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

OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR  
COUNTERINSURGENCY AND SPECIAL ACTIVITIES

THE JOINT STAFF

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR, JOINT STAFF

Subject: Comparison of the Khe Sanh Campaign with  
Dien Bien Phu

I. General

1. Now that the battle of Khe Sanh seems about to enter the critical phase, it may be worthwhile to compare both the general and local situations with the battle of Dien Bien Phu. General Westmoreland has made a decision to defend Khe Sanh. By this decision he is accepting battle on terrain and at a time selected by the enemy. There are those who doubt the wisdom of his decision. It seems highly likely that the critics and doubters will increase in numbers as costs, casualties and battlefield equipment losses are revealed during the course of the battle. We always know about our own losses from the beginning stages of the battle. It will be many months, perhaps years, before the full extent of enemy losses will be known to us. Because of this, criticism and second guessing comes easily. For these reasons, it seems important to draw a comparison between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu to provide background for a military judgment which has already been taken by the commander on the ground and endorsed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

2. In the brief report which follows, there is a statistical comparison of the forces involved in terms of their strength, firepower, mobility and support and the physical environment in the area of the two battles. However, before we examine those comparisons it should be established that there is an overall similarity between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu in the eyes of the enemy. The following subparagraphs

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GROUP 1  
Excluded from automatic  
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endeavor to outline the enemy view of the general situation in South Vietnam and the importance of Khe Sanh to his apparent strategy:

a. In 1953 General Navarre replaced General Salan as the French Commander. The forces available to him numbered about 522,000. Of these forces approximately forty seven percent or 245,000 were local auxiliaries including Vietnamese, Thai and Cambodians. The Government of Vietnam which had been thrown together as a political expedient under Bao Dai was weak politically and administratively. Corruption was rampant and subversion and penetration widespread. The Viet Minh had captured the patriotic theme of national independence.

b. Widespread guerrilla attacks from the Tonkin Delta to Cau Mau had tied down in defensive bases the bulk of the French Union Forces and their local auxiliaries. De Lattre had left behind a fortified line in the Tonkin Delta manned by auxiliaries and second line troops. It was the opinion of General Giap that the opponent was on the horns of a dilemma. 1/ If he concentrated his forces by withdrawing them from the defense of the populated areas, he contributed to the vulnerability of the rear, stopped pacification operations, and accelerated the possibility of an early takeover by the Communists leading to a "mass uprising". Alternatively, if he remained spread out in a defensive posture then the Viet Minh regiments and Divisions could concentrate at will and destroy his forces piecemeal.

c. ~~In order to shake loose some mobile forces Navarre planned to turn over the "pacification" task to the Vietnamese troops.~~ Giap calculated that these were neither inspired nor reliable and would pose no serious obstacle to the Viet Minh strategy.

d. ~~As soon as Navarre assembled his mobile forces, Giap ordered an immediate offensive by guerrillas throughout the country.~~ When French forces were committed at Dien Bien Phu, Giap ordered an offensive in Laos at Seno, Thakek and Luang Prabang and in Vietnam at Tuy Hoa, Pleiku and An Khe. ~~In February, the Viet Minh seized forty-five strong points in the Tonkin Delta and most of these through defections.~~

e. The Viet Minh had long been convinced that they would not succeed unless and until they achieved a

1/ For compendium of NVN statements and analysis see Annex A

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significant military victory, which they believed would demoralize French forces, remove the last vestige of hope from the weak government of Vietnam and finally persuade metropolitan France that the cost of the war was disproportionate to the objectives thereof. Therefore, while recognizing their deficiencies in military power and the formidable logistic problems involved, they nonetheless decided upon a Herculean national effort including the use of 250,000 porters in order to achieve a major battlefield success at Dien Bien Phu.

3. It is interesting to note that after the encirclement of Dien Bien Phu by four reinforced divisions a period of almost three months passed before they initiated their major assault on the 13th of March. Presumably, as any military headquarters or staff would do, the Viet Minh deployed around Dien Bien Phu the largest force they could hope to supply and sustain in intensive combat. It is noteworthy that the enemy force at Khe Sanh and at Dien Bien Phu seem to be almost identical in strength and surprisingly similar in organization. It is rumored that Giap himself is in command at Khe Sanh as he was at Dien Bien Phu.

