

KONTUM CONNECTION

Experiences During The 1972 Easter Offensive in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam

By Richard L. Montgomery and Nguyen Minh Hieu

PROLOGUE

Isn't it strange that a country can be so pastoral, yet so deadly?

--Dicky Chappell, war correspondent killed in 1965

If you were to visit Kontum today, you would probably find a peaceful, bustling Central Highlands city of around 35,000. Most of the inhabitants would belong to the various ethnic minorities, the people the French called "Montagnards." The main agricultural products would be coffee, tea, cassava (manioc root), rubber, and lumber. This pleasant city has a gentle climate. It would be difficult to find any evidence of—or even to imagine—the major battle that took place here long ago. During the last two weeks of May in 1972, Kontum was the scene of a violent struggle between the equivalent of three divisions of Communist North Vietnamese soldiers, who were attacking to seize the city, and the one South Vietnamese Division defending it. At least 30,000 refugees were packed into Kontum. Communist artillery, rockets, and mortars were pounding the city, and many buildings were burning. The enemy held almost half of the town, and their troops and tanks were assaulting day and night to take the remainder of it. It was close, brutal, often toe-to-toe combat. Helicopter and fixed wing gunships and aerial bombing both inside and outside Kontum aided the South Vietnamese troops. During just 25 days, B-52 bombers alone dropped about 60 million pounds of



B 52 releasing ordinance (from Wikipedia)

bombs around Kontum. Tactical air fighter-bombers dropped additional millions of pounds of bombs both inside and outside the city. Day after day during the battle, aircraft were being shot down in flames; soldiers on both sides were being killed and wounded; and the air was filled with the smell of cordite, smoke and rotting bodies.

In the spring of 1972, 12 Communist North Vietnamese divisions plus many independent units—about 200,000 men in all—supported by an estimated 1,000 tanks and the latest Soviet and Chinese artillery and anti-aircraft guns, invaded South Viet Nam in what Americans called the Easter Offensive. It was the biggest across-the-border invasion and the largest military offensive since the Communist Chinese attacked across the Yalu River into Korea 22 years earlier in October 1950. Although virtually no US Army ground combat units took part in the Easter Offensive—they were in the process of withdrawing from Vietnam—there were American advisors with the South Vietnamese army, marine, and air force units. Also, US Army aviation units, the US Air Force (USAF), the US Navy, and navy and marine aircraft crews were involved. Many Americans were wounded or killed during this campaign.

No US Army or US Marine ground units returned to Vietnam to respond to the invasion, but the USAF response was swift and massive. From bases in the United States, Korea, and the Philippines, waves of fighters, bombers, tankers, and cargo aircraft flowed to Southeast Asia. Some of those aircraft crews were flying combat missions three days after they received orders to deploy. The US Navy responded by tripling the number of aircraft carriers off the Vietnamese coast from two to six, with almost 500 aircraft, plus 20 cruisers and destroyers. It was the largest collection of naval power assembled since World War II.

The Easter Offensive was not like the attack on cities by the indigenous VC guerillas during Tet in 1968. In 1972, we were fighting the NVA, and for the first time in the Central Highlands the enemy had tanks. The Communists were not just testing; they were trying to conquer South Vietnam that spring. They made repeated all-out attempts to seize the outposts, fire support bases (FSBs), and cities they wanted. Their goal was to defeat South Vietnam or at least seize and hold enough key cities to relegate the United States to a weak bargaining position in the Paris peace talks. This offensive was a massive three-pronged attack into the I Corps area with six divisions of about 8,700 men each. Three Communist divisions

attacked II Corps in the Central Highlands, and the other three attacked into III Corps north of Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital.

A famous Vietnam War correspondent told me, "The main show was up north, Kontum was just a sideshow." The invasion did start in the North—across the DMZ into I Corps—so the Americans, the South Vietnamese, and the media initially focused their attention on the North. Maybe most of the reporters remained there, but after the NVA attacked in force into two other areas of South Vietnam, all three fronts became equally important. If the Communists' invasion from the North down Highway 1 had seized all the important coastal cities, they might have also seized Saigon. If An Loc in the South had fallen, they might have seized Saigon from that direction. If Kontum and the Central Highlands had fallen, South Vietnam would have been cut in half and defeated by the Communists. For those of us who were there, wherever we were fighting was the most important place in Vietnam.

—From "Kontum – The Battle to Save South Vietnam," by Thomas P. McKenna, published by the University of Kentucky Press, 2011, pages 1-3.

