

## INTRODUCTION

30 March 1971

On ~~1 April 1972~~ the North Vietnamese Army invaded South Vietnam. An article in the Pacific Stars and Stripes read: "President Nixon was reported Saturday to be closely watching North Vietnam's long-awaited major offensive as a test of the success of his Vietnamization program to shift the burden of the war effort to South Vietnam." The battle that had been in the making for years had finally begun. The enemy opened three major fronts. The first was in I Corps when he sent 30,000 troops streaming across the DMZ. The second was in III Corps where the enemy attacked out of his Cambodian sanctuaries and tried to capture the city of An Loc. The third was in II Corps where two NVA divisions tried to capture the Provincial Capital of Kontum. This ~~paper~~ chapter deals only with the battle of Kontum. For the first time in the Vietnam War both US and Vietnamese forces depended completely on each other for victory. Neither one of the allies could win alone. The US Forces could support the Vietnamese, however the responsibility for the ground combat rested squarely on the ARVN. The Battle for Kontum typified the combat in all fronts. The weaknesses and strengths that became obvious as the battle developed are a source of pride and sometimes shame for all involved. Although there were no US ground combat troops directly involved there were a large number of Americans acting as advisors and flying US aircraft in support of the South Vietnamese effort. (Many of these Americans died doing their duty. It is to these men that this small literary effort is dedicated.)

## Phase I The Battle for the Fire Support Bases

The battle has begun. Early on the morning of 4 April a flight of gunships and slicks lifted off Camp Holloway. There was a total of six gunships from the 361st Aerial Weapons Company and 57th Assault Helicopter Company, plus five slicks (UH-1Hs) from the 57th. The decision had been made the night before by LTC Charles Bagnal, Commanding the 52nd Aviation Battalion to attempt rescue of a CH-47 crew that had been trapped on Fire Support Base 421 since their aircraft was shot down on 31 Mar. FSB 421 had been under heavy enemy attack to include artillery, mortar, rockets and recoilless rifle fire. The enemy had completely surrounded the FSB with anti-aircraft weapons, 51 cal machineguns, 14.7 and 23 mm. Several attempts had already been made to set aircraft into the FSB on previous days but the fire was too intense. As the sun started to rise that morning of 4 April our aircraft approached Kontum. When LTC Bagnal reported in to the Airborne Brigade Headquarters at Vo Dinh, he was told that a heavy ground attack was in progress against FSB 421. The gunships were immediately sent to the FSB. The three sets of guns made repeated runs on the perimeter of the base. Large enemy troop formations were observed in the assault. All aircraft received intense enemy anti-aircraft fire. Rockets, machinegun and 40mm fire from the gunships poured down on the attacking enemy. Artillery from nearby FSB's impacted on the South and West sides of the FSB. The enemy was able to penetrate the perimeter carrying heavy machine guns and rocket launchers. The ARVN airborne units on the base along with the four US crewmen were forced into the northern half of the compound. The US advisor on the ground requested friendly fire on his position and the gunships responded by placing fire inside the compound. As the morning progressed the enemy attack

began to subside, it was evident of the terrible toll our fire power was taking on the enemy. Later in the day the enemy withdrew leaving behind hundreds of dead and numerous weapons. Thus ended the first major enemy attack. As luck would have it, we had the breaks. The fact that on that particular morning we had our gunships on station was the key to success.

The next day (5 April) an ARVN company escorted the US crewmen to the north so that a linkup could be made with forces coming down the ridge line from another FSB. As they moved out of the FSB to the north they observed the devastation wrought by the gunships. Over 200 enemy bodies were found north of the perimeter. After moving up the ridge line to the north the US crewmen were extracted by a VNAF UH-1H without incident.

For the next several days the enemy pounded the FSB's located on the large ridge line NW of Kontum known as "Rocket Ridge." Several ground assaults were beaten off by TAC air, gunships and artillery fire. The ARVN airborne units and units from the 22nd ARVN Division did well defending their bases. The enemy, reported as elements of the 320th NVA Division, was taking a beating against the hardened, well defended FSB's. It seemed he would continue smashing himself against these small strong points indefinitely. This was very much to our advantage. The FSB's were doing what they were intended for. If we could get the enemy to expend his forces on these bases our chances of defending Kontum would increase. This was truly an economy of force tactic. We used all our advantages, especially our heavy fire power. A small element well fortified, causing the enemy to mass so that fire power could be brought to bear on him. The attacks came mostly from the west although the enemy was located on both the east and the west sides of the ridge. He had located his AA weapons throughout the area and helicopter operations were extremely hazardous.

The most glaring weakness in the overall defensive plan was the vulnerability of the 22nd Div forward CP at Tan Canh. This relatively small compound was located on a small hill SW of the town of Tan Canh. There were 155MM and 105MM howitzers located at the base oriented to the SW. The compound had about 4 M41 ARVN tanks for defense and approximately one battalion of ARVN troops plus support troops. The base lacked defense in depth and was located on relatively low ground. There were no significant forces to the North to counter a serious enemy thrust from that direction.

Early on the morning of 24 April, a column of 12-15 tanks came down the road from the North East. With the appearance of the tanks most of the ARVN defenders retreated from the compound leaving their artillery pieces, tanks and a small group of U.S. advisors. Several advisors were wounded and as the situation deteriorated decided to abandon the camp escaping to the S.W. Later in the morning these men were picked up by the II CORPS Senior Advisor, Mr John P. Vann, flying an OH-58 observation helicopter. Since the aircraft was so small it was necessary to make several trips carrying the advisors to Dak To air strip. Once there, they were picked up by slicks from the 57th AHC. The last slick out of Dak To was hit by 51 Cal machinegun fire and began burning in the air. The aircraft was reported to have exploded on impact in the river South West of Dak To. It was presumed all aboard were killed. The NVA tanks continued moving toward Dak To. ARVN units there withdrew to the south. Gunships from the 361st and B/7/17th, Air Cav troop engaged the enemy tanks with 17 lb rockets, however, they were not effective against the armor. The loss of Tan Canh had a disastrous psychological and tactical effect on the ARVN units. Although there had been rumors and reported sightings of enemy armor in the area the actual appearance of the T-54's in large numbers produced the classic shock

effect the armor types are always taking about. There was really no attempt made to stop them short of a few LAW's fired by U.S. advisors at Tan Canh. These proved to be ineffective. By the same token, I believe the enemy was equally shocked at how easily he had taken Tan Canh. Herein lies the fate of Kontum and possibly MR II. The enemy either did not want to or, could not exploit rapidly his success. Had he been able or willing to drive his tanks and infantry down QL 14 he may have taken the city of Kontum within a couple of days. I believe this weakness of the enemy bears careful study, especially from the point of view of our reliance, conscious or otherwise, on his inability to react quickly. We will not be able to afford such complacency in future encounters with a more flexible enemy. After the loss of Tan Canh, chaos abounded. ARVN forces were incapable of reacting immediately to defend the city of Kontum. There were no significant defensive preparations made in the vicinity of the city. The enemy gave the ARVN the time that he desperately needed. The FSB's on the ridges were abandoned. Some under pressure others because they were untenable. The troops walked out leaving their 105mm howitzers behind. Some units made heavy contact and took many casualties as the withdrawal turned into an exercise in escape and evasion. Some units made it to the border camp of Ben Het to be extracted several days later. Others were able to move back to QL 14 and into Kontum. Many ARVN soldiers were lost, either captured or simply not able to make their way back to friendly locations.

The 22nd Div units operating in Kontum were considered combat ineffective and withdrawn from the area to reorganize and refit at camp Enari, Pleiku. Most of the airborne units were pulled back to the Saigon area to assist in the defense of An Loc. The 23rd ARVN Inf Div from Ben Netboult was assigned the

mission of defending Kontum. A gloom and pessimism bordering on panic infected U.S. and Vietnamese alike. The fate of Kontum would be decided soon.

On the 20th of April, Colonel John A. Todd, Deputy Commander of the 1st Avn Bde, arrived at Pleiku. His presence was requested by BG John G. Hill, Deputy SA for II CORPS. Colonel Todd would be the third member of a planning and control group consisting of the S.A., Mr John P. Vann; his deputy, BG Hill and Col. Todd. These men, along with the II CORPS Commander LTG Dzu, made the key decisions each day on the conduct of the defense.

