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MACJ031

Analysis of the Khe Sanh Situation in Light of Previous Sieges (C)

TO CofS

FROM Ch, Mil Hist Br

DATE 3 Mar 68

CMT 1

COL Argo/lpb/3838

1. (C) References:

a. Dien Bien Phu Briefing presented on 11 Feb 68.

b. DF, MACJ031 to CofS, Subject: Dien Bien Phu Briefing, dtd 17 Feb 68.

2. (C) Purpose: To evaluate the Khe Sanh situation in light of previous sieges.

3. (C) Background:

a. The posture of our forces at Khe Sanh bears a marked similarity to many investments of fortresses and entrenched camps throughout history. A brief summary of a few is attached. (Incl 1)

b. Although weapon systems, fortifications, and siege craft have changed through the years, there appears to be certain characteristics or principles which appear constant or recurrent. A singular characteristic common to invested fortresses is that very few have survived the siege. Their inability to withstand a siege is attributable to several factors:

(1) The besieged force fixes itself and forfeits the initiative. This leaves the enemy freedom of action to concentrate his forces and reduce the fortress in the manner and at the time of his choosing. Although in some cases the invested force has attempted to regain the initiative by sallying forth and striking the enemy, these attempts have generally been unsuccessful for several reasons. They are invariably lacking in combat strength compared with the investing force. It is difficult to gain surprise. They must always attack against enemy strength in the prepared encircling positions. And, lastly, the relative security offered by the defensive position militates against an offensive spirit. (Mantua 1896-97; Genoa 1800; Dien Bien Phu 1954.)

(2) Supply problems generally develop.

(3) During sieges of any length the defenders become demoralized by the lack of initiative, waiting, bombardment, and supply shortages. Unless plausible relief is offered, a feeling of futility soon sets in.

c. In those cases where invested force has survived, success has generally been attributable to one of the following reasons:

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(1) The investing force has been withdrawn because of inability to continue the siege from a logistic point of view, or more pressing needs for the force elsewhere. (Napoleon at Acre 1799.)

(2) A relieving force has attacked and defeated the investing force. These successes have uniformly been the result of the relieving force maintaining freedom of maneuver and employing offensive action to attack the besieging force. (Siege of Prague 1757; Tobruk 1941; Leningrad 1944; Bastogne 1944-45.) In cases where the relieving force has attempted to reinforce the beleaguered force, the siege has generally been successful and the relieving force has only served to swell the ultimate losses. (Mantua 1796; Dien Bien Phu 1954; Metz 1870; Sedan 1870.)

(3) The beleaguered force has broken out or been extracted. (Sevastopol 1855; Na Sam 1953; Lai Chau 1953.)

4. (S) Current Situation. It appears that Khe Sanh is following the pattern of previous sieges. The force is on the defensive in a fortified camp surrounded by a strong enemy. The relative strength of the investing forces precludes decisive offensive action by the Khe Sanh force. The enemy holds the initiative and is applying his timetable and techniques to conduct of the siege. In one important respect, however, Khe Sanh is different from previous investments. It is supported by independent massive firepower from outside the camp. Although we are strong in firepower, the enemy is seeking ways of offsetting our firepower through the use of bunkers, tunnels, dispersion, concealment, and hugging tactics.

5. (S) Discussion:

a. Several options lay open to us:

(1) Continue to maintain the position supported by all available firepower.

(2) Reinforce the position and initiate offensive operations.

(3) Initiate offensive with a relieving force aimed at attacking the enemy's forces deployed at Khe Sanh.

(4) Withdraw.

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b. Success in our current course of action lies only in deterring the enemy from his purpose by using our firepower to make success too expensive for him in men and logistics. His passive measures have thus far been effective in reducing our ability to locate targets through aerial reconnaissance and in limiting the effectiveness of our firepower. Although our firepower can still make his assault on Khe Sanh very costly, he is apparently willing to pay the price. In his calculations of the troop, weapons and supply strength required to take Khe Sanh, he has undoubtedly taken into account and made allowances for the attrition he will suffer in the process. Since he is apparently intent upon pressing the siege regardless of cost, the only question is whether he will exhaust his resources before overrunning the position. This course of action also has the obvious disadvantage of relinquishing the initiative to the enemy. He chooses the method, location, and timing of his attack.

c. To reinforce the position would merely raise the ante regarding how much in the way of resources he must apply. The question would remain, will he exhaust his resources before he can succeed. As in the past, attacks mounted from the base would hit him where he is best prepared. Surprise would be difficult to obtain. And, finally, such operations do not hold much promise of decisive action.

