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*MACV Command History
1972-73*

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ANNEX K

KONTUM

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BY _____ ON _____ THE NVA BUILDUP

(U) Military Region 2, the largest tactical zone in the Republic of Vietnam, contained 47 percent of the country's total land area (See Fig. K-1). However, it contained only three million people or about one-fifth of the population. For this reason, in the rolling, sparsely populated Central Highlands, neither side tried very hard to win. Both North Vietnamese Army/Viet Cong (NVA/VC) forces and Army of Vietnam (ARVN) troops were used in economy of force roles. Each year during the dry season the Annamite Mountains in Kontum Province became an area of increasing enemy activity; 1972 was no exception.¹ The drawdown of US maneuver battalions and the relegation of the remaining 60,000 US military personnel in Vietnam to advisory roles resulted in Vietnamese responsibility for the war in the region. Failure of the American Vietnamization program would be a disastrous blow to US foreign policy and give the enemy a decided advantage at the negotiating table.

(C) As early as the middle of December 1971, allied forces in the Central Highlands of Military Region 2 began to receive reports of preparations being made by the enemy for a major offensive in the winter/spring of 1972. ARVN intelligence reports and interrogation of PWs and Hoi Chanh revealed large scale enemy troop movements from base areas in Cambodia and Laos into northern Kontum Province. These sources also reported that the campaign would be a 3-phase offensive with Phase I from 27 January until 7 February; Phase II from 7 February to 14 February; Phase III from 14 February to 29 February. The high point of the offensive was to be characterized by attacks on Tan Canh/Dak To II, the fire support bases on Rocket Ridge, and the main population centers of Kontum City and Pleiku City.² In addition, VC local force activity in the southern portion of Military Region 2 and in the coastal provinces would increase in an attempt to scatter widely the ARVN forces and thus make the highlands vulnerable to a multi-divisional attack in Kontum Province. With the supporting attacks of VC units in traditionally VC-dominated Binh Dinh Province, a success on the Kontum battlefield would enable the NVA to cut the Republic of Vietnam in two and thus discredit the Vietnamization Program. Intelligence sources identified the controlling headquarters for the impending NVA offensive in the Central Highlands

as the B-3 Front. Its major combat units were the 320th NVA Division, the 2d NVA Division, and the organic combat units of the B-3 Front which equalled another division. These NVA units were supplemented by VC main force and local force units and the 203d Armor Regiment from Hanoi High Command.³

(C) Due to increasing indications of an impending offensive, the US advisors in Military Region 2 worked closely with their counterparts to utilize the remaining US assets in Vietnam. These assets were the air cavalry, tactical air support (TACAIR), and B-52 strikes. The air cavalry was used to reconnoiter known enemy base areas along the tri-border region of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam and also to the northwest of Kontum City in the Plei Trap Valley. The air cavalry and the USAF forward air controllers were able to detect enemy training areas containing mock-up tanks, mortar positions, and large bunker complexes.⁴

(C) During the last week of January the first sightings were made of enemy armor activity east of Base Area 609 (See Fig. K-2). On 25 January two Cobra gunship pilots from the 361st Aerial Weapons Company reported engaging two tanks in the Plei Trap Valley (not indicated on map) just west of Rocket Ridge. The pilots also saw four other tanks under trees in the area. In this same area another Cobra team reported sighting six sets of tracks made by armored vehicles. Subsequent visual reconnaissance did not locate the tanks, but the tracks indicated that the enemy had at least one armor company in the area. Further tank sightings by US gunships occurred on 30 January and sporadically thereafter. Because these reports could not be substantiated by ground reconnaissance, little credence was given to them by the SRAG advisory staff.

(C) Through the results of these reconnaissance efforts and the patrolling of the Border Rangers from fire support bases at Dak Pek, Dak Seang, and Ben Het, the US advisors were able to conduct over 60 B-52 strikes during the month of January. Friendly territorial forces, the Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF), increased their activity during January by conducting several ground and airmobile operations in battalion strengths, while ARVN regular forces concentrated on strengthening their defenses in Kontum and Binh Dinh Provinces.

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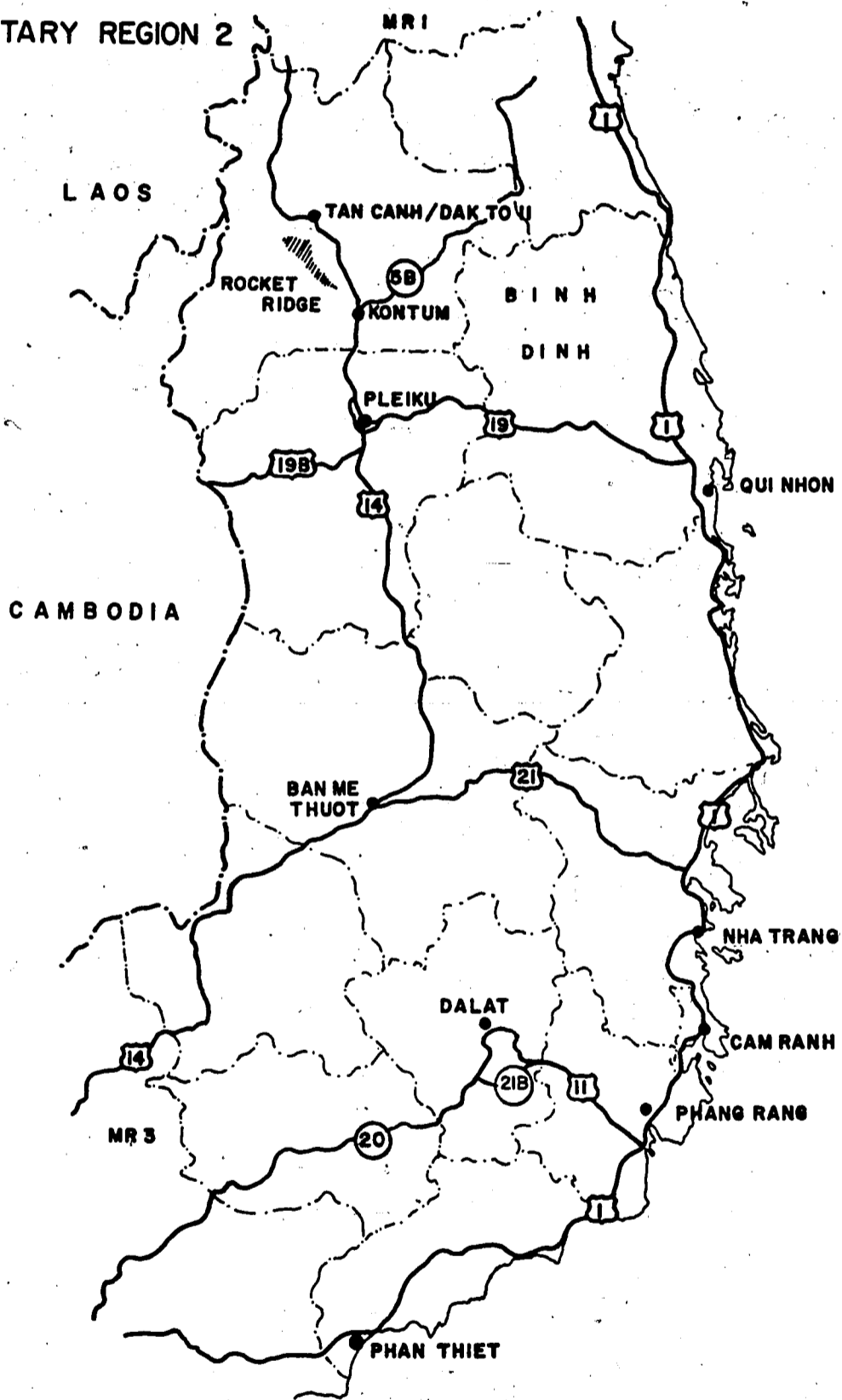
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MILITARY REGION 2



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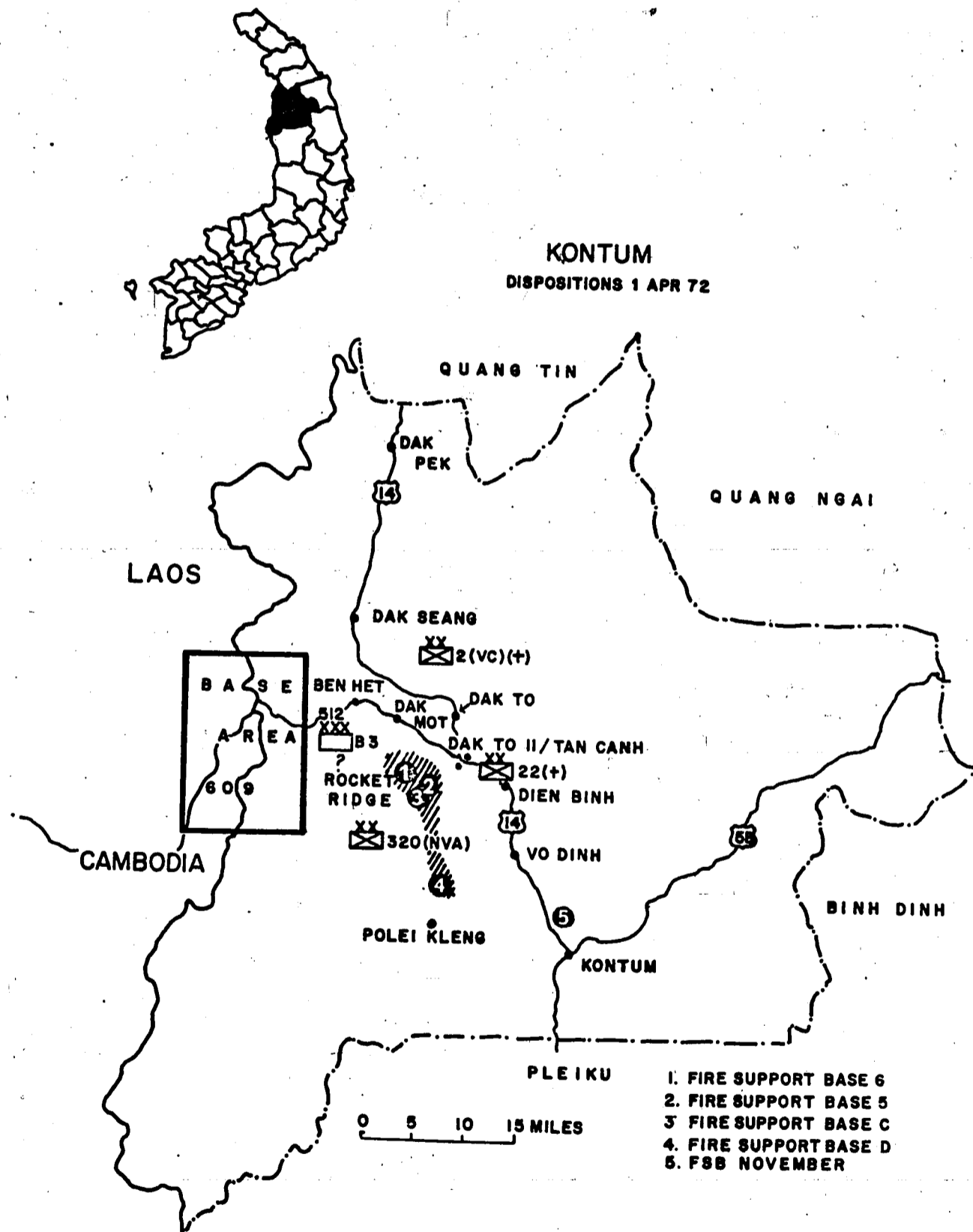


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Figure: K-2

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(U) Upon evaluation of all available intelligence, the ARVN II Corps staff, led by LTG Ngo Dzu, planned the defense of the Central Highlands. While the US advisors were kept informed of all developments, the Vietnamese themselves formulated the defense plan. The key US figure in this process was Mr. John Paul Vann, the only civilian ever selected to head the advisory effort in one of South Vietnam's military regions. Vann had spent over 11 years in Vietnam, first as an army officer and then as a civilian, and was highly respected among the Vietnamese people.⁶

(U) During the first week of February the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) and US air cavalry continued to report sightings of enemy armor, as tensions began to build. Documents captured during the week of 4 to 10 February confirmed the presence of the 320th NVA Division in the B-3 Front. One document also stated that the 320th was composed of the 48th, 52d, and 64th Infantry Regiments and the 54th Artillery Regiment. The total strength of the division and its special battalions was listed at 10,400 men. An accompanying document revealed that both 122mm and 130mm Soviet field guns with ranges up to 17 miles were being infiltrated to the triborder area.⁷

(U) As a result of this information LTG Dzu ordered COL Le Duc Dat, the new commander of the ARVN 22d Division, to move the division forward CP, the 47th Regiment, and logistical support to the Tan Canh/Dak To II area, which was already occupied by the 22d Division's 42d Regiment. The movement of the logistical and division main elements from the division base camp in Ba Gi, Binh Dinh, was accomplished on the 7th and 8th of February.⁸ In addition, elements of the 19th Cavalry Regiment were ordered to the Tan Canh area to reinforce the division's organic 14th Cavalry Regiment. COL Dat placed this new armor support at Ben Het because he felt that any NVA armor assault must come from that direction. LTC Tuong, the II Corps senior armor officer, argued against this deployment since it tied the armor to static positions. He felt that these units should be kept free for a mobile defense.⁹ The 2d Airborne Brigade from the Government of Vietnam's strategic reserve was also committed to the fire support bases on Rocket Ridge. LTG Dzu then defined his command structure. COL Dat was placed in command of the Dak To area to include the border ranger camps at Ben Het, Dak Mot, Dak Pek, Dak Seang, and Fire Support Bases 5 and 6. COL Long, Kontum Province Chief, was responsible for Kontum City and COL Tuong, the Corps Deputy for Operations, was given command in Pleiku.¹⁰

