

CCT at Khe Sanh

by Maj. John L. Cirafici, USAF

In February 1968 I was directed to report to Khe Sanh Combat Base. Located in the northwest extreme of the Republic of Vietnam and just south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), it had become the focus of increasing pressure from division-sized units of the People's Army of Vietnam (NVA) moving in from Laos and from North Vietnam the previous month. By the latter part of that month General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam and Commander, U.S. Army, Vietnam, reacted to what appeared to be a major siege effort. He shifted forces into I Corps (the northernmost of four military regions) to counter any enemy designs on the base.

Khe Sanh and its supporting bases were undergoing a major buildup when the 1968 Tet Offensive began on the evening of January 30. In an attempt to precipitate a general uprising against the government in the south, North Vietnam's Politburo had elected to commit to combat in South Vietnam's urban centers a majority of its regular army units located in the south and nearly all its National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) forces. It was not immediately clear whether Khe Sanh was a diversionary attack to draw U.S. forces away from urban areas or a key target whose reduction would provide an important complement to anticipated successes in the cities.

Role of the Combat Control Team

I had arrived in Vietnam during the summer of 1967 and subsequently saw service in all four corps areas of the country. As an experienced Combat Control Team (CCT) non-commissioned officer, I was usually assigned to a four-man element and would spend nearly my entire tour in Vietnam attached to or associated with combat units of the U.S. Army, the Marine Corps, and with different units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

Combat Controllers, all of whom were members of the U.S. Air Force, were trained to infiltrate, where necessary, using airborne and amphibious tactics and to move overland covertly to their intended target. They provided, under combat conditions, air traffic control, communications, terminal navigational aids, and general guidance and support for air movement into and out of temporary airheads. Each major operation conducted during the war in Vietnam had an associated airhead established for inserting and extracting units and their equipment. The CCT also operated and controlled within those airheads, as needed, drop zones (DZ) and LAPES (Low Altitude Parachute Extraction System)

and GPES (Ground Proximity Extraction System) zones.

When the Tet Offensive began, I was serving with the 3rd Battalion, 506th Infantry (Airborne), an independently operating unit of the 101st Airborne Division. In January, the battalion had relieved units of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) which, in turn, were moved north to be within striking distance of Khe Sanh. Our battalion maintained security for Phan Thiet, a III Corps provincial capital and an important fishing port on the South China Sea.

