third VC regiment joined them to form the 5th VC Division. That year, two more NVA regiments arrived from the DRV, and in 1967 a third regular NVA regiment joined them to form the 7th (nominally) VC Division, which was actually another NVA division.

In August 1965, the Politburo attempted to transition from the second stage of the Maoist model (semi-conventional, mobile tactics) to the third stage (conventional, positional tactics) with an invasion of the Central Highlands of South Vietnam by three regular NVA regiments. Their tactical objective was to attack large ARVN units, seize key terrain, and defend it. Their strategic objective was to conquer the Republic of Vietnam as quickly as possible before the expected arrival of large conventional U.S. forces.

In the Ia Drang Valley battle in November 1965 they learned that their attempted transition to the third-stage of the Maoist warfare model was premature. Two of the three NVA regiments leading the invasion were ravaged by a U.S. reinforced airmobile battalion with heavy artillery and close air support.[9] The NVA/VC forces were then forced to revert to second-stage, mobile warfare for the next three years.

In early 1967, the five key men in the DRV Politburo's Subcommittee for Military Affairs faced two critical situations. First, the semi-conventional VC forces that had been fighting the main U.S. forces since 1965 were losing the war of attrition. The air mobility and

firepower of Westmoreland's big-unit "search and destroy" campaigns allowed him to relentlessly pursue the main VC combat forces into their formerly secure base areas in South Vietnam. His conventional tactics were depleting the main VC forces and exhausting the survivors, who were constantly forced to evade the airmobile U.S. forces on foot.[10]

In the first half of 1967, VC and NVA combat, medical, and desertion losses exceeded 15,000 men per month, and the VC desertion rate was doubling every six months. Infiltration of NVA troops averaged 7,000 men a month, and VC recruitment averaged 3,500 men per month. More VC/NVA forces were being lost by attrition than were being gained by NVA infiltrators and VC recruits.[11] The depleted VC ranks were being filled by inexperienced, minimally trained, and increasingly younger NVA troops. As their age and training decreased, their combat effectiveness also decreased.

Second, the U.S. bombing campaign in North Vietnam, although much more tactical than strategic and interrupted eight times by President Johnson, was severely degrading the economic infrastructure of the DRV. Much of it was too large to be moved and concealed, and the frequent bombing was threatening to destroy what was left of it.

The DRV had been converted from an exporting to an importing economy and was reduced to little more than a conduit for Soviet and Chinese war supplies. Farm workers had to be used to repair the constant bomb damage, which led to widespread food shortages, food rationing, and malnutrition.[12]

The Politburo knew that an unrestricted, sustained escalation of the U.S. air campaign in North Vietnam would be disastrous both for the DRV's economic infrastructure and for their ability to support their VC/ NVA forces in South Vietnam. They also knew that a major U.S. invasion of Laos to permanently interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail network and destroy the VC/ NVA sanctuary bases in Laos and Cambodia would also be catastrophic for their forces in South Vietnam.[13] Despite their fanatical determination to persevere, they feared that unless they could prevent those two worst-case possibilities, they might lose the war in both the south and the north.

In 1968, in an attempt to regain the strategic initiative Le Duan

replaced Mao's strategy of protracted attrition with Lenin's *coup de main* strategy.[14] It required the rapid seizure of a few strategic targets in the RVN capitol, Saigon, combined with a simultaneous, nationwide, civilian insurrection of both rural "peasants" and "urban proletarians."

He believed that by coordinating all the VC forces with a few large NVA units in a surprise General Offensive he could incite a spontaneous, nationwide General Insurrection. According to his Leninist ideology, the oppressed "revolutionary masses" would then spontaneously join the victorious VC/NVA forces in a popular uprising to overthrow their "U.S. imperialist, neo-colonialist, puppet" regime.