4. Although the strategic situation in South Vietnam today differs substantially from the situation in 1953 and 1954, there are enough similarities so that the North Vietnamese might well construct in their own minds, with some wishful thinking, a reasonable parallel.

5. One last general point, prior to Dien Bien Phu, the French Government had decided to negotiate an end to the war. The Viet Minh were aware of this, and in fact, contacts were under way and negotiations had started while Dien Bien Phu was under siege.

## II. Comparison (For comprehensive statistical comparison see Annex B) (For Maps, See Appendix 1)

### 6. Location - Setting

|                   | <u>Dien Bien Phu</u>                                 | <u>Khe Sanh</u>                                         |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| a. <u>Terrain</u> | Open valley with jungle covered mountains on 2 sides | Open plateau with overlooking jungle covered mountains. |
| b. <u>Access</u>  | No open roads                                        | No open roads                                           |

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Dien Bien PhuKhe Sanh

## c. Distances

288 KM to nearest  
air and log base  
(Hanoi)

64 KM to Quang Tri;  
160 KM to Danang

## d. Weather

NE monsoon rain-  
reduced visibi-  
lity

NE monsoon rain-  
reduced visibility

7. Opposing Forces (See Annex B)Dien Bien PhuKhe Sanha. French

## (1) Infantry

5 Divs (-) ~~(13,000)~~

4 Divs (+) ~~23,500~~

## (2) Artillery\*\*

96 Tubes  
48 120" mortar  
16 122mm rockets

48 HOW (+) (Est)  
24 mortars (Est) 120"  
36 122mm rocket  
launchers  
105 Recoilless  
(75 or 90mm)

## (3) AAA\*\*

36-37"  
80 12.7" machine-  
gun

24-37"  
84 12.7" machine-  
gun

b. Friendlies

## (1) Infantry

7,235 French and  
African  
3,579 Auxiliaries  
(VN, Thai)

5,906 USMC  
400 VN Rangers  
500 Irregulars

## Total

~~13,800~~

~~26,000~~

## (2) Artillery

On Position

28 Howitzers  
24 120 mm mortars

24 Howitzers  
6 4.2 mortars

## (3) Armor

10 Lt tanks

None

(4) Other  
Artillery  
In Range

None

12 - 175 mm guns

\*\* Estimated on basis OS and TO&E

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8. Supporting Reinforcing Forces

a. Combat Air

Dien Bien Phu

Khe Sanh

- (1) Fighters/  
Fighter bombers 77 200+  
200 (+) on call
- (2) Bombers 47 (B-26) B-52 (30/day)
- (3) Sorties (Maximum in  
one day)
- (a) Fighter 99 } 99 MAY 500 (+)  
(b) Bomber 38 } COMBINED 40
- (4) ~~Ratio bomb tonnage~~  
~~delivered per day~~  
~~approx~~ 1:1 20

b. Log Air

- (1) ~~FW~~ 43 C-119 60 C-123  
29 C-47 108 C-130  
(Maximum one  
day delivery  
123 tons) + necessary  
cargo helicopter  
augmentation  
(up to 1,000  
tons)
- (2) Helicopter Utility only 500+ including  
CH-54 CH-56  
Heavy lift as  
req.

c. Mobile Reserves

- ~~6 or 7~~ 47 USMC Bns  
Infantry Bns 22 USA Bns  
(pent delivery All capable  
only) airmobile  
introduction

III. Campaign Scenario (To Date) (Annex C, Scenario)

9. The sequence of events and preparations are similar in many respects. In both cases the ~~buildup of enemy forces over a period of about a month was followed by a slow encirclement. Prior to the main attack there was prolonged supply activity and just prior to the attack a series of~~

coordinated attacks against population centers and support facilities, particularly at Dien Bien Phu. If the premise in this report is correct -- that is that the Sarr is a Dien Bien Phu in the eyes of the NVA, then the evaluation below is probably close to the mark as an extrapolation from the past.

