

Operation PEGASUS

On March 30, 1968 at 0800, the operational control of the 26th Marine Regiment at Khe Sanh passed to the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) which initiated Operation PEGASUS.

Elsewhere in northern I Corps Tactical Zone, it became apparent during late March that the enemy was continuing to build his base areas along Route 547 and had constructed an alternate route, 547A, from the A Shau Valley east towards Hue. These routes provided the enemy with a major artery for the movement of troops, supplies, and equipment out of the valley and into the dense jungle area between the valley and Hue. Reconnaissance of the area revealed a sophisticated communications system using wire lines and the presence of heavy automatic and anti-aircraft weapons.

Numerous caches of weapons, ammunition, and other equipment had been located by elements of the 101st Airborne Division operating along Route 547 and 547A west of Hue.



These caches indicated the presence of 37-mm. anti-aircraft cannons and tracked vehicles, probably tanks, in the area. General Westmoreland, after his 17 March visit to Provisional Corps, Vietnam, directed B-52 tactical airstrikes to interdict Route 547 and 547A.

Final preparations were being made for relieving the siege of Khe Sanh by the reinforced 1st Cavalry Division. On 22 March General Rosson held a meeting with division commanders at Camp Evans, 15 kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City and formulated plans for the relief of 1st Cavalry Division elements from their area of operation along the coastal areas of Quang Tri Province by units of the 101st Airborne Division. The Con Thien operation was envisioned as a deception plan for Operation PEGASUS. This operation would also place the airborne task force closer to the ultimate zone of action in the Khe Sanh Operation.

Operation Orders

The Third Marine Division issued its operation order on 25 March to cover both the Con Thien-Gio Linh operation, which would be executed in conjunction with U.S. Army elements and the 1st Vietnamese Division, and Operation PEGASUS. The 4th Marine Regiment was to secure Route 9 and provide convoy security in its area. The 9th Marine Regiment was to provide security for Route 9 in its sector. The 12th Marine Regiment was instructed to support the attack of the 1st Cavalry Division within its artillery capabilities.

As the enemy activity around Khe Sanh tapered off, it appeared that Operation PEGASUS might go much quicker than originally anticipated. If true, this would relieve elements of the 1st Cavalry Division for earlier commitment to attacks in the A Shau Valley area. General Westmoreland expressed the view that Operation PEGASUS was to exact the maximum destruction of enemy forces and facilities, and its duration would therefore have to depend on the tactical situation as it developed. General Cushman and General Rosson assured General Westmoreland that all preparations for Operation PEGASUS would be ready for the planned 1 April attack. General Westmoreland also approved the concept for a later operation in the A Shau Valley presented by the III Marine Amphibious Force. Thus, the logistical planning for the operation into the A Shau Valley was conducted concurrently with logistical support for PEGASUS and it was envisioned that the second operation would continue as a smooth transition from the first.

Provisional Corps, Vietnam, Operation Plan 1-68 was re-designated Operation Order 1-68 with D-day, Hhour, established as 01001 April. General Tompkins, Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, ordered the execution of a deception operation with D-day, H-hour, established as 0600 on 30 March. The U.S. elements participating in the combined operation were designated Task Force KILO and the Vietnamese Army portion of the operation designated LAM SON 203. The deception operation envisioned a task force attacking northeast from Dong Ha toward the demilitarized zone.

As the final co-ordination was being accomplished to insure all units were ready for the pending operation, some elements were already at work. In addition to the U.S. Air Force actions in preparation for the operation, the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry of the 1st Cavalry Division, was directing strikes to eliminate anti-aircraft positions in the area before the airmobile division committed the bulk of its helicopters. Heavy U.S. Air Force strikes had stripped away much of the concealment needed by the enemy. With the addition of the reconnaissance squadron of the 1st Cavalry Division, the effectiveness of artillery and air strikes directed against the enemy anti-aircraft positions was almost total.

Opening Operations

At 0600, 30 March, U.S. Army, Marine, and Vietnamese Army forces initiated their planned deception operation northeast of Dong Ha. The maneuver elements attacked generally north toward the demilitarized zone along the coastal plains near Gio Linh. All units reached their objectives that afternoon. Following only light action, the operation was terminated on the afternoon of 1 May.

The broad concept for the relief of Khe Sanh envisioned the 1st Cavalry Division attacking west from Ca Lu to seize the high ground along Highway 9 in a series of successive air mobile assaults. Concurrently the marines were to secure and repair Highway 9 leading to Khe Sanh. Under the single manager concept for air, intensive close air support was to assist the attacks, together with massive B-52 strikes

prior to and during the assault. Major units reinforcing the 1st Cavalry Division were the 1st Marine Regiment with three battalions and an airborne task force of three battalions, plus the supporting combat and service units.

Operation PEGASUS began at 0700 on 1 April with U.S. Army, U.S. Marine, and Vietnamese forces moving out from Ca Lu along Highway 9 toward the Khe Sanh Combat Base. The 1st Cavalry Division attacked with a combination of air and ground assaults to clear and secure the road and remove the enemy from the area of operation. During the morning hours, the two lead Marine battalions moved out according to plan, pushing west from Ca Lu. Delayed by weather, it was not until 1300 that the initial waves of 1st Cavalry Division helicopters placed men of the 3d Brigade of the Cavalry on a series of landing zones as close as five miles to Khe Sanh.

The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, advanced westward on the north side of Route 9 while the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, advanced on the south side of the road. As the Marines progressed and cleared Route 9 and the nearby terrain of enemy troops, engineer companies began repairing the road. They cleared one and a half kilometers of road and constructed four by-passes the first day. Throughout the operational area, the Americans spent a quiet night in rapidly prepared defensive positions.

