

**A NEW INTERPRETATION
OF
THE BATTLE OF KHAM DUC
MAY 10 – 12, 1968**

By

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In the predawn darkness on the eve of the formal opening of the Paris Peace Talks, elements of the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) 2nd Division assaulted and overran two of three outposts occupied by Americal Division and Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) troops at the isolated Kham Duc Special Forces Camp in Western I Corps near the Laotian border. Troops occupying the third outpost managed to escape and evade before the advancing NVA troops arrived. The assaults on the outposts presaged the culmination of a ferocious battle that began two days before and ended on May 12, 1968, just hours before American and North Vietnamese negotiators met for the first time in formal public session to discuss terms for an end to the Vietnam War.

The Kham Duc battle was almost completely overlooked by the major American and foreign news media clamoring for stories from Paris and the recent communist attacks on Saigon and elsewhere in South Vietnam. As the battle unfolded, the future course of the war hung in the balance. For the North Vietnamese Politburo, Kham Duc represented a perceived opportunity to seize strategic momentum at the peace talks by subjecting American military forces to a humiliating and sensationally publicized battlefield defeat just before negotiations were set to begin. The battle was apparently intended by the North Vietnamese to be reminiscent of the battle of Dien Bien Phu in which Viet Minh forces captured the heavily fortified French Army

base there on May 6, 1954, the day prior to the opening of peace negotiations at Geneva. Just as Dien Bien Phu broke the will of the French to persevere in the First Indochina War, so the North Vietnamese planned to push the Johnson Administration into major concessions at the negotiating table with a victory at Kham Duc.

The North Vietnamese planned to capitalize on the psychological impact of the recent Tet Offensive by capturing a devastating American defeat at Kham Duc on film.¹ The hundreds of journalists that gathered in Paris to cover the peace talks provided a ready conduit to disseminate the propaganda film to audiences around the world, including the American television news audience, with gruesome scenes of a battlefield littered with hundreds of dead and wounded American and South Vietnamese soldiers with those captives able to walk shackled and roped together, marched off at gunpoint to an unknown fate, defeated and humiliated at the hands of the NVA. The film would bolster the rhetorical claims of Hanoi's negotiators that the Americans and South Vietnamese were losing, fuel welling anxiety in the United States that the war could not be won militarily and add significant pressure from within and without the Johnson Administration to abandon the war effort. Or so the North Vietnamese planned.

A fortunate break in the Kham Duc weather enabled General William C. Westmoreland to order a tactical retreat and replicate the strategy that had worked so well at Con Thien and Khe Sanh.

In the first test of the “Grand SLAM” firepower technique (an intensified version of the SLAM

¹ Huu, Nguyen Van, producer and cameraman, “Victory at Kham Duc.” Huu was interviewed by a Research and Investigation Team, Joint Task Force – Full Accounting (now Joint POW - MIA Command) at Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam on April 25, 1995. Huu confirmed that he was assigned from the People’s Army of Viet Nam Film Studio in Hanoi to the 2nd Division to film the Kham Duc battle. The film shot at Kham Duc was later edited and narration added in Hanoi.

employed at Con Thien and Khe Sanh) developed by Air Force General William Momyer, the Seventh Air Force Commander, the NVA's 2nd Division troops at Kham Duc were pulverized as a reinforced Americal Division battalion, Special Forces and CIDG troops were airlifted out of Kham Duc.² The retreat was harrowing, very narrowly avoiding the defeat Hanoi planned to capture on film. The tactical retreat succeeded, however, leaving the North Vietnamese troops in the open, exposed to devastation from the air. The only North Vietnamese film to emerge from the Kham Duc battle, a grainy, staged, five minute testimonial to the bravery of North Vietnamese Army soldiers entitled, "Victory at Kham Duc," was of no propaganda value in Paris or anywhere else.

In military history parlance, the outcome of Wellington's "nearest run thing" at Waterloo may have been close, but the Kham Duc battle was much closer. Like Waterloo, too, the Kham Duc battle represented a crossroads in a larger conflict, with those responsible for prosecuting the war fully grasping the stakes. While the North Vietnamese attempted a knock-out blow at Kham Duc, the President, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CINCPAC Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp and General Westmoreland in the military chain of command and the American negotiating team at the Paris Peace Talks concentrated on the larger issues of war and peace while simultaneously focused on this battle.³ With the stakes so high and the eventual outcome such a "near run thing," an analysis of an alternative outcome in which the North Vietnamese prevail at Kham Duc and

² See discussion of SLAM in Westmoreland, Gen. William C., A Soldier Reports (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1976) pp. 203-04, 315, 338 & 343; Gropman, Lt. Col. Alan L., Airpower and the Evacuation of Kham Duc, USAF Southeast Monograph Series, Vol. V, Monograph 7 (Maxwell AFB: Airpower Research Institute, Air War College, 1979).

³ Johnson, Lyndon Baines, The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) p. 508; See also Telex Messages MAC 6210 and 6222 from Westmoreland, COMUSMACV to Adm. Sharp, CINCPAC; Gen. Wheeler, CJCS; and Lt. Gen. Goodpaster, Paris, 12 May 1968 and Telex MAC 6264, 13 May 1968 to the same addressees reporting on Kham Duc tactical situation.

produce and release their planned propaganda film is more than an interesting exercise in counterfactual history.

Such an analysis reveals the doubts that gripped both sides about the future course of the war in May, 1968, and underscores the missed opportunity for the Johnson Administration to force the North Vietnamese into an early settlement. In Hanoi, General Vo Nguyen Giap's failed Winter/Spring Offensive, including the Tet Offensive, left the North Vietnamese desperate for a significant battlefield victory and resulting leverage at the peace talks. In Washington, Johnson's tenuous patience for continued participation in the peace talks that had just convened and his doubts about the wisdom of the partial bombing halt of North Vietnam he had recently ordered provided the context for a Presidential decision that could have resulted in a negotiated end to the war more than four years before the Paris Peace Accords were signed.

