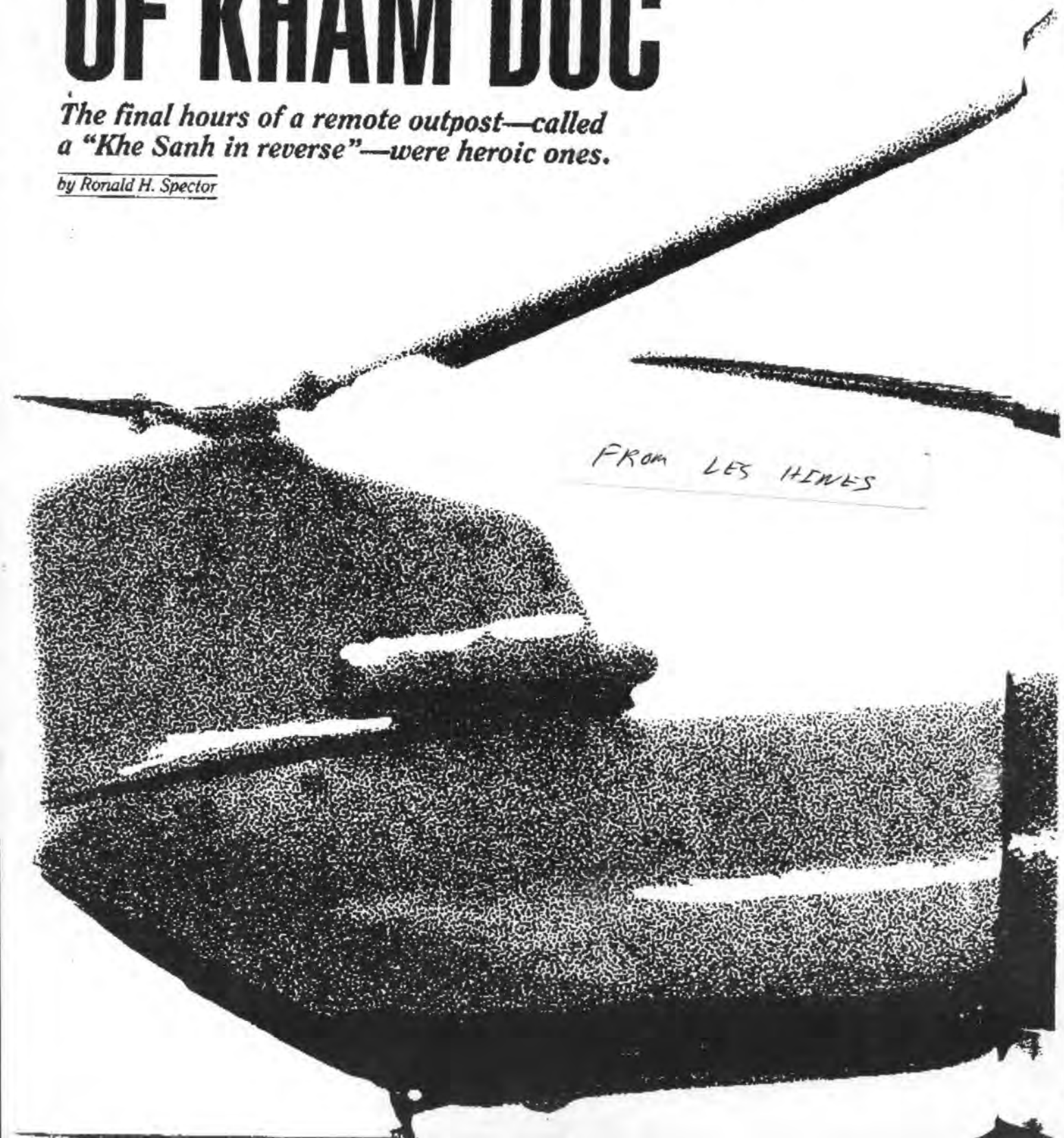
THE EVACUATION OF KHAM DUC

The final hours of a remote outpost—called a "Khe Sanh in reverse"—were heroic ones.

