Making Apocalypse Now

Episode 17: Do Lung Bridge



Forward By CINEMATYLER

Thanks so much for your support! This has been a highly anticipated episode for me because it might just be my favorite scene in the movie and I was happy to see from all the recent comments that many people seem to feel the same way that I do.

I know that Coppola was concerned about having such a big memorable sequence like Ride of the Valkyries so early on in the story, but the atmosphere he created in the Do Lung sequence really gives it a run for its money. It was brilliant having the pointof-no-return not only be a symbol of the insanity of war (a bridge that is in a constant state of being built and destroyed simultaneously) but to create a surreal circus-like atmosphere really pushes the point home.

I love how it manages to perfectly straddle a realistic hell with an expressionistic one. What we see and hear could very well be simply the fear that Clean is feeling or the confused awe Lance is experiencing while tripping on acid. It truly is an example of masterful filmmaking, and all somehow completed in the most unforgiving circumstances for the cast and crew imaginable.





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Battle of Khe Sanh



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CHARACTERS



Francis Ford Coppola:

The Hero. A director coming off the massive success of The Conversation and The Godfather parts I and II is about to embark on a journey that will test his limits—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Will he change the film industry? Will he survive?



Vittorio Storaro (Cinematographer):

The Genius. An Italian cinematographer apprehensively accepts perhaps the most important role on this team—capturing the images that will tell this epic story. A true student of light and color, Storaro must bring these grand ideas into reality. Failure would bring a potential end to Coppola's career. Can he do it?



Walter Murch (Editor):

The Wizard. It would be his idea to add a massacre scene to Apocalypse Now–a harrowing scene that would add a new layer of accountability rarely seen in American war movies.



Michael Herr:

The Experienced. A war correspondent whose experiences during the Vietnam War would provide credibility and eloquence to Willard's inner monologue. Beyond writing the narration for Apocalypse Now, Herr's writing would inspire many aspects of the story as well as Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam War movie, Full Metal Jacket.

CONTEXT (SUMMARY)

Prelude

Khe Sanh was a village near the border of Laos and was important because of its location on Route 9 in South Vietnam. The US first built an airfield there in 1962, and it became a lookout point to watch for North Vietnamese soldiers and protect local people.

By 1964, General William Westmoreland, the US leader in Vietnam, saw Khe Sanh's potential. He thought it could be a base to block enemies, launch operations in Laos, watch over the Ho Chi Minh Trail (a key route the North Vietnamese used), and defend the area near the DMZ. The base could also be a starting point for operations to stop the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In 1964, Khe Sanh was also used by a secret group to launch teams into Laos to gather intelligence on the North Vietnamese supply system. By 1966, Westmoreland believed it was vital to hold onto Khe Sanh. He sent US Marines there, and they built an airfield. By 1967, the Marines set up a permanent base at Khe Sanh, which was part of their defense system in the northern part of South Vietnam.

Skirmishes

In 1967, North Vietnamese forces began making stronger attacks on the border areas of South Vietnam. These weren't quick attacks; they lasted longer and were more intense. In October, North Vietnamese fired a lot of artillery on Con Thien, a strong point for the Marines. Westmoreland,



the US leader, responded with a big bombing campaign called Operation Neutralize. Later in October, the North Vietnamese attacked in several places: Song Be, Loc Ninh, and especially Dak To. The battle at Dak To was very intense and lasted 22 days. The US and South Vietnamese suffered heavy losses, but the North Vietnamese lost even more.

American analysts were confused. They didn't see a clear reason for these strong North Vietnamese

CONTEXT (SUMMARY)

attacks. The attacks hurt both sides a lot. But later, people realized these attacks distracted the US and South Vietnamese and made them focus on the borders, leaving the cities more vulnerable to the big Tet Offensive that was coming.

During 1966, not much happened around Khe Sanh, but Westmoreland wanted Marines there and even wanted more of them. A Marine leader, Walt, disagreed, saying they should



focus on protecting the local people. But Westmoreland's view won, and more Marines were sent.

By 1967, a Marine company had a clash with North Vietnamese forces, which led to a bigger fight. The North Vietnamese wanted to capture key hills before their main attack. However, US Marines pushed them back with both sides suffering casualties. It was important to keep the hills around Khe Sanh occupied and defended so the North Vietnamese couldn't use them against the main base.

