*THE LONG GOODBYE*
*Khe Sanh Revisited*


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# OTHER BOOKS BY MICHAEL ARCHER

## A Patch of Ground: Khe Sanh Remembered

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# WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT THE LONG GOODBYE

"Michael Archer established himself as a worthy spokesman for Vietnam War veterans in 2004 with publication of his poignant combat memoir, *A Patch of Ground: Khe Sanh Remembered*. Now, Archer has delivered a powerful sequel in *The Long Goodbye*, a brutally honest and impassioned work of nonfiction that takes us even deeper inside America's faltering war in Vietnam in early 1968. The focal point of *The Long Goodbye* is Archer's best friend from high school, Lance Corporal Thomas Patrick Mahoney III, who survives his combat debut at Hue City, only to disappear under mysterious circumstances at Khe Sanh. *The Long Goodbye* builds to a climax in contemporary Vietnam, with Archer playing the role of relentless cold-case detective, driven by loyalty and devotion to unravel the mystery of Tommy Mahoney's disappearance, and to bring home his beloved friend. Many Americans would rather not remember the anguish of our lost crusade in Vietnam. In *The Long Goodbye*, Michael Archer reminds us why we should never forget."

— *GREGG JONES has been a foreign correspondent, investigative journalist and Pulitzer Prize finalist author. His critically acclaimed works of nonfiction include* Last Stand at Khe Sanh *and* Honor in the Dust.

"Marines don't leave their dead behind, goes the adage, and in *The Long Goodbye* Mike Archer demonstrates the truth of that statement and the double-edges of its meaning. The dead stay with us. They demand to be recovered and remembered and for us to find meaning in their sacrifice. This is the task that Archer, himself a veteran of the bloody siege of Khe Sanh, took upon himself and in this tale of his search for a lost comrade and his journey into the Vietnam of the past and the present, he gifts us

with the vivid, utterly compelling story of his stubborn devotion to a friend and of the grim reality of war and its long echoes into the lives of veterans. This is a book that will leave its grip on your heart. It deserves to stand with the classics not only of the Vietnam War but of all wars."

— *WAYNE KARLIN is an award-winning author and editor. His numerous works of fiction and nonfiction include* Wandering Souls: Journeys With the Dead and the Living in Viet Nam. *A Marine veteran of combat in Vietnam, Wayne teaches languages and literature at the College of Southern Maryland.*

"A wonderfully written account by a Marine veteran of the siege of Khe Sanh, who refused to let the memory of a buddy be forgotten. Mike's gripping description of the decade long search for his friend's remains speaks volumes about the motto of the Corps, *Semper Fidelis*--Always Faithful. His description of the realities of service in Vietnam and its effects on those who served there are spot on. He writes plainly of his own fight to slay the dragon of post-traumatic stress and his discovery that human dignity and loyalty is a common thread among those who experience the horror of war."

— *DICK CAMP is a retired Marine Corps colonel, former company commander at Khe Sanh, and formerly Deputy Director of the Marine Corps' History Division. He has authored numerous books, both fiction and non-fiction, including* Boots on the Ground *and* Battleship Arizona's Marines at War.

"Skillfully blending history and biography, Michael Archer tells a compelling story of the Vietnam conflict and its aftermath. His timely revisiting of the epic battle of Khe Sanh reminds us that for those who experience combat a war may never end."

— *GEORGE HERRING, Alumni Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Kentucky, is a leading authority on U.S. foreign relations. His books include* America's Longest War *and* From Colony to Superpower.

"Michael Archer writes the simply gripping and astounding story of the death of his childhood friend and fellow Marine in *The Long Goodbye*, one that goes to great lengths to place that terrible event into its proper personal, historical, and geopolitical context. Everyone who dies in the service of their country deserves a friend like Archer who can write their story so powerfully and so beautifully."

