

THE BATTLE OF KONTUM - SPRING 1972

SUMMARY SECTION

On March 30, 1972, the Army of North Vietnam (NVA) invaded South Vietnam. The battle, that had been in the making for years, had finally begun. The enemy opened three major fronts. The first was in I Corps where he sent 30,000 troops streaming across the DMZ. The second was in III Corps where the enemy attacked out of his Cambodian sanctuaries and tried to capture the city of An Loc. The third was in II Corps where two NVA divisions, tried to capture the provincial capital of Kontum. This web site focuses on the battle of Kontum as I experienced it.

On this, the 30th anniversary of the Vietnam Easter Offensive or the Spring Offensive of 1972, it is my hope, that some of the insights gained during this period will be of use to others and may provide a better understand of this battle. This web site, on the Battle of Kontum, is my effort to commemorate those few Americans who stayed and fought with the South Vietnamese and especially the helicopter flight crews who did extraordinary things in a battle most Americans never heard of.

BATTLE FOR THE FIRE SUPPORT BASES (FSB)

During the latter part of March, the FSBs on "Rocket Ridge" had received 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. This early morning attack against FSB D 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.

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.

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.

After bitter fighting and the loss of several bases, 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 then, later, back to Kontum City. Many ARVN soldiers were lost, either captured or simply not able to make their way back to friendly locations.

BATTLE FOR THE 22nd DIVISION HEADQUARTERS AT TAN CANH

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 a large number of support troops and approximately one 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.

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. 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 had been reestablished in the 42nd Regiment TOC, but the morale of the ARVN Division commander, Colonel Duc Dat, and his staff, was very poor.

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 C-130 "Specter" gunship was called to the scene and with its onboard night vision equipment was able to detect a column of tanks 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) troops. These RF/PF

troops did not offer any significant resistance to the tanks nor did they destroy the bridges.

The 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.

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.

Unfortunately, many of the ARVN support troops located within the compound panicked and ran away from the attacking NVA forces. The exodus of these 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 22nd 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.

The destruction of the 22nd ARVN Division headquarters on the April 24th was a shock to the entire II Corps Headquarters. The Division ceased being an effective fighting unit, and the only things that stood between the NVA and Kontum City were a few airborne units located on the highway, QL 14, north of Kontum City.

THE BATTLE FOR THE BORDER CAMPS - POLEI KLENG

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.

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. The enemy moved his assault troops to within 100 to 200 meters of the camp.

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 living underground.

It was reported that the camp commander and other key officers attempted to escape from the camp during the night by way of a tunnel, however, it collapsed during the heavy shelling. The ARVN S-3 (operations officer) organized the defenders and generally took control of the situation.

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.

The commander at Polei Kleng estimated that 1,000 rounds of 130mm artillery had hit the camp during the night and early morning of May 9th. 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 so intense to

even use the M-72 Light Antitank Weapons (LAW). Approximately 350 defenders (including some dependents) moved out of the camp to the south, leaving an unknown number of wounded behind. At 1700 hours there were 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 quite heavy in the vicinity of Polei Kleng, and a VNAF A1-E was shot down 3km northwest of the camp.

THE BATTLE FOR THE BORDER CAMPS - BEN HET

On the morning of May 9th, Ben Het came under an intense combined arms assault. Prior to the attack, the NVA sent dogs through the defensive wire from the north to detonate antipersonnel mines and the infantry followed. The fighting continued at close quarters 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 stopped one tank at the main gate with an M-72 LAW. An estimated 100 enemy were killed in the immediate vicinity of the camp. Due to the low clouds, TACAIR was not able to work, however, our TOW aircraft, "Hawk's Claw" was able to acquire and destroy several tanks quite easily.

After an intense fire fight, 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.

THE BATTLE FOR KONTUM CITY

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 and M - 72 LAW, put this tank out of action.

The enemy continued his rocket and artillery attacks on Kontum City and the airfield throughout the day. 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.

On the 15th of May, there were numerous reports of contacts with enemy forces of unknown size north of the city, but no major attack developed. Kontum continued to receive enemy rocket and artillery fire. The shelling was a daily occurrence and the people of Kontum City tried to adjust to the bombardment.

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 crew member and damaging both aircraft.

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.

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.

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.

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 the 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 were 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. The counterattack was successful in ejecting the enemy and restoring the FEBA. During the action Mr. John Paul Vann was overhead monitoring the situation in his OH-58 helicopter lending moral support to the troops on the ground. 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 can not be overstated.

There were growing indications that the ARC light strikes 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 1/2 km north of the city. Years later, it would be reported that the NVA lost thousands of soldiers in this battle, most of who were listed as missing in action.

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, and killed 25 and captured two mortars.

On May 25th, enemy activity increased significantly in Kontum. 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 gapping holes in the defensive positions. For whatever reason, this weakness was never truly exploited by the enemy units.

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 was "hero" awards he had received for the tank battle of 1969. This information was found after the battle.

In response to the enemy attack, Hawk's Claw was launched from Camp Holloway at about 0615. 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.

The 27th was the second day of major enemy attacks on Kontum City. The enemy continued his attacks by fire and reinforced his forces 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.

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.

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.

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.

In the afternoon at about 1330 hours, President Thieu visited the 23rd Division CP. He promoted Colonel Ba to the rank of Brigadier General.

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.

The situation in Kontum continued to improve on June 1st. 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.

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 was a most significant day. 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, who died that night, in a helicopter crash in the Kontum Pass on QL 14.