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The loss of Ngoc Tavak had been costly. Of the forty-four Americans and Australians at Ngoc Tavak, fifteen had died, twenty-three had been wounded, and two were missing. Of the hundred-odd CIDG troops, sixty-four were missing or had deserted and thirty were killed or wounded.[37] 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 Americal reinforcements and additional supplies were flown into the besieged base. By the end of that day there were a total of some 1,500 U.S. and CIDG soldiers at Kham Duc plus almost three hundred 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 camp's bowl-shaped valley.

Late at night on May 11, troops of the 1st NVA Regiment 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 such Special Forces camps as Plei Me, Bu Dop, Bac Po, and Khe Sanh. Kham Duc 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 III MAF commander, General Robert Cushman, he found Cushman unwilling to commit

more troops to Kham Duc. Colonel Ladd pointed out that strong reinforcements would be needed to hold the camp against an attack by a reinforced PAVN regiment. General Cushman, however, 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. General Cushman also pointed out that Kham Duc would be difficult to resupply and was beyond artillery range of friendly supporting bases.[38]

The following afternoon, Ladd accompanied Deputy MACV Commander Creighton Abrams to a meeting with Cushman and Americal Division commander Major General Samuel Koster. 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 in the western mountains of southern I Corps. He also emphasized that it was an important launching site for MACV's super-secret SOG teams, 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 more than three hundred a year.[39]

Colonel Ladd suggested that a Communist victory at Kham Duc might be put to propaganda use, especially in view of the opening of peace talks in Paris. Unmentioned but ever present during the deliberations were the recent vivid 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 the 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," General Westmoreland's operations officer wrote.[40] At

the conclusion of the discussions, Abrams instructed Cushman to prepare plans for a withdrawal. Westmoreland approved the decision a few hours later.[41]

By the time word of the decision to evacuate reached Colonel Nelson at Kham Duc, all 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, which dropped flares to illuminate the area and peppered the attackers with their mini-cannon. As the outposts were overwhelmed, the defenders directed gunship and artillery fire onto their own positions. A few managed to escape into the Kham Duc perimeter, but many died on 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 the first evacuation helicopter, an Army CH-47, was hit by heavy ground fire as it landed on the runway. The chopper exploded in flames, and its burning hulk blocked the runway for more than an hour.

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 under way against the northwest perimeter. The burning CH-47 sent clouds of black smoke into the sky. On the nearby hills radio antennas sprouted above the newly established NVA command posts.[42]

Inside the perimeter the men of E Company, 2/1 Infantry, tensely awaited the ground attack they knew would come. 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 the E Company mortar team, quickly rounded up some Americal infantry men, 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 over the daytime battlefield. An instant later the mortar man recalled 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 to chuckle, "This ought to confuse the hell out of the enemy."[43]

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 and from bases in Thailand converged on the beleaguered base in answer to Seventh Air Force commander General W. W. Momyer's call 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 in light planes flew parallel to each other at opposite sides of the Kham Duc runway, each controlling fighter strikes on its side of the field. "There was such an abundance of fighters by late morning that the FACs could choose the fighter they wanted, based on whether it carried napalm, cluster bomb units, five-hundred- or seven-hundred-fifty-pound bombs, or high drag bombs."[44]

"We've got a small Khe Sanh going here," an Air Force officer at Kham Duc wrote in his diary. "I hope we finish it before night comes."[45] 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.

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 the twelfth, the 834th was alerted for an all-out effort to evacuate the beleaguered 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 1:30 P.M., transports were already on their way to Kham Duc loaded with ammunition. Other planes on the ground had to unload their cargoes before proceeding empty to Kham Duc to bring out the defenders. To complicate matters further, Colonel Henderson's command post could not

In the wake of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and widespread domestic dissent and disillusionment with the war, President Johnson meets with his advisers to hear a briefing by General Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland's deputy. At the end of March 1968, Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection, that bombing of North Vietnam would cease, and that peace talks should begin. (l. to r.: Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the President, and General Abrams)(Defense Dept.)

Following the defeat of the Communist attacks in August and September 1968, General Creighton Abrams advised President Johnson that a further bombing halt in return for substantive peace talks would be militarily safe and "the right thing to do." (U.S. Army)

communicate with many of the supporting aircraft because the Americal'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 nets.[46] 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 could be credited 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 about 10:00 A.M. in a hail of mortar and automatic weapons fire and blew a tire on the debris-strewn runway. Lieutenant Colonel Daryll D. Cole's plane, dispatched before the evacuation order had been reinstituted, had a full load of cargo for Kham Duc, but panic-striken 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 the plane was attracting from NVA gunners persuaded 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 striken C-130 airborne and safely back to Cam Ranh Bay.

