

Memorandum From the Chairman ^{of the} Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler) to Secretary of Defense
McNamara

Washington, January 13, 1968.

CM-2908-68.

1. Source: Washington National Records Center, RG 330, Office of the Secretary of Defense Files; ^{FRC} 73 A 1304, ~~Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense~~ 1968 Files, VIET 385. Top Secret. A notation on the memorandum indicates that McNamara saw it on January 15. According to a memorandum entitled "The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh, A Speculative Appraisal," January 8, sent by Carver to Helms, intelligence reports had indicated that elements from four NVA divisions (the 304th, 320th, 324B, and 325C) had been moved into the area around Khe Sanh in preparation for an attack. The memorandum concluded that the enemy's objectives were, at a minimum, to force abandonment of the base and, at a maximum, "to draw substantial U.S. reinforcements from other areas in South Vietnam and tie them down in the Khe Sanh area." (Central Intelligence Agency, Executive Registry, Job No. 80 R 01284A, DCI/ER Files, ER Files - Special Material 01 Jan - 28 Feb 1968)

2. In telegram JCS 343, January 11, Wheeler requested Westmoreland's views on each option. The first was phrased as "the possibility of turning an attack against the Khe Sanh to our advantage, that is, Dien Bien Phu in reverse. This view argues the possibility of capitalizing on an attack against Khe Sanh by striking the enemy from the rear in Laos and proceeding to attack enemy bases in the area, perhaps as far west as Tchepone, in a relatively short campaign," the second as "withdrawal from Khe Sanh because the enemy is building toward a Dien Bien Phu. This argument is based upon the following premises: A. The Road to Khe Sanh has been cut. B. We do not control the commanding hills. C. The enemy is bringing up artillery which will be able to control the airfield. D. A withdrawal now could be done without much public notice. E. There is an awkward

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relationship between COMUSMACV and the Marine commander which makes the Marines reluctant to withdraw and COMUSMACV reluctant to direct them to do so." (Johnson Library, William C. Westmoreland Papers, Eyes Only Message File, 1 Jan.-31 Jan. 1968)

3. A clearing operation involving bombing and artillery shelling of enemy positions around Khe Sanh.

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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

CM-2908-68
13 January 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Subject: Khe Sanh (U)

Recently, two differing views of the situation in the Khe Sanh area came to my attention. Briefly, these are: (1) preempting an enemy assault in the Khe Sanh area by an offensive into Laos; (2) a complete withdrawal from Khe Sanh. I do not personally subscribe to either of these views, both of which overlook important factors. However, since these two propositions have reportedly been given prominent attention at high non-military levels, I considered that it would be useful to have General Westmoreland's comments on them and on the Khe Sanh situation in general. I have now received his comments and I provide them to you, in the succeeding paragraphs, for your information.

"1. I have just returned from a visit with General Cushman during which we discussed contingency plans for reinforcing Khe Sanh and the I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ). General Cushman has two USMC battalions in Khe Sanh now and contingency plans for augmenting this force with an additional USMC battalion on eight hour notice, followed by a second battalion on twelve hour notice, and by SLF forces. Additionally, and as a result of the above discussion, I have directed him as a matter of first priority to alert a brigade of the Americal Division to move into the Hue/Phu Bai area. This can be done quickly with fixed wing or rotary wing aircraft.

"2. As a second priority we are prepared to reinforce I CTZ in the Hue/Phu Bai, Danang, or Chu Lai areas in that priority with another brigade, either from the 101st Airborne Division or from the 1st Cavalry Division.

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10 JAN 1968

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"3. Additional actions underway include the following:

"a. As the ROK Marine Brigade moves into the Danang tactical area of responsibility (TAOR), elements of the 1st Marine Division are being released for deployment north of Ai-Van pass. This in turn is releasing elements of the 3d Marine Division for movement into Quang Tri province. Two battalions of the ROK Marine Brigade have completed their movement and four battalions of the 1st Marine Division are now north of Ai-Van pass. This move will be completed by 31 January with four ROK battalions in the Danang TAOR and five 1st Marine Division battalions north of the pass.

"b. The JGS has agreed to deploy a task force of two airborne battalions to I CTZ on or about 15 January 1968, bringing to four the number of ARVN airborne battalions in I CTZ.