Another very significant event took place on 29 April. At about 1600 hours two UH-1B helicopters, mounting the airborne TOW system arrived at Camp Holloway, Pleiku. These aircraft would soon make Army Aviation history and prove a concept that was still in the testing stages.

The next week was devoted to preparing for the defense of Kontum. Initially there was confusion and attempts at establishing a perimeter were frustrated by command and control problems. The air cav conducted Recon missions North and North west of Kontum city. Enemy movement was evident. Tank tracks were observed to the Northwest of the city. There were indications of an enemy build up North and North east of the city. Large bunker complexes and fighting positions were located and targeted for air strikes. The Cav was the primary source of information. They warned of enemy movements and acquired targets for air strikes. The cost was high in personnel and equipment.

Kontum received sporadic ABF's during the first week of May, however, the enemy turned his attention toward the border camps of Polei, Kleng, and Ben Het

#### PHASE II The Battle for the Border Camps

On 5 May the Ranger Camps of Polei Kleng came under intense enemy artillery and rocket fire. The rounds were impacting in a tight pattern within the perimeter. The rounds were coming 3 to 5 seconds apart and appeared to come in three or four round volleys which would indicate at least three tubes firing. Enemy forces had moved in close around the perimeter and were placing accurate

small arms and B-40 rocket fire on the defensive positions. The defenders reported tanks approaching from the North. A FAC working the area also observed the tanks but lost them when they moved into a wooded area. Elements from B/7/17 Cav were called over from Kontum to try and relocate the tanks. The Cav and the airborne TOW aircraft arrived about the same time. The airborne TOW aircraft used the call sign "Hawk's Claw." Shortly thereafter, a steady stream of F-4's began arriving over the target area. The gunner spotted two of the tanks, which appeared to be painted black. The gunner acquired one in his sight, but elected not to fire when a helicopter from the Cav troop flew into his field of vision. Subsequently, the targets were spotted several times, but the gunner was unable to acquire the tanks early enough in his approach to the target to engage due to the thick jungle canopy in the area. TAC air, both U.S. and VNAF was put in on the suspected target locations in an attempt to blow away the jungle cover so that Hawk's Claw could get a clear shot. F-4's and VNAF A-1's hit the area, however the tanks were not visible. Several secondary explosions and what appeared to be POL fires indicated that the airstrikes may have destroyed at least some of the tanks. As our aircraft orbited the camp they were sporadically engaged by a 23MM AA weapon as well as 51 Cal machineguns and small arms fire. All aircraft were forced out of the area early in the evening due to weather. The ordeal by fire continued through the night. Intense artillery, rocket and mortar fire scored repeated direct hits on the command bunker and other bunkers in the compound. Many of these structures were damaged to the point that the defenders were forced out into individual foxholes. A 51 caliber machinegun was located just SE of the runway and it continually fired on approaching aircraft. The enemy had moved his troops to within 100 to 200 meters from the camp. Late in the afternoon of 6 May the decision was made by Mr. Vann and Gen Hill to pull out the two U.S. advisors. This was a difficult decision in light of the

fact that Polei Kleng was located on one of the main enemy avenues of approach into the city of Kontum. Many of the camp defenders had become casualties and there was a shortage of supplies especially water. It was decided to extract the two US advisors in the evening when it was dark enough to afford some concealment for the LOH from B/Trp that would make the pick up. Just at dusk the LOH flew into the camp through a hail of enemy fire and successfully extracted the U.S. advisors. It had also been planned to replace the ARVN camp commander, however, the VNAF slick pilot of the aircraft carrying the new commander refused to fly into the camp. Another dramatic event, took place on 6 May. A FAC flying in support of the Polei Kleng action received a radio call from "GLADIATOR 715." This aircraft had been shot down on 24 April South of Dak To and it had been assumed that there were no survivors as it was reported that the aircraft exploded on impact. The FAC established contact with a small group of survivors from the crash and elements from B/Trp were dispatched to try and locate them. At first a tran was suspected because no one believed there could still be survivors from that crash. After locating the small party on the ground and insuring they were in fact US personnel an LOH went in and picked up the two survivors. They were accompanied by a group of ARVN soldiers and Montagnards who grabbed the aircraft when it landed and almost pulled it out of the air. Some of the aircraft in the area started receiving fire so the US personnel were the only one's recovered. These men told of three other, badly wounded survivors, located in the vicinity of the crash site. A slick from B/Trp went into the reported location and recovered the three injured survivors. The men reported that they had been helped by some ARVN troops who were in the area, it was also reported that a large number of these troops

were wandering around in the hills south of Dak To, probably survivors from Tan Canh, Dak To and the FSB's on Rocket Ridge. A group of Montagnards had provided food and other assistance to include an old PRC-25 radio. It was with this radio that SP/4 Iea finally made contact with the FAC. He kept sweeping through the different frequencies in hopes of eventually making contact.

This was indeed a bright point in an otherwise very dismal picture. Polei Keng took several ground probes during the night. The enemy attacks by fire continued on 7 May. Most of the camp was destroyed and all the defenders were living underground.

It had been reported that the camp commander and other key officers attempted to escape from the camp during the night by way of a tunnel however, it had collapsed during the heavy shelling. The ARVN S-3 organized the defenders and generally took control of the situation. Mr Vann spent a great deal of time flying over the besieged camp trying to offer assistance and encouragement to the defenders. On several occasions he attempted to have his counterpart, Gen Dzu talk to the camp commander however, the camp commander was too shaken to talk to anyone.

Late in the afternoon of the 7th a very serious problem arose when one of the Montagnard Battalions, the 71st, located at Ben Het ranger camp, apparently mutinied. They shot one of their commanders and seized several Vietnamese officers as hostages. They threatened to shoot them all unless aircraft were made available the next day to transport them to Pleiku so they could spend some time with their families. The dissident troops held a portion of the Ben Het compound while the other battalion, still loyal, held the rest. Mr Vann immediately flew out to the camp and worked out an agreement with the Montagnards

and Vietnamese. A plan was drawn up to airlift the mutinous battalion out of the camp the next day. This seemed to appease them and for the moment the situation stabilized. During the night Ben Het came under intense attacks by fire and large numbers of enemy troops were observed to the NW of the camp.

On the 8th the enemy continued putting heavy fire into both Ben Het and Polei Kleng. The situation at Polei Kleng improved somewhat when an ARVN Captain, who spoke fairly good English, virtually assumed command of the situation. He was promoted to the rank of Major by Gen Dzu and put in command. The most serious problem facing the defenders was their critical shortage of water. A plan was devised to air drop 3000 pound loads of water into the camp at night from CH-47's. It was decided to run the mission before sunrise in the early morning. Col John A. Todd, DBC, organized and led the mission, however it was aborted due to poor weather in the vicinity of the camp. Enemy units moved in close to the perimeter at Ben Het, heavy machine guns were located within a few hundred meters of the compound. A platoon from the 95th Rangers, on a mission to destroy a 75MM recoilless rifle, engaged a reinforced NVA platoon. Results of the contact were: Enemy 15 KIA and loss of a flame thrower and 75 MM recoilless rifles, Friendly; 2 KIA, 5 WIA, one 105 MM ammo bunker and one small arms bunker destroyed. At about 1400 hours two wire guided missiles were fired at the camp but both impacted outside the perimeter.

At Ben Het, the revolt of the previous day subsided and all personnel within the camp turned their attentions to the defense of their position. One of the Vietnamese held captive by the mutinous unit, was released so that he could coordinate the defense.

The Commander at Polei Kleng estimated that 1000 rounds of 130 MM artillery

had hit the camp during the night and early morning of 9 May. Reports vary on the size of the attacking force, however, it is estimated that it was regimental size and supported by an unknown number of tanks. The defenders fired a 106MM recoilless rifle at the tanks, but missed. Allegedly, small arms fire became too intense to even use the M72 LAW. Approximately 350 defenders (including some dependents) moved out of the camp to the south leaving an unknown number of wounded behind. At 1700 hours there were unconfirmed reports of tanks leaving the area to the west and that 180 of the defenders were 6 KM west of Kontum City. As of 1800 hours 250 of the camp's defenders had joined with friendly units. In response to the loss of Polei Kleng the ARVN airlifted a battalion from the 45th Regt. (23rd Div) into a blocking position 12 KM west of Kontum City. The enemy anti-aircraft fire was quite heavy in the vicinity of Polei Kleng. A VNAF Al-E was shot down NW of the camp.

