

## INTRODUCTION

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**My name is Jack Heslin. I spent two tours in Vietnam, 1967-68 and 1971-72, both of which were in the Central Highlands operating out of Camp Holloway in Pleiku. My experience as a helicopter pilot and operations officer during the Easter Offensive of 1972 in Kontum Province provided me with first-hand experience and many insights relating to the military operations of that period. While a student at the Naval War College in 1978, I used the battle of Kontum to illustrate the effective use of combat power and the strategic decisions and perceptions that affect military operations in the field. Almost all of the material used on this web site was gathered as a participant observer during the Battle of Kontum in the spring of 1972. My intent is to provide, as an Army aviator, a first hand account of a historical event that has been reported in many other places.**

**This site is dedicated to the Americans, especially the aviation crews, who fought in the Battle of Kontum. Although there were many heroes in this battle, one man stands out. John Paul Vann was an extraordinary man of uncommon courage who died a soldier's death fighting for a cause which he believed in. One cannot overstate the essential role he played in the successful outcome of this battle.**

*JH*

**I am presenting the "story" of the Battle of Kontum as accurately as memory and notes allow. I am solely responsible for sins of omission or commission and I am truly sorry if anything I report here offends, or in any way hurts, another person. There have been some insightful documents; articles, books and web sites produced which add to the knowledge of the events I am presenting. I have provided a "Sources and References Section" for interested readers. The map overlays are mine and, although I am not an artist, I have tried to make them as accurate and concise as possible. All of the pictures and maps are from my own collection gathered both during the battle and in December of 1972, just before I left Pleiku, as units were clearing out and disposing of a significant amount of material. There are specific**

**acknowledgments of people who contributed to this effort whether they were aware of it or not. To that end, I have created an "Acknowledgment Section" for those who are interested. The web designers and myself have tried to organize the material for both the curious and the more serious researcher. Some of the graphics files, such as the maps, are large. If you are concerned with your available bandwidth, you may want to pass on these files. We view this project as a work in progress and hope that it provides some of the missing pieces of a story not completely told. Thank you for your patience and understanding and most of all, your interest in the "story".**

**"It is better that they do a thing imperfectly than for you to do it perfectly: for it is their country, their war, and your time is limited." - Lawrence of Arabia, 1919**

## **VIETNAM REVISITED - the French Experience**

**In order to place this presentation on the Battle of Kontum in perspective, I believe, it is important to better understand the American Experience in Vietnam in light of the French experience in Vietnam or Indochina. Perhaps if we had truly understood their situation, we might have been more successful in ours. There were three critical mistakes made by the French. These were: first, a flawed definition of victory; second, an underestimation of the Vietminh's mobility; third, the unforeseen ability of the Vietminh to create effective fire.**

**It is important to understand that France as a world power, in the post-WW II period, had a great *potential* for force in the form of military combat power. However, the actualization of that potential was quite limited and the French did not have a significant ability to project that force. On the other hand, the Vietminh forces' potential and combat power had its basis not only in themselves but also in their allies, especially China. They elected to actualize as much force as they possibly could to generate the maximum amount of combat power, at the point of contact, against the French forces. Thus, they drew on their own potential for manpower and relied on China and others, for most of their weapons. When evaluating relative combat power between combatants, one must not confuse actualized force with the potential for force. In the early 1950's there appears to have been a tendency on the part of many observers to measure the *potential* of France against the *potential* of the Vietminh. This often resulted in the erroneous perception that the balance was clearly in favor of the French who were equipped with modern weapons and an organized army. In the court of world opinion, this misunderstanding worked in favor of the Vietminh and against the French by defining the concepts of acceptable losses, expected gains, and eventually, victory or defeat. Vietminh losses were expected and, therefore, minimized; however, French losses were not expected, and an inordinate**

**weight was attached to them. In addition, one must understand their purpose. If we understand their objectives for actualizing force as combat power, then we can understand how they defined victory as well as defeat. It seems that the French labored under a post-World War conventional definition of victory (i.e. total destruction or surrender of one's enemy) and therefore applied combat power to create the perception of a tactical imbalance, which would force the Vietminh to admit defeat. Victory, as defined by the French, was completely and singularly levered on the Vietminh's admission of defeat. This put the French at a tremendous disadvantage in that they had to expend whatever force was necessary to get the Vietminh to admit defeat or, by definition, face defeat themselves. For in the court of world opinion, if they could not win by their own definition, they would be defeated.**

**The Vietminh defined the situation very differently from the French. For them, victory was simply the ability to survive in the face of French combat power, and to maintain a balance of combat power at the point of contact with the French. Their definition of victory was not dependent on any admission from the French. The situation was made more difficult for the French in that the rest of the world accepted the Vietminh definition and also understood the French definition. The Vietminh did not have to create an imbalance of combat power in order to defeat the French. The Vietminh merely had to remain viable in the face of what was perceived by the world as superior French combat power. The longer the Vietminh survived, the more recognized their definition of victory became. The French were committed to achieving an imbalance of combat power at the point of contact whereas; the Vietminh were committed to survival and, at minimum, achieving balance with the French.**

**Beyond these ideas of victory and defeat, the concept of combat power is inherently coupled with the assumption of battlefield infrastructure so relied upon, and fought over, in WWII (i.e. roads and bridges). This assumption added to the failure of the French in Vietnam. The French forces on the ground potentially had**

**more firepower than did the Vietminh. However, they were limited to the few serviceable roads than available in Vietnam and although the Vietminh were foot mobile, they had a clear mobility advantage against the French. Although the French had airborne troops that did not appreciably alter the balance of combat power because of the terrain. The Vietminh were able to engage the French ground forces when and where they chose, usually in a classic ambush, which provided them both surprise and devastatingly effective fire. The ambush is the quintessential application of combat power in that, if successful, it provides the attacker with total control and dominance of the situation. The Vietminh became masters at applying their combat power in this fashion. Their relative superior mobility allowed them to select the place and time to deliver their fire against the exposed and vulnerable French forces. The Vietminh were able to survive and were being defined as victorious. The French were not able to dominate and, therefore, were being defined as defeated.**

**The French became decisively engaged at a place they chose, Dien Bien Phu. The French plan was based on the Vietminh presenting its massed forces as a vulnerable and exposed target in front of the French positions. The Vietminh did, in fact, mass their forces and were vulnerable to massive air strikes. Unfortunately for the French, they were unable to generate the volume of firepower, from available artillery or air strikes, necessary to destroy the exposed Vietminh forces. They also underestimated the ability of the Vietminh to create effective firepower in the form of artillery (that was literally dragged up mountains) where it could dominate French positions. In the end, the French were forced to pin their hopes on the United States to provide effective firepower, in the form of massive air strikes. These requested air strikes were the only thing that could have saved the French position at Dien Bien Phu. The United States political leadership decided not to provide that level of support. The Vietminh demonstrated that they were not only able to survive, but also dominate at the point of contact.**

**The defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu sealed their fate and emboldened the Vietminh, and later, the Army of North Vietnam.**

**These lessons, these critical lessons, must not be lost on anyone contemplating the use of force in the form of combat power. The generation of effective firepower, at the point of contact, is the most essential ingredient to both physical and psychological dominance.**

#### **VIETNAM REVISITED - the American Experience**

**The American experience in Vietnam, which began well before most Americans were aware of a country called Vietnam, differed greatly from that of the French, but suffered under many of the same misunderstandings that brought about the French defeat.**

**Both the lack of clear objectives (which has been well documented by others) and the incremental application of combat power prolonged a conflict that could have ended much sooner with much less suffering. The debate of "what ifs" "could haves" and "should haves" will go on and this cannot be the place to resolve it. In retrospect, the decisive nature of the unrestricted B-52 bombing of North Vietnam in late 1972, ordered by President Richard Nixon, over a very short period of time, brought about a resolution to the combat operations of the Vietnam War, if not the hoped for, "peace with honor".**

**The American concept of victory in Vietnam was, like the French before us, never realistically defined; however, the "Vietnamization" of the war ordered by President Nixon in the early 70's, clearly changed the definition of victory for North Vietnam. The old definition of survival in the face of superior American combat power had to be replaced with a new definition of victory, which meant defeating the ARVN in the field. In contrast, the ARVN merely had to hold on to their country and survive in the face of the NVA attacks in order for the South to be**

**declared victorious. As stated earlier, their ability to do that, was totally depending on the enormous firepower that could only be generated by the U.S. Air Force.**

## THE BATTLE OF KONTUM

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**In War, as in life, one's perception is their reality. This holds true for both the individual and their society. If you ask most Americans today what the biggest battle fought during Vietnam War was, most would reply that the Tet Offensive of 1968 was the major battle of the war. If you asked them who won that battle, most would say America lost the battle just as they would say we lost the War. This perception does not accurately reflect the battlefield results but does match the perception created at the time by the media reporting the event and the political leaders who were in a position to evaluate the event. This perception, held by most Americans at that time, supported the objectives of the Army of North Vietnam and eroded the moral support for the U.S. Army in the field.**

**By 1972, the largest battles fought in Vietnam were not well known, or understood, by the majority of the American population. Perhaps people just wanted the War to be over or the negative emotions associated with our involvement in the war blocked us from hearing about the battles. Maybe, as almost all the U.S. ground troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam, our interest, and that of the media, had waned to the point of indifference. Among the most important lessons learned in the Vietnam War, one must include the events of 1972. These events must be studied, and remembered, if we are to gain anything from that experience; an experience many paid for.**

