

THE BATTLE OF KONTUM

Kontum is a city approximately 60,000 inhabitants about 30 KM North of Pleiku in the Central Highlands. During the months of Jan, Feb, and March of 1972 a large enemy build up was detected in the valley area SW of Dak To and North West of Kontum. During this period elements of the 22ND ARVN Div. were located North West of Kontum to counter the enemy threat. Most of the ARVN forces were deployed in fire support bases (FSB) along a large ridge line that ran North and South, parallel to QL14, NW of Kontum city. This ridge line was known as "Rocket Ridge". Other forces were located at the Dak To air strip and the Div Forward Headquarters was located in a compound near the village of Tan Canh (see Map).
See Sketch
The compound was referred to as Tan Canh.

Ranger Battalions occupied the border camps along the Laos and Cambodian borders. Ben Het which is located approximately 15 KM West of Dak To was occupied by two ranger battalions. Polei Kleng located about 20 KM West of Kontum was occupied by one ranger battalion.

For purposes of discussing the Battle of Kontum I have divided the battle into three distinct phases. Phase I was the battle for the Fire Support Bases 3-24 April. Phase II was the battle for the border camps 5-9 May. Phase III was the battle for Kontum City 14 May to 9 June.

Elements of the Airborne Brigade were moved into Kontum during the month of January to counter what was believed to be a major enemy threat during TET. These units occupied FSB's on the southern portion of Rocket Ridge and along QL14 North of Kontum. Their Headquarters was located in the vicinity of the small village of Vo Dinh.

The build up of enemy forces in the valley west of Rocket Ridge was monitored by B/troop 7/17 air cav squadron operating out of Pleiku. Air strikes were targeted against troop formations, truck parks, and other lucrative targets developed by the cav. Some Vietnamese Long Range patrols also provided intelligence information.

The anticipated TET offensive never developed. However, during the month of March enemy attacks by fire (ABF's) increased in intensity against the FSB's located on "Rocket Ridge". Enemy heavy antiaircraft weapons were moved in on both sides of the ridge line making helicopter operations extremely hazardous. It was believed that elements of the 320th NVA Division were making the attacks. Intelligence reports also reported that the 2ND NVA Division was located somewhere north of Dak To and moving south.

The enemy launched it's first major ground assault on the 4th of April. It so happened that a CH-47 had been shot down in the Fire Base on the 31st of March and after several days of unsuccessful attempts to rescue the crew a package of five UH-1's and six AH-1G gunships had been dispatched at first light to recover the downed crew on the ^{3rd} ~~4th~~ of April. The fire power of the gunships turned the tide at the FSB and by midmorning the enemy had broken off his attack leaving several hundred dead behind. The next day the Chinook crew was recovered without incident.

During the next several weeks all the FSB's on Rocket Ridge came under intense ABF's and ground attacks. The defenders were supported by Tac Air, artillery, and gunships. Intense antiaircraft fire took a heavy toll of aircraft, however, huge losses were inflicted on the enemy. The ARVN soldiers from the 22ND Div and 2ND Abn Bde did well in defending their positions.

On the 22ND of April the 22ND Div FWD HQ's at Tan Canh came under intense attacks by fire. There were four ARVN M41 tanks located within the compound. Three of these were destroyed by surface to surface wire guided missiles. The ABF's continued throughout the 22nd and 23rd. Within the compound there were approximately 1200 troops. About half of these troops were support type troops, the rest were combat troops. There were about ¹⁵ ~~20~~ US advisors located at Tan Canh during this period. On the 24th of April enemy forces launched a large scale combined arms attack. The attack was spearheaded by about 12-15 tanks that

drove down the highway from the Northeast through the town and attacked the compound. They attacked in the early morning. The tanks drove with their lights on and fired as they approached. They were supported by another tank element from a hill located about 1500 meters Northwest of the compound.

The ARVN support troops broke first and ran out to the south of the compound. Their panic effected some of the combat troops many of whom also fled. The situation continued to deteriorate and by mid morning the US Advisors were forced to make their escape. The 22ND Div Commander Col Dot was apparently captured by the enemy.

The loss of Tan Canh and especially the loss of the Headquarters element had a disastrous effect on the ARVN units. A general withdrawal began with many of the units fleeing before engaging the enemy. The enemy armor had a tremendous shock effect on the defenders. The one remaining M41 at Tan Canh, never came into action. There was one 106RR, however, it is not believed that it was used at all. There are reports of several LAWS being fired without success.

The friendly forces on the FSB's on Rocket Ridge abandoned their bases or were driven off. As the forces made their way to the base of the ridge they were ambushed. The withdrawal turned into an exercise in escape and evasion. Many of the ARVN troops were lost. About three-hundred made their way to Ben Het where they were airlifted back to Kontum. The 2ND Abn troops did a little better and most of them made it back to QL14 where they were picked up and brought back to Kontum city.

