



Last Stand at Khe Sanh: The U.S. Marines' Finest Hour in Vietnam

by Gregg Jones.

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Review by Bruce Zellers, Greenhills School and Oakland University (zellers@greenhillsschool.org).

When we think of the ground war in Vietnam, we envision two contrasting types of operations. On the one hand, long, uncomfortable, frustrating “search and destroy” slogs through terrain where the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) appeared only to booby trap trails or ambush an American column. On the other hand, there are the big conventional fights at places like Ia Drang, Hué, and Khe Sanh—an “emblematic confrontation” (xvii). Gen. William Westmoreland thought these disparate operational modes were complementary: assuredly, the enemy had to be found to be destroyed. For US soldiers and Marines, this was a distinction without a difference. Both types of operations incurred horrifying bloodshed and thus powerful waves of fear and anxiety that discipline, training, and raw courage had to overcome. In his new book, noted journalist Gregg Jones' illustrates the meaning of these aspects of combat in Vietnam.

Jones prioritizes engaging description over cold analysis, wanting to show “what was it like for the young Americans who were there” (xvii). Khe Sanh lay near the Demilitarized Zone between the Vietnams, within a few miles of the Laotian border. Like many battlefields in Vietnam, it had an aura of déjà vu: the remnants of a French fort lay nearby and, Jones tells us, the Marines and the NVA had fought and bled there a few months before, during the so-called “Hill Fights” (xix, 8).

Seeing the Vietnam conflict as “a tragic sideshow of the Cold War” (xix), the author considers Westmoreland's decision to make a “stand” at Khe Sanh to have been unnecessary—“a metaphor for the Vietnam War's strategic folly” (xvii); after all, the base was closed shortly after the general's departure. He briefly notes the panic that erupted in Washington, as Khe Sanh was compared to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. There is even less discussion of North Vietnam's goals, but plenty has been written elsewhere on these topics.

The heart of the book concerns the experience of combat at Khe Sanh from January to April 1968. “Khe Sanh” was not a single base, but a fortified airstrip surrounded (and protected) by hilltop outposts, manned mostly by companies and battalions of Marines. The extended engagement there illustrates the full range of military operations in Vietnam, from conducting daily search patrols (some resulting in ambushes and heavy casualties) to repelling regiment-strength NVA assaults. The fortifications erected by Marines would have looked familiar to Korean War veterans. American forces were subject to daily artillery, mortar, and rocket attacks by 200+ heavy weapons (76). The Chinese in Korea had generated heavier barrages, but the NVA fire was both nerve-wracking and destructive; on one occasion, a dozen NVA light tanks joined a night attack. Water and food were in short supply at Khe Sanh whenever helicopters were grounded by enemy action or bad weather, and medical evacuations, too, could be problematic. Though some outlying positions fell, the main combat base was never seriously threatened, thanks to massive US firepower—and perhaps NVA strategy. A hellish experience, no doubt, but not the “last stand” of the book's title.

1. He has been a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the Gerald Loeb Award.

Relying on interviews with eyewitnesses, Jones never romanticizes the combat at Khe Sanh, instead stressing details as shocking as those depicted in *Saving Private Ryan*² or *Dunkirk*.³ Some victims simply vanished in a direct hit by mortar, rocket, or artillery fire. Others sustained excruciating and disfiguring injuries. Those who survived their wounds spent months or years in military hospitals. Others were knocked unconscious, recovered, and returned to their posts while nursing the effects of a concussion. The pyrotechnics and the human interactions of war can be portrayed as awe-inspiring or even beautiful, but not the battle grounds of Vietnam, as Jones presents them, with their deafening racket of weapons punctuated by screams of agony.⁴ Of course, the situation on the other side was, as Jones observes, even more horrible.

Last Stand at Khe Sanh is a paean to the Vietnam-era Marine Corps: the men on those hilltops were well trained, highly motivated, competently led—and tough. Jones casts them as a microcosm of a diverse America:

the American melting pot was alive and well in Kilo Company [26th Marines]. The Corps had taken young men from every conceivable background—Northerners and Southerners, blacks and whites, jocks and scholars, high school dropouts and college boys—and broken them down and rebuilt them as peerless warriors bound by a sense of brotherhood and purpose.... They were and would forever be, United States Marines, guided by an uncomplicated creed: *Semper Fidelis*—Always Faithful, with an emphasis on Always. (22–23)

(US Army veterans may wish to read no further.) Jones offers no statistical evidence, but his careful introductions of individual actors in his story seem to confirm this stirring vision. Training was paramount. Through the fog of war, the men got to their positions, took charge, assisted the wounded and, when necessary, led counterattacks. Units at Khe Sanh typically comprised recent replacements, experienced veterans, and men counting the hours until rotations home; they fought and died together. This may have had less to do with the ethos of the Corps than with professionalism, courage, and character.

As the epilogue points out, some Khe Sanh survivors never fully recovered from their experience. But many others who spoke with Jones at reunions and during interviews saw their time there as having made them what they were. They had not just survived. They had grown and matured.

Given the number of fine accounts, both fiction and nonfiction, of the war in Vietnam,⁵ *Last Stand at Khe Sanh* does not meet any pressing need. However, Gregg Jones's gripping description of the vicious combat around Khe Sanh reminds Americans of what they require of their soldiers—men, women, straight, gay, transgender, et al.—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, (and soon Korea?). Thus, it merits careful reading and serious reflection.

2. Dir. Steven Spielberg (1998).

3. Dir. Christopher Nolan (2017).

4. Cf. Bernard F. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (1967; rpt. NY: Da Capo, 1985).

5. E.g., Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (NY: Delacorte Pr, 1975), and *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990); Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977; rpt. NY: Everyman's Library, 2009); Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977); Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young: Ia Drang—The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam* (NY: Random House, 1992); Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point in the American War in Vietnam* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 2017).