

# INTRODUCTION <sup>1971</sup> Rough DRAFT!

## ~~Vietnam Notes~~

The recent major battles that have taken place in Vietnam should be studied for valuable lessons that may aid us in future conflicts.

The Spring Offensive of '72 was as close to a mid-intensity environment as we have experienced since the Korean War. The enemy committed major battle formations in the attack. The offensive saw the introduction by the enemy of significant numbers of armored vehicles, artillery pieces and surface to air missiles. We found it necessary to change some of our tactics especially our helicopter tactics. We found that in fact, we could operate in an intense environment. We adjusted psychologically, tactically, and technically to our new situation. The initial shock of the appearance of enemy armor was overcome and new systems were introduced to counter the threat such as the ground and air TCW. The surface to air SA-7 missiles, although initially effective, were eventually countered. Probably the most significant adjustment however, was the psychological one. We quickly recovered our mental balance after the initial shock of the new enemy threats.

What then are some of the experiences that deserve some thought for future application? I will attempt to identify some of them as they become evident during the Battle of Kontum. I offer these ideas as a stimulus for constructive thought.

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# VIETNAM NOTES

Kontum is a city of 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, paralld to QL14, NW of Kontum city. This ridge line was known as "Rocket Ridge". Other forces were located at the Dak To <sup>II</sup> air strip and the Div. Forward Headquarters was located in a compound near the village of Tan Canh (see Map). 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 <sup>II</sup> was occupied by two ranger battalions. Poley 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 <sup>8/7/17</sup> ~~B/17~~ <sup>Air Cavalry</sup> air cavalry 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 anti-aircraft 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 <sup>3rd</sup> of April. It ~~so~~ happened that a CH-47 had been shot down in the Fire Base <sup>421</sup> 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 ~~31st~~ <sup>2nd</sup> ~~morning of the 3rd~~ <sup>3rd</sup> 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~~ <sup>CH-47</sup> 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 anti-aircraft 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. *Attacks continued against the FSBs on Rocket Ridge throughout the month*

*add.* On the 22nd of April the 22ND Div FWD B'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 <sup>ARVN</sup> approximately 1200 <sup>soldiers</sup> troops. About half of these ~~troops~~ were support ~~troops~~ and the rest were combat troops. There were about 10 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

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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 U.S. 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, <sup>operational</sup> however, it is not believed that it was used at all. There are reports of several LAWS being fired <sup>by U.S. advisors</sup> 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 <sup>friendly positions</sup> ~~Q-14 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. <sup>majority of the</sup> 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 Ban Me Thout.~~ The Division was moved ~~from Ban 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 ~~on~~ his initial success. Instead of continuing on to Kontum he turned his attention to the two border camps of Poley 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 Pleikou 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 Poley Kleng came under intense enemy ARF's. The enemy moved antiaircraft weapons (AA) within 200 meters of the camp making aerial resupply of 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. <sup>Three</sup> ~~one~~ PT76 tank was destroyed by the <sup>already</sup> ~~airborne~~ TOW, although they had probably ~~been~~ <sup>already</sup> damaged by M72 LAW's.

Although the Poley 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 on 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~~ <sup>and</sup> 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, ~~however~~ <sup>and</sup>, by the end of the day an ARVN counterattack was successful in ejecting the enemy and restoring the FEBA.

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. ~~That was~~ known as the FOB pad. ~~The southern portion of the city was defended mostly by local RF/RT 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~~ <sup>had</sup> 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 attacks 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 <sup>important</sup> factor in the eventually allied victory. At the time it was not known how badly these ARC light strikes were hurting the enemy.



This fact only became evident as the battle progressed.

On ~~the~~ <sup>27th</sup> 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~~ <sup>Late April</sup> in ~~the~~ <sup>CL 14</sup> in the area of the Kontum pass, had been closed by enemy units. This denied the ~~ARVN~~ <sup>ARVN</sup> the ability to reinforce ~~by road~~ from Pleiku, *by road*

The situation improved somewhat on the 29th 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 ~~units~~ assisted the effort. The fighting was extremely bitter and costly to both sides, ~~however~~ <sup>On</sup> the 9th of June, 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.

With the clarity of hindsight we can examine the battle and see what errors were made and what lessons ~~there~~ are to be learned.

If one was to say that the defense of Kontum was essentially a mobile defense I am sure there are many who would quickly take issue. Although I don't believe it was planned that way it is my contention that, in fact, Kontum is an example of the mobile defense and as such may provide some interesting insight into what we may use in the future.