**On March 30, 1972, the army of North Vietnam (NVA) invaded South Vietnam. This battle, which had been in the making for years, had finally begun. The enemy opened three major fronts. The first was in I Corps where 30,000 troops were sent streaming across the DMZ. The second was in III Corps where the enemy attacked out of his Cambodian sanctuaries and tried to capture the city of An Loc. The third was in II Corps where two NVA divisions and parts of a third, tried to capture the provincial capital of Kontum. This presentation deals only with the battle**

**of Kontum, as it typified the combat on all 3 fronts, in both its strengths and weaknesses.**

**For the first time in the Vietnam War, both U. S. and South Vietnamese forces depended completely on the other for victory as neither of the allies could win alone. The U. S. forces could support the Vietnamese; however, the responsibility for the ground combat rested squarely on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Although there were no U.S. ground combat troops directly involved, there were a number of Americans acting as advisors and flying U.S. aircraft in support of the South Vietnamese effort. It was this presence of U.S. advisors on the ground, and the role of large scale U.S. air support, that were the key factors in the success of the defensive operations conducted by the South Vietnamese Army in the Spring of 1972. It was exactly the lack of this magnitude of U. S. support, on the ground and in the air, in the spring of 1975, which, in my judgment, was the single major cause of the battlefield defeat inflicted on the South Vietnamese Army by the NVA.**

**Kontum, a city of about 30,000 inhabitants, is located about 30 kilometers north of Pleiku City, in the Central Highlands. During the first three months of 1972, a large build-up of enemy forces was detected in the valley area southwest of Dak To and northwest of Kontum City. For the purpose of this presentation, I have divided the Battle of Kontum into three distinct phases. Phase I was the battle for the fire support bases and Tan Canh, Phase II was the battle for the border camps, and Phase III was the battle for the city of Kontum. Phase I lasted most of the month of April; Phase II the first two weeks of May, and Phase III from the middle of May until the first week of June. There was overlap in time between the separate phases.**

**Elements of the 22nd ARVN Division were located northwest of the city and deployed in a broad arc, which extended from the southern end of "Rocket Ridge" to the district headquarters of Dak To. Most of the ARVN units were located in fortified positions known as fire support bases (FSB). These FSBs were**

**occupied by units that ranged from company size organizations (roughly 150 men) to full battalions (roughly 500 men). Most of the FSBs were located on the peaks of large hill masses or mountains. These bases were prepared to accept attacks from any direction and usually had interlocking artillery fire for mutual support. The 22nd Division headquarters was located in Binh Dinh Province; however, a forward headquarters was established northwest of Kontum City near the village of Tan Canh.**

**As the threat mounted in Kontum Province, the 22nd Division was reinforced by elements of the strategic reserve, two brigades of an airborne division. Elements from the airborne division were located in FSBs on "Rocket Ridge." The airborne headquarters was established near the village of Vo Dinh, approximately halfway between the city of Kontum and Tan Canh, on QL14.**

**In addition to the positions occupied by these elements of the 22nd Division, there were two Ranger camps, Polei Kleng and Ben Het, located along the Laos and Cambodian Borders. These camps were manned by Ranger battalions from the Ranger Group and were placed under the operational control of the 22nd Division.**

**The U. S. Army, 17th Combat Aviation Group (CAG) and the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion (CAB) operating out of Camp Holloway in Pleiku and Vietnamese helicopter squadrons operating out of the Pleiku Air base provided ARVN units operating in Kontum Province, helicopter support. The U.S. aviation units primarily supporting the 22nd Division and the airborne units were from the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion (this unit actually stood down in March of 1972 and these aviation assets came directly under the 17th Group): 57th Assault Hel. Co. (8 AH-1G, 20 UH-1H); 180th Assault Support (16 CH-47); 361st Aerial Weapons Co. (12 AH-1G); B Troop 7/17 Air Cavalry Squadron (9 AH-1G, 8 UH-1H, 10 OH-6) — This unit was re-designated H Troop 17<sup>th</sup> CAV in April 1972 and a small team from C Troop 7/17 Air Cavalry Squadron — This unit was re-designated H Troop 10<sup>th</sup> CAV in April 1972.**

**Some aviation assets from the 201<sup>st</sup> helicopter company supported II Corps operations, most notably, the OH-58s supporting Mr. John Paul Vann and the II Corps advisors.**

## PHASE I -- BATTLE FOR THE FIRE SUPPORT BASES AND TAN CANH

During the latter part of March, the FSBs on "Rocket Ridge" had received sporadic probing attacks and attacks by fire (ABF) from a mixed caliber of weapons. The intensity of the attacks increased until the first major assault took place on the 4th of April. Although these small bases were relatively autonomous, they were not isolated. Helicopters, both U.S. and VNAF, operating in and out of these FSBs linked them together both physically and psychologically with each other, and other friendly units involved in the battle. Even though there were periods during which helicopters were very restricted because of enemy fire and bad weather, there was a belief among the defenders that eventually, the "choppers" would get through to them. As a result, the FSB defenders, for the most part, did not perceive their situation as hopeless even in the face of large-scale attacks by NVA forces.

**April 4th:** This early morning attack against FSB "D" (Delta) marked the beginning of Phase I, the battle for the fire support bases. The attacks were made by elements of the NVA 320th Infantry Division and consisted of heavy infantry assaults supported by direct and indirect artillery and rocket fire. Numerous NVA anti-aircraft weapons were positioned around the FSB in order to prevent aerial re-supply or fire support. However, helicopter Cobra gunships were dispatched by the Commanding Officer of the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion, LTC Charles "Chuck" Bagnal "Dragon 6," and they were able to neutralize many of these anti-aircraft positions. During the infantry attacks, these gunships, along with artillery and Air Force TACAIR, were able to deliver extremely effective fire against the concentrated and vulnerable NVA infantry soldiers. Although the enemy was, at times, able to penetrate the defenses of the compound, the positions held, and the attack was beaten back with heavy losses to the attacking NVA forces.

**For the next several days the enemy pounded the FSBs located on "Rocket Ridge." Several ground assaults were successfully repulsed with enemy forces suffering heavy losses from the concentrated fire of gunships, TACAIR, and artillery. The ARVN soldiers did well defending their positions, although it was clear to all concerned that their survival was due in large measure to the immediately available fire support. The enemy was taking a beating against the hardened, well-defended FSBs. In fact, it seemed the enemy would continue to smash himself against these small strong points indefinitely. This was very much to the advantage of the defenders in that NVA losses expended against this "hedgehog" type defense would not be available for the main assault on the city of Kontum.**

**These strong defensive positions, although greatly effective against attack, did not allow for effective counter-attacks. Though the U.S. and Vietnamese coalition forces had tremendous quantities of fire available, it could not be employed effectively against the NVA units if the enemy was not attacking. Most of the time, the NVA forces were dispersed and well hidden in prepared positions. The problem was how to get the NVA units to concentrate in such a way that it would be vulnerable to effective fire. By locating the FSBs on terrain that dominated the area, "key terrain", it became necessary for the enemy to eliminate them in order to insure freedom of movement in the area. These small FSBs became the focal point of enemy activity and provided many opportunities for the coalition forces to deliver effective fire against the exposed, attacking NVA soldiers.**

**These FSBs were almost totally dependent on outside fire support if they were to survive these large-scale, enemy attacks. This created a difficult situation for the NVA in that their estimates of the strength within the bases, however accurate, could not account for how much fire support would be committed to defend any particular base at any particular time. Although the enemy could count ARVN soldiers, they could not accurately estimate the potential fire that could be generated in support of**

**the FSB. In my opinion, the NVA consistently underestimated this crucial element of the combat power equation. Eventually, some of the FSBs were overrun; however, even if one base was destroyed, the other bases continued to resist.**

**As the battle for the FSBs wore on, there were numerous reports that NVA armored vehicles were operating in the area. Although helicopter crews reported sighting what appeared to be tank tracks in the valley west of "Rocket Ridge", the presence of armored vehicles could not be confirmed. The importance of these tank sightings will become more apparent as the focus of the battle shifted from the FSBs to the 22nd Division headquarters at Tan Canh.**

**Mid- April: During the early and middle part of April, the FSBs continued to come under heavy attack by NVA forces. This increased pressure on the FSBs on "Rocket Ridge" was a clear indication that the Division headquarters at Tan Canh was a likely target. There was serious concern on the part of the U.S. advisors that the ARVN commanders were not providing accurate information on their locations in the field. The ARVN were not aggressive in their reconnaissance to the north and northwest of the Division headquarters.**

**The most glaring weakness in the overall ARVN defensive plan was the vulnerability of the 22nd Division command post located at Tan Canh. This relatively small compound was located on a small hill southwest of the town of Tan Canh. The ARVN forces had 155mm and 105mm howitzers at the base as well as four M-41 tanks from the 22nd Division's 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Located within the compound were approximately 500 logistical support troops and the better part of a battalion from the 42nd Regiment. The base lacked defense in depth and was located on relatively low ground. There were no significant forces to the north to counter a serious threat from that direction.**

**April 23rd: The 22nd Division headquarters located at Tan Canh had received sporadic artillery fire throughout the month of April. The intensity of these artillery attacks intensified until they reached more than 1,000 rounds per day. On the 23rd of April there were clear signs that an attack on the Division headquarters was imminent. Surface to surface wire guided missiles were used by NVA forces to destroy the ARVN tanks located within the compound and also to destroy the Division command bunker. Several of the American advisors were injured during these attacks. Colonel Philip Kaplan, the senior advisor to the 22nd Division, recognized the seriousness of the situation and began making plans for the eventual evacuation of the American advisory team. In addition to the tanks being destroyed, one of the two 106mm recoilless rifles was also destroyed. By the evening of the 23rd, the situation at Tan Canh was grave. The only remaining antitank defenses rested primarily on light antitank weapons (M72 LAW) and air support. The 22nd Division command post was reestablished across the compound in the 42nd Regiment TOC, but the morale of the ARVN Division commander, Colonel Duc Dat, and his staff, was very poor. It was believed that Colonel Dat was fatalistic about the outcome of the battle and was convinced that the NVA could not be resisted. This situation made it particularly difficult for Colonel Kaplan to get the division to adopt a more aggressive attitude.**