Cole was followed by a C-123 piloted by Major Ray Shelton, which managed to load about sixty Army engineers and Vietnamese civilians in less than three minutes and to take off under heavy enemy fire.

Throughout the day Army and Marine helicopters continued to dodge the 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 11:00 A.M. there had been no planes. Then, around 3:00 P.M., a C-130 piloted by Major Bernard L. Butcher 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.[47] Now, nearly two hundred women and children crowded aboard Butcher's bullet-riddled C-130.

Because he had received heavy fire from the southwest corner of the field on landing, Butcher elected to take off to the northeast. A few minutes before Butcher's takeoff, fighters had 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 failed to silence the guns, which were soon manned by replacements from nearby enemy positions.[48] Butcher'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.[49]

Watching Butcher's crash, Lieutenant Colonel William Boyd, Jr., pilot of the next C-130 into the camp, decided on a steep, side-slipping descent onto the field. 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 for a second attempt. Landing successfully on his next try, Boyd loaded about one hundred CIDG and Americal soldiers and took off under heavy fire for Cam Ranh Bay.

The fourth C-130, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Delmore, had been forced to make a second pass to avoid Boyd's takeoff, and this time the Communist gunners were ready. Their .50 caliber bullets ripped 6-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-46 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 orbiting above Kham Duc awaiting their turn to land had seen Butcher's plane crash and burn, Delmore's wrecked on landing, and two helicopters hit by ground

fire and destroyed. 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, which, together, brought out more than four hundred people, just as the Seventh Air Force was issuing orders to cancel further C-130 landings because of the high losses. A final daring flight by Lieutenant Colonel Joe M. Jackson in a C-123 brought out the last Air Force ground control personnel. The Special Forces command group, which had insisted on remaining to the last so as to exercise some control over the terrified and near-mutinous CIDG forces, escaped by helicopter shortly afterward.

Before 5:00 P.M. it was over. 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. 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."[50] "This was an ugly one and I expect some repercussions," the chief of Westmoreland's operations center wrote.[51]

Yet the repercussions were few. Abrams angrily ordered I Corps commanders to review their command, control, communications, and planning in order "that when your command is confronted with a similar imminent problem, appropriate action would be taken so that we would not lose another camp."[52] 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 and confused, even an unequivocal debacle like Kham Duc could be obfuscated, obscured, and ignored.

One reason General Cushman could ill spare troops to reinforce Kham Duc was that he was expecting an attack on Da Nang similar to those the Communists had already launched against Saigon. By 1968 the entire 1st Marine Division existed almost solely for the defense of Da Nang. That city, with its giant airfield, port facilities, and complex array of military headquarters and logistical support facilities, had become the nerve center of the war in the north.

The 1st Marine Division's regiments were deployed in a fanlike fashion to the southwest, south, and southeast of the city, facing at least five North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regiments, some thirty-thousand men, concealed among the heavily populated lowland rice country or in the scrub and elephant grass of the river valleys of the Thu Bon and An Hoa or the jungle-covered Que Son mountains.

Over the past three years the Marines and the Army Americal Division to the south had launched numerous forays against these base areas. Always difficult, often harrowing and bloody, the operations were invariably declared "successful." Yet the Communist threat remained.

Now Cushman prepared to launch another spoiling attack, code-named ALLEN BROOK. For this operation the Marines deployed elements of the 5th, 7th, and 27th Marines in the broad valley of the Thu Bon River, which flowed into the sea near Hoi An, about 20 miles south of Da Nang. The objective was a suspected Communist base complex located on Go Noi Island, an island formed by the Thu Bon River in Dien Ban district near Route 1, the main north-south highway of South Vietnam.

In Dien Ban district the coastal rice paddies gave way to flat, open fields covered by grass and scrub, broken by the occasional thick stand of trees. The flat, sandy soil was used for growing crops of corn, peanuts, and tobacco, and the civilian population was relatively sparse and scattered. In mid-May, when two battalions of the 7th and 27th Marines began Operation ALLEN BROOK, the average daily temperature in Dien Ban district hovered above 110 degrees each day.