(C) Tet passed however, and there was no offensive. Nevertheless, the evidence of enemy battlefield

preparation continued to increase. In an effort to disrupt the enemy's timetable the USAF flew more than 80 B-52 missions in the Tan Chanh area during the first three weeks of February.¹¹

(C) President Nixon's visit to Communist China from 21 to 28 February led many to believe that the enemy would attempt widespread activity to discredit this important meeting between the two powers. Once again the enemy acted contrary to intelligence estimates. He continued to avoid direct engagements but increased his interdicting attacks on the lines of communication and minor installations. The number of prisoners and Hoi Chanh decreased to a trickle. In previous years, this had signaled impending attack. Surveillance continued to detect an eastward movement of enemy supplies into Kontum Province in greater amounts than ever before. Still, the offensive was delayed because the NVA/VC units had difficulty in moving their supplies forward into attack positions due to heavy US B-52 and TACAIR strikes on the base areas in response to air cavalry surveillance and ARVN intelligence reports. Therefore, the Tet period was peaceful. Nevertheless, enemy preparation of the battlefield included bunker and road construction, reconnaissance operations, and movement into attack positions, all of which portended a massive enemy offensive. The attack awaited only an adequate enemy personnel and logistical situation and favorable weather conditions.¹²

(C) To further bolster the defense of the highlands, the Airborne Division Headquarters and another brigade moved to Kontum in the first week of March and took over responsibility for defense of Kontum City and the southern portion of Kontum Province. After the middle of March contacts with larger enemy units began to increase significantly. One major incident was initiated by the actions of the 2d Airborne Brigade along Rocket Ridge, which resulted in the capture of several PWs and one Hoi Chanh. The contacts were with NVA battalion size forces and marked the end of the period of enemy reluctance to engage in major combat. The rallier and PWs reported that the 320th NVA Division would support the B-3 Front and participate in an offensive during the period April to September. These sources also reported seeing many tanks in the base areas through which they had moved and hearing that NVA armor units would accompany B-3 Front ground forces during the coming offensive. They also told of massive casualties and materiel destruction inflicted on units in their area by B-52 strikes.¹³

(U) There were three other significant enemy contacts. One of these occurred 30 kilometers north of Kontum City where the 23d Ranger Battalion was surrounded while assessing a B-52 strike.

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Heavy tactical airstrikes, artillery, and supporting B-52 strikes were required to assist the rangers' breakout. A lesser engagement occurred between the 95th Border Ranger Battalion and the 141st Regiment, 2d NVA Division, north of Ben Het. At the end of the month elements of the 47th Regiment and the 2d Airborne Brigade again made heavy contact along Rocket Ridge. The friendly forces took a heavy toll of the attacking NVA forces with the support of B-52s and US and VNAF tactical air.

(C) These successful ARVN offensive actions and the enemy failure to launch his announced offensive on schedule unduly affected the II Corps staff; they began to doubt whether the enemy possessed the capability to attack his stated objectives. They felt that the continued pressure on the enemy through increased patrolling, the aggressiveness of the 2d Airborne Brigade, and the relentless use of available air resources had harassed the enemy sufficiently to delay his preparation of the battlefield. Therefore, continued ARVN aggressive ground activity and massive air support would deny the enemy the initiative and reduce the size, duration, and effectiveness of the planned offensive.¹⁴

(C) In the first week of April this estimate appeared to be accurate as the 320th NVA Division's 48th and 52nd Regiments sustained heavy losses in assaults on the fire bases on Rocket Ridge. B-52s and tactical aircraft continued to pound at the massed enemy forces in this area until four to five enemy battalions were rendered combat ineffective. A prisoner taken in one of these attacks confirmed this information. He reported that reinforcements were infiltrating daily, however, and the units were regaining their original strength. At the same time the 42d and 47th ARVN Regiments were in heavy contact north and east of Dak To with elements of the 2d NVA Division and the 66th Regiment of the enemy B-3 Front. Prisoners captured in these contacts indicated that the mission of the 2d Division was to seize Dak To II airfield and the headquarters of the 42d ARVN Regiment at Tan Canh, as well as to destroy friendly artillery units along Provincial Route 512. The 66th Regiment had reconnoitered the Tan Canh compound and was in

THE ATTACK ON TAN CANH

(U) On 14 April Fire Support Base Charlie (See Fig. K-2) on the northern end of Rocket Ridge received over 300 mixed 105mm howitzer and 75mm recoilless rifle rounds followed by a ground attack from the 48th NVA Regiment. Although US Cobras and tactical aircraft were able to slow the initial advance, at 2230 hours the 11th Airborne Battalion was forced to withdraw. MAJ. John Duffy, the Senior Advisor to the battalion, was the last to

leave the position. He noted that five of the nine enemy antiaircraft guns that had ringed the fire base had been destroyed and that as many as 1,000 bodies from the attacking enemy forces were lying on the perimeter wire.¹⁷

(C) Hearing these reports, LTG Dzu felt that he had insufficient forces in the Dak To area to counter a multi-divisional NVA attack. He wanted to bolster the Dak To forces with nine ARVN battalions from Binh Dinh and thus leave that province stripped of ARVN regular forces and defended only by territorial forces. Mr. Vann, however, convinced LTG Dzu that such a move might prove disastrous. Vann proposed that the area of operations of the 23d Division be adjusted to give it some responsibility in Kontum and thus eliminate the need to move the battalions from Binh Dinh. With this plan the friendly order of battle showed the 22d Division with a total of 13 battalions consisting of three border ranger battalions, eight ARVN infantry battalions and scout companies, cavalry, sector forces, and 50 tubes of artillery; the Airborne Division with six airborne battalions, one border ranger battalion, and 16 tubes of artillery; Kontum sector with a ranger group of two battalions and territorial forces; and 50 tanks belonging to the 19th and 14th Cavalry Regiments spread between Pleiku and Ben Het.

(C) This realignment strained the logistical support of ARVN forces north of Vo Dinh due to the limited capability of the single road into the area. In this posture the ARVN forces were extremely vulnerable to an envelopment which would isolate all forces north of Vo Dinh. However, LTG Dzu ignored these logistical problems, perhaps because he was under orders from President Thieu to hold territory at all costs. The pressure continued to increase, however, as the enemy buildup continued.

(C) His problems were compounded by the ineffective leadership of COL Dat, the 22d Division Commander, whose inept handling of a combat assault by the 9th Airborne Battalion resulted in the loss of two helicopters, a failure to exploit two B-52 strikes, and divisiveness between the 22d Division and the Airborne Division.¹⁸

(C) The 42d and 47th ARVN Regiments continued their attempts to control the ridgelines around Tan Canh and Dak To II, but slowly fell back to the main compound. On the 19th the 1st Battalion of

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the 42d was isolated by an estimated two enemy battalions, making resupply impossible. COL Dat made only feeble attempts to relieve this force. On the 21st, after running out of ammunition, 63 of the 360 men in the battalion filtered back to the regimental compound.¹⁸

(U) On 20 April, the Vietnamese Joint General Staff required the release of one airborne brigade of three battalions and the division light command post from Military Region II. To fill the gap, the 6th Ranger Group was brought in from Hue, and the 23d Division assumed the old Airborne Division area of operations with its 53d Regiment.

(U) At 1930 hours on 21 April, after several days of heavy artillery attacks, the ARVN forces at Fire Support Base Delta on Rocket Ridge were overrun. The defenders, composed of one airborne company and one company of the 2d Ranger Group, had held until an NVA attack supported by three tanks forced them to withdraw. On 22 April in order to offset the setbacks on Rocket Ridge and give depth to the battlefield, LTG Dzu moved some of his artillery to Dien Binh in Dak To District. Vann had urged this move for several weeks but had been previously unable to convince Dzu of its value.¹⁹

(U) By 23 April the defenses in the Tan Canh area appeared adequate. The airborne brigade and rangers at the fire support bases on Rocket Ridge were well supplied. Their American advisors considered them to be excellent combat units. The 47th ARVN Regiment at Dak To II had a company of tanks and one airborne battalion in support. They also had two 106mm recoilless rifles and numerous M-72 light antitank weapons (LAW). The 22d Division at Tan Canh had the 42d Regiment and one battalion of the 41st Regiment near the compound. The garrison comprised 1,200 troops, which included 900 from the support elements not organized into the defensive plan of the compound. For antitank defense the compound had two 106mm recoilless rifles, over one hundred M-72s, and a company of M-41 tanks. More than 50 tubes of 105mm and 155mm artillery were in support. The area appeared to be prepared for the multi-division attack which threatened.²⁰

(U) By 23 April, although signs of an imminent enemy offensive had been present since early January, the long awaited campaign had not yet begun. Contacts with large units of regular NVA forces had increased significantly in the previous two weeks as the Tan Canh/Dak To II area had become encircled by hostile forces. The artillery fire had increased from 20 to 50 rounds per day in late March and early April to approximately 1,000 rounds a day in the previous two weeks. The enemy had already secured key terrain to the north and

east of the Tan Canh compound and were able to place accurate observed fire onto the forces inside.

(U) Lying on top of a bunker on the northeast side of the Tan Canh perimeter on 23 April, CPT Raymond H. Dobbins, acting Senior Advisor to the 42d ARVN Regiment, paid little attention to the constant volleys of artillery and rocket fire which fell like rain on the beleaguered 22d Division forward compound. Although he was completely exposed to this deadly and accurate fire, he calmly and methodically directed US airstrikes onto targets given him by his Vietnamese counterpart. He knew that one battalion of the 42d, supported by four M-41 tanks, in a nearby operation was also taking a fierce pounding from the mixed 122mm rocket, 130mm artillery, and 82mm mortar fire and needed the US airpower he was coordinating if they were to clear the area which was dangerously close to their perimeter. His attention was momentarily diverted to the area of the main gate where one of the M-41 tanks had gone to unload a crewman who had been wounded by small arms fire. At that moment a brilliant flash and accompanying roar signified that the tank had been hit by an enemy antitank weapon and destroyed. Due to the frequency with which the enemy had been utilizing the B-40 rocket, the Vietnamese immediately reported this as the cause of the explosion to CPT Dobbins. Dobbins quickly radioed a spot report to the division tactical operations center (DTOC) where the call was taken by MAJ Jon Wise, the G3 advisor who brought it to the attention of COL Philip Kaplan, the Senior Advisor to the 22d Division and LTC Terrence McClain, the Deputy Senior Advisor at the 22d DTOC. After a brief discussion the three agreed that the terrain was not suitable for a B-40 rocket since its effective range is only 200 meters and the enemy was over 500 meters from where the tank was hit. COL Kaplan, LTC McClain and MAJ George Carter, the Senior Advisor to the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment, proceeded to the destroyed tank. At that moment a wire guided missile whisked over their heads and struck another tank some 150 meters to the north of their position at the main gate. LTC McClain ran to the vehicle gathering up some 30 to 40 meters of thin copper wire. He noticed a small hole about the size of a silver dollar in the frontal armor. Underneath the tank was the tail assembly of a rocket. Examination revealed this assembly to be about three inches in diameter with two bobbins of wire and two jet nozzles attached to the body. The three advisors quickly returned to the division TOC as Dobbins continued to direct air strikes. Before Kaplan, McClain, and Carter could return to the DTOC, two more guided missiles were fired from the high ground to the northeast in the vicinity of a Buddhist

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pagoda. All agreed that the introduction of this sophisticated equipment might signal the beginning of the long-awaited offensive. The time was 1031 hours. At that moment a large explosion rocked the DTOC sending people and equipment crashing about; then all was quiet except for the unceasing artillery fire which continued to shake the earth above.