* * *

On the surface, little logic can be found in the North Vietnamese decision to attack the Kham Duc Special Forces Camp in May, 1968. Neither is there any readily apparent logic in the American military's decision to hold the camp until it was attacked by a vastly superior numerical force. This apparent lack of logic does not mean, however, that the decisions made by both sides were irrational.

From the time a Special Forces camp was established at Kham Duc in September, 1963, its value for military operations was marginalized by unpredictable weather. Situated on the floor of an isolated six kilometer long by two kilometer wide valley ringed by the steep, jungle choked mountains of the Central Highlands in the former South Vietnamese province of Quang Tin,

Kham Duc is located approximately 90 kilometers southwest of Da Nang and 15 kilometers east of the Laotian border. Inaccessible by road, the bowl-like valley frequently trapped ground fog and clouds, rendering the airstrip adjacent to the camp, which was not outfitted with radar, unusable for weeks on end.⁴

In October, 1965, a Special Forces Studies and Observations Group (SOG) forward operating base was established at Kham Duc to launch secret cross border missions into Laos to gather intelligence and interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The SOG base was soon downgraded in favor of a launch site at Phu Bai, bad weather having rendered Kham Duc too often unflyable for use as a major forward operating base. Relatively clear weather permitting the launch of cross border operations one hour would turn so foul the next that helicopter and fixed wing aircraft could not pierce the impenetrable clouds and fog to negotiate a safe landing.⁵

Caught between the two weather systems of the Laotian panhandle and the narrow coastal plain of Central Vietnam, Kham Duc was perfectly positioned geographically to catch the worst of the weather that plagued both sides of the Annamite Mountains. The northeast monsoon that saturates Central Vietnam from mid-October to March reaches Kham Duc while the Laotian panhandle remains relatively dry. In April, the spring rains in the Laotian panhandle begin to increase in frequency and intensity, giving way to the torrential rains of the southwest monsoon

⁴ Interviews with several Kham Duc battle participants confirm the unpredictable weather there. See, for example, interview of James McLeroy, former Special Forces SOG First Lieut., September 22, 2007 by the author. For a general discussion of weather patterns in Central Vietnam and neighboring Laos, see Collins, John M., "Going to Tchepone: OPLAN El Paso," "Joint Force Quarterly," Autumn/Winter 1997-98 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1998) pp. 124-25.

⁵ McLeroy, *Ibid.*

in May, which lasts until September.⁶ The unpredictable Kham Duc weather so compromised military operations there that even General Creighton Abrams took note of the problem:

“ . . . never in the history of warfare have weather decisions played such an important role in operational planning as they did in Southeast Asia. Khe Sanh, the A Shau Valley and Kham Doc (sic) are only a few of the many areas where weather has been a primary consideration in operational intelligence planning.”⁷

Over time, continuous weather problems resulted in downgrading of Kham Duc to a camp for CIDG recruit training. With no radar equipment at the airstrip, Kham Duc was strategically insignificant. The benign threat posed by the Special Forces camp permitted the NVA to simply sidestep Kham Duc whenever its units operated in the area. There was simply no strategic or tactical military advantage to be gained by taking the Special Forces camp.

For the NVA to once again leave the jungle sanctuaries of Laos and the Central Highlands, fight in the open and risk annihilation for an objective that posed no threat may have seemed a fool's errand. Coming so quickly on the heels of the attempted siege of Khe Sanh in which some of the finest units of General Giap's army suffered a punishing torrent of death and destruction from the air, a successful attack at Kham Duc depended almost entirely on the frequent cloud cover and dense fog to neutralize American air supremacy. The decision to attack at Kham Duc, however, may have transcended pure military considerations. A brief review of the internal debate within

⁶ Collins and McLeroy, *Ibid.*

⁷ Quoted in Winters, Harold E., Battling the Elements (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) p. 72.

the Politburo of the North Vietnamese Lao Dong Central Committee over the future course of the war in the months leading up to the Tet Offensive serves to explain the larger policy underpinnings that supported the decision to attack, militarily unnecessary though an attack at Kham Duc may have been. Such a review also further underscores the Johnson Administration's lost opportunity to bring the war to an early conclusion.

The historic North/South split among the members of the Politburo occurred almost simultaneously with consummation of the 1954 Geneva Accords which created the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Divided over the need to build an economically sound communist state on the one hand and the desire to overthrow the South Vietnamese regime and unify the country on the other, the Politburo tilted sharply in favor of the South-first faction in December, 1963. At the Ninth Plenum of the Lao Dong Central Committee in December, 1965, a resolution committing North Vietnam's military forces to the war was adopted. At the Twelfth Plenum of the Lao Dong Central Committee in December, 1965, a resolution declaring "ultimate victory" in the South was to be achieved "in a relatively short period of time" and committing the North Vietnamese government to "increase aid to the South" was adopted. The shift in policy recognized the inability of the National Liberation Front and People's Liberation Armed Forces to win the war in the face of increasing American military assistance to the regime in South Vietnam without direct involvement of the NVA. Building the socialist state in the North would continue, but the war effort in the South would share heavily in the allocation of the North's resources.⁸

⁸ For a discussion of the evolution of Lao Dong Central Committee and Politburo war policy and the North-first v. South-first factions, see Turner, Robert F., Vietnamese Communism, Its Origins and Development (Stanford:

Despite early success on the battlefield, the tug of war within the Politburo continued. The combined bombing campaigns of American Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps units directed against North Vietnam, beginning with Operation Flaming Dart in February, 1965, followed by three plus years of Operation Rolling Thunder initiated a month later, exacted a high price. While reports such as the August 29, 1966 publication, “The Effects Of U. S. Bombing On North Vietnam's Ability To Support Military Operations In South Vietnam: Retrospect and Prospect,” published by the Institute for Defense Analyses and other internal Department of Defense reviews concluded that the bombing campaigns had produced “no measurable direct effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the South at the current level,”⁹ the damage to North Vietnam's economy was undeniable. A mid-1968 report prepared for Admiral Sharp in preparation for hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee concluded that destruction of the North’s infrastructure and means of production had been devastating and that “There was widespread disruption of economic activity.”¹⁰ As General Westmoreland observed in late 1966, “. . . the strikes had definite military value in slowing the southward movement of supplies, diverting North Vietnam manpower and creating great costs to the North.”¹¹

Hoover Institution Press, 1975) pp. 243-45. For a discussion of Lao Dong Central Committee war policy resolutions see Pribbenow, Merle L., translator, Victory in Vietnam (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas) pp. 124-25 and 171-72.

⁹ Institute for Defense Analyses, “The Effects of U. S. Bombing on North Vietnam’s Ability to Support Military Operations in South Vietnam: Retrospect and Prospect,” August 29, 1966, reprinted in Herring, George C., ed., The Pentagon Papers (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993) p. 148-56.

¹⁰ Sharp, Adm. U. S. Grant, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978) p. 188.

¹¹ Davidson, Lt. Gen. Phillip B., Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975 (Novato: Presidio Press, 1988) p. 394 quoting Westmoreland.

From time to time the bombing exacted a heavy toll on North Vietnam's military operations in the South, as well, when high value targets were hit, as even the North Vietnamese have admitted. In Victory in Vietnam, the official People's Army of Viet Nam history of the war, an assessment of the phase of Operation Rolling Thunder carried out between April and October, 1968 is included: "Because the enemy was attacking during the rainy season in terrain cut by many rivers and streams, many (infiltration) routes were blocked, and the quantity of supplies being held at Group 559's delivery points in Region 4 dropped to only 1,000 tons in September, 1968."¹² Thus, even during the partial bombing halt announced by President Johnson on March 31, 1968, disruption of the flow of war materiel into South Vietnam (a principal objective of Operation Rolling Thunder) was, at times, achieved.

If not the Rolling Thunder campaign alone, then in combination with the rapid buildup of American ground forces that had put the NVA and Viet Cong on the defensive in the South caused a reassessment of North Vietnam's earlier policy to achieve victory "in a relatively short period of time." American military successes had pushed the attrition rate among Viet Cong guerilla main force and NVA units to 15,000 per month by early 1967. With Viet Cong recruits amounting to only 3,500 per month on average and new NVA deployments to the south numbering approximately 7,000 troops per month, the mathematical problem facing the Politburo was simple. The war could not be sustained without heavier reliance on NVA regular units.¹³

¹² Pribbenow, p. 225.

¹³ Davidson, p. 435.

North Vietnam's war policy problems were compounded by the emergence of the relatively stable regime of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu. The South's hegemony had been extended into former Viet Cong strongholds in the rural areas of the country, significantly reducing the National Liberation Front food and tax sources. All the while, General Giap understood the continuous risk of an invasion of his army's jungle sanctuaries in Laos or Cambodia, or both, or an invasion of North Vietnam itself by American military units. Giap's concerns were not unfounded. General Westmoreland had plans prepared for Operation York, a proposed invasion of Laos by American troops to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail.¹⁴ The toll the war had taken on the North Vietnamese coupled with the fear of cross border attacks caused a reassessment of the North Vietnam's war policies.

The first evidence that North Vietnam's war policies were under review came to light in December, 1966, following the Thirteenth Plenum of the Lao Dong Central Committee. Signaling a shift in emphasis back to the North-first position, a resolution providing that "diplomatic struggle has an important, positive, active role to play in the war effort" was adopted. For the first time, North Vietnam indicated overtly a willingness to negotiate a settlement of the war with the United States, a far cry from the North's previous demand for an unconditional United States surrender. A second meeting of the Lao Dong Central Committee a month later resulted in recognition of the obvious: the war had not been won "in a relatively short period of time." That policy was scrapped in favor a resolution calling for a "decisive

¹⁴ Westmoreland, pp. 314, 318.

victory” to be won “in the shortest time possible.”¹⁵ If reunification of Vietnam was to be achieved by military means, the Politburo wanted it accomplished quickly. North Vietnam simply could not continue the war indefinitely and survive as a viable state. This new mandate set the stage for the NVA's General Offensive/General Uprising or Winter/Spring Offensive of late 1967 and 1968, including the Tet Offensive, and the eventual showdown at Kham Duc.

On the diplomatic front, North Vietnam pared back its list of negotiation preconditions to an unconditional halt “to the bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam” while General Giap prepared for the Winter/Spring campaign, the military response to the edict to shorten the war with a decisive military victory. But a decisive military victory was not to be. During the first phase of the offensive, NVA units were soundly defeated at Con Thien and other Special Forces border camps. In the second phase, the communists failed to rally the South Vietnamese to their side as planned and lost every significant battle waged. In an unusual spurt of candor, even the NVA’s own assessment of the first two phases of the Winter/Spring Offensive was critical:

“We had somewhat underestimated the capabilities and reactions of the enemy and had set our goals too high. Our soldiers’ morale had been very high when they set off for battle When the battle did not progress favorably for our side

¹⁵ Westmoreland, pp. 314-15. For a discussion of the Lao Dong Central Committee Thirteenth Plenum and the Politburo’s change in strategy, see Doyle, Edward, et al., The Vietnam Experience: The North (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1986) pp. 56-59.

and when we suffered casualties, rightist thoughts, pessimism and hesitancy appeared among our forces.”¹⁶

The most stunning defeat of the NVA occurred at Khe Sanh where, over the period of the 77 day attempted siege, enemy losses soared well into the five figure level.¹⁷ With the NVA troops drawn to Khe Sanh from their jungle sanctuaries in open, set battle positions, General Westmoreland was able to employ air and surface firepower marshaled in a coordinated manner by utilizing the SLAM (seeking, locating, annihilating and monitoring) concept developed by General Momyer. First used to pummel the NVA forces that attempted to lay siege to the Special Forces outpost at Con Thien, the SLAM tactic at Khe Sanh elevated Westmoreland's attrition strategy to staggering proportions.¹⁸ By the time the 1st Air Cavalry Division broke through to restore the Route 9 link between Khe Sanh and the coast to end the attempted siege, the SLAM concept had become doctrine.

