

THE LAST STAND OF RECON TEAM KANSAS

Outnumbered worse than the Alamo defenders, here's the story of a SOG team's desperate last stand.

By Maj. John L. Plaster, USAR (Ret.)

The once bustling Khe Sanh Marine Base in South Vietnam's extreme northwest had been a ghost town more than three years by the summer of 1971. Though used briefly that February to support the South Vietnamese Army's invasion of Laos, after that bloody debacle the South Vietnamese abandoned not just Khe Sanh but the entire region, yielding immense areas to the NVA, who almost overnight began extending their Ho Chi Minh Trail highways into South Vietnam.



In late July 1971, U.S. intelligence began tracking a large enemy force shifting across the DMZ a dozen miles east of Khe Sanh, threatening the coastal cities of Hue, Danang and Phu Bai where the last sizeable American ground units were based.

It was essential to learn what was happening near Khe Sanh, a mission assigned to a shadowy organization called "SOG." Created to conduct covert missions deep behind enemy lines in Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam, the top secret Studies and Observations Group had shifted most of its operations in-country by 1971 to cover the continuing U.S. withdrawal. From among its clandestine assembly of Army Green Berets, Navy SEALs and USAF Air Commandos, the Khe Sanh mission eventually became a prisoner snatch assigned to Recon Team Kansas, an 11-man, Special Forces-led element, which included eight Montagnard tribesmen.



"Recon Team Leader Loren Hagen shortly before his final mission." (Photo by Tony Andersen)

But how do you grab a prisoner in the midst of 10,000 or more NVA? Headed by an easygoing, lanky Midwesterner, First Lieutenant Loren Hagen, along with Sergeants Tony Andersen and Bruce Berg, the RT Kansas men had brainstormed through several scenarios until settling upon the best option: They would land conspicuously on an abandoned firebase -- which obviously would draw some sort of NVA reaction -- put up a short fight, then extract by helicopter. Except half of Hagen's men would stay hidden on the hill. When the NVA sent a squad up to see if the Americans had left behind sensors or bombing beacons -- as SOG teams often did -- the hidden men would ambush the NVA, seize a prisoner and come out.

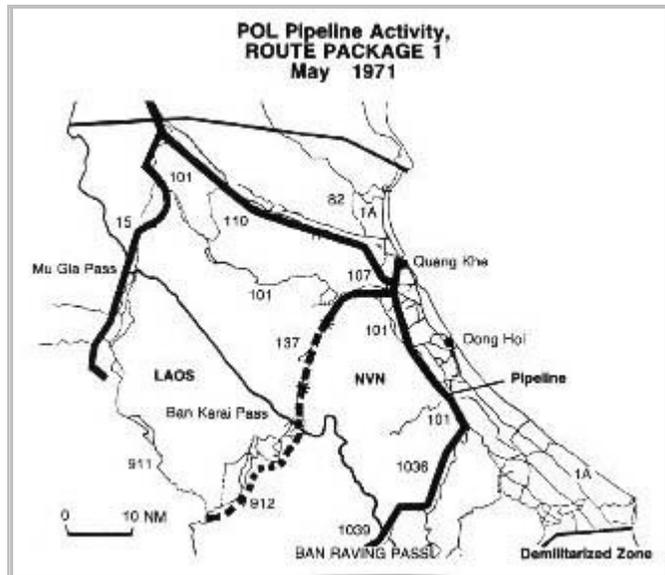
In case a serious fight developed, Lt. Hagen reinforced his team with three more Green Beret volunteers, Staff Sergeant Oran Bingham and Sergeants Bill Queen and William Rimondi, for eight Montagnard tribesmen and six U.S. Special Forces, a total of 14 men.

Landing at last light on 6 August 1971, Lt. Hagen surveyed the scrub brush and bomb craters below them and split his defense into three elements to cover the hilltop's three slopes. Immediately they went to work restoring the old firebase's two dilapidated bunkers and shallow trenches. The enemy must have seen them land, and Hagen reckoned to be ready.

A Foreboding Night

It was well after dark when the SOG men noticed campfires on two facing ridgelines, unusual because the NVA normally masked itself. By midnight enemy probes were at the base of the hill, firing provocatively from the north, south, east and west.

At 1 a.m. a USAF AC-130 Spectre gunship arrived, walking 40mm and 20mm fire around the hill nearly all night. Never once did the team fire their weapons, staying blanketed in darkness. Then at 3 a.m. the SOG men heard trucks and tailgates dropping. This was odd, very odd.



