

Lying on top of a bunker on the northeast side of the Tan Canh perimeter, Captain Raymond H. Dobbins, acting Senior Advisor to the 42nd ARVN Regiment, paid little attention to the constant volleys of artillery and rocket fire which fell like rain on the beleaguered 22nd Division Forward compound. Although he was naked and unprotected to this deadly and accurate fire, he continued to perform in a calm manner as he methodically directed US airstrikes onto targets given to him by his Vietnamese counterpart. He knew that the battalion of the 42nd which was supported by 4 M-41 tanks in performing this operation was also taking a fierce pounding from the mixed 122mm, 130mm, and 82mm fire and that they needed the US airpower he was providing if they were to clear this area which was so dangerously close to their perimeter. It was the ^{23rd} ~~23rd~~ of April 1972 and all of the signs of an imminent enemy offensive had been present since early January, but the long awaited campaign had not yet begun. Contacts with large ^{main} ~~regular~~ NVA forces had increased significantly in the past two weeks as the Tan Canh/Dak To II area had seen itself become incircled by a ring of hostile forces. The daily rain of artillery fire had increased from 20 to 50 rounds per day in late March and early April to approximately 1000 rounds a day in the past two weeks. NVA forces had already secured key terrain to the north and east of the Tan Canh compound and were thus able to place accurate observed fire onto the forces inside.

His attention was momentarily diverted to the area of the main gate where one of the M-41 tanks had gone to unload a crewman who had been wounded by small arms fire. At that moment ^a brilliant flash and accompanying roar signified that the tank had been hit by an enemy anti-tank weapon and destroyed. Due to the frequency with which the enemy had been

utilizing the B-40 rocket, the Vietnamese immediately reported this as the cause of the explosion to CPT Dobbins. Dobbins quickly radioed a spot report to the DIV TOC where the call was taken by Major John Wise the G3 advisor. Major Wise brought this to the attention of Colonel Philip Kaplan, the Senior Advisor to the 22nd DIV and LTC Terrence McClain, the DSA at the 22nd DIV TOC. After a brief terrain analysis the three agreed that the terrain was not suitable for a B-40 rocket since its effective range is only 200 meters and there was over 500 meters of open terrain where the tank was hit. Col Kaplan, LTC McClain and Major George Carter the Senior Advisor to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, proceeded to the destroyed tank. At that moment another wire guided missile whisked over their heads and struck another tank some 150 meters to the north of their position at the main gate. LTC McClain ran to the vehicle gathering up some 30 to 40 meters of thin copper wire as he ran. He noticed a small hole about the size of a silver dollar in the frontal armor. Underneath the tank was the tail assembly of the rocket which was still very hot. Examination revealed this assembly to be about 3 inches in diameter with 2 bobbins of wire attached and 2 jet nozzles on its body for directional control. The three advisors quickly returned to the DIV TOC as Dobbins continued his methodical direction of air onto suspected enemy locations. In the period before Kaplan, McClain and Carter returned to the TOC 2 more guided missiles were fired from the highground to the northeast in the vicinity of a Buddhist Pagoda. Major Wise informed Col Kaplan of this upon his arrival back in the TOC. All agreed that the introduction of this sophisticated equipment might signal the beginning of the long awaited offensive. The time was 10:31 AM. At that moment a large explosion rocked the TOC sending people and equipment crashing about; and then it was quiet except for the unceasing artillery fire which continued to shake the earth above.

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Military Region Two is the largest tactical zone in the Republic of Vietnam, containing 47 percent of the country's total land area. However, it contains only 3 million people or 18 percent of the population. For this reason the rolling, sparsely populated central highlands was a war theater where neither side tried very hard to win. Both NVA/VC and ARVN forces practiced what military strategists refer to as an economy of force. Each year during the dry season the Annamite Mountains in Kontum Province became an area of increasing enemy activity and 1972 was no exception. ³ No 10 yet

As early as the middle of December 1971, the allied forces in the central highlands of MR II began to receive reports of preparation being made by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) for a major offensive in the winter/spring of 1972. ARVN intelligence reports and interrogation of PW's and Hoi Chanh's told of large scale enemy troop movements from base areas in Cambodia and Laos into northern Kontum Province. These people also reported that the campaign would be a 3 phase offensive with Phase I from 27 January until 7 February; Phase II from 7 February to 14 February; Phase III from 14 February to 29 February. The high point of the offensive was to be characterized by attacks on Tan Canh/Dak To II the fire support bases on Rocket Ridge, and the main population centers of Kontum City and Pleiku City. ^{4/1} In addition VC local ^{force} activity in the southern portion of MR II and in the coastal provinces would increase in an attempt to stretch the ^{regular} ~~regular~~ Army of Vietnam (ARVN) forces very thin and thus make the highlands vulnerable to a multi-divisional attack in Kontum Province. With the supporting attacks of VC units in traditionally VC Binh Dinh Province, a success on the Kontum battlefield would enable the NVA to successfully slice the Republic of Vietnam in half and thus discredit

the Vietnamization program, which was characterized by the drawdown of US maneuver battalions and the relegation of the remaining 60,000 US military personnel in Vietnam to advisory roles, had been a loudly proclaimed success by the Nixon administration. Its failure would be a disastrous blow to US foreign policy, and in turn give the NVA/VC a decided advantage at the negotiating table. 5

Intelligence sources identified the controlling headquarters for the NVA offensive in the Central Highlands as the B3 Front. Its major combat units

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were the 320th NVA Division, the 2nd NVA Division, and the organic combat units of the B3 Front which equaled another division size unit. These NVA units were supplemented by VC main force and local force units and the ^{203rd} ~~202nd~~ Armor Regiment from Hanoi High Command. ⁶

Due to the ever increasing indication of a TET offensive, the US advisors in MR II worked closely with their counterparts to utilize the remaining US assets in Vietnam. These assets were the Air Cavalry, tactical air support and B-52 strikes. The Air Cavalry was used to reconnoiter known enemy base areas along the Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam border and also the area to the northwest of Kontum City known as the Plei Trap Valley. The Air Cavalry together with Air Force forward air controllers were able to detect training areas with mock-up tanks, mortar positions and large bunker complexes.⁷

During the last week of January the first sightings were made of enemy armor activity east of Base Area 609. On 25 January two Cobra gunship pilots from the 361st Aerial Weapons Company reported sighting and engaging two tanks in the Plei Trap Valley just west of Rocket Ridge. The pilots also saw four other tanks under trees in the area. In this same area another team of Cobra gunships reported sighting six sets of tracks made by tracked vehicles. Even though subsequent visual reconnaissance did not locate the tanks the tracks indicated that the enemy had at least one armor company in the area. Subsequent tank sightings by US gunships occurred on 30 January and sporadically from this time forward. however, the various reports could not be substantiated by ground action and therefore, little credence was given to these reports by the SRAC advisory staff. Through the results of these reconnaissance efforts and the patrolling of the Border Rangers from FSB at Dak Pek, Dak Seang, and Ben Het the US advisors were able to coordinate over

60 B-52 strikes during the month of January. Friendly territorial forces, the Regional (RF) and Popular (PF) forces, increased their operations during January with several battalion size ground and airmobile operations being conducted while ARVN regular forces concentrated on strengthening their defenses in Kontum and Binh Dinh Provinces. ⁸

Upon evaluation of all available intelligence, the ARVN II Corps staff led by LTG Ngo Dzu developed their plan for the defense of the Central Highlands. It is significant to note that while the US advisors were kept informed of all developments, the Vietnamese themselves were the sole draftsman of the plan which was formulated. The key US figure in this process was John Paul Vann, the only civilian ever selected to head the advisory effort in one of South Vietnam's military regions. Vann had spent over 11 years in Vietnam, first in a military capacity and then as a civilian, and was very highly respected among the Vietnamese people. ⁹

Again during the first week of February VNAF and US Air Cavalry continued to report sightings of enemy armor as anxiety for the expected offensive began to build. Documents captured during the week of 4-10 February confirmed the presence of the 320th NVA Division in the B3 Front. The document also stated that the 320th was composed of the 48th, 52nd, and 64th Infantry Regiments and the 54th Artillery Regiment. The total strength of the division and its special battalions was listed as 10,400 men. An accompanying document revealed that both 122mm and 130mm Soviet field guns with ranges upward of 17 miles were being infiltrated to the Tri-border area. ¹⁰

With this added information LTG Dzu appointed Col Le Duc Dat as commander of the ARVN 22nd DIV Forward CP and ordered them to move the CP, the 47th Regt, and logistical support to the Tan Canh/Dak To II area which was already occupied by the 22nd Division's 42nd Regt. The movement of the logistical and

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Division main elements from the division base camp in Ba Gi, Binn Dinh, occurred on the 7th and 8th of February and was accomplished very efficiently.¹¹ In addition elements of the 19th Cavalry were ordered to the Tan Canh area to reinforce the division's organic 14th Cavalry Regiment. Col Dat placed this new armor support at Ben Het since he felt that any NVA armor assault must come from this direction. LTC Toung, the II Corps armor advisor argued against this deployment since it tied down the highly mobile armor to static positions, and it would be better if it was kept in a more mobile role.¹² The 2nd Airborne Brigade from Saigon's strategic reserve was also committed and placed on the fire support bases on Rocket Ridge. LTG Dzu also defined his command structure. Col Dat was placed in command in the Dak Lo area to include the Border Ranger camps at Ben Het, Dak Mot, Dak Pek, Dak Seang, and FSB Sand 6. Col Long, Kontum Province Chief was responsible for Kontum City and Col Tuong the Corps Deputy for operations was given command in Pleiku.¹³

However, TET arrived and there was no offensive. Nevertheless, the sightings of enemy battlefield preparation began to increase and grow closer to the stated objectives they would attack. In response to this continued buildup the USAB conducted its own offensive flying more than 80 B-52 missions in the Tan Canh area during the first three weeks of February in an effort to disrupt the enemy's timetable.¹⁴

President Nixon's visit to Communist China from 21 to 28 February led many to believe that widespread enemy activity would occur during this period so as to discredit this important meeting between the two powers. Once again the enemy acted contrary to intelligence estimates as he continued to avoid direct engagements but increased his interdicting attacks on the lines of communications and minor installations. The number of PW's and Hoi Chanh's decreased to only a trickle which in previous years was a precursor of impending attack. Sur-

veillance continued to indicate an eastward movement of enemy supplies into Kontum Province in amounts not experienced in any previous enemy offensive.