In response to the reported tank attack at Polei Kleng our Hawk's Claw package which consisted of one UH-1H C&C, one UH-1B TOW equipped aircraft and two AH-1G gunships for fire support was launched at about 0645 from Camp Holloway. After arriving on station and not able to locate suitable targets the package was diverted to Ben Het.

On the morning of 9 May Ben Het came under an intense combined arms assault. Prior to the attack the NVA sent dogs through the wire from the North to detonate the mines with infantry following. The fighting continued at close quarters with the positions on the eastern perimeter trading hands several times. Late in the afternoon a small enemy element still occupied several bunkers. The defenders stopped one tank at the main gate with an M72. An estimated 100 enemy were killed in the immediate vicinity of the camp. Due to low clouds TAC air was not able to work however, our TCV ship was able to easily acquire and

destroy three tanks.

During the early morning a decision was made to send in a slick from the 57th AHC to resupply the defenders with M72 LAW's. The aircraft was escorted by two AH-1G's from the 361st AHC. All the aircraft received hits. The drop was successful, however, while escorting the slick out of the camp one of the gunships received multiple hits and crashed several hundred meters SE of the camp. The aircraft exploded shortly after impact. The front seat pilot, was observed climbing out of the aircraft and falling down nearby. The aircraft Commander, CPT Reeder, was observed running to the SW into a wooded area. After numerous airstrikes, an LOH from B'Trp was able to locate and pick up the front seat pilot, however CPT Reeder was never seen again.<sup>7</sup> The other AH-1G also received several hits and the aircraft pilot, WO Allen, was shot through the chest. After the Co pilot/gunner, CPT Gamber, landed the aircraft on QL 14, East of Dak To, WO Allen was administered life saving first aid by CPT Roy Sudec who was flying the C&C aircraft for Hawk's Claw. After administering first aid CPT Sudec evacuated the wounded pilot to Pleiku.

The attack on Ben Het was successfully beaten off with the enemy taking very heavy losses. The situation was relatively stable on 10 May and by 0900 hours 11 May the defenders had eliminated the enemy inside the camp and secured the entire perimeter. During the fighting four bunkers and the frontal perimeter wire were destroyed. At about 1500 hours the defenders swept out from the camp and established OP's 1200 meters south of the airfield and 1000 meters in the other directions.

Another encouraging development was that VNAF slicks resupplied the camp and extracted 14 WIA. The cumulative results from 9 May to 1600 hours 11 May were

friendly - 9 KIA and 28 WIA: Enemy - 304 KIA and 1 PW, 29 ~~new~~ served weapons, 65 small arms, one 75 MM recoilless rifle, 2X60 MM mortars, 17 B-40 rocket launchers, 2 B-41 RL, "51 Cal MG's, and a flame thrower and assorted amounts of ammunition captured. Four enemy tanks were destroyed.

Thus ended the second phase of the battle.

It can be assumed that the enemy considered these border camps important enough to expend so much of his strength on them. Although Polei Kleng was lost, the cost to the enemy in his attempts to take Ben Het and the time he consumed must be considered a big plus for the allies. Preparations for the defense of Kontum were proceeding at a rapid pace but time was the critical factor. The question was, would the defense be well enough organized and prepared to take the attack everyone knew was soon to come.

The battle for the border camps was significant to the defense of Kontum. First, it delayed the main attack on the city. Secondly, the resources expended on these well fortified camps would not be available to the enemy in his main effort. Thirdly, and probably most important, was the fact that the successful defense of Ben Het was the first really positive action since the disaster at Tan Canh. The fact had been established that the enemy could be stopped. On the 11th of May the Vietnamese II Corps commander was replaced. Gen Dzu was replaced by Gen Toan. General Dzu departed smiling and apparently quite happy remarking that he had been fired but at least he had not lost any province capitols. General Toan made a favorable impression. He is reputed to be both a fighter and lover. Mr Vann had remarked that if you didn't do one you wouldn't do the other, and he had hopes that things would improve. The staff had not changed and was still very weak. Mr Vann recommended strongly that Gen Toan use his personal influence to get some top notch people from Saigon. A matter of serious concern was that the briefings and other information presented to the Corps Commander daily, bore no discernable resemblance to the actual facts. The daily staff update for the CG was known as the "fairy tale hour." This lack of factual information created obvious problems in determining what should be done.

During the period 1 April thru 11 May 17th CAG had 136 aircraft hit by enemy fire. Sixteen of these were destroyed; Six OH-6A, six AH-1G, three UH-1H, and one CH-47.

Kontum airfield continued to take in-coming rocket and artillery fire. A special note of praise should go to the courageous tower and GCA operators who continued to man their positions even when hardened veterans were ducking for cover. The defensive preparations were proceeding at a fever pitch and it was essential to this effort to have the airfield open and operating.

On 12 May activity centered around anti-tank operations North of Kontum city. B/7/17th Air Cav had been conducting VR's NW of the city and in the past few days they had detected numerous fresh tank tracks. Judging from the amount of fire our LOH's were receiving they were getting close to the quarry.

The decision had been made to laace our Cav troop and the Hawk's claw package at Kontum airfield. This presented some problems in that the airfield received sporadic ABF's throughout the day. It was believed however, that the high degree of risk was warranted. A great deal of wasted blade time was saved by having the aircraft on standby at the airfield. Several aircraft were damaged but fortunately no one was killed.

One of the B troop LOH's piloted by 1st LT Smith finally located a T54 tank. Unfortunately the tank fired his main gun at the aircraft along with his machine-gun. Although the LOH was not hit by the 120mm round the aircraft was shot down by small arms fire. Both crewmembers were successfully extracted but the A/C was a total loss.

In response to the tank sighting the TOW package was scrambled. The Bravo model had considerable difficulty acquiring the target because of the jungle canopy and camouflage. Several aircraft from B Troop substantiated that three

T54's were in the area. After several unsuccessful passes two missiles were fired into cut bamboo camouflaged clumps in the area where the tanks were hidden with unknown results. TAC air was called in to attempt to blow away the camouflage. Following this attack the camouflage was blown away from one tank and it received a direct hit by a TOW missile. The tank erupted into flames and was still burning as of 1900 hrs. Numerous attempts were made to hit the other tanks with TOW, but they could not be acquired by the gunner due to the dense jungle and camouflage employed. One tank was seen to move a short distance just at dusk and although Hawk's claw could not get in a shot, the approximate position was marked for the FAC on station who was attempting to get TAC Air to strike the area again. The area appeared to be a tank park or assembly position and was nominated for an ARC light (B52 strike) that night.

TAC air was doing a job on the enemy anywhere we found him. There were over 50 US TAC air sorties and 28 VNAF sorties in the Kontum area on the 12th of May. In addition there were 25 ARC light strikes. The approaches to Kontum city took on the appearance of the carpet bombing area for the breakout at St Lo. The resemblance stopped there, however, for the ARVN were not interested in breaking out, especially to the North.

The new Corps commander MG Toan spent the night of 11-12 May in Kontum city. He visited several positions and then met with the 23rd Div and Kontum province Commanders and Staffs. He told them there would be no retreat from Kontum city. Early on the morning of the 12th he conducted inspections of units and forward positions, being highly critical of most prepared positions. It was reported that he gave his commanders up and down the line some good chewings-out.

The 44th Regt was scheduled to arrive in the city on the night of the 12th. The 44th was reported to be one of the best ARVN Regts in the 23rd Div and every-

one was anxious to get it into position before the main attack. Although everyone was voicing confidence that the city would be held, these were dark days and most harbored grave doubts as to the ARVN's ability to hold the city. Most of the GVN officials had evacuated the city and population control was becoming a serious problem. Our CH-47's from the 180th ASHC were doing a marvelous job of carrying in much needed supplies. Often times the A/C were forced to orbit until the shelling slowed enough for them to set into one of the pads. The chinooks were taking civilian refugees and wounded out of the city. The civilian population was in a state of near panic and many of them would rush our aircraft in a desperate attempt to get out. This problem of refugee control plagued us throughout the battle. Often times it was necessary for armed police to fire their weapons into the air to control the mobs.