I Company, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, was the first to find the enemy. Landed by helicopter onto a grassy knoll, the company fanned out by platoons into the valley. Moving toward a small hamlet with his squad, Lance Corporal Lewis Carpenter, the point fire team leader, noticed a woman gesturing and shouting vigorously to some unseen persons in the hamlet. Yelling for the squad to follow, Carpenter's fire team raced to the hamlet, surprising a platoon of North Vietnamese soldiers at their meal. As Carpenter's men opened fire, the Communists fled in all directions while the women screamed and vainly attempted to retrieve the NVA rifles from their hiding places in the village and throw them to the fleeing soldiers. In a few moments the one-sided fight was over. More than a dozen North Vietnamese bodies lay scattered through the hamlet, and the women, later identified as members of a medical unit, had been taken prisoner.[53]

I Company pushed on through a dry river bed and on toward a tree line on the far bank. About midway across the river bed the company was hit by a hail of rifle and machine gun fire from the tree line. Only the point squad of the lead platoon managed to reach the far side of the dry river before the entire company became pinned down by heavy fire. Enemy snipers in the tree line began picking off the Marines as they vainly sought cover in the river bed. A steady rain of grenades issued from the tree line as well.

Unable to advance or withdraw, I Company called for air strikes. For almost an hour fighters bombed and strafed enemy positions in the wood. Then the company attempted a second assault but was again met by heavy fire.[54] Almost half the company was killed or wounded in this second attack. The Marines could make little headway against the North Vietnamese defenders fighting from bunkers whose ordinarily strong log-and-concrete construction had been reinforced by railroad ties and iron rails from a nearby abandoned rail line.[55] I Company's survivors remained pinned down in the river bed for more than eight hours tormented by the heat and running low on water.

Two more companies of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, were lifted in by helicopter to link up with and relieve the pressure on I Company. As the CH-46 transports, their motors still roaring, lowered their rear ramps to debark the men of K Company, 3/27,

been spectacular yet unsuccessful. In the Central Highlands, however, the story would be different.

Far from the urban centers and coastal farmlands, just 10 miles from the Laotian border, the Special Forces base of Kham Duc sat in the center of a mile-wide green bowl in the rugged border country of northwestern Quang Tin province, about 90 miles southwest of Da Nang. After the much-publicized fall of Lang Vei in February 1968, Kham Duc, with its satellite camp Ngoc Tavak, 3 miles closer to Laos, was the last remaining Special Forces camp on the Laotian border of I Corps. The two outposts sat astride Route 14, the principal north-south road through the border region. Just across the border, the roads and tracks of the Ho Chi Minh Trail extended their fingers south and east, some already reaching to Route 14 itself. From there the North Vietnamese forces could continue east to the coastal plains south of Da Nang, or southeast to the Central Highland towns of Kontum and Dak To.

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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 bring the survivors back to Kham Duc.[36]

The loss of Ngoc Tavak had been costly. Of the forty-four Americans and Australians at Ngoc Tavak, fifteen had died, twenty-three had been wounded, and two were missing. Of the hundred-odd CIDG troops, sixty-four were missing or had deserted and thirty were killed or wounded.[37] 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 Americal reinforcements and additional supplies were flown into the besieged base. By the end of that day there were a total of some 1,500 U.S. and CIDG soldiers at Kham Duc plus almost three hundred 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 camp's bowl-shaped valley.

Late at night on May 11, troops of the 1st NVA Regiment 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 such Special Forces camps as Plei Me, Bu Dop, Bac Po, and Khe Sanh. Kham Duc 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 III MAF commander, General Robert Cushman, he found Cushman unwilling to commit

more troops to Kham Duc. Colonel Ladd pointed out that strong reinforcements would be needed to hold the camp against an attack by a reinforced PAVN regiment. General Cushman, however, 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. General Cushman also pointed out that Kham Duc would be difficult to resupply and was beyond artillery range of friendly supporting bases.[38]

The following afternoon, Ladd accompanied Deputy MACV Commander Creighton Abrams to a meeting with Cushman and Americal Division commander Major General Samuel Koster. 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 in the western mountains of southern I Corps. He also emphasized that it was an important launching site for MACV's super-secret SOG teams, 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 more than three hundred a year.[39]

Colonel Ladd suggested that a Communist victory at Kham Duc might be put to propaganda use, especially in view of the opening of peace talks in Paris. Unmentioned but ever present during the deliberations were the recent vivid 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 the 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," General Westmoreland's operations officer wrote.[40] At

the conclusion of the discussions, Abrams instructed Cushman to prepare plans for a withdrawal. Westmoreland approved the decision a few hours later.[41]

By the time word of the decision to evacuate reached Colonel Nelson at Kham Duc, all 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, which dropped flares to illuminate the area and peppered the attackers with their mini-cannon. As the outposts were overwhelmed, the defenders directed gunship and artillery fire onto their own positions. A few managed to escape into the Kham Duc perimeter, but many died on 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 the first evacuation helicopter, an Army CH-47, was hit by heavy ground fire as it landed on the runway. The chopper exploded in flames, and its burning hulk blocked the runway for more than an hour.

