

Two Articles by Peggy Dye

Peggy Dye (January 4, 1943-December 4, 2007)

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW July 23, 1989 19

NONFICTION

KHE SANH. Siege in the Clouds: An Oral History. By Eric Hammel. (Crown, \$24.95.) The voices of about 100 American servicemen, mostly Marines, take the reader of "Khe Sanh" straight into the trenches and foxholes of one of the worst sieges in the history of the American armed forces. In the lush Vietnamese highlands, 6,000 Marines battled an estimated 40,000 soldiers from the North Vietnamese Army for 77 days in the first three months of 1968. North Vietnamese shelling pinned the Marines into trenches full of jungle rats, blood, rotting socks and fear. The Marines also heard American B-52's bomb the enemy jungle into a moonscape; more tonnage of explosives fell on Khe Sanh than on Hiroshima. Ultimately, the Americans got out, but controversy stayed. Was Khe Sanh a victory? After all, the Americans wiped out two North Vietnamese divisions. Or was Khe Sanh a ruse by the North Vietnamese Army to draw the Americans away from cities targeted for the simultaneous Tet offensive? Eric Hammel, a military historian of Guadalcanal and other battles, recounts the controversy in the words of the embattled men who lived it, from a general's gung-ho view to disillusionment in other officers and men. It is a mark of Mr. Hammel's skill that he has pieced together often conflicting fragments and yet he makes a whole. "Khe Sanh" holds you in battle for 500 pages, pressing home the horrible ambiguity of war: that men driven to grubbing in trenches, not seeing anything but the few feet of red dust ahead or an exploding body beside them, still managed — in continuing to keep diaries and write letters home, and in their willingness to talk — to see their place in the larger scheme of things.

PEGGY DYE

GERONIMO!: American Paratroopers in World War II.

By William B. Breuer. (St. Martin's, \$29.95.) William B.

Breuer celebrates in "Geronimo!" the heroics of America's first airborne battalions, the paratroopers — the men who parachuted from aircraft, often behind enemy lines, in the major campaigns of World War II. They became targets on the way down and also risked death from a faulty chute or other technical bumbles; once on the ground, they often faced suicide missions. Mr. Breuer — the author of 16 war books, who was himself a

member of a mortar platoon attached to paratroop units in Europe — interviewed 400 servicemen to tell the story of every World War II campaign involving paratroopers. The action ranges over North Africa, the South Pacific, Europe and even the mountains of Oregon, where black paratroopers, denied combat jumps in Europe, fought forest fires. Humor is interspersed with violence: in Anzio, Italy, paratroopers captured 190 Ger-

man soldiers "in bed in their underwear." Mr. Breuer brings to life how the soldiers survived. How the human will prevails — against overwhelming enemies, tactical and mechanical failure, terror and finally death — is the story Mr. Breuer tells. Behind the action and the carnage, life itself, in the great paradox of war, always wins.

PEGGY DYE

February 18, 1990