



Bait: The Battle of Kham Duc by James D. McLeroy and Gregory W. Sanders.

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The US armed forces' Nine Principles of War¹ include "Offensive"² but not "Defensive." The other seven can apply to defensive operations, but are generally associated with taking the fight to the enemy. The Battle of Kham Duc provides an excellent example of a smaller force defeating a larger one by defending a tactically deficient piece of terrain.

James McLeroy and Gregory Sanders, the authors of *Bait: The Battle of Kham Duc*, have careers in international finance and law, respectively. While both hold master's degrees in history, their true qualifications to write this book come from their on-the-ground combat service. McLeroy actually fought at Kham Duc; Sanders served (two years later) in the same area as an infantry officer involved in psychological operations and the CIA's Phoenix Program, designed to root out enemy political infrastructure within civilian populations. They write with the passion and insight born of experience, tapping both military reports and documents and extensive interviews with American and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) veterans.

The battle took place in the Kham Duc Valley in the Central Highlands close to the Laotian border, where a US Special Forces camp had built an airstrip and additional fortifications as well as three small observation posts on high ground. There was also a lightly manned fire base at Ngok Tavak, five miles south. The mission of this camp was to conduct reconnaissance and interdiction forays into Laos and monitor traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in support of NVA and Viet Cong guerrilla fighters in South Vietnam. By May 1968, increasingly large amounts of men, food, and equipment were constantly flowing south through this network of roads and trails. The main task of watching and impeding this traffic fell to OP 35, a Studies and Observation Group (SOG) comprised of skilled Special Forces (SF) soldiers trained for this specific purpose. A secondary mission was to work with the local populace and train a cohort of Civilian Irregular Defense Group fighters to protect the camp.

NVA leaders, frustrated by the interference of an isolated US outpost, decided to make an example of it. Their plan was to lure as many additional defenders into the area as possible and then inflict an overwhelming defeat comparable to the French debacle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954³. Coming only a few months after the 1968 Tet Offensive and just before the Paris Peace Talks began, an NVA victory would be dramatically illustrated in American media reports; such a psychological victory might well accelerate the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam. In short, the camp at Kham Duc was to serve as "bait" to entice US forces into a stunning defeat.

As threats to the security of this post became increasingly obvious, Gen. William C. Westmoreland dispatched a mix of units to assist in its protection: by the time of the battle, these included, besides units already mentioned, a platoon of Marine artillery, an Air Force Combat

1. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Principles of War."

2. See *US Army Field Manual FM 3-0*.

3. See, further, *MiWSR* 2021-055.

Control Team, an infantry battalion with attached artillery, and elements of an engineer unit, each with its own chain of command. Defending so much mountainous terrain with such diverse units made it hard to cope with the two NVA regiments. First Ngok Tavak, then the surrounding observation posts, and finally parts of the main perimeter fell to the overwhelming onslaught. Even before this, troops in the camp had begun to be evacuated under extreme duress. The enemy shot down Air Force cargo planes, jet fighters, helicopters, and observation planes, clogging the runway and cutting off the surrounded base.

There were two bright spots for the Americans and their Vietnamese allies. The month of May in Vietnam marks the onset of monsoon weather, during which aircraft use falls off due to heavy rains and fog. But, miraculously, clear skies prevailed during the entire three-day battle. This enabled US tactical air power to save the day. Westmoreland had recently entrusted overall control of aircraft to one man—Air Force Gen. William Momyer—who directed the necessary air resources to evacuate the embattled soldiers and civilians and crush NVA forces in the mountains. B-52 bombers rained down heavy payloads, while jet fighters and helicopter gunships blasted the surrounding triple-canopy jungle hiding known or suspected enemy positions. Thousands of NVA soldiers died.

Afterward, both sides claimed victory. NVA forces had taken an outpost that had been a springboard for SOG teams. Even though they failed to capture any dramatic film images or reports to use in psychological offensives against the Americans, they could still point to the forced withdrawal of vaunted US soldiers from the battlefield. To be sure, the battle exacted a high price in casualties, but it was one the NVA accepted as part of their ongoing plan to win a decisive war of attrition.

The Americans, on the other hand, even though they placed a higher premium on conserving lives, counted the deaths of 46 of their own and 133 of their allies as acceptable, given the much higher toll taken on their enemy. Moreover, the terrain yielded to the enemy was not critical. Hence, the US “retreat-victory” over NVA forces at Kham Duc was categorical. There was no reprise of Dien Bien Phu, just a withdrawal. Indeed, the official post-battle story was that Kham Duc had served as “bait,” meant to lure the NVA out of hiding so they could be destroyed. In the end, both sides claimed this small outpost as their own enticement for defeating the enemy.

Bait: The Battle of Kham Duc is an excellent book. Besides clarifying both sides’ conduct of the fighting on the ground and in the air, it sheds light on multiple levels of decision-making by their leaders. The authors’ granular account of action in the trenches as well as terrain, equipment, tactical and strategic goals, and leadership is informed by their scholarship and their own experiences of Viet Nam.

The key fact of the battle of Kham Duc is that it was a massive, hastily improvised air ambush of two reinforced NVA regiments by virtually unlimited numbers of combat aircraft attacking in ideal weather for visual flight. The attackers were vastly more numerous than the defenders, but the inflexible NVA attack plan did not envision the possibility of such an unlikely concentration of air power in such unlikely weather at such an unlikely time and place. (184)

We must be grateful to James McLeroy and Gregory Sanders for memorializing the deeds of the men who fought at Kham Duc, for better or worse.