**Late in the evening of April 23rd, there were reports that enemy tanks were approaching the Tan Canh area from the northwest. An Air Force AC-130 "Specter" gunship was called to the scene and with its onboard night vision equipment was able to detect a column of tanks, approximately 12, on the road north of Tan Canh. The gunship engaged the tanks with a 105mm cannon and reported hitting three tanks. The column continued its advance toward Tan Canh. There were two bridges between the approaching tanks and the 22nd Division headquarters that were being secured by Regional Force/Popular Force (RF/PF), sometimes referred to as "Rough Puff," troops. These RF/PF troops did not offer any significant resistance to the tanks nor**

did they destroy the bridges. The introduction of enemy armor and the employment of the wire guided missiles, were both materially and psychologically shocking to the defending ARVN units. This was the first large scale, introduction of armored vehicles into this area of South Vietnam and the defenders were ill prepared to cope with them. It should be noted that, to our surprise, the antitank rockets being used on the AH-1G gunships were only marginally effective against the Soviet and Chinese T-54/T-59 tanks. These tanks, with their 100mm main guns, totally out-gunned the ARVN M-41 tanks, with their 76mm guns.

*Later in the conflict American M-60 Tanks were rushed to South Vietnam.*

**April 24th:** When the tank column reached the town of Tan Canh, antitank hunter/killer teams, made up of ARVN infantry from the 42nd Regiment, engaged them with M-72 LAWs. Using the M-72 LAW, the hunter/killer teams disabled two of the enemy tanks. However, the enemy tank column continued their approach during the early morning hours of April 24th. Some of the tanks, about 10, split off from the main column and moved into positions north of the 22nd Division headquarters compound, in order to provide direct fire support for the attack of the main body. Large numbers of infantry were observed moving into positions around the compound. Some of these formations were taken under fire by the Air Force AC-130 gunship and also by artillery fire however, early morning fog limited visibility in the battle area. At about 0530 that morning, the tanks began their attack on the 22nd Division headquarters. The tanks approached through the fog with their lights on and firing their machine guns at positions along the perimeter. The tanks that had taken up firing positions earlier supported the attack with direct fire from their main guns. Large infantry formations assaulted the compound from the north. One of the American advisors, Captain Ken Yonan, directed fire against the enemy from a water tower located in the compound. Unfortunately, many of the ARVN support troops located within the compound panicked and ran away from the attacking NVA forces. This exodus of troops over the wire on the southern side of the compound spread a general sense of hopelessness among the remaining defenders. By 0600, the situation was critical. Fog and low clouds greatly restricted

**the effective employment of air support. The Senior U.S. advisor to the 22<sup>nd</sup> ARVN Division, Colonel Kaplan, made the decision to evacuate the American advisory team once it became evident that the compound was about to be overrun. His decision to leave the compound was supported by the Senior U.S. Advisor for Military Region II, John Paul Vann. Mr. Vann, a civilian advisor who had over ten years of experience in Vietnam, was flying over the besieged compound in an OH-58 helicopter directing the air support which was finally able to work as the weather improved. Some of the enemy tanks were engaged by the U.S. advisors using M-72 LAWs as they fought their way out of the compound. Although some of the tanks were hit, it did not appear that the LAWs were being effective against the tanks at close range. The last time Colonel Dat the Division commander and his staff were seen, they were located in the men's room of the compound and had resigned themselves to eventual death or capture. It was reported some weeks later that Colonel Dat had, in fact, been captured and taken to North Vietnam.**

**Once outside the compound, Mr. Vann picked up the U.S. advisors in a daring rescue. John Vann was flying in his light OH-58 helicopter. Mr. Vann and his pilot Captain John Todd made several trips in the rescue effort and ferried some of the advisors to the Dak To II airstrip located about six kilometers to the west. It was necessary to keep the distance short because some of the ARVN soldiers had grabbed the skids of the helicopter as it departed and were hanging beneath it. On one of the trips, Mr. Vann's helicopter crashed while attempting to pick up the last of the advisors. Fortunately, he and the advisors were rescued by another helicopter. ARVN armored units that had been located west of Dak To II, at the Ben Het border camp, were ambushed by NVA infantry as they approached Dak To. Enemy infantry weapons destroyed all of the ARVN tanks in the relief column. Several of the ARVN M-41 tanks located at the Dak To airstrip were destroyed by NVA tanks, which were, in turn, destroyed by TAC AIR strikes. The ARVN M-41 tanks, which were armed with a 76mm main gun, were no match for the T-55 tanks of the NVA. Even though some of the ARVN tanks were able to get direct hits**

on the NVA tanks, their fire had no effect on the enemy due to the inability of the 76mm guns on the M-41 to penetrate the T-55s' armor. However, when the NVA tanks fired their 100mm guns, they were able to totally destroy the ARVN M-41 tanks. As this truth became more apparent, several ARVN tank crews abandoned their vehicles rather than being killed in their tanks. Later in the morning, several of the enemy tanks were engaged by helicopter gunships; however, even though the tanks were hit by anti tank rockets, again they were not destroyed.

The psychological shock created by the appearance of these enemy tanks from the 202nd NVA tank regiment was greater than the physical damage they wrought. This appeared to be a perfect example of the classic "shock effect" of armor on infantry troops. Fortunately, the NVA were either unable or unwilling to exploit their initial success. One might argue that this was a major tactical, if not strategic, error on the part of the NVA. After overrunning the 22nd Division headquarters, they had the chance to exploit their success, however, it appeared they out-paced their own plans or logistical support and were forced to wait until they could consolidate their positions. This provided crucial time for the ARVN defenders to reorganize, reinforce and prepare for the NVA's next move.

The destruction of the 22nd ARVN Division headquarters on April 24th was a shock to the entire II Corps Headquarters. The Division, now in disarray, ceased being an effective fighting unit, and the only thing that stood between the NVA and Kontum City were a few airborne units located on the highway, QL 14, north of Kontum City. Reports of two separate NVA regiments operating in the area subordinate to the B-3 Front brought the size of the enemy effort against Kontum to about three divisions, essentially a Corps sized operation.

Although the FSBs had been extremely effective against attack, their entrenchment limited their combat efficacy once the 22nd Division headquarters had fallen. General Ngo Dzu, the II Corps Commander, ordered the evacuation of the remaining FSBs on

**“Rocket Ridge.”** The troops walked out of these bases leaving their 105mm artillery pieces behind. Some of the units made heavy contact and took many casualties as the withdrawal turned into an exercise in escape and evasion. Some of the troops made it to the border camp at Ben Het and were extracted several days later by helicopter. Others were able to make their way to QL 14 and eventually followed that back to Kontum City. Many ARVN soldiers were lost – either captured or simply not able to make their way back to friendly locations.

**The 22nd ARVN Division units operating in Kontum province were considered no longer combat effective and were withdrawn from the area to reorganize and refit at Camp Enari, Pleiku, which used to be the home of the U.S. 4th Infantry Division when it was in Vietnam. Most of the airborne units were pulled back to the Saigon area to assist in the defense of An Loc. The 23rd ARVN Infantry Division from Ban Me Thout was assigned the mission of defending Kontum.**

**A general sense of gloom and pessimism, sometimes bordering on panic, infected both U.S. and Vietnamese troops alike. U.S. aviation units at Camp Holloway were preparing to leave with essential equipment if the NVA continued their attacks South unchecked. If they had wanted to, the NVA units could have driven their tanks all the way to Pleiku without significant resistance from ARVN ground forces. The fate of Kontum, and the Central Highlands, rested on the speed and determination of the 23rd ARVN Division and especially, of its commander, Colonel Ly Tong Ba.**

**April 29th: On the 29th of April, Colonel John A. Todd, Deputy Commander of the 1st Aviation Brigade, arrived at Pleiku. His presence was requested by BGEN. John G. Hill, Deputy Senior Advisor for II Corps. Colonel Todd was the third member of a planning and control group consisting of the Senior Advisor, Mr. Vann, his deputy, General Hill, and Colonel Todd. These three men, along with the II Corps Commander, LTGEN Dzu, made the key decisions each day on the conduct of the battle. On a**

personal note, I worked very closely with Col. Todd during this period and found him extremely dedicated, courageous, and competent. As the senior aviator, he made key decisions on the employment of aviation assets and made a significant contribution to the overall effort. He was a man I greatly admired.

**April 30th-May 4th:** The next week was devoted to preparing for the defense of Kontum City. Initially there was confusion, and attempts at establishing a perimeter defense were frustrated by command and control problems. The air cavalry, H troop (provisional) 17 CAV, conducted reconnaissance missions north and northwest of Kontum City. The importance of the role played by this single air cavalry troop can't be overstated. This unit was responsible for a very large operating area and consistently provided timely, crucial intelligence on enemy movements and actions. In spite of sustaining significant combat damage to its aircraft and casualties to the crews, H troop 17 CAV continued to perform its essential mission throughout the battle.

The air cavalry was able to pick up on enemy movement north and west of the city and there were strong indications that the battlefield was being prepared. Numerous reports of tanks throughout the area resulted in much lost time as the air cavalry tried to verify these reports. In fact, during this period most activity centered on attempts to locate and destroy tanks. However, the NVA were very successful in keeping their tanks hidden. Large bunker complexes and fighting positions were located north and northeast of the city and targeted for B-52 air strikes (ARC light strikes).