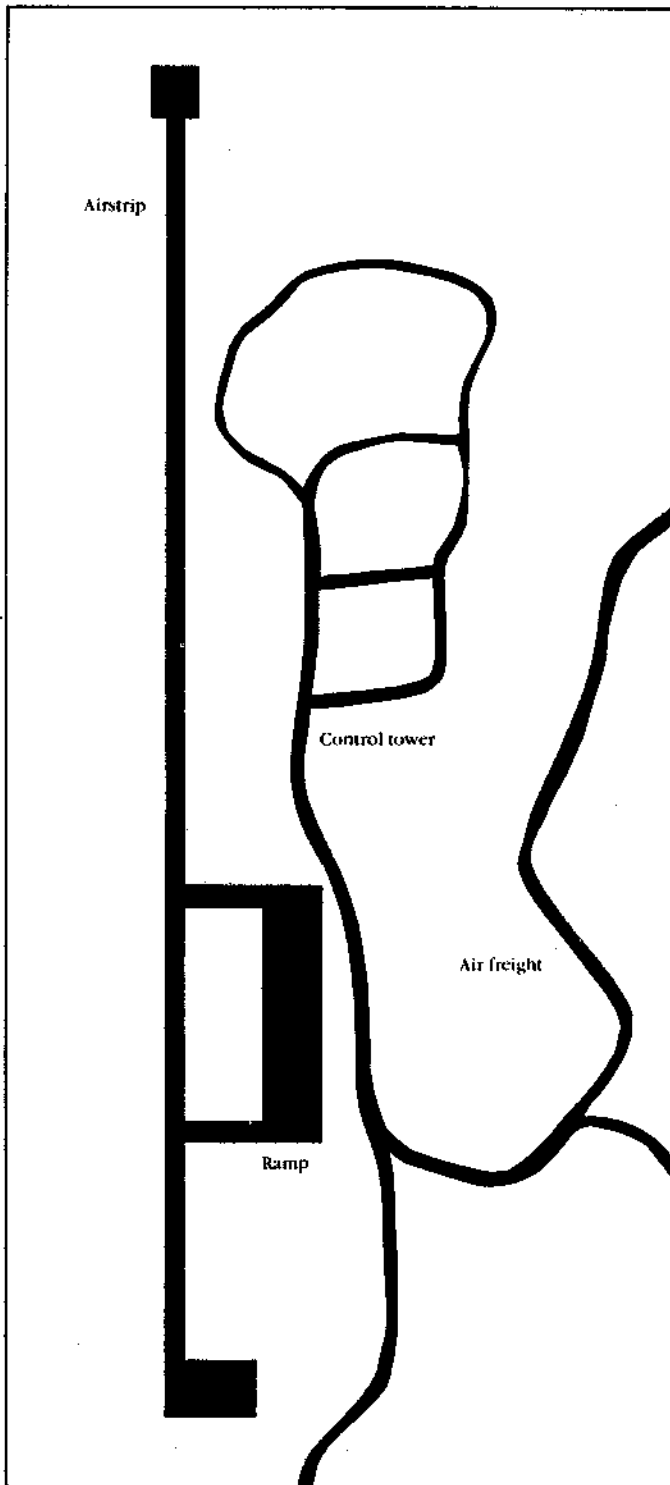
On the night of January 30 the first mortar rounds impacted on our camp, igniting a ferocious battle for Phan Thiet. In the middle of that month-long struggle for the city, I received a radio call on our H.F. (high frequency) net directing me to board the next available aircraft and report to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, near Saigon, for further orders. After reporting in to the Combat Control Team Operations Center, I was quickly grouped with three other controllers to form an operational element ready for rapid deployment.

When Tet began there were some 59 CCTers on the in-country team. Approximately 52 of them were continually in the field on operations. When team members periodically returned to Tan Son Nhut, they were usually given a day to take care of personal matters and get ready to go out again. That was our situation when we were told to prepare our personal equipment, team radios with associated batteries, signal panels, smoke grenades, weapons and parachutes. We were instructed to proceed by whatever means were available to Khe Sanh to relieve a CCT element at that base. The parachutes we took were intended only as a backup option to airlift, which we anticipated would be available at Danang Air Base.

Since mid-January, the airstrip at Khe Sanh had come under increasingly heavy fire from North Vietnamese gunners. By February 12, all C-130 Hercules air landings onto the strip had been halted because of the damage already sustained. On the other hand, C-123K "Providers," augmented with two jet engines for short field operations, were continuing to land at the besieged base on a restricted basis.

Our plan was to link up with a C-123K departing from Danang or, in the absence of that option, look into the possibility of jumping in from one of the C-130s or C-123s that were airdropping onto a DZ located around 1,000 yards west of the base perimeter.

We soon located a C-130 parked on the ramp outside the 834th Airlift Division Operations Center at Tan Son Nhut. It was fragged (fragmentary order) by the center to take



Layout of the Khe Sanh Marine base, home of the 26th Marine Regiment and other units. Under siege since before Tet 1968, the base was cut off from all contact except by air. Airlifters of the 7th Air Force kept the base supplied and evacuated casualties throughout the siege.

five pallets of cargo up to Danang AB, a flight of slightly under two hours. Our element, led by Technical Sergeant "Pete" Taylor, loaded rucksacks and equipment onto the "Herky Bird," strapped themselves into the web sideseats, and awaited the flight "up-country."

After arriving at Danang, we checked in with the airlift controllers who soon located a "Provider" fragged for our destination. The crew planned to land at Khe Sanh, quickly offload their cargo and depart the base at the earliest possible moment.

Heading for the Khe Sanh

Our 1 hour and 20 minute flight there took place during a typically overcast morning. We sat in the aircraft's rear, on its floor, pressed together with grunts (Marines) and equipment. Flying above mist-enveloped mountains, which flanked the Quang Tri River, we all felt a bit uneasy about the automatic weapons positioned by the North Vietnamese along the eastern approach into the field. Bundled up in flak jackets, helmets and backpacks, we rehearsed in our minds what actions we would take to safely exit the C-123K once she touched down.