He called it the August 1945 Strategy, assuming it would be as successful as Ho Chi Minh's virtually unopposed seizure of power in August 1945. If he had compared the military context of Ho Chi Minh's 1945 success with the military context of his similar strategy in 1967, he would have seen that no significant points of comparison existed. Giap and his few Politburo supporters, including Ho Chi Minh, recognized the fatal fallacy in Le Duan's new strategy and strongly opposed it as militarily unrealistic and potentially disastrous.[15]

Giap agreed that they needed a decisive victory in a large battle soon, but he disagreed with Le Duan's assumption that dispersed VC forces could defeat the combined firepower of the U.S. and ARVN forces in simultaneous assaults against heavily defended urban targets. Instead, he urged delaying the strategic transition to third-stage positional warfare, until U.S. political will to continue the war was clearly exhausted.

Despite the increasing VC losses, Giap wanted to continue second-stage mobile warfare by attacking only vulnerable enemy units. He considered it essential to avoid large battles with U.S. conventional forces and not risk more major losses in the main VC combat forces.[16]

Ignoring Giap's advice, Le Duan marginalized him in the Politburo and gave the command of the 1968 General Offensive/General Insurrection campaign to Giap's ambitious subordinate, GEN Van Tien Dung. Giap then temporarily exiled himself in Hungary for "health reasons." Ho Chi Minh, whom Le Duan also marginalized in the Politburo for his strong support of Giap's opposition to Le Duan's strategy, temporarily exiled himself in China for medical treatment.[17]

The culmination of Le Duan's 1967 strategy was intended to be a decisive victory over large U.S. forces in a set-piece battle comparable to the decisive 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu.[18] That iconic event was officially portrayed as the triumph of the heroic revolutionary masses, but Giap's name was always associated with it. Le Duan was jealous of Giap's wide popularity and wanted to win a strategically decisive battle against the U.S. forces without Giap.

Le Duan apparently chose the U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh as the target.[19] Lacking any technical military knowledge, he did not understand that he could never match Giap's victory over the French forces at Dien Bien Phu with a victory over the U.S. forces at Khe Sanh for technical reasons beyond his control. Westmoreland confidently welcomed a multi-divisional attack in such a remote area with no collateral damage to civilians from U.S. firepower.

Khe Sanh had an all-weather, twenty-four-hour, radar-controlled bomb targeting system; secure, external artillery support; virtually unlimited, first-priority air support; and acoustic, seismic, and infrared sensors that could precisely detect NVA troop locations and movements. With that data, U.S. air power and long-range artillery firepower could preempt any size and number of NVA ground attacks under any conditions.[20]

The NVA isolated Khe Sanh by land, bombarded it with long-range artillery, dug deep trenches near its perimeter, and repeatedly attacked the surrounding high ground, but the crude, WW I entrenching and bombardment tactics that were successful against the French at Dien Phu in 1954 failed disastrously against the U.S. ground and air forces at Khe Sanh in 1968 They resulted in the loss of at least 10,000 elite NVA troops without ever penetrating the perimeter of the massively defended base.[21]

On the last day of January 1968 Le Duan launched his nationwide General Offensive/ General Insurrection campaign. Some 84,000 VC troops simultaneously attacked five of the six major RVN cities, thirty-six of the forty-four provincial capitals, and sixty-four of the 245 district capitals. In doing so, they lost an estimated 58,000 VC troops and failed to achieve any of their main objectives. Some VC/NVA troops held out for three weeks in Hue and parts of Saigon and Cholon, but most were eventually killed, and the relatively few survivors retreated.[22]

Not surprisingly, there was also no General Insurrection of South Vietnamese civilians. The mass civilian atrocities by the defeated VC forces in Hue and other towns alienated even most of the formerly passive VC sympathizers. For the first time in the war, national patriotism and hostility toward the VC began to develop in South Vietnam.[23]

If Le Duan was surprised by the disastrous failure of his strategy in Tet 1968, his surprise was likely equaled by the U.S. media's portrayal of it as the failure of Westmoreland's attrition strategy and by implication the failure of President Johnson's war in Vietnam.[24] The five key men in the Politburo's SMA must have known that the disastrous VC/NVA losses in the Tet battles demonstrated the effectiveness of Westmoreland's mass attrition "strategy-of-tactics" beyond his own most optimistic expectations.