Another very significant event had taken place on April 29th. At about 1600 hours, two NUH-1B helicopters, mounting the only airborne TOW (tube launched, optically tracked, wire guided) antitank missile system in the world, arrived at Camp Holloway, Pleiku. These aircraft, tested in battle in the following weeks, would soon make Army aviation history and prove themselves as a viable concept that had only recently been in the testing stage.

**Previous to this, no helicopter had had this level of "antitank" capability.**

## PHASE II -- THE BATTLE FOR THE BORDER CAMPS

**May 5th:** On 5 May, the Ranger camp of Polei Kleng came under intense enemy artillery fire. The rounds were impacting in a tight pattern within the perimeter. Enemy forces had closed in around the camp and were placing accurate small arms fire on the defensive positions. The defenders reported tanks approaching from the north. A forward air controller (FAC) working in the area also observed the tanks but lost sight of them when they moved into a wooded area. Elements from the air cavalry were called in, once again, to locate the tanks. In addition, the airborne TOW aircraft had been called in to engage the tanks. These two NUH-1B helicopters were the only aircraft in the world equipped with the TOW system and great caution was exercised in employing them. Only one TOW aircraft went out at a time and escorted by a team of two AH-1G cobra gunships and a UH-1H that was the command and control (C&C) aircraft. The airborne TOW aircraft used the call sign "Hawk's Claw." Shortly after the helicopters arrived in the area, a steady stream of F-4 attack aircraft began arriving over the target area.

The gunner on the TOW aircraft spotted two of the tanks, which appeared to be painted black. He acquired one of them in his sights but elected not to fire when a helicopter from the air cavalry troop flew into his field of vision. Later, the targets were spotted several times, but, each time, the gunner was unable to acquire the targets early enough in his approach to engage them because of the thick jungle canopy in the area. TACAIR, both U.S. and Vietnamese, dropped bombs on the suspected target locations in an attempt to blow away the jungle cover so that the "Hawk's Claw" could get a clear shot. F-4's and VNAF A1-E's struck the area; however, the tanks were not visible. Several secondary explosions and what appeared to be oil base fires indicated that the air strikes might have destroyed at least one of the tanks. As the aircraft orbited the camp, a 23mm antiaircraft gun as well as numerous 51 cal. machine guns and small arms fire sporadically engaged them. All aircraft were forced out of the area early in the evening due to weather. The

ordeal by fire for the camp continued throughout the night. Intense artillery fire scored direct hits on the command bunker and other defensive positions in the compound. Many of these structures were damaged to the point that the defenders were forced to seek cover in individual foxholes as the enemy moved his assault troops to within 100 to 200 meters of the camp.

**May 6th:** Late in the afternoon of May 6th, as intense fighting continued, the decision was made by Mr. Vann and General Hill to pull out the two U. S. advisors. This was a difficult decision in light of the fact that Polei Kleng was located on one of the main enemy avenues of approach into the city of Kontum. Many of the camp defenders had become casualties, and there was a shortage of supplies, especially water. It was decided to extract the two U.S. advisors in the evening when it was dark enough to afford some concealment for the light observation helicopter (LOH) OH-6 from the cavalry troop that would make the extraction. Just at dusk the LOH flew into the camp through a hail of enemy fire and successfully extracted the U.S. advisors. It had been the plan to replace the ARVN camp commander, however, the VNAF pilot of the UH-1 carrying the new commander refused to fly into the camp.

Another dramatic event took place on the 6th of May. A FAC, flying in support of the Polei Kleng operation received a radio call from "Gladiator 715." This aircraft had been shot down on April 24th south of Dak To II carrying the U.S. advisors who had been rescued at Tan Canh by John Paul Vann. It had been reported that there were no survivors because the aircraft (UH-1H) had exploded on impact. The FAC established contact with a small group of survivors from the crash, lead by the crew chief, Spec/4 Lea, who had managed to both stabilize the wounded and evade capture. A team from H troop 17 CAV was immediately dispatched to try to locate them. At first a trap was suspected because no one could believe there was any possibility of survivors from the crash. When a helicopter got shot down, the crew chief and gunner often tried to jump clear before impact. If able, they would then go back to the aircraft to attempt a rescue

of the pilots. This was a plan that rarely worked. After locating the small party on the ground and insuring that they were, in fact, U.S. personnel, an LOH went in and picked up two survivors. They were accompanied by a group of ARVN soldiers and Montagnards who grabbed the aircraft when it landed and almost pulled it out of the air. Although these Montagnards had been essential to the survival of Lea and the others, it was impossible to airlift everyone involved out of the area at that time. This was a painful choice. Some of the aircraft in the area started receiving fire, so the U.S. personnel were the only ones recovered. These men told of three other badly wounded survivors located in the vicinity of the crash site. A "slick" (UH-1) from B/7/17th CAV landed in the reported location and recovered the three injured men. They reported that some ARVN soldiers who were in the area had helped them. It was also reported that a large number of these troops were wandering around in the hills south of Dak To, probably survivors from Tan Canh, Dak To, and the FSBs on Rocket Ridge. A group of Montagnards had provided food and other assistance to include an old PRC-25 radio. It was with this radio that Spec/4 Lea finally made contact with the FAC.

**May 7th:** This was one bright point in an otherwise dismal picture. Polei Kleng took several ground probes during the night. Enemy attacks by fire continued throughout the day on May 7th. Most of the camp was destroyed and all the defenders were forced underground into bunkers and foxholes.

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

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

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

**May 8th: On May 8th, the enemy continued to put heavy fire into both Ben Het and Polei Kleng. The situation of Polei Kleng improved somewhat when an ARVN captain, who spoke fairly good English, virtually assumed command of the situation. He was promoted to the rank of major by General Dzu and put in command. At Polei Kleng, one of the most serious problems facing the defenders was their critical shortage of water. A plan was devised to airdrop 3,000 pound loads of water from CH-47 helicopters, into the camp before sunrise. Colonel John A. Todd organized and led the mission; however, it was aborted due to poor weather in the vicinity of the camp. Unfortunately, this added to an already difficult situation within the camp.**

**May 9th: This young commander of Polei Kleng estimated that 1,000 rounds of 130mm artillery had hit the camp during the night of May 8th and early morning of May 9th. It seemed apparent that the enemy was about to stage a final push against the ranger camp. Reports vary on the size of the attacking force, however, it is estimated that it was regimental size and**

**supported by an unknown number of tanks. The defenders fired a 106mm recoilless rifle at the tanks but missed. Allegedly, small arms fire became too intense to even use the M-72 Light Antitank Weapons (LAW). Approximately 350 defenders (including some of their dependents) moved out of the camp to the south, leaving an unknown number of wounded behind. At 1700 hours there were reports of tanks leaving the area to the west and that 180 of the defenders were 6 km west of Kontum city. As of 1800 hours, 250 of the camp's defenders had joined with friendly units. In response to the loss of Polei Kleng, the ARVN airlifted a battalion from the 45th Regiment (23rd Division) into a blocking position 12 km west of Kontum city. The enemy antiaircraft fire was very heavy in the vicinity of Polei Kleng and resulted in a VNAF A1-E being shot down 3km northwest of the camp.**

**In response to the reported tank attack at Polei Kleng, the "Hawk's Claw" was launched at about 0645 from Camp Holloway. Typically, the "Hawk's Claw" team was on strip alert at Camp Holloway. After arriving on station and not being able to locate suitable targets, the package was diverted to Ben Het.**

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

**On the morning of May 9th, Ben Het had also come under an intense combined arms assault. Prior to the attack, the NVA had sent dogs through the defensive wire from the north to detonate antipersonnel mines, after which the infantry followed. The fighting intensified to close-quarters combat, with positions on the eastern perimeter trading hands several times. Late in the afternoon a small enemy force still occupied several bunkers within the camp. The defenders were able to destroy one tank at the main gate with an M-72 LAW. During the battle, an estimated 100 enemy troops were killed in the immediate vicinity of the camp. Due to the low clouds, TACAIR was not able to work;**

however, our TOW helicopter was able to acquire and destroy several tanks, as they were not as well hidden during the actual attack on the camp.

During the early morning, a decision was made to send in a slick from the 57th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC), the Gladiators, to re-supply the defenders with M-72 LAWs. The aircraft was escorted by two AH-1G cobra gunships from the 361st Arial Weapons Company (AWC), the Pink Panthers. Although all of the aircraft received hit, the drop was successful; however, while escorting the slick out of the camp, one of the gunships received multiple hits and crashed several hundred meters southeast of the camp where it exploded shortly after impact. The front seat pilot was observed climbing out of the aircraft and falling nearby. The aircraft commander, Captain Reeder, was observed running to the southwest into a wooded area. After numerous air strikes, an LOH from the cavalry was able to locate and pick up the front seat pilot; however, Captain Reeder was not seen again. (It was learned later that he had become a POW.) The other AH-1G also received several hits and the pilot, WO Allen, was shot through the chest. After the copilot/gunner, Captain Gamber, landed the aircraft on highway QL 14, east of Dak To, WO Allen was administered life saving first aid by Captain Roy Sudec who was flying the C&C aircraft for "Hawk's Claw." After WO Allen was stabilized, he was evacuated to a medical facility in Pleiku.