I guess it would be appropriate here to discuss some definitions. A mobile

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defense is one in which the defender plans for an enemy penetration which will be blocked and then a counter attack will be conducted to destroy the enemy ~~penetration~~ *the lowest level at which it can be conducted is Division* within the penetration. The defense is oriented more on the destruction of the enemy than on the retention of ground. ~~However,~~ the use of the terrain to assist in this destruction is essential. This defense also assumes that some attrition of the enemy forces will have taken place prior to his arrival in the area where the ~~decisive~~ *forces will become decisively engaged* ~~blow is to be struck~~. The destruction of the enemy will be the result of the judicious and timely application of combat power. Here in, I think, lies the key to the defense. That is, the timely application of combat power.

Combat power may be defined as the total force of maneuver and fire power. This equation of maneuver and fire power has obviously changed over the years. At one time the commander had only large maneuver forces available to provide combat power and essentially who ever had the most troops won the battle. With the introduction of gunpowder and especially artillery, *The equation took on a new look and the commander could apply both maneuver and fire. (Napoleon and I)* As technology provided us with a greater and greater fire capability combat power became more an application of fire power rather than maneuver. With the introduction of nuclear weapons to the battle field it is obvious that the equation for combat power is now dominated by fire and we can anticipate this trend to continue in the future.

In terms of our mobile defense, when we refer to the destruction of the enemy within the penetration most of us visualize the employment of our armor heavy reserve, in other words, our <sup>e</sup>maneuver force, to do the killing. *ma counter attack* Perhaps we should think more in terms of counterattack by fire rather than maneuver. The manpower that makes up a maneuver force in the future may well be very limited in numbers and surely will be ~~not~~ our most valuable resource. The point is, we must think more in terms of fire power when we consider combat power.

Looking back at the battle of Kontum, it is possible to see how the defense was



in fact, a mobile defense in which the decisive blow was the fire power used to destroy the enemy within the penetration. *The defense was conducted at Corps level and involved the use of two ARVN Divisions against approximately three ARVN Divisions.*

The city of Kontum was, from the beginning, the enemy's objective. This is an essential fact and provides the starting point for an analysis of the terrain and how the defense was to be conducted. *(Compare with Kontum 7-1-68)* By studying the map one can see that the river that runs east and west on the south side of the city presents an obstacle to large troop formations and vehicles. Although the river was low, due to the dry season, it did restrict movement. With this in mind a large scale attack from the south was unlikely. The terrain to the northwest of the city offers a good avenue of approach however, it is fairly open ground and as such large troop concentrations could be detected from the air. The terrain directly north and northeast of the city is mountainous and heavily vegetated with triple canopy jungle. This area lent itself well for enemy staging purposes. *(Note: enemy moves forward - MUST PREPARE Battle Field!)* So this would probably be the most likely staging area. In order for the enemy to move large units into this area from his sanctuaries in the tri-border area, it was necessary for him to cross the valley that runs northwest from Kontum and is located between QL14 on the east and Rocket Ridge and the river on the west. This valley area provided the most direct access to his staging area. However, the valley is dominated by Rocket Ridge. *Rocket Ridge then, is key terrain for the defense of the city. By occupying this terrain the ARVN forced the enemy to eliminate the FSB's before moving large units through the valley.*

The FSB's located on Rocket Ridge, Dak To and Tan Canh provided the initial points of contact and the initial defense positions. The purpose of the FSB's was to begin the attrition of the enemy. Once the bases came under attack it was impossible to reinforce them, so to think of becoming decisively engaged in a battle for these bases would be extremely foolish. It was also a good economy of force tactic in that a large area was covered with a relatively small force. If these bases could hold <sup>out</sup> long enough ~~to~~ *cause the enemy to mass,* the ~~same~~ fire power ~~available~~ *could* be employed ~~they would serve their purpose.~~ *effectively* in friendly *9.*

fact this is exactly what happened. The enemy paid a very heavy price to eliminate the FSB's. The weakness in these outer positions was the Div Headquarters, at Tan Canh. Because of its location on relatively low ground and the lack of an adequate antitank defense, the base fell quickly. It is significant to note that the ranger camps which were located even further out were not affected by the loss of Tan Canh primarily because they were under a different command. The lesson to be learned here is the danger in placing a headquarters element in a relatively exposed position. Some of the FSB's on Rocket Ridge had come under intense attack and a couple were even <sup>OVER RUN</sup> ~~over run~~ but their loss did not precipitate the general collapse that resulted from the loss of Tan Canh.