The delay in the offensive was attributable to the difficulties the NVA/VC units were encountering in getting their forward logistics moved into attack positions. These difficulties were caused by the massive US B-52 and tactical air strikes in the base areas and as follow up attacks in response to Air Cavalry surveillance and ARVN intelligence reports. Thus the TET period had been peaceful. Nevertheless, the ominous signs of the preparation of the battlefield by means of bunker and road construction, reconnaissance operations, and movement into attack positions portended of a massive enemy offensive which the highlands had never before experienced and that the attack will be launched when the enemy's personnel and logistical pattern is optimized and changing weather favors his greater freedom of movement. To further bolster the defense of the highlands, the Airborne Division Headquarters and another brigade moved to Kontum in the first week of March and took over responsibility for defense of Kontum City and the southern portion of Kontum Province. ¹⁵

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~~optimistic and changing weather favors his greater freedom of movement.~~
~~As the Ides of March approached contacts with larger enemy units began~~

to increase significantly. The most notable of these incidents was initiated by the 2nd Airborne Brigade along Rocket Ridge which resulted in the capture of several PW's and one Hoi Chanh. The contacts were with NVA battalion size forces and marked the end of the period of enemy reluctance to engage in major combat. The rallier and PW's reported that the 320th NVA DIV would support the B3 Front and participate in an offensive during the period of April to September. The sources also reported many tanks in the base areas through which they had moved and that NVA armor units would accompany B3 Front ground forces during the coming offensive. They also told of massive casualties and destruction inflicted on units in their area by B-52 strikes. 16

There were three other significant enemy thrusts. One of these occurred 30KM north of Kontum City where the 23rd Ranger Battalion was assessing a B-52 strike. They became surrounded, and it was necessary to employ large amounts of tactical airstrikes, artillery, and supporting B-52 strikes to break up the attack. Another less intense engagement occurred between the 95th Border Ranger Bn and the 141st Regiment, 2nd NVA DIV north of Ben Het. Finally at the end of the month elements of the 47th Regiment and the 2nd Airborne Brigade once again came into heavy contact along Rocket Ridge. These contacts were supported by B-52's and US and VNAF tac air which took a heavy toll on the attacking NVA forces.

These successful ARVN offensive actions and the NVA/VC's failure to launch their announced offensive on schedule had an adverse effect on the II Corps Staff as they began to doubt whether the enemy possessed the capability to attack his stated objectives. It was felt that the continued pressure on the enemy through the use of increased patrolling, the aggressiveness of the

2nd ABN BDE's offensive action and the massive continuing use of available air resources was harassing the enemy and hampering his timetable for the preparation of the battlefield. If ARVN could continue his aggressive ground activity coupled with continued massive air support it would deny the enemy the initiative and reduce the size, duration and effectiveness of any planned offensive. 17

In the first week of April this estimate appeared to be accurate as the 320th NVA DIV's 48th and 52nd Regiment continued to conduct human wave assaults on the fire bases on Rocket Ridge. B-52's and tac air continued to pound at the massed enemy forces in this area until 4 to 5 battalions were rendered combat ineffective. This information was affirmed by a PW captured in one of these attacks but the PW also reported reinforcements were infiltrating daily and the units were regaining their original strength. At the same time the 42nd and 47th ARVN Regts were in heavy contact north and east of Dak To with elements of the 2nd NVA DIV and the 66th Regiment of the B3 Front. PW's captured in these contacts indicated that the mission of the 2nd DIV was to attack and occupy Dak To II airfield and the Headquarters of the 42nd ARVN Regt at Tan Canh. Additionally they were to destroy friendly artillery units along Provincial Route 512. The 66th Regt had performed 4 reconnaissance missions of the Tan Canh compound and were in the final planning stages for the attack. The PW's did not know the time frame for the attack but were certain it was imminent. 18

Hearing these reports, LTG Dzu, felt that he had insufficient forces in the Dak To area to counter a multi-regimental NVA attack. He therefore wanted to withdraw 9 ARVN battalions from Binh Dinh and thus leave the Province stripped of ARVN regular forces and defended only by RF/PF units.

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Mr. Vann, however, was able to use his tact and expertise to convince LTG Dzu that such a move would prove disastrous. Vann proposed that in its place the AO of the 23rd DIV be adjusted to give it some responsibility in Kontum and thus there would be no need to move the battalions from Binh Dinh. This plan left the friendly order of battle as follows:

- * A. 22nd DIV with a total of 13 battalions consisting of 3 Border Ranger Battalions, 8 ARVN Infantry Battalions and scout companies, cavalry and sector forces and 50 tubes of artillery.
- B. The Airborne Division with a ~~Ranger~~ 6 Airborne Battalions of Infantry 1 Border Ranger Battalion, and 16 tubes of artillery.
- C. Kontum sector with a Ranger Group of 2 battalions, and RF/PF units.
- D. 50 tanks belonging to the 19th Cav and 14th Cav Regts spread between Pleiku and Ben Het.

With this realignment the logistical requirements to support ARVN forces north of Vo Dinh were stretched to a maximum due to the single road access to the area. In this posture the ARVN forces were extremely vulnerable to an envelopment which would isolate all forces north of Vo Dinh. However, LTG Dzu would not acknowledge the fact that there were logistical problems. Additionally he was under orders from President Thieu to hold all real estate at all costs. The pressure was becoming greater each day and LTG Dzu began to wilt under the weight of such a burden.

His problems were compounded by the ineffective and uninspiring leadership of Col Dat, the 22nd DIV commander, who was in command in the critical Dak To area. This fact was fully illustrated by his handling of a combat assault which was made by the 9th ABN BN under his control in Dak To and resulted in the loss of 2 helicopters, a failure to exploit 2 B-52 strikes and a bad feeling between the 22nd DIV and the ABN DIV.¹⁹

On 14 April FSB C received over 300 mixed 105mm Howitzer and 75 recoilless rifle rounds accompanied by a ground attack by the 48th NVA Regt. Although US Cobras and tac air were able to slow the initial advance, at 2230 the 11th ABN BN was forced to withdraw. Major John Duffy, the Senior Advisor to the battalion was the last to leave the positions and as he left under the cover of the cobras he noted that 5 of the 9 anti-aircraft guns that had ringed FSB C had been destroyed and that upwards of 1000 bodies of the 48th Regt were stacked like cordwood on the perimeter wire. ²⁰

The 42nd and 47th Regts continued in their attempts to control the ridge-lines around Tan Canh/Dak To II. The battalions were slowly falling back to the main compound. The 1/42 became isolated by an estimated 2 enemy battalions on the 19th and resupply was impossible. Relief attempts were feeble by Col Dat and on the 21st after running out of all ammunition only 63 of the 360 men in the battalion returned to the Regimental compound. ²¹

On 20 April orders from Saigon required the release of an Airborne Brigade of 3 battalions and the Division Light CP from MR II. To fill the gap left by the departing forces the 6th Ranger Group was brought in from Hue, and the 23rd DIV assumed the old Airborne AO with its 45th and 53rd Regiments.

At 1930 hours on 21 April the ARVN forces on FSB D on Rocket Ridge were overrun. Artillery fire had been heavy for several days, but the defenders composed of one company of Airborne and one company of the 2nd Ranger Group, held until an NVA attack supported by 3 tanks forced them to withdraw. To offset the two recent setbacks on Rocket Ridge LTG Dzu thinned out the Dak To area by moving some of his artillery to Dien Binh and Dak To District giving depth to the battlefield. Vann had been urging this move for several weeks but had been unable to convince Dzu of its value until now. ²²

On paper the defenses in the Tan Canh area appeared formidable and adeq-

uate. The Airborne Brigade and Rangers on the fire support bases on Rocket Ridge were well supplied and were considered to be excellent combat units by the American Advisors. The 47th ARVN Regiment at Dak To II had a company of tanks supporting it and also one battalion of Airborne. They also had two 106mm recoilless rifles and numerous M72 light assault weapons for anti-tank defense. The 22nd LIV at Tan Cann had the 47th Regt and one battalion of the 41st Regt in the vicinity of the compound. Inside the compound there were some 1200 combat and combat support troops. ^{However} ~~Although~~ 900 of these belonged to the Logistics Battalion and were not organized into the defensive plan of the compound. The compound relied on two 106 recoilless rifles for its main anti-tank defense and in addition had over one hundred M72's and a company of M-41 tanks. There were over 50 tubes of 105mm and 155mm artillery in support of the area. The area appeared to be prepared for the multi-division attack which threatened. ^B

The Div TOC was a 45 ft by 30 ft reinforced bunker of ^{beams} ~~bars~~ and PSP fencing with ^a double layer of sandbags and was buried about 8 ft underground. The impact of the blast which had tossed everyone about like matchsticks had blown out several walls, ^{totally} ~~totally~~ destroyed the TOC's communication room and equipment and the sleeping area of the ARVN Div TOC officers. As LTC McClain pulled himself to his feet the ringing sensation caused by the blast continued to rush through his head. His mind had cleared enough to realize that Col Kaplan and Major Wise had serious head wounds. ^{No} ~~Other~~ other US appeared injured at that time but there were about 20 ARVN dead and seriously wounded writing in pain on the debris strewn floor of the crippled TOC, 1LT John Jones, OPNS OFF, and Captain David Stewart, Div Signal Officer, began to bandage Wise and Kaplan, as McClain saw to similar details with the wounded

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ARVN. Everyone went about the task of caring for the wounded in a ~~businesslike~~ manner. Col Kaplan was the first man to notice that a curtain of smoke was ^{beginning} ~~beginning~~ to ^{fill with} ~~spread~~ in the TOC. The ~~K~~ ^Krescued timbers which reinforced the bunker in the communications room had been ignited by the blast and were starting to burn furiously. There were no fire extinguishers present and ^{after} ~~after~~ several futile attempts to douse the flames with water it was decided to evacuate the bunker. LTC Kaplan and McClain saw to it that everyone was removed from the bunker ^{before} ~~before~~ they themselves ^{scrambled} ~~scrambled~~ from the flaming tomb. 24

In the interim Stewart and Major ^{Sullivan} ~~James~~ Warmath had begun to set up a new ARVN ~~TOC~~ in the 42nd Regimental ~~TOC~~ using US signal equipment, ~~XXXXXX~~ since all that the ARVN Div staff had owned was destroyed when the missile ^{destroyed} ~~destroyed~~ their former bunker. Working ^{efficiently} ~~efficiently~~ and arduously the Div slowly regained a certain amount of its ^m ~~composure~~. But a seed of fatalism had been implanted in the mind of nearly every member of the ARVN Div staff and most importantly in the mind of their leader Col Dat. The wire guided ^{devastated} ~~devastated~~ missile which had ~~devastated~~ the command bunker had destroyed for it had shattered the 22nd Div's confidence in themselves and an outlook of "whatever will be will be. The NVA are better ^{soldiers} ~~soldiers~~ and must win" had ^{settled} ~~settled~~ over nearly every responsible ^{individual} ~~individual~~. 25

As of 1200 hours the enemy had taken a heavy toll on the ARVN forces through the use of the wire guided missile. The five M-41 tanks within the compound were all destroyed by the missile. Several bunkers were hit to include the Div TOC and a bunker which had a 106 ~~recoiler~~ ^{recoiler} rifle on it for anti-tank defense. But the most important destruction had been

psychological and this factor alone was ^{Ominous} ~~ominous~~ for the ^{coming} ~~caning~~ events.

At 11 AM ^{J.P. guided} Vann ~~guided~~ his OH-58 LOH through the heavy incoming artillery fire which had ~~increased to 200 rounds a minute~~ ^{decaying} and landed at Tan Canh to inquire about the ^{decaying} ~~decaying~~ situation. He noticed that there was no ARVN counter ^{fire} battery and that the ^{medevac} ~~medevac~~ of wounded ARVN soldiers which was in progress was ~~an~~ all US effort on the ground. After discussing the situation with the advisors, Vann directed them to devise a plan for escape and evasions. He then departed taking with him several Vietnamese ²⁶ ~~civilian~~ who were employed by the advisors.