On the 13th of May Kontum continued to receive what had become daily attacks by fire. Fortunately these attacks had not inflicted too much damage at this point in time.

ARVN losses from 1 Apr to 5 May in Kontum province were reported as:

	<u>KIA</u>	<u>WIA</u>	<u>MIA</u>
42 Regt	31	127	1,304
47 Regt	60	335	127

These units were from the 22nd Div and had suffered their losses in the fighting at Tanh Canh and the FSB's.

The city of Kontum was beginning to fill up with several hundred ARVN deserters. These men were probably from units of 22nd Div who had deserted in the confusion of battle. ARVN authorities were reluctant to round these men up and return them to their units. In order to force the ARVN authorities to take action an

ingenious plan was devised at SRAG HQ's and a false report was released that NVA soldiers were in the city masquerading as ARVN soldiers in uniform. This had the desired effect. During the afternoon of the 13th the great tank hunt continued. The brave LOH drivers of B troop continued their perilous work of hovering around suspected tank locations trying to get a visual fix on them. A special place should be reserved for the men of our Air Cav troops. The significance of the roll they played can not be over emphasized. They were our most important source of hard, timely intelligence and the methods they had to use to gather it were extremely hazardous to say the least. This fact is attested to by the heavy losses they suffered in men and material.

An armored personnel carrier, which was uncovered by an ARC light strike, was located by the Cav and Hawk's claw was scrambled to engage the target. The APC was successfully engaged and was set ablaze by the second hit. One of the scout aircraft spotted a tank, however, due to the camouflage and canopy, a steep approach angle was necessary in order for the Hawk's claw to acquire the target. The angle was excessive and the pilot nearly exceeded the safe flight envelope of the aircraft. He had great difficulty in pulling out of his dive. The missile overshot the target. Another shot was attempted by firing at a MP grenade dropped by one of the scouts. This was also unsuccessful. Subsequently TAC air was requested to attempt to uncover the target, but before this could be accomplished it got dark and the claw package was forced to return to base. So it was, that we learned a few lessons about the new TOW system. One was that we couldn't hit what we couldn't see. If the enemy successfully camouflaged his vehicles we simply couldn't engage them. This problem was aggravated by the dense jungle. The second lesson

was that this was a system still in the experimental stage. No one really knew what the limitations on the aircraft were. This whole system was sort of jury rigged to see if the concept was feasible. Thus we learned that the aircraft itself was a major limiting factor in the employment of an airborne TOW system. It is hoped that many of these problems will be eliminated when the system is mounted on a more suitable airframe such as the Cobra.

PHASE III

"THE BATTLE FOR KONTUM CITY"

On the morning of 14 May the Battle of Kontum city began. The enemy fired 122MM rockets and artillery rounds into the city as preparatory fires. At approximately 0530 hours five tanks and an estimated two battalions of infantry attacked from the North west. One of the tanks broke through the perimeter and attempted to crush a bunker. This tank was put out of action by an ARVN soldier using an M72 LAW. Hawk's Claw had been scrambled from Holloway and was on station by 0650. The sky was overcast at about 7000 feet which prevented TAC air from working. As the Hawk's Claw aircraft arrived on station two tanks were observed withdrawing to the North west. One of them had just entered a ford across a small stream and the other one was immediately behind it. Hawk's Claw engaged the tank in the stream first. The tank was hit by the first missile fired and the second tank was hit moments later by the second missile. Both tanks burst into flames and exploded. The entire engagement took about five minutes. A VNAF FAC flying in an O-1 directed accurate artillery fire on the attacking enemy troops. Enemy units started to withdraw under this intense artillery fire. The attack was over by 0900 hours. The burning hulls of the tanks were a welcome sight for both the US advisors and ARVN troops. FSB November, located about 7 KM North west of Kontum on QL 14, received a very heavy ABF in the early morning.

The enemy continued his rocket and artillery attack on Kontum city and the airfield throughout the day. One of the POL blivets containing JP-4 at the airfield was set ablaze, however it was extinguished before it completely destroyed the POL facility. The ground attack resumed at 1700 when friendly elements were reported in heavy contact on the Northern perimeter. This attack

was beaten off before nightfall. Thus, ended the first day of attacks on the city itself. The defenses held and the outstanding performance of the Hawk's Claw had a very positive effect on everyone. Mr Vann was over the battle area most of the day in his OH-58 helicopter directing the defensive effort. Due to the intensity and accuracy of enemy fire directed at the airfield the decision was made to have our aircraft standby at Camp Holloway instead of Kontum.

On the 15th there were numerous reports of contacts with unknown size enemy forces North of the city but no major attack developed. Kontum continued to receive enemy rocket and artillery fire. This was a daily occurrence and the people of Kontum, to include our tower operators, were learning to adjust to it. The 44th Regt, 23rd ARVN Div reported the following casualty figures for 14 May. Friendly - 18 KIA, 52 WIA, 9 MIA; Enemy - 173 KIA, 3 PW. The 2/53rd Inf reported: Enemy - 32 KIA, and 1 PW.

Hawk's Claw was laagered at the Kontum airfield again on the 15th. They launched several times in response to reports from the Air Cav. One of the scouts reported sighting a tank, however, when the TOW aircraft got in the area the only thing observed was a vehicle variously reported as an Armored Personnel Carrier, half-track and 2½ ton truck. At any rate, a missile was fired at it and scored a direct hit, totally destroying the vehicle.

At about 2000 hours six tanks were reported 2 KM North of Kontum city. Hawk's Claw, which had returned to Holloway for the night was scrambled to Kontum. The enemy tanks moved into firing positions just beyond the perimeter and began firing directly into friendly positions. Spector, an armed airforce C-130, was on station and engaged the tanks with 400 MM cannon fire without success. Flares were dropped to provide illumination for Hawk's Claw. Unfortunately the gunner had difficulty acquiring any of the tanks in his sighting system. One missile

was fired at a suspected tank location, however, there was no indication that the tank had been hit. After unsuccessfully attempting to acquire a target, the Hawk's Claw returned to Holloway. The airforce Spector remained on station providing illumination and fire support for most of the night. Although the enemy tanks were firing on friendly positions they never advanced any closer and after several hours they pulled back out of the area.

Two VNAF C-123's were destroyed on 16 May by enemy rocket and mortar fire on Kontum airfield. One of the aircraft had been damaged several weeks earlier. One artillery round put a hole in the runway however, this was easily repaired.

The Hawk's Claw destroyed numerous targets NW of Kontum city on the 16th. Most of them were abandoned ARVN trucks and APC's. All the items of equipment were considered usable. The targets were out of the range of friendly artillery and not considered suitable for TAC Air.

Kontum airfield received sporadic rocket and artillery fire on 17 May. One of the rockets impacted in close proximity to two Cobra gunships wounding one crew member and damaging both aircraft. Later in the day, an exploding rocket set off a stack of ammunition just as an airforce C-130 was unloading another ammunition pallet near by. The pilot of the C-130 immediately applied full power in an attempt to make a take-off. Unfortunately, the ramp was still down on the aircraft and when the pilot tried to rotate for take-off the ramp would drag on the runway slowing down the aircraft. As the aircraft ran off the end of the runway the right wing struck a brick building sheering the wing and rupturing the fuel tank. The fuel immediately ignited engulfing the aircraft in flames as it cartwheeled for several hundred yards. Only two survivors were pulled from the wreckage.

The ammunition continued to explode on the airfield for the rest of the day hurling 105MM artillery rounds all over the area. Eventually the entire ammunition

dump was destroyed. One of the shells landed near a POL bivet and set the JP-4 ablaze. The exploding ammunition dump eventually cost the allies over 3,000 105MM artillery rounds, 25,000 gals of POL, one C-130, and seven airforce personnel who were the crew for the C-130.

For the next several days defensive preparations continued as the enemy continued firing artillery and rockets into the city. There were numerous reports of enemy contacts along the perimeter. At night the flashes from enemy machine guns and recoilless rifles could be observed in close proximity to the friendly positions. These enemy targets were engaged by TAC air, gunships and Spectors (armed C-130's).