d. Although our air and artillery attacks in the Khe Sanh complex may constitute an attack on the enemy by outside forces, as noted above, the ultimate effectiveness of this firepower is blemished by the enemy's meticulous cover and concealment, his hugging tactics, and our inability to precisely locate targets at any distance from the fire support base. A ground attack mounted against the enemy with forces from outside the Khe Sanh base would have several advantages. It would deprive him of the initiative, disrupt his operations, and relieve pressure on the Khe Sanh position. The enemy would be compelled either to withdraw or to stand and fight. In the former case, we would probably at the minimum succeed in destroying a quantity of his supplies stocked in the area as well as lifting the siege. In the latter case, we would be able to fix the enemy forces, bring our firepower to bear more effectively, and fight on grounds of our choosing. In either case, he would have to abandon or suspend the siege. Even limited objective spoiling attacks would disrupt his plans, cause a suspension or delay of the siege, and cause him damage.

e. There are, however, certain dangers or limitations inherent in undertaking independent ground operations. If the relieving force is not sufficiently strong, it is subject to being defeated in detail. We might end up with two invested

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forces. A major force operating the rugged, roadless terrain may not be logistically supportable at this time. However, a limited objective airmobile spoiling attack or reconnaissance in force can undoubtedly be supported. Such an operation would at least enhance target location; and, depending on enemy reaction, may be able to do substantial damage to the enemy. Such an operation has the advantage of being capable of being extracted should the enemy turn on it in strength.

f. Withdrawal is strategically, politically or psychologically unacceptable.

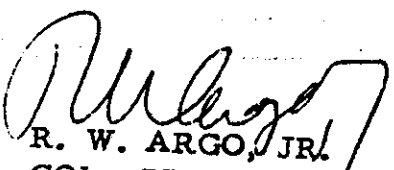
6. (S) Conclusions:

a. If a purely defensive course of action is pursued at Khe Sanh, the enemy may succeed in concentrating sufficient combat power to overwhelm our base in spite of our firepower, as has been the case in most sieges in the past.

b. Offensive action by forces from outside the Khe Sanh position offers promise of disrupting the enemy's operations and bringing our firepower to bear more effectively.

7. (S) Recommendation. That urgent consideration be given to employing an outside force in offensive action against the enemy's forces devoted to the siege.

Incl
as


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A SUMMARY OF SIEGES

1. General:

a. During the medieval period fortresses had a fair record of withstanding sieges. They held out more often than not. Their success was attributable to several factors. Since explosives had not been developed, siege craft consisting of battering type devices, catapults, fire, and scaling equipment, had limited effectiveness against a well-constructed fort. Starvation, for the most part, was the primary tool. However, since field logistics systems had not been developed, the well stocked fortress could generally outlast the investing force. In cases where the balance was reversed, the fort had to rely on an ally to take to the field and defeat the besieger, thus raising the siege. Where outside help was not forthcoming the fortress fell.

b. With the advent of gunpowder, the time required to breach a fortress was reduced to within the limits of endurance of the investing force. This period of decline of the fortress was heralded by the fall of the impregnable fortress of Constantinople in 1453.

c. Elaborate fortresses were designed and constructed during the Seventeenth Century. The Vauban system of fortification with its interlocking fields of fire, mutually supporting lunettes and redoubts, all protected by moats, was the ultimate in this period. These grand fortresses,

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however, were far from impregnable. They merely increased the amount of force, effort, and time that would be required to reduce them. Vauban also developed the formalized siege system of parallels, saps, and mines to reduce them. (Giap used this system virtually unmodified at Dien Bien Phu. He appears to be using it again at Khe Sanh.) So well was it recognized that a fort could not withstand a siege that formalized rules for surrender were observed by all commanders. Initially the attacking force was required to develop their saps and three parallels and blow a major breach in the wall. When the defender had repelled two assaults he could surrender. By the Eighteenth Century, as an economy measure, the rules had been relaxed to a minor breach of the wall and the repelling one assault.

d. At the end of the Eighteenth Century the system had been revised. Forts were held tenaciously, although almost uniformly unsuccessfully. During the Nineteenth Century with the improvements in weaponry, the Vauban fortifications gave away to the developments of the fortress consisting of a number of mutually supporting forts. These were, however, no more successful than their predecessors in withstanding an investment. They did require the enemy to concentrate substantial combat power to reduce them and bought time for a nation to mobilize its army and take to the field.