LTC McClain and MAJ Warmoth worked constantly during the afternoon to insure that all of the wounded were evacuated. In addition to directing the helicopters through ^{the} ~~max~~ of artillery fire which had increased to 3 or 4 rounds per minute, the advisory team was also carrying the ~~latter~~ ^{latter} patients to the awaiting aircraft. The remainder of the advisors were engaged in the direction of tac air onto the countless enemy targets in the vicinity of the compound. With the exception of the increased artillery fire and small ground probes the remainder of the afternoon and early evening passed rather insignificantly. It was not until 1900 hours that the enemy made his next move in the human chess match. At this time the NVA/VC lined up ten B-40 and B-41 rocket launchers on the high ground near the L-19 airstrip. Aided by the heavy barrage of artillery which kept the ARVN forces under cover they were able to lob rounds of B-40 into the ammunition dump. After several direct hits they were able to ~~ignite~~ ^{ignite} a large fire which set off a chain of explosions destroying the stored ammunition. ²⁷

At 2100 hours CPT Richard Cassidy the DSA of DAK TO ^{District} ~~SA~~ received word from his counterpart that tanks were moving through the hamlet of DAK ^{Blung} ~~BOUNG~~ toward DAK TO Dist Headquarters. Cassidy in turn relayed this report to the 22nd Div TOC and requested that a Spectre gunship with its 105mm gun and 2 x

40mm guns be made available to check out this report.

At 2300 hours Spectre arrived in the Tan Canh area and immediately began to scan the Dak Brung hamlet area with his infrared and television tracking mechanisms. After a period of continuous search of 15 minutes ~~he~~ located his prey. A ^{column} ~~column~~ of 18 tanks was moving from west to east toward Dak To District Headquarters. Spectre reported his discovery to the 22nd Advisors and began to engage the tanks with his 105mm cannon. Within Tan Canh itself this discovery initiated a flurry of activity. LTC Thong, 42nd REGT CO, sent his deputy to the water tower on the northwest side of the perimeter to direct airstrikes onto the encroaching enemy. CPT Ken ~~Jonan~~, DSA 42nd REGT accompanied his counterpart to the tower and prepared to direct Spectre onto the tanks should they turn toward Tan Canh. COL Kaplan called the DCAT together ~~and~~ made sure that they all knew the E&E plan since it appeared a major attack was imminent and ARVN was not attempting any countermeasures. He then placed the advisors in selected bunkers to await the outcome of the initial engagements. ²⁸

Spectre meanwhile had reported 3 tanks kills around Dak Brung hamlet. Local RF/PF forces captured one of these tanks and found that strangely enough there was no visible damage. A group of NVA Sappers then came down the road and the RF/PF fled leaving the tank which the NVA drove off. It ^{thus} ~~then~~ became evident that although Spectre claimed a kill when a vehicle he was engaging stopped moving, his 105 cannon was having only marginal success in destroying the enemy armor. Since the vehicles were T-54's (or Chi Com T-57's) the only vulnerable points on the vehicles were the rear fuel tanks and rear engine compartment. ^{and} Thus, a hit anywhere else would cause some casualties among the crew but not necessarily disable the vehicle. ³⁰

About 2400 hours the enemy armor column turned south onto a newly built road and headed for Tan Canh and the 22nd Div. COL Kaplan desperately advised the ARVN artillery commander to get his people to fire on the tanks before it was too late, and they were overrun. His pleadings were answered with a 4 gun Volley which Spectre claimed hit one ~~POL~~ vehicle and landed within 5 ft of one of the advancing T-54's.

Kaplan applauded the Vietnamese for their efforts but an intensified barrage of enemy artillery sent the ^{ARVN} artillerymen scurrying for their bunkers and ended all attempts to engage the oncoming enemy with indirect fire. 31

The column of steel had to cross two bridges to reach the 22nd Div compound. Both bridges were across non-fordable streams and were defended by a platoon of RF/PF. Having no anti-tank capability, the RF/PF's evacuated their bridge positions when faced with the advancing armor, and the tanks continued into the outskirts of Tan Canh village. However, here strangely enough, some of the tanks stopped while others drove back toward Dak To. Spectre requested permission to fire on the tanks which had entered the town but was refused due to th presence of the civilians dependents of the ARVN troops who occupied the village. Dobbins persuaded LTC Thong to deploy one company of the 42nd in tank ^{hunter/KILLER} ~~killer~~ teams and move out to seek out the enemy armor. Their efforts were rewarded with reports of 2 kills by these teams on the western edge of town. It was now 0326 hours and Spectre reported 10 of the tanks had split off from Tan Canh and travelled to the high ground north of the compound near the L-19 strip. The remaining vehicles were proceeding south of Tan Canh village and then west toward the compound. Spectre returned to Bleiku to refuel and rearm and was replaced by another Spectre gunship ^{that} ~~which~~ was armed only with two 20mm cannon and two 40mm cannon which were not capable of destroying a T-54. From his vantage point in the water ^{tower} CPT Yonan was able to place Spectre's fire onto troop concentrations which were moving ever closer to the compound. Dobbins had been on the east side of the perimeter near the main gate with LTC Thong since the first reports of the enemy armor were received. In the distance the sounds of the grinding of tracked vehicles was almost drowned out by the incessant pounding of the NVA's artillery. He ^{glanced} ~~glanced~~ quickly at his watch noting that it was 0515 and morning would soon arrive. Why didn't they attack was the question foremost in his mind? His question was soon answered by the roar of engines and the awesome sight of a solid wall of headlights as the tanks turned on their headlights and advanced through the early

morning haze. As they began their assault they opened fire with their machine guns (12,62 and co-ax) and raked the front line bunkers of the perimeter near the main gate with their deadly and lethal fire. At the same moment the tanks which had moved to the highground near the L-19 airstrips began to support ^{by} fire an infantry assault on the northern perimeter while a second infantry assault hit the southern perimeter which was defended by the recon company of the 42nd. Dobbins informed the TOC of the advance of the armor and also of a mass exodus of ARVN soldiers through the wire. The sight and sound of the advancing enemy armor was too much for the 900 undisciplined and unorganized support troops within the compound, and they fled in fear. The tanks crossed the bridge and moved on line toward the main gate. Dobbins and LTC Thong remained in positions near the gate in an attempt to build up the confidence of the combat troops there who had seen the support troops break and flee in terror. Having heard of the fleeing of the support troops in the TOC Colonel Kaplan diagnosed the situation as ^{critical} ~~critical~~ and alerted the DCAT advisors to prepare to be extracted if the situation turned any worse and ARVN did not hold. He did not have to wait long for the next report from Dobbins 5 minutes later placed the advancing tanks at the main gate and ARVN was unable to stop them. His transmission was cut out by ^{three} 105 shells which impacted the TOC ^{on} knocking down the ^{antennas} ~~antennas~~ ending all ~~communication~~ ^{communication} with Dobbins and the outside world. At this report the Division Advisors recognized that they were in no position to continue to influence the action by their presence and as they exited the TOC, they secured their weapons, radio and 2 LAW's and ventured out into the compound. They headed west past the shelled messhall and BOQ they had called home for the past 3 months and proceeded to the vicinity of the water tower where Ken Yonan was still perched in hopes of thwarting the attack if ^{tac air} ~~TAC AIR~~ came into the area. But the morning haze was too low for high performance aircraft and gunships were still some 30 minutes away. 32

Captain Stewart who was carrying the PRC-25 radioed Yonan and told him to come down out of the tower and move with them to the west where they would be extracted. Yonan said he was unable to move at that time but would join them later. His reply was silenced by the sound of two rounds of T-54 main gun as they impacted on the water tower where Yonan was perched. A quick call by Stewart again to Yonan to evacuate the tower received the reply that he was ~~OK~~ but could not leave at that time. Dodging impacting artillery shells as they ran the advisors proceeded to the western perimeter where they were greeted by the sight of a T-54 with its exterior fuel tanks blazing barreling down the road from north to south just outside of the wire. It happened so quickly that they were unable to engage the tanks with their LAW's. However, as a second ^{came} tank ~~ran~~ into view LTC McClain and LT Jones prepared their weapons for engagement but were frustrated by two malfunctions as the second T-54 moved quickly past. Amazingly there was no infantry in support of the two tanks. Realizing that this was their opportunity to exit from their entrapment the advisor moved quickly across the road. They halted and dropped to the ground since ahead of them lay 200 meters of open ground which they remembered was an ARVN minefield. A wounded ARVN soldier lay ~~with his~~ ^{lying} in pain just a few meters away. After quickly applying first aid the ARVN told the advisors he knew the way through the minefield and ~~then~~ ^{they} proceeded to lead them across the open terrain to the other side of the clearing where they took up positions to ponder their next move. 33

John Vann had been awake most of the previous night as reports filtered in to the II Corps headquarters in Pleiku and at first light he and his pilot Captain Richard Todd were already in the air heading for Tan Canh. He had no communication with the advisors since enemy ^{armor} ~~armor~~ had begun their assault on the compound. Arriving in the air over Tan Canh, Vann was able to establish communication with Stewart on the ground. The urgency of the situation did not allow for the formalities of good radio telephone operating procedures. 34

Communications were on a first name basis as Vann assessed the situation and requested instruction on how best to come in and pick up the advisors. Col Kaplan decided it would be best to move 200 more meters to the west since small arms fire was picking up near their present position. While one group of 6 men moved the remaining 3 supported by fire and then joined the first group several hundred meters to the west of the compound. Finally it was decided that Vann could come in his OH-58 and extract the first group of advisors. In this group were Major Carter, Major Warmath, Captain Kellar, LT Jones, Sgt Ward, and Specialist Zollenkoher. As Vann lifted off with the first group, several frightened ARVN soldiers ^{grabbed} ~~fell~~ onto the skids of the helicopter. Stewart warned Vann of this but Vann was well aware of his increased load as he flew off at tree top level toward the west. Due to his fear that the Vietnamese hanging onto the skids would fall before he could reach Ben Het, Vann instead sat down at Dak To II where LTC ^{Robert} ~~Brownlee~~ and Captain Charles ~~arden~~, advisors to the 47th Regt, awaited them and whisked them into a bunker as Vann lifted off to head back for Tan Canh and the remaining advisors. It was only a short 5 minute trip back to the place he had left the remaining advisors, but as he sat the aircraft down it was swamped by 15-20 ARVN soldiers who were panicked with fear. While attempting to lift off with this load, the helicopter crashed but Vann often called the man with 9 lives, and Captain Todd escaped to be picked up shortly by another aircraft which then located the three remaining US, Kaplan, McClain and Stewart. Panicky ARVN troops again tried to crowd aboard but the helicopter took off leaving them stranded on the ground. Thirty minutes later the aircraft landed at Pleiku. ³⁴

LTC Brownlee and Captain Carden had listened intently to the 6 US who had been deposited with them as they told of the T-54 and infantry attack on Tan Canh and of their escape. Dak TO II itself was encountering increasing artillery ^{and} mortar fire and some ground probes. It was less than 1 hour since the attack had begun on Tan Canh. The helicopter which had originally been ~~scheduled~~ to be used for the command and control helicopter of the 22nd DIV was ~~diverted~~ to Dak To II where it was to evacuate the ~~SIX~~ 22nd DCAT advisors. Cpt Carden had carefully noted the NVA antiaircraft weapons on his map and briefed the aircraft pilot over the radio. The aircraft made its ^{approach} ~~approach~~ from the southwest as per instruction and weaved its way to the compound helipad where the 6 passengers awaited. The helicopter took some small arms fire from the dense ~~undercover~~ around the perimeter but landed and then ~~lifted~~ off with out damage. However, contrary to instructions the pilot exited to the northwest and flew into a crossfire of two antiaircraft guns. The helicopter burst into flames and crashed on the southern side of the perimeter. From Carden's vantage point he concluded that there were no survivors since the ball of flames and crash had killed all those aboard. IT was 0730, 24 April 1972 and the fate of the 12 men on board Gladiator 17 would not be known until 13 days later. ³⁵ //

Back in the 42nd compound Dobbins, ^{who} ~~who~~ had chosen to remain until the bitter end, and LTC Thong were feverishly working to reconstitute the defenses of the shattered troops of the 42nd. By 0630 the NVA had pierced the northeast perimeter with their ^{armor} ~~armor~~ leading, closely followed by the infantry. After initially repelling a Battalion size infantry assault on the southern peremeter the Recon company had been ~~overrun~~ by sheer numbers although the more than 100 bodies on the wire attested to their valiant fight. The northwestern perimeter ^{was} ~~was~~ penetrated by a Battalion size infantry assault and then exploited by a platoon of T54's.