The transport suddenly landed with a thump on the eastern end of Khe Sanh's 3,900-foot long aluminum matting runway and, with back now opened, quickly taxied to the pierced steel planking (PSP) ramp area on the west side. The aircraft, without stopping, made a 180 degree turn on the ramp and continued back toward the runway. While this was happening we grabbed all of our equipment and rapidly exited the moving "Provider." Behind us, the crew rolled out pallets of cargo.

At nearly the same time as we were departing the aircraft, Marines raced toward the ramp with litters of seriously wounded troops. The loadmaster boarded them, then raised the ramp. The pilot, soon after taking the runway, advanced his throttles and switched the jets to 100 percent. Throwing myself into the nearest crater, I watched the C-123, after barely a minute's ground time, leap back into the air heading east toward the coast.

A few mortar rounds and a couple of 120mm rockets impacted near the ramp, a little too late to do any harm to their now intended target. The shelling then ceased. Suddenly, it was all very quiet. It looked like the gunners intended to take a break. But just to be safe, we sat in the crater a few minutes longer before standing up and stepping out.

We picked up our equipment and moved the 20 yards over to the CCT radio bunker, which was dug in on the ramp's southern edge. After discussing the situation with the CCT element we were relieving, it packed up its gear and soon departed on a Marine UH-34 chopper, which was passing through on its return to Dong Ha. The next morning, we got down to the business of resupplying Khe Sanh.

We divided our element of four into teams of two, one for the DZ and the other for the LAPES zone. Pete Taylor



An extraction parachute jerks a pallet of supplies from a 7th AF C-130 flying inches above the strip at Khe Sanh. (Ciraflct photo)

and I, who made up the DZ team for the first day, loaded up with smoke grenades, flak jackets, and personal weapons. At dawn, we drove the CCT radio jeep out of its protective revetment and headed toward the western extreme of the base perimeter. We joined up with a few squads of Marines before passing through the wire and the surrounding mine fields on our way out to the DZ.

Operation at the DZ

During each night the drop zone reverted back to a no-man's land. Thus there was always the possibility that the enemy had planted mines, set up booby traps or left behind some snipers. Each time we carefully advanced through the ever-present morning ground fog, we were never quite sure what lay ahead. Dead, truncated trees, blasted by artillery, eerily poked their broken branches out at us through the haze. When we reached the drop zone's center, the area which served as the DZ's point of impact (PI), the Marines

fanned out to establish security for the time we would remain there. Pete and I broke out approximately 15 rectangular cerise signal panels which we set out in a large circle around the PI. The entire drop zone was a mere 300 by 300 yards in size.

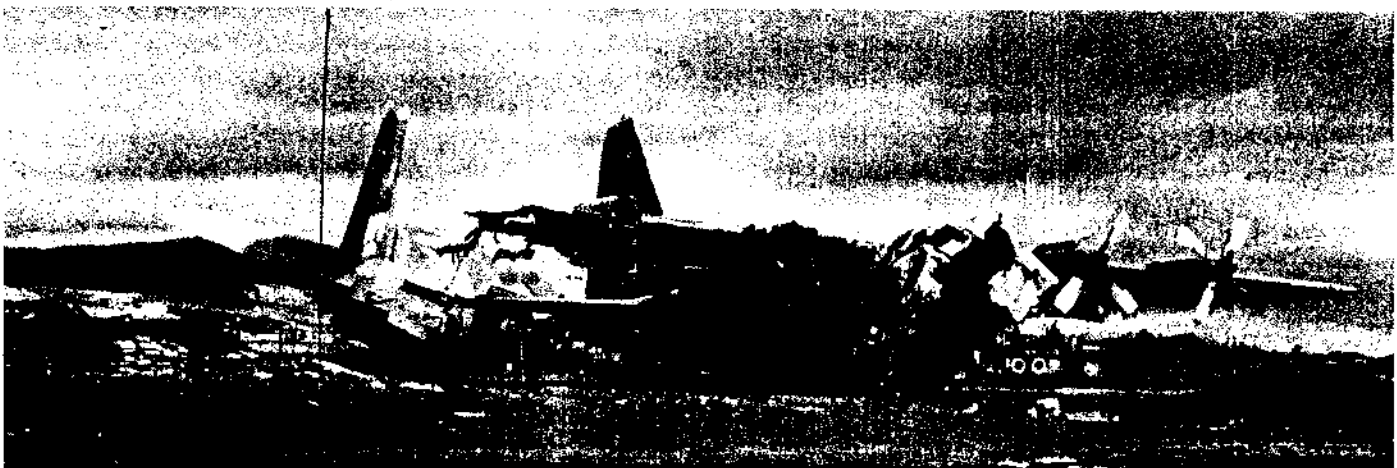
Our first morning on the DZ was typical of operations there. We needed the fog to lift just a few hundred feet more so that the low flying C-130s and C-123s could see the circle and smoke we threw up and make any final adjustments before releasing their pallets. Once he was satisfied with the DZ setup, Pete tuned the high frequency radio and contacted "Hilda," the 834th Air Division's Operations Center at Tan Son Nhut. He reported that "Tailpipe E" (our callsign) was on net, that the DZ was secure and the Marine cargo recovery teams were in place and ready for airdrops.