Although badly mauled in the first two phases of the Winter/Spring Offensive, Giap and the NVA pressed on, no doubt invigorated by the adverse impact of the Tet Offensive on the American public's psyche, fueled in large part by the American press. With the anti-war flames in the United States fanned by fanciful observations of respected journalists such as Walter Cronkite, who opined that the best America could hope for in Vietnam was a “stalemate,” hope

¹⁶ Pribbenow, p. 224.

¹⁷ Woodruff, Mark W., Unheralded Victory (Arlington: Vandamere Press, 1999) p. 116. See also Summers, Harry G., Jr. Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995) p. 138.

¹⁸ Westmoreland, pp. 203-04, 315.

was instilled in the North Vietnamese that a knockout blow similar to the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu was possible.¹⁹

As the scheduled formal opening of the Paris Peace Talks neared, Hanoi's "fight/talk" strategy emerged. Despite the looming peace talks, the North Vietnamese launched a scaled down reprise of the Tet Offensive dubbed by the American military as "mini-Tet." In concert with the new offensive, two reinforced regiments of the NVA's 2nd Division maneuvered into position to attack Kham Duc. Symbolically, the setting for Giap and the NVA could not have been better. Similar in terrain, with an airstrip on the valley floor and in close proximity to the Laotian border, Kham Duc was as close to a mirror image of Dien Bien Phu as could be found in South Vietnam, although smaller.²⁰ One South Vietnamese soldier assigned to Kham Duc who had served with the Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu recognized the similarities. When asked in 1964 whether the Kham Duc camp was a good one, he responded affirmatively. "Yes. Very good camp. Just like Dien Bien Phu!"²¹

The timing, too, was reminiscent of the maximum psychological impact the Viet Minh garnered from victory at Dien Bien Phu. Evidence suggests that Giap may have delayed assaulting the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu for a month or more until two days prior to the opening of the

¹⁹ Cronkite, Walter, untitled text, reprinted in Bates, Milton J., et al., Advisory Board, Reporting Vietnam (New York: The Library of America, 1998) pp. 581-82.

²⁰ See Fall, Bernard B., Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1967) p. 6 for a description of Dien Bien Phu.

²¹ Anh, quoted in Morris, Jim, War Story (Boulder: Sycamore Island Books, 1979) p. 151.

Geneva Conference to gain maximum, immediate bargaining leverage at the negotiating table.²² Kham Duc could have been taken at any time the weather prevented visual flying for close air support. However, if a climactic battle occurred on May 12, victory would be achieved the day before the peace talks opened, with film of the spectacle of an American defeat arriving in Paris shortly thereafter. Giap could reasonably expect the same psychological impact produced at Geneva fourteen years earlier. With a film crew set to record a major American defeat on the battlefield, Giap and the NVA apparently intended to capitalize on those opportunities and carry out the edict to win a “decisive” victory “in the shortest possible time.”

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The Johnson Administration's response in late 1967 to reports of the improved military situation in South Vietnam was to maintain pressure on Hanoi. In a memorandum “For the File” authored by the President, he memorialized his responses to recommendations from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara on the future conduct of the war. McNamara advocated a halt to further bombing of North Vietnam and stabilization of the number of American ground forces as a means to induce the enemy to enter into negotiations to end the war. Although recent Administration efforts at nudging Hanoi toward peace talks had failed and despite Johnson's publicly expressed desire to end the war through a negotiated settlement, he rebuffed McNamara. Johnson sanctioned continued bombing of targets having “significant military content” without excessive civilian casualties or losses of American lives, or “substantial increased risk of engaging the USSR or Communist China in the war.” He also authorized maintenance of a bombing restrike program for major North Vietnam targets. Although seeing

²² Turner, p. 85; see also Chen, King C., Vietnam and China, 1938-1954 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 305.

no basis for augmenting American troop levels, Johnson refused to publicly announce his assessment. Johnson did not want Hanoi to perceive a “sign of weakening will.”²³ Aside from McNamara, Johnson's views in late 1967 and early 1968 reflected a consensus among those from within and without the Administration whom the President regularly sought out for policy advice on the war. Clearly, the Johnson Administration strategy was to force North Vietnam to the negotiating table through military pressure.

Consistent with his policies, the President's initial military response to the Tet Offensive was to intensify military pressure on the enemy by authorizing air strikes on targets in North Viet Nam that were previously off limits. At the regularly scheduled Tuesday luncheon meeting with his war advisors on February 6, Johnson discussed the Administration's military options. On the subject of bombing North Vietnam, McNamara resisted a Joint Chiefs of Staff recommendation that the off limits circumferences around Hanoi and Haiphong be reduced from five miles to three and one and one-half miles, respectively. He argued that the “military effect is small,” outweighed by the cost in aircraft and noncombatant casualties. Clark Clifford, who would soon replace McNamara as Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State Rusk, General Wheeler and the other “Wise Men” assembled at the meeting, disagreed. Unconvinced by McNamara's arguments and consistent with his prior responses to strong military initiatives undertaken by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, Johnson ratified the Joint Chiefs recommendation to tighten

²³ Johnson, Lyndon B., “Memorandum for the File,” reprinted in Barrett, David M., Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers: A Documentary Collection (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997), pp. 568-69.