— *CALEB CAGE is a West Point graduate, decorated for his leadership and courage in combat during Operation Iraqi Freedom II and coauthor of the book* The Gods of Diyala. *He is director of Nevada's Office of Homeland Security and an advisor to Governor Brian Sandoval.*

# THE LONG GOODBYE

*Khe Sanh Revisited*

MICHAEL ARCHER

*In memory of Robert J. "Doc" Topmiller:*
*healer, teacher, friend*

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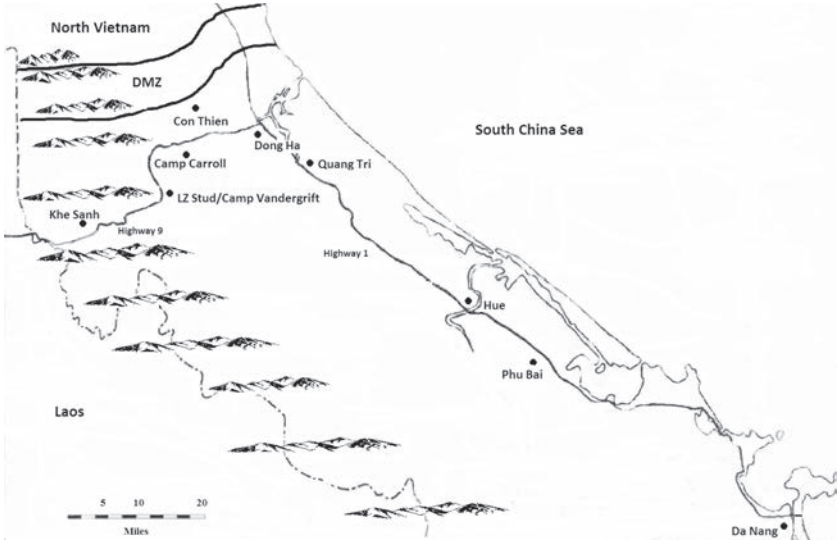
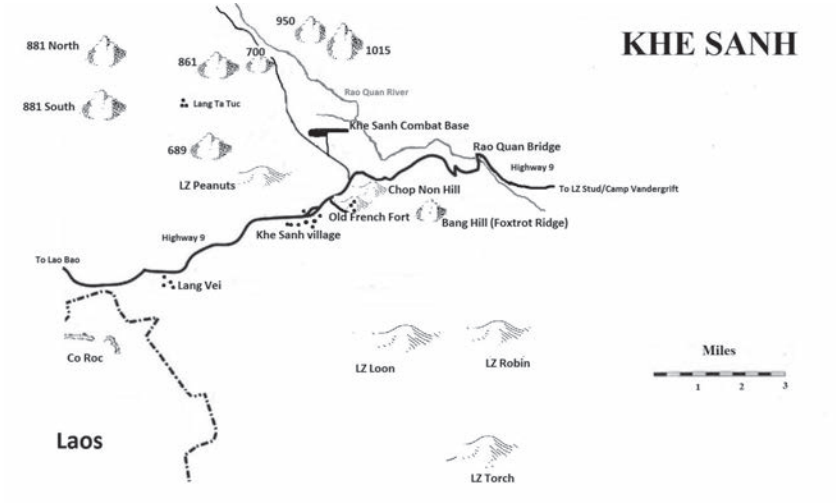



Map of northern I Corps, South Vietnam, 1968.




Map of Khe Sanh area, 1968.

# PROLOGUE

On the stifling, summer afternoon of July 6, 1968, twenty-three-year-old warrant officer Nguyen Van Luong squirmed uncomfortably within the tight confines of a camouflaged foxhole he'd dug the night before. His scout team from the 246*th* Independent Regiment of the People's Army of Vietnam had been ordered to move as close as they could to the U.S. Marines on Hill 881 South without being detected. Luong complied, as he always did, expertly and silently leading his men through a hundred yards of land mines, tanglefoot barbed wire traps and trip flares, now so close he could hear conversations coming from the American bunkers and smell their cigarette smoke.

The previous March, when Luong led his platoon from North Vietnam into the vicious fighting around the remote American combat base at Khe Sanh, he commanded over forty soldiers. Death, wounds, disease and desertion had now reduced that number to just five. The "glorious liberation" of Khe Sanh, he mused, had taken longer, and cost more, than their political cadres had assured them it would; but now, four months after arriving, the mission was nearly completed. Five miles to the east, the large American base and airfield had been abandoned just fourteen hours earlier, and only three undermanned hill outposts now remained. It was the job of Luong's team that day to block Marines on this hill from going to the aid of others, less than two miles away, who were now battling his regiment's main force.

As he raised up out of his hole and peered through the tall, pale-green grass toward the bunkers, Luong was astonished to see a lone, unarmed American standing just forty feet away. He would later report him to be "a young, male Caucasian, tall and with a large build," who may have been in some emotional distress because "his face was red and his eyes were blue like a mean animal."