Almost two hours later, the first of the C-130s assigned that day was inbound at approximately 500 feet above ground level and rigged for a Container Delivery System (CDS) airdrop. A CDS was normally composed of 16 cargo bundles on wooden pallets which were released in a single group, permitting the delivery of supplies in a relatively tight cluster.

The "Herky" pilot followed radar vectors to Khe Sanh and then flew at 500 feet above and roughly parallel to the runway. We passed wind information to him and set off smoke grenades at the DZ's PI to assist the crew as it began the final portion of the run in. Watching for our first "inbound," Pete and I were barely able to see the "Herky" through the soup. But we could see that he had good alignment with the DZ, so we cleared him for the drop.

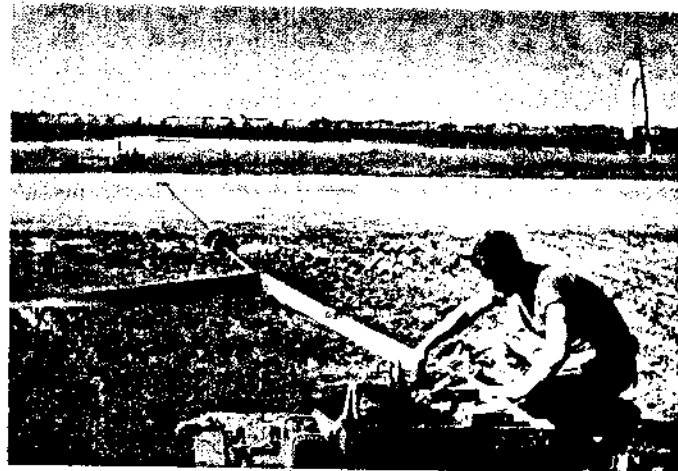
Almost directly above us, the pilot raised the C-130's nose while accelerating and released the load. Within seconds

Aircraft permanently on the ground at Khe Sanh; hulks of a C-123K and C-130 hit by enemy fire and dragged out of the way so that airlift operations might continue. (Ciraflct photo)



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From left to right, the sequence of actions in the Ground Proximity Extraction System (GPES). In the first photo, the Combat Control Team members position the cable and energy-absorbing drums. Center photo, the C-130 bringing supplies flies in over the cable with hook down. On the far right, the hook has engaged the cable and the load is coming out of the aircraft, still flying just above the ground. These photos were taken during a GPES operation in the Mekong Delta, not at Khe Sanh. (Cirafict photos)



16 pallets loaded with badly needed artillery rounds and an occasional case of Coca Cola fell out and deployed chutes. It was a perfect drop — many of the pallets landed right on our signal panels.