After the FSB's were lost, an effective delay could have continued, ~~if the defenders were properly organized.~~ Unfortunately, this was not the case. I think the point that must be remembered here is that the allies greatest advantage, massive fire power, could only be effectively employed against the enemy when he was massed. When ever he concentrated sufficient forces to attack a base he was a good target for ~~our~~ fire power. ~~The more often we could get him to come out of his bunkers and mass for an attack the better off we were.~~ <sup>IN DELAY POSITIONS</sup> As the largely dispersed enemy units moved in closer to their final objective, Kontum, they had to become more concentrated there, by presenting a better target ~~for us.~~ I don't believe it was by design, but the fact that the enemy was able to overcome the initial resistance, to break through so to speak, actually aided <sup>IN</sup> ~~our~~ efforts <sup>TO</sup> ~~in~~ destroying him. Once he had massed around Kontum, <sup>TO BE</sup> ~~again in the area~~ <sup>was</sup> ~~already determined~~ <sup>his</sup> ~~his most likely staging area,~~ <sup>THE TOTAL WEIGHT OF ALLIED COULD BE BROUGHT</sup> ~~we could bring our full combat power~~ <sup>TO BEAR</sup> to bear. Once he was blocked within the <sup>BATTLE AREA</sup> ~~penetration we conducted~~ <sup>could be conducted,</sup> a counter attack, not by maneuver forces, but rather by massive applications of fire power. The objective was the destruction of the enemy forces and that is exactly what took place around Kontum city.

This battle provided an opportunity to observe our reaction to a relatively sophisticated environment. As mentioned earlier the spring offensive was the occasion for the introduction of new weapons and tactics.

The introduction by the enemy of armored vehicles had a significant impact. Although there had been reports of enemy armor in the area no one really prepared for what was about to take place. This failure to prepare initially cost us heavy losses. *(Historically one of our most consistent mistakes)* It is interesting to note that after the initial shock was over individual soldiers did engage enemy tanks with LAW's. *Successfully* Our failure was not so much in not providing equipment but rather in not preparing the ARVN soldiers mentally for an armored attack. One wonders how well our individual soldier is prepared to face an enemy armored vehicle.

The enemy armor threat brought about the introduction of the TOW systems to Viet Nam. ~~The ground TOW was employed around key installations.~~ The airborne TOW system was employed in the defense of Kontum. As mentioned earlier this system was extremely effective. *Although, normally they carried 4.* There were two aircraft available, each armed with 6 missiles. One of the significant limiting factors of the system was the aircraft itself. The A-1H was limited to about 70 KTS airspeed and about 1-hour flight time per fuel load. Hopefully these limitations will be eliminated when the system is mounted on a better airframe such as the AH-1G.

The system was employed as a package consisting of one A-1H Airborne TOW aircraft, two AH-1G escort gunships and one OH-1H command and control aircraft. *part of* Anytime the system was sent out this package went with it. *Normally* ~~Before~~ the TOW package would be launched *only after* someone else, such as the aircav or a FAC, *had* ~~would~~ located a suitable target. Once the package was in the target area who ever had located the target would point it out to the C&C aircraft. The C&C, after evaluating the target and determining the best direction of attack, would vector the TOW aircraft in. The two gunships provided protection for the slower moving TOW aircraft. It was demonstrated that the TOW could hit any target within range, that the gunner could see. These targets were

anything from a tank to the tube of a 105 artillery piece. The range of the system kept the aircraft well out of small arms range. During the battle of Kontum I do not know of either aircraft being hit in the air.

In employing the system it quickly became obvious that the biggest problem was the gunners ability to visually fix the target. Although the sighting system provides some magnification it was often times extremely difficult for the gunner to detect the target ~~and~~ <sup>hidden by</sup> the foliage or clutter of the battle field. While the enemy was preparing for the attack we had great difficulty actually locating his tanks. ~~The~~ <sup>He</sup> enemy was very skillful at providing cover and concealment for his vehicles. However, when he launched his attack ~~and~~ <sup>exposed</sup> his vehicles became exposed and were relatively concentrated they were easy targets for the airborne TOW. I think this is <sup>A</sup> ~~the~~ significant point we should understand for future application. On another battle field it may not be wise to send our TOW equipped helicopters out in search of enemy targets but rather hold them in relatively secured areas until lucrative, exposed targets are located by other means. One can also visualize employing the TOW helicopters against enemy armor penetrations. Thinking again of our mobile defense this system may be ideal for destroying enemy armor within <sup>the battle area</sup> ~~at~~ penetration. We may use flights of these aircraft as a significant portion of our counter attacking force.

None of us knows what lies ahead or what battles we may be called upon to fight. I hope that this discussion has provided some interesting ideas, and stimulated a little interest in looking at our recent experience for lessons that may be translated to other theaters at other times.