The U.S. media's radically misleading reporting of those battles, their failure to report the huge tactical losses of the VC-NVA forces, and their discrediting or ignoring the tactical success of the U.S. and ARVN forces was a serendipitous gift to Le Duan. That strategic propaganda victory in America outweighed all the tactical failures of his forces in South Vietnam in 1968.

Most of the U.S. media seemed to believe a simplistic cliché about the war in Vietnam: if the "counterinsurgency" forces are not consistently and visibly winning the "guerrilla" war, they must be losing it or else hopelessly stalemated.[25] That widespread fallacy was based mainly on the rumors, superficial impressions, and gossip of a few cynical and militarily ignorant American reporters in Saigon. Their view of the war was pseudo-authenticated by their brief, occasional visits to U.S. troops in the field for background scenes to enhance their staged war reporting.[26]

Their militarily ignorant view of the war was further validated by a covert, deep-cover DRV agent of influence. A graduate of a U.S. college and fluent in American English, he was a Saigon reporter for *Time* magazine. After the NVA conquest of South Vietnam in 1975, Pham Xuan An, the helpful friend of so many U.S. reporters for so many years, revealed himself as a general in the DRV intelligence service.

His unique contribution to the ultimate NVA victory was not tactical information from spying, but strategic disinformation covertly planted in his conversations with credulous U.S. reporters, who passed on his

covert disinformation messages their reports to the U.S. public. His "poisoning the well" technique discredited the U.S. military's war reports and convinced many reporters that, contrary to official claims, U.S. forces were losing the war to the "Viet Cong."[27]

Most U.S. news editors were not pro-Communist, but seemed to be almost viscerally anti-anti-Communist. They ignored or minimized the fact, reported by a few objective journalists in Vietnam, that the VC fought the 1968 Tet battles with semi-conventional tactics, not guerrilla tactics, and the U.S. and ARVN forces destroyed the VC forces with conventional tactics, not counterinsurgency tactics.[28]

Those news editors seemed not to understand that in the Tet battles. They refused to believe that the U.S. and ARVN forces had permanently destroyed most of the VC combat forces, and the few surviving VC combat forces were no longer an existential threat to RVN sovereignty. They also minimized or ignored the key fact that the ravaged VC forces were being constantly replaced by large, conventional NVA troop units in an accelerated and increasingly overt invasion of the DRV.

In 1968, most Americans got their international news in capsule form from three national television networks. Some TV news editors were more like editorial writers than disinterested journalists reporting factual news in a balanced format. Their negative visual and semantic messages about the war in 1968 led to the popular belief that as long as the "VC guerrillas" could fight big battles, the U.S. forces must be either stalemated or losing the "counterinsurgency" war in South Vietnam, regardless of the greatly favorable tactical results of those battles for the U.S. forces.

Many news editors seemed to be overtly prejudiced against the RVN's authoritarian regime. They seemed reluctant to acknowledge that the DRV and the RVN were two nations, not one nation with two names, and regardless of their racial, linguistic, and cultural similarities, both Vietnams, like both Koreas and both Germanys, were officially recognized as such by numerous other nations. They also resisted acknowledging that a war between two nations is not primarily a civil war, and an invasion of one nation by the forces of other nation is not primarily an insurgency.

The irony of the failure of the NVA's 1968 Dien Bien Phu strategy at Khe Sanh and the failure of the VC's General Offensive/General Insurrection strategy everywhere else in South Vietnam is that both of those moribund strategies were resuscitated by most of the politically adversarial and militarily ignorant U.S. media. That unexpected result evidently convinced Le Duan that a second series of such battles in May would be reported by the media as U.S defeats, regardless of the greatly disproportionate NVA losses, merely because they were fought.

