

... cont. Chapter 1: Khe-Sanh

I realize this as I snap a picture of one of the strangest things I've seen before. In front of me, there are cows crossing the runway as they flee to save themselves. The fear in their eyes reminds me of something I saw in my childhood. After Soviet troops burned our Berlin apartment, my mother and I escaped the wrecked city to the country where my grandparents kept a cottage. Dead bodies were everywhere, but I remember crying when I saw a group of horses lying together in a ditch among rubble and blood. This was a cost of war rarely reported. You hear of the buildings smashed and burned and of the people dead and wounded, but rarely of the animals killed or the lovely tree, staple of your childhood backyard, shattered by mortars. These are terrible things also. They are part of the mood of war, and seeing the cows scatter with terror in their eyes brought me to the moment when we were also the victims of war.

It wasn't just the cows running from the plane that struck me but the oddity of cows on a military runway at all. I later learned the people in the village of Khe-Sanh, looking for safety, had brought their herds here. And so that's how you get cows on a runway dodging incoming.

But that didn't help my position now, behind oil drums. At the end of the airstrip, the C-130 banked over the trees for its return flight, followed by explosions on the runway. To my left Marines motion to me from the large green sandbag opening that leads to the base. The Marine closest to me is shouting: "Those drums are full of oil! Those drums are full of oil!"

I remember thinking: "Where else was I supposed to go?" These were the only objects within a reasonable distance that I could have hid behind. Had one of the cows been hit, I suppose that might have served my purpose too. But the men here also just thought I looked funny. And they were right. A journalist scrambling for her life on an open runway was probably funny to some of the Marines under these conditions.

The incoming stops and somebody runs over from the sandbags and takes me inside. He grabs my arm and pulls me. I notice his hands are covered with red clay from where he grabbed me. I'm covered in the clay from diving on the edge of the strip. Everything is covered in it, even the oil drums have red smudges on their sides, and the green sandbag walls show the red streaks, especially down by the ground where the men kick it up. It's evening and it's just starting to get dark, but the red is clearly visible wherever you look.

As we enter the base, the man says: "You could have been killed."

"Well, how else was I supposed to get in?"

He doesn't respond. Who knows what he's thinking. Since it's dark now few Marines know there's a woman here, which may be better for now. The man I'm with takes me to the Marine Captain, whose job is to keep me alive and out of trouble. After a short introduction in the opening to a sandbag enclosure, the Captain walks me to the First Aid Tent. Inside is full of wounded men, mostly there from shrapnel. The ones who take direct fire don't make it here.

When I ask for the bathroom, he points it out to me just across from the First Aid Tent. I'm wearing fatigues and I have on a white Marine belt that was given to me by a friend. The trouble is that something is broken, and I can't get it off. It's dark and I can't see. I call the Captain, and he comes with a flashlight, and in the dark, holding possibly the only light in camp, he fumbles to undo my belt outside the latrine. I can only guess what the others think. There are a few laughs from somewhere indistinguishable as the Captain walks back to the tent alone. I follow shortly behind.

Without a word on the incident, the Captain puts me on a cot in a section of the Medical Tent where I'm mostly by myself. Soon the only thing I can think of is a shell dropping through the fabric above me. There's something about being attacked from above that's more unsettling than any other part of warfare. There's no action during the night,

and so I sleep, but from time to time, and all night long, I hear the planes landing out on that strip. I can tell the deceleration and landing from the acceleration of the takeoff. The two come close together as the planes are not stopping throughout the night.

Next morning, I'm up early to tour the base. I want to see the ammo dump first—or what's left of it. The NVA really landed a blow when they hit that ammo dump, and it is important that I see the destruction. Word still hasn't spread that there's a woman in camp, but as I'm walking in the direction of the ammo dump I happen upon the open shower where the young Marines are bathing.

Here I am, a young blond German girl in the midst of a war, watching these young men shower. I'm a journalist, but when I see these young, fit men I pause without thinking. It's only a moment before they notice me standing there. The fact that I'm wearing fatigues apparently doesn't hide that I am a woman, and the men begin shouting, "Female in camp! Female in camp!" and boyishly run for their towels. I couldn't tell why they did that. I hadn't even taken pictures. Some of them blush, while others turn with towels on and stand, chests out, in more aggressive stances.

After the shower scene with the naked Marines, I continue on toward where the ammo dump was pointed out to me. It's not hard to find. Like the Captain said as he sent me in this direction, "You can't miss it." And you really can't. The ammo dump is now just one giant hole in the ground. When it blew up, it took nearly everything with it, and sent all types of munitions bouncing in every direction in camp and onto the runway itself. This is the reason the planes must land around the clock as they do, even risking coming down in broad daylight. If there's to be a full assault on the base, then they need every round they can get. With the explosion and subsequent damage, the Marines must get in more supplies so they don't run out of bullets when the shooting starts.

I talk out loud to my tape recorder and snap a few pictures. I notice a small dug-in bunker off to the side of the runway. I think this must be the tower where they direct landing planes, and since the base is under attack, the "tower" is underground and fortified. I make a note to get there after the briefing.

A few Marines are nearby as I look over the ammo dump. Suddenly I hear the click click sound, and the Marine closest to me shouts damn near in my ear, "Incoming!" I hit the red clay ground again, but I'm the only one. The other Marines stand there laughing as I dust myself off. The rounds were outgoing. I assume this is payback for witnessing some of them in the shower, but I can't be sure. A few of them look me over with less than friendly eyes.

We don't say another word to each other and I head off to the briefing. But since the briefing reveals nothing new, I walk out by the runway and enter the bunker. There are no flights scheduled to land for the next hour or so, so the man inside takes some time to talk with me. He's bored to tears.

This is not the assignment he planned on. "Sergeant Lan," he says to me, reaching out his hand. "Thea," I say. Despite the sunshine it's dark inside the bunker where he directs air traffic. Beneath a haze of smoke, he begins to talk. I guess since the Marines at Khe-Sanh were all in the same boat, and he had no one to talk to, he opened up to me. You might think the men were not fond of talking to journalists. I found it to be exactly the opposite.

Sergeant Lan is not where he wants to be, he tells me. Of course this goes without saying, since he's in Khe-Sanh, but in his case this is especially true. Until getting transferred here, Lan had it good in the Marines. He only arrived a few days before I did. Prior to this unfortunate deployment, he handled the Officers Bar and the Enlisted Men's Bar. He worked the supplies, but he also traded in money, wheeling and dealing in military payment certificates and cash. The PX wouldn't accept American dollars, only dealing in military scrip, and so he had what they called a "mamma sanh" in a nearby village who helped him exchange the money. He was running black market arbitrage and doing well. So well, in fact, that he had re-enlisted to keep his business. He had it in mind that he would supply the Americans in Japan. He

probably read Catch-22 and took that sort of military venture to heart. That was before he was sent here for a four-week stint in a fortified, underground airport tower, which saw constant assault.

At this point his dreams of building an empire in the Marine Corps were about as far away as possible.

"I won't leave this hole unless it's an urgent urgent." He says. "Just urgent's not enough to have me cross the open, not after the last few days."

"Today's not bad."

"Remember that when you cross back to the base," he said.

He's right. As I cross back in the open, I remember his words. Today isn't a bad day, but the silence is ruthless as I imagine the concussion that might come all of a sudden. I'm sure I'll hear the click click first, but God knows where it'll land.

Back in the base I see a French photographer. He's frantic because he just learned in a briefing that an offensive is on throughout the country. There is no cease-fire. It's obvious we have to get out. The action here at Khe-Sanh has died. We're in the wrong place. There's a war on after all, and it's my job to report from it.