PART I - SECOND TOUR



MACVSOG PATCH

It was September 1971, and the captain had his orders... again, to Viet Nam, where he had served just three years earlier. Freshly sworn as a Regular Army officer, he was wrapping up three years of a successful portion of his career as Operations Officer for Region I, 650th Military Intelligence Group, NATO

Southern Command, Naples, Italy. Cpt. Richard Montgomery was eager to enter the first phase of his journey, which was 12 weeks of training in the Phoenix program at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. (He had been there prior to his last tour in Viet Nam, that time going through 12 weeks of psychological operations training with a subsequent assignment to US Military Assistance Command-Vietnam/Special Operations Group or, USMACVSOG.)

After a brief leave at home with his parents and

relatives in Kansas City, the captain reported in at Fort Bragg, having driven there from Missouri. The Phoenix program (better known by its Vietnamese name, *Phung Hoang*) training focused on the coordination of Vietnamese and American intelligence assets, including the Republic of Viet Nam National Police, for operations to neutralize (a polite word) the Viet Cong (VC) infrastructure in Viet Nam. By then, each province had an up-and-running Province Intelligence Operations Coordinating Center, or PIOCC. Each province was divided into districts, usually three or four, and each district then had a corresponding DIOCC, or District Intelligence Operations Coordinating Center, which fed info into the province level. These centers designed and targeted operations against VC personnel operating in the province. Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU) carried out the operations, which often were ambushes, or captures of identified VC. The PIOCC pooled the various American and Vietnamese intelligence agencies' data, analyzed it, and either carried out operations with the PRU, or passed the information on to larger units if so required.



Colonel Lewis Millett
(Wikipedia)

Cpt. Montgomery completed his training, spent Christmas 1971, once again with family, in Kansas City, and boarded a TWA for San Francisco, then South Viet Nam to become a US advisor in the Phoenix program.

Arriving in Saigon shortly after the first of the New Year, he reported to the Director of the Phoenix program, Colonel Lew Millett. Col. Millett had quite a reputation in the Army, since he had led the last known bayonet charge in Army history during the Korean War, and received the Congressional Medal of Honor for it. An unconventional type, perfect for his assignment!

Cpt. Montgomery explained to the colonel that he had just come from a major European headquarters, and wanted to be assigned to the lowest level possible, for career development. Colonel Millett

explained to the captain that final assignments would be made at the province level, but he would recommend that he be assigned to the Dak To District in Kontum, Central Highlands.

The next day, Cpt. Montgomery did some in processing, received some clothing and equipment and proceeded out to Tan Son Nhut Airport to fly to Kontum. Arriving late in the day in Pleiku, about 30 miles south of Kontum, he caught a ride on a helicopter up to Kontum airfield. Flying into that small airstrip, he and the chopper crew noticed a helicopter approaching from the other direction and it was hauling on the cable hook hanging from the belly of the craft, a huge water buffalo, strung up by his four legs to the cable hook! Later he learned that a US chopper crew was bringing it in to help a local Montagnard tribe have a feast to celebrate one of their festivals. That wasn't the only surprise in store for Montgomery. As soon as the chopper landed, he grabbed his baggage and debarked to meet a small entourage of US advisors and Vietnamese military personnel. There was the Province S-2 (Intelligence), Cpt. Hung, and an ARVN (Army of Viet Nam) lieutenant, a US lieutenant, and his sergeant. As the introductions began, there was an ominous "boom" in the distance, which was quickly followed by two or three more "booms!" Someone yelled "incoming!" Everyone scattered. Although Cpt. Montgomery had been to Viet Nam before, this was the first time that hostile fire became personal. Within seconds, several shells of unknown caliber, bracketed the airfield. Montgomery felt his knees turn to water as he found safety in a nearby ditch! A tiny sample of what was to come. Welcome to Kontum!

Colonel Steve Bachinski was the Province Senior Advisor, or PSA, US MACV Advisory Team 41. Cpt. Montgomery reported to him, and was then introduced to the S-2 (Intelligence) Advisor for the province, Major Robert Frasche. Montgomery expressed his desire to be assigned to a DIOCC. Colonel Bachinski said he would think about it since there was another captain who had just been assigned, and he would have to make a decision as to which man would be assigned to Dak To.

The next day, Colonel Bachinski asked Cpt. Montgomery to come to his office. There, he was introduced to a Cpt. Cassidy. Bachinski said that he wanted them to write an essay on their philosophy of

life, and have it on his desk by the end of the day. Cpt. Cassidy was an Infantry Officer, while Cpt. Montgomery was a Military Intelligence Officer. So they wrote...!