After these fights, things got quiet at Khe Sanh for a while. Some leadership changes happened, and the number of Marines there went up and down. By the end of the year and into January, some North Vietnamese activity was noticed, but it was still mostly quiet.

The Decision

The American leaders had to decide: Should they send more troops to defend the Khe Sanh base or give it up? Westmoreland, a top American general, believed it was important to keep it for several reasons, including its strategic location and usefulness against the enemy.

However, not all military leaders agreed. Some said the base wasn't that important, arguing it was too isolated and difficult to defend, especially during bad weather. One general even said that if they lost Khe Sanh, it wouldn't be a big loss. But for Westmoreland, the main point was that a large number of enemy troops were gathering for a big battle at Khe Sanh. He saw this as a chance to use American firepower and defeat a big part of the enemy without hurting civilians. He thought it could be a huge victory for the US.

CONTEXT (SUMMARY)

The Battle

In December 1967, the North Vietnamese positioned many troops and equipment near the American base at Khe Sanh. The Americans noticed this build-up and sent more troops to defend the base. On the night of January 2, 1968, the first direct conflict occurred, prompting the Americans to send even more reinforcements.

On January 20th, a North Vietnamese soldier defected and told the Americans about a planned attack. When the attack began the next day, the base was heavily shelled, causing a lot of destruction. Khe Sanh village, close to the base, was also attacked, and the defending forces there were overwhelmed. The North Vietnamese also attacked other nearby positions, including the first use of their tanks in battle. While the Americans and their allies were waiting for a ceasefire for the Tết holiday, they were informed it was cancelled. This signaled the start of the Tet Offensive, a major series of attacks by the North Vietnamese.

Before the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese army attacked US forces near the Demilitarized Zone at Khe Sanh. During the crisis, US General Westmoreland considered using nuclear weapons if the situation worsened. While some top US military officials supported this idea, it was ultimately dismissed. Declassified documents revealed that due to the unique terrain of South Vietnam, nuclear weapons wouldn't be effective. Meanwhile, intense aerial campaigns were launched around Khe Sanh, involving fighterbombers, B-52s, and other aircraft. This was one of the heaviest uses of aerial firepower in warfare history.

There was also a political tussle between military branches about who should control the aircraft. While the Air Force wanted centralized control over all air assets, the Marines wanted to retain control of their own squadrons. After much debate, it was decided that for the first time during the Vietnam War, air operations would be under one manager's control. Throughout this period, General Westmoreland believed that the broader Tet Offensive was just a distraction and that Khe Sanh was the real target of the North Vietnamese.

The Tet Offensive was a major attack by North Vietnamese forces on South Vietnam. Despite this massive assault, General Westmoreland remained focused on Khe Sanh, an area he believed was the main target. In early February, a base at Lang Vei was attacked by 12 tanks, surprising the US Special Forces there. Even though US Marines nearby had plans to help, their leader didn't send help, fearing it was a trap. The next day, after much debate and pressure from higher-ups, a rescue was launched. When survivors from Lang Vei reached the Marines' camp at Khe Sanh, they weren't initially let in due to mistrust and fear of enemy infiltration. Throughout these events, tensions between the Special Forces and Marines were evident.

Supplying Khe Sanh was challenging because of the bad weather and enemy fire. Most supplies were delivered by air, with planes often dropping them without landing to avoid attacks. The US

CONTEXT (SUMMARY)

heavily bombarded the areas around Khe Sanh to counter the North Vietnamese, dropping an average of 1,300 tons of bombs daily. Despite the intense fighting, communication with outside command was maintained through advanced signal technology.

The North Vietnamese kept attacking, but the U.S. forces defended their positions. Eventually, the North Vietnamese began to withdraw their forces, but that didn't mean the fighting was over. There were still artillery attacks and ground battles. The Marines launched a final attack but didn't find all of the men from an earlier ambushed patrol. The operation officially ended the next day, with a lot of casualties on both sides. The area was then handed over to another U.S. Army division. The battle was heavily watched by the U.S. media, and there were fears it could be a disaster. However, U.S. President Johnson insisted the base be held, leading to heavy bombings. The fighting at Khe Sanh became a major headline in the news during the war.