by Ronald H. Spector



At the beginning of April 1968, U.S. Marines and Air Cavalry troops in Vietnam lifted the siege of Khe Sanh, in one of the largest operations of the war. As the North Vietnamese withdrew from the area of the besieged marine base, leaving behind evidence of their heavy losses, a communique from the headquarters of the U.S. commander, General William Westmoreland, declared that for the Communists the battle for Khe Sanh had been "a Dien Bien Phu in reverse." Less than two months later, however, U.S. forces were to suffer a sharp defeat at another remote outpost near the Laotian border called Kham Duc—a defeat that was, in a sense, Khe Sanh in reverse.

The months following the Tet attacks at the end of January had been a time of stress and of calamity not always averted. Early in February communist troops, supported for the first time by tanks, overran the Lang Vei Special Forces camp near Khe Sanh, killing 200 of its 500 defenders, including 10 of its more than two dozen American advisers. After the much-publicized fall of Lang Vei, Kham Duc was the last remaining Special Forces camp of I Corps along the Laotian border. Far from the urban centers and coastal farmlands, Kham Duc sat in the center of a mile-wide green bowl in the rugged country of northwestern Quang Tin province. Route 14, the principal north–south road through the border region, ran through the base. Just across that border, ten miles away, the roads and tracks of the Ho Chi Minh Trail extended their fingers south and east, some already reaching Route 14 itself.

Like Khe Sanh and Lang Vei, Kham Duc and Ngoc Tavak—its satellite camp three miles closer to Laos—did not truly block the enemy's infiltration into South Vietnam. The border country was too rugged, the Communists' lateral roads were too numerous, and the camps' garrisons were too small to do that; yet the units holding them kept the Communists under observation and frequently interdicted their movements. Their presence meant that there would always be some sand and gravel thrown into the smoothly meshed gears of the Laotian infiltration system.

Since early April, U.S. Army engineer units had been at work upgrading Kham Duc's runway and constructing a concrete base to support the radio-navigation facility. As the improvements to the base progressed, so did communist preparations for attack. By late April, U.S. intelligence was reporting large enemy units in the area, including elements of the 2nd Division of the North Vietnamese Army. A prisoner taken on May 3 reported that his unit was planning to attack Kham Duc. Four months before, when Khe Sanh had been similarly threatened, the Americans had poured in reinforcements and air support. Now the Americans again began reinforcing. A battalion task force of the Americal Division, consisting of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry, an additional infantry company, and some supporting artillery, began arriving by air at Kham Duc late on the morning of May 10. Lieu-

One of the first evacuation helicopters, a CH-47 like the one pictured here, was hit by ground fire, exploded, and blocked the runway for an hour.

SYGMA PHOTO NEWS, NEW YORK CITY

tenant Colonel Robert B. Nelson, commander of the 2nd Battalion, took charge of the camp.

Nelson's men joined about 60 army engineers, about 400 Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) soldiers, and the latter's South Vietnamese and U.S. Special Forces leaders and advisers. Neither as well armed nor as well trained as the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, the CIDG were mercenaries that the Special Forces recruited and organized from among the various highland, non-Vietnamese tribal, ethnic, and religious minorities. The CIDG's primary mission was surveillance, scouting, patrol, and local security. Although their leaders were sometimes bound to the Special Forces and the government by personal ties or political deals, they were primarily freelance soldiers, hired as a group on a contractual basis. Their behavior in a crisis varied from cowardice and treachery to stalwart heroism, depending on the specific situation and the tribal group involved.

Even as reinforcements were arriving at Kham Duc, Ngoc Tavak was already under attack. Located on the site of an old French fort, Ngoc Tavak was defended by a 113-man CIDG Mobile Strike Force company, with 8 U.S. Army Special Forces troops and 3 Australian training-team advisers. Thirty-three U.S. Marines manned two 105mm howitzers, which had recently been moved to Ngoc Tavak to interdict nearby North Vietnamese routes and trails. The howitzers were short of ammunition, however, and could be resupplied only by air from Kham Duc.