**May 10th and 11th:** After an intense firefight, the attack on Ben Het was successfully beaten off, with the enemy taking very heavy losses. The situation was relatively stable at Ben Het on May 10th, and by 0900 hours May 11th, the defenders had eliminated the enemy still inside the camp and secured the entire perimeter. During the fighting, four bunkers and some of the perimeter wire had been destroyed, so the remaining troops took to repairing the fortifications, as another attack seemed likely.

It appeared that the NVA considered the two border camps of Polei Kleng and Ben Het important enough to expend a great deal

of resources against them. Although Polei Kleng was lost, the cost to the enemy in men, equipment, and most of all, time, was a major advantage to the defenders of Kontum City, especially the 23rd ARVN Division. Preparations for the defense of Kontum were proceeding at a rapid pace, but time was the critical factor. The question was whether the defense would be well enough organized and prepared to survive the attack everyone knew was soon to come.

The battle for the border camps was significant to the defense of Kontum for a number of reasons. First, it delayed the main attack on the city. Secondly, the resources expended on these well-fortified camps would not be easily replaced by the NVA in time for the attack on the city. Third, and probably most important, was the fact that the successful defense of Ben Het was the first really positive action since the disaster at Tan Canh. The fact had been established that the enemy could be stopped. On May 11th, MGEN Nguyen Van Toan replaced the Vietnamese II Corps commander, LTGEN Ngo Dzu. General Dzu departed smiling and apparently quite happy, remarking that he had been fired but at least he had not lost any of the province capitols. General Toan made a favorable impression. His reputation as "both a fighter and a lover," sparked Mr. Vann to remark that if the General didn't do one, he wouldn't do the other. Mr. Vann had high hopes that things would improve for the city of Kontum and the defense of the Central Highlands. The staff had not been replaced and was still very weak. Mr. Vann recommended strongly that General Toan use his personal influence to get some topnotch people from Saigon to replace the staff of LTGEN Dzu. A matter of serious concern was that the briefings and other information presented to the Corps Commander about troop movements and estimates bore no discernible resemblance to the actual facts. The daily staff update for the Commanding General was known as the "fairy tale hour." This lack of accurate information from the ARVN leadership was exactly the same problem faced by the advisors for the 22nd Division. Much of the reports on troop activities and locations were not accurate and lead to a false picture of the

**situation on the ground. This was very frustrating to the U.S. advisors and created major problems in planning air strikes.**

**Kontum airfield continued to receive daily attacks by rocket and artillery fire. A special note of praise should go to the courageous tower at the airfield and the Ground Control Approach (GCA) operators who continued to man their positions, even when hardened veterans were ducking for cover. Though the defensive preparations were proceeding at a feverish pitch, it was essential to have the airfield open and operating. Most of the supplies were being delivered to Kontum by Air Force C-130 cargo aircraft, operating at night, and often in poor weather conditions.**

**The decision had been made to laager the cavalry troop and the Hawk's Claw at Kontum airfield. This presented some problems in that the airfield received sporadic ABFs throughout the day. It was believed, however, that the high degree of risk was warranted. Having the aircraft on standby at the airfield saved a great deal of flight time, or "blade time." During this period, with increasing enemy fire, several aircraft were damaged but, fortunately, no pilots were killed.**

**The role of helicopters, both in the battle of Kontum, and the Vietnam War in general, cannot be overstated. All of the U.S. advisors praised the aviation support they received and often gave special mention to the U.S. air cavalry, H troop 17 CAV. The air cavalry's performance during the Battle of Kontum was extraordinary, by anyone's definition. Also the tremendous fire support provided by the U.S. Air Force, especially the B-52 strikes, has often been described as the "key" factor in the battle.**

**On May 11, the new II Corps Commander, MGEN Toan, spent the night in Kontum City. He visited several positions and then met with the 23rd Division Commander and his staff. He told them that there would be no retreat from Kontum City. Early on the morning of the 12th, he conducted inspections of units and**

**forward positions, and was highly critical of most positions. The single biggest criticism of the soldiers' positions was that they had not dug their fighting positions deep enough to protect them from tanks – a problem that had to be checked on daily.**

**May 12th: On May 12th, while conducting a visual reconnaissance, one of the cavalry LOHs, piloted by Lieutenant Smith, located a T-54 tank. Unfortunately, the tank fired his main gun at the aircraft along with his machine gun. Although the LOH was not hit by fire from the main gun, the aircraft was shot down by small arms fire. Both crewmembers were successfully extracted but the aircraft was destroyed.**

**In response to the tank sighting, the TOW package was launched. The Hawk's Claw had considerable difficulty acquiring the target because of the jungle canopy and camouflage. Several observers from the cavalry verified the report that three T-54 tanks were in the area. After several unsuccessful passes by the TOW ship, two missiles were fired into bamboo, camouflaged clumps in the area where the tanks were hidden, with unknown results. TACAIR strikes were used in an attempt to blow away the camouflage. The camouflage was blown away from one tank, and it received a direct hit by a TOW missile. The tank erupted into flames and was still burning as of 1900 hours that night. Numerous attempts were made to hit the other tanks with TOW missiles; however, the gunner could not acquire the tanks. The dense jungle, and the camouflage employed by the enemy, made it very difficult to find the tanks. The area appeared to be a tank park or assembly position and was nominated for a B-52 ARC light strike that night.**

**TACAIR was used against the enemy anywhere he was found. There were over 50 U.S. TACAIR sorties and 28 VNAF sorties in the Kontum area on May 12th. In addition to the TACAIR, there were 25 ARC light strikes.**

**Much has been said about the VNAF aviation support, both helicopter (mostly UH-1) and TACAIR (mostly A1-E). I got to**

know several of the VNAF pilots and after the war, I became a close friend with a helicopter pilot who had escaped and become a refugee. Some of the helicopter pilots of an earlier time, such as the CH-34 "Kingbee" pilots "Cowboy" and "Mustachio" who had supported the SOG missions out of FOB 2, were legendary in their courage and skill. It is important to note that, unlike American soldiers, these pilots were not on a one-year tour. They continued to fly combat missions until they couldn't fly anymore. At Kontum, A1-E pilots took on 51 cals head-to-head and sometimes got shot down. It would be both a mistake and a disservice to this brave group of aviators, not to mention their contributions to the battle.

The northern approaches to Kontum City took on the appearance of the "carpet bombing" area for the breakout of St. Lo, in WWII. The resemblance stopped there, however, for the ARVN were not interested in breaking out, or taking the offensive, especially to the north. There have been many that have criticized the ARVN soldiers and leadership for their lack of aggressiveness and offensive spirit on the battlefield. This is not the place to go into a detailed discussion on this aspect of the war, but observations by some of the U.S. advisors provide an interesting perspective. The ARVN were trained to fight anti-guerrilla war, not a conventional battle against battle hardened, well equipped NVA division formations. The ARVN division commanders had never had an opportunity to command their units, as a division organization, until they were in the heat of battle. The ARVN soldier, on offensive operations, would stop and call for fire support as soon as they encountered enemy fire. They did not employ "fire and maneuver" tactics very successfully. However, if provided a good defensive position and adequate leadership and support, they would fight bravely and effectively. This lack of an aggressive spirit was not the American way, and often led to frustration for the advisors and criticism from the U.S. press.

**The 44th Regiment was scheduled to arrive in the city on the night of May 12th. The 44th was reported to be one of the best ARVN regiments in the 23rd Division, and everyone was anxious**

to get the unit into position before the NVA launched the main attack. Although most officials were publicly voicing confidence that the city would hold, these were dark days and most harbored grave doubts as to the ARVN's ability to hold the city. Most of the governmental officials had evacuated the city, and population control was becoming a serious problem. The enemy cut the road south to Pleiku, QL14, and panic had set in with the people of Kontum. The near hysteria that existed with the civilians had had a negative effect on many of the defenders, especially the local RF/PF forces who were defending the entire southern perimeter of the city. Chinooks (CH-47's) from the 180th ASHC stationed at Camp Holloway, did an extraordinary job of carrying in supplies and carrying out refugees and wounded. Often the aircraft were forced to orbit the city until the shelling slowed enough for them to get into one of the landing zones (LZ). Crowd control in the LZs became such a problem that the armed police were forced, at times, to use brutal methods to control the hundreds of desperate people trying to leave to escape the advancing NVA.

During this period, the city of Kontum started to fill up with several hundred ARVN deserters. These men were mostly from the units of the 22nd Division who had deserted in the confusion of battle. ARVN authorities were reluctant to round these men up and return them to fighting units. In order to force the ARVN authorities to take action, a false report was released that NVA soldiers were in the city masquerading as ARVN soldiers in uniform. This had the desired effect.