Leaving the Base

Planning began to relieve the Khe Sanh base in January 1968, resulting in Operation Pegasus, a major effort involving both Marines and the 1st Cavalry Division to link up with the base. While this plan annoyed the Marines, who felt they didn't need rescuing, the operation went ahead in April 1968 and met with some resistance. However, by mid-April, the operation was deemed successful, but it cost many lives on both the U.S. and North Vietnamese sides.



Shortly after, the U.S. began to withdraw from Khe Sanh. Some fighting continued, and by July, the base was officially closed. This was a significant move as it marked the first time the U.S. abandoned a major combat base due to enemy pressure. The North Vietnamese celebrated it as a victory and used it for propaganda. Meanwhile, the U.S. media questioned why the

CONTEXT (SUMMARY)

base was abandoned after so much effort to keep it. Although the base was left, the U.S. continued patrolling the surrounding areas. Over the next year, there were various operations in the area, but the presence of significant enemy forces diminished. By 1969, the U.S. strategy shifted, focusing more on defending than offensively taking territory.

The decision to abandon Khe Sanh became symbolic of the confusion and perceived futility of the U.S. effort in Vietnam, with some historians and commentators seeing the battle as a reflection of the war's broader failures. but the presence of significant enemy forces diminished. By 1969, the U.S. strategy shifted, focusing more on defending than offensively taking territory.

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Dispatches

MICHAEL HERR (SUMMARY)

What follows is a summary of Michael Herr's chapter on Khe Sanh in his book

"Dispatches."



In the winter of 1968, at the Khe Sanh Combat Base in Vietnam, there was a young Marine who had finished his tour. He'd been there for nearly five months with the 26th Marines. At first, being stationed at Khe Sanh seemed like a reward after surviving tough battles. This Marine had even been injured in an ambush. However, over time, Khe Sanh became a dangerous and stressful place. The Marine recalled happier times when they could relax and appreciate nature. Now, the men were often underground, avoiding enemy attacks.

This Marine, around 20 years old from Michigan, had a distinct smile that hid the trauma he experienced. His eyes showed the strain of war, making it hard to tell his age. He had two names tattooed on him: MARLENE on his arm and JUDY on his helmet. He made light of the situation, saying Judy was aware of Marlene. He also tried to erase a tough quote he'd written on his protective gear because too many others had the same one.

On his final day, he was in good spirits, making sure all was ready for his departure. He exchanged memories and contact information with friends, and he gifted his remaining marijuana joints to his closest remaining friend since his other close friend had been killed. They waited for the mist to clear so planes could come and take him home.

Khe Sanh was a dangerous location during the Vietnam War, especially its airstrip. The airstrip was often attacked by enemies from nearby hills. When planes approached, they were frequently met with gunfire and artillery, making landings

Dispatches

MICHAEL HERR (SUMMARY)

very risky. This made the airstrip littered with damaged aircraft debris. Due to the dangers, the Air Force began using smaller planes and sometimes dropped supplies from parachutes. People waiting for planes had to take cover in trenches, and when a plane landed, passengers would quickly swap places with those departing, often amidst panic due to the constant threat of attack.

On top of that, Americans divided Vietnam into specific zones for military convenience, often ignoring the country's true geography. This created confusion and obscured the actual nature of Vietnam. Many reports about the war used this new division system, which made it hard for people to understand the real Vietnam. The Highlands, a significant area, continued into North Vietnam and included Khe Sanh, highlighting its strategic importance in the war.

The Highlands of Vietnam are very mysterious, made up of mountains, valleys, and jungles where the Montagnards, a native and ancient group, live. These Montagnards, distinct from the typical Vietnamese population, often clashed with them. Some of these Montagnards worked for the American Special Forces, but old tensions between the two groups made cooperation difficult. The war displaced many Montagnards, due to American attacks that destroyed their villages and crops.

Many Americans found the Montagnards and their customs unsettling. I will note that one of these customs was the slaughter of the water buffalo we see in the movie. This was something that the Montagnards, who had been brought over to play Kurtz's army, happened to be doing during their time at the location and the crew decided to film it. The Highlands were known for their eeriness and witnessed significant battles. One notable battle was the Ia Drang in 1965, where North Vietnamese forces surprised American troops, leading to severe casualties. This battle changed American perspectives on the war, realizing that the conflict would not be easy. The terrain was notoriously tricky, and even victories, like the Battle of Dak To, were overshadowed by haunting events for instance, expecting thousands of enemy casualties but finding only four.

