

G.I. Mood at Battered Khesanh: 'We Don't Want

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Special to The New York Times

KHESANH, South Vietnam, March 25—When Specialist 4 Gregory Geneviva heard at noon today that the American troops of the 101st Airborne Division would shortly be leaving the huge allied base here, with the Vietnamese drive into Laos at the feeble end of its final chapter, he shook his head and sighed:

"I don't just want to get out of here—I want to run for it."

There was no official confirmation from the command of the airborne division, which has provided major support for the drive in Laos, that within 48 hours its base at Khesanh would be shut down. But as Specialist 4 Geneviva put it, "Some officers told 500 G.I.'s today and we all can't be wrong."

Reminders of Death

This has been an ugly week here. Yesterday was the ninth day in a row that enemy mortar, rocket, or artillery fire has crashed into the base.

And there are many reminders that Americans have died suddenly and unpleasantly at Khesanh.

Yesterday, on the floor of the aluminum shack by the airstrip here, where a soldier had been waiting for a plane to take him out of Khesanh when a rocket hit the hut and killed him, two snapshots of pretty girls and one of his new Volkswagen lay near pools of blood.

So did his P.-X. card and a package of the cigarettes he was smoking when at 9 A.M. Monday the rocket came in.

Other soldiers talked about mopping up the blood but no one knew what to do with the traces of the dead man's life. No one knew who he was.

"Well that was yesterday" said Specialist 4 Charles Ledford, a tower chief, "That was yesterday". What he meant was, "Let's not dwell on it."

Runways Almost Empty

The two 3,900-foot runways at Khesanh, which had been jammed with C-130 cargo planes and army helicopters at the peak of

the Vietnamese operations in Laos, were almost empty.

"It's so quiet around here because we're getting hit," Pvt Herman Sullivan of the 101st Airborne said.

"Yeah, maybe it's because things are winding down around here, too."

"I'll drink to that," another G.I. said. But there was nothing to drink.

Some of the men at Khesanh, however, don't have the feeling that anything is winding down for them yet, and think that maybe it will only get worse. They are the Third Platoon of Troop D,

Second Squadron, 17th Cavalry, a unit of the 101st Airborne Division.

"The Grim Reapers of Death" say big black letters on the platoon's calling cards, a refinement that pleases them.

Tuesday morning, around 2:35 A.M., when a North Vietnamese demolition squad entered Khesanh, the Third Platoon was on the bunker line.

Half the Platoon Wiped Out

"There were 33 men in our platoon," said the platoon sergeant, Terry Stallard of

Waco, Tex. "Now we have 18 left."

Seven of the men, their eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep and their faces gray from fatigue, sat near one of the bunkers.

"We are too damned scared to sleep," said the platoon medic, Pvt. Edward White. Like many others at Khesanh, he hopes the whole base will shut down in the next two weeks.

But until then, the Third Platoon has troubles. Three members have been killed, 15 have been wounded. An entire North Vietnamese demo-

FRIDAY, MARCH 26, 1971

to Be Relieved—We Want to Get Out'

lition squad was able to creep inside the perimeter to the Americans' trench lines and bunkers, and blow up the United States Air Force control tower overlooking the airstrip.

No Reinforcements Sent

"We fought them for four hours—Jesus, some of them were on the runway," Sergeant Stallard said. "We killed 15 of them. The Dinks had charcoal on their legs and faces. When they were throwing satchel charges into our bunkers they'd kind of start yelling."

There are eight positions in an area of 300 yards on the bunker line on the north side of the airstrip that the Third Platoon and the two others in Troop D guard. No new troops have been sent in to reinforce or relieve them.

"Oh, they could get us out of here, but they won't," Private White said, with the contempt of the enlisted man for what he calls the Green Machine.

None of the seven men know why reinforcements haven't come.

"We don't want to be relieved—we want to get the

hell out of here," Sergeant Stallard said.

A mile away, in a mess tent, the first cook, Specialist 6 Roger Harris, said Khesanh could expect shelling at 7 in the morning and 7 at night. "And God knows what in between them," a private added.

The cooks had their flak jackets and their steel helmets right near the stoves where the veal and the cherry cobbles were being cooked for dinner last night.

Specialist Harris was right. Last night, at 7:20, the enemy artillery came in.