**May 13th:** During the afternoon of May 13th, the great tank hunt continued. The LOH pilots of the cavalry troops continued their perilous work of hovering around suspected tank locations trying to get a visual fix on them. The air cavalry was the most important source of hard, timely intelligence, and the methods they used to get it were extremely hazardous, to say the least. This fact is attested to by the heavy losses they suffered in men and material during the months of March through June 1972 (See "Aircraft Losses" section on this site). Later in the day of May

**13th, the cavalry located an armored personnel carrier (APC) and Hawk's Claw was launched to engage the target. The APC was hit and set ablaze. On one of the attacks by the Hawk's Claw, the pilot put the NUH-1B aircraft in a steep dive that nearly exceeded the safe flight envelope of the aircraft. The pilot had great difficulty in pulling out of his dive, and the TOW missile overshot the target. Although the NUH-1B helicopter was not the best platform for the TOW system, they were the only ones available in 1972.**

### PHASE III - THE BATTLE FOR KONTUM CITY

**May 14th:** On the morning of May 14th, the Battle of Kontum City began. The enemy fired numerous 122mm rockets and artillery rounds into the city. Many of the artillery rounds were being fired from captured ARVN weapons lost at Tan Canh and from other ARVN bases. At approximately 0530 hours, five tanks and an estimated two battalions of infantry attacked from the northwest. One of the tanks broke through the perimeter and attempted to crush a bunker. An ARVN soldier using an M-72 LAW, put this tank out of action. Hawk's Claw had been launched from Camp Holloway and was on station over the battle area by 0650. The sky was overcast which prevented TACAIR from providing close air support. At the time the Hawk's Claw aircraft arrived on station two tanks were observed withdrawing to the northwest. One of them just entered a ford across a small stream, and the other one was immediately behind it. Hawk's Claw first engaged the tank in the stream. The first missile hit this tank, and the second tank was hit moments later by the second missile. Both tanks burst into flames and exploded. The entire engagement took about five minutes. A VNAF FAC directed accurate artillery fire on the attacking enemy troops, and they started to withdraw under this intense fire. The attack was over by 0900 hours. The burning tank hulks were a welcome sight for both the U.S. advisors and the ARVN troops. This first attack appeared to be more a probe than a full attack. A captured enemy tank driver stated that he was told that they would not meet much resistance. The NVA had probably thought the ARVN troops would break and run like they did at Tan Canh.

The enemy continued his rocket and artillery attacks on Kontum City and the airfield throughout the day. Aircraft fuel was stored in large, rubberized containers called blivots. One of these blivots containing JP-4 fuel at the airfield was set ablaze by an incoming shell; however, the fire was extinguished before it completely destroyed the POL facility. The ground attack resumed at 1700 when friendly elements were reported in heavy contact on the northern perimeter. This attack was beaten off

before nightfall. Thus ended the first day of attacks on the city itself. The Hawk's Claw was both an effective tank-killer, and an effective psychological weapon. Beyond just stopping individual tanks, its presence helped to calm the same kind of panic that the NVA tanks had created at Tan Canh. Mr. Vann was over the battle area most of the day in his OH-58 helicopter directing the defensive effort. Due to the intensity and accuracy of enemy fire directed at the airfield, the decision was made to have the helicopters stand by at Camp Holloway instead of Kontum.

**May 15th:** On the 15th there were numerous reports of contacts with enemy forces of unknown size north of the city, but no major attack developed. As Kontum continued to receive enemy rocket and artillery fire, there was a sense that seemed to permeate everything that the real battle for Kontum was about to begin.

Hawk's Claw was laagered at the Kontum airfield again on May 15th, so as to be able to more quickly respond to reports of NVA tank movement. The tanks had taken on primary target status and the U.S. advisors wanted to destroy as many as possible. The Hawk's Claw launched several times in response to reports from the air cavalry. One of the scouts reported sighting a tank; however, when the TOW aircraft got in the area, the only thing observed was a vehicle variously reported as an armored personnel carrier (APC), half-track and 2 1/2 ton truck. At any rate, a missile was fired at it and scored a direct hit, totally destroying the vehicle.

At about 2000 hours that evening, six tanks were reported 2 km north of Kontum City. Hawk's Claw, which had returned to Holloway for the night, was scrambled to Kontum. The enemy tanks moved into firing positions just beyond the perimeter and began firing directly into friendly positions. An armed Air Force C-130 Specter gunship was on station and engaged the tanks with 40mm cannon fire without success. Flares were dropped to provide illumination for Hawk's Claw. Unfortunately, the TOW gunner had difficulty acquiring any of the tanks in his sighting system. One missile was fired at a suspected tank location;

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

**May 16th:** The Hawk's Claw destroyed numerous targets northwest of Kontum City on May 16th. Most of these were abandoned ARVN trucks and APCs, but all of these items of equipment were considered usable. The targets were out of the range of friendly artillery and not suitable for TACAIR.

**May 17th:** Kontum airfield received sporadic rocket and artillery on May 17th. One of the rockets impacted in close proximity to two Cobra AH-1G gunships wounding one crewmember and damaging both aircraft. Later in the day, an exploding rocket set off a stack of ammunition just as an Air Force C-130 was unloading another ammunition pallet nearby. The pilot of the C-130 immediately applied full power in an attempt to make a take-off. Unfortunately, the aircraft rear ramp was still in the down position and when the pilot tried to rotate for take-off the ramp would drag on the runway slowing down the aircraft. As the aircraft ran off the end of the runway, the right wing struck a brick building sheering the wing and rupturing the fuel tanks. The fuel immediately ignited engulfing the aircraft in flames as it cart-wheeled for several hundred yards. Only two survivors were pulled from the wreckage.

The ammunition continued to explode on the airfield for the rest of the day hurling 105mm artillery rounds all over the area. Eventually, the entire ammunition dump was destroyed. One of the shells landed near a POL blivet and set the JP-4 ablaze. The exploding ammunition dump eventually cost the allies over 3,000 105mm artillery rounds, 25,000 gallons of POL, one C-130, and seven Air Force personnel who were the crew for the C-130.

For the next several days, defensive preparations continued as the enemy continued firing artillery and rockets into the city. There were numerous reports of enemy contacts along the perimeter. At night the flashes from enemy machine guns and recoilless rifles could be observed in close proximity to the friendly positions. TACAIR and gunships engaged these enemy targets.

**May 18th:** Efforts were made on the night of May 17th and early morning of the 18th to clean up the airfield. By 1030 hours the airfield was open to rotary wing aircraft but not ready for fixed wing traffic. Hawk's Claw successfully engaged and destroyed a tank and 23mm antiaircraft weapon northwest of the city on the afternoon of the 18th. Air Cavalry Reconnaissance indicated that NVA units were continuing to move into the area, preparing the battlefield for the coming "final push."

**May 19th:** During the early morning of the May 19th, the 44th Regiment came under ground attack along the northern perimeter. The attack, which was supported by 105/155mm artillery fire, lasted until about 0330 hours when the enemy finally withdrew. Gunships from Camp Holloway and Air Force gunships provided fire support for the 23rd ARVN Division. Some of the enemy troops managed to infiltrate behind elements of the 44th Regiment, however, these pockets were eliminated by 0730 hours.

The 23rd Division launched a reconnaissance in force to the north of Kontum City on the morning of May 19th. At 1100 hours the 23rd Recon Company air-assaulted, using VNAF helicopters, into a landing zone (LZ) 8 km north of the city in the vicinity of a suspected artillery position. The assault went well and elements of the 1/45th moved into blocking positions south of the LZ. The plan was to have the Recon Company move south from the LZ and catch any enemy troops between themselves and 1/45th. Enemy forces caught between the 23rd Recon Company and 1/45th, chose to attack 1/45th in their blocking positions. The

**position held, however, ARVN reaction forces refused to conduct counter attacks.**

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

**May 20th: During the night of May 19th, enemy forces apparently tunneled up to the perimeter of the 53rd Regiment area on the northeast side of the city. The enemy drove elements of the 53rd out of their positions and occupied some of the ARVN bunkers. The 53rd conducted counterattacks supported by TACAIR, gunships, artillery, and 9 ARVN M-41 tanks. A problem arose when the tank commanders refused to advance. General Toan and Colonel Ba rushed to the scene and managed to convince the tank commanders that it would be best for them if they advanced. By later afternoon the positions that had been lost were recaptured.**

**Kontum City and the airfield received the usual ABFs throughout the day. An enemy rocket hit a VNAF C-123 while it was parked on the ramp. The fuel cell was ignited and the aircraft burned to the ground. Luckily, the crew was able to get out of the aircraft without injury.**

**Reports from the air cavalry troop indicated the enemy was reinforcing his units by infiltrating troops into the area. The buildup was concentrated north and northeast of the city. B-52 ARC light strikes were scheduled into these areas on a daily basis. Bomb damage assessments (BDAs) conducted by air cavalry units indicated that the enemy bunkers and fighting positions were being destroyed. Although there were no clear indications that large numbers of enemy troops were being killed, it was believed the ARC light strikes were hurting the enemy. Later events proved this belief to be correct.**

**May 21st: On May 21st the enemy launched a major attack against the northern perimeter. The friendly units were deployed**

generally in an arc to the north of the city running from west to east these units were; 3/44, 4/44, 4/45 and 2/53rd. The forward edge of the battle area (FEBA) generally followed the arc, however, along QL 14, the FEBA extended up the highway to the northwest to form a finger. At 0500 hours friendly units received a heavy ABF of mixed caliber rounds, followed by a two-pronged ground attack. The enemy was initially successful in cutting QL 14 at the base of the finger and in driving a wedge between 4/45 and 2/53rd.

Friendly elements conducted counterattacks throughout the day supported by artillery, TACAIR, and ARVN M-41 tanks. 3/44th was successful in driving the enemy out and restoring the FEBA trace at the base of the finger. Two battalions attacked up QL 14 to the north, one on either side of the road. Eight tanks supported the counterattack. One tank was hit and sustained moderate damage. The counterattack was successful in ejecting the enemy and restoring the FEBA. During the action Mr. Vann was overhead monitoring the situation and lending moral support. His presence in the battle area had a great stabilizing influence on both the U.S. advisors and the ARVN leadership. His role in the successful outcome of this battle cannot be overstated.

As Mr. Vann observed the battle, he appeared to be pleased with the outcome and stated that Colonel Ba's presence in the battle area had a positive effect on the troops and was responsible for the successful outcome. It is believed that the enemy attacked with a regimental size force. The 406th sapper battalion was identified as the unit that had cut QL 14.

There was strong evidence that the enemy was continuing his build up north west of the city. It was the cavalry troop commander's evaluation that the main attack would come from that area in the next few days. This proved to be an accurate prediction.

