

1993

Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh

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Recommended Citation

Morgenthauer, Wendell P.C. Jr.; Prados, John; and Stubbe, Ray W. (1993) "Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 46 : No. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol46/iss2/18>

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transcend such formalities, and so it is with Sheppard's book.

Those familiar with the body of literature on Vietnam will recognize a number of current themes characterizing the debate about this checkered war. Perhaps the most striking is Sheppard's ability to breathe life into the Johnson administration's technological imperative that is so clearly defined in James Gibson's *The Perfect War*. Unlike Gibson, however, Sheppard, forced to fight his way down the Bassac River under enemy fire while frustrated by official indecision, makes no apology for his pragmatic technocracy. Like any good sailor, he is there to do his job with the tools provided.

One may dislike Sheppard's tendency to define in black-and-white terms his task of interdicting the Vietcong: Ho Chi Minh, for example, is presented in typically Cold-War terms as an evil opponent of freedom, while the Vietcong are merely ruthless thugs. Sheppard believes that the imbalance of firepower and his willingness to employ extreme force was justified by this attitude. Yet he is a man of some conscience, asking the reader to understand the frustrations leading him to actions he recognizes as irrational brutality.

Sheppard admires courage and decisiveness in Americans and Vietnamese with fine impartiality and is equally disdainful of ambivalence and indecision that cost lives. A "mustang" (commissioned from the ranks), he leaves a nagging impression that such indecision was most prevalent

among professional staff officers, while the war in the Mekong was fought largely by a handful of savvy enlisted men. Experience suggests there is some truth to this observation.

One should not read this book expecting to find a definitive history of Operation Game Warden or even a concise explanation of riverine operations. Nor is there any attempt to place Riverine Division 51 within the purview of general U.S. policy in Vietnam or, thankfully, within the larger context of the Cold War itself. Yet in many ways Sheppard's account does reflect all the conflict and contradiction of a seemingly bygone era. Still, it remains a very personal testimony about the futility and near anarchy of prosecuting any war in the absence of clearly defined and fully supported national goals—a lesson perhaps all the more valuable as superpower confrontation gives way to regional conflicts.

Finally, *Riverine* is a good story, especially for someone who spent a year in the general vicinity of Binh Thuy. Its action is unrelenting, and for this reason alone the book should have a restless life on most library shelves.

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Prados, John and Stubbe, Ray W.
Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991. 551pp. \$29.95

To better understand the authors' purpose in this work it is necessary to read the preface written by professional historian and co-author John Prados, who focuses on the larger operational and strategic context of the siege. Ray Stubbe, a retired naval chaplain who served throughout the battle with the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, writes at the rifleman level. Prados states in the preface, "I am mightily pleased because I believe this book is greater than either of us could have produced alone." This reviewer does not agree. Each had the opportunity to produce an excellent book. Together, they have unsuccessfully attempted to accomplish too many things, especially Prados.

Several of the important issues that Prados raises are worthy of additional in-depth study. For example, why did we persist in staying in Khe Sanh? How were "single-manager" air assets handled? What were the operational differences between General Westmoreland and Lieutenant General Cushman? What was Westmoreland's "real" agenda? And how did President Johnson perceive the war? In several cases Prados's discussions are confusing. On pages 228 and 229, Westmoreland, losing confidence in Cushman, decides to establish a Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MacV) forward headquarters. Nothing more is mentioned until page 418, when suddenly there is a discussion of a Provisional Corps Vietnam, commanded by an army general and operating in I Corps. How did this corps come about? Is it

MacV "forward" under another name? What happened? Similarly, Prados offers a rather detailed discussion of the air control dispute only to state that new air management procedures went into effect in early April 1968 "and almost immediately resulted in tragedy." Unfortunately, the circumstances surrounding the tragedy are nowhere mentioned and the reader is left wondering how or why the tragedy occurred.

Stubbe, for his part, spent much of his time visiting fighting positions, accompanying patrols, spending nights with the men on-line, and keeping a detailed diary of "every kind of act and rumour." He has written about the men who served, and offers literally hundreds of vignettes about patrols, ambushes, small units, and battalion-size actions. One gets the feeling that he interviewed every soldier, sailor, and Marine in the operation and felt compelled to name everyone and tell their story. But Stubbe's discussion of single small-unit-action success stories is hard to understand. There are tactical successes in war, but this reviewer can not remember reading about a single small-unit action which can be described as successful.

My criticism is with the book, not the people in it. Veterans of the 3rd Marine Division, the 1st Cavalry Division, and the MacV Studies and Observations Group will find their actions described in great detail. A book about their role in the long, dirty campaign is warranted, just as is one about Johnson, McNamara,

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Westmoreland, Cushman, and the others who served at the top.

Putting both stories into one volume just did not work.

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Perret, Geoffrey. *There's a War to Be Won: The United States Army in World War II*. New York: Random House, 1991. 623pp. \$30

For nearly a generation the United States Navy has enjoyed an admirable one-volume history of its role in World War II in Samuel Eliot Morison's *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War*, published in 1963. The United States Army has had to wait for a comparable volume.

To mention this work in the same breath with Morison is altogether appropriate. Perret merits high praise for his eloquent style and lively and compelling writing. Furthermore, Perret's history actually excels Morison's, because his emphasis on operations offers a fuller development of organization, administration, and logistics, as well as of the ideas and doctrine that lay behind the fighting. Though both histories share many strengths, they also share a conspicuous shortcoming. Neither pays much attention to strategy—though a partial explanation might be offered that strategy belongs mainly to the history of joint commands rather than of the particular services.

Together with the long-standing need for such a book and Perret's exceptional literary quality, the aspect of this work that deserves most attention is its positive assessment of the fighting capacities of the United States Army.

Perret, a free-lance, nonacademic, military historian, earlier wrote *A Country Made by War: The Revolution to Vietnam, the Story of America's Rise to Power*, published in 1989. In that overview of the nation's military history, he stressed how profoundly war and military institutions have shaped the United States in spite of its declarations of abhorrence for war. He also suggests the existence of a considerable American aptitude for waging war—a theme he particularly reinforces by his decided opposition to the widespread and strong belief in the qualitative superiority of the German army over the American army in World War II.

The author states that his purpose in this work is to explain why the United States Army of the Second World War "was so good it never lost a campaign; I count the fall of the Philippines as being essentially a campaign fought by Filipinos under American direction. The wartime army lost only one battle out of more than a hundred fought around the world, in Tunisia at Sidi-bou-Zid. It suffered only one major check, the Rapido River crossing." Perret asserts that "no [other] army ever compiled such a record of victories." One could quibble about this or that battle (for example, was the fighting in the