(U) The division TOC was a 45 by 30 foot reinforced bunker constructed of beams and pierced steel planking with a double layer of sandbags and was buried about eight feet underground. The impact of the blast had tossed everyone about like matchsticks and blown out several walls. The DTOC communications room and equipment and the sleeping area of the division TOC officers had been destroyed. As LTC McClain pulled himself to his feet, a ringing sensation caused by the blast continued. He soon realized that COL Kaplan and MAJ Wise had serious head wounds. No other Americans appeared injured, but there were about 20 ARVN dead and seriously wounded on the debris-strewn floor of the damaged DTOC. 1LT John Jones, an operations officer, and CPT David Stewart, division signal advisor, began to bandage Wise and Kaplan, while McClain treated the wounded ARVN. While the wounded were being cared for, COL Kaplan noticed that smoke had begun to fill the DTOC. The creosoted timbers which reinforced the bunker in the communications room had been ignited by the blast and had started to burn furiously. There were no fire extinguishers present, and after several futile attempts to douse the flames with water, the bunker was evacuated. COL Kaplan and LTC McClain insured that everyone was removed from the bunker before they departed.²¹

(C) Meanwhile, Stewart and MAJ Julius Warmath started to set up a new division TOC in the 42d Regiment TOC using US signal equipment. The division slowly regained a part of its composure, but a seed of doubt had been planted in the mind of their leader, COL Dat. The wire guided missile had devastated more than the command bunker; it had shattered the 22d Division's confidence in itself. A feeling that the NVA were better soldiers and must win had seemed to take hold on nearly every responsible individual. By noon the enemy had taken a heavy toll of the ARVN forces through the use of the wire guided missile. The five M-41 tanks within the compound were all destroyed by the missiles. Several bunkers were hit in addition to the division TOC. But the most important destruction had been psychological. At 1100 hours Vann, despite heavy enemy artillery fire, landed at Tan Canh to inquire about the decaying situation. He noticed that there was no ARVN counterbattery fire and that the MEDEVAC of wounded ARVN soldiers was entirely an American effort. After dis-

cussing the situation with the advisors, Vann directed them to implement their plan for escape and evasion. He then departed, taking with him several Vietnamese civilians who were employed by the advisors.²²

(U) LTC McClain and MAJ Warmath worked constantly during the afternoon to insure that all of the wounded were evacuated. In addition to directing the helicopters through increasing artillery fire, the advisory team also carried the litter patients to the aircraft. The remainder of the advisors were engaged in the direction of TACAIR onto enemy targets near the compound. With the exception of the increased artillery fire and small ground probes the remainder of the afternoon and early evening passed without significant incidents. The enemy did not move until 1900 hours when they lined up ten B-40 and B-41 rocket launchers on the high ground near the L-19 airstrip. Aided by the heavy barrage of artillery which kept the ARVN forces under cover, they were able to lob rounds of B-40 into the ammunition dump. One of several direct hits ignited a large fire which set off a chain of explosions and destroyed the stored ammunition. At 2100 hours CPT Richard Cassidy, the District Advisor of Dak To District, received word from his counterpart that tanks were moving through the hamlet of Dak Brung toward Dak To District Headquarters. Cassidy relayed this report to the 22d Division TOC and requested that a Spectre C-130 gunship be made available to counter this threat.²³

(C) At 2300 hours Spectre arrived in the Tan Canh area and immediately began to scan the Dak Brung hamlet area with its infrared and television tracking mechanisms. After 15 minutes the gunship located a column of 18 tanks moving from west to east toward Dak To District Headquarters. The Spectre reported this discovery to the 22d Division advisors and began to engage the tanks with the airborne 105mm cannon. Within Tan Canh this discovery caused a flurry of activity. LTC Thong, commander of the 42d Regiment, sent his deputy to the water tower on the northwest side of the perimeter to direct airstrikes onto the approaching enemy. CPT Ken Yonan, Deputy Senior Advisor, 42d Regiment, accompanied him to the tower and prepared to direct Spectre onto the tanks if they turned toward Tan Canh. Because a major attack appeared to be developing and ARVN was not attempting any countermeasures, COL Kaplan called his advisory team together and insured that they knew the escape and evasion plan. He then placed the advisors in bunkers to await the outcome of the initial engagements.²⁴

(U) Meanwhile, the Spectre had reported three tank kills around Dak Brung hamlet.

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torial forces captured one of these tanks and found no visible damage. When a group of NVA sappers came down the road, the territorials fled, and the enemy drove the tank away. Evidently, Spectre's 105mm cannon was having little success in destroying the enemy tanks. Since the vehicles were T-54s (or Chinese Communist T-57s), the only vulnerable points to attack from high altitude with high explosive ammunition were the rear fuel tanks and rear engine compartment. A hit anywhere else caused casualties among the crew but did not usually disable the vehicle.²⁵

(U) About midnight the enemy armor column turned south toward Tan Canh and the 22d Division. COL Kaplan advised the ARVN artillery commander to get his people to fire on the tanks before they were overrun. His pleas were answered with a four gun volley which Spectre observed to hit one POL vehicle and land within five feet of one of the advancing T-54s. Kaplan applauded the Vietnamese for their efforts, but an intense counterbarrage of enemy artillery sent the ARVN artillerymen scurrying for their bunkers and ended the attempt to engage the oncoming enemy with indirect fire.²⁶

(U) To reach the 22d Division compound, the enemy column had to cross two bridges. Both bridges were defended by a platoon of territorial forces. Because they had no antitank capability, these local troops evacuated their bridge positions when faced with the advancing armor. This incident demonstrated a lack of coordination between the regular and territorial forces. Both bridges were along likely avenues of approach and spanned unfordable streams. The 22d ARVN Division Headquarters, however, believed that the sector forces had prepared the bridges for destruction; this was not the case, and the failure was not realized until it was too late. The tanks continued into the outskirts of Tan Canh Village. Some of them stopped there while others drove back towards Dak To. Spectre requested permission to fire on the tanks which had entered Tan Canh, but was refused because of the ARVN dependents in the village.

(U) Dobbins persuaded LTC Thong to deploy one company of the 42d in tank hunter/killer teams to seek out the enemy armor. Their efforts were rewarded with reports of two kills by these teams on the western edge of town. At 0326 hours on 24 April Spectre reported ten of the tanks had split off from Tan Canh and traveled to the high ground north of the compound near the L-19 strip. The remaining vehicles were proceeding south of Tan Canh Village and then west toward the compound. Spectre returned to Pleiku to refuel and rearm and was replaced by another Spectre gunship armed with two 20mm cannons and two 40mm cannons incapable of destroying a T-54. However,

from his vantage point in the water tower CPT Yonan was able to place Spectre's fire onto troop concentrations which were moving closer to the compound.

(U) Dobbins had been on the east side of the perimeter near the main gate with LTC Thong since the first reports of the enemy armor were received. Shortly before 0600 hours the tanks began their attack through the early morning haze. As they assaulted they raked the front line bunkers of the perimeter near the main gate with machine gun fire. Simultaneously, the tanks which had moved to the high ground near the L-19 airstrip supported by fire an infantry assault on the northern perimeter, while a second infantry assault hit the southern perimeter which was defended by the reconnaissance company of the 42d Regiment. Dobbins informed the TOC of the advance of the armor and of a mass exodus of ARVN soldiers through the perimeter. The sight and sound of the advancing enemy armor had proved too much for the 900 undisciplined and unorganized support troops within the compound, and they fled in fear. The tanks crossed the bridge and moved on line toward the main gate. Dobbins and LTC Thong remained in positions near the gate in an attempt to build up the confidence of the combat troops there who had seen the support troops break and flee in terror.

(U) After he received the report that the support troops had fled, COL Kaplan diagnosed the situation as critical. He alerted the division advisors to prepare for extraction if the ARVN did not hold. Five minutes later Dobbins reported that the advancing tanks were at the main gate and that the ARVN was unable to stop them. His transmission was cut out by three 105mm shells which struck the TOC and knocked down the antennas. At this report the division advisors recognized that they were in no position to continue to influence the action by their presence. They left the TOC, secured their weapons, radio, and two LAWs and went into the compound, proceeding to the water tower. CPT Yonan was still perched there in the hope of thwarting the attack if TACAIR arrived. Unfortunately, the morning haze rendered high performance aircraft ineffective and helicopter gunships were still 30 minutes away. CPT Stewart, who was carrying a PRC-25, radioed Yonan and told him to come down out of the tower and move with them to the west where they would be extracted. Yonan said he could not move at that time, but would join them later. His reply was silenced by the sound of two rounds of T-54 main gun shells as they exploded on the water tower. Another quick call by Stewart to Yonan to evacuate the tower received the reply that he was uninjured but could not leave at that time.²⁷

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(C) Dodging artillery, the advisors ran to the western perimeter. There they saw a burning T-54 tank barreling down the road from the north just outside the wire. The tank was past their position before they could engage with their LAWs. However, as a second tank came into view LTC McClain and LT Jones prepared their weapons for engagement but were frustrated by two malfunctions as the second T-54 moved quickly past. Fortunately there was no infantry in support of the two tanks. Seizing this opportunity to escape entrapment, the advisors moved quickly across the road. Ahead of them lay 200 meters of friendly minefield. A wounded ARVN soldier lay nearby. While being given first aid, the soldier told the advisors he knew the way through the minefield. He led them across the field to the other side of the clearing. Here they took up positions and pondered their next move.²⁸

(C) Mr. Vann had been awake most of the previous night as reports filtered into the II Corps headquarters in Pleiku. At first light on 24 April he and his pilot, CPT Richard Todd, were in the air heading for Tan Canh. He had had no communication with the advisors since the enemy armor had assaulted the compound. Arriving over Tan Canh, Vann was able to establish communication with Stewart on the ground. Vann viewed the situa-

tion and asked how best he could pick up the advisors. COL Kaplan replied that they would move 200 more meters to the west, away from small arms fire. While six men moved, the remaining three covered them. These three then joined the first group. Finally it was decided that Vann could come in in his OH-58 helicopter and extract the first group of advisors. In this group were MAJ Carter, MAJ Warmath, CPT Kellar, LT Jones, SGT Ward, and SP Zollenkopher. As Vann left with the first group several frightened ARVN soldiers hung onto the skids of the helicopter. Fearing that the dangling Vietnamese would fall before he could reach Ben Het, Vann set down at Dak To II, where LTC Robert Brownlee and CPT Charles Carden, advisors to the 47th Regiment, awaited them. Vann then headed back for Tan Canh and the remaining advisors. As he landed, the aircraft was swamped by 15 to 20 panic-stricken ARVN soldiers. While attempting to lift off, the helicopter crashed, but Vann and CPT Todd escaped. They were picked up shortly by another aircraft which then located the three remaining advisors, Kaplan, McClain and Stewart. Panicky ARVN troops again tried unsuccessfully to crowd aboard, but the aircraft lifted off without them. Thirty minutes later the party landed at Pleiku.

THE ATTACK ON DAK TO II

(U) Meanwhile, Dak To II came under increasing fire and some ground probes less than an hour after the attack on Tan Canh had begun. The helicopter originally scheduled to be used for the command and control helicopter of the 22d Division was diverted to Dak To II where it was to evacuate the six 22d Division advisors. CPT Carden had noted the NVA antiaircraft weapons on his map and he briefed the aircraft pilot over the radio. The aircraft made its approach from the southwest and weaved its way to the compound helipad where the six passengers awaited. The helicopter took some small arms fire from the dense undergrowth around the perimeter but landed and then lifted off without damage. However, contrary to instructions, the pilot exited to the northwest and flew into a crossfire of two antiaircraft guns. The helicopter burst into flames and crashed on the southern side of the perimeter. Carden concluded that there were no survivors.²⁹

(U) Back in the 42d Regiment's compound Dobbins had chosen to remain until the bitter end. He and LTC Thong were feverishly working to reconstitute the defenses of the shattered troops of the 42d. By 0630 hours the enemy had pierced the northeast perimeter with their armor, closely followed by the infantry. After initially repelling

an enemy infantry battalion on the southern perimeter, the outnumbered reconnaissance company had been overrun by weight of numbers, although more than 100 enemy had been killed. The northwestern perimeter was penetrated by a battalion infantry assault and then exploited by a platoon of T-54s.

(U) The enemy artillery continued to fire throughout the attack. When the weather finally cleared enough for high performance aircraft, Dobbins relayed targets to the forward air controllers who then marked them with smoke. The tanks stopped and did not attempt evasive action; they served as decoys for the antiaircraft gunners. When the NVA 37mm antiaircraft guns fired, however, they were targeted by the forward air controllers. Dobbins and Thong continually moved from bunker to bunker, hiding in culverts and whatever else would lend them cover. At 1000 hours LTC Thong lost all contact with his elements, and both men decided there was nothing else they could do to influence the situation. Dobbins' recent attempts to contact Yonan had been fruitless. It appeared unlikely that Yonan was still alive in view of the pounding that side of the compound had taken. (Editor's Note: CPT Yonan's name was included on the POW list released by Hanoi in late January 1973.) LTC Thong directed Dobbins to follow him

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as he led the way to his quarters within the inner perimeter. They were followed by about 19 ARVN soldiers. Arriving at the hut, Thong opened a trap door revealing a hidden bunker. Climbing inside they closed the door and settled into the darkness as the fighting overhead slowly dwindled to a few isolated pockets of resistance.³⁰

(U) After reporting the crash of the UH-1 at Dak To II, CPT Carden and LTC Brownlee tried vainly to find their counterparts and the 47th command group. The regimental TOC was deserted, and it appeared that the command group had already decided it was time to exit the danger area. While looking for someone in command, Carden viewed the arrival of two T-54 tanks on the airstrip. One T-54 proceeded to the west end of the airfield along the north road to cover the highway leading into Dak To II from Ben Het where COL Dat had erroneously positioned the bulk of his armor. The other T-54 wheeled into the center of the airfield from the north and systematically attacked the bunker defenses of the 47th Regiment's command post. The two remaining operational M-41 tanks maneuvered to the west flank of the T-54 and took it under fire with three rounds each. Carden was only 100 meters from the NVA tank and observed direct hits and smoke, but the enemy tank was not knocked out. The T-54 recovered quickly and destroyed one M-41 with a second round hit, and immediately thereafter the enemy tank destroyed the other M-41 with one round. The wounded crew members abandoned their burning tanks.