**May 22nd: Due to the heavy ABFs on Kontum airfield during the day, Air Force C-130s were operating at night only. Early in the morning of May 22nd the airfield received approximately five 122mm rockets. A C-130 blew a tire while landing at about 0115 hours. This closed the field due to the fact that the Air Force would not allow more than one aircraft on the field at a time. Throughout the early morning the airfield continued to take enemy rocket and artillery fire. The C-130 that had the blown tire was hit by a piece of shrapnel causing a fuel leak. The spilled fuel was ignited by another round. The fire burned for some time in close proximity to the aircraft, however, there were no attempts to put out the fire for fear that the aircraft could explode. After a while, the flames spread under the wing and set it on fire. At about 1030 hours Colonel John A. Todd landed his helicopter near the burning aircraft and he and his crew put out the fire with buckets of sand. Then, Colonel Todd extracted the Air Force crew. This is just one example of the courage and determination of Col. John Todd. Throughout the Battle of Kontum, Col. Todd made significant contributions to the Army aviation effort in support of the ARVN defense of Kontum City.**

**There were growing indications that the ARC light strikes had had a significant impact on the combat effectiveness of the 320th NVA Division. The 4/53rd Infantry found 70 bodies just 2 km northwest of Kontum City. In addition, they recovered numerous small arms and crew served weapons. Later in the morning the 2/53rd found 28 more bodies 1.5 km north of the city. Years later, it would be reported that the NVA lost thousands of soldiers in this battle, most of whom were listed as missing in action.**

**Since January 1st, there had been 820 ARC light strikes in Kontum Province alone. In the previous week, there had been 84 such strikes. It was becoming obvious that the heavy bombing was taking a toll on the enemy forces. There was some frustration among the advisors on the use of the B-52 strikes. The rules of engagement imposed on the targeting for ARC light strikes often made it difficult to call in the strikes in a timely**

**manner and close in to friendly positions. There was a great concern not to accidentally hit friendly positions. This conservative approach often limited the effectiveness of the strikes, but another contributing factor was the uncertainty of the ARVN positions when they were out in the field. If ARVN positions were not precisely known, they too could be hit by the massive strikes of the B-52s.**

**May 23rd and 24th: The 23rd and 24th of May were relatively quiet. It appeared to be the “calm before the storm.” There were the usual ABFs against the city and the airfield. Elements of the 53rd Regiment made contact with an enemy force of unknown size, killing 25 and capturing two mortars. The Forward Operating Base (FOB) pad, which was an old Special Forces camp located about 3 km south of the city on QL 14, came under enemy artillery fire, but there was no appreciable damage.**

**This camp, which actually straddled QL 14 on the east and west sides, had been used for years by the Special Forces to launch secret long-range operations into Cambodia and Laos. On my first tour, 1967-68, I lived at the base as a lift platoon commander for more than 90 days as the 189th AHC, 119th AHC and 57th AHC provided support for the mission. During this battle, the base was being utilized as an alternate rearm and refuel point for helicopters operating in Kontum. I had the opportunity to fly the “Air Boss” mission over the battle area on a number of occasions. The call sign for this mission was “Sage Street” and the mission was to coordinate and control all aircraft within the immediate battle area of Kontum City. This was General John Hill’s idea and it worked well. An OH-58 was used for the mission and the responsibility for the mission was rotated between a core group of officers from the 17th CAG.**

**May 24th: On May 24th, the 1/44th and 2/44th conducted a combat assault using seven VNAF units and two gunships about 4 km north of their perimeter. They met light resistance as they moved back towards friendly positions without major contact with NVA units.**

**May 25th: Enemy activity in Kontum increased significantly on May 25th. Enemy ABFs on the city continued throughout the day. The caliber of weapons varied from 60mm mortars to 155mm artillery. There were reports that two NVA Sapper Battalions had infiltrated the southeastern part of the city wearing ARVN uniforms. RF units were in heavy contact within the southeast quadrant of the city. There was great concern about the ability of the RF units to hold. They had responsibility for the entire southern portion of the perimeter and that was considered the most vulnerable point. Many times at night the soldiers would go back into town to be with their families leaving gaping holes in the defensive positions. For whatever reason, this weakness was never truly exploited by the enemy units.**

**In the southern quadrant, the 4/44th killed 16 enemy soldiers and captured one. The POW stated his battalion (6th Bn, 1st Regiment, 2nd NVA Division) had infiltrated Kontum City. During this period, the intense enemy artillery and rocket fire neutralized the 23rd Division artillery. Most of the ARVN artillery pieces were operational, but the crews refused to leave the safety of their bunkers in order to fire their weapons. This was a continuing source of irritation and frustration for the U.S. advisors who knew the ARVN had to fire counter battery fire if they were ever going to affect the NVA guns. Mr. Vann closed the airfield and directed that all of the air controllers be evacuated; this was done by 1730 hours.**

**The air cavalry conducted extensive reconnaissance northwest of Kontum City. Numerous small arms and supply caches were found in the vicinity of Rocket Ridge and the adjacent valley. It appeared that the area north of Polei Kleng was being used as a storage and staging area. There were numerous sightings of small groups of people throughout the area. The road that had stopped west of the ridge now extended over it to the east. There were indications of heavy usage by wheeled and tracked vehicles.**

**May 26th: The long awaited main attack hit the northeast quadrant of the city early in the morning of May 26th. The enemy conducted an intense artillery preparation beginning at about 0230 hours and lasting until about 0430 hours. The timing of the attack had been anticipated because of intelligence information. However, the exact hour was different from what was expected because the NVA were on Hanoi time that was one hour behind local time. The artillery preparation was followed by a massive combined arms attack spearheaded by 10-12 tanks. One of the lead tanks carried a large colorful NVA flag; it was the company commander's tank and inside were "hero" awards he had received for the tank battle of 1969. This information was found after the battle.**

**The enemy penetrated the perimeter and got in behind the 1/53rd and 3/53rd Infantry Battalions. The 44th Regiment was also heavily engaged. Enemy tanks and infantry penetrated to within several hundred meters of the runway at the airfield. In addition, enemy units that had occupied positions in the southeast part of the city had been reinforced during the night. Efforts to conduct a counterattack to eject the NVA were unsuccessful.**

**In response to the enemy attack, Hawk's Claw was launched from Camp Holloway at about 0615. The "turkey shoot" began at about 0645 when the first tank of the day was destroyed by a TOW missile. Some of the reports were that the enemy referred to the Hawk's Claw as "whispering death" because of the sound made by the trailing wires behind the missile. This was the optimum situation for the airborne TOW system. The weather was fairly good and the tanks were exposed in the attack during daylight hours. Before the morning was over, the Hawk's Claw aircraft had destroyed nine tanks, two machine guns, one truck, and one bunker. This effectively stopped the momentum of the attack. During the remainder of the day the battle raged on with opposing forces locked in close combat within the city. By the end of the day, the enemy controlled the eastern part of the city. TACAIR, artillery, and gunships supported the ARVN effort to stop the enemy.**

**May 27th:** The 27th was the second day of major enemy attacks on Kontum City. The enemy continued his attacks by fire and reinforced his positions within the city. Pressure continued to be applied by enemy units to the northern portion of the perimeter. Enemy artillery fire was impacting with great accuracy and affect in the vicinity of the 44th Regiment Command Post. Early in the morning of the 27th, the enemy made another major infantry attack from the northeast. At this point there was great concern that the NVA units would breach the defenses and pour into the city.

Once again, Hawk's Claw was scrambled from Camp Holloway to meet the threat. Two T-54 tanks were destroyed as soon as the Claw arrived in the area. However, dense smoke and dust clouds from the artillery and rockets impacting in the area obscured the battle area, which prevented Hawk's Claw from acquiring any more targets. The Senior Advisor for the 44th Regiment confirmed that two tanks were killed by the TOW missiles plus two T-54's were knocked out by M-72 LAWs 400 meters north of his command post. The ARVN soldiers were gaining confidence in their ability to stop the tanks with the LAW. After the battle, I saw pieces of 2x4 wood planks that the ARVN soldiers had rigged up to fire six M- 72s at one time. Most of the tank hulks surveyed after the battle had multiple holes in them from the M-72 hits.

The helicopter re-supply effort continued throughout the battle. The main logistical burden during this period was carried by CH-47s belonging to the 180th Assault Support Helicopter Company (ASHC). Even though there were enemy snipers in close proximity to the LZ and enemy artillery rounds impacting nearby, the Chinooks continued their essential work of hauling ammunition and food to Kontum. The only area that was secure enough to use was the soccer field located in the southwest part of the city. A serious problem that plagued the logistical effort throughout the battle was the lack of control of the refugees in the LZ. The CH-47s were taking as many civilians out of the city

as possible, however, often in their panic to escape, the refugees would mob the aircraft. On several occasions the air controllers were threatened by unruly mobs. This sad spectacle was only made worse by the, sometimes brutal, methods used by the local police to control these terrified people. This problem continued off and on throughout the period of intense enemy action but subsided as the situation in Kontum stabilized.

Late in the afternoon of May 27th, a VNAF A1-E was shot down 2km southwest of the city. The pilot parachuted safely and was picked up by a helicopter operating in the area.

During this intense period of combat, there was considerable concern that ARVN units were not successfully launching counterattacks. The biggest fear was that the longer the enemy stayed in the city, the more difficult it would be to dig them out.