Within seconds of the airdrop, I heard the familiar sound of an artillery piece firing a round off to the west. North Vietnamese artillery spotters on nearby hills 950 and 881 N (the height of the hills in meters) had apparently reported the drop and requested fire. Just 11 kilometers west, in Laos, on the reverse slope of Co Roc Mountain, the NVA maintained their biggest guns — Soviet 152mm field artillery.

We could hear the rounds fired from those guns tearing through the air as they made their way to the DZ or farther on to the combat base. There wasn't any place to hide on the DZ except for a few shallow foxholes we had dug, so we just counted seconds and awaited the rounds' impact. Most of the time our luck held out, but not always. In early March, a young combat controller sent out to augment us on his first experience in combat was critically wounded shortly after arriving at Khe Sanh.

As the day progressed, a few more C-130s and a C-123 made successful passes over the drop zone. The accurate and continual resupply enabled our 155mm and 105mm batteries to return fire and break up enemy concentrations.

The moments of monotony on the DZ were frequently interrupted by incoming rockets, mortar fire, some recoilless rifle fire, and the inevitable 152s from Co Roc. When "Hilda" notified us that the drops were over for the day, we closed down the drop zone, retrieved the panels and headed back to the base to assist with LAPES in the afternoon.

From the DZ to LAPES

That afternoon "Hilda" informed us that the LAPES C-130 was inbound. LAPES permitted a "Herky" traveling at 130 knots just five feet above the runway to extract a load out the back and accurately deliver it onto the runway. This method allowed us to acquire heavy timber for bunker construction without having to haul it in from the DZ.

The arriving aircraft barreled down the runway as its crew deployed an extraction chute. At a point down the runway that we had marked with panels, the pilot electrically fired a squib that permitted the chute to fully inflate, pulling the load from the C-130. If all went well, the extracted load would come to a complete halt approximately one hundred yards down the runway. The "Herky" then climbed safely back up to altitude and returned to base. For us on the ground, however, there was usually one undesirable side effect: the NVA, hoping to hit the aircraft, would open up with everything they had. So the grunts in their simple wisdom rechristened the 130s "rocket bait" and "mortar magnets."

Between drops and LAPES, there was always plenty to observe at Khe Sanh. Every day NVA sappers worked on their trenches and tunnels, digging some of them almost to the wire. And every day F-4s and A-4s would release their ordnance, often right over our heads, so that the trajectory took the bombs into the excavations. "Charlie" always repaid us in kind. On one day alone, the North Vietnamese hit us with nearly 1,200 rounds of fire from their array of artillery.

During one particular barrage, I found myself totally out in the open with no shelter nearby. I was absolutely amazed that I was able to emerge from that one unscathed. It impressed me a great deal to see just how much shrapnel one detonating round can produce. It was even more impressive to watch countless fragments skip along the ground, just like a flat rock tossed across a lake's surface, passing close by but not striking me. Even when I was injured in a later barrage, luck was with me. The injury was a minor one.

When there was a lull in activity, we would open up some "Cs" (C-rations) and speculate about the battle. The Marines at Khe Sanh — the 26th Regiment — were a tough, high-spirited bunch who had no doubts at all about what the outcome would be in an all-out assault against the base. Within the camp we numbered somewhat more than 5,000, including the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion and a Special



Forces "A" Team. Surrounding us, in the immediate area were approximately 20,000 NVA regulars, including the elite 304th Home Guard Division from Hanoi. Yet the Marines, almost always in the best of spirits, never faltered in their determination to "hand the NVA their hides."

Much of the time, we discussed the rumors we heard about Khe Sanh. One source — probably some imaginative journalist — maintained that General Vo Nguyen Giap, the victor of Dien Bien Phu and mastermind behind the Tet Offensive, was personally directing his troops from a not-too-distant cave. For the average grunt, that really simplified matters. All we had to do was drop one 750-pound bomb on that cave and we could all go home.

Another rumor kept our eyes to the sky. Some grunts swear that this one came right out of headquarters. Word had it that Ho Chi Minh had ordered his Ilyushin-28 jet bombers to destroy Khe Sanh. A rumor like that made one look up uneasily every time a jet screamed overhead.