(U) At this time a relief column of two platoons of M-41s plus a platoon of infantry left Ben Het to counterattack the NVA forces around Dak To II. They crossed the Dak Mot bridge and were ambushed by a large NVA force holding the high ground just east of the bridge. Enemy B-40 and recoilless rifle fire destroyed all of the M-41s and scattered the infantry.³¹

(U) This was the last ARVN counterattack on the 24th. After the tank battle, Carden located LTC Brownlee. Both men decided the compound was in imminent danger of being overrun in the absence of control of the 47th Regiment and the 9th Airborne Battalion, also located in the compound. At about 1000 hours Carden witnessed friendly forces moving toward the south. The departure of the airborne troops, extraction of the US advisors, and the desertion of their command group were the final blows in shattering the confidence of the 47th Regiment. With no one to control them they began to leave their positions and head out of the compound. Brownlee and Carden realized that they could no longer influence the situation and that no further fighting was going to occur that day. They gathered together their radios and supplies,

burned some documents, and moved out of the base camp toward the southeast. The two advisors and their Vietnamese interpreter and driver attempted to cross a small footbridge over the Dak Poko River which flows along the southern boundary of the compound. However, the airborne battalion and elements of the 47th Regiment who had followed them were pinned down by a large volume of fire. The river was clogged with the bodies of the dead and wounded who had been chopped down while attempting to cross the footbridge. Realizing it was impossible to cross the river at that location, Brownlee and Carden moved westward along the riverbank until they reached a likely fording spot about 700 meters up the river from the bridge. As they attempted to ford the river they came under an intense volume of both direct and indirect fire. When the group finally crossed the river and were climbing up the steep bank on the other side, Carden noticed LTC Brownlee having trouble climbing the bank. At that moment the volume of fire increased again. Carden was forced to abandon his position on top of the river bank and hurry into the dense underbrush about 100 meters away. When the firing slackened off several minutes later, Carden moved cautiously back to the riverbank in an attempt to locate LTC Brownlee. He moved several hundred meters up and down the stream in his search but was unable to locate Brownlee. LTC Brownlee was not heard from again. Carden and the two Vietnamese began to head south toward Fire Support Base Vida where they were picked up two days later.

(C) Day long US TACAIR strikes on the enemy around Tan Canh had shaken the bunker where Dobbins and the 20 ARVN had hidden. At 2000 hours, Dobbins divided the South Vietnamese up into three-man groups and prepared to escape. The moon was full and they were detected as they neared the southwest side of the perimeter. Four men were killed before the group finally found concealment in a pigpen on the eastern bunker line. At midnight the group again attempted to escape. This time they were caught in the illumination of a flare by Spectre which was firing on targets in the area. Once again they were detected, losing several more men to small arms fire. They returned to the pigpen and waited until about 0430 hours when the moon finally set for the night. A low ground fog also covered their moves as they successfully passed through the perimeter on this try. They proceeded south several kilometers and were spotted and picked up the next day.³²

(C) The attacking enemy units at Tan Canh and Dak To II were part of the 2d NVA Division. Battalions of the 1st and 141st NVA Regiment formed the infantry assault along with the D-10

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Two Communist tanks were destroyed in the middle of the runway at Dak To Airfield April 24 by fighter-bombers of the Republic of Vietnam Air Force. The airfield is adjacent to Route 512, three miles south of Dak To.

Sapper Battalion. The T-54 tanks which supported the assaults were from one battalion of the enemy 203d Tank Regiment. The attack was well-coordinated in spite of several miscues in timing, and the use of conventional tactics by the enemy was not new in the Indochina War. What was significant, however, was the heavy commitment of front line NVA troops in an all-out effort. During prior offensives such as Tet of 1968, VC units had led the attacks, but the attack on Tan Canh was primarily an NVA effort. During the 24th and 25th of

April the North Vietnamese consolidated their gains and extended their control west of the Dak To II airstrip and south to Dien Binh. Captured ARVN equipment included twenty-three 105mm. howitzers, seven 155mm howitzers, 14,000 rounds of artillery ammunition, and other materiel. Among the missing were COL Dat and his entire staff.³³

(C) The 320th NVA Division continued to pressure the remaining fire support bases on Rocket Ridge during the attacks on Tan Canh and Dak To II (See Fig. K-2). On 25 April the decision

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was made by LTG Dzu to abandon the precarious positions at Fire Support Bases 5 and 6, affording the NVA covered movement down Route 14 to Kontum City. In addition, the enemy could now force ARVN to abandon its defensive positions along the route by bringing a heavy volume of fire to bear on them. At the same time as the enemy thrust in Kontum Province, the 3d NVA Division and VC main force units attacked the three northernmost districts in Binh Dinh Province. Although the 40th and 41st Regiments of the 22d ARVN Division had been quite successful in recent combat with VC units, the NVA regulars forced them

to break and run from Landing Zone (LZ) English and other fire bases in the area. This focused allied attention on the threat to Kontum City, as the NVA came within reach of their goal of cutting South Vietnam in two. The Vietnamese Joint General Staff and the US Command began to give more credence to John Paul Vann's contention that the enemy campaigns at Quang Tri and An Loc were limited in scope and that the NVA's real goal was to take Kontum, Pleiku, and Binh Dinh Provinces by multidivision attacks across the highlands.

THE ENEMY APPROACH ON KONTUM

(U) To combat the successes of the NVA offensive the II Corps staff activated the following plan. COL Ba, 23d Division commander, would command all forces in Kontum Province. Four battalions of rangers would occupy blocking positions at Vo Dinh and south along the Dak Poko River. The 53d ARVN Regiment was given the responsibility for Kontum City. The 22d Ranger Battalion moved to Polei Kleng to reinforce the battalion of border rangers there. In addition, Vann placed B-52 strikes along Rocket Ridge and over the evacuated fire support bases. Thousands of refugees, remnants of the 22d Division, and missing US advisors in enemy held areas limited the number of airstrikes. To alleviate this problem TACAIR was utilized with over 180 sorties flown during the period 24 to 26 April.

(C) By 28 April much of the 23d Division staff was enroute to Kontum City. COL Ba was faced with the difficult task of molding a conglomeration of units into a cohesive defense. The only 23d Division unit remaining under his command was the 53d Regiment. The 2d and 6th Ranger Groups, an airborne brigade, and sector forces under COL Long comprised the remaining forces under COL Ba's command (each of these other unit commanders reported through nine different chains of command). Several of these full colonels resented taking orders from another colonel, and as a result COL Ba had an increasingly difficult time attempting to get them to respond to his orders. Many times they would not show up for coordination meetings, making it impossible to adequately plan for the defense. To solve the problem Vann suggested to LTG Dzu that his deputy, MG Phong, and Vann's deputy, BG John Hill, fly to Kontum each morning at 0800 hours to preside over the staff meetings. Their presence insured the attendance of the unit commanders and permitted the defense to be planned. COL John Truby, the acting Senior Advisor to the 23d Division, was given the monu-

mental task of advising the division staff on the concepts of a conventional defense within a limited time. The 23d Division advisors also had to explain details such as limiting points, coordination of units on the perimeter, reduction of penetrations, and so forth.

(C) To insure the division maximum time to train and prepare for the defense, COL Ba assigned the 2d and 6th Ranger Groups to the critical mission of delaying along Route 14 between Tan Canh and Kontum. The defensive plan established an outer defensive line seven kilometers from the center of the city with a delaying position four kilometers in front of the final defensive positions on the edge of the city. Four 155mm howitzers and forty-four 105mm howitzers were available for fire support. The northern and western approaches were defended by rangers, while the 53d Regiment defended the east and south.

(C) On 26 April LTG Dzu was ordered to Saigon to see President Thieu. When he returned to Pleiku, he brought word that he had a heart ailment which would cause him to be committed to a hospital in Saigon. Dzu appeared to be shaken by his visit to Saigon and did not wish to discuss it with anyone. Dzu eventually left for the hospital in Saigon on 10 May and was replaced by MG Toan.³⁴

(U) The 6th Ranger Group arrived in Military Region 2 on 24 April from the Hue battlefield where it had been heavily engaged. MAJ James Givens, Senior Advisor to the 6th Ranger Group, had listened to the fall of Tan Canh on the radio as the group moved into position at Fire Support Base Bravo. This base was just north of Vo Dinh where the group was colocated with the 2d Airborne Brigade Command Post (See Fig. K-2). The next day the airborne brigade was ordered to Kontum to board transportation for Saigon and the 6th Group moved nearer Kontum to Fire Support Base November. From Lam Son, a long, high piece of key terrain with a commanding view of

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Highway 14 north of Vo Dinh and south toward Kontum, Givens and his assistant, CPT Vannie, observed the remnants of the 22d Division struggle past their position in groups of from 5 to 15 people with very few small arms and no crew-served weapons; many of the troops had no steel helmets or web gear. They had discarded these items in their haste to flee the attacking NVA forces. Although unorganized, there was no panic among the stragglers, who gave the appearance of Sunday strollers.

(U) Throughout the 25th and 26th increasing attacks-by-fire hit the group command post. The group had not received heavy casualties, but at 1500 hours on the 27th Givens and Vannie, along with the ranger group command post, were airlifted to Fire Support Base November over the objections of Givens that the command post should remain with the major elements of the group at Lam Son. The remaining ranger battalions, the 34th and 35th, continued to receive ground probes and attacks-by-fire. At 0500 hours on 1 May the

crews of four M-41 tanks at Lam Son abandoned their vehicles in the face of an NVA attack. The NVA then occupied the tanks, which VNAF TAC-AIR and a USAF Stinger gunship successfully destroyed, and the attack was repulsed.

(U) At 1800 hours the 23d Division Combat Advisory Team contacted Givens and informed him that the airborne artillery battery had departed Lam Son. Givens hurried to confirm this with the group commander, LTC De, but was told that the group headquarters had no contact with its two battalions at Lam Son. At 1930 hours contact was reestablished with the withdrawing ranger units. They were moving well to the south of Lam Son, carrying 50 wounded and their crew-served weapons with them. Asking why the artillery had abandoned the fire support base, Givens discovered that LTC De had ordered his two infantry battalions to withdraw; thus, the artillery was left without local security and forced to leave. On 4 May LTG Dzu relieved LTC De for failing to hold Fire Support Base November.³⁵



Ranger groups leaving Kontum after being replaced by the 44th and 45th ARVN Regiments.

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(C) The advisor convinced Mr. Vann to persuade LTG Dzu that the remaining organic units of the 23d Division, the 44th and 45th Regiments, should be brought to Kontum to replace the two ranger groups and the airborne brigade with no resultant loss in manpower. Dzu accepted this proposal. On 6 May the 45th Regiment moved up Route 14 from Pleiku and was exchanged for the 6th Ranger Group.³⁶

(C) From 24 April to 5 May attacks-by-fire on the ranger camps which were astride the NVA supply routes increased. Ben Het and Polei Kleng bore the brunt of these sporadic attacks because they hindered the enemy's movement of supplies into his assembly areas for the attack on Kontum City. On 6 May at 1200 hours Polei Kleng received heavy artillery fire. Over 50 rounds fell in an hour and a half before US air strikes temporarily stopped the enemy fire. When the forward air controllers left station at 1515 hours, however, the volume of fire once again increased until 500 rounds had fallen by 1900 hours that day. The systematic destruction of each bunker within the compound indicated that the fire was being adjusted. The command bunker, where advisors CPT Geddes MacLaren and LT Paul McKenna were directing US air support, was struck by several direct hits. At 1730 hours a round collapsed the walls and blew out an oak door. The two advisors dug their way out of the rubble and moved to open foxholes nearer the perimeter. The enemy forward observers then systematically destroyed all the buildings above ground, all of the bunkers, and knocked down the antennas. The repeated accurate shelling demoralized the ARVN ranger defenders. When McKenna attempted to find the battalion commander at 1800 hours, he found that the commander had fled from the compound. On his return to the limited cover of his foxhole, he observed the enemy using flashing red beacons to signal their infantry who were poised for the

THE FIRST ATTACK ON KONTUM

(U) The air cavalry had not been idle during the period since Tan Canh. Daily missions over the battle area detected new trails, caches, and bunker complexes. The regional advisory group began using a regional command and control helicopter in which senior officers flew as observers and went where they could best influence the action. On 10 May BG John Hill stopped in Kontum to confer with COL John Truby about a sighting he had made just north of Vo Dinh. Hill was convinced that the area was a main assembly area for the attacking forces. A prisoner captured that same day confirmed that the 320th NVA Division had closed on its assembly area. Subsequently, B-52 strikes

attack. At 1900 hours, despite the heavy anti-aircraft fire an OH-6 landed to extract the advisors. The camp continued to hold on for three more days through continuous indirect fire and ground attacks by the 64th NVA Regiment. The enemy's massing of forces to seize Polei Kleng provided lucrative targets for the sixteen US B-52 strikes employed in the area during the three days of extended attack. A Hoi Chanh later attested to the effectiveness of B-52 strikes against the forces attacking Polei Kleng. He reported that his company of 100 men had sustained 40 killed and many more wounded. At 0500 hours on 9 May, however, the ARVN forces were wedged out of Polei Kleng by an assault of NVA tanks and infantry. LTG Dzu then directed anything within the evacuated perimeter to be taken under fire.

(C) During this period Ben Het Ranger Camp received a total of 400 to 500 rounds of mixed caliber indirect fire. On 7 May the 71st Ranger Battalion mutinied and gave the battalion commander an ultimatum to extract the unit within 48 hours. Before the extraction was completed the camp was ringed by anti-aircraft weapons.³⁷

(U) At dawn on the 9th of May the North Vietnamese sent dogs into the perimeter wire to detonate mechanical mines. This tactic was followed at 0600 hours by a heavy ground attack supported by six PT-76 tanks. Two of the tanks, supported by infantry, assaulted the main gate but were knocked out by rangers using LAWs. At 0730 hours five PT-76 tanks attacked the eastern perimeter; two were knocked out by LAWs. The remainder retired after NVA infantry had seized the eastern perimeter. The rangers spent the rest of the day ejecting the enemy. By 1700 hours the perimeter was restored. The attacking NVA forces lost 11 tanks and over 100 dead in their attempt to overrun Ben Het. Although the forces there continued to be harrassed, no more major assaults were made.

were placed on the suspected positions.