As a result of the action the 22nd ARVN Div was considered no longer combat effective and withdrawn from the battle area to be reorganized and retrained. The 2ND Abn Bde was pulled back to the Saigon area to defend the capital. The mission of defending Kontum was given to the 23RD ARVN Div which was located in Bao Me Thout. The division was moved from Bao Me Thout to Kontum during the last week of April and the first two weeks of May.

For some reason the enemy did not exploit his initial success. Instead of continuing on to Kontum he turned his attention to the border camps of Polei Kleng and Ben Het.

Because of the enemy tank attacks in this area two NUH-1B aircraft with the TOW (airborne system) were sent to Pleiku by the 1st Aviation Brigade. They were located at Camp Holloway and placed under the control of the 17th Combat Aviation Group. This system although experimental at the time proved to be extremely effective. The aircraft used the call sign "HAWK'S CLAW".

On the 5th of May the Ranger Camp of Polei Kleng came under intense enemy ABF's. The enemy moved antiaircraft weapons (AA) within 200 meters of the camp making aerial resupply or reinforcement virtually impossible. The defenders held out under almost continuous artillery, rocket, and mortar fire until the 9th of May when they evacuated the camp leaving most of their wounded and some dependents behind.

On the 8th of May Ben Het came under attack by fire and sustained a large scale combined arms attack on the morning of the 9th. However, the defenders held and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. One PT76 tank was destroyed by the airborn TOW.

Although the Polei Kleng camp was lost, the second phase of the battle served two very good purposes for the allies. It continued the attrition of the enemy's combat power and provided much needed time.

The last elements of the 23RD Div moved into defensive positions on the 13th of May. The friendly positions were generally as depicted in figure 2.

Kontum city was receiving enemy rocket and artillery fire daily. The airfield remained open and was used by C-130's for resupply and as a staging field for the aircav troop, gunships and the air TOW aircraft.

The first ground attack against the city came on the 14th of May. It was

a combined arms attack lead by four or five tanks followed by approximately two battalions of infantry. The attack was from the NW. ARVN artillery disorganized the infantry and inflicted heavy casualties. One of the T54 tanks penetrated the perimeter but was destroyed by a LAW. Two other tanks were destroyed by the airborne TOW aircraft. Gunships engaged the fleeing enemy forces.

The next attack came in the early morning of 21 May. It was a regimental sized infantry attack from the North. The enemy was successful in making three penetrations of the ARVN perimeter. The penetrations were contained, and by the end of the day an ARVN counterattack was successful in ejecting the enemy and restoring the FEBAs.

On the 25th of May an enemy sapper battalion, reportedly dressed in ARVN uniforms, infiltrated the south eastern portion of the city and occupied it. This closed the airfield. Our helicopters were forced to stage out of a small Special Forces compound located 4KM south of the city known as the FOB pad. The southern portion of the city was defended mostly by local RF/PP units.

The enemy's main attack came on the early morning of the 26th of May. It was a large combined arms attack from the north east. The enemy conducted an intense artillery preparation prior to the assault. Armored Forces led the attack and were followed by large infantry formations. Between 0700 hours and 0900 hours the air TOW aircraft destroyed nine tanks, one truck and several machine gun positions. This success slowed the enemy but did not stop him. Penetrations were made in the north east quadrant and ARVN forces were forced back into the city. The enemy continued these combined arms attack for the next several days and although there were almost continuous airstrikes and gunship support the enemy gained the eastern portion of the city to include the airfield. Of great significance is the fact that heavy B52 strikes pounded the enemy's staging areas and the ground over which he was attacking. This fact probably was the single most important factor in the eventual allied victory

At the time it was not known how badly these ARVN light strikes were hurting the enemy, this fact only became evident as the battle progressed.

On the 29th of May the situation was extremely grave. It did not appear that ARVN forces would be able to conduct a successful counterattack.

Another point that must be noted is that early in May QL14, in the area of the Kontum pass, had been closed by enemy units. This denied the allies the ability to reinforce from Pleiku by road.

The situation improved somewhat on the 30th of May as it became evident that the enemy was no longer capable of reinforcing his units within the city.

On the first of June friendly elements began to retake the southern portion of the city. After three days of hard, costly house to house fighting the southeastern quadrant was retaken by the ARVN. All efforts were concentrated on the Northeast sector. Numerous airstrikes and gunship support assisted the effort. The fighting was extremely bitter and costly to both sides. On the 9th of June, ^{B6 BA} however, the 23RD Div commander declared the city secured. This, for all intents and purposes, ended the battle of Kontum, although sporadic contact continued for the next two weeks.

The victory was truly an allied effort. It is true that American fire power did most of the killing however, it would not have been successful if the ARVN soldiers had not been able to hold the enemy. The cost of the Vietnamese effort was very high and although some of us are quick to criticize, it must be remembered that they did most of the dying.