

# This Day in History... January 21, 1968

## Battle of Khe Sanh

On January 21, 1968, one of the most controversial and highly publicized battles of the Vietnam War began at Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB) in South Vietnam.

The site of a former French fort, Khe Sanh Combat Base was built by Green Berets in 1964. The Marines eventually expanded and took over Khe Sanh, while the Green Berets built a smaller camp halfway between the base and Laos at Lang Vei.

In April 1967, US Marines began to encounter North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops in the hills surrounding Khe Sanh. To prevent enemy troops from holding these positions, and thereby observing the base, American troops had to be stationed on the surrounding hills at all hours. This increased American presence led to a lull in fighting on the hills.

In the second half of 1967, the NVA and NLF (National Liberation Front) began launching attacks along the border of South Vietnam. However, these attacks were different – the North Vietnamese normally launched hit-and-run skirmishes, but were now fighting longer-lasting, bloody battles. The combination of hill and border battles, as well as reports of significant enemy build up in the area, led General William Westmoreland to call in reinforcements. Then, on January 20, 1968, an NVA lieutenant defected to the base and informed the Marines of their plans to attack Khe Sanh and the nearby hills.

Shortly after midnight on January 21, the NVA launched their first attack on Hill 861. However, the Marines knew the attack was coming and were prepared, launching extensive artillery fire. In spite of this, the NVA made it through the perimeter but were eventually forced back out after close-quarters combat.

Next came a massive mortar and rocket barrage on the main base that destroyed most of the above ground buildings. Some of these shells hit the base's main ammunition dump, sending mortar flying into the air that then exploded when it landed. Even hours after the bombardment was over, fires raged around the base, igniting C-4 and causing more explosions.

At the same time as the bombardment of the base, NVA troops attacked the village of Khe Sanh. A group of 160 local troops and 15 American advisors protected the village until they could evacuate. The NVA then took full control of the village the next morning.

In the coming days, American and South Vietnamese (ARVN) reinforcements arrived at Khe Sanh and dug-in as the NVA launched a merciless artillery bombardment. The troops at Khe Sanh hoped that the upcoming Tet holiday truce would give them a break from the attacks, but they soon received word that the truce had been called off. Worse, the NVA launched their Tet Offensive on January 30, striking over 100 cities across Vietnam. Westmoreland was convinced that the Tet Offensive was staged as a distraction from the real threat at Khe Sanh. President Lyndon Johnson was swayed by Westmoreland's belief in the importance of Khe Sanh and ordered all military personnel to hold the base at all costs.

Within days of the first attacks on Khe Sanh, US commanders began planning for a possible overland relief mission – Operation Pegasus. The operation began on April 1 with Marines leading a ground assault out of Ca Lu, while cavalry units launched air assaults. Along the way, these troops established fire support bases and repaired the largely destroyed Route 9. They faced little enemy opposition in the first few days, but soon found themselves engaged in daylong battles as they neared Khe Sanh. The cavalry managed to capture the old French fort near Khe Sanh on April 7 and linked up with the Marines in KSCB on the morning of April 8. Route 9 was finally reopened on April 11 and Operation Pegasus ended on April 15.

For the next two months, US Marines conducted search and destroy operations in the area. Then in early June, General Creighton Abrams replaced Westmoreland. Abrams did not want to see another battle of Khe Sanh, so he ordered the evacuation and destruction of the KSCB. The Marines removed anything useful and destroyed the rest. The NVA quickly entered the base on July 9 and raised their flag. The Battle for Khe Sanh, as well as the Tet Offensive, made 1968 the bloodiest year of the war for the American military.



*Issued on Veteran's Day in 1979 to honor the brave soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War.*



*From the 1960s Celebrate the Century sheet*



*The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, contains the names of the 57,939 military personnel who gave their lives during the Vietnam War.*



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