



Gregg Jones, *Ostatni bastion w Khe Sanh. Godzina chwały amerykańskich marines w Wietnamie*, transl. Stanisław Powąła-Niedźwiecki, Czerwonak 2020, pp. 491

Few publications describing the siege of Khe Sanh Combat Base are now accessible for Polish readers in their own language. There is one monograph of the battle written by Jarema Słowiak;¹ the siege of Khe Sanh CB is also mentioned in several other works, mostly in close connection with the famous Tet Offensive of 1968.² Because of that, Gregg Jones's book *Ostatni bastion w Khe Sanh. Godzina chwały amerykańskich marines w Wietnamie* (original title: *Last stand at Khe Sanh*), published in the Polish edition by Vesper in 2020 (originally published in United States in 2014 by Da Capo Press) and dedicated entirely to the eponymous battle, is most welcome by all interested in the history of the Second Indochina War.

Located near the Laotian border and protected by several small outposts on the nearby surrounding hills, Khe Sanh CB constituted both a serious threat to the adjacent portion of the so-called Ho Chi Minh Path and a potential starting point for a major American offensive aimed at the North Vietnamese Army's logistical network in Laos (the role of this network was to resupply NVA sanctuaries and the complex base area used for all

¹ J. Słowiak, *Khe Sanh 1968. Amerykańskie i wietnamskie poszukiwania rozstrzygającej bitwy*, Zabrze–Tarnowskie Góry 2017; see also: idem, *Khe Sanh – niespełnione Dien Bien Phu drugiej wojny indochińskiej*, in: *Studia nad wojnami w Indochinach*, vol. 1, ed. P. Benken, Oświęcim 2013, pp. 33–65.

² See e.g. P. Benken, *Ofensywa Tet 1968. Studium militarno-polityczne*, Szczecin 2014, pp. 166–187.

major communist military activities conducted south of the Demilitarised Zone). Located in the mountainous area, with a limited road network, Khe Sanh CB was relatively easy to cut off by NVA troops equipped with long ranged artillery (firing from covered emplacements in Laos), mortars, rocket launchers and various antiaircraft guns. As Jones points out, Khe Sanh CB was therefore both an important stronghold restraining the NVA's movement in the DMZ area, and America's potential weakest point in the South Vietnamese I Corps Military Region area. The garrison of Khe Sanh CB (about six thousand men) consisted mostly of United States Marines Corps units. Marines were well known for their aggressive tactics, bravery and stubbornness which in Vietnam often resulted in unnecessary casualties caused by the elusive enemy.

The book is divided into three main parts consisting of several chapters each (twenty two altogether). In the first section, Jones gives readers a taste of battle by writing about the first assaults on Khe Sanh (the failed NVA attack on Hill 861, the Communist takeover of the village of Khe Sanh); he also provides necessary introduction, by clarifying the importance of Khe Sanh CB for the American and Vietnamese war effort. Jones writes not only about the military and political background of the siege but also describes the so-called border battles from the second part of 1967 (NVA probes before the actual offensive). The other two parts of the book are dedicated to various stages of the siege after the 29th of January until the middle of April 1968. In the second part of the book, Jones gives a valid and very detailed description of the most critical part of the siege between the 30th of January and 25th of February (the failed NVA assault on Hill 861 Alpha, the battle for Special Forces Camp in Lang Vei, the repelled NVA assault on Hill 64). Jones also presents the new American methods of supply airlifting to Khe Sanh which had to be improvised when NVA artillery, mortar and rocket barrage effectively eliminated traditional techniques. Moreover, he illustrates the heavy impact of American bombing raids on NVA troops concentrated around the Khe Sanh. On the other hand, in the first chapter of the last part of the book, Jones describes the badly planned and poorly executed Marine patrol conducted outside BC perimeter on the 25th of February, when one of the American companies lost 23 men killed in action in an enemy ambush. In the last chapter, Jones also presents the operations of the 1st Air Cavalry

Division (codename 'Pegasus') which resulted in breaking through to Khe Sanh and lifting the siege in April. At the very end, Jones writes about the evacuation of Khe Sanh CB that took place in June the same year.