#### IV. Evaluation

##### 10. Probable enemy course of action:

- a. ~~Attempt to strengthen the Sarr by "axis" or feeder~~  
trenches at Dien Bien Phu.
- b. ~~Deny use of the Sarr in the field.~~
- c. ~~Dig anti-aircraft trenches and other measures to cover.~~
- d. ~~Ambush the enemy at LZs and other key points in the command area.~~
- e. ~~Attack supporting airfields and other facilities in the south as far as possible by day or night. Perhaps at Dien Bien Phu.~~
- f. ~~Interdict routes in North Vietnam.~~
- g. ~~Raise local guerrilla and sabotage activity throughout country.~~
- h. ~~Initiate negotiations.~~

W. E. DePUY  
Major General, USA

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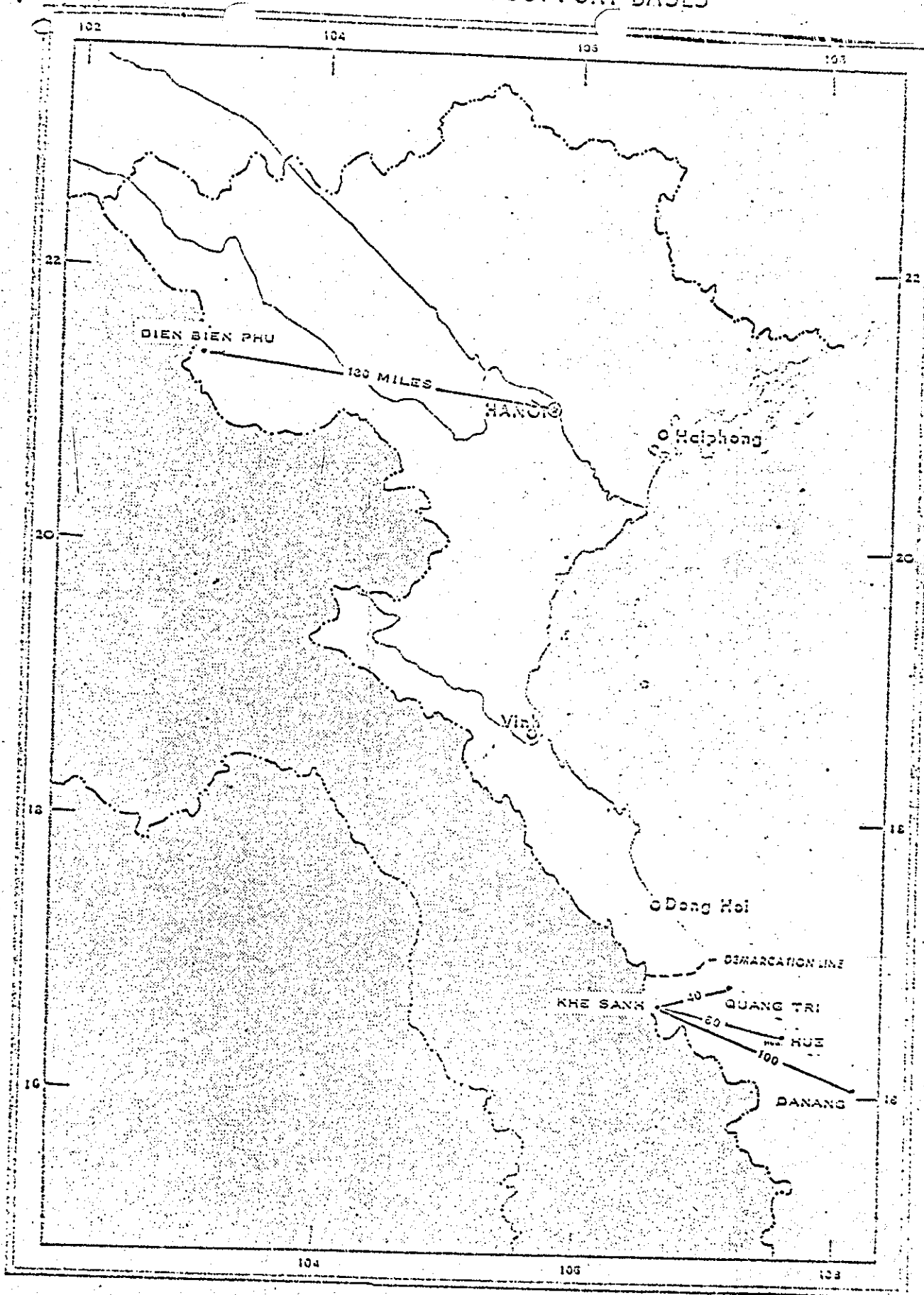
## MAPS