The DRV had a propensity for commemorative battles, and May was important to them for eight historic events: 1) Ho Chi Minh's birthday; 2) the 150th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth; 3) the founding of Giap's "Vietnam Liberation Army" in 1945; 4) the founding of the Lao Dong Party in 1951; 5) the Dien Bien Phu victory in 1954; 6) the beginning of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1959; 7) the founding of the military facade called the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) in 1959; and 8) the strategically decisive Second Geneva Conference in 1961.[29]

The NVA had no tactical need to attack Kham Duc or Ngok Tavak. The pseudo-soldiers of Kham Duc's Civilian Irregular Defense Group had never even attempted to interdict the constant infiltration south of the camp by thousands of regular North Vietnamese Army troops. Because of that fact, the use of two full NVA regiments to attack a place of so little intrinsic value was tactically senseless. A much better use of those troops would have been in attacks on far more important lowland targets in the second wave of the NVA's 1968 General Offensive in May.

Nearly thirty years later retired NVA MG Phan Thanh Du, the operations officer of the 2nd NVA Division in the battle of Kham Duc, implied that the main NVA tactical objective of the attack was simply to lure U.S. reinforcements to that remote area and destroy them.[30] The reason given for the battle in the official history of the PAVN 2nd Division is that it was a prerequisite for repairing QL 14 north and south of the SF camp and extending an old French road eastward toward to the piedmont valleys.[31]

That plan was unrealistic, however, as long as U.S. combat forces remained active in I Corps. A constant and ultimately futile NVA engineering effort would have been required to repair the damage caused

by frequent air attacks and artillery attacks from U.S. fire bases in range of QL 14 and the other road in the more open terrain east and south of Kham Duc.

Exploiting the U.S. domestic political divisions over the war was not part of the Politburo's original strategy for their 1968 General Offensive, but by May of that year it might well have been included. The Politburo knew that a large-scale NVA battlefield victory at that time would be enthusiastically exploited by the far-left leaders of the U.S. anti-war movement.

An April 8, 1968 memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency's Office of National Estimates (ONE) noted that a decisive stage in the war had arrived and intensified military action would strengthen Hanoi's bargaining position vis-a-vis the United States in Paris.[32] A May 3, 1968 memorandum by the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence concluded that Hanoi could be planning to launch major military actions in South Vietnam just before or shortly after the opening of the Paris talks for the same purpose.[33]

A May 6, 1968 CIA memorandum on the likely North Vietnamese strategy in Paris and South Vietnam assumed that the Communist position in South Vietnam was "not at all what [the Politburo] thought it would be…when they conceived the winter-spring campaign last year." It concluded that the military initiative had passed to the U.S. in many areas, but the NVA forces would make every effort to regain it.[34]

That memorandum predicted a coordinated DRV military-diplomatic strategy in the second half of 1968. It considered the simultaneous timing of the Politburo's May 3 agreement to meet the U.S. delegation in Paris and the timing of the NVA's nationwide "Mini-Tet" May offensive "no accident." It predicted that future Politburo actions would be designed to enhance the DRV bargaining position in Paris.[35]

The accelerated NVA combat in their 1968 General Offensive was predicted to culminate in a large, set-piece battle somewhere in I Corps. In allied intelligence circles that prediction was called the "Dien Bien Phu gambit" or the "other shoe scenario."[36] President Johnson recognized the potential impact of the battle on the start of the Paris talks, but he unknowingly understated the size of the NVA forces attacking Kham Duc by half. In his Presidential memoir he wrote:

> "Just before dawn on May 12, the day before the full Paris talks began, a North Vietnamese regiment attacked our troops in northern I Corps near Laos [Kham Duc]. Westmoreland reinforced the units under attack, then skillfully pulled them out…. the North Vietnamese had been denied a tactical victory, but we knew they would continue to try. They wanted to create the impression that they were stronger than they were and could strike at will."[37]

U.S. military intelligence also predicted a strong NVA military initiative to influence the Paris peace talks. It was speculated that a dramatic NVA victory in a large battle with significant U.S. losses might influence the 1968 U.S. Presidential election by swaying public opinion in favor of a radically anti-war candidate.[38]

If Le Duan's strategy for the second phase of his 1968 General Offensive included a large, potentially strategic battle in May just prior to the start of the Paris peace talks, the target of that battle seems to have been Kham Duc. Although smaller than Dien Bien Phu, its characteristics were eerily similar.