The American, Lance Corporal Tom Mahoney, did not appear to be looking for anything in particular when his gaze suddenly fixed upon an odd flickering in the grass. It was Luong blinking perspiration from his eye as he now took aim at him along the barrel of a Kalashnikov. Tom's fellow Marines heard his stunned cry—"Oh my God, help me!"—an instant before Luong squeezed the trigger, hitting him twice in the heart.

Tom Mahoney was unquestionably the most popular member of his platoon, known for his quick smile, courage and composure under fire, and a perpetual concern for the safety of his fellow Marines, often fretfully counting heads after a combat engagement until all were accounted for. So it was with anxious fury that his buddies fought the remainder of the day to recover his body from under the effective gunfire of Luong's well-hidden team; even resisting orders from senior Marine officers to discontinue the rescue effort and immediately carry out the scheduled abandonment of the hill. As darkness began to fall, making it impossible to continue the fight, they reluctantly left their friend behind—never forgotten and always wondering what had led to his mysterious walk into oblivion.

# PART I

*They were willing to guard something more precious than my life. They would have carried my reputation, the memory of me.*

~ MICHAEL NORMAN, *These Good Men* ~

# 1
# TOM MAHONEY

TOM MAHONEY AND I met about the time of his fifteenth birthday in early October 1962 while attending Saint Mary's College High School in Berkeley, California. Later that month, two events would be burned into our memories forever. The first occurred in the bottom of the ninth inning during Game Seven of the World Series across the bay at Candlestick Park when, down by a run with two out and runners at second and third, Willie McCovey scorched a line drive into the glove of shortstop Bobby Richardson ending our dreams of a local championship by the San Francisco Giants over the haughty and much-despised New York Yankees.

The second would affect our lives much more profoundly. With national midterm elections looming, and to preempt accusations by Republicans that he was soft on the threat of Soviet missiles in Cuba capable of reaching U.S. soil, President John F. Kennedy ordered a naval blockade of the island to prevent further such armaments from arriving. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev soon exchanged dire public warnings of imminent nuclear war.

A pall descended over the nation as Americans became fixated on televised news footage of Russian cargo ships, escorted by war vessels, steaming resolutely toward the American blockade. Each passing hour without a resolution reinforced our belief that we were about to be incinerated in an atomic holocaust from which there was no escape. Secret negotiations eventually ended the crisis, and evidence declassified years later indicated the actual situation may not have been that grim; but the trauma of those frightening days left me, Tom and much of our generation convinced that the communist

world was a real and very immediate threat to ourselves and our families.

Throughout his childhood Tom had been naturally adept at sports, particularly basketball and baseball, and possessed an adventurous spirit that often distressed playmates. One recalled that on several occasions as a third grader Tom explored the city's sewers alone, because others refused to join him, gaining access through a loose storm drain grate near his grade school and later telling unsettling stories of eerie noises and rats scurrying about in the dank, shadowy tunnels.[1]

By fifth grade, the girls in his class at Saint Leo's parochial school in Oakland developed a collective crush on the handsome and confident boy, altering the pronunciation of his last name to "My honey" when they talked about him among themselves. One classmate, Kathleen (McCorry) Lopes, later my high school sweetheart, recalled that her close friendship with Tom in grade school was not solely due to his charm, but because each were being raised by single mothers who shared the prevailing social stigma of that time, particularly among Catholics, that came with being divorced. They also shared a first kiss at age seven, which Kathleen never forgot. "Tommy would stop by each morning," she said, "and we would walk together to school, truly a gentleman, even as a boy."[2]

Tom's mother, Patricia, instilled such chivalrous behavior early on. Another Saint Leo's classmate, Bill Corporandy, recalled a shopping trip with him and his mother in downtown Oakland, and how she insisted they walk closest to the curb "when with a lady" and never forget to open doors. "I remember feeling inadequate," Bill said, "not like Tom, who seemed so suave and self-assured."[3] But life had not always been easy for Tom or his mother.