(U) The 23d Division had continued its preparation for the defense of Kontum. COL Ba personally walked the entire perimeter. He criticized poor positions and talked encouragingly to his troops. Several tank hulls were pulled into open areas for targets and as many soldiers as possible were given the opportunity to fire the LAW in conjunction with a companion program which showed victorious ARVN soldiers beside T-54 tanks they had destroyed at An Loc and Quang Tri. The purpose was to instill in ARVN soldiers the confidence that they could destroy an attacking tank.

(U) Commanders coordinated at their limiting

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points and supervised the improvement of camou-
flage. Reserve forces practiced counterattacking
possible penetrations. The division artillery planned
fires around the perimeter. Sector forces were
trained in calling for fire to show them that the
division was going to give them all possible fire
support. COL Ba ordered limited offensive opera-
tions which fixed the enemy and developed targets
for the B-52 missions allocated to Military Region 2.

(U) On 12 May the 44th Regiment completed its
replacement of the 2d Ranger Group astride Route
14, the probable main avenue of approach. The
44th Regiment's positions were approximately four
kilometers northwest of Kontum. The ARVN soldiers
were confident and believed that they could knock
out NVA tanks with their organic weapons. COL
Ba was more confident now that the 23d's own
units were organized into the defense. At 0700 hours
on 13 May, radio intercepts confirmed that the
320th NVA Division was in its final stage of pre-
paration in its assembly area, confirming air
cavalry reports of a large buildup of armor and
troops just south of Vo Dinh.³⁸

(C) The enemy planned to attack as early as
possible because they felt that US B-52s would hurt
them if they remained long in their attack posi-
tions. Vann was skeptical about an imminent attack
since no concentrated artillery preparations were
falling on the 23d's defensive positions. Although
there were scattered attacks-by-fire, the pattern
of heavy bombardment before the attacks on Tan
Canh and the fire support bases was absent. At
2230 hours a battalion of the 44th Regiment at
Fire Support Base November reported many lights
moving south on Highway 14 toward their positions.
This report did not cause alarm until it was realized
that NVA inexperience with night movement of
armor vehicles had caused them to use their lights
when moving into attack positions at Tan Canh.
Shortly afterward COL Ba entered with a captured
document which had been sent from the 320th
Division artillery commander to one of his units.
The message stated that all supporting artillery
would support an attack by the 320th at 0400 hours
on 14 May. COL Truby again talked to Vann and
the Corps G-3. Although both still considered this
contention hasty, Vann believed it was better to be
prepared and told Truby he would get air assets
to them at first light. At 0400 hours nothing hap-
pened. The 23d Division G-2, LTC Tieu, then brought
in another captured document which delayed the
attack one-half hour. The G-2 believed that since
these orders were coming from B-3 Front Head-
quarters the times were probably Hanoi time —
one hour later than Saigon time. At 0430 hours
Fire Support Base November began to receive an
increasing volume of indirect fire which continued

until 0530 hours, when the attack began.³⁹

(C) The NVA had been surprised at the ease with
which they had taken Tan Canh. As a result they
decided to attack Kontum City without a time-
consuming artillery preparation. The attack had
three major axes of advance (See Fig. K-3) ori-
ented along Highway 14 from the north and north-
west. The 48th NVA Regiment and one company
of the 203d Tank Regiment attacked from the north-
west along the west side of Route 14. The 64th
NVA Regiment attacked south along the east side
of the highway also with one company of support-
ing armor from the 203d Tank Regiment. The 28th
NVA Regiment of the enemy B-3 Front advanced
from the north against the 53d ARVN Regiment.
The 141st Regiment of the 2d NVA Division probed
the sector forces who defended the southern posi-
tions along the river.⁴⁰

(U) The air support was not yet on station when
the call came into the DTOC that two columns of
infantry with tanks were coming down Route 14.
A quick call by COL Truby to the corps operations
center launched US Cobras and the new weapon
in the corps arsenal, the helicopter mounted TOW
missile. The ARVN artillery commander quickly
massed his artillery on the high speed avenue of
approach, Route 14, and the 44th dispatched several
tank killer teams armed with the LAW. The massed
artillery made the T-54s easy prey for the tank
killer teams by separating the attacking infantry
from the tanks. LTC Thomas McKenna, Senior Ad-
visor to the 44th Regiment, reported that ARVN
soldiers, while admitting they were initially scared
by the iron monsters, crawled out of their bunkers
and engaged the tanks with their LAWs at point
blank range. Two quick kills were made by the
teams. Meanwhile, the helicopters with TOW mis-
siles had arrived over Kontum. Before two of the
tanks could reach the cover of the thick under-
growth along the highway, the TOW missiles
stopped them dead in their tracks. The heavy
artillery concentration and sudden destruction of
the leading armor broke up the initial attack by
0900 hours, although indirect fire and small probes
continued. In addition, the sky was filled with
both US and VNAF aircraft attacking enemy targets
vigorously.

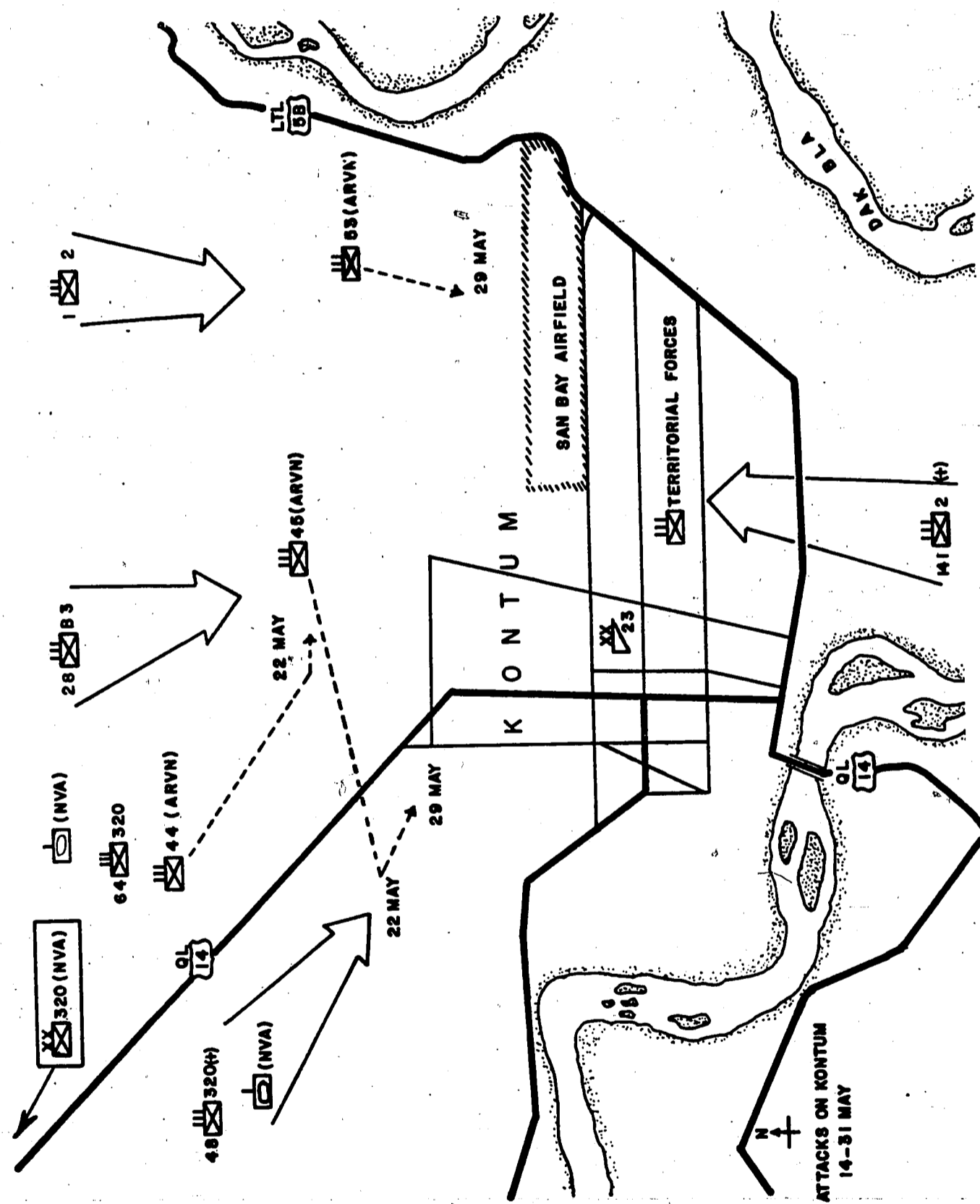
(U) All of Kontum City received incoming artil-
lery and rocket fire, but the air support was success-
ful in spotting its origin and silencing the guns
and launchers. Some areas, however, such as the
airfield and the division CP received light attacks-
by-fire, indicating that the enemy forward observers
were adjusting their rounds for future fires. By
nightfall on the 14th the front lines had been re-
stored by the 23d Division through fierce, hand-
to-hand fighting.

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Source: MACDO

Figure: K-3

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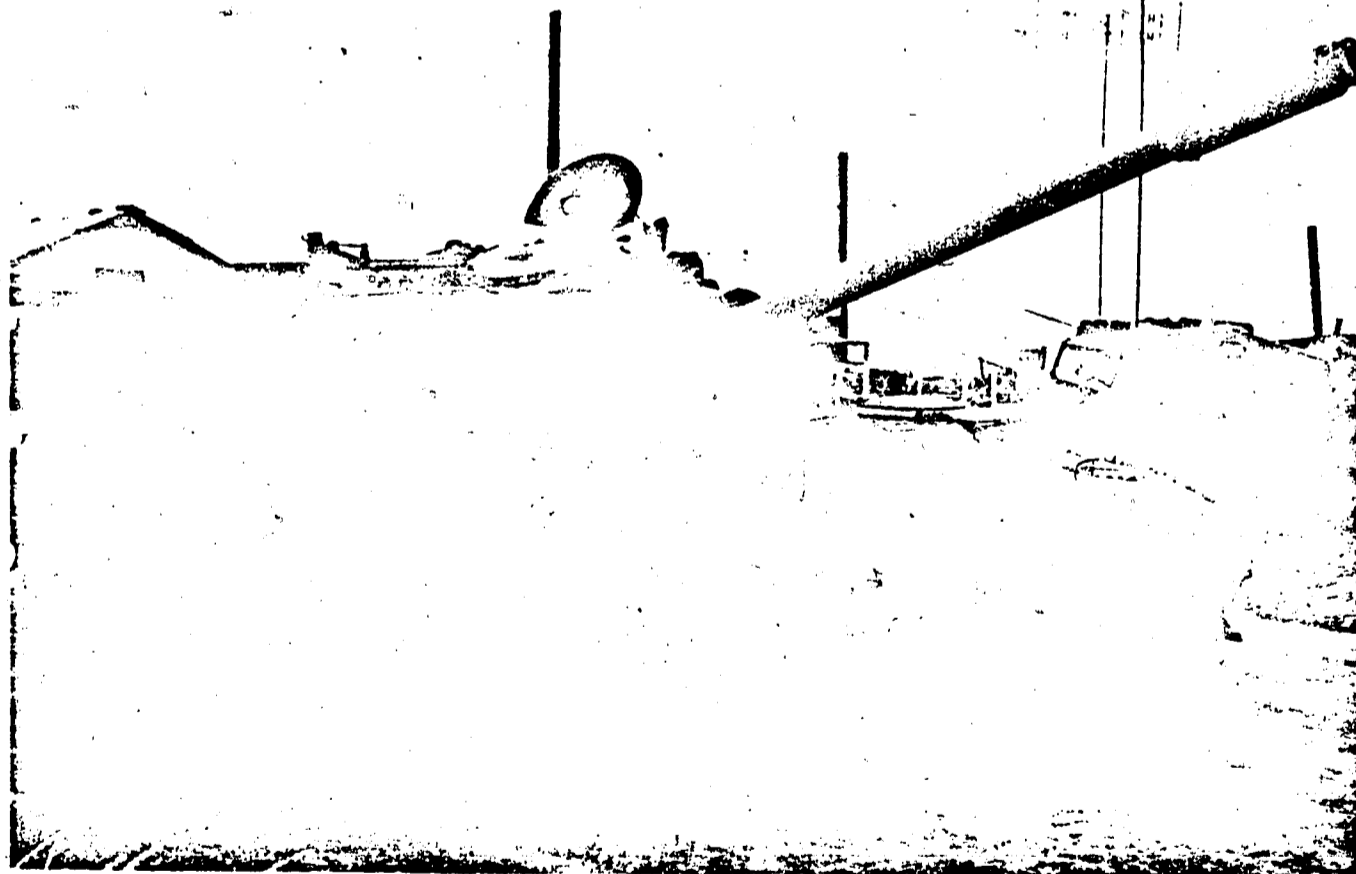
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(U) At 2000 hours the enemy again launched attacks against the 44th and 53d Regiments. The renewed attacks were more intense than the previous ones. In the confusion of fighting at night the two ARVN regiments failed to coordinate and interlock their fires. This situation spelled disaster when a battalion of the NVA penetrated the gap between the ARVN regiments.

