Award-winning author and Khe Sanh siege veteran Michael Archer

Battle of Khe Sanh

Insights

This blog is intended to share information about the topics of my books on the Battle of Khe Sanh, including *A Patch of Ground: Khe Sanh Remembered* and *The Long Goodbye: Khe Sanh Revisited.* A

Heritage Foundation's prestigious Colonel Joseph Alexander Award for a distinguished book of biographical literature in 2019.

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Yet Another Glimmer of Hope

February 21, 2026



Former Marine Lieutenant Frank Ahearn (center) in June 2016 on Hill 881 South with the DPAA team, identifying the site where he last saw Tom Mahoney's body from just a few yards away on July 6, 1968 (photo taken by Tom Northrop).

Thanks to Tom Northrop's determined efforts, new and encouraging information was recently obtained from the Defense POW-MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA).

It's been ten years since Northrop and Mahoney's former platoon commander, Frank Ahearn, accompanied the DPAA to Hill 881 South at Khe Sanh to locate the area where Tom

After their visit, nothing happened. Our subsequent efforts to contact the DPAA for more information were met with silence. Northrop's persistence and contacts, stemming from his having formerly been a Marine Corps League officer, paid off this week when he received a detailed message from Ray Kern, the DPAA researcher and field investigator who had arranged and accompanied Northrop and Ahearn to the hill in 2016.

Kern was subsequently given other duties within the agency, and so is now "discouraged" to learn that communication had ceased for so long. Because he is so familiar with Mahoney's case, his superiors asked him to reach out to Northop and to determine where the breakdown in communication occurred over the years.

Kern advised him that in June 2021, the DPAA attempted to partner with "The Ride of Brotherhood" to conduct a ground-penetrating radar project on Hill 881 South. Unfortunately, we were unable to secure permission from the Vietnamese government to allow a volunteer group to perform this work.

Then, in July 2021, DPAA initiated a partner project with the University of Wisconsin to analyze and consolidate all U.S. veteran-provided data—including maps, sketches, photos, and notes—into a comprehensive GIS map product. Geographic Information System (GIS) is a computer-based framework for gathering, managing, analyzing, and visualizing data based on its geographic location. It links information to specific locations on the Earth's surface—such as latitude/longitude. The information they had received from Northrop, Ahearn, and other veterans over the years was included in that partnership. (In 2015-16, I communicated extensively with Ray Kern and even sent him a copy of my book, *The Long Goodbye*, a detailed account of Mahoney's death and subsequent efforts to locate his remains).

Coincidentally, in 2007, I was in regular contact with Dr. Joe Hupy, who was in on that project at the University of Wisconsin mentioned by Kern. Hupy, who's students called him "Doctor Dirt," was a geomorphologist specializing in the effects of high explosives on soil. In his research, Hupy had visited several battlefields known for their high concentrations of explosives, such as Verdun and Khe Sanh. I gave him what information I had about Mahoney at the time and Hupy made a special trip up to Hill 881 South to study the terrain. He's worked hard to translate the old AMS military map coordinates we used at the time into GIS positioning. With the additional information added to this project over the years, I'm encouraged that they can locate Tom's site with greater precision than ever.

About five years ago, I heard from Rear Admiral Jon Kreitz, then the outgoing director of the DPAA's component dealing with the Vietnam War theater. He advised me that the DPAA has recently contracted with an expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for its project and

This technique was been used by DPAA with great success to identify the site of a B-25 bomber crash in Burma during World War II. The 1944 aerial photo of the crash site showed a small stream nearby, which is now no longer visible. But the geo-satellite imagery revealed traces of the old streambed, allowing DPAA to locate the crash and recover the crew's remains.

With Ahearn and Northrop having narrowed down the area on Hill 881 South to just a few yards, it may now be possible to use this technology to locate the old trench lines, spider holes, and perhaps even the trail Mahoney took on his short walk into oblivion.

Kern says the DPAA has tentatively planned for an investigation team to return to Hill 881 South late in the summer of 2026 and plans to expand their survey area downslope from the site Northrop and Ahearn located. This is, of course, great news, but let's hope that no other issues arise and that the Vietnamese government ultimately allows the use of this advanced technology.

As readers of this blog may remember, in my continuing research last year I came across a DPAA memo dated 2014 related to Tom Mahoney's case, and also related to a rather strange interaction I had in 2007 with an NVA soldier who may have helped ambush Tom Mahoney (https://khesanh-battle.com/f/a-bizarre-twist). I'm going to pass this information along to Kern.

(NOTE: It seems I inadvertently republished that link on my blog site earlier today, so for those of you who have seen it, this is the context I intended. Thanks).



Uniformed mystery former NVA soldier, who may have been in the recon team that shot Tom Mahoney, joining us to pay his respects on my visit to Hill 881 South on December 20, 2007. Behind him is soul caller Nguyen Buu Thuan (photo taken by Steve Orr).

REMINDER:

As I posted on this site about three weeks ago, I've been invited to sign copies of my book, *A Patch of Ground*, next Saturday, February 28, at the Shore Hotel in Santa Monica. This will be part of StoryFest 2026, hosted by the Veterans Breakfast Club and sponsored by Unlikely Collaborators, designed to help veterans communicate their stories. Please visit the link for more information on this highly interesting three-day event. While open to the public, some events have limited seating and require registration (which you can do here as well): https://veteransbreakfastclub.org/events/vbc-storyfest-santa-monica/.

I will be there in the evening of February 27, and throughout the day and evening of February 28. My book signing is scheduled on the 28th from 2:30 to 4:30, and I am delighted to be joining such exceptional national best-selling (and former Marine) authors and combat veterans, Karl Marlantes (Matterhorn) and Elliott Ackerman (The Fifth Act). Can't wait to meet them.

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