the off-limits zones around Hanoi and Haiphong and authorized hitting fourteen targets in the formerly restricted bombing areas.²⁴

Throughout the war, Johnson's use of air power against North Vietnam followed a pattern of reprisals and periodic attempts to elicit an agreement to negotiate an end to the war by bombing suspensions. The first air strikes directed at North Vietnam were undertaken in retaliation for the attacks on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2 and 4, 1964. Operation Flaming Dart was initiated on February 8, 1965 as a reprisal for Viet Cong sapper attacks the previous day directed against the U.S. airbase at Pleiku and nearby Camp Holloway and installations at Qui Nhon. Operation Flaming Dart II was authorized three days later in response to a second Viet Cong attack at Qui Nhon in which a bomb planted in a hotel killed twenty-three Americans.²⁵

While Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained bombing campaign of North Vietnam initiated on March 2, 1965, had strategic and tactical military underpinnings, it, too, was originally justified on the basis of reprisals for NVA and Viet Cong attacks on U.S. installations in the South.²⁶ Over time, however, the link between enemy action directed at American military forces and bombing missions dissipated. Yet, for Johnson, Operation Rolling Thunder continued to provide opportunities to attempt to modify the behavior of his adversaries with reprisals or a

²⁴ Barrett, David M., Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers/A Documentary Collection (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997) "Notes of the President's Tuesday Luncheon Meeting," February 6, 1968, p. 585-87.

²⁵ Frankum, Ronald B., Jr., Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005) p. 15. See also Palmer, Dave Richard, Summons of the Trumpet: U. S. – Vietnam in Perspective (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978) pp. 72-73.

²⁶ Palmer, 73.

“carrot and stick” approach. When North Vietnam and the Viet Cong did not respond favorably to his proposed Mekong River hydroelectric power and agricultural development initiative as a vehicle for beginning negotiations for a settlement, for example, Johnson authorized an increase in bombing sorties.²⁷ In May, 1965, Johnson initiated a six day bombing halt coupled with other “carrots” in an effort to get the North Vietnamese to the bargaining table. When his initiative failed, Johnson again authorized resumption of bombing.²⁸ The 1965 Christmas bombing halt, which extended for 38 days, produced no reciprocity from the North. In response, Johnson authorized resumption of Operation Rolling Thunder.²⁹ As discussed above, Johnson authorized strikes closer to the centers of Hanoi and Haiphong in reaction to the Tet Offensive.³⁰ Time after time Johnson demonstrated a willingness to use air power as an element of his overall war policy and as part of a larger diplomatic effort, sometimes in increasing intensity and proximity to noncombatants.

In March, 1968, Johnson directed the Wise Men, led by Clifford, to undertake a review of war policies. The review was prompted, in part, by Westmoreland's request for an augmentation of more than 200,000 troops and Johnson's sense that there had been “a dramatic shift in public opinion” against the war and his war policies in the wake of the Tet Offensive.³¹ Ironically, the review was undertaken despite defeat of the NVA and Viet Cong at every turn during the first

²⁷ Barrett, “Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisory on Vietnam,” May 16, 1965, p. 159; see also Palmer, p. 79.

²⁸ Palmer, *Ibid.*

²⁹ Barrett, “Memorandum To: The President, From: Amb. Lodge,” February 1, 1966, p. 326.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, “Notes of the President's Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors,” February 6, 1968, p.587.

³¹ *Ibid.*, “Memorandum To: Sec. Clifford, Sec. Rusk, From: The President,” February 28, 1968, pp. 635-36; “Luncheon Meeting,” March 22, 1968, p. 701.

two phases of General Giap's Winter/Spring Offensive. Westmoreland's attrition strategy was working well at Khe Sanh and the Viet Cong had been routed so badly that it no longer constituted a serious military threat to the viability of South Vietnam.³²

The NVA's intense effort on the battlefield as the Winter/Spring Offensive continued and the domestic problems facing the North Vietnamese resulting from the sustained war were not lost on senior U.S. military commanders. At a March 26, 1968 meeting with his war advisors, Johnson was advised by General Creighton Abrams, who would soon succeed Westmoreland as Commander of the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, that the "Enemy is making this year an all-out effort." Responding to the President's query whether this marked a change in the NVA's strategy, Abrams responded, "Yes. He was losing under the old strategy. He was losing control of people."³³

Despite having the upper hand militarily, Johnson accepted the consensus recommendation of his advisors to once again extend the olive branch. Bombing of the North except as necessary in the vicinity of the DMZ (restricting bombing to targets south of the 19th parallel, although some targets between the 19th and 20th parallels were approved) to interdict the flow of NVA war materiel and protect American troops in the South was halted. Johnson made no demands or offers except a public invitation to meet anywhere, anytime to negotiate a settlement.³⁴

³² Woodruff, pp. 48-53.

³³ Barrett, "Notes of the President's Meeting with His Foreign Policy Advisors," March 26, 1968, p. 712.

³⁴ Johnson, 427.

Never one to leave himself without options, however, Johnson carefully considered his position should his latest peace initiative fail. Clifford and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had prepared a list of targets to be struck “if they play us for fools” and the President decided to resume bombing.³⁵ Johnson also had available an “Optimum Air Campaign” outlined by Admiral Sharp in a message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff of September 25, 1967. Sharp's plan was similar in intensity and objectives to the Linebacker II bombing campaign undertaken in December 1972.³⁶ With his air power options at the ready, the Johnson Administration, the country and the rest of the world waited for Hanoi to respond.