The day for CCT activities drew to a close in the late afternoon as resupply missions to the base ceased. After making a final report to "Hilda," including drop scores, and after receiving orders for the following day, we returned to our bunker to eat some more rations, talk about the day's events and discuss new rumors. Sometimes we would sit on top of our bunker and watch Arclight (B-52 raids) bombs impact as little as a mile away. Before we turned in for the night, the last thing we did was set out our weapons and packs. One never knew if this would be the night General Giap came out of his cave.

GPES: A New Delivery System

A new delivery system was introduced at Khe Sanh in the latter part of March. Nine sets of the Ground Proximity Extraction System (GPES) were airlifted from storage in the United States (where we had ceased employing the system in 1966) to Tan Son Nhut. One complete set of equipment was sent temporarily to Okinawa for C-130 aircrews and a CCT element to practice extractions.

Later in March, the trained and proficient CCT element arrived at Khe Sanh with a full GPES system and took over all CCT activities there. Briefly, the GPES allows an extracted platform to stop at a predetermined point without fear of a runaway load or damage to the runway, both of which had previously occurred with LAPES. For instance, on one of our LAPES extractions, the load continued to travel without the benefit of breaking action from its parachute. In the resulting collision of the load with a bunker one Marine was killed.

The CCT team installed four GPES energy absorbers (two on each side) along the western portion of the runway. Each of the energy absorbers was simply a twister — that is, a series of blades in a fluid inside a container. The container was set into a depression in the ground and anchored using metal stakes. On top of the twister was a drum containing a length of heavy duty nylon tape. The tape from each drum was, in turn, mated together with its companion drum and then connected to a cable stretched perpendicular to the flight path across the runway. The opposite end of the cable was connected likewise to its respective twist-ers.

A C-130 flying between 120-130 knots just above the ground (with landing gear extended) with a hook extended from its load would engage the slightly elevated cable. The load, upon extraction, continued along the ground unwinding the nylon tapes. This caused each twister to turn, creating resistance against the container's fluid. Within a short distance, the load would come to a complete stop. The CCT would then disengage the hook and rewind the nylon tapes for the next extraction with a small gasoline engine mounted on each drum.

Closing Down Khe Sanh

After a period of time, my CCT was relieved. I departed with my element for Tan Son Nhut. Shortly afterward I returned for a short stay at Khe Sanh, bringing in 20 gallons of antifreeze fluid. The antifreeze worked far better with the twist-ers than water, the fluid originally intended for

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GPES. My final stay at Khe Sanh took place in June when we evacuated equipment and closed down all operations at the combat base.

Like most combat controllers, combat operations continued to keep me quite busy. My element operated the airstrip in the A Shau Valley supporting 1st Cavalry Division operations there during Operation Delaware. At other times, I was involved in resupply and force movement activities in the Delta and along the Cambodian and Lao border areas. I did not find time for my "R and R" (Rest and Recreation) leave until the 11th month of my tour. The day after returning from R and R, I was back out on operations. I departed the field for the final time just one day prior to leaving Vietnam.

Looking back, it's clear that airlift operations during the battle for Khe Sanh were central to the very viability and survival of the combat base. We could not, at the time, however, lean back and dwell on our achievements there. Although our duties during the Khe Sanh siege were conducted under difficult and hazardous conditions, for many of us the battle there did not stand out as an event removed from what we were generally doing during Tet. The frequency

of battle and operations throughout the country tended to make Khe Sanh just one more location, albeit a well-publicized one, in a long list of places where airlift made the difference between success and possible failure. Khe Sanh, A Shau, Hue, Kham Duc, Katum, Dak To . . . the list goes on and on.

Those who had served at Khe Sanh received special recognition in May 1968. President Lyndon B. Johnson presented the Marine Corps Presidential Unit Citation and the Air Force Presidential Unit Citation. All combat controllers who served during Tet 1968 shared in the latter, which was awarded to their parent unit.

Maj. John L. Crafici is an instructor flight navigator and executive officer to the Deputy Commander for Operations at the 436th Military Airlift Wing, Dover AFB, DE. He is one of a very small group of navigators assigned to the special operations mission, and flies frequently on missions requiring special navigator expertise. He taught European and military history at the US Air Force Academy for four years. He is a master navigator and a master parachutist. →