Although Operation NIAGARA had been terminated with the beginning of PEGASUS, air support continued. The first day of the operation, eight B-52 raids were flown to assist the ground forces. Four of the missions were in the vicinity of Khe Sanh. Poor weather in the early daylight hours limited tactical fighter support to 66 sorties. Eight U.S. Air Force C-130 and four C-123 cargo aircraft delivered 115 tons the first day and 24 helicopter missions boosted the sum to just under 150 tons. An additional 44 personnel joined the combat base by way of C-123 aircraft, which were still permitted to land on the strip.

On 2 April operations began at 0655 with two Marine battalions resuming their advance along either side of Route 9 toward Khe Sanh. Contact with the enemy was minimal. The 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, began an air assault at 1300. The late starting time was attributed to ground fog, haze, and low hanging clouds. These unfavorable flying conditions continued throughout the operation.

The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, remained near the air field north of Ca Lu, which had been designated Landing Zone STUD. The Marine unit retained this mission for the duration of the operation.

The Army, Navy, and Marine engineer units continued their work along Route 9. On 2 April they cleared almost three kilometers of the road and completed two bridges and two more bypasses.

The sustained air support included 36 B-52 aircraft delivering six strikes, five of which were in the immediate vicinity of Khe Sanh Combat Base. In spite of the unfavorable flying weather, 142 tactical air sorties were flown by Air Force, Navy, and Marine aircraft in support of the ground troops conducting PEGASUS. Air Force cargo aircraft dropped 91.4 tons of supplies into Khe Sanh and helicopters raised the total tonnage to 162.

On 3 April the tempo of the operation picked up somewhat. The marines continued westward along Route 9 with the engineers working furiously right on their heels. The 1st Cavalry's 3d Brigade continued operations in the vicinity of the landing zones they had occupied during the first day. The 2d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division air-assaulted in the PEGASUS area of operations one day ahead of schedule with the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, going into Landing Zone Tom and the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, moving first to Landing Zone STUD by CH-47 helicopters, then reloading into smaller UH-1H helicopters for an air assault into Landing Zone WHARTON. The 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, then flew into Landing Zone WHARTON. Both landing zones received artillery and rocket fire from enemy positions during the moves, but the troops were not to be easily diverted. By the end of the day, all 2d Brigade troops and three batteries of the 1st Battalion, 77th Artillery, were in position. At that time, other artillery batteries in position included Battery C, 21st Artillery, which had followed the air assault troops into Landing Zone CATES, and B Battery, 21st Artillery, which had followed into Landing Zone MIKE on D-day. Battery A, 21st Artillery, joined the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, at Landing Zone THOR on 2 April.

During the fourth day, April 4, the marines maintained their westward attack along the main supply route and the Third Brigade kept up pressure on enemy elements around the established landing zones. The 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, initiated an attack on an enemy battalion at an old French fort.

On the same day, elements of the 26th Marine Regiment began their first major offensive move in weeks, attacking out of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. Preceded by artillery preparation, at 0600 the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, assaulted southeast towards Hill 471. The hill was secured by 1720 that day.

The fifth day, 5 April, opened with an enemy attack on Hill 471, which the Marines had occupied the previous afternoon. At 0515 the 7th Battalion, 66th Regiment, 304th North Vietnamese Division, charged up the hill. The fight was one of the highlights of Operation PEGASUS and was quite one-sided. Assisted by tremendous artillery and close air support, the marines cut down large numbers of the attackers while suffering few casualties themselves.

Elsewhere, except for the 1st Cavalry Division's 2d Brigade, the operation followed a routine pattern. The marines and the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, maintained their westward movement, meeting moderate opposition along Route 9. The engineers had reconstructed a total of 5.5 kilometers of the road, completing four bridges and twelve by-passes.

The Marine advance along the main supply route continued through 6 April. The 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, maintained its drive west and met stubborn enemy resistance occasioning the heaviest fighting of the operation thus far. Following a day-long battle, the cavalry finally drove the enemy out of his defensive positions, capturing 121 individual and 10 crew-served weapons.

The 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, was airlifted from Landing Zone TIMOTHY to Hill 471 and effected relief of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, at noon. The marines then opened a clearing attack to the northwest.

Meanwhile the 1st Battalion of the 5th Cavalry was encountering stiff resistance at an old French fort about 15 kilometers due east of Khe Sanh. On the sixth day of Operation PEGASUS the 1st of the 5th was extracted and the 2d Battalion of the 5th Cavalry assumed the mission of seizing the strongly defended position. The fort fell on 7 April thus eliminating the final known enemy strongpoint between the advance cavalry troopers and Khe Sanh.

Little further significant contact occurred during the final days of the operation. The remainder of Operation PEGASUS was directed at opening the main supply route and sifting through the debris of battle. The retreating enemy continued to offer some resistance, but without spirit.

The seventh day, 7 April, witnessed a further lessening of enemy strength in the area of operations. Ground probes against friendly positions continued but fewer reports were made of attacks by enemy artillery.

At 0800 on 8 April, the relief of the Khe Sanh Combat Base was accomplished as the 3d Brigade airlifted its command post into the base and assumed the mission of securing the position. The 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, cleared Route 9 to the base and linked up with the marines.

By this time it was apparent that the enemy had chosen to flee rather than face the highly mobile Americans. Vast amounts of new equipment were abandoned in place by the North Vietnamese as they hastily retreated.