Efforts were made on the night of the 17th and early morning of the 18th to clean up the airfield. By 1030 hours the airfield was open to rotary wing aircraft but not ready for fixed wing traffic.

Hawk's Claw successfully engaged and destroyed a tank and 23MM anti-aircraft weapon North west of the city on the afternoon of the 18th.

During the early morning of the 19th the 44th Regt came under ground attack along the Northern perimeter. The attack was supported by 105/155MM artillery fire. The attack lasted until about 0330 hours when the enemy withdrew. Gunships from Camp Holloway and Airforce Spectors supported the 23rd Div. Some of the enemy had managed to infiltrate in behind elements of the 44th Regt, however, these packets were eliminated by 0730 hours. Results of the contact were reported by the 44th as: 41 enemy KIA, and in the 53rd sector as 12 enemy sappers KIA.

The 23rd Div launched a reconnaissance in force to the North of Kontum city on the morning of the 19th. At 1100 hours the 23rd Recon Company air assaulted using VNAF helicopters into an LZ 8 KM North of the city in the vicinity of a suspected artillery position.

The assault went well as elements of 1/45 moved into blocking positions South of the LZ. The plan was to have the Recon company move South from the LZ and catch any enemy troops between themselves and 1/45th. Enemy forces caught between the 23rd Recon Company and 1/45th, chose to attack 1/45th in their blocking positions. The position held, however, reaction forces refused to leave their positions to conduct counter attacks.

The 23rd Div reported the following results for the 19th of May: 44th Regt - 72 enemy killed by air, ~~enemy~~; 45th Regt - 29 KBA; and 53rd Regt - 36 enemy KIA.

There was a cautious note of optimism beginning to appear as it became evident that ARVN Forces would stand and fight under sustained enemy pressure.

During the night of 19-20 May enemy forces apparently tunneled up to the perimeter in the 53rd Regt area on the Northeast side. The enemy drove elements of the 53rd out of their positions and occupied some of the friendly bunkers with about a company sized force. The 53rd conducted counter attacks supported by TAC Air, gunships, artillery and 9 ARVN M-41 tanks. A problem arose when the tank commanders refused to advance. Gen Toan and Col Ba, 23rd Div Commander, rushed to the scene and through various means managed to convince the tank commanders that it would be best for them if they advanced. By late afternoon the positions were recaptured.

Kontum city and the airfield received the usual ABF's throughout the day. A VNAF C-123 was hit by an enemy rocket while it was parked on the ramp. The fuel cell was ignited and the aircraft burned to the ground. The crew was able to get out of the aircraft without injury.

Reports from the Air Cav troops indicated the enemy was reinforcing by infiltrating troops into the area. The buildup was concentrated North and North east of the city. B-52 ARC Light strikes were scheduled into these areas on a daily bases. Bomb damage assessments (BDA's) conducted by air Cav units indicated that the enemy bunkers and fighting positions were being destroyed. There were

no significant indications that large numbers of enemy troops were being killed however, it was believed the ARG light strikes were hurting the enemy. Later events proved this belief was correct.

On 21 May the enemy launched a major attack against the Northern perimeter. The friendly units were deployed generally in an Arc to the North of the city running from west to east, they were: 3/44, 4/44, 4/45, and 2/53rd. The FEBA Trace generally followed the ARG, however, along QL 14, the FEBA extended up the highway to the Northwest to form a finger. At 0500 hours friendly units received a heavy ABF of mixed caliber rounds, followed by a two pronged ground attack. The enemy was successful initially in cutting QL 14 at the base of the finger and in driving a wedge between 4/45th and 2/53rd. Friendly elements conducted counterattacks throughout the day supported by artillery, TAC Air, and tanks. 3/44th was successful in driving the enemy out and restoring the FEBA trace at the base of the finger. Two battalions attacked up QL 14 to the North, one on either side of the road, to reduce the penetration between 4/45th and 2/53rd. The counterattack was supported by eight tanks. One tank was hit and sustained moderate damage. The counterattack was successful in ejecting the enemy and restoring the FEBA. During the action Mr Vann was overhead monitoring the situation. He appeared to be pleased with the outcome and stated that Col Ba's presence in the battle area had a very positive effect on the troops and was responsible for the successful outcome. It is believed that the enemy attacked with a regimental size force. The 406th sapper battalion was identified as the unit that cut QL 14.

There was evidence that the enemy was continuing his buildup North east of the city. It was the Cav troop commanders evaluation, that the main enemy attack would come in the next few days from that area. This proved to be a very accurate evaluation.

Due to the heavy ABF's on Kontum airfield during the day airforce C-130's were operating in and out of the field at night only. Early in the morning of 22 May the airfield received approximately five 122MM rockets. A C-130 blew a tire while landing at about 0115 hours. This closed the field due to the fact that the Airforce would not allow more than one aircraft on the field at one time. Throughout the early morning the airfield continued to take enemy rocket and artillery fire. The C-130 that had the blown tire was hit by a piece of shrapnel causing a fuel leak. The spilled fuel was ignited by another round. The fire burned for sometime in close proximity to the C-130, however, there were no attempts to put it out. After awhile the flames spread under the wing of the aircraft and set the tip on fire. The Airforce crew had taken refuge in a nearby bunker. At about 1030 hours Col John A. Todd landed near the burning aircraft and he and his crew put the fire out with buckets of sand. The airforce crew was extracted by Col Todd. The C-130 was declared a combat loss by the airforce.

There were indications that Arc Light strikes had a significant impact on the combat effectiveness of the 320th NVA Div. Evidence of this was the results of several sweep operations. The 4/53rd Inf found 70 KBA just 2KM North west of Kontum city. In addition, they recovered small arms and crew served weapons to include an 82MM mortar and a 12.7MM A4 gun. Later in the morning the 2/53rd found 28 KBA 1½ KM North of the city. There were several unconfirmed reports of sighting 150-200 KBA in Arc Light strikes. Since 1 January there had been 820 Arc Light strikes in the Kontum area alone. In the previous week there had been 84 such strikes. It was becoming obvious that the heavy bombing was taking the toll of the enemy forces.

The 23rd and 24th of May were relatively quiet. It appeared to be the "calm before the storm." There were the usual ABF's against the city and the airfield. Elements of the 53rd Regt made contact with an unknown size enemy force killing 25 and capturing two mortars. The FOB pad, which was an old special forces camp located about 3 KM South of the city on QL 14, came under enemy artillery fire. This camp was being utilized as an alternate rearm and refuel point for our aircraft operating in Kontum. The 1/44th and 2/44th conducted a Combat assault using seven VNAF slicks and two gunships about four KM North of their perimeter. They met light resistance as they moved back towards friendly positions.

On 25 May enemy activity increased significantly in Kontum. Enemy ABF's on the city continued throughout the day. The caliber of weapons varied from 60MM mortars to 155MM artillery. There was one report of a suspected 240MM mortar round impacting in the 44th Regt area which left a 4'X6' crater. There were also reports that two NVA Sapper Battalions had infiltrated the Southeast part of the city wearing ARVN uniforms. RF units were in heavy contact within the southeast quadrant of the city. The 4/44 killed 16 enemy and captured one. The FW stated his battalion (6th Bn, 1st Regt, 2nd NVA Div) was in Kontum city. The 23rd Div artillery was neutralized by the intense enemy artillery and rocket fire. Most of the artillery pieces were operational but the crews refused to leave their bunkers for fire missions. Mr Vann closed the airfield and directed that all of our air controllers be evacuated; this was done by 1730 hours.

H/17th Air Cav conducted a VR of the large ridge line 20KM Northwest of Kontum city. Numerous small arms and supply caches were found in the vicinity of the ridge and the adjacent valley. It appeared that the area North of the Polei Kleng was being used as a storage and staging area. There were numerous sightings of small groups of people throughout the area. The road that had

stopped West of the ridge now extended over it to the East. There were indications of heavy usage by wheeled and tracked vehicles. The Cav gunships expended on the numerous sightings of ammunition caches resulting in small secondary explosions. About mid-morning the troop conducted a search for a suspected rocket position west of Kontum city. Just as the scouts discovered the positions, which consisted of a large bunker complex and many rockets, a FAC advised him to exit the area immediately. The LOH had no sooner departed to the west when an ARC Light landed right on the rocket position totally destroying it.