The Highlands' mysterious nature was emphasized by the hidden presence of North Vietnamese divisions, ready for battle, making the region very tense and dangerous for Americans.

The Seabees, a U.S. naval construction group, built a 600-meter airstrip, a beer hall, and an air-conditioned officers' club at Khe Sanh. Although the base was initially a minor concern, its significance grew over time. As it expanded, the Marine Corps began suggesting they'd drawn a large number of enemies to the area.

Around this time, the press became interested in a historical battle, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, because it seemed to have parallels with the situation in Khe Sanh. At both locations, the defending forces were heavily outnumbered, and the terrain and weather

Dispatches

MICHAEL HERR (SUMMARY)



conditions were similar. However, there were also differences: Khe Sanh had certain advantages in terrain and massive potential backup forces, especially aerial support. Yet, there were significant challenges; Khe Sanh was surrounded by the enemy, and the rainy season made air support difficult.

A joke circulated comparing the Marine Corps to the Boy Scouts, suggesting the Marines lacked mature leadership. This highlighted the perceived reckless nature of Marine operations. Some believed that a single Marine could take on many enemies, leading to risky strategies that often resulted in high casualties. Numerous stories emerged about Marine units facing devastating losses.

The Roach

JOHN MILIUS 1969

(Cont.1)

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GUNNER

I'm sorry, sir.

WILLARD

It's all right sergeant - what's out there?

GUNNER

They were tryin' to cut through the wire - I got 'em all I think.

OTHER SOLDIER

On yeah - listen.

There is a low moaning scream from out in the wire - it stops for a minute then continues hideously.

GUNNER

He's trying to call his friends send up a flare.

The spotter does, it arcs up, then bathes them in cerie light. The gunner fires a long BURST.

SPOTTER Those are all dead stupid, he's obviously underneath 'em -

They think about this as the flare goes out. The SCREAMING gets more intense.

GUNNER

Wake up the Roach.

The spotter moves down to where a tall lanky soldier is leaned up against the trench. He kicks him hard several times. Reach wakes and just looks up. On his helmet are the words: "GOD BLESS DOW."

ROACH

Yeah, man.

SPOTTER Slope in the wire - hear him.

He listens, he does, he nods.

SPOTTER

Bust him.

(CONTINUED)

The Roach

JOHN MILIUS 1969

(Cont.2)

3:5

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Roach gots up somewhat annoyed but very cool. He saunters up to the machine gun dragging his M-79 which has paisley designs all over it.

GUNNER

Hear him.

ROACH

Sure, yeah.

GUNNER

You need a flare -

ROACH

Nc, it's cool.

He opens the breach of his shotgun-like weapon and plunks the big slug into it. He SNAPS it closed then rests it across his forearm over the trench - he listens to the scream, calculating.

ROACH

He's close - real close.

He adjusts his sights so that the gun is simed high into the air. He listens again then fires. The grenade WHISTLES off into the night. There is a sharp explosion that cuts off the scream. Then the thud of bodies or pieces of bodies coming down around them.

FOACH

Muhhhh Fuhhhh...

He staggers back down the trench to go to sleep.

CUT TO:

FULL SHOT P.B.R. BRIDGE CLEAN CHEF

They stand in the shallows waiting for Willard and Lance. Clean is nervous, he constantly checks his M-16. Shells WHISTLE by and crash in the distance.

CHEF

Geez, I wish they'd hurry.

A soldier comes up on his way with some others to start building the bridge.

SOLDIER Hey buddy, that boat still runs, eh?

Selected Comments

DO LUNG SEQUENCE



@insanejughead

OOOOH!! I can't wait for the next episode.

Roach is my favorite character in this movie.

He only says ten words in the script (easily the best 10 period) and is the epitome of just how apathetic and far-gone a soldier can be.

J

@musenenlightened1984

Hey soldier do you know who's in charge here??

Roach: "Yeah" and slowly walks away.



@adopequeenatyrantkingaboss8057

Now I can RIP without wondering what happened to the puppy! I didn't catch the glimpse of him later, so now I know. What a film.