At about 3:00 in the morning on May 10, the Communists opened their final heavy-artillery and mortar barrage against the base, followed by a ground attack some thirty minutes later. During the height of the action, some of the CIDG troops abandoned their positions and fled toward the compound yelling, "Don't shoot, don't shoot, friendly, friendly." But once inside the compound, these "friendly" troops tossed grenades and satchel charges at the marine positions, causing heavy casualties. Some of the surviving Americans believed they could also hear the distinctive sound of carbines being fired at them by the CIDGs. (Only the CIDGs had carbines; NVA troops carried AK-47s, whose high-velocity rounds sound quite different from those of a carbine.)

Fighters and rescue aircraft flew to the beleaguered camp in Quang Tin province, near the Laotian border, from Pleiku, Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay, Phu Cat, and bases in Thailand.

The Special Forces commander, Captain Christopher J. Silva, and the commander of the marine battery, Lieutenant Adams, were both badly wounded during the night. As the North Vietnamese attackers penetrated the perimeter and advanced into the eastern end of the camp, the remaining defenders pulled back and called for support from air force gunships and fighter bombers. The defenders believed that some of the wounded were still on the western side of the camp; but as the North Vietnamese closed in, the Americans had no choice but to call for the gunships to blast the western side with their deadly fléchettes (artillery rounds with dartlike metal projections) and cannon fire.

At dawn two Australian warrant officers managed to organize a counterattack by the CIDG troops who were still loyal; they cleared the perimeter and recaptured the howitzer positions abandoned during the nighttime attack. Yet the marines were almost out of shells for their 105s.

Four CH-46 helicopters carrying reinforcements from Kham Duc arrived later that morning, greeted by a hail of fire from the North Vietnamese forces surrounding Ngoc Tavak. The first chopper managed to land safely and unload its cargo of about twenty-five CIDG troops, but as the second approached the landing zone, its fuel line was severed by automatic-weapons fire. The damaged chopper, fuel streaming from the fuselage, settled safely to the ground and unloaded its troops. The third helicopter landed alongside and discharged its reinforcements as the crew of the crippled CH-46 jumped aboard. But as the third chopper was about to lift off, it was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade round and burst into flames. The landing zone was now unusable, and only small UH-1 medevac helicopters could land at the camp to take off the severely wounded. As one medevac chopper came in to hover off a nearby hill, a large number of panicky CIDG soldiers rushed aboard; others held onto the skids as the helicopter lifted off, then fell to their deaths several hundred feet below.

Captain White of the Australian training team, the senior surviving officer, was now in command. Requesting permission to evacuate the camp, he was told to hang on. But with the helicopter pad unserviceable, water and ammunition nearly exhausted, most of the Americans killed or wounded, and the steadiness of the CIDG a doubtful proposition, White believed he had no choice but to abandon the camp before darkness brought renewed attacks. The men destroyed the damaged helicopter and weapons that they could not take with them.

Avoiding the obvious routes to Kham Duc, where the enemy was almost certain to be waiting in ambush, White led his men southeast through heavy jungle to a hill about a mile from Ngoc Tavak, where they hacked out a landing zone. CH-46s quickly swooped in to take the survivors back to Kham Duc.

The loss of Ngoc Tavak had been a costly one. Of the forty-four Americans and Australians at Ngoc Tavak, fifteen had been killed, twenty-three were wounded, and two were missing. Of the hundred-odd CIDG troops, sixty-four were missing or had deserted and thirty were dead or wounded. By the time the dazed and exhausted survivors reached Kham Duc, that camp too was under attack.

Scattered mortar fire rained down on the camp on May 11, as the last of the American reinforcements and additional supplies were flown into the besieged base. By the end of that day, there was a total of some 1,500 U.S. and CIDG soldiers at Kham Duc, as well as almost 300 dependents of the CIDG troops who had been

evacuated from their village near the base. Many of the Americal troops had been sent to reinforce the outposts in the hills surrounding the bowl-shaped valley where the camp was located.