A 57th AHC UH-1H was shot down west of the MACV pad in Kontum city. The pilot made a hard landing which collapsed the skids. Except for one back injury there were no other injuries. However, upon exiting the aircraft the pilot was decapitated by the main rotor as he moved away from the aircraft.

H/10th Air Cav lost an LOH 2 KM Southwest of Kontum city while conducting a visual reconnaissance. The aircraft was hit by a B-40 rocket and exploded killing the pilot and his observer.

The long-awaited main attack hit the Northeast quadrant of the city early in the morning of 26 May. The enemy conducted an intense artillery preparation beginning at about 0230 hours and lasting until about 0430 hours. The preparation was followed by a massive combined arms attack spearheaded by 10-12 tanks. The enemy penetrated the perimeter and got in behind the 1/53rd and 3/53rd Infantry Battalions. The 44th Regt was also heavily engaged. The enemy tanks and infantry penetrated to within several hundred meters of the runway at the airfield. Enemy units that had occupied positions in the Southeast part of the city were reinforced during the night. Efforts to conduct a counter attack to drive the enemy out were unsuccessful.

In response to the enemy attack Hawk's Claw was launched from Camp Holloway at about 0615. The Turkey shoot began at 0645 when the first tank of the day

was destroyed by a TOW missile. This was the optimum situation for the Claw. The weather was fairly good and the tanks were exposed in the attack during daylight hours. Before the morning was over the Hawk's Claw aircraft had destroyed: Five T-54, Four PT-76 tanks, Two MG's, one truck and one bunker. This effectively stopped the momentum of the enemy attack. During the remainder of the day the battle raged on with opposing forces locked in close combat within the city. By the end of the day the enemy controlled the Eastern part of the city. TAC Air, artillery and gunships supported the ARVN effort to stop the enemy.

The 27th was the second day of major enemy attacks on Kontum city. The enemy continued his attacks by fire on the city and continued reinforcing the forces within the city. Pressure was applied by enemy units to the Northern portion of the perimeter. Enemy artillery fire was impacting with great accuracy in the vicinity of the 44th Regt CP (estimated 300 rounds). Early in the morning of the 27th the enemy made another major tank infantry attack from the Northeast.

Once again Hawk's Claw was scrambled from Camp Holloway to meet the threat. Two T-54 tanks were destroyed as soon as the Claw arrived in station. Dense smoke and dust clouds obscured the battle area which prevented Hawk's Claw from acquiring any more targets. The Senior Advisor for the 44th Regt confirmed the two tanks killed by the TOW missiles plus two T-54's knocked out by M-72 LAW's 400 meters north of his CP. Our resupply effort continued throughout the battle. The main logistical burden at this point in time was carried by CH-47's belonging to the 180th Assault Support Helicopter Company. Even though there were enemy snipers in close proximity to the Landing Zone and enemy artillery rounds impacting nearby, the Chinooks continued their essential work of hauling ammunition and food to Kontum. The only area that was secure enough to use was the soccer field located in the Southwest part of the city. A serious problem

that plagued our logistical effort throughout the battle was the lack of control of refugees in the LZ. Our CH-47's were taking as many of these civilians out of the city as possible however, often in their panic to escape, they would mob the aircraft. On several occasions controllers were threatened by unruly mobs. This problem continued off and on throughout the period of intense enemy action but it subsided as the situation later stabilized. During this evacuation effort our CH-47's carried over 46,000 refugees out of Kontum.

Late in the afternoon of the 27th a VNAF Al-E was shot down 2KM Southwest of the city. The pilot parachuted safely and was picked up by our command and control aircraft, the Air Boss.

In late April the Air Boss concept was put into effect by BG Hill. The purpose of the Air Boss was to serve as an airborne C & C to control all aviation assets within the battle area. It was necessary to have this aircraft airborne most of the time and it flew as much as 14-16 hours a day.

There was considerable concern at the fact that ARVN units were not successful at launching a counter-attack. The biggest fear was that the longer the enemy stayed the more difficult it would be to dig him out.

The evening of the 27th was relatively quiet. The lull was used by us to resupply the units in Kontum. Our CH-47's flew resupply missions most of the night.

An interesting event took place in the Kontum Pass where ARVN forces had been trying, without success, to open QL 14 between Kontum and Pleiku. Friendly forces were bogged down by strong enemy forces occupying well constructed bunkers and fighting positions. Col Tuong, II CORPS Deputy for Operations, offered one third of his months pay (he said 10,000 piasters) to anyone in that unit he was with who would knock out a 51 Cal AA weapon that had been firing

at any aircraft that came into the area. His offer was accepted by one soldier who got into position, covered by his comrades, and threw a grenade into the cave from which the gun was firing. The soldier observed a 57 recoilless rifle nearby and knocked this out with a grenade also. Both weapons were brought back to Col Tuong but the gunner of the .51 Cal MG had to be cut loose from the weapon since he was chained to it. The enemy soldier was identified as being from the 40th artillery Regt, normally part of the 304th Division, but now apparently supporting the 95th B Regt.

The operation to open QL 14 through the Kontum Pass dragged on for weeks. The enemy offered stiff resistance and the ARVN Forces were unable to dislodge him until the first week of July.

On the 28th of May the enemy continued his early morning attacks, however, they were not as strong as the previous ones and were easily beaten off. Enemy ABF's continued throughout the day with the majority of the rounds landing in the vicinity of the 44th Regt CP. The attacks were lighter than they had been for the previous three days. Although scattered contacts continued throughout the day, a major enemy assault never materialized. Hawk's Claw was launched at 0935 to engage an enemy 51 Cal machinegun position mounted on top of a water tower in the North central part of town. The position was attacked at 1010 hours. Five missiles were fired in an attempt to knock out the gun and destroy the water tower. The gun was destroyed and the water tower was damaged to the point where it was leaning badly to one side. Another 51 Cal machinegun position located at the base of the tower was knocked out by 105MM artillery fire. At 1145 hours 100 enemy troops were located just west of the city. TAC Air and gunships engaged the troops. The attack lasted about one hour. Later in the day friendly elements found 70 enemy KBA. They captured one PW, two AK47's,

two radios and one B-40 rocket launcher.

The situation within the city remained critical. The enemy still occupied the Eastern half of the city plus some small penetrations in the Northwest. During the night of 28-29 May friendly forces were pulled back closer to the city so that ARC Light strikes could be brought in closer.

The situation in Kontum remained about the same on 29 May. Enemy attacks by fire tapered off during the day. Although the ARVN were still not able to launch an effective counter attack there were indications that the enemy was no longer able to reinforce his elements. VNAF airstrikes in the Southeast quadrant of the city appeared to have a good effect. The enemy had dug in and constructed fighting positions and bunkers throughout the city which made movement and aircraft operations extremely hazardous. Two slicks received intensive small arms fire attempting to land at the 23rd Div CP. During the afternoon reinforcements were sent to Kontum by CH-47. These troops, about 400 of them, were from the 47th Regt.

Mr Vann and Gen Toan were becoming more optimistic at this point. There were indications that the enemy had been badly hurt. POW's stated that enemy commanders at all levels had been directed to personally lead attacks to insure their success. Mr Vann and Gen Toan directed that an all out effort be made by psyops personnel to try to get enemy troops to surrender. This effort proved mostly unsuccessful.

While H/17t Air Cav troop was conducting a VR Northwest of Kontum city one of their LOH's received intense small arms fire. The aircraft was hit, pitched to the left and went into the ground nose first. Seconds after it hit the ground the aircraft burst into flames and exploded. The Cav C & C aircraft immediately attempted a rescue.

On approaching the burning aircraft the C & C aircraft came under intense SA fire and received several hits, one of which wounded the gunner. Another LOH attempting to get into the crash site was also hit. A platoon of ARVNS with an American NCO was put in on QL 14 about 600 meters from the downed aircraft. This unit came under heavy attack almost immediately. Airstrikes were brought in and the unit was extracted before reaching the downed LOH. Later on, the decision was made to put in a B-52 Arc Light strike near the downed LOH. The strikes went in on either side of the crashed aircraft. No further attempts were made to get into the crash site.