"c. We are developing priority targets in Operation NIAGARA for a sustained ARC LIGHT campaign, augmented by tactical air, beginning not later than 18 January. We plan to concentrate on targets in RVN prior to Tet with approximately 75 percent or more of our total effort. During and following the Tet cease fire, we will strike targets in Laos. This operation also includes a slam type operation in the Khe Sanh area by 7th Air Force. In conjunction with our sustained ARC LIGHT campaign, I am requesting (by separate communication) a further step up in the B-52 accelerated program now scheduled to begin 20 January.

"d. We are also requesting that a carrier be alerted to be brought in to augment tactical air, and the prompt return of the SLF for commitment to either the 3d or 1st Marine Division areas.

"e. Maximum number of NGF support ships will be concentrated in the I CTZ.

"4. Regarding view (1), above, my concept for operations in Laos is outlined in Operation EL PASO, proposed for October 1968. Preempting a Khe Sanh area assault by an offensive into Laos is neither logistically nor tactically feasible at this time. Significant considerations include the following:

"a. To be effective, a Laotian assault should be launched in the near future.

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"b. With the NE monsoon upon us, launching and supporting the magnitude of force envisioned is not within our current capability. An air LOC is essential and flying weather is marginal. Additionally, our airlift capabilities are inadequate to support both this concept and an acceptable tactical posture in other RVN threat areas at this time.

"c. We estimate sizable enemy forces to be in the Tchepone area and to the north thereof; thus a brief successful campaign there may not be possible.

"5. Regarding a withdrawal from Khe Sanh, I consider this area critical to us from a tactical standpoint as a launch base for Special Operations Group (SOG) teams and as flank security for the strong point obstacle system; it is even more critical from a psychological viewpoint. To relinquish this area would be a major propaganda victory for the enemy. Its loss would seriously affect Vietnamese and US morale. In short, withdrawal would be a tremendous step backwards.

"6. Although there are some in non-military circles who favor the concept of retreating into enclaves, I must reiterate that such a strategy merely returns the center of violence to the midst of the RVN people in the populated centers. On the other hand, a massive assault into Laos is not feasible in the near time frame.

"7. In view of the enemy capability to initiate a major offensive in Quang Tri province before Tet, I would prefer to defend with force deployment and combat support as indicated above. I will submit additional support requirements separately for ARC LIGHT, Carrier and NGF support."



EARLE G. WHEELER
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff

CONTAINS CODEWORD INFORMATION

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*footnote 1, VN 12 (1-1)
(document not for print)*

8 January 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh, A Speculative Appraisal

1. Attached is a memorandum on "The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh," which is primarily the work of Mr. Riggin of our Related Activities Center. It runs up a warning flag I think should be heeded. If Mr. R.J. Smith and his colleagues concur, I would recommend that this memorandum be published through the DDI mechanism as an Agency paper and circulated around the community before the battle for Khe Sanh commences.

2. Mr. Riggin's memorandum was written prior to the receipt of General Westmoreland's EYES ONLY estimate of current enemy strategy (MAC 00277). General Westmoreland's piece, however, does not provide new data contradicting Mr. Riggin's judgments or requiring any substantial rewrite of the attached memo.

George A. Carver, Jr.
Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

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*Folder 1 ER File - Special Material OI Jan - 25 Feb 68
BOX 15 Note ROR 01277A DCI/ER*

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8 January 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh, A Speculative Appraisal

Background

1. COMINT has revealed a major Communist buildup in the area around Khe Sanh, the Marine outpost located on Route 9 in Quang Tri Province approximately 9 miles from the Laotian border. The buildup of Communist forces in the area is on a scale which is unprecedented in the history of the US involvement in the war. COMINT has identified elements of four North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Divisions -- the 304th, 320th, 325C and 324B Divisions -- around Khe Sanh. Two of these Divisions, the 304th and 320th, have recently moved to the south of Khe Sanh through Laos. Both of these Divisions had been located in areas around Hanoi and Vinh. The 325C Division was involved in the heavy fighting around Khe Sanh in the spring of 1967, but subsequently deployed to the Dong Hoi area of North Vietnam. An advanced headquarters element of the Division has recently relocated to a position NW of Khe Sanh. At least one regiment of the 324B Division, the 812th Regiment, has recently deployed from the eastern section of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to a position north of Khe Sanh. This regiment has not previously been noted this far west.