One aspect I like about Jones's way of reconstructing the battle is that he does not separate the siege of Khe Sanh CB from the bigger picture, that is the Tet Offensive. Some other authors have the tendency to take Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive as two different battles, since the former was fought in a distant area near the DMZ while the latter raged through the cities of South Vietnam in the very heart of the country.³ As much as it is tempting to think of Khe Sanh as just a supplement for the Tet Offensive, these two battles were closely connected, since the siege of Khe Sanh CB started first, in order to lure American forces away from Hanoi's main goals – the cities of South Vietnam. Jones understands all this and does not omit important military and political questions concerning the siege. The author writes about general William C. Westmoreland's conception of fighting a decisive conventional battle at Khe Sanh and at the same time emphasises president Lyndon B. Johnson's great anxiety that the siege could have turned into another Dien Bien Phu – a military disaster that had sealed the French defeat in Vietnam. To Westmoreland, the massive concentration of NVA troops at Khe Sanh constituted a much needed opportunity to fight the enemy on the selected battlefield where Americans could have used their vast fire power and complete air superiority to the maximum effect. Therefore, the American commander welcomed the siege of Khe Sanh with open arms and, unlike president Johnson, was not upset about it but eagerly started to prepare a devastating counterattack.⁴

As for Hanoi's point of view, Jones justly claims that the siege of Khe Sanh was undertaken in order to weaken the American ability to counter the NVA and Viet Cong attacks on the cities planned to kick off at the end of January of 1968. Some authors believe that this was Hanoi's single goal and the NVA never intended to actually take Khe Sanh.⁵ However, Jones thinks (and in this he seems to be right) that the massive NVA troop

³ See e.g. J. Pimlott, *Vietnam. The decisive battles*, London 1990.

⁴ W. C. Westmoreland, *A soldier reports*, New York 1971, pp. 336–337.

⁵ See: W. T. Allison, *The Tet Offensive. A brief history with documents*, New York 2008, p. 32.

concentration at Khe Sanh (more than twenty thousand men, perhaps even as many as forty thousand) was far too big for just a decoy.⁶ Those troops suffered heavy casualties during the battle (no less than five and a half thousand KIA, not counting the unknown number wounded and missing soldiers), mostly from American tactical aircraft (including B52 so-called Arc Light raids)⁷ and long-range artillery strikes; therefore, it is rather unlikely that the NVA high command put them there just to be slaughtered. It is true that the NVA was not eager to send their forces into costly general assaults and during most of the battle the North Vietnamese were just blocking Khe Sanh CB while subjecting it to steady heavy artillery, mortar and rocket bombardment. The communist commanders did however order several attacks on the hills surrounding the CB, executed by units from company to regiment size. The North Vietnamese also dug up a impressive trench network around the CB. All of this clearly indicates that the NVA was undertaking preparations for the attack on the CB itself. If the NVA had taken the hills, the North Vietnamese would have gained the ability to put much heavier and more accurate indirect fire on the CB in order to reduce defence positions with great efficiency (just like at Dien Bien Phu). Besides, the NVA commanders had every right to think that by successfully cutting off Khe Sanh CB from the reinforcements and resupply both from the ground and air (by blocking roads and by directing intense antiaircraft fire on incoming planes assisted with the dense shelling of the CB landing tip), they would force the defenders to either abandon the stronghold or surrender. Only after the Americans had come up with some extraordinary ways of airlifting (conducted mostly by C130 and C123 transportation planes) were they finally able to secure enough ammo, food and water to keep the besieged Marines combat effective⁸ Nevertheless, the permanent supply shortage continued to dog the Americans during the battle⁹ (espe-

⁶ G. Jones, *Ostatni bastion w Khe Sanh. Godzina chwały amerykańskich marines w Wietnamie*, transl. S. Powąła-Niedźwiecki, Czerwonak 2020, p. 121.

⁷ See e.g. S. P. Callahan, *Close air support and the battle for Khe Sanh*, Quantico 2009.

⁸ See also: P. Brush, *Aerial lifeline to Khe Sanh*, "Vietnam" 1999, no. 12, pp. 30–37.