The enemy artillery continued to rage throughout the attack and even now was pounding about the attackers. The weather had ~~finally~~ ^{Finally} cleared enough for high performance aircraft. Dobbins relayed targets to the air controllers who then rolled in and marked the tanks with smoke. The tanks stopped and attempted no evasive action but the NVA 37mm antiaircraft guns would open up giving the fac's still more targets. Dobbins and Thong continually moved from bunker to bunker hiding in culverts of whatever would lend them cover. At 1000 LTC Thong lost all contact with his elements, and both men decided there was nothing else they could do to influence the situation. Dobbins recent attempts to contact Yonan had been fruitless as he had not heard from him since the water tower had taken the two direct hits by the T-54's. It appeared unlikely that Yonan was still alive in view of the pounding that side of the compound had taken.

^{Thong}
LTC directed Dobbins to follow him as he led the way to his quarters within the inner perimeter. They were followed by about 19 ARVN soldiers. Arriving at the hut Thong opened a trap door revealing a hidden bunker. Climbing inside they closed the door and settled into the darkness as the fighting overhead slowly dwindled to a few isolated pockets of resistance. 36

After reporting the crash of the UH1 Captain Carden and LTC Brownlee ~~was~~ tried in vain to find their counterparts and the 47th command group. The Regimental TOC was deserted, and it appeared that the command group had already decided it was time to exit the danger area. While looking for someone in command, Carden viewed the arrival of two T-54 tanks on the airstrip. One T-54 proceeded to the west end of the airfield along the north road to cover the highway leading into Dak To II from Ben Het where Col Dat had erroneously

positioned the bulk of his armor. The other T-54 wheeled into the center of the airfield from the north and began to systematically fire at and reduce the bunker defenses of the 47th CP. The two remaining operational M-41 tanks maneuvered to the west flank of the T-54 and took it under fire with three rounds each. Carden was only 100 meters from the NVA tank and observed direct hits and smoke, but the enemy tank was not knocked out. The T-54 recovered quickly from the stun of being hit and laid its main gun on the first M-41 ^{but} ~~was~~ missed with the first round at a range of 800 meters. The second round touched home and destroyed ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ the M-41. Immediately the NVA laid on the second M-41 and destroyed it with one round as the wounded crew members abandoned their burning tanks. ³⁷

At this time a relief column of two platoons of M-41's plus a platoon of infantry left Ben Het to counterattack the NVA forces attacking Dak To II. They crossed the Dak Mot bridge and were ambushed by a large NVA force holding the high ground just east of the Dak Mat bridge. The B-40 and RR fire was successful in destroying all of the M-41's and scattering the infantry. ³⁸ This ended all counterattacks by ARVN forces on the 24th. ^R Having witnessed the tank battle, Carden once again located LTC Brownlee and both men decided the compound was in imminent danger of being overrun due to the total lack of command ~~and~~ control of the 47th Regt. At about 1000 hours Carden witnessed, the 9th Airborne Bn which was also located in the compound moving out heading south with no explanation being given. Seeing the Airborne quitting their positions and remembering the US Advisors being extracted by helicopter was psychologically damaging to the troops of the 47th and coupled with desertion of their command group proved to be the final blow in shattering their confidence. With no one to control them they began to leave their positions and head out of the compound. IT was evident → go to next page

to Brownlee and Carden that ^{the} could no longer influence the situation and they decided that no fight was going to occur there on that day. They ~~Gathered~~ ^{Gathered} together their radios and whatever else they could carry, burned some documents and moved out of the base camp in a southeasterly direction.

The Dake Poko River flows along the southern boundary of the compound.

The two advisors along with their Vietnamese interpreter and driver attempted to cross a small footbridge across the river. However, the Air-Borne battalion and elements of the 47th Regt who had followed them were pinned down by a large volume of fire. The river itself was saturated with the bodies of the dead and wounded who had been chopped down while attempting to cross the footbridge. Realizing it was impossible to cross the

river at that location Brownlee and Carden moved cautiously back along the riverbank in a westerly direction until they reached a likely fording spot about 700 meters up the river from the bridge. As they attempted

to ford the river they came under an intense volume of both direct and indirect fire. Finally the group crossed the river and were climbing up the steep bank on the other side when Carden noticed LTC Brownlee

having trouble climbing the bank. Carden motioned to him to move to the left and come up the bank where he had just climbed. Brownlee told Carden to move on and he would be up in a minute. At that moment the

volume of fire increased again forcing Carden to abandon his position on top of the river bank and hurry into the dense underbush about 100 meters away. Several minutes later the firing slackened off and Carden

moved cautiously back to the riverbank in an attempt to locate LTC Brownlee.

He moved several hundred meters up and down the stream in his search but

was unable to locate Brownlee. LTC Brownlee was never heard from again. Gathering his thoughts together Carden and the two Vietnamese began to head south toward FSB Vida where they were picked up two days later. 39

The pounding of US TAC AIR on the NVA around Tan Canh had shaken the bunker where Dobbins and the 20 ARVN were hiding all day. Finally at 8PM Dobbins divided the ARVN's up into 3 man groups and prepared to escape. However, the moon was full and they were detected as they ~~heard~~ the southwest side of the perimeter. Four men were killed in the attempt, and the group finally found a place to hide in ^a pigpen on the eastern bunker line. At midnight the group again attempted to exit the compound but were caught in the illumination of a flare by Spectre who was firing on targets in the area and ^{went} once again detected losing several more men to small arms fire at this time. They returned to the pig pen and waited until about 0430 when the moon finally set for the night. A low ground fog also covered their moves as they successfully exited the perimeter on ^{this} ~~their~~ try. They proceeded south several kilometers and were spotted and picked up the next day. 40

The NVA attaching units at Tan Canh and Dak To II were organic to the 2nd NVA Division. Battalions of the 1st NVA Regt and 141st NVA Regt formed the infantry assault along with the D-10 Sapper Battalion. The T-45 tanks which supported the assaults were from one battalion of (27 tanks are in an NVA tank battalion) the 20th 2nd Armor Regiment. The attack was well coordinated in spite of several miscues in timing. The use of conventional tactics by the enemy was not new in the Indochina war; What was significant was the NVA's heavy commitment of front line troops in an all out effort. During prior offensive such as TET of 1966, VC units led the attacks but the attack on Tan Canh was ~~almost~~ almost entirely an NVA effort. Throughout the 24th and 25th the NVA consolidated their gains and expanded their control from west of ^{the} Dak To II Airstrip and south to Dien Binh. The captured ARVN equipment which was ~~deserted~~ ^{deserted} by the fleeing troops amounted to 123 X 105 MM howitzers, 7 X 155mm howitzers, 11,000 ^{rounds} ~~rounds~~ of 105mm ammunition, 3000 rounds of 155mm ammunition, Division CP communication equipment, trucks, supplies and other small equipment. The ARVN MIA included Colonel Dat and his entire staff. 4/1

The 320th NVA Div continued its pressure on the remaining fire support bases on rocky ridge throughout the attacks on Tan Canh and Dak To II on the 24th. On 25 April, the decision was made by LTG Dzu to abandon the precarious positions at FSB 5 and FSB 6, thus giving the NVA the ability to cover their movements down QL 14 to Kontum City and also to hasten the abandonment of ARVN defensive positions along the route by bringing a heavy volume of fire to bear on their positions.

Simultaneous with the attacks in Kontum Province the 3rd NVA Div and VC main force units attacked the 3 northern ^{most} districts in Binh Dinh. The 40th and 41st ARVN Regiments of the 2nd Div had been

quite successful in recent combat with VC units, but the confrontation with NVA regulars caused them to break and run from LZ English and their other fire bases in the area. This focused all of the attention on the battle brewing for Kontum City. The NVA were within one small but difficult step of ~~it~~ slicing South Vietnam in half. ^{SAN} ~~SON~~ and the US command began to give more attention to John Paul Vann's previous ¹⁹⁴⁵ ~~projections~~ projection that the enemy action at Quang Tri and An Loc were limited in scope and the NVA's real goal was to take Kontum, Pleiku and Binh Dinh Provinces by ^{multiple division} ~~multidivision~~ attacks across the highlands.