Late on the night of the eleventh, troops of the 1st Vietcong Regiment, 2nd NVA Division, began their final preparations for an assault on Kham Duc. Around 4:00 A.M. the Communists overran the first of the outposts, Number 7, on a hill northeast of the base. By that time, General Westmoreland had already decided to abandon the camp.

Since the arrival of U.S. forces in Vietnam, some of the largest and most stubborn battles had begun as contests for the control of Special Forces camps such as Khe Sanh. Kham Duc had appeared likely to be the next such battleground, with powerful enemy forces converging on the base, U.S. reinforcements arriving, and support and strike aircraft being summoned to aid the defenders.

Yet as U.S. commanders studied the impending battle, they began to have second thoughts. When Colonel Jonathan Ladd, commander of Special Forces in Vietnam, met with the commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF), Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., he found Cushman unwilling to commit more troops to Kham Duc. Ladd pointed out that strong reinforcements would be needed to hold the camp against an attack by a reinforced North Vietnamese regiment. But Cushman had few uncommitted troops to spare and was concerned about a new threat posed by the buildup of communist forces in the An Hoa basin area southeast of Da Nang. A reserve CIDG Mobile Strike Force company had already been dispatched to another threatened Special Forces camp, Thuong Duc, located on the main western approaches to Da Nang. Cushman also pointed out that Kham Duc would be difficult to resupply and was beyond the artillery range of friendly supporting bases.

On the afternoon of May 11, Ladd accompanied the deputy commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), Creighton Abrams, to a meeting with Cushman and Major General Samuel Koster, the Americal Division commander. Koster had now assumed operational control of the Kham Duc battle. At the meeting, the III MAF staff briefed the generals on the situation at Kham Duc. They recommended that the camp be abandoned—or, as they phrased it, "relocated." Colonel Ladd strongly disagreed, pointing out that Kham Duc was the last South Vietnamese outpost of southern I Corps in the western mountains. He also emphasized that it was an important launching site for the super-secret teams innocuously called the Studies and Observation Group, which conducted reconnaissance missions and raids into Laos and other parts of Southeast Asia to observe and interdict lines of communication, capture prisoners, assess bomb damage, and collect intelligence. By 1968, the number of such missions had risen to over 300 a year. Further, Ladd suggested that the Communists might put a Kham Duc victory to propaganda use, especially in view of the opening of peace talks in Paris.

Unmentioned but ever-present during the deliberations were the recent memories of the siege of Khe Sanh. Although American generals had always spoken of the battle with confidence and enthusiasm when addressing Washington or the media, they had found it an anxious and wearing experience, superimposed as it was on the widespread and bloody fights of Tet. Now, with this new "mini-Tet" looming, neither Abrams nor Cushman was inclined to begin another protracted battle. "The decision to evacuate was brought on considerably by the Khe Sanh experience," wrote Westmoreland's operations officer. At the conclusion of the discussions, Abrams instructed Cushman to prepare plans for a withdrawal. Westmoreland approved the decision a few hours later.

By the time word of the decision to evacuate reached Colonel Nelson at Kham Duc, all seven of the hill outposts were under heavy attack. Squads and platoons of Americal soldiers reinforcing the CIDG troops on the hills fought desperately, supported by C-47 gunships dropping flares to illuminate the area and peppering the attackers with their minicannon. As the outposts were overwhelmed, the defenders directed gunships and artillery fire onto their own positions. A few managed to escape into the Kham Duc perimeter, but many died in the hill outposts.

The fate of the outposts added to the sense of terror and foreboding within Kham Duc. The morning began with a fresh disaster as one of the first evacuation helicopters, an army CH-47, was hit by heavy ground fire as it landed on the runway. The chopper exploded, and its flaming hulk blocked the runway for over an hour. An A-1E fighter also was shot down.

As the sun rose over Kham Duc, burning away some of the morning fog, aerial observers beheld a grim sight: The camp was under almost continuous mortar fire, and heavy ground attacks were taking place against the northwestern perimeter. The burning CH-47 sent clouds of black smoke into the sky. On the nearby hills, radio antennae sprouted above the newly established NVA command posts.