Beneath the hill, dismounting NVA soldiers formed up into platoons and companies, which their leaders marched through the darkness to their assigned attack positions, to wait for dawn.

Just before sunrise it became forebodingly quiet. Then Lt. Hagen heard more trucks arriving.

Fifty miles away at a coastal airbase, a USAF Forward Air Controller (FAC) and a flight of helicopters was lifting away for the false extraction; they would be above RT Kansas in 30 minutes.

As darkness gave way to light, Lt. Hagen detected glimpses of NVA on one slope; then on another slope the helmets appeared, bobbing in the fog. When his men reported NVA on the third slope, too, Hagen realized the hill was completely encircled by NVA -- but that would require a whole regiment, at least a thousand men!



"The NVA were laying a Soviet-made tactical fuel pipeline, like this one, near RT Kansas' hilltop, the first ever extended into South Vietnam. It would be of strategic value a few months later during the Easter 1972 Offensive."
(Def. Intell. Agency)

The NVA regimental commander understood he had to dispatch the Americans quickly. They'd inadvertently landed almost within sight of the Hanoi High Command's most critical new venture, the first six-inch fuel pipeline laid across the DMZ, absolutely essential in a few months when entire tank battalions rolled through here for the war's largest offensive. Already the 304th NVA Division was massing here, plus a regiment of the 308th Division, preparing for the 1972 Easter Offensive.

A fourth battalion moved into place; then, concealed in the ground fog, a fifth battalion arrived. Later, SOG's commander, Colonel John Sadler, would learn an entire

regiment had stormed the hill, supported by a second regiment, a mass assault by approximately 2000 enemy infantry.

A Human Wave

As the clearing ground fog disclosed that terrible truth, Lt. Hagen had no time for inspiring words, just serious soldier work; in those final moments he repositioned weapons while his men readied grenades and stacked magazines. The Catholic Montagnards made the Sign of the Cross.

Then they came.

A well-aimed RPG rocket smashed into Bruce Berg's bunker, collapsing it and signaling the attack -- fire went from nothing to ten thousand rounds per second! Andersen could see dozens of NVA rushing in lines up his slope, meeting them with his M-60 machinegun. Hagen hollered that he was going to check Berg, and ran directly into a ferocious maelstrom, with bullets ricocheting and slamming the earth in front of, behind, and beneath his dashing feet. He made it a dozen yards when fire from the other slope cut him down, killing him.

Then Klaus Bingham left a bunker to reposition a claymore and a bullet struck him in the head, apparently killing him. One Montagnard in a trench below Tony Andersen fired several bursts then jumped up to pull back and fell into Andersen's lap, dead.

Four men had died in less than four minutes. It was up to Andersen now, the senior man.

The Last Stand

Small arms fire rattled closer on all sides and grenades lobbed up from below the hillcrest where waves of NVA were scurrying behind small rises and rolling from bomb crater to bomb crater. Andersen dashed over the hill to look for Hagen but couldn't see him anywhere -- just 100 khaki-clad NVA almost at the top! He fired one M-60 belt at

NVA advancing up his own slope, then sped to the other approach and ran belt after belt on the 100 assaulting enemy. By then grenades started coming from behind him as NVA closed in from his rear. Just a dozen yards away, beyond the curvature of the hill, enemy heads popped up, cracked a few shots, then dropped back down.

Still a dozen minutes away, the approaching Cobra gunships went to full throttle, leaving the slower Hueys behind.

Meanwhile RT Kansas had just run out of hand grenades when a North Vietnamese grenade exploded beside Andersen's M-60, rendering it useless; he spun his CAR-15 off his back and kept shooting, then he tossed back another grenade but it went off in front of him, nearly blinding him, yet he kept shooting. More shrapnel tore into him, then an AK round slammed through his webgear and lodged in his elbow, knocking him down. He stumbled back to his knees and kept firing.

The perimeter was pinched almost in half when Andersen grabbed his last two living Montagnards, circled below the nearest NVA and somehow managed to reach the survivors on the opposite side. He found Bingham, started to lift him, and saw he, too, was dead from a head wound. All around him he heard, "zzzsss, zzzsss, zzzsss," as bullets flashed past his ears.

He dragged Bingham back to where Bill Queen lay, wounded. Only Rimondi wasn't yet hit and still fired furiously. Andersen put them in a back-to-back circle just off the hilltop where they would make their last stand. AK bullets had destroyed their team radio, another slug had shot Andersen's little survival radio out of his hand so Rimondi tossed him another survival radio, their last.

