

Khe Sanh: After An Epic Battle, Looking to the Future



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It is a landscape of haunting beauty.

Mountains clad in deep green rain forest cover disappear into scudding grey clouds in scenes reminiscent of a traditional Chinese water color.

Swollen rivers thrash through deep mountain gorges.

The old emperors of Vietnam once hunted bountiful elephants, tigers and other wildlife herds in this area of central Vietnam. Traders moved back and forth between neighboring Laos and the sea along hidden mountain trails as did armies in times of trouble.

But the region was so remote it remained largely cloaked in mystery to the outside world—until the Americans came in the 1960s and developed a major airbase here—setting the stage for an epic showdown with North Vietnam and etching the name of the place forever in military history: Khe Sanh.

In 1967-68 elements of several North Vietnamese divisions isolated and then encircled Khe Sanh base, manned by a reinforced Marine regiment and troops of the then South Vietnamese arm, and for several months the two sides were locked in the most publicized battle of the so-called American war.

The North Vietnamese, or Viet Minh as they were known then, had won a similar confrontation in 1954 against French troops to effectively end colonialism and U.S. President Lyndon Johnson was so concerned about a repeat outcome he unprecedentedly demanded his military chiefs publicly guarantee Khe Sanh would not fall.

It did not. Round the clock bombing, particularly by high-flying B52 bombers, turned the surrounding rain forests into a moonscape of bomb craters. The North Vietnamese troops eventually withdrew, but so did the marines.

Today, the lush forests have covered over most of the scars of war. Khe Sanh base is a military museum. The east-west highway nine carries a brisk traffic between Laos and the coast and is part of a wider network of roads embracing several countries of Southeast Asia.

The lower mountain slopes are covered with coffee fields. Khe Sanh town is a bustling community of some 10,000 people. But the region and its local population, including ethnic minorities such as the Van Kieu and Pako peoples, is still a poor area of the country with only limited resources for such basic needs as education and healthcare.



A military museum at the old marine Khe Sanh military base.

Photo: Ray Wilkinson



Pupils at Khe Sanh's satellite primary school.

Photo: Ray Wilkinson

The Washington-headquartered Global Community Service Foundation (GCSF) has been working in the area for several years to strengthen education facilities.

At the foot of a steep incline the organization, with the help of donors, built a three-classroom 'satellite' compound for the Khe Sanh No. 1 Primary School. Some 145 children aged 6-10 study in two shifts under the guidance of 13 teachers.

This satellite school allows the students to study nearer their rural homes and avoid a daily trek to the main school in the town center which could take several hours each day. Faced with such a long hike families might well decide not to send their children to school at all.

But reminders of the war are never far away. Only a few feet from the busy schoolrooms is a muddy fishing pond which was once a huge B-52 bomb crater.

Recently at the main school compound, the non governmental agency completed the most comprehensive library in the region, aided once more by voluntary donations, led by a Rhode Island family, the Bergstroms.

In Western terms costs are modest: less than \$30,000 for the entire library and its contents. But it will have a major local impact.

GCSF's local manager, Nguyen Xuan Tam, who is headquartered in the local province capital of Dong Ha, was project manager, coordinating with school, local government and contractors, buying equipment and overseeing construction.

"Today we have some 10,000 books in the library including regular school books, popular children's stories, history books and newspapers," according to school principle Miss Vo Thi Thu Huong. "The five computers can be used by our 720 pupils and they will also help our 40 teachers to develop specialized courses and school curriculums."

Miss Huong hopes this will just be the start. "If we can get five more computers from donors the library could have a major impact on primary education throughout the Khe Sanh area."

The military battle of Khe Sanh is a fading memory in this community, but it still faces major battles in the years ahead to provide adequate facilities for future generations.