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 under way against the northwest perimeter. The burning CH-47 sent clouds of black smoke into the sky. On the nearby hills radio antennas sprouted above the newly established NVA command posts.[42]

Inside the perimeter the men of E Company, 2/1 Infantry, tensely awaited the ground attack they knew would come. 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 the E Company mortar team, quickly rounded up some Americal infantry men, 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 over the daytime battlefield. An instant later the mortar man recalled 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 to chuckle, "This ought to confuse the hell out of the enemy."[43]

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 and from bases in Thailand converged on the beleaguered base in answer to Seventh Air Force commander General W. W. Momyer's call 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 in light planes flew parallel to each other at opposite sides of the Kham Duc runway, each controlling fighter strikes on its side of the field. "There was such an abundance of fighters by late morning that the FACs could choose the fighter they wanted, based on whether it carried napalm, cluster bomb units, five-hundred- or seven-hundred-fifty-pound bombs, or high drag bombs."[44]

"We've got a small Khe Sanh going here," an Air Force officer at Kham Duc wrote in his diary. "I hope we finish it before night comes."[45] 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.

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 the twelfth, the 834th was alerted for an all-out effort to evacuate the beleaguered 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 1:30 P.M., transports were already on their way to Kham Duc loaded with ammunition. Other planes on the ground had to unload their cargoes before proceeding empty to Kham Duc to bring out the defenders. To complicate matters further, Colonel Henderson's command post could not

In the wake of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and widespread domestic dissent and disillusionment with the war, President Johnson meets with his advisers to hear a briefing by General Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland's deputy. At the end of March 1968, Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection, that bombing of North Vietnam would cease, and that peace talks should begin. (l. to r.: Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the President, and General Abrams)(Defense Dept.)

Following the defeat of the Communist attacks in August and September 1968, General Creighton Abrams advised President Johnson that a further bombing halt in return for substantive peace talks would be militarily safe and "the right thing to do." (U.S. Army)

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 nets.[46] 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 could be credited 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 about 10:00 A.M. in a hail of mortar and automatic weapons fire and blew a tire on the debris-strewn runway. Lieutenant Colonel Daryll D. Cole's plane, dispatched before the evacuation order had been reinstituted, had a full load of cargo for Kham Duc, but panic-striken 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 the plane was attracting from NVA gunners persuaded 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 striken C-130 airborne and safely back to Cam Ranh Bay.

Cole was followed by a C-123 piloted by Major Ray Shelton, which managed to load about sixty Army engineers and Vietnamese civilians in less than three minutes and to take off under heavy enemy fire.

Throughout the day Army and Marine helicopters continued to dodge the 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 11:00 A.M. there had been no planes. Then, around 3:00 P.M., a C-130 piloted by Major Bernard L. Butcher 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.[47] Now, nearly two hundred women and children crowded aboard Butcher's bullet-riddled C-130.

Because he had received heavy fire from the southwest corner of the field on landing, Butcher elected to take off to the northeast. A few minutes before Butcher's takeoff, fighters had 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 failed to silence the guns, which were soon manned by replacements from nearby enemy positions.[48] Butcher'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.[49]

Watching Butcher's crash, Lieutenant Colonel William Boyd, Jr., pilot of the next C-130 into the camp, decided on a steep, side-slipping descent onto the field. 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 for a second attempt. Landing successfully on his next try, Boyd loaded about one hundred CIDG and Americal soldiers and took off under heavy fire for Cam Ranh Bay.

The fourth C-130, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Delmore, had been forced to make a second pass to avoid Boyd's takeoff, and this time the Communist gunners were ready. Their .50 caliber bullets ripped 6-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-46 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 orbiting above Kham Duc awaiting their turn to land had seen Butcher's plane crash and burn, Delmore's wrecked on landing, and two helicopters hit by ground

fire and destroyed. 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, which, together, brought out more than four hundred people, just as the Seventh Air Force was issuing orders to cancel further C-130 landings because of the high losses. A final daring flight by Lieutenant Colonel Joe M. Jackson in a C-123 brought out the last Air Force ground control personnel. The Special Forces command group, which had insisted on remaining to the last so as to exercise some control over the terrified and near-mutinous CIDG forces, escaped by helicopter shortly afterward.