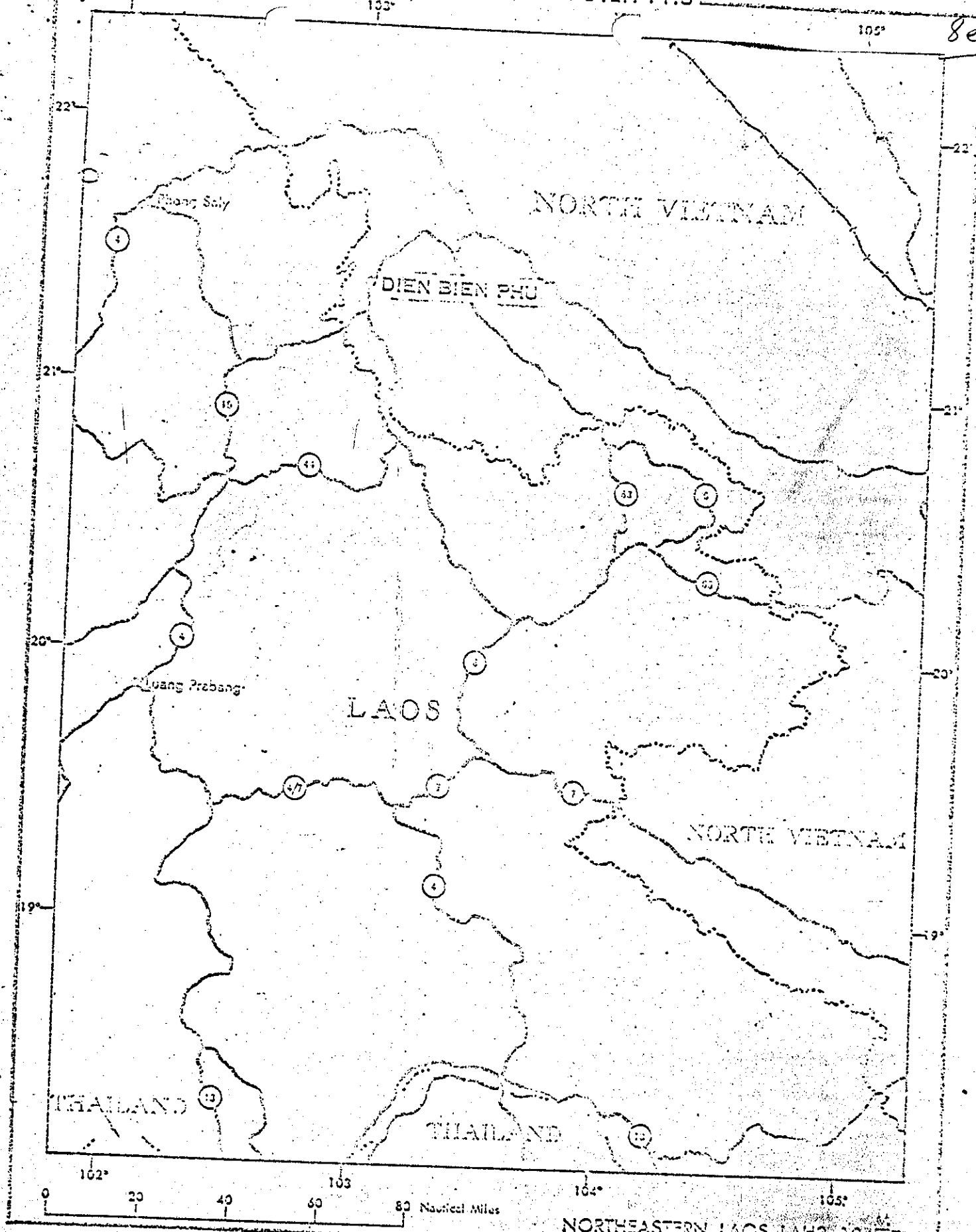
- I. INDOCHINA
- II. AIR DISTANCE FROM SUPPORT BASES
- III. GENERAL AREA - DIEN BIEN PHU
- IV. GENERAL AREA - KHE SANH
- V. BATTLE AREA - DIEN BIEN PHU
- VI. BATTLE AREA - KHE SANH & DMZ