(U) MAJ Wade Lovings, Deputy Senior Advisor, 44th ARVN Regiment, reported to the division advisors that the ARVN regimental commander was requesting timed, preplanned artillery fires on their locations. Lovings also requested that when the Spectre came on station he be allowed to work him on the perimeter of the 44th. By this time Lovings and LTC McKenna felt they were faced with three battalions of attacking NVA who were situated in their front, eastern flank, and rear. The Spectre arrived and Lovings immediately put his fires all around the perimeter as targets were relayed from the front line units through the regimental commander.⁴¹

(C) At that same moment in the DTOC COL

Truby and the other members of the advisory team were developing some last-ditch defensive measures in order to stop the enemy penetrations. They wanted to place on the attacking enemy the two B-52 strikes scheduled for 0300 hours. The situation was turning more desperate by the minute. If the penetrations were not stopped Kontum would fall by dawn. Because it was impossible to request the B-52 strikes any nearer to friendly positions, COL Truby proposed that COL Ba withdraw his forces one hour before the strikes. An increase in artillery was planned to compensate for the withdrawn force. When the B-52s arrived, they would catch the NVA in the open with little cover. Ba was deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation and anxious to do whatever possible to improve it. Truby told Vann of the plan and requested his approval. Vann was hesitant due to the complex coordination involved. Finally, he acquiesced after thorough discussion with both Truby and Ba. During the three or four hours until the strikes all attention was focused on holding in place. The 53d Regiment committed their reserve to block the penetration



A T-54 tank destroyed 14 May

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in their sector. With the aid of Spectre, the 44th was holding its own against the attack on three sides.

(C) Then the critical time arrived, and Ba ordered the withdrawal and directed his artillery to fire continuously for the next hour. The nearness of the two strikes shook the teeth of the ARVN defenders but as the rumbling stopped, so did the ferocity of the attacks. At first light elements of both ARVN regiments moving into the areas which had been struck discovered several hundred bodies and parts of bodies dressed in green uniforms and sandals. The majority of the attackers who had penetrated the defense were sappers armed only with AK-47s and explosive charges. In the front line area numerous crew-served weapons were found with the crumpled bodies of their operators nearby. Over 200 enemy killed were confirmed by McKenna and Lovings in front of their positions with another 189 reported by MAJ Perry from the 53d. Seven tanks were destroyed by the TOW missiles, LAWs, and tactical aircraft during the attacks on 14 May. The South Vietnamese claimed 11 tank kills and both the 23d Division staff and the American advisors felt that the battle had convinced the South Vietnamese line troops that tanks were not invincible. Vann and his staff at II Corps headquarters thought that the North Vietnamese were trying to save time by attacking with tanks before their usual artillery preparations. The enemy apparently hoped that the defenders would be frightened into retreat as at Tan Canh some three weeks before. Although fewer than 3,000 NVA troops had taken part in these initial attacks, Vann's staff knew a full division of 10,000 men was within striking distance. A major thrust was anticipated within the next two or three days.

(C) While searching a B-52 strike area the 2d Battalion, 53d Regiment found 23 enemy killed and one wounded in a close group. The wounded prisoner stated that his company had had only 25 men. They had just begun their attack when the bombs started to fall. COL Ba ordered limited offensive maneuvers in the areas of the previous night's B-52 strikes in an attempt to fix the enemy's new positions and develop new air and artillery targets. During these operations elements of the 44th and 53d Regiments received intermittent fire from heavy mortars and automatic weapons. The airborne TOW missiles continued to seek the enemy, destroying an ammunition truck, an ammunition cache, and a large bunker in the area northeast of the city. The air cavalry reported a large increase in activity to the northeast, southeast, and west of Kontum. Similar activity was detected further west of Kontum City near the Dak Poko River.

(U) This buildup in the southern defensive area of operations particularly worried the division advisors. Their concern was caused by the habit of the territorial forces manning the southern defenses leaving their positions at night and going into town to be with their families. This absence created gaps in the defense which, if detected by the enemy, would allow them to enter the city virtually unopposed and undetected.

(C) An increased airlift was begun on the 15th to evacuate the families of Montagnard refugees. Some 2,500 Montagnard men were given arms and detailed to militia units defending the city. The refugees were flown to relatively safe Pleiku. Some 30,000 civilians had also fled from the provincial capital to the coastal regions and southern provinces immediately following the Tan Canh disaster.⁴²

(C) The relative quiet of the 15th was interrupted at 0200 hours on 16 May by an increase in enemy shelling. Some of this fire was 100mm fire from the main guns of six T-54 tanks. A US ground TOW team that had been deployed to Kontum City on the 14th took one under fire and destroyed it. A ground attack had just started in front of the 53d Regiment's positions when a B-52 strike fell on the attackers at 2240 hours. The attacks-by-fire continued along the entire division front until approximately 2300 hours when the contact again decreased, and the firing ceased. The remainder of the evening passed without any further significant enemy activity until about 0615 hours when the tanks once again began to fire upon the positions of the 44th. There were no ground probes at this time.⁴³

(U) COL Ba examined the results of these first few probes. He had seen his defensive line penetrated and disaster narrowly avoided. His fear of this happening again led him to decide to tighten his defensive perimeter. Ba had discussed this with MG Toan, the new II Corps commander, and Mr. Vann during their visit to Kontum City on the 16th. They had agreed to let him move the 44th Regiment back into a reserve position in the hospital compound and move the 45th Regiment into its place.

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

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(U) At 1430 hours on the 17th a US C-130 was unloading its cargo of ammunition on the western end of the airfield when rocket fire again fell on the airfield. The USAF pilot attempted to take off with his aircraft only partially unloaded and the ramp still down. A shower of sparks was thrown out as the ramp dragged on the runway and prevented the aircraft from obtaining flight speed. The C-130 scraped the roof of a Vietnamese brick factory off the east end of the runway. After the pilot lost control of the aircraft, its right wing struck the ground and the plane flipped onto its back. A US helicopter extracted two of the five crewmembers. Because of this incident and the increasing volume of observed artillery and mortar fire Vann decided to limit fixed wing traffic to night flights only.

(C) On 17 May COL Rhotenberry replaced COL Truby as the senior advisor to the 23d ARVN Division. His first day as the senior American within the 23d Division was quiet with the exception of continued indirect fire on the airfield. Intelligence information gathered during the lull in the fighting indicated that a major registration of artillery fire would be made on the 18th when the North Vietnamese Army celebrated Ho Chi Minh's birthday. The night of the 17th and morning and early afternoon of the 18th produced no significant activity.⁴⁴ From 1740 to 1940 hours over 200 rounds of mixed artillery and mortar fire peppered the Kontum City defenders. Forward elements of the 44th reported to LTC McKenna that seven T-54s were to their front. A forward air controller spotted the tanks and was able to destroy one with US tactical air support. The location of the tanks about two miles out from the defenders indicated the NVA reluctance to expose their armor to accurate ARVN antitank fire. The same controller spotted two 130mm guns firing from the vicinity of Polei Kleng on Kontum City. Further observation revealed two 23mm anti-aircraft guns. Even after they realized they were detected, the guns continued to fire until they were destroyed by tactical aircraft.⁴⁵

(C) At 2345 hours on 18 May an increased barrage of heavy artillery fire heralded the beginning of a ground assault by the 48th NVA Regiment against the forward defenders from the 44th ARVN Regiment. Antipersonnel claymore mines sowed on the perimeter created gaping holes in the wall of attackers. ARVN artillery, the tenacity of the ARVN frontline soldiers, and the devastation wrought by the claymores thwarted the first attack. A B-52 strike at 0015 hours on 19 May ended the first assault.

(C) The only significant activity on the 19th occurred at 2115 hours when the NVA troops fired

canisters of CS gas onto the front line ARVN bunkers, followed by an assault on the defenders. The attack was quickly dispersed by ARVN artillery and ground fire. Before dawn, at 0345 hours on the 20th, the 53d ARVN Regiment received the first of three successive assaults on their positions. During the final assault they allowed themselves to be pushed off the positions during the early daylight hours. This lack of resistance may have been caused by weariness from the past weeks of heavy fighting.

(U) Throughout the day ARVN forces unsuccessfully attempted to regain the lost position. ARVN unit commanders falsely reported its recapture several times during the action. By 1645 hours the enemy had tunneled to within twenty meters of the positions of the 53d, too close for the use of tactical air support. COL Rhotenberry, who had sent a member of the advisory team up in the command and control helicopter after each false report of success by the unit commanders, convinced COL Ba that his personal presence was necessary to control the action. Ba himself had been reluctant throughout the day to commit his armor or attempt to verify the false reports coming in. Finally Vann's arrival and conference with Ba persuaded him to commit his division reserve. Success was achieved by linking up nine M-41 tanks firing direct fire at the enemy with the support of gunships. This decisive action resulted in the eviction of the enemy forces. Meanwhile, air cavalry reported intensive activity in the area to the north and east of Kontum City. The NVA movement in the area was down the valley along Route 5B pushing closer to the defenses in that area.

(C) The night of 20 May passed quietly until 0500 hours on the 21st. The 44th ARVN Regiment, which had been scheduled to be replaced by the 45th, received heavy indirect fire. Under the cover of this barrage the enemy 406th Sapper Battalion moved behind the 3/44th and cut Route 14 three kilometers northwest of Kontum City. At the same time another enemy battalion penetrated between the 4/45th and 2/53d creating a wedge in the ARVN front lines. Quickly and efficiently the 3/44th counterattacked south on Highway 14 while the 4/44th and 1/45th moved north along the highway. Supported by US gunships and tactical aircraft, the two forces linked up and cleared the road of the enemy sappers after fierce fighting. The wedge which formed between the 44th and 53d Regiments deeply concerned COL Ba. He quickly requested TACAIR and artillery preparations on the entrenched enemy. He then went to the site of the battle. The personal presence of Ba inspired his men in their counterattack and was a key factor in

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the ejection of the NVA and restoration of the front line.⁴⁶

(C) From Pleiku, the South Vietnamese Air Force sent an AC-47 Spooky gunship armed with three 7.62mm miniguns. Thirty minutes later it was spraying the enemy positions with its fire. Its arrival corresponded with another unsuccessful assault on the forward defenses. Meanwhile, US C-130 aircraft began to land at Kontum airfield to resupply the Kontum defenders. They were the first fixed wing aircraft to land in 48 hours.

(C) Two more assaults within the next two hours coincided with scheduled B-52 strikes on enemy attack positions, silencing the attackers. The fifth and final assault began at a little past 0400 hours on 21 May. The fight was characterized by fierce hand-to-hand combat during which hand grenades were lobbed between the opposing forces. ARVN

coordination, which had been excellent throughout the evening between units on the defensive line, broke down toward dawn. The attackers made a small penetration as a result. Lovings requested the Cobra gunships to help seal this penetration before it could be enlarged. The gunships raked the enemy company which had penetrated the defenses and chased them back to the north where two more B-52 strikes hit them. The gunships reported bodies blown several feet into the air. Altogether, five assaults were beaten off by a combination of ground and air fire, and the use of B-52 strikes in the vicinity of the front lines every hour.⁴⁷

(U) During the night twelve C-130 sorties carrying ammunition and cargo flew into Kontum airfield. The two 10,000 gallon fuel bladders destroyed on the 17th were replaced and the refueling point was fully operational by dawn.

THE ARVN COUNTEROFFENSIVE

(C) The successes of the previous night inspired COL Ba and the 23d Division to make their first extensive offensive efforts. The 23d Division Reconnaissance Company was airlifted eight kilometers to the northwest. Once on the ground it worked its way south to link up with the 1st Battalion, 45th ARVN Regiment, which was moving north by ground. They discovered 30 bodies in a B-52 strike area and evidence of many more casualties which had been evacuated. The remainder of the 44th and

53d ARVN Regiments were sent out to examine the area bombed on the previous evening. After some initial progress they were halted by light enemy contacts. The air cavalry confirmed the extensive damage of the B-52 strikes when reconnaissance of the area revealed the enemy attempting to pull bodies from bunkers.

(C) On the 21st a task force composed of the 2d and 6th Ranger Groups and the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment began an operation to clear High-



Reconnaissance northwest of Kontum.