2. COMINT has tentatively identified six infantry regiments as being involved in the buildup: three from the 304th and 320th Divisions, two (95C and 29th) from the 325C Division, and one (812th) from the 324B Division. It is suspected, however, that the other three infantry regiments and the two artillery regiments of the 304th/320th Divisions are also deploying to the Khe Sanh area. If these units are indeed committed, this would bring the total number of regiments to eleven. A conservative estimate of 2,000 men per regiment would give the Communists about 22,000 men to use in a sustained offensive around Khe Sanh. There is tenuous evidence in COMINT of battlefield preparations being made by the 29th and 812th Regiments. Messages between subordinates of

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the 29th indicate that it is engaged in reconnaissance activities , and one element of the 29th has moved to within five miles of Khe Sanh. There are also tenuous indicators that the third regiment of the 325C Division, the 101D Regiment, is coordinating reconnaissance activities with the 29th Regiment. At present the operational area of these reconnaissance elements extends from the vicinity of Tchepone, Laos, to the ENE of Khe Sanh and to an area south of Khe Sanh. Communications between units of the 812th Regiment have been concerned with transportation and supply activities.

3. Collateral information also indicates that the Communists are preparing for an offensive around Khe Sanh. Photography on 2 December of an area about five miles WNW of Khe Sanh (XD 7845) revealed 21 foxholes, two fortified hilltops, and heavy trail activity. On 26 and 27 December, an unknown force twice attempted to penetrate the defensive perimeter of friendly forces on Hill 861. On 27 December, a friendly reconnaissance team contacted an estimated 15 - 20 enemy 4 miles ENE of Khe Sanh. On 28 December, a friendly listening post, located about 7 miles NW of Khe Sanh in the immediate vicinity of Hill 861, heard a great deal of movement in front of the position. On 2 January, an enemy force of about six men engaged a Marine squad at a listening post about two miles north of Khe Sanh. The next day a patrol about 1 mile NE of Khe Sanh was grenaded; the patrol also observed lights on a trail near Route 9. All of these incidents point to increased enemy reconnaissance against the Khe Sanh combat base.

Enemy Objectives

4. What does the enemy hope to achieve by an offensive against Khe Sanh? The most obvious answer is to wipe out the US garrison at Khe Sanh and the Civilian Irregular Defense Corps (CIDG) camp at Lang Vei, about 5 miles SE of Khe Sanh on Route 9. As indicated by past battles in the area, the Communists have long considered Khe Sanh, located near the infiltration corridors in Laos, to be a thorn in their side. According to latest information, the garrison at Khe Sanh is defended by two infantry battalions and an artillery battalion of the 26th Marine Regiment. The CIDG camp at Lang Vei has about 320 men.

5. The Communists, however, do not need a force of upwards of 22,000 men to take Khe Sanh and Lang Vei. The Communists' primary objective in attacking Khe Sanh would be to draw US reinforcement into the area, tie them down to static defensive positions, and inflict maximum casualties on US forces

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over a period of time. By occupying the high ground around Khe Sanh and setting up ambushes along Route 9, the only overland route into the area, the enemy could make resupply/reinforcement a difficult and costly proposition, especially if he has developed an effective anti-aircraft capability. Monsoon rains have closed large portions of Route 9, compounding the resupply/reinforcement problem and making it largely dependent on airlift.

6. A final objective of the Khe Sanh buildup would be to harass and foil the strong point barrier system which is being implemented in the DMZ north of Khe Sanh and in the infiltration corridors in Laos.

7. Enemy strategy as outlined in paragraphs 4 and 5 above fits in neatly with General Giap's thesis of fighting the main force war from peripheral areas adjacent to border sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. By positioning his forces in these areas, Giap seeks to lure US units away from populated areas, disperse them, and inflict a maximum number of casualties in the process. This relieves pressure on main force units operating in populated areas and enables them to coordinate with local force units to disrupt the pacification program and attack Allied outposts and base camps around urban areas. Since the start of the winter/spring campaign in October, the enemy has employed this strategy in II Corps and III Corps. In II Corps the enemy has concentrated his forces operating in the highlands under a Front headquarters which receives orders directly from Hanoi. This Front headquarters would direct battles like the recent clashes at Dak To from border sanctuaries in Cambodia. A similar situation exists in III Corps, where a new Military Region (MR), designated MR 10 and consisting of the border provinces of Binh Long, Phuoc Long, and Quang Duc, was established in 1967. The establishment of MR 10 was followed by a rapid buildup of Communist forces in the area and attacks on targets near the Cambodia border like Loc Ninh, Bu Dop, and Bo Duc. It is probable, therefore, that the buildup of Communist forces in the Khe Sanh area presages the establishment of a new Front headquarters to conduct operations in the border areas of Tri-Thien Military Region (Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces).