The logistical problem was relieved somewhat as Air Force C-130's using radar vectors started dropping bundles of supplies by parachute. This proved very effective and continued throughout the remainder of the battle.

Early in the morning of the 30th of May the 44th Regt CP and 23rd Div CP received an intense ABF however, it was of short duration. Enemy elements within the city attacked units of the 44th Regt. The enemy was not able to make any significant gains. At about 0700 hours a large ammo dump located North of the airfield was set on fire and exploded. Two wounded NVA Troops were captured early in the morning near the 44th Regt CP. There was an attempt to exploit these PW's for psyops purposes, however, the operation was not successful. Late in the day elements of the 44th Regt made some progress in clearing the Northeast section of the city.

In the afternoon at about 1330 hours, President Theiu visited the 23rd Div CP. He promoted Col Ba to the rank of BG.

The weather turned poor and started to adversely affect our aviation operations. However, there was a note of optimism as it appeared that MACV had taken away Kontum's priority for Arc Light strikes. The entire picture was looking a little

brighter.

Some progress was made in the Battle for Kontum city on the 31st of May. There were no enemy ABF's during the night. Elements of the 44th Regt and RF/PF units continued attacks against enemy held positions within the city. The fighting in the Northeast was difficult and friendly forces suffered many casualties. The enemy, although not considered strong in numbers, occupied well constructed bunkers. The difficult business of rooting them out fell on the ARVN infantry troops. The task was very costly and it must be mentioned that the ARVN soldiers demonstrated a great deal of courage and persistence in this tedious work. The 44th Regt reported the following results: Enemy-28KIA, 2 B-40 RL, 2LT-MG's, 9 AK-47's, 10 Carbines and 1 PRL, 25 radio captured. RF/PF units operating <sup>114</sup> in the Southeastern quadrant reported finding 56 enemy NBA.

The situation in Kontum continued to improve on 1 June. There were indications the enemy was withdrawing to the Northeast. The enemy penetration in the Southeast quadrant had virtually been eliminated. Only one large concrete building was reported as still held by the enemy. The 23rd Div reported that they had seized control of the airfield. Hawk's Claw was used to hit several enemy bunkers in the Northern part of the city. Several bunkers were hit by missile with apparently good results. The gunner had difficulty acquiring the targets due to the debris in the area. When the CAC aircraft first arrived in the target area it was hit by small arms fire which knocked out the aircraft's hydraulic system. The aircraft was successfully returned to Pleiku by the aircraft Commander LTC Jack Anderson the 17th CAG XO. LTC Anderson and his crew picked up another aircraft and completed the mission.

For the next several days the friendly forces conducted clearing operations within the city. The Southeast quadrant was cleared first and then all forces

were directed to sweep the Northeast quadrant. Hard, bitter fighting ensued with heavy losses experienced by both sides. ARVN M41 tanks often fired point blank into buildings occupied by the enemy. Throughout the period the enemy conducted sporadic ABF's. Several minor attacks on the Northern perimeter were easily repulsed. It was believed that these attacks were to support enemy units attempting to withdraw from the city.

Our aircraft continued providing aviation support. Unfortunately the cost was sometimes very high. On 2 June a 57th UH-1H flying south through the Kontum Pass was hit by enemy fire and crashed near QL 14. Most of the crew and passengers were seriously injured when the aircraft burned on impact. The pilot was killed in the crash. A UH-1H from H/10th Cav flying C&C near the crash site attempted a rescue of the downed crew members. The aircraft received one hit from a 51 Cal machine gun. Unfortunately, the round hit the aircraft Commander in the leg and lodged in his abdomen. He died several hours later in the hospital.

On one occasion as the enemy was withdrawing from the city he ran into one of his own units. A fire fight ensued and ARVN artillery supported both sides.

As ARVN units continued clearing operations, large numbers of enemy bodies were found in bunkers and destroyed buildings. Also, a large number of enemy weapons were captured. Stiff resistance was encountered in the Northeast quadrant but it eventually was cleared out.

The business of cleaning up the battle field was made more difficult by the fact that the enemy had booby trapped many of the dead ARVN soldiers. As time progressed this problem became more serious as the bodies, rapidly decomposed in the hot sun.

By the 7th of June it began to appear that another enemy attack on the city was

unlikely and optimism was felt by everyone. On the 8th of June, Airforce C-130's began landing again at the airfield during the night. Our tower operators were set-up at the airfield and a GCA flown up from Long Binh was put into operation.

The 9th of June was a most significant day. On that day the 23rd Div Commander declared the city secured.

Another event took place on the 9th of June that was felt by everyone. That was the death of the II CORPS Senior Advisor Mr John Paul Vann. After a farewell party held in honor of BG Hill, who was departing the next day, Mr Vann got in his OH-58 helicopter along with his pilot 1LT Doughtie, and a passenger, CPT Robertson. They took off from II CORPS Headquarters at about 2100 hours. Mr Vann had insisted on going to Kontum because he wanted to spend the night with the 23rd Div. For the previous thirty days he had been up to Kontum at least once a day and he didn't want to break his record. He took some fresh fruit and other treats that were left over from the farewell party. He had intended these for the men in Kontum so that they could share in the festivities that had taken place earlier.

Apparently Mr Vann elected to low level up QL 14 because the weather was poor. There were thunderstorms in the area and low scuddy clouds laying in and around the Kontum Pass. Mr Vann called the 23rd Div CP shortly after take off estimating 15 minutes out of Kontum. That was the last anyone ever heard from him. An ARVN unit located in the Kontum Pass reported observing a helicopter crash. A search effort was launched as aircraft from 17th CAG scrambled from Camp Holloway and an ARVN unit was dispatched to the suspected crash site. Within an hour the wreckage was found down in some trees several hundred meters East of QL 14. The three bodies were found by the ARVN soldiers on the ground and Mr Vann's body was carried out on LTC Anderson's helicopter. The other bodies were recovered later.

The Battle for Kontum was a victory that resulted from an allied effort. Neither part of the allied team could have won alone but their joint effort proved very successful. The ARVN provided the ground element fighters, the troops who met the enemy hand to hand on many occasions and held him. The US provided the fire power that did most of the killing. This battle was primarily a defensive one for the allies and I believe there are lessons that can be extracted that will help in future actions against the NVA and some lessons that could be applied to other battle field, in other times.

#### O B S E R V A T I O N S

Whether it was planned or not the defense was organized to provide for a delay back to final defensive positions. The FSB's and the border camps served as outer positions to delay the enemy and allow for as much attrition as possible. This tactic proved very effective. By creating these outer strong points the enemy was forced to eliminate them. This caused the enemy to mass his forces which provided lucrative targets for our massive fire power. This was also an economy of force tactic for the allies. Many such strong points could be established on dominant terrain by a relatively small force. By assuming a defensive posture the allies accrued all the advantages of the defense in that they were able to prepare their positions and organize the terrain to their advantage. A significant point is the fact that our mobility, notably the helicopters, allowed the ARVN to utilize positions that provided for the best defense but would not have been usable if air resupply was not available.

These outlying positions served our purposes very well. Using Kontum as the base, for we know this was the enemy's objective, one can see how strategically located the FSB's on "Rocket Ridge" were. By controlling this ridge the shortest lines of communication for any advancing enemy force from Cambodia were

effectively blocked. Also, these postions provide outstanding ob servation of the surrounding low ground which made ARVN artillery pieces located in the FSB's particularly effective. Thus, it can be established that by their very existence they represented a significant threat to any enemy plans to attack Kontum. I believe this was a key to the defense. If the FSB's were located so that they could have easily been by-passed by a large enemy force advancing on Kontum, they would have served no purpose at all.

*...TERRAIN Around Kontum : It becomes evident that the Northern approaches to the city were the*

By a quick examination of the best. Three main avenues of approach should be considered. One from the Northwest roughly parralleling QL 14 on the west. One from the North on the East side of QL 14 and the third from the North east. The river running East and West just south of the city constituted a significant obstacle to a massive advancing force although smaller enemy units did infiltrate across the river.

From this evaluation it becomes obvious that the enemy would have to mass somewhere to the North of the city prior to his main attack. The most direct route for him, from his base areas, was through the valley located North west of the city. This valley was bordered on the west by the river and rocket ridge and on the east by QL 14 and a ridge line that ran North and South and was located North of Kontum city.