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ARVN counteroffensive north of Kontum.

way 14. Convoys were needed to carry supplies from Pleiku to the forces defending Kontum City. Several B-52 and tactical air strikes of CBU-55s were placed on the enemy 95B Regiment which was entrenched in the Chu Pao mountain pass. Initially the attack was successful, but as ARVN forces came within B-40 range the fighting became more intense. When several armored personnel carriers and M-41 tanks were destroyed by the B-40s, the armor spearhead halted against the entrenched forces.⁴⁸

(C) The 44th Regiment became the division reserve on the night of the 21st after the front lines were restored. The transfer of positions took most of the next two days. This period was punctuated by light attacks of indirect fire and small ground probes. A minor sapper attack occurred at 0630 hours on the 23d and continued with intermittent breaks until 1900 hours that evening. Bomb damage assessments during this period revealed at least 20 to 30 bodies and equipment. Sector forces received one Hoi Chanh from the 48th NVA Regiment. He gave the position of the 48th NVA Regiment's command post and revealed that nearly all companies in his battalion were down to 10 men as

a result of B-52 strikes. Because many of their supplies had been destroyed en route to the front lines, food as well as medicine for malaria was in critically short supply. His knowledge of the plan of attack was limited but he knew it would include a heavy artillery barrage followed by tank/infantry assaults. The ferocity of this barrage would depend on resupply, since artillery ammunition was in short supply.⁴⁹

(C) After a day's rest for his forces, COL Ba ordered new offensive operations conducted on the 24th. The operations began at 1045 hours when the 1st Battalion, 44th ARVN Regiment, was lifted into a landing zone four kilometers north of Kontum City near Route 14. From here they attacked south. The 2d Battalion was inserted one kilometer to their east with orders to attack south. A blocking force was positioned just south of the intended objectives. In another operation the 53d ARVN Regiment attacked north to seize a small village which the enemy had taken on the 22d. By 1245 hours the combat assaults were completed and all units were engaged in small arms fire fights. Resistance remained light throughout the afternoon and each unit achieved its objectives by 1500 hours.⁵⁰

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THE SECOND ATTACK ON KONTUM

(U) Following a generally quiet period from 2200 hours to 0200 hours on the 25th, attacks by indirect fire began on units of the 23d Division in Kontum City and the southern defensive area (See Fig. K-3). The firing concentrated on the vicinity of the airfield and southeastern portion of the city. At 0300 hours the enemy 406th and 10th Sapper Battalions began to infiltrate the positions of the sector forces in the southeast portion of Kontum City. Reconnaissance had revealed to them what the US advisors had known; the territorial forces left gaps in their defenses each night when they went back into the city to stay with their families. Moving in small squad size groups, some of the enemy were dressed in captured ARVN 22d Division uniforms. The sappers successfully moved into the built-up area near the airfield, a school, a Catholic seminary, and the home of the French Bishop of Kontum. Some of the regional force units reacted well and made contact with the enemy elements. At 0925 hours near the airfield one of these units killed 20 sappers who had placed 60mm mortar fire on the airfield. Throughout the remainder of the morning and into the early afternoon the 23d Division command post and division artillery positions received continuous incoming artillery and mortar fire. At the insistence of LTC Gannon, now Senior Advisor to the 53d Regiment, the artillery moved to secondary positions after two of their 105mm howitzers were destroyed by the incoming artillery. The continued excellence of the NVA artillery was demonstrated soon after the move was completed, for the next round landed five meters from the new positions, followed by a six round barrage that destroyed another 105mm howitzer.⁵¹

(U) At 1300 hours BG Hill declared a tactical emergency for Kontum City, diverting all available air and gunship support to the area. By 1515 hours the 23d Division artillery was completely neutralized. Their guns and ammunition were either destroyed or the crews were pinned in their bunkers by the enemy's volume of fire, now at a rate of one round every 30 seconds. A crater analysis by MAJ Lovings, an artilleryman, indicated 155mm ammunition was being used. By 1900 hours that evening only fourteen 105mm and two 155mm howitzers were operational to support the 23d's operations. The C-130 resupply airlift was cancelled the night of 25-26 May due to the tactical situation; this meant that the division went without resupply for 24 hours. Vann estimated that at least one battalion of sappers remained in the area around the airfield. At 0100 hours on the 26th the attacks by indirect fire increased to several rounds per

minute. Three or four tank/infantry teams attacked from the north under this heavy barrage. The principal attacks occurred against the 53d Regiment but pressure also increased on the sector forces around Kontum City. At first light helicopter mounted TOW missiles began firing and by midafternoon had destroyed two T-54 tanks and numerous trucks. COL Ba ordered one battalion of the 44th Regiment, reinforced by eight tanks, to counterattack. It was successful in helping to contain the penetration between the 44th and 53rd Regiments, and as on the 22d ARVN forces were able to limit enemy gains but unable to push him out of his newly captured positions. The situation remained fairly stable for the remainder of the day within the city. However, the air cavalry sighted major enemy movements toward the penetrations, possibly reinforcements moving into the battle. Since the airfield was closed to fixed wing aircraft, CH-47 Chinook helicopters hauled in emergency resupply to the soccer field and evacuated the seriously wounded. Lightly wounded ARVN soldiers trying to escape the beleaguered city led to the use of American armed security guards on the resupply aircraft.⁵²

(U) After dark, indirect fire on the command posts of the 45th and 53d Regiments increased. The 45th was faced with the heaviest attacks by three battalions of the 64th NVA Regiment. The attackers penetrated between the 45th and 53d and enveloped the forces of the 45th. All tactical air support was diverted to the embattled regiment. LTC Grant, the Senior Advisor, conferred with COL Rhotenberry who agreed to divert two scheduled B-52 strikes on the forces attacking the 45th. The bombers struck at 0230 hours and decreased the ferocity of the attack. In addition, LTC Grant relayed targets from the front lines to a USAF gunship overhead throughout the night.⁵³

(U) When the 44th Regiment completed the move into its reserve position on the 22d, they failed to place any security to their front. They mistakenly believed that the 45th and 53d were to their front. This error nearly proved disastrous. The main NVA armor and infantry thrust came in this area with attacks by the 1st Regiment, 2d NVA Division, and the 66th Regiment, B-3 Front, supported by one company of armor. A coordinated attack was made by the 52d NVA Regiment of the 320th NVA Division, with the assistance of the 64th Regiment which had enveloped the 45th ARVN Regiment the previous night.

(U) Inside the 44th Regiment tactical operations center MAJ Lovings and LTC McKenna were attempting to sleep as the incoming enemy artillery

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exploded overhead. Their concern during the evening hours was the large enemy force which had been steadily creeping in toward the northeastern part of the city. Their sleep was interrupted by the cry of "Tanks and infantry in our wire!" It seemed impossible for Lovings to believe that this was true so he ran to the entrance and attempted to verify it himself. He arrived in time to see the lead T-54 tank moving within 50 meters of the bunkers around the TOC. A battle streamer flew from the turret in the early morning breeze. The blast of an M-72 LAW fired by an ARVN officer from the front line bunkers momentarily blurred his vision of the assaulting tank. The impact of metal against metal was distinctly heard above the roar of the battle. When the smoke cleared there was a hole the size of a silver dollar in the front slope and the tank engine was silent. A second T-54 tank on another street in the crowded hospital complex saw this tank destroyed. Apparently deciding the NVA infantry had not secured the area, this second tank attempted to turn back toward cover. The enemy vehicle presented a broadside target to an ARVN soldier who scored a direct hit on it. Lovings hurried inside to contact the division command post to obtain air support.

(U) BG Hill had risen early to fly to the battle area with a team of gunships. Contacting Lovings as he hovered overhead, he reported six tanks approaching across the open area north of the hospital compound. He also saw infantry moving through the buildings of the compound. Lovings radioed that his bunker line was the 90 grid line on the map; anything north of that line was free fire. The gunships swooped out of the sky on the attackers. Separating the infantry from the tanks, they forced two other T-54s which had entered the compound to drive into some deserted buildings for concealment. This made them ineffective for the time being.⁵⁴

(U) Helicopters with TOW missiles had been scrambled from Pleiku at the first report of enemy tanks. At 0600 hours they were over the northern battle front. The open terrain north of the city provided no cover or concealment for the attacking tanks, making them easy prey for the helicopters which scored two TOW missile hits on tanks that were moving to join the attack on the northeastern defenses. Tactical aircraft, the gunships, and the efforts of the front line soldiers stemmed the enemy advance by 1000 hours. By 0615 hours on the 27th, friendly forces were again in heavy contact with enemy tanks and infantry. At 0715 hours the main ammunition dump north of the Kontum airfield was struck by an enemy mortar round and exploded. A stray round from the exploding ammunition dump struck a nearby petroleum

pump, and the resulting fire and smoke obscured visibility.⁵⁵

(C) As the morning of the 27th progressed the NVA infantry held their gains in the northernmost compounds. They also continued to harass the airfield and to exert pressure on the regional forces in the eastern part of the city. By midday the enemy had formed pockets of resistance all across the northern front. USAF and VNAF air strikes and the air cavalry supported the ARVN forces. During the afternoon a VNAF lieutenant spotted a large enemy troop concentration and requested VNAF tactical air strikes. Since none was available, he contacted the ground commander and coordinated a US strike in which 60 North Vietnamese were killed. Near the embattled 53d ARVN Regiment north of the airfield, several .51 caliber machine guns were firing constantly at the fighter bombers. Two VNAF pilots in A-1Es made pass after pass at the machine gun positions exposing their aircraft to deadly crossfire. Their efforts silenced several of the machine guns as well as a 23mm AA gun which revealed its position.⁵⁶

(U) At 1800 hours VNAF helicopters began shuttling much needed supplies from the soccer field to the regimental command posts. LTC Gannon had organized the ARVN into teams to evacuate the supplies from the drop zone. The enemy artillery was firing constantly on the teams as they worked. As he attempted to move back to his bunker after directing the resupply, Gannon was wounded in the upper leg.

(U) COL Ba then decided to tighten the city's defenses again. He ordered the 45th to withdraw from Fire Support Base November and move into a tighter ring around the city. His purpose was to prevent further penetration of the defensive perimeter and to allow for better utilization of



A VNAF A-1E attacking an NVA position.

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B-52 strikes. That evening Toan also agreed to strengthen defenses by pulling in the 53d Regiment to maintain greater integrity.

(U) The NVA infantry was now firmly entrenched in the hospital compound only 40 meters away from the ARVN defensive positions. With the exception of some small arms fire and a few mortar rounds the evening passed without incident. During the evening Spooky, Spectre and Stinger aircraft all provided support for the defensive forces. At 0345 hours on the 27th the indirect fire increased throughout the northern defensive perimeter; between 300 and 400 rounds fell by dawn. At 0500 hours elements of the 53d Regiment defending the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment compound were attacked by sappers. This was followed shortly by an attack against the 44th Regiment positions to the west. Because bad weather made tactical air support impossible, Sky Spot strikes were employed every 20 minutes between 0350 hours and 1230 hours on preplanned targets along the battle front. Elements of the 44th and 53d Regiments, supported by tanks from the 8th Armored Cavalry Regiment, attempted to dislodge the enemy from the northern compounds. At the same time the territorial forces engaged in bitter house-to-house fighting in the southern portion of the city where the North Vietnamese were still dug in inside a school and some houses at the edge of the airfield.

(U) An NVA machine gun crew on a water tower overlooking the area halted the ARVN counter-attack in the hospital compound by stopping the government infantry. Two M-41 tanks were unable to destroy the reinforced concrete of the water tower by direct fire. Finally the TOW helicopter, which had just neutralized a 23mm AA position, placed one of its missiles into the NVA position and silenced the .51 caliber gun. The 53d advanced through the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment compound and advanced to within 500 yards of the airstrip in hand-to-hand fighting throughout the day. VNAF A-37 Skyraiders and US Cobra gunships devastated the armor compound, reducing it to rubble.

(U) Enemy artillery shifted from military targets such as the various compounds and the airfields to an indiscriminate pattern which caused over 100 civilian casualties. Kontum was reinforced during the afternoon by the 3d Battalion, 47th Regiment, from Pleiku. The 45th, pulling back into a tighter ring around the city, encountered heavy resistance by an entrenched NVA battalion and was unable to enter the city's defensive ring until the 29th of May. By the night of the 28th the situation remained critical; the NVA still held the same area that he had held at the beginning of the day. The 23d

Division's only accomplishment was in containing the two penetrations in the northern compounds and southern area. The North Vietnamese found it difficult to resupply their troops in the penetrations because the hourly B-52 strikes forced them to store their supplies great distances from the city. Originally each soldier had been provided three belts filled with cooked rice. Transportation elements were to carry food and ammunition to the front lines. However, heavy air strikes disrupted the telephone lines and the transportation elements trying to reach the front lines. In short, the NVA had to achieve success swiftly or withdraw to the sanctuary of the mountains in order to resupply and refit.⁵⁷

(C) The 23d ARVN Division was also beginning to feel the pinch from lack of resupply. To counter this, American C-130 aircraft airdropped a total of 64 tons of ammunition, of which three-quarters was recovered. May 29th was a day of light activity consisting mostly of sniper fire and sporadic attacks-by-fire, with only 30 artillery rounds hitting the city by midafternoon. The ARVN counterattackers were pinned down by sniper fire from strengthened enemy bunker defenses. Although sixty sorties of assorted tactical aircraft destroyed 39 of these heavily fortified bunkers, the stalemate continued through the evening, despite heavy fighting. Just after midnight the 44th and 53d Regimental Command Posts received heavy mortar fire. Two Spectre gunships and one Stinger were on station and fired on the suspected mortar locations. However, 50 to 100 rounds fell in the next half hour, followed by NVA ground attacks against the northeastern perimeter. The attack was joined by renewed activity just south of the airfield, when the enemy made a last attempt to link his penetrations. One of the enemy mortar rounds strayed into the remains of the ammunition dump between the ARVN defenders and the attacking enemy. The resulting explosion and fire caught the enemy in the middle of his assault, causing many casualties and breaking up the assault.⁵⁸

(U) Soon after daylight the 23d Division forces once more counterattacked the northern compounds occupied by the enemy. Bunker-to-bunker fighting, hand grenades, and individual efforts were required because the bunkers were too well fortified and hidden to be damaged by artillery or air support.⁵⁹

(U) At 1430 hours on 30 May President Nguyen Van Thieu flew into Kontum City amid sporadic rocket and mortar fire in a personal effort to inspire the counterattack. Thieu promoted COL Ba to Brigadier General while the guns rumbled outside. Thieu later chatted with many of the soldiers, voicing encouragement. Slowly but surely the bunkers were won back. Two T-54 tanks were