8. In summary, the enemy's objectives for a sustained offensive in the Khe Sanh area would be at a minimum to force the abandonment of the Khe Sanh base and the Lang Vei CIDG camp while at the same time inflicting heavy casualties. This would give the Communists even greater freedom of movement in Laos. At the maximum, the Communists hope to draw substantial US reinforcements from other areas in South Vietnam and tie them down in the Khe Sanh area. This would give the other NVA units which operate in the Tri-Thien Military Region (the 5th, 6th, and 9th Regiments) greater mobility to operate

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against the populated areas along the coast of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. It would also give the Communists greater freedom of action along the DMZ. Whatever course of action opens to the enemy, he will strive to obtain that often-quoted, but much-maligned, psychological victory against one of our most vulnerable positions in Vietnam. Several seasoned observers, with some trepidation, have likened the Communist buildup around Khe Sanh to that which occurred prior to the battle of Dien Bien Phu. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Communists then were also making peace overtures.

Disposition of Enemy Forces

9. The current locations of Communist units involved in the Khe Sanh buildup follows:

320th Division

a. The divisional headquarters is located along the Laotian/Quang Tri Province border about 10 miles SSE of Khe Sanh. This location, which is near the enemy's base area 611 in Laos, contains a concentration of elements of the 304th/320th Divisions and may well emerge as the headquarters of the Front to direct the Khe Sanh campaign. Way Station "Echo," which has served as an infiltration terminal for the elements of the 304th/320th Division which have deployed from North Vietnam, is also located in this area.

b. A suspect infantry regiment of the 320th Division is also located near divisional headquarters in the Way Station "Echo" area.

c. The other regiments subordinate to the 320th Division are unlocated at the present time, but are believed to be deploying from North Vietnam to the Khe Sanh area.

304th Division

a. Divisional headquarters was last fixed on 29 December near Route 92 in Laos about 18 miles SW of Khe Sanh. The headquarters is believed to be heading for the Way Station "Echo" area.

b. An unidentified regimental echelon subordinate of the 304th is located in the Way Station "Echo" area.

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c. Another unidentified regimental echelon subordinate of the 304th was located on 12 December on Route 912 in Laos, having deployed to this position from Ha Tinh Province in North Vietnam.

d. A suspect artillery regiment of the 304th was located on 15 November in Quang Binh Province, North Vietnam, near the Laotian border. This entity was also moving southward.

e. A suspect regiment of the 304th is located in Quang Binh Province near the Laotian border about 22 miles north of the DMZ.

f. Another suspect regiment of the 304th, which was located in the Vinh area of North Vietnam as late as 24 December, has moved to a position in Laos about 30 miles NW of the DMZ.

325C Division

a. Although the divisional headquarters is believed to remain in the Dong Hoi area, a detached headquarters element of the division has repositioned to a point in Laos about 18 miles NW of Khe Sanh.

b. The 95C Regiment was located in a position about 15 miles WSW of Khe Sanh in October and is still believed to be in this general area.

c. Tenuous fixes on the 29th Regiment indicate that it has recently deployed from the Dong Hoi area, North Vietnam. The regimental headquarters is currently unlocated, but elements of the regiment have been fixed around Khe Sanh.

d. The 101D Regiment is believed to be located about 15 miles north of the DMZ. Recent communications between the 29th and 101D Regiments, however, may signify that the 101D is also deploying to the Khe Sanh area.

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324B Division

a. The headquarters of the 324B Division and two of its subordinate regiments, the 90th and the 803rd, remain in the eastern DMZ area where they have operated for some time. The 812th Regiment, however, has relocated from this area to a position across the DMZ about 15 miles north of Khe Sanh. This move is significant because the 812th Regiment has never been noted to operate this far west before.

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