Any large enemy movements through this valley would have easily been observed from the bases on Rocket Ridge.

Thus, it was recognized that these bases would have to be eliminated if a major enemy force was to attack Kontum. This, in fact, as describe in Phase I, is exactly what the enemy did. As pointed out earlier the FSB's did well and did in fact account for many of the enemy's losses. The weakness of the defense was the vulnerability of the Command Post at Tan Canh. If there had been well

situated FSB's North of Tan Canh, the situation may have been different. As it was, the loss of the Command Post ended the resistance from the FSB's. It is interesting to note that although the FSB's were abandoned there was no thought of abandoning the Ranger border camps.

I think the lesson that can be learned here is that Command Posts must be well protected. The loss of one of the FSB's would not have had as critical an effect as the loss of Tan Canh did. The main reason being that the CP was located at Tan Canh. Actually the loss of Tan Canh itself should not have hurt the defensive position as much as it did. I believe the loss was greater psychologically than tactically.

This battle saw the introduction by the enemy of weapons not used in large numbers previously. For the first time, in this area, the enemy used relatively large numbers of tanks and artillery pieces. The fact that the enemy had this equipment available was known. However, when the enemy actually employed them, especially the tanks, the ARVN soldiers were terrified. This, I believe, was one of our great failures as advisors and may foretell future events if we do not take steps to correct the situation. It was not so much the firepower of the tanks that defeated the ARVN's at Tan Canh, it was mostly their appearance. We have learned from bitter experience in past wars that one of the greatest advantages to armor is the fear it puts in the infantry. The ARVN soldiers defending Tan Canh simply were not prepared for an enemy tank attack.

Once again there is no substitute for good training and planning. If soldiers are prepared for what the enemy will use against him on the battle field the chances are good for survival. Once the initial shock of the presence of enemy armor on the battle field was overcome by the infantry soldiers and he gained confidence in his ability to stop the enemy tanks, defensive positions held.

It appears that the enemy spends a great amount of time and effort preparing the battle field. This fact can be used to advantage when trying to determine from which direction the enemy will attack and at about what time. It seems that the threat and fighting positions to protect his troops in stagnating areas. Often times this construction work can be observed quite easily from the air. The presence of these bunkers and the fact that they are being constructed or old ones being repaired is a good indication of the enemies intention. The presence of large bunker complexes within 3-5 KM of friendly locations should alert the defenders. Once the enemy had constructed these bunker complexes he begins to infiltrate his combat troops into the area to mass for the attack. Often times the presence of well used trails in the area and sightings of small groups of enemy soldiers is an indication that the enemy has started to mass. Every effort should be made to destroy these bunkers with air or artillery strikes. In this way, not only will enemy soldiers occupying the bunkers become casualties but any attempts by the enemy to reuse the bunkers will become obvious as he repairs them.

Aircraft misutilization was a serious problem throughout the battle. This is an area that will require extensive study to reduce these problems. In the future, aircraft will not be as readily available as they have been in Vietnam and the question of aircraft utilization will be even more critical.

During the battle of Kontum enemy forces closed QL 14 in the area of the Kontum Pass. This prevented any surface resupply from reaching the besieged city. The ARVN forces defending Kontum and what was left of the civilian population were totally dependent on aerial resupply. The two primary aircraft used in the logistical effort were US Army CH-47 Chinooks and US Airforce C-130's. The problem was that much of the cargo that was carried by the Chinooks could have been easily carried by the C-130's. As long as the airfield was open C-130's

were able to operate. By proper planning and staff work more effective use could have been made of fixed wing assets. Large numbers of refugees could have been carried out of the city on C-130's. This was not the case and the Chinooks were used almost exclusively for back-hauling refugees.

Another problem area involving the Chinooks was that the PZ's were not well organized and many of the sling loads were poorly rigged or improperly loaded. This resulted in a great deal of wasted blade time.

In the future this problem should be anticipated and steps should be taken in advance to insure the proper preparations are made. All PZ's and LZ's used by US Chinooks should have US personnel available to advise the Chinook pilots and control the landing area.

Another aircraft that was often times misutilized was the AH-1G Cobra gunship. This aircraft was extremely effective in providing very accurate fire support. However, it has limitations and there are other sources of fire support that can be utilized. Gunships are particularly effective against troops in the open, however, they are not good against bunkers or other hardened targets.

Often supported units utilized gunships to engage bunker complexes and large area targets. These targets would have been more appropriate artillery or TAC air targets. Many times artillery and TAC air were available. The fact that gunships were so responsive often led to a reliance on them instead of organic weapons such as artillery.

As US units draw down, aviation assets will be reduced. A greater emphasis must be placed on the proper utilization of all aircraft. This may require an adjustment in tactical operations and a greater effort in planning but preparations must be made if we are to continue to effectively operate with reduced assets.

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The airborne TOW system proved to be extremely effective. It is my belief that the system had a significant impact on the battle for Kontum.

The aircraft was able to standoff from its target an average distance of 2500 meters while flying at an altitude well out of small arms range and engage point type targets with a very high first round hit probability. I believe that if this system was available in large numbers it would greatly reduce enemy armor capability and revolutionize the battle field. It may be possible to conduct counter attacks against large enemy armor penetrations by employing TOW aircraft working closely with friendly armor units.

An area that needs more attention is aircraft vulnerability. Many of our aircraft received hits in areas where other aircraft had previously been hit or shot at. I believe one of our great shortcomings was our lack of attention to enemy anti-aircraft locations.

Surprisingly, the enemy anti-aircraft fire was not as intense in the area of operation, during the battle, as we had expected. However, we did suffer heavy losses. There was not enough emphasis placed on keeping up with enemy AA positions as there should have been. Consequently, our pilots went out on missions not really aware of enemy locations. This resulted in aircraft being hit while flying over known enemy locations.

This situation can be corrected by insuring that shot at and hit reports are submitted as soon as possible after the incident. Secondly, that this information is disseminated to the units so that they can post their map boards and keep them current. Thirdly, and probably most important, that the aviators receive a thorough briefing on enemy locations each day before they go out on missions.

Air Cav operations were essential to the successful defense of Kontum. The Cav troops were our primary source of reliable and timely intelligence information.

It is because of the critical role they played that we should look at their operations. During most of the battle there were two air cav troops employed in the Pleiku and Kontum area. The cav troops however, were sometimes poorly utilized.

Several lessons can be extracted from our experience.

One of the problems which arose as enemy activity increased was over reaction. This was a problem that continued in one form or another throughout the battle. Enemy activity was continually reported over a vast area of operations. Often times the Cav was bounced from one area to another reacting to suspected enemy locations or unconfirmed enemy sightings. This greatly reduced the efficiency of the air cav.

It must be expected that as the enemy was near there will be an increase in activity in all sectors. Someone in the Chain of Command must decide what area the Cav will operate in. This area must be realistic in size. Once the Cav is committed to conducting reconnaissance in an area a great deal of thought should be given to any decision to relocate them.

Another problem that frequently arose when the friendly forces were in contact with the enemy was the use of the Cav gunships to fire in support of local units. By doing this the Cav team was broken up and no longer effective.

The lessons we should have learned are:

1. Air Cav units should be given an area to work in and be allowed to work the area thoroughly before being pulled out to look in other areas. The areas designated for the Cav should be carefully selected to insure that the time spent in them will be worth while, i.e., quite likely to produce meaningful information. Too often the Cav units were sent into areas that were known to be void of enemy

activity or areas too far out from the battle area to be of consequence.

2. Air Cav troops work in teams consisting of scout aircraft or LOH's, a C&C aircraft, and AH-1G gunships which provide cover for the scouts. It is essential that the team remain intact. Gunships working as part of a Cav team should not be used to provide fire support for local units. This degrades the Cav potential for operating as it should in a reconnaissance role.

This paper is intended as a summary of the events that took place during the battle of Kontum. The observations are not intended as criticism of anyone. I believe that many of the lessons learned can be translated to other battle fields at other times. I apologize for any errors of commission or omission in its contents as I am sure that there are more than a few.

# BATTLE of KONTUM

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MOUNTAINOUS AREA