To combat the NVA offensive the II Corps ~~staff~~ staff activated the following plan. Col Ba, 23rd Div commander would command all forces in Kontum Province. Blocking positions at VC Binh and south along the Dak Peko river would be manned with 4 Battalions of Rangers. The 53rd AFWN Regt was given the responsibility for Kontum City while the 22nd Agr Bn moved to Poley Kleng to reinforce 1 battalion of Border Rangers which was already there. Vann also sought priority on B-52 strikes which were then placed along Rocket Ridge and over the FSB's which were evacuated. Thousands of refugees, remnants of the 22nd, and missing US advisors were safety factors which had to be considered and hindered the planing of strikes. To get more selectivity in targeting tac air was utilized with over 180 sorties being flown during the 3 days from 24-26 April. ⁴²

By 28 April a great many of the 23rd Div staff was on the move to Kontum city. Colonel Ba was faced with an extremely difficult and hazardous task of molding a conglomeration of units into a cohesive defense. The only unit organic to his command was the 53rd Regt. The 2nd and 6th Ranger Groups, ~~the 2nd and 6th Ranger Groups, the 2nd and 6th Ranger Groups, the 2nd and 6th Ranger Groups~~

the Airborn Brigade, and sector forces under Col Long composed the remaining forces under Col Ba's command. Each of the other unit commanders reported through different a chain of command. Several were full colonels and resented taking orders from another colonel. As a result Colonel Ba had an increasingly ^{difficult} ~~difficult~~ time attempting to get these commanders to respond to his orders. Many times they would not show up for the meetings which made it impossible to adequately plan for the defense without having all of the subordinate commanders available. To solve the problem Vann suggested to LTG Dzu that his deputy MG Phong and the American USA BG Hill fly to Kontum each morning at 0800 to preside over the staff meetings. Their presence insured the attendance of all ~~of~~ the unit commanders and enabled them together with the staff to plan for the defense. ⁴³

Colonel Truby the Senior advisor to the 23rd Div realized that the job facing him and his DCAT was monumental for in a ^{limited} ~~limited~~ amount of time they had to teach the Div staff the concepts of a conventional defense such as limiting points, how the units on the perimeter work together, movement of reserve to counterattack a penetration ^{and} ~~and~~ preparation of routes for ~~possible~~ possible penetrations. Therefore the delaying action which Col Ba directed the 2nd and 6th Ranger Groups to perform ^{was} ~~was~~ critical to insuring that the Div had as much time as possible to train and prepare for the defense. The defensive plan which was developed created an outer defensive line 7 KM from the center of the city. There was one delay position 4 KM in front of the final defensive positions on the edge of the city. Four 155mm howitzers and forty

four 105mm howitzers were available for fire support. The north and west defenses were defended by Rangers with the East and South defended by the 53rd. 44

On 26 April LTG Dzu was ordered to Saigon to see President Thieu. When he returned to Pleiku, he brought word that he had a heart ailment which would cause him to be committed to a hospital in Saigon. Dzu appeared to be shaken from his visit to Saigon and did not wish to discuss it with anyone. However, the cover of a stay in the hospital is a usual one used to conceal the relief of an ARVN general. Dzu left for Saigon for the hospital on 10 May and was replaced by NGT ~~xxx~~ Toan. Toan had been "convalescing" in Saigon after the alleged rape of a 12 years old girl in 1970. However, his reputation as a combat commander and tactician were well accepted in the US advisory channels and his dynamic leadership would be welcome in the II Corps tactical operations area. 45

The 6th Ranger Group arrived

~~Since arriving in MR II on 24 April from the Hue Battelfield~~

~~Major James Givens, senior advisor to the 6th Ranger Group~~

where they heavily MAJOR JAMES GIVENS, SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE 6TH RANGER GROUP, had been ~~heavily engaged~~ 6th Ranger Group had listened to the fall

of Tan Canh on the radio as the group moved into its new position

at FSB Bravo *just north* ~~just south~~ of Vo Dinh where they were co-located with

the 2nd Airborne Brigade Command Post. The next day the Airborne were

ordered to Kontum to board transportation for Saigon and the 6th Group

moved back to FSB Lam Son where they replaced the 2nd Ranger Group who

then moved to FSB November. From Lam Son which is *high* along ~~the edge~~ of

key terrain with a commanding view of QL 14 north to Vo Dinh and south

toward Kontum, Givens and his assistant Captain Vannie observed

the remnants of the 22nd Div struggle past their positions. They were in groups of from 5 to 15 people with very few small arms, no crew served weapons, and many had no steel helmets on web gear which they had discarded in their haste to flee the attacking NVA forces. Surprisingly, although there was no organization, there was no panic as the stragglers looked like they were out for a Sunday stroll down the highway.

Throughout the 25th and 26th sporadic attacks by fire hit the Group CP increasing near the end of the period. The Group had not received heavy casualties, but at 1500 on the 27th, Givens and Vannie along with the Group CP were picked up by VNAF UH1H and helilifted to FSB November over the objections of Givens who advised that since the major elements of the Group were remaining at Lam Son the CP should remain to influence the action. After the departure of the CP from Lam Son the remaining Ranger Battalions, the 34th and 35th, continued to take ground probes and attacks by fire. At 0500 on 1 May the crews of four M-41 tanks at Lam Son abandoned their vehicles in the face of an NVA attack and the NVA then occupied the tanks. Several sorties of VNAF tac air and a USAF Stinger gunship were successful in destroying the tanks and repulsing the NVA.

At 1800 Givens was contacted by the 23rd LCAT NCS and informed that the Airborne artillery battery had departed FSB Lam Son. Givens hurried to confirm this with the Group Commander LTC De, but was told that the Group headquarters had no contact with its two battalions at Lam Son. This was difficult to believe due to the small transmittal distance and the abundance of PRC 25/77 radios within the units. At 1930 contact was re-established with the units who were then well south of Lam Son and

moving south carrying 50 wounded and their crew served weapons with them. Givens inquired as to the reason that the artillery had abandoned the FSB and discovered that LTC De had ordered his two battalions to move out and the artillery had no local security remaining and were thus forced to leave. Givens asked LTC De if there was a change in orders changing their mission to hold the FSB at all costs, but was told that there had been no change. On 4 May LTC De was relieved of command by LTG Dzu due to this disobedience and disregard of orders. 46

This problem convinced Col Truby and Mr Vann that the best plan of action to pursue was to recommend to LTG Dzu that the remaining organic units of the 23rd, the 44th and 45th Regiments, should be brought to Kontum. These regiments would be exchanged for the 2 Ranger Groups and the 1 Airborne Brigade with no loss in manpower from the exchange. Dzu accepted this proposal and on 6 May the 45th Regt moved up QL 14 from Pleiku and was exchanged for the 6th Ranger Group. The 44th Regt had been in heavy contact in the Meng Yeng Pass during the latter part of April. Their actions there demonstrated that they deserved the US advisors' estimate of being the best regiment in MR II. 47

The period from 24 April to 5 May was one of increased attacks by fire on the Ranger Camps which were astride the NVA supply routes. Ben Het and Polei Kleng bore the brunt of these sporadic attacks since they hindered the enemy's movement of supplies into his assembly areas for the attack on Kontum City. Finally on 6 May at 1200 Polei Kleng began to receive heavy caliber artillery fire with over 50 rounds falling in the next hour and a half. US air strikes caused a momentary lapse in the rain of

fire, but when the forward air contrillers left station at 1515, the volume of fire once again increased until 500 rounds had fallen by 1900 that day. The fire was being adjusted as the rounds systematically destroyed each bunker within the compound. The command bunker where US advisors CPT Geddes Mac Laren and 1LT Paul McKenna were busily directing US air support was struck by several direct hits. The final blow at 1730 collapsed the walls and blew a two foot thick oak door off its hinges. The two advisors dug their way out of the mass of rubble and moved to open foxholes nearer the perimeter. The enemy forward observers then systematically walked rounds around the compound destroying all the buildings above ground, all of the bunkers, and knocking down the antennas. The repeated accurate shelling of the camp completely demoralized the ARVN Ranger defenders. When McKenna attempted to find the Battalion Commander at 1800, he found that the commander had fled from the compound. On his return to the limited cover of his foxhole, he observed the NVA using flashing red beacons to signal their infantry who were poised for the attack. At 1900 an OH-6 weaved its path through the heavy anti aircraft fire to extract the advisors. 48

The camp continued to hold on for 3 more days of continuous pounding by indirect fire and ground attacks by the 64th NVA Regt. The enemy's massing of his forces to seize Polei Kleng provided luctative targets for US B-52 strikes which totalled 16 in the area during the 3 days of extended attack. Finally at 0500 on the 9th of May the ARVN forces were wedged out of Polei Kleng by a combined assault of NVA tanks and infantry. LTC Dzu directed anything within the evacuated perimeter to be taken under fire. The effect of B-52 strikes against the forces attacking Polei Kleng was attested to by a Hoi Chanh who reported that his company which

originally had 100 men had over 40 KIA and many more wounded. 49

During this same 3 day period Ben Het Ranger Camp began to receive an increasing amount of indirect fire totalling 400 to 500 rounds of mixed heavy caliber fire. On 7 May the 71st Ranger Battalion mutinied with the Battalion Commander being given an ultimatum to extract the unit within 48 hours. Before the extraction could be completed the camp was rained by anti-aircraft weapons. Two wire guided missiles were fired on the afternoon of the 8th but impacted in an open area causing no damage. 50

As dawn approached on the 9th of May the NVA sent dogs into the perimeter wire to detonate mechanical mines. This tactic was followed at 0600 by a heavy ground attack supported by tanks. The tanks were PT-76's and a total of 6 were taking part in the attack. Two of the tanks supported by infantry assaulted the main gate but were repulsed by 0700 with both tanks knocked out by Rangers using the LAW. 51

At 0730 another assault by 5 tanks was made on the eastern perimeter. Two of these PT-76's were again struck by Rangers using the LAW and the remainder retired after assisting the NVA infantry in seizing the eastern perimeter. The remainder of the morning and afternoon was one of constant NVA assaults which were thwarted by the Rangers. By 1700 The perimeter was restored. The attacking NVA forces lost 11 tanks and over 100 dead in the abortive attempt to overrun Ben Het and although the forces there continued to be harassed, no more major assaults were made. 51

The Air Cavalry had not been idle during the period since Tan Canh. There daily missions over the battle area detected new trails, caches, and bunker complexes as they were being prepared. Another innovation by the Corps advisory group was a Corps Airborne command and control helicopter

with senior officers flying as observers and going where they could best influence the action. On 10 May BG Hill stopped in Kontum to confer with Col Truby about a large sighting he had made slightly north of Vo Dinh. Hill was convinced that the area was a main assembly area for the attacking forces. A POW captured that same day confirmed that the 320th DIV had closed on their assembly area. Subsequently B-52 strikes were placed on the suspected positions. 52

The 23rd DIV had continued their preparation of the defense with Colonel Ba personally walking the entire defensive perimeter criticizing certain positions which weren't sufficient and talking encouragingly to his troops. Several tank hulls were pulled into open areas and as many soldiers as possible were given the opportunity to fire the M-72 LAW. A companion program was the psychologically oriented use of pictures from the battlefields of An Loc and Quang Tri showing victorious ARVN soldiers beside T-54 tanks they had destroyed. The whole idea was to instill in ARVN confidence that he could destroy an attacking tank. 53

Commanders coordinated at their limiting points and supervised the improvement of camouflage. Reserve forces practiced moving through counterattacks against possible penetrations. The DIV artillery preplanned fires around the perimeter and also trained Sector forces in the art of calling for fire in hopes of instilling in them a sense of duty to the 23rd by showing them the Div was going to give them all possible fire support. Col Ba ordered limited offensive operations which were successful in fixing the enemy and developing targets for the numerous B-52 missions which were now being allotted to MR II. 54

On 12 May the 44th Regiment completed its replacement of the 2nd

Ranger Group along the main probable avenue of approach QL 14. The 44th Regt's positions were approximately 4 KM Northwest of Kontum astride QL 14. The ARVN soldiers were quite confident of themselves and their ability to knock out NVA tanks with their organic weapons. Col Ba had himself gained confidence now that he had the 23rd's own units organized into the defense. The Air Cavalry detected a large buildup of armor and troops just south of Vo Dinh and had 1 LOH shot down by a T-54. 55

At 7 PM on the 13th of May a radio intercepts confirmed that the 320th Div was in its final stages of preparation in their assembly area and would attack as early as possible since they felt their presence had been detected and US B-52's would hurt them if they remained. Truby talked to Vann and both were a little skeptical of the thought of an imminent attack since no concentrated artillery preparations were falling on the 23rd's defensive positions. Scattered attacks by fire were occurring, but the pattern of the previous attacks at Tan Canh and the FSB's was to use a large volume of indirect fire prior to the attack and this had not occurred. 56

At 2230 FSB Nember which was defended by a battalion minus of the 44th Regt reported seeing many lights moving south on QL 14 toward their positions. Even this report did not at first create alarm until they remembered that the NVA's inexperience with night movement of armor vehicles had caused them to use their lights when moving into attack positions at Tan Canh. As they continued to cultivate the idea in their minds Col Ba walked in with a captured document which had been sent from the 320th Div artillery commander to one of his units. The message stated that all supporting artillery would support an attack by the 320th at 0400 the next morning. Col Truby again talked to Vann and the Corps G-3. Although both

still considered this contention hasty Vann believed it was better to be prepared and told Truby he would get air assets to them at first light.