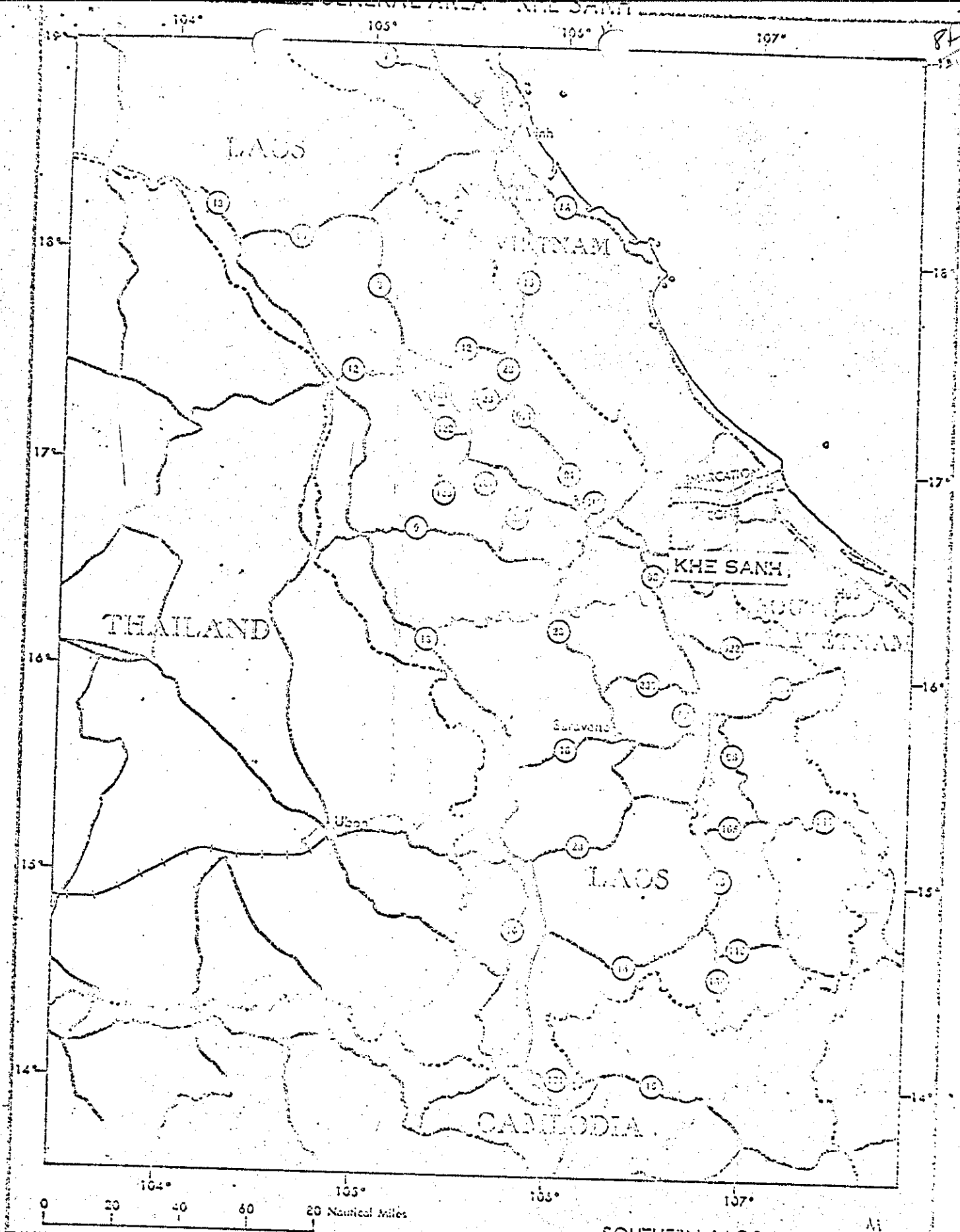


# AIR DISTANCE FROM SUPPORT BASES

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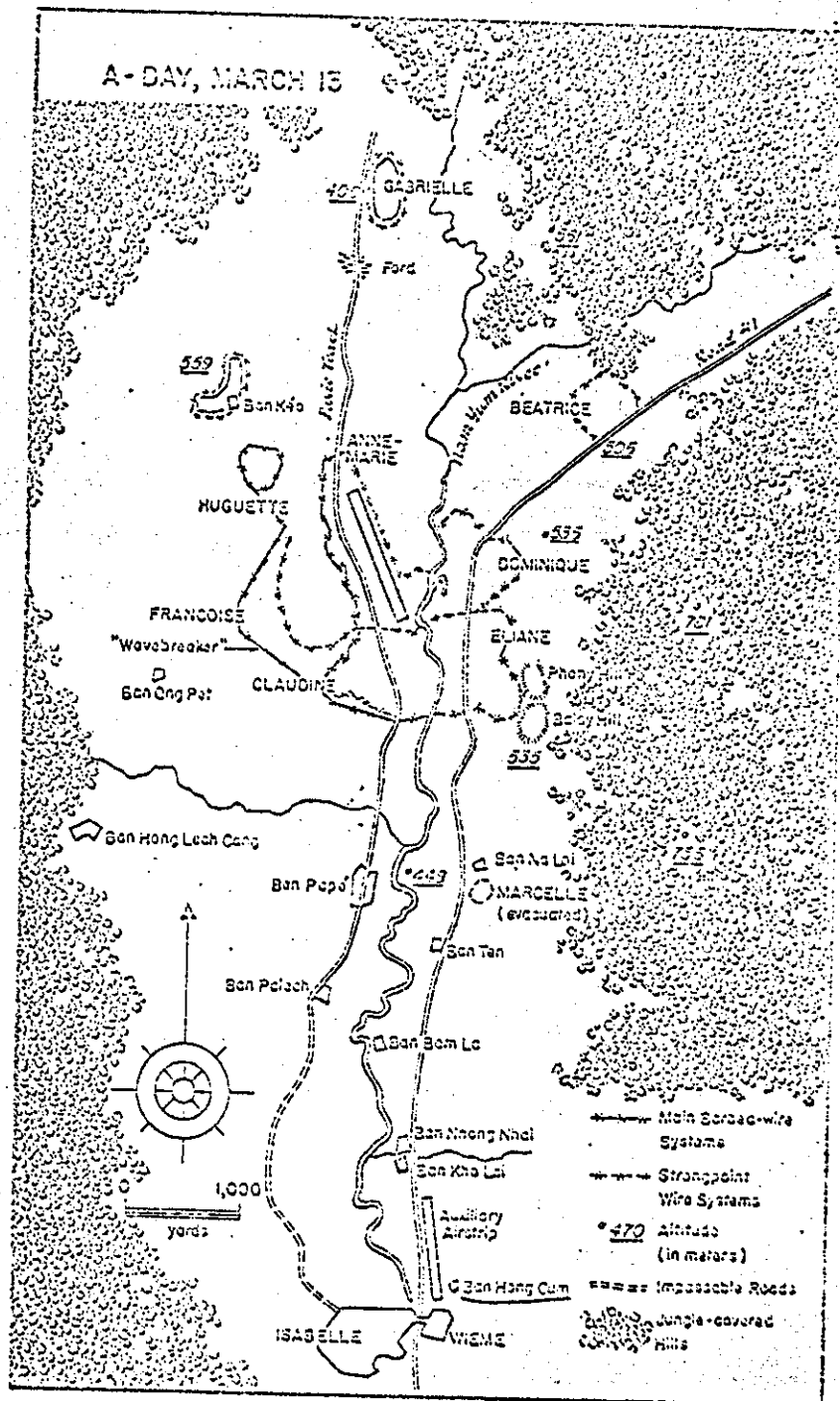






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# BATTLE AREA - DIEN BIEN PHU



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BATTLE AREA - KHE SANH - DMZ

