

The Hill Fights - “Hill 881 North”

BLUF: The Hill Fights, also known as the First Battle of Khe Sanh, was a battle during the Vietnam War between the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) 325C Division and the United States Marines on several hill masses north of the Khe Sanh Combat Base in northwest Quảng Trị Province in 1967. On 2 May 1967, the Marines opened an engagement against PAVN and Viet Cong (VC) forces on Hill 881 North. The engagement lasted until 10 May. Marine losses on Hill 881N were 24 dead and 19 wounded, while the Marines reported PAVN losses to be 234 killed.

MAIN CHARACTERS: 2nd Battalions 3rd Marines, 3rd Battalion 3rd Marines 9th Marine Regiment, and the 6th Battalions from the 325C Division PAVN.

SETTING THE STAGE: On 20 April 1967, operational control of the Khe Sanh area passed to the 3rd Marine Regiment. On 22 April, SLF Bravo comprising 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines supported by HMM-164 had commenced *Operation Beacon Star* on the southern part of the “Street Without Joy” straddling Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên Provinces against the Vietcong (VC) 6th Regiment and 810th and 812th Battalions. Between 29 April and 2 May, the Marines fought for Hill 881S. After taking the objective, they turned their attention to Hill 881N.

THE STORY: At 1015 hours on 2 May, Companies E and G, 2/3 Marines, assaulted Hill 881N from the south and east. Company G encountered a PAVN position and pulled back to allow for artillery support. Company E almost reached the hill’s summit when an intense rainstorm hit it, and the Battalion was pulled back into night defensive positions.

At 0415 on 3 May, a PAVN force attacked Company E’s night defensive position, penetrating east of the position and reoccupying some bunkers. A Marine squad sent to drive out the PAVN was hit by machine-gun fire, and a scratch squad of engineers was sent to support them while air and artillery strikes were called in on the PAVN. A flare ship arrived overhead, and the Marines on Hill 881S could see approximately 200 PAVN forming up to attack Company E from the west and fired over 100 rounds of recoilless rifle fire to break up this fresh assault. At dawn, reinforcements were flown in to support Company E while Company H, 2/3 Marines attacked the PAVN from the rear. The last bunker was cleared at 1500, 27 Marines were killed and 84 wounded in the attack while claiming the PAVN had lost 137 killed and three captured. Prisoner interrogations revealed plans for another attack on the Marine positions that night, but this did not occur.

At 0850 on 5 May, Companies E and F, 2/3 Marines, began their assault on Hill 881N, PAVN fire increased as they neared the summit, and both companies pulled back to allow for air and artillery strikes. The assault resumed at 1300, and by 1445, the hilltop had been captured. After securing Hill 881N, the Marines thoroughly searched the area around Hills 881N and 881S, and air and artillery strikes were called in on suspected PAVN positions. Still, it appeared that the PAVN had withdrawn north across the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone or west into Laos.

On 9 May, Company F, 2/3 Marines encountered a PAVN force 3.2 km northwest of Hill 881N, artillery fire was called in, and Company E was deployed in support. The engagement resulted in 24 Marines killed and 19 wounded while US forces claimed the PAVN had lost 31 killed, while a further 203 recent graves were alleged to have been discovered in the area. At midnight on 9 and 10 May, the PAVN attacked Reconnaissance Team Breaker of the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion. The PAVN could have easily overrun the Marines but instead targeted the Marine helicopters attempting to extract them, severely damaging several helicopters. Marine losses were four Reconnaissance Team members and one helicopter pilot while claiming PAVN losses were seven dead.

AFTERMATH: The Hill Fights officially ended on 10 May. Marine losses were 155 dead and 425 wounded, while the Marines reported PAVN losses to be 940 dead. Intelligence gathered after the battle found that the PAVN plan was to build up stores and positions north of Khe Sanh Base and isolate the base from resupply by attacks on Marines bases in northern I Corps. From there, launch a diversionary attack on Lang Vei Special Forces Camp, which occurred as scheduled on 4 May. Then, several Regiments of the 325C Division would overrun Khe Sanh Base. However, the encounter on 24 April had frustrated the PAVN plan.

As with the later Battle of Khe Sanh, the PAVN's strategy remains unclear. Trần Văn Trà, PAVN commander of the B-2 Front in III Corps, had his theory. He stated in a 1990 interview that the intention of the border battles, particularly at Khe Sanh, was to draw U.S forces into the remote border regions away from the population centers that would be attacked during the Tet Offensive. Following the conclusion of the battle, the Marines began *Operation Crockett* in the same area.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the terrain limit Marine operations in the region?
2. What was the over plan of the PAVN and VC forces?
3. What did the Marines learn from their battle tactics on Hill 881N that would benefit them at Khe Sanh?

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