Le Duan's choice of Khe Sanh for his first Dien Bien Phu gambit was the result of his own ideological self-delusion and military ignorance, but his apparent choice of Kham Duc as the target of his second Dien Bien Phu gambit was realistic. Compared to the 6,000 U.S. Marine, SF, and RVN defenders of Khe Sanh, who were heavilt armed and constantly supported by massive air and artillery firepower, Kham Duc was like ripe, low-hanging fruit.

The problem with attacking it as a strategic gambit was that capturing or killing a few more U.S. Special Forces men and their indigenous troops would not attract major media attention, and a film of such a remote and insignificant event would have no strategic propaganda value. Unless the attack resulted in the capture or death of numerous U.S. troops, the media could not portray it as a U.S. Dien Bien Phu, as they repeatedly tried to portray Khe Sanh.[39]

Enough U.S. reinforcements had to be sent to Kham Duc to make their death or capture sensational television news in America. The 1967

battle of Dak To, an SF border camp in II Corps, gave Le Duan reason to expect that Kham Duc would be similarly reinforced.[40]

Le Duan evidently thought that the best way to attract major reinforcements to Kham Duc was to convince Westmoreland that if he did not heavily reinforce it, it would soon be overrun by NVA forces. Apparently to convey that message, the NVA planned to first attack Ngok Tavak, a small patrol base south of Kham Duc, where an SF indigenous mercenary company and a Marine artillery platoon were temporary encamped.

In addition to their possible strategic objective at Kham Duc the NVA had at least two tactical objectives. First, they wanted to lure an Americal Division brigade away from its defense of the lowland population centers to increase their chance of success in their attacks on those targets. Second, they wanted to inflict prolonged attrition on the U.S. reinforcements at Kham Duc. Its remote location surrounded by jungle-covered mountains close to the NVA's supply lines and sanctuary bases in Laos was ideal for their large-scale ambush tactics.

Le Duan undoubtedly knew that a shocking, nationwide media message about the fall of Kham Duc might influence the peace talks in Paris. With that strategic potential and with both the numerical odds and the weather odds in his favor he must have thought the maximum tactical risk of losing up to two-thirds of the 2nd NVA Division was a calculated risk well worth taking.

NOTES

1. Griffith, Samuel (trans.); *Mao Tse-tung On Guerrilla Warfare*; Praeger; NY; 1961; p. 60. Mao repeatedly stressed that guerrilla warfare alone cannot win wars against large, determined, conventional armies. Only other large, determined, conventional armies can do that.

2. "We were invading, but we did our best to disguise ourselves as native liberators." – NVA COL Huong Van Ba quoted in Chanoff, David and Doan Van Toai, *Portrait of the Enemy*; Random House; NY; 1986; p. 153.

3. In 1967, Nguyen Chi Thanh died, and Le Duan replaced him with his own closest friend, Pham Hung. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen; *Hanoi's War;* University of North Carolina Press; Chapel Hill, NC; 2012; pp. 25.

4. Doyle, Edward, et al.; *The Vietnam Experience: The North*; Boston Publishing; Boston, MA, 1986; pp. 16-24. Griffith, op. cit., passim.

5. Lien-Hang, op. cit., 26-27.

6. Doyle, op. cit., pp. 16-17. Fall, Bernard; *The Two Viet-Nams (2nd ed.)*; Praeger; NY; 1967; p. 129. Fall, Bernard; *Viet-Nam Witness*; Praeger; NY; 1966; p. 76.

7. Doyle, op. cit., pp. 18, 20, 22, 24.

8. Ibid., pp. 29, 32.

9. cf. Moore, Harold and Galloway, Joseph; *We Were Soldiers Once…And Young*; Random House; NY; 1992.

10. In the rainy season most VC units stayed in their camps for about a month, but in the dry season they moved every ten to fifteen days. – Wilkins, Warren; *Grab Their Belts To Fight Them*; Naval Institute Press; Annapolis, MD; 2011; pp. 35-37. "…we were on the move all the time. Our health and fighting ability got worse and worse." – Bui Van Tai, NVA assistant platoon leader, quoted in Chanoff, op. cit., p. 171.