@billytrespassers3123

I always saw the puppy as a metaphor for how the US sort of took up the position to protect the non-communist Vietnamese but ultimately ended up failing them. I thought the dog going missing meant that it had been killed in the firefight or had run off on its own into the jungle and maybe ended up among the Vietnamese again.

@ingvarhallstrom2306

The most shocking thing about this scene isn't the massacre itself, because carnage is a part of war. The true shock is Willard executing the only survivor in cold blood because it's the most expedient thing to do. That's the part when the entire crew loses their true innocence about what this mission really is.



@PolishGod2003

To be fair she was sprayed with bullets, there was nothing they could do to save her–just put her out of misery

Selected Comments

DO LUNG SEQUENCE

@SEAZNDragon

Interesting breakdown of this scene. I'm sure someone like John Milius would have hated the scene thinking it promoted the "baby killer" trope used by antiwar activists but it ended up being more sympathetic to the boat crew. They are not monsters; if anything Clean and Lance thought they were saving Chef.

@davidlean1060

One of my favorite shots in the movie happens right after this scene. (you have it at 9.10 minutes on your video). Lance is sat, bathed in lens flare and golden sunlight, holding one of the puppies. Then Willard enters the frame. the camera adjusts its angle slightly, causing the flare and the light to vanish. I love the symbolism of that shot.





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Endnotes

Battle of Khe Sanh (Wiki) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Khe_Sanh

Dispatches (1977) by Michael Herr

1969 Draft of Apocalypse Now by John Milius

Patrons

THANK YOU!!!

Adam Adam Nojszewski Adam Savage adnriy Aj Salvo Alberto Pereira Alberto Ulloa DP Alex Sadier-Gane Alexander Flodén Alexander Fryer Alexey kolbekhin Allyn Quigley Andre K Andrés Yang Anton Jaeger Antonio Zapiain Luna Arnaldo Leon atd8vii Aurora Borealis Bart Kiggen Ben Barnes Ben Watson **Bill Bates** Bob Lyness Borys Vengerov Brad Macpherson bree hopper Brendan Larkin Brendan Smith **BRIAN GRANILLO** Brian McGregor Bryan M. Buttercup Caracasaurian Cary McManus-Davis CH Charlotte Ostrov Chris Carman

Chris Maddox Chris Markham Chris Talerico Chris Washburn Chris Weston Chris Wright Christiaan Phleger Christopher Chen Christopher Oberling Christopher Wenham Clint Armstrong Colin Christian Costas Stergiou Craig Borders Cristopher Novick cthuliew Dan Caffee Dan Reed Danial Sami Daniel Daniel Daniel Martin-Mc-Cormick Daniel Snitting Darin Boville Darren Kellaway Darren Simon Dave Carroll Dave Cavanaugh Dave Nagy Davenzane Hayes David Goscinny David Kehn David Lieb David Sheffield David Spake David Thornthwaite Deathpoul

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THANK YOU!!!

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Makabe Rokurota Make Stuff Maktoum Saeed Al-Maktoum Manon Raja Mark Hammer Marshall Crawford Martin Forchemer Mats Helgesson Matt Matt Dancer Matt Finnegan Matt Rice Matthew Bouchard Matthew Lloyd Matthew Miller Matthew Weinstein Mauro Vargas mcceri Media Roots Radio with Abby & Robbie Martin Michael Andre Michael Fitzhugh Mike Bird mina jaweed Minna MrMcKonz Ned Price Neither-Neither Nick Nick Scafidi Nick's Personal Symphony Nikita Liamzine Nikita Shpanko Noah Smith Oblomov

Odet Abadia Oliver Oran Carroll Orapher ΡK Paolo Barbolini Paul Paul John Showalter Paul Lashmana Paul Spence Paul Thomas Peter Runkel Peter Williamson pitgamer POWER TOOLS Quincy Battieste Quintin Owsley quirkformity R Ciampa Raja Thiagarajan Ramble Rex Dotson Ricardo P-Man Richard Richard M Campbell **Richard Mawle** Richard Millett Rick OBrien **Rob** Gilleece Rob Williamson Robert Robert Decker Robert Panico Robert Scharba Robin Miller Rodney Roi **Royce Stephens**

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