Before 5:00 P.M. it was over. 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. 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."[50] "This was an ugly one and I expect some repercussions," the chief of Westmoreland's operations center wrote.[51]

Yet the repercussions were few. Abrams angrily ordered I Corps commanders to review their command, control, communications, and planning in order "that when your command is confronted with a similar imminent problem, appropriate action would be taken so that we would not lose another camp."[52] 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 and confused, even an unequivocal debacle like Kham Duc could be obfuscated, obscured, and ignored.

One reason General Cushman could ill spare troops to reinforce Kham Duc was that he was expecting an attack on Da Nang similar to those the Communists had already launched against Saigon. By 1968 the entire 1st Marine Division existed almost solely for the defense of Da Nang. That city, with its giant airfield, port facilities, and complex array of military headquarters and logistical support facilities, had become the nerve center of the war in the north.

The 1st Marine Division's regiments were deployed in a fanlike fashion to the southwest, south, and southeast of the city, facing at least five North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regiments, some thirty-thousand men, concealed among the heavily populated lowland rice country or in the scrub and elephant grass of the river valleys of the Thu Bon and An Hoa or the jungle-covered Que Son mountains.

Over the past three years the Marines and the Army Americal Division to the south had launched numerous forays against these base areas. Always difficult, often harrowing and bloody, the operations were invariably declared "successful." Yet the Communist threat remained.

Now Cushman prepared to launch another spoiling attack, code-named ALLEN BROOK. For this operation the Marines deployed elements of the 5th, 7th, and 27th Marines in the broad valley of the Thu Bon River, which flowed into the sea near Hoi An, about 20 miles south of Da Nang. The objective was a suspected Communist base complex located on Go Noi Island, an island formed by the Thu Bon River in Dien Ban district near Route 1, the main north-south highway of South Vietnam.

In Dien Ban district the coastal rice paddies gave way to flat, open fields covered by grass and scrub, broken by the occasional thick stand of trees. The flat, sandy soil was used for growing crops of corn, peanuts, and tobacco, and the civilian population was relatively sparse and scattered. In mid-May, when two battalions of the 7th and 27th Marines began Operation ALLEN BROOK, the average daily temperature in Dien Ban district hovered above 110 degrees each day.

I Company, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, was the first to find the enemy. Landed by helicopter onto a grassy knoll, the company fanned out by platoons into the valley. Moving toward a small hamlet with his squad, Lance Corporal Lewis Carpenter, the point fire team leader, noticed a woman gesturing and shouting vigorously to some unseen persons in the hamlet. Yelling for the squad to follow, Carpenter's fire team raced to the hamlet, surprising a platoon of North Vietnamese soldiers at their meal. As Carpenter's men opened fire, the Communists fled in all directions while the women screamed and vainly attempted to retrieve the NVA rifles from their hiding places in the village and throw them to the fleeing soldiers. In a few moments the one-sided fight was over. More than a dozen North Vietnamese bodies lay scattered through the hamlet, and the women, later identified as members of a medical unit, had been taken prisoner.[53]

I Company pushed on through a dry river bed and on toward a tree line on the far bank. About midway across the river bed the company was hit by a hail of rifle and machine gun fire from the tree line. Only the point squad of the lead platoon managed to reach the far side of the dry river before the entire company became pinned down by heavy fire. Enemy snipers in the tree line began picking off the Marines as they vainly sought cover in the river bed. A steady rain of grenades issued from the tree line as well.

Unable to advance or withdraw, I Company called for air strikes. For almost an hour fighters bombed and strafed enemy positions in the wood. Then the company attempted a second assault but was again met by heavy fire.[54] Almost half the company was killed or wounded in this second attack. The Marines could make little headway against the North Vietnamese defenders fighting from bunkers whose ordinarily strong log-and-concrete construction had been reinforced by railroad ties and iron rails from a nearby abandoned rail line.[55] I Company's survivors remained pinned down in the river bed for more than eight hours tormented by the heat and running low on water.

Two more companies of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, were lifted in by helicopter to link up with and relieve the pressure on I Company. As the CH-46 transports, their motors still roaring, lowered their rear ramps to debark the men of K Company, 3/27,