Inside the perimeter, men tensely awaited the ground attack. The enemy mortar barrage increased in intensity, and a near miss showered one squad with shrapnel. An 82mm mortar round scored a direct hit on a nearby mortar manned by CIDG personnel, killing or wounding all three of the crew. Specialist 4 Todd Regon, leader of a mortar team, quickly rounded up some Americal infantrymen, led them to the pit, and gave them a crash course in mortar firing. Scrambling back to his own mortar position, Regon was astounded to see illumination rounds bursting harmlessly over the daytime battlefield. An instant later the mortar man realized that he had failed to show his infantry trainees the difference between high-explosive and illumination rounds for the CIDG mortar. Despite his grim situation, Regon managed a smile. "This ought to confuse the hell out of the enemy."

As enemy pressure on the base increased, MACV directed all available air support to Kham Duc. Fighters and attack planes from Pleiku, Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay, and Phu Cat—as well as bases in Thailand—converged on the beleaguered base in answer to the call from the Seventh Air Force commander, General W.W. Momyer, for a "Grand Slam" maximum air effort. An airborne command post in a converted C-130 coordinated the air attacks as dozens of aircraft responded to Momyer's call. At times there were as many as twenty fighters over Kham Duc. Two forward air controllers (FACs) in light planes flew parallel to each other at opposite sides of the Kham Duc runway, each controlling fighter strikes on his side of the field. Traffic was so thick that by late morning the FACs could specifically select fighters based on their load:

napalm, cluster-bomb units, 500- or 750-pound bombs, or high-drag bombs.

"We've got a small Khe Sanh going on here," an air force officer at Kham Duc recorded. "I hope we finish it before night comes." The evacuation, when it came, was marked by confusion, panic, and tragedy. Many of the defenders at Kham Duc were not informed of the decision to abandon the camp until many hours after it had been made. The CIDG forces, panicky and on the verge of mutiny or surrender, feared that the Americans would abandon them. Suspicion was mutual, since American troops had heard the stories of CIDG forces firing on other Americans at Ngoc Tavak.

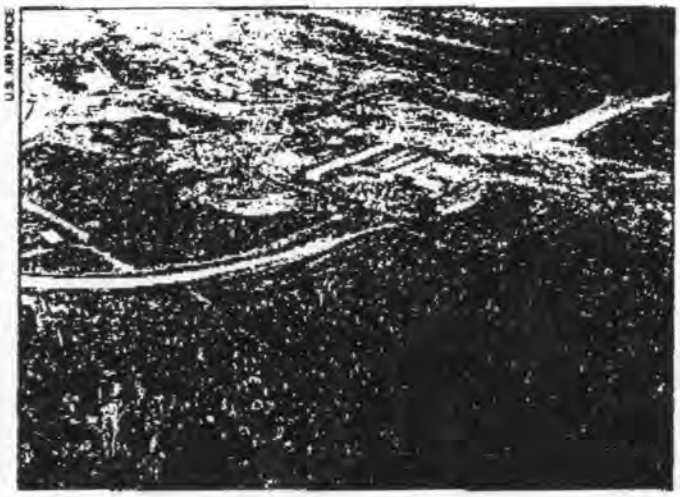
The air force's 834th Air Division, whose giant C-123s and C-130s would have to make the actual evacuation, was also dogged by confusion and last-minute changes. At 8:20 A.M. on May 12, the 834th was alerted for an all-out effort to evacuate the base. Two hours later, fighting at Kham Duc had grown so intense that the Seventh Air Force canceled the evacuation and directed the transports to fly in additional ammunition to Kham Duc. By the time the MACV operations center directed the 834th to resume evacuation operations, around 1:15 P.M., transports were already on their way to Kham Duc loaded with ammunition. Other planes on the ground had to unload their cargo before proceeding empty to Kham Duc to bring out the defenders. To complicate matters further, Colonel Nelson's command post could not communicate with many of the supporting aircraft because the American's radios were incompatible with those used by most of the planes. Messages had to be relayed from the Special Forces command post, whose radios could talk to the planes. At times, the heavy volume of incoming message traffic almost jammed the two available networks. The communications mess made it almost impossible for ground commanders to coordinate transport and helicopter landings with supporting air strikes.