At 0400 they all waited but nothing happened. The 23rd Div G2 LTC Tieu then brought in another captured document which delayed the attack one-half hour. LTC Tieu also stated he believed that since these orders were coming from B3 Front Headquarters the times were probably Hanoi time which is one hour slower than Saigon time. At 0430 FSB November began to receive an increasing volume of indirect fire which continued to increase in intensity until 0530. At this time the attack began. ⁵⁷

The NVA had been totally surprised with the ease they had taken Tan Canh. Since their success was so great there they decided to attack Kontum City without utilizing a heavy time consuming artillery preparation. The attack had three major axis of advance (Sketch Map 3) all oriented along QL 14 from the north and northwest. The 48th NVA Regiment with one company of the 203rd Tank Regiment attacked from the northwest along the west side of QL 14. The 64th NVA Regiment attacked south along the east side of QL 14 also with one company of supporting armor from the 203rd Tank Regiment. The 28th NVA Regiment of the B3 Front completed the attacks as they advanced from the north against the 53rd ARVN Regiment which was defending the northern portion of the city about 2 KM out. The 141st Regiment of the 2nd NVA Div probed the Sector forces who defended the southern positions along the river. ⁵⁸

The air support was not yet on station when the call came into the Division Operations Center that two columns of infantry with tanks was coming down QL 14 but a quick call by Truby to the Corps Operations Center launched US Cobras and the new weapon in the Corps arsenal, the helicopter

borne TOW missile which was designated Hawks Claw. The ARVN artillery commander quickly massed his artillery on the high speed avenue of approach QL 14, and the 44th dispatched several tank killer teams armed with the M-72 LAW. The massed artillery separated the attacking infantry from the tanks making the T-54's easy prey for the tank killer teams. LTC Thomas McKenna, SA to the 44th Regt reported ARVN soldiers, although admitting they were scared by the iron monsters, were crawling out of their bunkers and engaging the tanks with their LAW's at point blank range. Two quick kills were made by the teams. Meanwhile Hawks Claw had arrived over Kontum. Before two of the tanks could reach the cover of the thick undergrowth along the highway Hawks Claw had released his missiles stopping them dead in their tracks. The heavy artillery concentration and sudden destruction of their leading armor broke up the initial attack by 0900, although indirect fire and small probes continued. The air was filled with air support now, both US and VNAF, and they took on the many targets with vigor.

All of Kontum City was receiving incoming artillery and rocket fire, but the air support was highly successful in spotting its origin and silencing the guns and launchers. Some areas, however, such as the airfield and Div CP received light attacks by fire as if the enemy forward observers were adjusting their rounds for future use. By nightfall on the 11th the front lines had been restored by the 23rd Div although the fighting was fierce and hand-to-hand most of the day. 59

At 2000 the enemy again launched attacks against the positions of the 44th and 53rd Regts. The renewed attacks were more intense than the previous ones and in the confusion of fighting at night the two ARVN Regts failed to coordinate and interlock their fires creating a situation which

spelled disaster as a battalion of the NVA penetrated both of the ARVN

Regts.

Maj Lovings reported to the Div advisors that the ARVN Regimental Commander was requesting the timed preplanned artillery fires on their locations. Lovings also requested that when Spectre came on station he be allowed to work him on the perimeter of the 14th. By this time Lovings and LTC McKenna felt they were faced with 3 battalions of attacking NVA who were situated in their front, eastern flank and those who had penetrated to their rear. Spectre arrived and Lovings immediately put his fires all around the perimeter as targets were relayed from the front line units through the Regimental Commander to him. 60

At that same moment in the Division Operations Center Col Truby and the other members of the DCAT were attempting to develop some drastic defensive measures which would stop the enemy penetrations. Two B-52 strikes were scheduled for 0300 and the idea that perhaps somehow these could be placed on the attacking enemy and decimate their attack. The situation was turning more desperate by the minute and if the penetrations could not be stopped Kontum would fall by dawn. The Rules of Engagement were strictly enforced and made it impossible to request the arc light strikes any nearer to friendly positions, but a proposal was placed before Col Ba to withdraw his forces one hour before the strikes, take up the slack in weapons fire with artillery, and when the B-52's arrived they would catch the NVA in the open with little cover. Ba was deeply concerned with the deteriorating situation and anxious to do whatever possible to improve it. Truby called Vann and told him of the plan and requested Vann approve it for implementation. Vann was

B52
in close
air support
role

very hesitant due to the complications involved in this plan which he could see was taken from the pages of nuclear warfare tactics of withdrawing your forces, striking, and then exploiting the strikes. Finally he acquiesced after discussing it thoroughly with both Truby and Ba.

There was still 3 or 4 hours until the strikes were to go in and now all attention was focused on holding in place. The 53rd Regt became desperate and committed their reserve to block the penetration in their sector. The 44th with the aid of Spectre was holding its own against the attack on three sides. At last the time to withdraw arrived, and Ba sent out the order to withdraw and increased his artillery fire having the guns fire continuously for the next hour. The nearness of the two strikes shook the teeth of the ARVN defenders but as the rumbling stopped so did the ferocity of the attack. At first light elements of both ARVN Regiments moved into the areas which had been struck discovering several hundred bodies and parts of bodies dressed in green uniforms and sandals. The majority of the attackers who had penetrated the defenses were sappers which was evidenced by the fact they were armed only with AK-47's and carried explosive charges. In the front line area numerous crew served weapons were found with the crumpled bodies of their operators nearby. Over 200 enemy KIA were confirmed by Mc Kenna and Lovings in front of their positions with another 189 being reported by ~~the 53rd~~ ^{MAJ PERRY from the 53rd}. Seven tanks were destroyed by the TOW missile, LAW, and tac air during the attacks of the 44th. 61

~~The South Vietnamese claimed 11 tank kills, but no matter what the number was both the ARVN Division Staff and the American advisors felt that the battle had a major impact in convincing South Vietnamese line troops that tanks are not invincible. The analysis by Vane and his staff at II Corps HQs was that the North Vietnamese apparently were trying to save time by attacking with tanks before their usual artillery preparations in hopes the defenders would be frightened into retreat as had occurred in AN KANH some time.~~

This build up in the southern defense ^{caused} ~~area~~ of operations ~~could~~
a great deal of concern among the Div advisors. This concern was
based on the fact that the R/PF manning the southern defenses had a bad
habit of leaving their positions at night and going into town to
be with their families. This absence created gaps in the defenses
which if detected by the enemy would allow them to enter the city
virtually undetected.

An increased airlift was begun in ^{earnest} ~~effect~~ on the 15th to evacuate
the families of Montagnard refugees. Some 2500 Montagnard men were
given arms and detailed to militia units defending the city. The
refugees were flown to Pleiku which was relatively safe, but some
30,000 of its civilians had also fled from the provincial capital
to the coastal regions and southern provinces. Much of the exodus ~~occurred~~
immediately following the Tan Canh disaster. ⁶³

The relatively quiet day was ^{disrupted} ~~disrupted~~ at 0200 hours by an increased
in the enemy's shelling activity. Some of ~~this~~ fire was 100 mm fire from
the main guns of T-54 tanks. Six of these were discovered ¹⁵ minutes later
and a US ground TOW team who had been deployed to Kontum City on the
14th took one of these T-54 under fire and destroyed it. These increased
attacks by fire continued along the entire Division front until
approximately 2300 when the contact again decreased. A ground attack had
just started in front of the 53rd Regt's positions when a 2240 arc light
fell on the attackers and the firing ceased. The remainder of the evening
passed without any further significant enemy activity until about 0615
when the tanks once again began to fire upon the positions of the 44th.
However, nothing developed in the ground activity. ⁶⁴

Colonel Ba examined the difficulties he had encountered in these first few probes. He had seen his defensive line penetrated and disaster narrowly avoided. As a result of his fear of this happening again he decided to tighten his defensive perimeter. Ba discussed this with MG Toan and Vann on their visit to Kontum City on the 16th and it was agreed to move the 44th Regt back into a reserve position in the hospital compound and move the 45th Regt into their place.

The airfield came under increased observed indirect fire during the afternoon of the 16th. Each time a helicopter came in to refuel at the hot refuel point he was greeted by 9-12 rounds of mortar and artillery fire. Three helicopters were damaged in this manner during the afternoon hours. Two VNAF C-123's which were parked on the parking ramp were systematically brought under fire and destroyed. In addition to damaging aircraft the airfield runway was damaged by over 50 rounds which impacted on it after 1700. The airfield remained closed until 0645 on the morning of the 17th.

At 1430 on the 17th a US C-130 was unloading its cargo of ammunition on the western end of the airfield when rocket fire again began to fall on the airfield. The USAF pilot fearing damage would occur to his aircraft attempted to take off with his aircraft only partially unloaded and the ramp still down. A shower of sparks was thrown out as the ramp dragged on the runway and prevented the aircraft from obtaining flight speed. A Vietnamese brick factory was built at the east end of the runway and the C-130 scrapped the roof of the building. This jolt caused the pilot to lose control of the aircraft with its right wing striking the ground and the plane flipping onto its back. A US helicopter dropped in and

extracted two of the five crewmembers. This incident coupled with the increasing volume of observed artillery and mortar fire caused Vann to reach the decision to limit the fixed wing traffic to night time only.

Terrorist activity in the Pleiku area on the 16th and 17th struck at the Pleiku ammunition dump and POL storage tanks. The ammunition which was destroyed, however, was of no importance. The storage tank situation could have been worse but only one tank was lost due to the sapper's mistake of hooking up the wrong fuze to his first charge.

On 17 May Col Rhotenberry replaced Col Truby as the Division Senior Advisor. His first day as the Senior US with the 23rd Div was sluggish and with the exception of continued attacks by indirect fire on the airfield all was strangely quiet as if the enemy were preparing for another push within the next 24-36 hours. The night of the 17th and morning and early afternoon of the 18th produced no significant activity until 1740. 65

Intelligence information which had been gathered during the lull in the fighting had indicated that a major registration of artillery fire would be made on the 18th, as the NVA celebrated the late H^u Chi Minh's birthday with an attack. For the next two hours over 200 rounds of mixed artillery and mortar fire peppered the Kontum City defenders. Forward elements of the 44th reported to LTC McKenna that they had seven T-54's firing direct fire to their front. A Covy forward air controller spotted these tanks and was able to destroy one with US tac air. The tanks were about 2 miles out from the defenders indicating the NVA's reluctance to expose their armor to accurate antitank fire. The same FAC spotted two 130mm guns firing from the vicinity of Polei Kiang on Kontum City.