11. Davidson, Phillip; *Vietnam At War*; Presidio Press; Novato, CA; 1988; pp. 407, 425, 434-438, 467.

12. "Bomb Damage Inflicted On North Vietnam, Summary," May 12, 1967. "Summary of the Ten Year Southeast Asia Air War, 1963-1973," vol. 2, suppl. Doc. III-N, 21, USAF Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, AL. Dougan, Clark, et al.; *The Vietnam Experience: Nineteen Sixty-Eight*; Boston Publishing; Boston, MA; 1983; p. 56.

13. Bui Tin; *From Enemy To Friend*; Naval Institute Press; Annapolis, MD; 2002; pp. 41, 74.

14. A *coup de main* is a method of gaining control of a government by a sudden, decisive seizure of a few strategic targets. On November 7, 1917 Leon Trotsky organized a *coup de main* that enabled Lenin's troops to seize key control points in Petrograd, then the capital of Russia, with no effective opposition. The government was not overthrown, because there was no government left to overthrow. The Communists gained control of the government by political default, not by military conquest.

15. On August 19, 1945 Ho Chi Minh seized power with a *coup de main* in Hanoi, as Lenin did in 1917 in Petrograd. – Robbins, James; *This Time We Win*; Encounter Books; NY; 2010; pp. 64-68. At that time, control of Vietnam could be easily taken by anyone bold enough to claim it. – Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, op. cit., p. 61.

16. Lien-Hang, op. cit., pp. 95, 99, 101-102. Ironically, in 1930 Mao's forces suffered huge losses by following an order by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party to launch simultaneous attacks on heavily defended urban targets. Because of that tactical disaster Mao permanently rejected the Soviet model of revolutionary warfare. – Griffith, op. cit., p. 16.

17. Lien-Hang, op. cit., p. 101-102.

18. Ibid, p. 99.

19. The later NVA claim that Khe Sanh was a "diversion" is risibly absurd. No sane commander would sacrifice three of his best divisions to "tie down" or "isolate" the equivalent of one enemy regiment. That claim, typical of Communist propaganda, is a total reversal of the facts and is acknowledged as such in the memoir of one of the few NVA survivors of three infantry attacks against the perimeter at Khe Sanh. – Delezen, John; *Red Plateau*; Corps Productions; [n.p.]; 2005; pp. 112-113. In reality, Khe Sanh tied down and virtually destroyed with massive air and artillery firepower two or three NVA divisions that could have been much more effectively deployed in the simultaneous and potentially strategic battle of Hue.

20. Westmoreland, William; *A Soldier Reports*; Doubleday, NY; 1976; pp. 336-340.

21. Summers, Harry; *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War*; Houghton Mifflin; NY; 1995; pp. 58-59.

22. Ibid., pp. 138-139. Dougan, op. cit., p. 43. Tucker, Spencer (ed.); *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*; Oxford University Press; NY; 2001; pp. 204-206. An estimated 58,000 VC/NVA troops were killed compared to fewer than 4,000 U.S. troops, fewer than 5,000 ARVN troops, and about 14,300 civilians. – Tucker, op. cit., p. 396-399. Davidson, Phillip; *Vietnam At War*; Presidio Press; Novato, CA; 1988; pp. 474-475. Summers, op. cit., pp. 130-135. Braestrup, Peter; *Big Story*; Presidio Press, Novato, CA; 1983; pp. viii-xvi. Dougan, op. cit., p. 120. Robbins, op. cit., pp. 195-206. Davidson, op. cit., pp. 425-429, 434-438, 546-547. Doyle, op. cit., p. 119-120.

23. Dougan, op. cit., pp. 119-120.

24. An NBC news special on March 10, 1968 stated, "… the war as the Administration has defined it is being lost."– Spector, Ronald; *After Tet;* The Free Press; NY; 1993; p. 5. Davidson, op. cit., pp. 484-488. "… the public was experiencing the bloodshed through the new technology of television. The summaries were not believed. The projected experience was." – Oberdorfer, Don; *TET!*; Doubleday; NY; 1971; pp. 158-159.