That complete disaster was averted was due largely to the deadly skills of the fighter pilots and their controllers and to the iron nerve and brilliant improvisation of the tactical airlift crews. The first C-130 into Kham Duc landed on the debris-strewn runway at about 10:00 A.M., in a hail of mortar and automatic-weapons fire that punctured a tire and fuel tanks. Lieutenant Colonel Daryl D. Cole's plane, dispatched before the evacuation order had been reinstituted, had a full load of cargo for Kham Duc, but panic-stricken civilians and CIDG troops rushed the plane as soon as it taxied to a stop, preventing either orderly unloading or evacuation. With mortar shells landing ever closer to the aircraft, Cole decided to attempt a takeoff with his overloaded plane, crowded with CIDG personnel and much of the remaining cargo. His first attempt was unsuccessful, and the increased attention that the plane was attracting from NVA gunners convinced the passengers to make a hasty exit. In the meantime, the crew had succeeded in cutting away part of the ruined tire. Dodging the runway debris, with fuel streaming from the wing tanks and under heavy fire, Cole managed to get his stricken C-130 airborne and safely back to Cam Ranh Bay.

Lt. Col. Joe Jackson turns his C-123 off the runway (circled above) to finish the evacuation. At least 200 died in the crash of Maj. Bernard Bucher's C-130 (below right). The aerial (below left) was taken after the 1970 reoccupation.

Cole was followed by a C-123 piloted by Major Ray Shelton, which loaded about sixty army engineers and Vietnamese civilians in less than three minutes before taking off under heavy enemy fire.

Throughout the day, army and marine helicopters continued to dodge heavy fire to bring in ammunition and evacuate the wounded from Kham Duc. Yet the helicopters could not carry the large numbers of people now desperate to escape from the doomed camp. Only the large transports of the 834th could do that, and since eleven o'clock there had been no planes. Then, around three in the afternoon, a C-130 piloted by Major Bernard L. Bucher landed at Kham Duc. CIDG troops, women, and children swarmed aboard the plane. The CIDG soldiers and their families were convinced that the Americans intended to leave them behind and were in a state of utter panic. Two hours earlier, Special



Forces sergeant Richard Campbell had watched in horror and disbelief as a woman and her small child who had fallen while climbing the rear ramp of a CH-46 helicopter were trampled by fear-maddened CIDG soldiers in a rush to board the chopper. Now nearly 200 women and children crowded aboard Bucher's bullet-riddled C-130.

Because he had received heavy fire from the southwest corner of the field on landing, Bucher elected to take off to the northeast. A few minutes before Bucher's takeoff, fighters raked the NVA machine guns on the low ridges north of the runway with loads of cluster-bomb units. The deadly CBUs killed the gun crews, but replacements from nearby enemy positions soon had the guns back in action. Bucher's plane, struck by heavy machine-gun fire, crashed and exploded in an orange ball of flame less than a mile from the runway. There were no survivors of what has to be counted as one of the worst air disasters of this century, and the costliest one in the Vietnam War.

Watching Bucher's crash, Lieutenant Colonel William Boyd, Jr., pilot of the next C-130 into the camp, decided on a steep, sideslipping descent. Just as Boyd's plane was about to touch down, a shell exploded 100 feet ahead on the runway. Pushing his throttle forward, Boyd climbed steeply into the air. Landing successfully on his next try, he loaded about 100 CIDG and Americal soldiers and took off under heavy fire for Cam Ranh Bay.

The fourth C-130 of the day, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Delmore, had been forced to make a second pass to avoid Boyd's takeoff. This time the communist gunners were ready, and .50-caliber bullets ripped six-inch holes in the sides of the fuselage as the giant C-130, its hydraulic system shot away, bounced along the runway, glanced off the wreckage of the CH-47 destroyed that morning, and plowed into a dirt mound on the side of the runway. Miraculously, the entire crew escaped. A few minutes later Delmore's crippled plane burst into flames.