Further observation revealed two 23mm AA guns. The guns continued to fire even after they realized they were detected before being destroyed by tac air. 66

At 2345 an increased barrage of heavy artillery fire followed by the beginning of the ground assault by the 48th NVA Regt on the forward wall of defenders from the 44th. Their attack detonated antipersonnel & claymore mines sowed on the perimeter creating gaping holes in the wall of attackers. CPT JAX Finch the DTOC duty officer quickly called II Corps' HQs and within five minutes a set of Panther (Cobra) gunships from the 361st was on the way. The ARVN artillery again responded to the attack in the absence of air support as they had on the 44th and coupled with the tenacity of the ARVN front line soldiers and the devastation wrought by the claymores the first attack was thwarted. A B-52 strike at 0015 sounded the end of the first assault.

VNAF in Pleiku scrambled an AC-47 Fire Dragon gunship armed with three 7.62 miniguns and 30 minutes later it was spraying the enemy positions with its fire. Its arrival corresponded with another assault on the forward defenses and again resulted in it being thrown back. Meanwhile US C-130 aircraft began to land at Kontum airfield to resupply the Kontum defenders. They were the first fixed wing aircraft to land in the last 48 hours.

Two more assaults within the next 2 hours from 0200 to 0400 were coincidentally begun just as scheduled arc lights hit the areas silencing the attackers. The fifth and final assault began at a little past 4 o'clock. After a full night of fierce hand-to-hand fighting during which hand grenades were lobbed between the opposing forces the ARVN coordination which had been excellent throughout the evening between units

on the defensive line, broke down allowing the attackers to create a small penetration. The Panthers were still on station and Lovings requested their assistance to stop this penetration before it could be fully exploited. Acting as cowboys on an 19th century cattle drive the Panthers raked the enemy company which had penetrated the defenses and herded them back to the north where coincidentally two more arc lights were raining their death from the skys. First hand reports from the herding gunships told of bodies blown several feet into the air. All together five assaults were beaten off by a combination of ground and air fire , and the coincidence of arc lights nitting in the vicinity of the front lines every hour. ⁴⁷

During the night twelve C-130 sorties carrying ammunition and cargo flew into Kontum airfield. The two 10,000 gallon fuel bladders at the hot ~~re~~fuel point were restored after being destroyed on the 17th and the refuel point was fully operational by dawn.

The successes from the tremendous support of the previous night inspired Col Ba and the 23rd Div to make their first extensive offensive efforts. The 23rd Div Recon Company was air lifted 8 KM's to the northwest. Once on the ground they worked their way south to link up with the 1/45th which was moving north by ground. They discovered 30 bodies in an arc light box and evidence of many more casualties which had been removed. The remainder of the 44th and 53rd Regts were sent out to examine the most extensively struck area from the previous evening. After making initial progress they were halted by enemy contacts indicating they were still present in the area. This presence indicated that the arc lights of 18-19 May were effective in extensively damaging the enemy. The Air Cav

confirmed this in several reconnaissances of the area by observing people attempting to pull bodies from bunkers.

The only significant activity on the 19th occurred at 2115 when the NVA fired canisters of CS gas onto the front line ARVN bunkers and followed this tactic with an assault on the defenders. The attack was only a probe by an enemy company and was quickly dispersed by ARVN artillery and ground fire. That night at 0345 the 53rd Regt received the first of three successive assaults on their positions. Showing a marked lack of aggressiveness possibly caused by weariness from the past weeks of heavy fighting they allowed themselves to be pushed off the positions during the early daylight hours.

Throughout the day ARVN forces meekly attempted to regain the position with the ARVN unit commanders falsely reporting its recapture several times during the course of the action. By 1645 the enemy, had tunneled to within twenty meters of the positions of the 53rd which was too close for the use of tac air. Col Rhotenberry who had sent a member of the advisory team up in the C&C helicopter with each false report by the unit commanders, convinced Col Da that his personal presence was necessary to control the action. Da himself had been reluctant throughout the day to commit his armor or to attempt to look into the false reports coming in. Finally Vann's arrival and conference with Da persuaded him to commit his Division reserve. Lining up 9 M-41 tanks firing direct fire at the enemy and supported by Panther gunships again success was achieved. This last desperate action finally resulted in the eviction of the enemy forces. 68

The Air CAV reported intensive activity in the areas to the north and east of Kontum City. The NVA movement in that area was down the valley along Route 58 pushing ever closer to the defenses in that area. The new

forces spotted were dressed in new uniforms, with helmets and were carrying large amounts of supplies.

The night passed quickly and quietly again until 0500 on the 21st when the 44th Regt, which had been scheduled to be replaced by the 45th on this day, began receiving heavy indirect fire. Under the cover of this barrage the 406th Sapper Battalion moved behind the positions of the 3/44th and cut QL 14 three KM's northwest of Kontum City. At the same time another battalion size enemy force penetrated between the 4/45th and 2/53rd creating a wedge in the ARVN front lines. Acting quickly and efficiently the 3/44th counter attacked south on QL 14 while the 4/44th and 1/45th moved north along the highway. Fierce fighting supported by US gunships and tac air enabled the two forces to link up and clear the road of the enemy sappers. The wedge which had been formed between the 44th and 53rd Regts deeply concerned Col Ba. This time he acted without reservations by requesting tac air and artillery preparations on the entrenched enemy and then personally going to the site of the battle to influence the action. The personal presence of Ba inspired his men in their counterattack and was a key factor in the ejection of the NVA and restoration of the front line. Ba was beginning to demonstrate the leadership attributes which insure success in military operations. ⁶⁸

This same day a task force composed of the 2nd and 6th Ranger Groups and the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regt began an operation to clear QL 14 and allow convoys to carry supplies to the forces defending Kontum City. Several B-52 strikes and tac air strikes of CBU-55's were placed on the 95th Regiment which was entrenched in the Chu Pao mountain pass. Initial y

the attack achieved a great deal of success, but as they came within B-40 range of the forces still entrenched in the pass the fighting became more intense. Several APC's and M-41's were destroyed by the B-40's and the armor spearhead was halted. The great expectations of the ARVN Corps Staff and US advisors was shattered as the operation digressed into a battle of entrenched forces. ⁷⁰

The 44th Regt began its transfer into the Division reserve on the night of the 21st after the front lines were restored. The transfer of positions took the better part of the next two days. These two days were once again characterized by light attacks by indirect fire and small ground probes. A small sapper attack occurred at 0630 on the 23rd and continued with intermittent breaks until 1900 that evening. Bomb damage assessments during this period were numerous and usually contained from 20-30 bodies and equipment. Sector forces received one Hoang Chanh from the 48th NVA Regt. He gave the positions of the 48th Regt's command post and said that nearly all companies in his battalion were down to 10 men each thus demonstrating the effectiveness of B-52 strikes on the attackers. Many of their supplies had been destroyed in route to the front lines making food as well as medicine for the many inflicted with malaria a critical problem. His knowledge of the plan of attack was limited but he knew it would include a heavy artillery barrage followed by tank infantry assaults but the ferocity of their barrage depended on the resupply since they were short on ammunition for their artillery pieces. ⁷¹

Having rested his forces on the previous day Col Ba ordered new offensive operations conducted on the 24th. The operations commenced at 1045 when the 1/44th was lifted into a landing zone 4KM north of Kontum City near QL 14 from where they attacked south. [REDACTED]

The 2/44th was lifted into a landing zone one KM to their east and also was to attack south. A blocking force was placed across the area of operations just south of the intended objectives. In another operation the 53rd Regt attacked north to seize a small village which the enemy had taken on the 22nd. By 1245 the combat assaults were completed and all units were engaged in small arms fire. Resistance remained light throughout the afternoon and each unit achieved its objectives by 1300. ⁷² Fall

Following a generally quiet period from 2200 to 0200 attacks by indirect fire commenced on units of the 23rd Div in Kontum City and the southern defensive area. The firing concentrated on the vicinity of the airfield and southeastern portion of the city. At 0300 the next morning the 406th Sapper Battalion and 10th Sapper Battalion began to infiltrate through the positions of the Sector forces in the southeast portion of Kontum City. Reconnaissance had revealed to them that ^{which} ~~what~~ the US advisors had feared about the RF/PF leaving gaps in their defenses each night when they went back into the city to stay with their families. Moving in small squad size groups ^{with some} dressed in captured ARVN 22nd Div uniforms the sappers successfully moved into the built up area near the airfield, a school, a Catholic seminary and the home of the French Bishop of Kontum. Some of the RF units reacted well and made contact with the enemy elements. At 0925 one of these RF units aggressively attacked these small units killing 20 sappers near the airfield. These sapper units utilized 60mm mortars to place fire on the airfield. Throughout the remainder of the morning and into the early afternoon the 23rd Div command Post and Division Artillery positions received continuous incoming artillery and mortar fire. At the insistence of LTC ~~S~~ ^S Gannon now SA to the 53rd, the artillery moved to

secondary positions after having had two of their 105's destroyed by the incoming artillery. The accuracy of the NVA artillery was demonstrated after the move was completed as the next round impacted 5 meters from the new positions and was followed by a six round barrage which destroyed another 105.

At 1300 BG Hill declared a tactical emergency (TAC-E) for Kontum City diverting all available air and gunship support to the area. By 1515 the 23rd Division artillery was completely neutralized by virtue of either having their guns and ammunition destroyed or being pinned in their bunkers by the enemy's volume of fire which now was a round every 30 seconds. A fuze analyses by Maj Lovings, a career field artillery officer, indicated 155mm was being used. By 1900 that evening only fourteen 105mm and two 155mm howitzers remained operational in support of the 23rd's operations. The C-130 resupply airlift was cancelled for the night of the 25-26 due to the tactical situation which left the Division without resupply for the past 24 hours. Vann estimated that there was at least one battalion of sappers remaining in the area around the airfield. At 0100 the attacks by indirect fire increased to several rounds per minute. Between 3 and 4 AM tank infantry teams attacked from the north under this heavy artillery barrage. The principle attacks occurred against the 53rd Regiment but pressure also increased on the Sector forces around Kontum City. Spectre used his 105mm cannon to destroy one tank and at first light Hawks Claw began his turkey shoot which by mid afternoon totaled 2 T-54's and numerous trucks. Col Ba ordered a counterattack by one battalion of the 44th supported by 8 tanks but it was unsuccessful except in helping to contain the penetration between the 44th and 53rd. Again as had occurred

on the 22nd ARVN was able to hold the enemy to ~~limited~~ gains but was unable to push him out of his newly captured positions. The situation remained fairly stable throughout the remainder of the day within the city. The Air Cav sighted major enemy movements towards their early morning successes indicating possible reinforcements were moving into the battle. With the airfield closed to fixed wing aircraft emergency resupply was accomplished by CH-47 Chinook helicopters who hauled in the supplies to the soccer field and evacuated the seriously wounded. ARVN's try Some problems was encountered by less seriously wounded ARVN's trying to get out of the beleaguered city which necessitated the use of US armed guards on the resupply aircraft.

indirect fire

After dark ~~against~~ increased around the command posts of the 45th and 53rd Regts. The 45th was faced with the largest attacks by ~~3~~ battalions of the 64th NVA Regt. The attackers succeeded in penetrating between the 45th and 53rd and enveloping the forces of the 45th. All tac air was diverted to the embattled Regiment and LTC John Grant, the Senior Adviser, conferred with Col Rhotenberry who agreed to divert two scheduled F-52's to be placed on the forces attacking the 45th. The arc lights detonated at 0230 and decreased the ferocity of the attack. LTC Grant relayed targets he received from the front lines to a Stinger gunship overhead throughout the remainder of the night.

