

PATHFINDER

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AIR POWER IN THE SIEGE OF KHE SANH

The Vietnam War is not a conflict in which air power is popularly credited with having made a major difference to what was ultimately an unsatisfactory outcome, even in the southern half of divided Vietnam where allied air power (principally the US Air Force) enjoyed uncontested supremacy. In what is still usually described as an irregular war—wrongly, as it was actually a “hybrid” conflict fought at many levels—there are also few major set-piece engagements where air power is considered to have provided the winning edge. The exception to this was the siege of the US Marine Corps outpost at Khe Sanh in 1968. From an Australian perspective it is notable that the RAAF had a generally unrecognised involvement in this epic battle.

Situated in the hills close by the western end of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) separating the southern Republic of Vietnam from its communist northern neighbour, Khe Sanh provided a valuable base for disrupting the route used by the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) to move supplies and reinforcements from the North into South Vietnam, through the neighbouring territory of Laos. It was to remove this threat that in late 1967 the PAVN commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, began building up his forces. By the end of the year Giap had marshalled into the area three full divisions and a regiment of a fourth, numbering around 30,000 troops, in readiness to attack the 6000 Marines and Army troops within Khe Sanh.

Unknown to the allies, there was a sinister twist to the PAVN plan in that an assault on the American stronghold was intended to be merely the opening shot in a general offensive by communist insurgents across South Vietnam timed for the Tet national holiday that would mark the lunar New Year on 31 January 1968. The hope was that

a large scale attack on Khe Sanh would draw American troops to the far north-western corner of South Vietnam, and away from the major population centres that would be targeted in the coming offensive. Giap undoubtedly expected that the loss of Khe Sanh would have the same dramatic effect on the Americans as the defeat he had inflicted on the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. He even sought to add to the symbolism of the undertaking by including the seasoned 304th Division—one of those that had humbled the French 14 years earlier—among those earmarked for the assault on Khe Sanh.



Giap’s strategy was also essentially the same as that he employed at Dien Bien Phu. He would use the rugged terrain and isolation of the American base to surround and cut it off, before pounding it with artillery placed on the surrounding hills and finally overwhelming it by ground assault. However, the assumptions behind Giap’s designs were flawed on this occasion because he had not fully taken into account the improved technology, particularly in aircraft, which the American and allied forces now possessed. Although Khe Sanh—just like Dien Bien Phu—was heavily dependent on an airfield for much of its outside supplies, especially once heavy monsoonal rains had made the few roads near the base impassable, the

allies had on hand a large number of aircraft capable of delivering strikes to break the siege.

On the morning of 21 January, PAVN forces made their first attacks on Khe Sanh using artillery, rockets and mortars. One rocket landed in the base’s ammunition dump and, at a single stroke, most of its stockpile of artillery rounds and explosives were lost. However, the US commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, was determined that the base would

hold out and poured staggering quantities of troops and other resources—including air power—into its defence. Operation *Niagara*, as the siege was known, became a hard-fought affair that lasted for the next 77 days, only ending when the PAVN withdrew in mid-April.



The Australian involvement in events at Khe Sanh were represented by the missions carried out by the RAAF's No 2 Squadron. A year earlier, in April 1967, this unit had arrived at the American base at Phan Rang, 1000 kilometres to the south of Khe Sanh, to begin operations with the USAF's 35th Tactical Fighter Wing. For the next six months the squadron's aging Canberra jet bombers were engaged in night operations across South Vietnam involving bombing under radar direction. Only in September was the squadron employed on low-level daylight bombing sorties where it began to achieve a well-deserved reputation as the most accurate bombing unit in the Wing.

This change in role for the Canberras came in time for the Australians to participate in the defence of Khe Sanh. Within days of the siege's commencement, 2 Squadron began daylight bombing operations around the base, although they occasionally flew night missions also. The number of aircraft over Khe Sanh and the DMZ—not just from the US Air Force, but also the Navy and Marine Corps—was so large that the airspace frequently became congested. On 2 February, the 2 Squadron crews found they had to return to Phan Rang without being able to drop their bombs.

Over the course of the siege 115,000 tonnes of bombs, rockets and napalm were delivered by American and allied aircraft, frequently including B-52 strategic bombers. It was this weight of ordnance that primarily ensured that Khe Sanh did not fall. It is also believed to have caused 10,000-15,000 PAVN casualties (the exact

number is not known), and helped keep the defenders' losses to about 1000 killed and 4,500 wounded. Although air power had been the primary factor in preventing the allied cause suffering a major defeat, this outcome did not come to be viewed as the success it undoubtedly was. This was for reasons which ultimately overshadowed the whole of the Khe Sanh story.

Two months after the siege ended, the US Marines abandoned Khe Sanh and deliberately destroyed the base so as not to give the PAVN a symbol of victory. By then it was already apparent that the successful defence mounted there had been essentially in vain. Even though the wider Tet Offensive had also been repelled, this had brought a reversal of fortune for the American cause which proved to be a turning point in the Vietnam conflict. Whereas a majority of the American (and Australian) population had previously supported the war, the ability of the PAVN and Viet Cong guerrilla fighters to wreak so much havoc appeared to reveal serious shortcomings in the conduct of the war, and also called into serious question claims by political and military leaders that final victory was in sight. Public opinion began to turn irreversibly against further escalation of the war, eventually compelling the American and allied forces to withdraw from Vietnam.

- *Air power proved vital in ensuring that Khe Sanh did not become a shattering defeat like Dien Bien Phu.*
- *The damage caused by the broader Tet Offensive erased the significance of the successful defence at Khe Sanh and delivered a psychological defeat for the allied cause in Vietnam.*
- *No 2 Squadron, RAAF, played a little known part in halting the PAVN at Khe Sanh.*

'Our Canberra strikes were part of the enormous air campaign mounted by tactical aircraft to prevent the enemy overrunning the base, which was ultimately saved by air power.'

WGCDR (later AIRMSHL) S.D. Evans,
CO 2 SQN 1967-68



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