A native of Oakland, Patricia (Waterman) Mahoney was raised by her mother, Ruby, who had come from Montana alone about the time of the First World War. Little was ever said about Patricia's father. By the late 1930s, Ruby owned a small corset shop on Grand Avenue in Oakland and had purchased an imposing Queen Anne style home at 677 Fairmount Avenue, with a dark, redwood

shingle exterior, latticed windows and an elegant front staircase with a leaded-glass entry door. The home was located in a fashionable area of the city, near the small upscale community of Piedmont, and Ruby saw to it that Patricia was provided all the benefits of upper middle-class society.

Tom's paternal great-grandfather, Patrick Mahoney, emigrated from Ireland to Ohio in 1851 and his son, Thomas Patrick Mahoney, moved to Oakland around the turn of the century. His wife Gertrude would bear eight children. Thomas Jr., the youngest and only boy, was born in October 1918. He showed an early aptitude for mechanical design and, after graduation from high school, the handsome and gregarious Thomas Mahoney Jr. attended San Francisco Junior College where he was soon smitten by classmate Patricia Waterman, a lithesome, blue-eyed, blonde. The two were married in September 1942, with a reception for over two hundred guests at Ruby's home.

Thomas enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army Air Corps the following year and was later selected to attend aviation officer training in Carlsbad, New Mexico. He graduated with the rank of second lieutenant and, as a navigator, flew combat bombing missions in the western Pacific until the war ended in August 1945. Upon his release from active duty, Thomas returned to Oakland and purchased a cocktail lounge on Grand Avenue. Marital problems led to a separation and just two months after their son Tom was born, they divorced.

In 1950, Thomas was recalled to military duty for the Korean conflict. Now a first lieutenant, he navigated thirty-three combat bombing missions before returning to Ellington Air Force Base near Houston, Texas. Three days later, on November 16, 1952, while traveling at a recklessly high speed through an intersection on the Old Galveston Highway in his newly purchased sports car, Thomas collided with another vehicle killing him instantly. The other driver avoided serious injury, but a passenger in Mahoney's vehicle, reported by a local newspaper as a "pretty, young Houston model," was left in critical condition.

Thomas' body was returned to California and buried with military honors at the San Francisco National Cemetery in the Presidio.

Little Tom did not attend the service; but each Memorial Day thereafter, Patricia would drive the boy across the Bay to place flowers at his father's grave.

Thomas Patrick Mahoney III had begun life on October 3, 1947, at Providence Hospital in Oakland, located among other medical buildings on a slight prominence known to locals as Pill Hill. From there, a few miles to the west across the gray-green expanse of the bay, could be seen the celebrated hills of San Francisco and beyond that the shimmering span of the Golden Gate Bridge. The weather was clear and mild, but a storm was soon expected to bring rain in from the Pacific Ocean.

Dark clouds of another kind were forming that day thousands of miles beyond the horizon. In the Protectorate of Tonkin, French Indochina, over one thousand French Union paratroopers were poised to descend on the town of Bak-Can, near the border with China. The League for the Independence of Vietnam, called Viet Minh, were headquartered there and French colonial forces hoped to crush their seven-year-long movement in one dramatic attack. Code-named Operation Lea, another fifteen thousand French Union soldiers moved overland to encircle the Viet Minh army and block its escape.

Those at Bak-Can were stunned by the swiftness of the assault and their leader, Ho Chi Minh, eluded capture by just minutes. When paratroopers kicked in the door of his office, a still-hot cup of tea was sitting on Ho's desk beside neat stacks of correspondence awaiting his signature.[4] Ho and General Vo Nguyen Giap, the main prizes sought by the French, would slip away to safety through gaps in the French lines, along with most of their forty-thousand-person army.

Government leaders in Paris, struggling with postwar economic problems and public disenchantment about the military campaign in Indochina, knew immediately that the failure of Lea meant the end of their hold on the region. Now, consolidating their forces primarily around Hanoi, the Red River Delta and a few larger coastal cities, French forces virtually conceded the countryside and highlands to the Viet Minh. This included a small Legionnaire fort hidden deep

among the rainy, jungle-entwined peaks along the Laotian border in the central Vietnam protectorate of Annam beside a coffee plantation and the sparsely inhabited village of Khe Sanh.

It would have been impossible for anyone to imagine on that October day in 1947 there could ever be a connection between the birth of a baby boy in Oakland, the subsequent escape of the Viet Minh from Bak-Can and this obscure mountain village. That sad episode was still cloaked in the future, like the ghostly fog enshrouding the mountains at Khe Sanh.