Now the NVA were streaming, rolling over the crest like a tidal wave, their rattling AKs blending together into one never-ending burst. Andersen's men were firing not at NVA but at hands wielding AKs over parapets and around bunkers. There was no place left to fall back. Andersen was shooting NVA little further than the length of his CAR-15 muzzle, and the time it took to speed-change a magazine meant life or death.

From the air it looked like an ant mound, with moving figures everywhere. Cobra lead rolled in and sparkled 20mm cannon shells around the surviving SOG men, and at last fighters arrived, adding napalm and Vulcan cannons to the melee. Then at last the assault ebbed, turned, and the NVA fled for cover, just as the Hueys arrived.

Though wounded repeatedly, Andersen crawled out to fire his CAR-15 to cover the landing Hueys. With Rimondi's help, Andersen dragged as many teammates' bodies as he could to the first Huey, then helped the wounded Queen and others aboard the second.



"Lt. Loren Hagen (right, rear) and Bruce Berg pose with five indigenous teammates. Both Hagen and Berg would die on the small hilltop, along with six of their Montagnard soldiers."
(Photo by Tony Andersen)

"3 months before RT Kansas fought the most one-sided fight in American history, the USAF already had plotted three enemy pipelines running out of North Vietnam but these extended into Laos. The most critical pipeline was secretly being laid across the DMZ into South Vietnam." (USAF)

A Terrible Toll

In one hellacious half-hour, nine of Recon Team Kansas' fourteen men had been lost.

Lt. Hagen had died, along with Bingham, Berg was presumed dead, six Montagnards had died, Rimondi and Queen both suffered multiple frag wounds, Andersen had been struck by both smallarms fire and shrapnel, and their other two Montagnards, too, all had been wounded

"It's amazing that any of us came through it with the amount of incoming that we were getting," Tony Andersen says today, 25 years later. He attributes their survival to his deceased team leader, Lt. Loren Hagen. "He epitomized what a Special Forces officer should be -- attentive to detail, a lot of rehearsals, followed through on things," he explains. "We were ready. I think that was probably the only thing that kept us from being totally overrun. Everybody was alert and knew what was happening and was waiting."

As for Hagen's bravery, dashing into a wall of AK fire to try to save Bruce Berg, that didn't surprise Andersen, either. "Lt. Hagen was that kind of officer. He was a good man."

Against the lost of most of his teammates, Andersen learned, the USAF counted 185 NVA dead on that hill little RT Kansas had killed half a battalion and probably wounded twice that many NVA. But that gives Andersen sparse satisfaction compared to the loss of most of his team.

Perhaps Andersen's most difficult duty was carrying the bodies of his six Montagnard teammates -- his "family" he called them -- to their home village. "As soon as they saw us driving up in the truck, they knew. Wailing and moaning started, and all the grieving." The villagers gathered in a circle around the headman's stilted longhouse. "Through one of the interpreters I tried to explain how proud we were of them, what good fighters they were, that they had died for a good cause."

That would be borne out a few months later when the intelligence generated by RT Kansas' spirited defense helped U.S. analysts read enemy intentions, enabling American airpower to counter the NVA's Easter Offensive.

And though details of this incredible fight would remain classified for decades, enough was disclosed that First Lieutenant Loren Hagen's family was presented the U.S. Army's final Vietnam War Medal of Honor; Tony Andersen, who held together what remained of RT Kansas through those final mass assaults, received the Distinguished Service Cross, while Queen, Rimondi, Berg and Bingham were awarded Silver Stars.

And now, today, with full disclosure, we can appreciate the significance of their fight:

At the Alamo, 188 Americans had stood against 3000 Mexicans, a ratio of 16-to-1; at Custer's Last Stand, 211 cavalymen succumbed to 3,500 Sioux warriors, or 16.5-to-1; at the 1877 Battle of Rorke's Drift, the most heralded action in British military history resulting in -- 11 Victoria Crosses -- 140 British troops withstood assaults by 4000 Zulus, or 28-to-1. Lt. Hagen's 14 men had held on despite being outnumbered 107-to-one, four times as disadvantageous as Rorke's Drift and seven times worse than the Alamo, one of the most remarkable feats of arms in American history.

(This article is derived from Maj. Plaster's book, SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam, published by Simon & Schuster.)