The remaining C-130 pilots circling above Kham Duc, awaiting their turn to land, had seen Bucher's plane crash and burn, Delmore's wrecked on landing, and two helicopters destroyed by ground fire. The runway was littered with debris and burning wreckage.

Undeterred, Lieutenant Colonel Franklin Montgomery brought his C-130 into Kham Duc, followed by two more C-130s; together, the three planes brought out more than 400 people just as the Seventh Air Force was issuing orders to cancel further landings. As the order was given, Major James L. Wallace's C-130 was able to make a pickup, bringing out the remaining soldiers and civilians.

But in the confusion, according to some reports, another C-130 landed briefly just as Wallace's was taking off. In the mistaken belief that personnel were still on the ground, the three men in the combat control team (CCT), who had been pulled out of the camp that morning after spending two days helping to bring in the Americal Division reinforcements, were now dropped off again—to find themselves alone, surrounded by exploding ammunition dumps and the advancing enemy.

Heavy fire forced the C-130 that had brought the team to fly out before the three men could return to the plane. The airwaves fell silent as the pilot, Major Jay Van Cleeff, radioed that the camp now was not, after all, fully evacuated and ready to be destroyed by air strikes.

On the ground, Major Gallagher and Technical Sergeants Freedman and Lundie took cover in a ditch, began shooting at the enemy—silencing one of the two machine guns firing at them from the sides of the runway—and hoped for a miracle. Lieutenant Colonel Alfred J. Jeanotte, Jr., given cover by fighter aircraft, touched down on the north side of the runway—but the crew couldn't see the three men and had to take off right away because of enemy fire. Once airborne, however, the crew spotted the men running back to their ditch after seeing the rescue plane leave without them. Their position was radioed to the next plane in line to attempt a rescue.

Lieutenant Colonel Joe M. Jackson brought in his C-123 with a sideslipping descent, to make the smallest possible target. Despite sharp objects and holes on the runway, the plane landed safely, rolled as close as possible to the ditch, and swung back around for a departure as the three men raced from their cover and were pulled on board. In less than a minute, with bullets, shells, and even a 122mm rocket striking all around them, the C-123 took off and got away—without a single hole in the plane. Jackson's daring rescue of the last three defenders of Kham Duc earned him the Medal of Honor.

It was over before 5:00 P.M. Communist troops advanced cautiously into Kham Duc and along the runway perimeter as explosions from the burning aircraft and ammunition dumps lit up the twilight sky. The following morning, sixty B-52 bombers, the entire force available in Vietnam, rained 12,000 tons of bombs on the camp, and MACV proclaimed that the enemy had suffered severely. Yet nothing could disguise the fact that Kham Duc had been an American defeat—a Khe Sanh in reverse. Twenty-five Americans had been killed and nearly 100 wounded, and there were several hundred Vietnamese casualties; seven U.S. aircraft and all the camp's heavy military and engineering equipment were also lost. American commanders had vacillated between reinforcing the camp and evacuating it, finally opting for evacuation—under the worst possible circumstances. Command, control, and communications had been confused and often ineffective. General Abrams termed the operation "a minor disaster." "This was an ugly one and I expect some repercussions," wrote the chief of Westmoreland's operations center.

Yet the repercussions were few. Abrams angrily ordered I Corps commanders to review their command, control, communications, and planning, so "that when your command is confronted with a similar imminent problem, appropriate action would be taken so that we would not lose another camp." The general's expression of unhappiness, however, was confined to top-secret messages. No heads rolled; no investigations were launched. Saigon and Washington remained unruffled, barely concerned. The news media, preoccupied with the communist attacks in Saigon and the peace negotiations in Paris, paid little attention. In a war in which the distinction between success and failure, victory and defeat, had long been blurred, even an unequivocal debacle like Kham Duc could be obfuscated, obscured, and ignored.

RONALD H. SPECTOR is a professor of history and international affairs at George Washington University. This article is adapted from his new book, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, published by The Free Press.