When the 44th Regiment completed the move into its reserve position on the 22nd they failed to place any security to their front in the belief that the 45th and 53rd were on the front line defenses to their front. Such was not the case as the 44th which was now in the hospital compound was actually on the forward edge of the defenses. This

error nearly proved disastrous as the main NVA armor and infantry thrust struck in this area with attacks by the 1st Rept 2nd NVA Div and the 66th Rept B3 Front supported by one company of armor. Closely coordinated with this attack on their western flank was an attack by the 52nd Rept of the 320th with the assistance of the 64th Rept which had enveloped the 45th ARVN Regt the previous night.

~~Inside~~ Inside the 44th Regimental TOC Maj Lovings and LEC McKenna were attempting to catch a few minutes of sleep as the incoming enemy artillery exploded overhead. Their concern during the evening hours was with the large enemy force which had been steadily creeping in tight against the northeastern part of the city and where Spence had destroyed one armor vehicle just an hour before. His momentary sleep was interrupted by the alarm from a lookout in a position above the TOC of "tanks and infantry in our wire." It seemed impossible for Lovings to believe that this was true so he ran to the TOC entrance and attempted to verify it himself. He arrived in time to see the lead T-54 moving within 50 meters of the bunkers around the TOC. From the turret a battle streamer blew in the early morning breeze. The blast and flash of an M-72 LAW fired by a n ARVN Captain from the front line bunkers momentarily blurred his vision of the assaulting tank. But the impact of metal against metal was distinctly heard above the roar of the battle and when the smoke cleared a small silver dollar size hole in the front slope and silencing of the tank's engine attested to the accuracy of the launcher. A second T-54 which was proceeding down another street in the densely built up hospital complex saw his sister tank destroyed and decided maybe what he had been told about the objective

already being secure by his infantry was not true and attempted to perform a neutral steer and move back to where he could have some cover to ponder the situation. The broad side target he presented to the ARVN forward defenders was too good to believe and an ARVN Sergeant took careful aim, fired, and again scored a direct hit on the enemy tank.

Lovings hurried inside to contact the DTOC and get some air support. BG Hill had risen early to fly Sage Street, the Corps airborne Command and control ship, and was in route to the battle area with a team of Panther gunships. He contacted Lovings as he hovered overhead and reported six tanks approaching across the open area north of the hospital compound and many infantry were moving through the buildings of the compound. Lovings radioed that his bunker line was the 90 grid line on the map and anything north of that line was free fire. The Panthers screamed down out of the sky on the attackers separation the infantry from the tanks and caused two other T-54's which had entered the compounds to drive into some deserted buildings where they would be concealed from the air power, but at the same time were of no use to the attacking forces.

Hawk's Claw had been scrambled from Pleiku at the first reported sighting of enemy tank activity and at 0600 was already plying his trade on the northern battle front. The open terrain north of the city offered no cover and concealment for the attacking tanks and made them easy prey for the TOW missile. The Claw scored two hits on tanks moving down to join the attack on the northeastern defenses. Tac air and the Panther gunships coupled with the bravery of the front line soldier succeeded in stemming the enemy's advance by 1000 that morning.

By 0615 on the 27th friendly forces were in heavy contact with tank and infantry forces. At 0715 the main ammunition dump north of the Kontum airfield was struck by an enemy mortar round and exploded. A stray round from the exploding ammunition dump struck a nearby POL pump with the resulting fire and smoke obscuring the visibility.

As the morning progressed the NVA infantry continued to hold onto the gains they had made in the northern most compounds. They also continued to harass the airfield and exert pressure on the ARVN in the eastern part of the city. By midday the enemy had formed pockets of resistance all across the northern front. Numerous air strikes and the Air Cav supported the ARVN forces. VNAF also aggressively attacked the enemy infantry. In one instance during the afternoon a VNAF lieutenant spotted a large enemy troop concentration and requested VNAF tactical air strikes. Learning that none was available, he then contacted the ground commander and coordinated a US strike through the Americans on the ground resulting in 60 North Vietnamese killed. Near the embattled 53rd Regt which was located just north of the airfield, several 51 Caliber machine guns were firing constantly at the fighter bombers assaulting the NVA infantry. Two VNAF pilots in A1H made pass after pass at the machine gun positions constantly exposing their aircraft to deadly crossfire. Their efforts silenced several of the machine guns as well as a 23mm gun which made the mistake of revealing its position.

At 1800 VNAF helicopters began shuttling much needed supplies from the soccer field to the regimental command posts. LTC Cannon had organized the ARVN into teams to evacuate the supplies from the drop zone as they were kicked out of the helicopter at low level. The enemy artillery was

firing constantly on the team as they attempted to save the valuable supplies. As he attempted to move back to his bunker after directing the resupply Gannon was filled by the incoming artillery with a wound in his upper leg.

In a decision to tighten the city's defenses again Col Ba ordered the 45th to pull its troops off of FSB November and moved back into a tighter ring around the city to prevent further penetration of the defensive perimeter and allow for better utilization of arc lights. At a meeting later that evening Toan also agreed to tighten the defenses by pulling the 45th and 53rd Regts in tighter to maintain greater integrity.

The NVA infantry was firmly entrenched in the hospital compound with their positions only 40 meters away from the ARVN defensive positions. But with the exception of some small arms fire and a few mortar rounds the evening passed with little happening. Spooky, Spectre and Stinger all provided support for the defensive forces. At 0345 the indirect fire increased throughout the northern defensive perimeter as between 300 and 400 rounds fell by dawn. At 0500 elements of the 53rd defending the 14th ACR compound were attacked by sappers. This was followed shortly by an attack against the 14th positions to the west. Due to bad weather which made tac air support impossible combat sky spots were employed every 20 minutes between 0350 and 1230 on preplanned targets along the battle front. Elements of the 44th and 53rd supported by tanks from the 6th ACR made minor offensive attempts to dislodge the enemy from the northern compounds while the RF/PF engaged in bitter house-to-house fighting in the southern portion of the city where the North Vietnamese were still dug in inside a school and some houses at the edge of the airfield.

The ARVN counterattack in the hospital compound was halted by an
NVA

NVA machine gun crew which climbed a water tower overlooking the area and sprayed the government forces pinning down the infantry. Two M-41 tanks firing direct fire were unable to destroy the reinforced concrete of the water tower. Finally the helicopter TOW which had just neutralized a 23mm AA position placed one of its missiles into the NVA position silencing the 51 caliber gun.

The 53rd forces advanced through the 14ACR compound and drove south to within 500 yards of the airstrip after engaging in hand-to-hand fighting throughout the day. VNAF A37 skyraiders and US Cobra gunships devastated the armor compound reducing it to rubble.

The heavy enemy shelling of the city changed from attacks against only military targets such as the various compounds and the airfields to an indiscriminate pattern resulting in over 100 civilian casualties and planting a new seed of panic within those still remaining. Kontum forces were augmented during the afternoon by the arrival of the 3/47th which moved from Pleiku to Kontum by CH47. The 45th which was pulling back into a tighter ring around the city encountered heavy resistance by an entrenched NVA battalion and did not enter the city's defensive ring until the 29th of May. When night fell on the 28th the situation remained critical as the NVA still held the same area he held at the beginning of the day. ARVN's only accomplishment was in keeping the two penetrations in the northern compounds and southern area from linking up and cutting the city in two. The North Vietnamese were finding it very difficult to resupply their troops which had penetrated the city's defenses due to their having to store the supplies great distances from the city because of the US B-52 strikes falling nearly every hour in some area around the city. Originally each soldier was provided three belts filled with rice which had already been

cooked. Transportation elements were to carry food and ammunition resupply to the front lines by following the telephone lines to reach the positions of each unit. However, because of the heavy air strikes around the city the telephone lines didn't exist and the transportation elements were unable to reach the front lines leaving the many elements there short of food and ammunition. In short the NVA had to achieve success shortly on the inroads he had created or withdraw to the sanctuary of the mountains areas to resupply and refit his units.

The 23rd themselves were beginning to feel a pinch from the limited resupply they were receiving by helicopter into the soccer field. To counter this tightening of the belts, USAF C-130 aircraft airdropped a total of 64 tons of ammunition of which 3/4's was recovered.

May 29th was a day of very low level activity consisting mostly of sniper fire and sporadic attacks by fire with only 30 rounds hitting the city by mid afternoon. The ARVN counterattacks were pinned down by sniper fire from the enemy which had used the last two days to strengthen his bunker defenses. Sixty sorties of assorted tac air were placed on the entrenched NVA resulting in the destruction of 39 of these heavily fortified bunkers, but after heavy fighting they still remained firmly entrenched such that by evening the stalemate continued.

Just after midnight the 44th and 53rd Regimental Command Post's began receiving heavy mortar fire. Two Spectre gunships and one Stinger were on station and began firing on suspected enemy locations where this mortar fire was originating. 50-100 rounds fell in the next 1/2 hour followed by ground attacks by the NVA against the northeastern section. The attack was joined by renewed activity just south of the airfield. As

the enemy attempted to make one last attempt to link his penetrations. One of the enemy mortar rounds strayed into the remains of the ammunition dump which lay just north of the airfield between the ARVN defenders and the attacking enemy. The resulting explosion and fires destroyed the dump and also caught the enemy in the middle of his assault resulting in many casualties in his ranks and breaking up the assault.

Soon after daylight the 23rd Div forces began their counterattack again against the northern compounds still occupied by the enemy. The fighting was done bunker by bunker mostly through the use of hand grenades and individual efforts as the bunkers were too well fortified and hidden to be damaged by artillery or air support.

= At 1430 President Nguyen Van Thieu flew into Kontum City amid sporadic rocket and mortar fire in a personal effort to inspire the counter-attack. Thieu promoted Col Ba to brigadier general as the guns rumbled outside. Thieu later went out in a civilian open-necked suit and chatted with each of the soldiers voicing encouragement. Slowly but surely the bunkers were won back. Two T-51 tanks were destroyed by the LAW as they sat amid the rubble of the hospital but under cover and out of sight from the air. Snipers again were routed from the water tower by the TOW after having occupied the position again the previous night. LTC McKenna was wounded by shrapnel from the incoming mortar rounds and evacuated to Pleiku as the fighting continued. As the 44th moved forward in their advance they saw large groups of the enemy pulling back toward the northeast which was the only avenue of escape left as the counterattacking forces were on the other three sides. The Air Cav and forward air controllers also told of seeing the enemy moving away from the battle front. By day's end they still

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