An interesting event took place in the Kontum Pass, south of the city, where ARVN forces had been trying, without success, to open QL 14 between Kontum and Pleiku. Strong enemy forces occupying well-constructed bunkers and fighting positions bogged down friendly units. Colonel Tuong, II Corps Deputy for Operations, offered one third of his month's pay (he said about 10,000 piasters) to anyone in the unit he was with who would knock out a 51 cal antiaircraft weapon that had been firing at aircraft that came into the area. His offer was accepted by one of the ARVN soldiers. The soldier got into position, covered by his comrades, and threw a grenade into the cave from which the gun was firing. The soldier observed a 57mm recoilless rifle nearby and knocked this out with a grenade also. Both weapons were brought back to Colonel Tuong, but the gunner of the 51 cal. MG had to be cut loose from the weapon since he was chained to it. This was one more indication that the NVA were decisively engaged and were committed to winning the battle at all costs. The enemy soldier was identified as being from the 40th Artillery Regiment, normally part of the 304th NVA Division, but now, apparently, supporting the 95th B Regiment.

The NVA were masters in the use of the 51 cal. MG and the B-40 rocket. Both weapons were used in a variety of roles. Usually the 51 cal. MGs were employed with a crew of 10 - 12 men who supported the gun and prepared the firing positions. They used the gun for antiaircraft and antipersonnel missions. These weapons were deadly against helicopters. The B-40 rocket was also a very effective weapon, which was sometimes used in an antiaircraft role. It was apparently one of these gun positions in the pass that killed a friend of mine, CPT Joe Eubanks flying a 57th AHC UH-1H helicopter on June 2nd. Another friend, CPT Fred Suttle from H/10 CAV was also killed trying to go in to get Joe and his crew from the downed aircraft. They are not forgotten.

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

**May 28th:** The enemy continued the early morning attacks on May 28th, however, they were not as strong as previous ones and were easily beaten off. Enemy ABFs continued throughout the day with the majority of the rounds landing in the vicinity of the 44th Regiment. The attacks were lighter than they had been for the previous three days. Although scattered contacts continued throughout the day, a major enemy assault never materialized. Hawk's Claw was launched at 0915 to engage an enemy 51cal. Machine gun position mounted on top of a water tower in the north central part of town. The position was attacked at 1010 hours. Five missiles were fired in an attempt to knock out the gun and destroy the water tower. The gun was destroyed, and the water tower was damaged to the point that it was leaning badly to one side. Another 51 cal. MG position located at the base of the tower was knocked out by 105mm artillery fire.

The situation within Kontum City remained critical. The enemy still occupied the eastern half of the city plus some small penetrations in the northwest. The Senior Advisor for the 23rd ARVN Division, Colonel John Truby, with his staff, made a crucial

**decision during the night of May 28th. After overcoming many difficulties, they decided to pull friendly forces back, closer to the center of the city so that the rules of safe distance from ARC light strikes could be satisfied and they could bring the strikes much closer in. This was a courageous and risky decision but it was crucial to the successful defense of the city. The B-52 strikes caught the NVA units preparing to attack and had a devastating effect on the enemy.**

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

**Mr. Vann and General Toan were becoming more optimistic at this point. There were indications that the enemy had been badly hurt. POWs stated that enemy commanders at all levels had been directed to personally lead attacks to insure their success. Mr. Vann and General Toan directed that an all-out effort be made by psyops personnel to try to get enemy troops to surrender. These efforts, for the most part, were unsuccessful.**

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

**May 30th: Early in the morning of May 30th, the tide of the battle of Kontum, although still extremely volatile, seemed to be**

shifting in favor of the ARVN troops. The 44th Regiment CP and 23rd Division CP received an intense ABF, but it was of short duration and the damage done was limited. Enemy elements within the city attacked units of the 44th Regiment, but the enemy was not able to make any significant gains. At about 0700 hours, a large ammo dump located north of the airfield was set on fire and exploded.

Two wounded NVA troops were captured early in the morning near the 44th Regiment CP. There was an attempt to exploit these POWs for psyops purposes by trying to convince other NVA soldiers to surrender; however, the operation was not successful. Late in the day, elements of the 44th Regiment made some progress in clearing the northeast section of the city.

Although the weather turned poor, and started to adversely affect air operations, there was a note of optimism, and the entire picture was looking a little less dark. In the afternoon, at about 1330 hours, President Thieu visited the 23rd Division CP and promoted Colonel Ba to the rank of Brigadier General.

**May 31st:** Some progress was made on the 31st of May when elements of the 44th Regiment and RF/PF units continued attacks against enemy-held positions within the city. The fighting in the northeast was difficult, and friendly forces suffered many casualties. The enemy, although not considered strong in numbers, occupied well-constructed bunkers. The difficult business of rooting them out fell on the ARVN infantry troops. The task was very costly to the ARVN. The soldiers demonstrated a great deal of courage and persistence in this hazardous work.

**June 1st - 8th:** The situation in Kontum continued to improve on June 1st as the enemy penetration in the southeast quadrant had virtually been eliminated, and there were indications that the enemy was withdrawing to the northeast. The 23rd Division reported that they had seized control of the airfield.

For the next several days the friendly forces conducted clearing operations within the city. The southeast quadrant was cleared first and then all forces were directed to sweep the northeast quadrant. Hard, bitter fighting ensued with heavy losses resulting for both sides. ARVN M-41 tanks often fired point blank into buildings occupied by the enemy. Throughout this period, the enemy conducted sporadic ABFs. Several minor attacks on the northern perimeter were easily repulsed. It was believed that these attacks were to support enemy units attempting to withdraw from the city.

On one occasion, as the enemy was withdrawing from the city, he ran into one of his own units. With each unit mistaking the other for an ARVN unit, a firefight ensued between them and ARVN artillery took the opportunity to support both sides.

As ARVN units continued clearing operations, large numbers of enemy weapons were captured. Stiff resistance was encountered in the northeast quadrant, but it eventually was cleared out.

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

By June 7th, it began to appear that another enemy attack on the city was unlikely, and everyone felt optimistic. On the 8th of June, Air Force C-130 aircraft began landing again at the airfield during the night.

**June 9th:** This was indeed a most significant day because, on that day, the 23rd Division Commander declared the city secured. Another event took place on the 9th of June that was felt by all of us. That was the death of John Paul Vann, the II Corps Senior Advisor. After a farewell party held in honor of BGEN John Hill, who was departing the next day, Mr. Vann got into his OH-58 Bell

**Ranger helicopter along with his pilot, First Lieutenant Ronald F. Doughtie and a passenger, Captain Robertson. They took off from II Corps Headquarters at about 2100 hours.**

**I had been flying a UH-1H helicopter from the 57th AHC to the coast that day on a routine mission. On my return, at about 1800 hours, I was notified that the Ground Control Approach (GCA) equipment at Kontum was down and that they needed a part to be flown up to the Kontum airfield as soon as possible to support the Air Force C-130 aircraft coming in that night. We picked up the part and went to Kontum. The weather was closing in and it was not easy to maintain Visual Flight Rules (VFR) conditions. Rain, heavy at times, and low clouds were present for most of the flight. We dropped off the needed part and headed back to Pleiku. The weather had deteriorated and we were flying under instrument flight regulations (IFR) conditions back into Pleiku. In the lightning flashes you could see low clouds in the Kontum Pass along QL 14. As we approached Camp Holloway we heard Mr. Vann call off of the II Corps helipad with his distinctive voice and call sign of "Rouges Gallery". When I got back in to the 17th CAG TOC, LTC Jack Anderson was there and they were monitoring a report that a helicopter had gone down in the Kontum pass.**

**Mr. Vann had insisted on going to Kontum because he wanted to spend the night with the 23rd Division. For the previous 30 days he had been up to Kontum at least once a day and he didn't want to break his record. He took some fresh fruit and other treats that were left over from the farewell party. He had intended these for the men in Kontum so that they could share in the festivities that had taken place earlier.**

**Apparently, Mr. Vann elected to low-level up QL 14 because the weather was poor. Mr. Vann called the 23rd Division CP shortly after take-off estimating 15 minutes from Kontum. That was the last anyone heard from him. An ARVN unit located in the Kontum Pass reported observing a helicopter crash. A search effort was launched by the 17th CAG from Camp Holloway. LTC Jack**

**Anderson and CPT Bernard Ferguson went to the crash site and brought back Mr. Vann's body. A detailed description of this event can be found on page 786 of Neil Sheehan's excellent work on the life of John Paul Vann and the American experience in Vietnam, "A Bright Shining Lie". Mr. Sheehan interviewed me in Pleiku in August of 1972 about this event and the Battle of Kontum in general.**

**This concludes my presentation on the Battle of Kontum. My purpose has been to provide what information I have on an event that affected many people and an event that also gave us some powerful lessons learned. The recent events in Afghanistan bore an amazing resemblance to the tactics and battles fought in the Central Highlands of Vietnam more than 30 years ago. The fact that the AC-130 Specter gunships and the B-52 ARC light strikes were used again only reinforces the timelessness of the lessons we learned so long ago.**

**I have tried to provide a more comprehensive picture of the role played by aviation units in this battle, especially the Army helicopter units that supported the ARVN units who fought the battle, along with their American advisors. The critical importance of the Air Force support, both on the ground and in the air cannot be emphasized enough. Without the massive fire produced by the B-52 ARC light strikes it would have been impossible to resist the onslaught of the NVA divisions.**

**Finally, I wanted to remember those who were there and who gave all they had in a cause that remains to this day, a source of pride for some of us, and, a source of pain for all of us.**

**"If the free nations want a certain kind of world, they will have to fight for it, with courage, money, diplomacy — and legions..... A nation that does not prepare for all forms of war should then renounce the use of war in national policy. A people that does not prepare to fight should then be morally prepared to surrender." — T. R. Fehrenbach, This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness.**