25. "… the dominant opinion of the reporters and their editors … [was] that the war was a stalemate …." – Oberdorfer, op. cit., pp. 160-161. "… [in] the northern provinces … American forces [were] fighting a conventional war against regular NVA divisions that had largely abandoned their earlier hit-and-run tactics to stand and fight …." – Dougan, op. cit., p. 147.

26. "U.S. forces in action … were not covered firsthand by many journalists." "Relatively few [reporters] saw any combat (i.e., at battalion level or below) prior to Tet." "… it was rare for newsmen to spend the night with a U.S. company or battalion in the field … long enough to see the [combat] as the troops or their leaders saw it." – Braestrup, op. cit., p. 24. "… [Reporters] centered their attention on Saigon." –

Hammond, William; *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*; University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS; 1998; p. 110. "[They] passed on rumors circulating in Saigon." – ibid. p. 132. The three main Saigon rumor and gossip mills were the veranda of the Continental Hotel, the bar of the Caravelle Hotel, and the Grival restaurant on Rue Catinat. – Just, Ward; *Reporting Vietnam*; The Library of America; NY; p. 601. The U.S. correspondents and camera crews in Saigon could leave their hotels in the morning, drive to the war, drive back to their offices with their film and reports, and return home the same day. – Oberdorfer, op. cit., p. 160. Watching the war from the roof of the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon was a nightly social event. – Ibid, p. 183.

27. cf. Berman, Larry; *The Perfect Spy*; Smithsonian Books; NY; 2008.

28. "Everywhere in South Vietnam many of the ablest and most experienced Viet Cong cadres, administrators, and combat leaders were dead or prisoners by the end of 1968." – Spector, op. cit., p. 282.

29. At that conference the inept diplomacy of a grossly incompetent U.S. ambassador, Averell Harriman, resulted in the arbitrary prohibition of a limited U.S. invasion of eastern Laos and Cambodia, which made those nations permanent sanctuaries for VC and NVA forces and a permanent route for the Ho Chi Minh Trail. – cf. Summers, op. cit., p. 68.

30. Phan Thanh Du quoted in Davies, Bruce; *The Battle For Ngok Tavak*; Allen & Unwin; Crows Nest, NSW, Australia; 2008; p. 187.

31. Chuong, Nguyen Huy; *Su Doan 2, Tap 1 [2nd Division, Volume 1]*; *Second Division Party Committee and Headquarters*; Danang Publishing House; Danang, Socialist Republic of Vietnam; 1989; pp 100-101; excerpts translated by Merle Pribbenow.

32. "ONE Memo for DCI: Speculation on Hanoi's Motives," Memorandum for the Director; April 8, 1968; Office of National Estimates, Central Intelligence Agency; Washington, D.C.

33. "Hanoi's Paris Initiative and the Possibility of a New Communist Military Offensive"; Memorandum SC No. 08360/68; May 3, 1968; Directorate of Intelligence; Central Intelligence Agency; Washington, D.C.

34. "Hanoi's Negotiating Position and Concept of Negotiations"; IM 0587/68; May 6. 1968; Central Intelligence Agency; Washington, D.C.

35. Ibid.

36. Pike, Douglas; *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*; The M.I.T. Press; Cambridge, MA; 1969; p. 128.

37. Johnson, Lyndon Baines; *The Vantage Point*; Holt, Rinehart and Winston; NY; 1971; p. 508. LBJ was aware of Harriman's desire to capitulate to the DRV demands to withdraw all U.S. troops from South Vietnam. He ordered GEN Andrew Goodpaster, his military representative on the U.S. team in Paris, to immediately inform him personally, if Harriman ever indicated any intention of doing so. – Email and telephone statement of Goodpaster to McLeroy, April 12, 1998.

38. In 1972, George McGovern won the Democratic Party Presidential nomination on a pledge to immediately end all U.S. participation in the Vietnam War. – Tucker, op. cit., p. 255. Davidson, op. cit., p. 338.

39. Tucker, op. cit., pp. 90-91. Davidson, op. cit., pp. 223-283.

40. Summers, op. cit., pp. 128-129.