North Vietnam's response was swift. Radio Hanoi's April 3 broadcast declaring North Vietnam's willingness to meet “to decide with the U.S. side the unconditional cessation of bombing and all other war acts against the DRV so that talks could begin” was greeted with cautious optimism by Johnson and his advisors.³⁷ The response soon turned to dismay, frustration, even anger, however, as concern mounted that Hanoi was using the bombing halt and dragging out agreement on a venue for talks to improve its military position in the South. Days turned to weeks as wrangling over the site of the talks dragged on while Hanoi planned another major offensive. Johnson discussed resumption of bombing above the 20th parallel with General Wheeler on April 30,³⁸ but any thoughts he had of resuming bombing at that time were temporarily shelved, as three days later Paris was selected as the site of the talks. North Vietnam

³⁵ Johnson, 501.

³⁶ Sharp, Appendix E, “CINCPAC Message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff of 25 September 1969 Outlining an Optimum Air Campaign,” p. 293. For a synopsis of Operation Linebacker II, see Frankum, pp. 163-66.

³⁷ Barrett, “Handwritten Notes of the President’s Meeting with his Advisors,” April 3, 1968, pp. 729-30.

³⁸ Ibid. “Notes of the Tuesday Luncheon,” April 30, 1968, pp. 739-41.

proposed that the talks begin on “May 10, or a few days later,” and the Johnson Administration agreed.³⁹

Johnson had always held out hope that the North Vietnamese would reciprocate with de-escalation in one form or another in response to the bombing halt, but reciprocity was not to be. Rather, Hanoi put its fight/talk strategy into play by attacking 119 cities, villages, hamlets and other targets, signaling the beginning of the third phase of the Winter/Spring Offensive.⁴⁰

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While the battles in Saigon and other South Vietnam locations raged in early May, elements of the NVA's 2nd Division maneuvered into position in preparation for an assault on Kham Duc. Intelligence reports had confirmed the presence of large units of the 2nd Division in the Kham Duc area since late February. NVA engineers and 2nd Division troops were improving a road east from Laos to Route 14, which extended north to Ngok Tavak, a former French outpost located 8 kilometers south of Kham Duc, and to the Kham Duc Special Forces outpost and airfield itself.⁴¹

³⁹ Johnson, p. 504.

⁴⁰ Bowman, John S., ed., The World Almanac of the Vietnam War (New York: World Almanac, 1985) p. 204.

⁴¹ Schungel, Lt. Col. Daniel F., “After Action Report Battle of Kham Duc,” (Company C, 5th Special Forces Group) May 31, 1968, p. 2. See also McNeill, Ian, The Team: Australian Army Advisors in Vietnam 1962-1972 (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1984) pp. 329-30; Henderson, Robert, interview by James McLeroy, Dec. 21, 1995; Chung Capt. Donald Y.B., “Summary of Operation Golden Valley,” (Headquarters, Americal Division) May 16, 1968.

Before dawn on Friday, May 10, NVA troops on the hills across the river east of the Special Forces camp attacked it with rocket and mortar fire while an enemy battalion assaulted a U.S and indigenous Special Forces company and attached U.S. Marine artillery platoon at the Ngok Tavak outpost. Later that day, a reinforced battalion of the Americal Division was airlifted to Kham Duc and deployed around the airfield as the Ngok Tavak survivors were airlifted to Kham Duc and from there to Da Nang. That night and the following day, the NVA concentrated mortar and rocket fire on the Special Forces camp and attempted several ground attacks on the positions around the airfield, all of which were repeatedly repulsed with close air support.⁴²

In the darkness of early morning of May 12, the NVA attacked and captured two of the hilltop outposts around the Special Forces camp and airfield and occupied a third after it had been abandoned, poured heavy machine gun, rocket and mortar fire on the airfield and shot down several aircraft. That afternoon, after the Americal reinforced battalion was withdrawn from Kham Duc, the NVA launched a mass ground assault against the eastern perimeter of the Special Forces camp. The eastern perimeter was defended by Special Forces and elite indigenous troops. The assault was repelled with rifle and machine gun fire and an extremely close napalm strike. About twenty minutes after the last defenders were airlifted out of Kham Duc, a huge thunderstorm enveloped the Special Forces camp and airfield.⁴³ Only cooperative weather for most of the three days of the battle stood between a success for U.S. forces and a disaster.

⁴² Henderson; McLeroy.

⁴³ Ibid. See also interview of Jeffrey Weber by the author, September 15, 2007.

For the entire day of May 12, two forward air controllers flew over Kham Duc on each side of the airfield. A third forward air controller flew above them to distribute aircraft as requested to each forward air controller below. Above the three forward air controllers, an Air Force Command and Control C-130 coordinated the constantly arriving flights of virtually every American and allied combat and combat support aircraft flying in Southeast Asia that day.⁴⁴

Hundreds of Air Force, Navy, Marine and South Vietnamese planes arranged in mile high stacks waited their turn to dive down and attack. Seemingly endless sorties of A-1s, A-4s, A-6s, F-4s, F-5s, F-100s and F-105s ravaged the massed NVA troops, who were exposed and without adequate defenses against the unexpected onslaught. Planes waiting to attack refueled from orbiting KC-135 air tankers. After expending their payloads, some flew back to their bases, rearmed and returned to the exceptionally target-rich environment in unusual perfect visual flying weather. To top it off, B-52 Arc Light strikes were employed against the NVA troops on the periphery of Kham Duc.⁴⁵

The Grand SLAM air ambush at Kham Duc involved aircraft flown from airbases in South Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines and Guam with a full array of ordnance. For several days following the May 12th withdrawal from Kham Duc, B-52s continued to pummel those NVA troops who managed to survive the previous day's pounding, targeting the most likely escape

⁴⁴ Gropman, ch. III; McLeroy.

