

KHE SANH

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

CM-2944-68
3 Feb 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

DECLASSIFIED

SUBJECT: KHE SANH

Authority JCS 10-3-78 letter
By if, NARS, Date 3-16-79

In response to your telephone call to me last evening, I asked General Westmoreland to provide me his views as soon as possible on our reinforcement capability in the Khe Sanh area. His reply to me is presented in the following paragraphs for your information.

"1. I agree with (General Wheeler's) response on the question of our Khe Sanh reinforcement capability and would add the following amplification.

"2. Our situation at Khe Sanh as compared with the French at Dien Bien Phu is different in three significant respects. We have supporting air (tactical air and B-52's) for all-weather attack of enemy forces by orders of magnitude over that at Dien Bien Phu. We have reinforcing heavy artillery within range of the Khe Sanh area from USMC positions east of the mountains. We have multiple and vastly improved techniques for aerial supply and we are within helicopter support range for troop reinforcement, logistic support, medical evacuation and other requirements.

"3. We now have four Marine Corps battalions and one ARVN ranger battalion with combat and combat service support in the Khe Sanh area. We currently have two brigades of the 1st Air Cavalry Division (Airmobile), plus one brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, with appropriate light and medium artillery support, located north of the Ai Van Pass, within prompt reinforcing distance of Khe Sanh. We have plans to further reinforce this area on short notice if required.

"4. We have a significant capability to reinforce Khe Sanh by fire in all weather conditions by artillery, tactical air, and B-52's. There are 18 105MM howitzers and 6 155 MM howitzers within the Khe Sanh defensive system. Additionally, 16 175MM guns are with the 3d Marine Division forces east of Khe Sanh positioned at the Rock Pile and at Camp Carroll. These guns are within range of Khe Sanh and their fires can be massed as required through the use of the centralized fire direction facility at Dong Ha. In addition to this heavy artillery support, and in contrast to the French situation at Dien Bien Phu, we have a highly effective tactical air and B-52 capability. Radar or "SKY SPOT" technique allows us

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direct tactical air strikes either at night or in zero visibility conditions throughout the Khe Sanh area. In addition to tactical air, our B-52 strikes are also weather independent. During adverse weather in the Khe Sanh area there are frequent breaks of three or four hours, in which we could intensify the air strikes, and insert helicopter gun ships into the area for additional fires as required. If the enemy masses to attack, he will be extremely vulnerable to the massed B-52's against his supporting forces and destructive power of tactical air, gunships and artillery against his infantry. This capability of reinforcement by fire alone could have changed the course of battle at Dien Bien Phu.

"5. Although logistical support will present a major problem, I am satisfied we can resolve it by our multiple means of resupply. Enemy interdiction of the airfield at Khe Sanh will not deny our reinforcement and support capability by helicopters. As pointed out in (General Wheeler's) response to the President, we could also re-open Route 9 for a land line of communication. This would take 22 company days of engineer effort, but with considerable cost in security.

"6. Although not ideal, the tactical situation at Khe Sanh as well as our improved combat techniques and capabilities are considerably different from those at Dien Bien Phu.

"7. Addressing the President's query on additional help required, with the current level of activity we need an additional squadron of C-130 aircraft, complete with ground handling and maintenance crews, for immediate usage. In addition, I recommend a second squadron of C-130's be alerted for immediate movement if unforeseen contingencies arise. Admiral Sharp may wish to address these requirements from the standpoint of assets available elsewhere in the theater. Additionally, it would be prudent to have heavy air drop equipment in reserve which can be called forward if we need it. We currently have a capability of delivering 600 tons per day for 14 days with no recovery. I would like at least an equal quantity ready for immediate air shipment forward if required. These requirements are also being submitted separately. Acceleration of the issue of M-16 rifles, M-60 machine guns and M-29 mortars to South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) units would improve our posture in economy of force areas. The importance of helicopter assets in the pending battle cannot be overstated. To achieve the necessary helicopter lift for forces deployed to Northern Corps Tactical Zone, I plan drawing on Rosson's (Commander I Field Force) and Weyand's (Commander II Field Force) assets to a major degree. Expediting the rate of delivery of replacement helicopters for assault helicopter companies and assault support helicopter companies would aid in maintaining our situation in the south during the battle in the north. We are also experiencing high loss rates of O-1 observation aircraft and

replacements are urgently needed to maintain our observation and surveillance capability over our newly opened LOC, new areas under pacification, enemy routes of infiltration and enemy base areas. The northern I Corps Tactical Zone has greatly increased our engineering requirements. Construction of a logistical base, the maintenance of Route I in that area, construction of DYE MARKER obstacle/strong point system, plus the need of opening Route 9 to Khe Sanh will tax severely our construction capability. Providing the Naval Mobile Construction Battalion yet to be furnished as part of Program 5 would significantly improve our buildup in the north. With regard to Republic of Korea Forces, action should be taken to oppose any thought of withdrawing elements of Republic of Korea forces in Vietnam and returning them to Korea. In addition, every effort should be made to re-open negotiations regarding the proposed ROK light division deployment as soon as the situation in Korea will allow. Expedited deployment of the Thai light division, within practical limitation, is most desirable and would permit greater flexibility in the employment of our ready reaction forces in RVN.

"8. The use of tactical nuclear weapons should not be required in the present situation in view of the authority to use COFRAM. However, should the situation in the DMZ area change dramatically, we should be prepared to introduce weapons of greater effectiveness against massed forces. Under such circumstances I visualize that either tactical nuclear weapons or chemical agents would be active candidates for employment."

Earle G. Wheeler
EARLE G. WHEELER
CHAIRMAN
JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

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GROUP 1
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downgrading and
declassification