

John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, **Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh**, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004. 576pp.

Reviewed by Dr. Nikolas Gardner  
University of Salford

This is the first soft cover edition of Prados and Stubbe's poignant and authoritative study of Khe Sanh, originally published in 1991. Although the authors have added no new material to this edition, the book certainly deserves the wider audience that it will reach in paperback. *Valley of Decision* is the product of two scholars examining the same topic from different vantage points. Stubbe, the Lutheran chaplain of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 26<sup>th</sup> Marines, collected the records and reminiscences of soldiers and Marines who fought at Khe Sanh, while Prados drew upon archival material to illuminate the operational, strategic and political backdrop to the siege. The result is a study that provides numerous insights into the aims and conduct of US operations as well as the experiences of the many individuals who participated in them.

The book recounts events from the arrival of the first Special Forces detachment at Khe Sanh in July 1962 until the decision to abandon the American base there in June 1968. It focuses in particular on the period from late 1967 until the spring of 1968, as North Vietnamese pressure progressively intensified into an outright siege of Khe Sanh. The bulk of the narrative is constructed around the personal accounts of ordinary soldiers and Marines who participated. These accounts are a goldmine of information on the Vietnam War at the tactical level. While the reminiscences of individuals seldom shed significant light on the higher conduct of the war, they effectively portray the anxiety that pervaded operations for American troops around Khe Sanh, as routine patrols could erupt suddenly into violent clashes with elusive enemy forces that remained largely unseen. Anxiety often became terror as the siege intensified and troops faced heavy North Vietnamese artillery bombardments as well as the awesome spectacle of US airpower wreaking havoc on enemy units in close proximity to American positions. While in many ways the book is a testament to those who fought at Khe Sanh, it is also a valuable source of information on the experience of the Vietnam War for ordinary soldiers and Marines.

Rather than simply providing an oral history of Khe Sanh, however, *Valley of Decision* also includes careful analysis of the motives of each side. While acknowledging the lack of concrete evidence regarding North Vietnamese intentions, Prados and Stubbe contend that the communists did not see Khe Sanh as a decisive confrontation modeled after their defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Instead, they argue, it was William Westmoreland who remained fixated on Dien Bien Phu. The American commander hoped to create the conditions for a similarly climactic battle at Khe Sanh, using superior American firepower to exact a crippling defeat on the North Vietnamese Army. Ultimately, US forces inflicted heavy casualties on enemy forces during the siege, but the extent to which this thwarted Hanoi's strategic and political objectives in 1968 was limited. According to Prados and Stubbe, Khe Sanh was not the real prize for the communists. In their words: "Khe Sanh was Westmoreland's battle. Tet was Hanoi's." (p.455.)

Beyond explaining a particular episode of the Vietnam War, *Valley of Decision*

also addresses themes that remain resonant decades after the end of the conflict. The near obsession of Westmoreland and other American decision makers with Dien Bien Phu raises questions about how and why leaders use certain historical analogies to inform their decisions. In discussing the use of American airpower at Khe Sanh, Prados and Stubbe's study also highlights the bureaucratic and cultural barriers that can undermine inter-service cooperation. Moreover, the book provides a case study relevant to US and allied armies in Iraq and Afghanistan today, as it illustrates the problems facing American forces in Vietnam as they struggled to maintain effective relationships with indigenous groups who were often suspicious of one another and compromised by enemy infiltration. Overall, *Valley of Decision* is not a light read. Indeed, it is sometimes easy to lose the thread of the narrative amid the detailed descriptions of individual engagements. Nonetheless, Prados and Stubbe's work is unsurpassed as a study of Khe Sanh, and it will provide the careful reader with numerous insights into the nature of the Vietnam War as well as some of the enduring problems of modern warfare.

Nikolas Gardner