⁴⁵ Gropman, p. 11, 25-29.

routes back to Laos. On May 13, continued B-52 bombing produced 130 large secondary explosions, many as much as ten times larger than the ordnance that detonated them.⁴⁶

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Concern mounted within the Johnson Administration and the American delegation preparing for the opening session of the peace talks as the outcome of the Kham Duc battle remained in doubt. Signaling the high stakes involved, Westmoreland kept Admiral Sharp, the Joint Chiefs and General Andrew Goodpaster, Military Advisor with the delegation in Paris, apprised as the battle unfolded. Characterizing the airlift as potentially “sticky business,” Westmoreland’s perception of the need to keep everyone informed underscored his sense of urgency and the possibility of a significant defeat.⁴⁷ While the press focused on coverage of other “mini-Tet” battles throughout South Vietnam, particularly the savage street fighting for control of portions of Saigon, Westmoreland spent part of his time dwelling on Kham Duc. He appreciated the opportunity to hit the 2nd Division hard; however, he was also mindful of the prospect for disaster at the little known Special Forces camp and the potential ramifications in Paris. Even the President was in the information loop and clearly understood the diplomatic implications of the battle. Referring specifically to Kham Duc, Johnson later wrote, “They wanted to create the impression that they were stronger than they were and could strike at will.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 29 (n. 7), referencing Sams, Kenneth and Thompson, A.E., “Kham Duc. A Project CHECO Report, HQ PACAF, Directorate of Tactical Evaluation, CHECO Division, HAFB, HA.”

⁴⁷ Westmoreland, (see n. 3 re: Telex Messages).

⁴⁸ Johnson, p. 508.

The enemy assaults directed at various Kham Duc defenses throughout the day of May 12 left no doubt about the enemy's mission. In the face of an obvious withdrawal of American forces from Kham Duc, the NVA pressed the attack with thousands of enemy troops killed by the aerial bombardment for an objective that had no strategic military value. The film was the objective, not the real estate.

It is not difficult to imagine the horrific scenes that would have made their way into a final version of a film released to the news media. By the time elements of the 2nd Division moved on Kham Duc, Johnson and the American public had recently become sensitized to television broadcasts of battle scenes from Vietnam, including dramatic film shot at Hue and Khe Sanh just weeks before. Yet, not even the exploding C-130 that had been hit by enemy fire on the runway at Khe Sanh or the gritty street fighting in Hue would have prepared Johnson and the rest of the American television viewing audience for the savagery of an enemy assault on the vastly outnumbered forces attempting to hold Kham Duc. Without the unusually cooperative weather on May 11 and 12 and with escape and evasion routes cut off by the encircling NVA units, grisly scenes of Americans fighting and dying by the hundreds, with a few survivors forced to surrender after expending what remained of their of ammunition, would have found their way into the living rooms of America courtesy of the network television news programs.

Two incidents that occurred during the Kham Duc battle provide insight into the nature of the film Hanoi had in mind. According to some accounts, after overrunning and securing the first outpost in the early morning hours of May 12, the enemy unit that occupied that area strung up the corpse of an American soldier, suspending him upside down from a tree at the top of the hill.

The scene would have incensed Johnson and the American public had it been included in the film.⁴⁹ The assault on the eastern perimeter of the Special Forces compound against the few remaining Kham Duc defenders later that day would have provided the North Vietnamese with a morbid counterpoint to the John Wayne movie, “The Green Berets.” With the rapid speed at which the assault occurred, surrender would not have been an option, if even that would have been contemplated.

Scenes of the aftermath of the battle would have made for difficult viewing, as well. The two outposts where close-in, sometimes hand to hand combat occurred were littered with American dead. The airfield was strewn with the wreckage of a downed CH-47 helicopter, a disabled C-130 cargo plane, an O-2 forward air controller aircraft, the remains of a UH-1 helicopter and other equipment damaged or destroyed over the period of the three day battle. And, to top it off, disheveled American and South Vietnamese captives, some wounded, roped together and herded like so many head of cattle would surely have survived the cutting room and provided the kind of imagery that would produce the maximum propaganda impact Hanoi was looking for. These descriptions of film scenes do not amount to idle speculation. Images of downed and captured American pilots, some seriously injured or wounded, paraded through gauntlets of taunting North Vietnamese, with scenes of the wreckage of their aircraft thrown in for good measure, were captured on film and routinely used for propaganda purposes by Hanoi.

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⁴⁹ McLeroy.

Johnson's trepidation over the partial bombing halt decision was rooted in more than just a concern that Hanoi would take full military advantage of him. He often expressed concern for the safety of the troops in the field. On May 14, 1968, for example, Johnson discussed armed reconnaissance of North Vietnam between the 19th and 20th parallels with Wheeler, Clifford and Rusk. Advised by Clifford that the targets in that area were not worth the risk of rupturing the nascent peace negotiations, Johnson made it clear that he wanted to hear both sides of the argument. "I am sensitive that we do anything to hinder negotiations. I also worry that we kill some of our people by holding back to the 19th," Johnson said.⁵⁰ Earlier in the year, in speeches given on March 17 and 20, Johnson invoked the safety of American troops as he lashed out at his detractors. "Make no mistake about it . . . we are going to win. Those of you who think that you can save lives by moving the battlefield in from the mountains to the cities have another thought coming," he argued.⁵¹

The President also vented his frustration from time to time at the intractability of the North Vietnamese. On May 21, again discussing bombing of North Vietnam with Wheeler, Clifford and Rusk, Johnson commented on Hanoi's fight/talk strategy. In response to a report from Wheeler that the NVA enhanced its capabilities while the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris continued to use the talks to denounce the United States, Johnson lamented, "How long can we go on with 19th (parallel) without getting trapped into never being able to do anything above the

⁵⁰ Barrett, "Notes of Tuesday Luncheon," May 14, 1968, pp. 746-47.

⁵¹ Hoopes, Townsend, The Limits of Intervention (New York: David McKay, 1973) p. 206.