⁹ NVA artillery fire destroyed Khe Sanh Combat Base main ammo dump in the very first hours of battle.

cially for units occupying the hilltops where all the necessary materials had to be brought up by the USMC CH46 choppers). Additionally, the author does not forget to present the negative impact that the siege of Khe Sanh had both on American public opinion and the US government.

To sum up, it appears that the NVA planned to achieve two main goals at Khe Sanh – the first one was to lure American forces away from the cities; the second was to take their combat base, if practical. The communist troops massed at Khe Sanh were very well dug in to withstand the severe and expected American tactical air strikes and ready to conduct a general assault at the first signs of enemy collapse due to hardships suffered from a long-term siege. Hanoi's plan however ultimately failed mostly due to the American mobility, fire power and air superiority displayed during operation "Niagara". General Westmoreland had enough resources to hold Khe Sanh and counter the massive NVA/VC offensive against the cities. The battle for Khe Sanh ended as a costly defeat for the communists. Their only gain was that after the siege was lifted Westmoreland decided to evacuate Khe Sanh, which fastened the NVA position in that part of the DMZ area. This gave Hanoi an opportunity to present the clash as a North Vietnamese victory.

Jones uses a lot of data he gathered from official documents (including after action reports from the USMC archives) and previously published works.¹⁰ Although the overall depiction of the battle is very much the same as we know from other books, there are many details that make a difference. The most important and original information comes from the many interviews Jones conducted with Americans veterans, enabling him to provide his readers with carefully and meticulously crafted descriptions of each fight. Especially in the chapters dedicated to American ordeals during defence of the Hill 861, the battle for the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp (where the NVA used tanks PT76 to successfully reduce the defenders'

¹⁰ Jones used amongst the other: E. Hammel, *Khe Sanh: Siege in the clouds. An oral history*, New York 1989; R. Pisor, *The end of the line. The siege of Khe Sanh*, New York 1982; J. Prados, R. Stubbe, *Valley of decision. The siege of Khe Sanh*, Boston 1991; J. Shulimson, L. Blasiol, Ch. Smith, D. Dawson, *U.S. marines in Vietnam. The defining year 1968*, Washington 1997.

position) or the defence of Hill 64, Jones places his readers slap bang in the middle of the action. He tells the story not only from a battalion or company commander point of view, but gives the perspective of a platoon and squad leader as well. Frankly speaking, Jones goes even further as he often describes the fates of individual soldiers manning the bunkers, foxholes and machine gun positions. Neatly using the data he obtained during his interviews with veterans, Jones gives the readers a unique sense of combat experience when there is no mercy and soldiers are fighting for their very survival. Death, terrifying wounds, fear, bravery and cowardice – it is all there. At the same time, Jones manages to write the story of Khe Sanh in such a way that his readers do not miss the bigger picture and are fully aware of what was going on and how the Americans losing this or that machine gun position affected their overall ability to fend off the attackers. But Jones writes not only about the combat but also presents daily life in the besieged Khe Sanh. Jones shows that an ordinary Marine had to go through a variety of hardships during battle. The most serious issues were problems with getting a sufficient amount of water (it had to be transported to Khe Sanh from the outside world) and nearly constant and nerve wrecking NVA bombardment.

In conclusion Gregg Jones's book is the best work about Khe Sanh available for Polish readers and one of the best books about that battle overall. It is well-constructed and written in a compelling style. What is impressive about Jones as an author is that he does not just follow information from documents or eye-witness accounts but he confronts them and as a result finds some mistakes or distortions that can be corrected. Jones is not afraid to point at all the bad decisions made by the Americans during the battle, which paints him as a reliable and trustworthy author. His book's only weakness comes from the lack of any wider NVA perspective (presented mostly by citing documents captured on the site of battle) but this shortcoming can be justified by limited access to Vietnamese archives. Perhaps one might also say that not only do the North Vietnamese stand in the shade of the Marines. Amongst the units defending Khe Sanh there was a South Vietnamese Rangers battalion. Jones mentions the American allies a few times but it seems scant to say the least.

Despite some minor critical notes, Jones is to be congratulated for writing a great book that will undoubtedly remain one of the most important works on the battle for Khe Sanh. Polish readers may be genuinely happy to have it available in their own language since the quality of the translation is very good.

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