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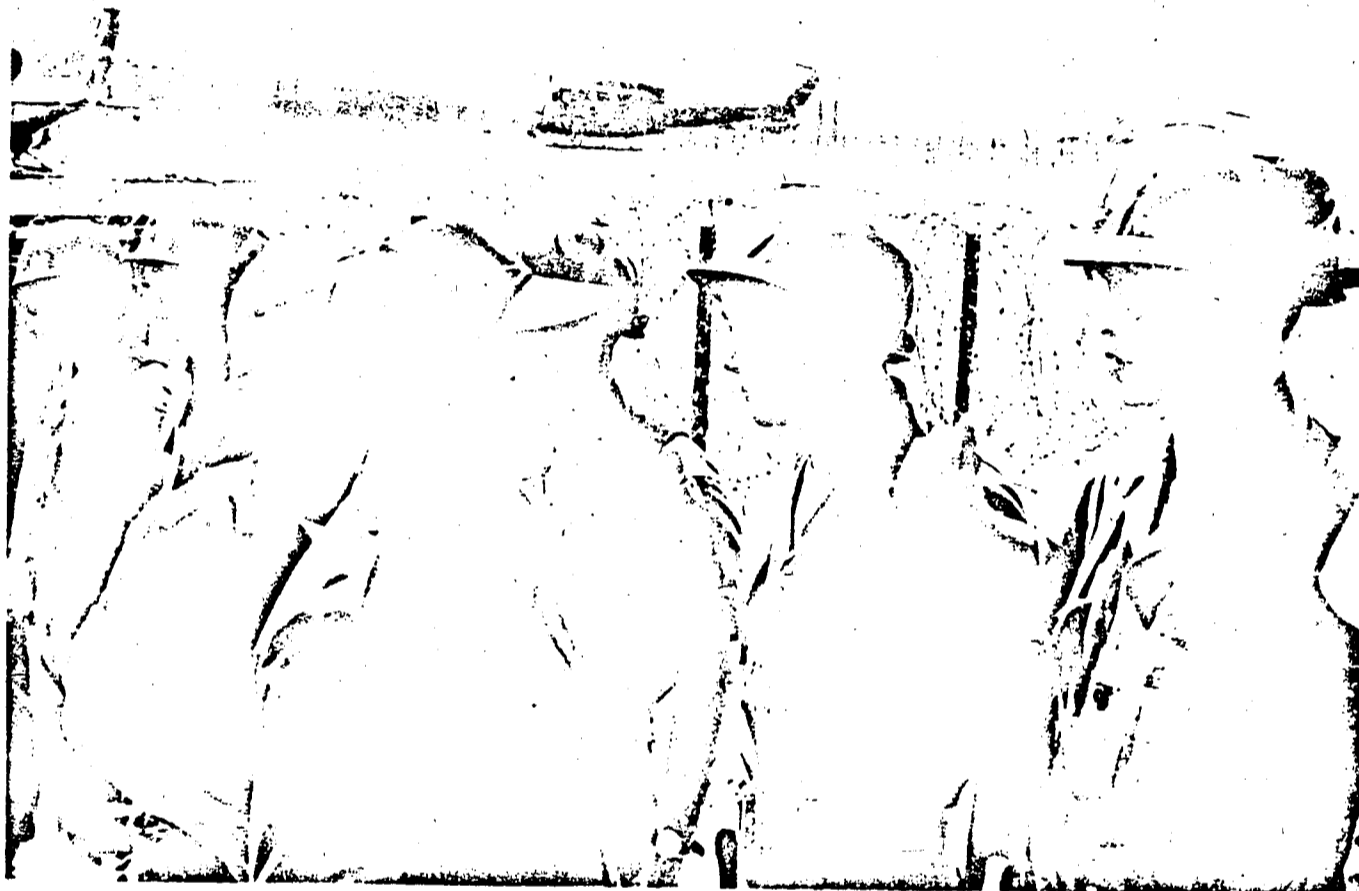
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President Thieu visits Kontum.

destroyed by LAWs amid the rubble of the hospital. Snipers were routed from their positions. When the 44th Regiment moved forward, the troops saw large groups of the enemy withdrawing to the northeast. This was the only avenue of escape left as the counterattacking forces were on the other three sides. The air cavalry and forward air controllers also reported the enemy leaving the battle front. By day's end some NVA soldiers still remained in Kontum, but their positions rapidly

weakened under ARVN pressure.

(U) By midday on the 31st Vann commented that the main battle was over, although pockets of resistance in the city would remain for a time. Needing resupply and replacements for their battered forces, the NVA retreated. Nearly 4,000 NVA dead littered the battlefield. The South Vietnamese Army, too, had suffered heavily, but they held the field. Effective enemy resistance in Kontum City ceased by 10 June 1972.⁶⁰

ARVN CLEARING OPERATIONS

(C) After enemy resistance was eliminated within Kontum City, combat activity for the remainder of the year in Kontum Province dropped to a low level. The activities of government forces focused on opening Highway 14 between Kontum and Pleiku and in clearing the enemy out of the

areas to the north of the city that had fallen in the first days of the offensive.

(C) The road opening operation was first conducted in June and required fourteen maneuver battalions to accomplish the task. The enemy fought fiercely in the initial phases. By 26 June, however,

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after suffering heavy casualties, the enemy lessened his resistance when the advancing ARVN forces secured the high ground east and west of the highway. On 30 June the highway was open and a military convoy of 36 vehicles traveled from Pleiku to Kontum City without incident. On 6 July the road was opened to civilian traffic.

(C) Although the road had been opened, the enemy continued to harass traffic with minor attacks-by-fire south of Kontum Pass in Pleiku Province. In August, ARVN units began to make contacts with small enemy elements along the highway north of Pleiku. By September the enemy had recovered sufficiently to interdict the road sporadically. Enemy activity increased in October and effectively closed the road by destroying a culvert 12 kilometers south of Kontum City on 19 October. Enemy activity prevented repair work. Three days later, a bridge in the pass area was destroyed. Although the 23d ARVN Division moved additional troops into the area to secure the engineers performing repairs, enemy activity prevented early restoration of the bridge despite heavy enemy casualties. By 8 November the highway was declared open again but travel remained hazardous.

(C) Clearing operations out from Kontum City were also varied in their results. To establish the ability of government forces to reenter lost territory, to gain a psychological advantage, and to destroy enemy personnel and materiel, an airmobile

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raid was conducted into the Tan Canh area on 17 June. A 23d ARVN Division reconnaissance company was used to seize limited terrain objectives. The company was withdrawn after three hours. Several months later, two more companies from the 23d ARVN Division air assaulted into the Tan Canh and Dak To areas. Several days later, when one of the companies was dispersed by enemy action, another company was landed as reinforcement. For the most part contact with the enemy was light and sporadic, however, and the ARVN troops were withdrawn on 12 November.

(C) Government forces attacked by foot to the north and northwest during the last half of the year. The 23d ARVN Division was directed by the II Corps Commander to destroy enemy forces between Kontum City and Vo Dinh. Several sharp engagements were fought, particularly in October during a general increase in enemy activity and resistance throughout South Vietnam. In one three day battle beginning on 5 October, ARVN troops accounted for 250 enemy killed. On 6 December a reinforced battalion of the 53d ARVN Regiment air assaulted into the Vo Dinh area. Three days later elements of the battalion had gained temporary lodgements in the village before being withdrawn to Kontum for rest and resupply. The operation continued until the cease-fire was declared on 28 January.⁶¹

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KONTUM — ANNEX K

1. Intel Rpt (C), PSA, Kontum Province, 18 Jan 72, GDS-Not Stated.
2. Rpt (U), CPT John Schandl, G-3, SRAG, 15 Feb 72, Subj: Battle for Kontum. (SRAG refers to the Second Regional Assistance Group which was under Mr. John Paul Vann. On 10 Jun 72 when BG Michael Healy succeeded Mr. Vann who had been killed in a helicopter crash, SRAG was re-designated SRAC: the Second Regional Assistance Command.)
3. Rpt (C), G-2, SRAG, 13 Jan 72, Subj: SRAG WIEU 7-13 Jan 72 (U), GDS-Not Stated.
4. Interview (C), CPT Jack Heslin, S-3, 17th CAG, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 22 Jun 72, Pleiku, RVN.
5. Rpt (C), CORDS, MR 2, Jan 72, Subj: SRAG Military Region Overview, January 1972 (U), GDS-Not Stated.
6. Vincent Davis, "If there is a Hero, it will be John Vann," reprint from The Denver Post, Sunday, June 28, 1972.
7. Rpt (C), G-2, SRAG, 10 Feb 72, Subj: SRAG WIEU, 4-10 Feb 72 (U), GDS-Not Stated.
8. Interview (U), CPT David Stewart, Signal Advisor, 22d ARVN Div, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 6 Jul 72, Ba Gi, RVN.
9. Rpt (U), LTC Ralph C. Waara, SA, 2d ARVN Armored Bde, 5 June 72, Subj: Lessons Learned (U).
10. Same as #2.
11. Interview (C), MAJ Stanley Kweciak, G-3 Air, SRAC, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 21 Jun 72, Pleiku, RVN; Rpt (C), G-2, SRAG, 17 Feb 72, Subj: SRAG WIEU, 11-17 Feb 72 (U), GDS-Not Stated.
12. Rpt (C), G-2, SRAG, 9 Mar 72, Subj: SRAG WIEU, 3-9 Mar 72 (U), GDS-Not Stated.
13. Rpt (C), CORDS, MR 2, Subj: SRAG Military Region Overview, March 1972 (U), GDS-Not Stated.
14. Rpt (C), G-2, SRAG, 6 Apr 72, Subj: SRAG WIEU, 31 March-6 April 1972 (U), GDS-Not Stated.
15. Msg (C), SA, SRAG to COMUSMACV, 9 Apr 72, Subj: Daily Commander's Evaluation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
16. Stars and Stripes (Pacific edition), April 9, 1972.
17. Interview (U), LTC Terrence McClain, DSA, 22d ARVN Div, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 27 Jul 72, Phu Cat, RVN.
18. Msg (C), SA, SRAG to COMUSMACV, 21 Apr 72, Subj: Daily Commander's Evaluation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
19. Interview (U), CPT Raymond Dobbins, Acting SA, 42d ARVN Regt, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 6 Jul 72, Ba Gi, RVN.
20. Same as #17.
21. Same as #19; Same as #17; Interview (U), MAJ John Wise, G-3 Advisor, 22d ARVN Div, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 22 Jun 72, Pleiku, RVN.
22. Same as #19; Msg (C), SA, SRAG to COMUSMACV, 23 Apr 72, Subj: Daily Commander's Evaluation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
23. Interview (U), CPT Richard Cassidy, Asst District Advisor, Dak To District, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 27 Jul 72, Pleiku, RVN.
24. Same as #8; Journal (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 24 Apr 72. Note: Tan Canh was the home base of the 42d ARVN Regiment and Regimental Advisory Team. Dobbins and Yonan knew the area well. They drew up a plan for E&E based on their experience in the area. This was the plan that was distributed.
25. Same as #8.
26. Same as #19.
27. Same as #19; Same as #17.
28. Same as #17; Msg (C), SA, SRAG to COMUSMACV, 24 Apr 72, Subj: Daily Commander's Evaluation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
29. Interview (U), CPT Charles Carden, DSA, 47th Regt, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 7 Jul 72, LZ English, RVN.
30. Same as #19.
31. Same as #29; Same as #9.
32. Interview (U), CPT Raymond Dobbins, Acting SA, 42d Regt, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 7 Jul 72, LZ Uplift; Msg (C), SA, SRAG to COMUSMACV, 25 Apr 72, Subj: Daily Commander's Evaluation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
33. Msg (C), SA, SRAG to COMUSMACV, 26 Apr 72, Subj: Daily Commander's Evaluation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
34. Interview (C), COL John O. Truby, Acting SA, 23d ARVN Div, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 17 Aug 72, Pleiku, RVN; Stars and Stripes (Pacific edition), August 12, 1972.
35. Interview (U), MAJ James Givens, SA, 6th Rgr Gp, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 29 Jun 72, Pleiku, RVN.
36. Same as #34; Journal (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 6 May 72.
37. Journals (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 6, 7 and 9 May 72.
38. Same as #34.
39. Same as #34; Journal (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 13 May 72; Rpt (C), G-2, ARVN II Corps, n.d., Subj: II Corps Scenario (U), GDS-Not Stated.

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40. Journal (C), G-2/G-3, 23d ARVN Div, 14 May 72.
41. Same as #34; Interview (U), MAJ Wade Lovings, DSA, 44th Regt, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 22 Jun 72, Kontum, RVN.
42. Ibid.; Same as #34; Journal (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 15 May 72; Journal (C), G-2/G-3, 23d ARVN Div, 15 May 72.
43. Journal (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 17 May 72.
44. Ibid.
45. Journal (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 19 May 72.
46. Interview (C), LTC James W. Bricker, G-3 Advisor, 23d ARVN Div, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, G-3, SRAC, 22 Jun 72, Kontum, RVN; Msg (C), SA, SRAG to COMUSMACV, 21 May 72, Subj: Daily Commander's Evaluation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
47. Msg (C), Ibid.
48. Journal (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 23 May 72.
49. Journal (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 24 May 72.
50. Interview (U), same as #46; Same as #23.
51. Interview (U), LTC Norbert C. Gannon, SA, 53d ARVN Regt, by 1LT Gary R. Swingle, 22 Jun 72, Kontum, RVN.
52. Same as #41; Journals (C), G-2/G-3, SRAG, 25-26 May 72; Msg (C), SA, SRAG to COMUSMACV, 26 May 72, Subj: Daily Commander's Evaluation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
53. Journal (C), G-2/G-3, 23d ARVN Div, 26 May 72.
54. Same as #41.
55. Same as #51.
56. Msg (C), same as #52.
57. Journals (C), G-2/G-3, 23d ARVN Div, 26-28 May 72.
58. Rpt (C), MACDI, 4 Jun 72, Subj: PW Interrogation (U), GDS-Not Stated.
59. Same as #41.
60. Same as #41; Rpt (TS), MACDO-43, 18 Jul 72, Subj: DO Historical Summary for June 1972 (U), p 26, GDS-Not Stated.
61. See Annex B.

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