19th? I think our force brought them to (the) table, not our eloquence of March 31. All we are doing now is to let them build it back up.”⁵²

With his frustrations over the recalcitrant North Vietnamese running high, concerned that he was being backed into a bombing halt corner, with the safety of American troops on his mind and convinced that Hanoi responded only to force, Johnson was primed to order a resumption of bombing and wage an all out military effort to induce them to negotiate in good faith. On top of these considerable burdens, Johnson’s personality was probably driving him to take the gloves off in his dealings with Hanoi. As one Johnson psycho-biographer has concluded, Johnson’s “fear of failure and his fear of revealing ineptitude” made it impossible for him to “cease and desist” from his war policies, “which would constitute an admission of inadequacy.”⁵³ An embarrassing defeat at Kham Duc coupled with release of Hanoi’s planned propaganda film would have pushed Johnson into a psychological corner from which he would have to extricate himself.

With American troops dislodging the NVA from Saigon and otherwise occupied with fending off the enemy in other areas of South Vietnam as the “mini-Tet” offensive dragged on, the only military alternative available to Johnson to respond to a Kham Duc debacle was the option he had consistently used in the past to retaliate against North Vietnam’s transgressions – bombing. Johnson’s time left in office was short. If Hanoi was going to be punished and forced to

⁵² Barrett, “Notes of the Tuesday Lunch Meeting,” May 21, 1968, pp. 755-56.

⁵³ Muslin, Hyman L., M.D. and Jobe, Thomas H., M.D., Lyndon Johnson The Tragic Self: A Psychohistorical Portrait (New York: Plenum Press, 1991) p. 176.

negotiate in good faith and if his legacy was to be preserved, he would have had no choice but to turn to his senior military advisors for a bombing plan that would accomplish these objectives.

Nearly the entire senior military establishment had chafed under the bombing restrictions, even after the off limits circumferences around Hanoi and Haiphong had been tightened. More than interdicting the flow of military hardware after it had been unloaded and targeting enemy troop movements into South Vietnam, Wheeler, Sharp, Westmoreland and the others felt that action to stop the importation of war materiel into North Vietnam was an obvious strategy that should have been employed. Operation Rolling Thunder had not gone far enough, with so many target restrictions imposed by the White House. Sharp, in particular, wanted all militarily important targets no matter where located to be hit, including targets within the population centers of Hanoi and Haiphong and interdiction of rail lines and roads in the north and northwest to within 15 miles of the Chinese border. He also advocated choking off the influx of supplies from China and the Soviet Union by mining Haiphong Harbor and the two other deep water ports in North Vietnam used to offload military hardware from abroad. His message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff outlining a bombing campaign did just that. He estimated that 80% of North Vietnam's imports would be unable to reach bottled up seaports or inland military depots if his plan was authorized.⁵⁴

The specter of China entering the war had loomed over Administration discussions involving bombing of targets near North Vietnam's northern border and mining Haiphong Harbor where Chinese and Russian vessels disgorged military hardware. A top secret Central Intelligence

⁵⁴ Sharp, Appendix E, p. 294.

Agency (CIA) report completed in 1967 considered the possible reactions of China and the Soviet Union to mining of North Vietnam's harbors. The report concluded that China would probably shift to the Soviet Union the problem of coping with the mines, perhaps augment its presence in North Vietnam to attempt to enhance overland shipment capabilities, saber rattle, but not enter the war directly. The CIA also discounted the prospect that the Soviets would undertake a military response. In the CIA report, Johnson had the answer he needed to respond to critics from within and outside the Administration that a radically stepped up bombing campaign that included mining of North Vietnam's deep water ports would cause China or Russia to enter directly into the war.⁵⁵

Sharp and the other senior military leaders also had advances in bomb technology working in their favor. The Walleye bomb, an early "smart bomb" developed by the Navy in 1966, was available and in production. Guided from the cockpit with the aid of a television camera mounted in its nose, the bomb could be dropped with precision on selected targets where minimal collateral damage was desired.⁵⁶

As discussed earlier, by ordering implementation of Sharp's bombing campaign, Johnson would have put into action many of the hallmarks of the Linebacker II bombing campaign ordered by President Nixon in December, 1972. Sharp predicted that his plan would eviscerate North Vietnam's capacity to wage war for a protracted period. Hanoi's reaction to Linebacker II bears

⁵⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "Communist Reactions to Certain U. S. Courses of Action" (Top Secret – Declassified), February 6, 1967, pp. 15, 16.

⁵⁶ Parsch, Andrew, "Directory of U. S. Military Rockets and Missiles: Martin Marietta AGM-62 Walleye" (www.designation-systems.net) pp. 1-3; Momyer, William M. Air Power in Three Wars (WWII, Korea, Vietnam) (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1978) pp. 211-13.

out his prediction. Reeling under the onslaught, the North Vietnamese quickly came back to the negotiating table in January, 1973 and signed the accords that ended American involvement in the war in a matter of days. With North Vietnam's grip on the South much more tenuous in 1968 and the internal debate within the Politburo swinging in the direction of the North-first faction, Lyndon Johnson could have experienced the same response given Richard Nixon when Hanoi realized the severe implications of failure to negotiate an end to the war.

History supports Johnson's observation that Hanoi responded favorably only to American force. In the wake of a Kham Duc propaganda film, Sharp's bombing plan was the only "shelf ready" military action available to Johnson that amounted to a meaningful retaliatory response. The North Vietnamese came perilously close to prevailing at Kham Duc. Had they done so and released the propaganda film, the unintended consequences of a brutal retaliation from the air would have left North Vietnam with no option but to bargain for peace. With the election of Richard Nixon in November, North Vietnam's best chance for a reasonable agreement rested with Johnson and his desire for a settlement to preserve his legacy. American involvement in the war could have ended more than four years before the Paris Peace Accords were finally signed in January, 1973. As Robert Cowley wrote in the introduction to What If, the road not taken also belongs on the map.

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