2. The following is a list of some of the more notable sieges. The notation "unsuccessful" indicates that the fort fell.

<u>Fort</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Defender</u>	<u>Attacker</u>	<u>Results</u>
Constantinople	1453	Byzantines	Turks	Unsuccessful
Belgrade	1456 (Relieving force attacked Turks and raised the siege.)	Serbia	Turks	Successful
Belgrade	1521	Serbia	Turks	Unsuccessful
Rhodes	1480-81 (Turkish ruler, Mohammad, died and the siege was lifted.)	Knights of St. John	Turks	Successful
Rhodes	1521	Knights of St. John	Turks	Unsuccessful
Vienna	1529 (Bad weather. The Turks were unable to bring up siege artillery or maintain themselves logistically.)	Austrians	Turks	Successful
Vienna	1683 (A united German and Polish relief army defeated the Turks and raised the siege.)	Austrians	Turks	Successful
Prague	1757 (A relief force from Vienna under Count Von Daun attacked Frederick the Great's investing forces, fought him to a draw, and caused him to raise the siege before the city starved.)	Austrians	Prussians	Successful
Yorktown	1781	British	US & French	Unsuccessful
Mantua	1796-97 (Four attempts were made to relieve the fortress. All were defeated by the investing French forces under Napoleon. One relieving force joined the Mantua garrison but ultimately only contributed to the logistic problem. Several attacks were mounted by the invested force but all were contained and defeated.)	Austrians	French	Unsuccessful

<u>Fort</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Defender</u>	<u>Attacker</u>	<u>Results</u>
Acre	1799	Turks	French	Successful
	(A relieving force from Damascus caused the siege to be suspended and weakened the French force, although it itself was ultimately defeated. The French under Napoleon had to abandon the siege because the operation could not be supported logistically.)			
Genoa	1800	French	Austrians	Unsuccessful
	(The French force under Massena attempted to break out and attack the investing force but was defeated.)			
Danzig	1807	Prussians	French	Unsuccessful
	(Prussians reinforced the city by sea and attempted to attack the investing force. They were defeated and surrendered the well stocked bastion.)			
Konigsberg	1807	Prussians	French	Unsuccessful
	(Prussian force broke out and escaped.)			
Saragossa	1809	Spanish	French	Unsuccessful
Riga	1812	Russians	Prussians	Successful
	(Prussians under French control lifted siege and withdrew when main French force was defeated elsewhere.)			
Sevastopol	1757	Russians	French-British	Unsuccessful
	(Russians reinforced garrison and attempted to defeat investors. They finally broke out and escaped.)			
Fort Donaldson	1862	Confederate	Union	Unsuccessful
	(Gen Forrester broke out and escaped with a cavalry element the night before the fort fell.)			
Vicksburg	1863	Confederate	Union	Unsuccessful

<u>Fort</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Defender</u>	<u>Attacker</u>	<u>Results</u>
Chattanooga	1863 (Relieving force cleared a secure LOC.)	Union	Confederate	Successful
Knoxville	1863 (Confederate forces were without a siege train. The threat of a two corps relief force enroute coupled with the confederate defeat at Chattanooga caused the siege to be lifted.)	Union	Confederate	Successful
Metz	1870 (French Army withdrew into fortress and were lost.)	French	Prussians	Unsuccessful
Sedan	1870 (Same as above.)	French	Prussians	Unsuccessful
Paris	1870-71	French	Prussians	Unsuccessful
Liege	1914	Belgians	Germans	Unsuccessful
Antwerp	1914	Belgians	Germans	Unsuccessful
Namur	1914	Belgians	Germans	Unsuccessful
Maubeuge	1914	French	Germans	Unsuccessful
Przemysl	1914-15	Austrians	Russians	Unsuccessful
Warsaw	1939	Poles	Germans	Unsuccessful
Ft Eben Emael	1940	Belgians	Germans	Unsuccessful
Corregidor	1941-42	US	Japanese	Unsuccessful
Leningrad	1942-44 (A marginal LOC was driven into city. Investing forces later were defeated in the field by relieving forces.)	Russians	Germans	Successful

<u>Fort</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Defender</u>	<u>Attacker</u>	<u>Results</u>
Sevastopol	1942 (Reinforcements were bottled up in the fort.)	Russians	Germans	Unsuccessful
Stalingrad	1942-43	Germans	Russians	Unsuccessful
Bastogne	1944-45 (Strong relief forces under General Patton attacked and defeated investing force.)	US	Germans	Successful
Na Sam	1952-53 (French force was covertly extracted by air.)	French	Vietminh	Unsuccessful
Lai Chau	1953 (French force broke out and attempted to withdraw overland--mostly destroyed.)	French	Vietminh	Unsuccessful
Dien Bien Phu	1953-54	French	Vietminh	Unsuccessful