Shortly after the assignment was turned in, Cpt. Montgomery was called to Colonel Bachinski's quarters, and in a very informal setting, Cpt. Montgomery was told by the colonel that he admired his intellect, his obvious writing skills, and that the mission would better be served if he were to remain in Kontum and be the US advisor to the PIOCC as well as assist the S-2 Advisor, Major Robert Frasche. Cpt. Cassidy would report to Dak To, as the only other American, along with Major Dennis Bruzina, in that tiny Montagnard village!



UH-1 Huey Helicopter
(Wikipedia)

In January '72, the American presence in Viet Nam was drawing down, there were no ground combat troops left in country, and the entire US military contingent in South Viet Nam was hovering around nine thousand personnel, most of whom were advisors to the Vietnamese. As this telescoping down occurred, those who remained were given responsibility for more and more. Cpt. Montgomery soon found himself to be not only the Phung Hoang advisor, but also the US officer responsible for obtaining information from POWs, refugees, and other sources, the visual reconnaissance officer (which meant that he flew almost every day over the province to observe any changes or anything of suspicion or interest), the crater analysis officer (meaning, when shells landed, he had to go and survey the site, get an azimuth to determine direction of fire, find shrapnel to determine caliber and range), the US security officer, responsible for all classified documents and encryption codes, the assistant S-2 advisor, the officer-in-charge of Vietnamese interpreters, and in charge of any captured documents or weapons! Later in the year, about June, he became the only US Intelligence officer on Team 41!

Cpt. Montgomery quickly fell into routines, which included flying up to Tan Canh, about 20 miles north of Kontum City, which was the forward base for the 22nd ARVN Division, in a UH-1 Huey "slick," where

the commander, Col. Le Duc Dat, held morning briefings daily. US MACV advisory teams in the area usually sent representatives to these meetings. Major Frasche and or Cpt. Montgomery always went, and were often accompanied by a Vietnamese interpreter. After the briefings, they would fly back down to Kontum City and brief Colonel Bachinski, and his advisory team, including the Vietnamese staff for Kontum Province.

Each day's schedule varied due to the circumstances, and after the morning flight to Tan Canh, a visual reconnaissance of the province was flown to determine if there were any unusual activities or targets of opportunity presenting themselves. If any were spotted, then this information was quickly passed to operations in Pleiku who then would assign aircraft or artillery assets to engage the target. Cpt. Montgomery became the "corporate memory" of Kontum from the air for Advisory Team 41, and he flew the area on most days. Major Frasche was a recent graduate of the University of Kansas, and had a Master's degree in Russian studies, and spoke Russian. His tour of duty ended in May of '72, leaving Cpt. Montgomery with the responsibilities of the Kontum Province S-2 (Intelligence) US Advisor.

Cpt. Montgomery dutifully located his office in the PIOCC building, where the Vietnamese staff was busy working to locate Viet Cong and North Vietnamese covert operations. The communists, both North and South, had set up a local "shadow" government to support their struggle. They usually operated at night and would attempt to tax the population by enlisting

SFC Nguyen Minh Hieu



Photo by R. Montgomery

the youth into their cause, and forcing people to provide them with food and money. Most of the people saw this for what it was – extortion.

Part of Montgomery's Vietnamese associates included an Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN)

Sergeant First Class interpreter, Nguyen Minh Hieu. SFC Hieu stood out from the six or seven other interpreters assigned to Team 41 for several reasons. Primarily, his English was very good, he was reliable, and had good rapport with the Vietnamese staff officers and enlisted personnel. Montgomery began to rely on his services, and usually had SFC Hieu with him when he was away from his office and, that turned out to be most of the time.

Enemy activity in the province began to escalate, and Major Frasche was convinced that a major push by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was imminent. Frasche was further convinced that armor would be used in the coming offensive. Also, the pace of activities quickened, and daily briefs were held by Team 41 in Kontum City, following the briefings in Tan Canh.

Activity in and around Tan Canh increased, most notably shelling by assorted artillery and rockets, most notably Katyusha 122mm rockets. Reports of increased activities on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the heavy shelling of fire support bases began to increase in intensity. Kontum City was no exception, and it received a daily ration of various hostile ordinances.

During March, a prisoner was taken, and Montgomery was sent to observe the interrogation by ARVN interrogators. This took place in a small hospital in the center of Kontum City. The prisoner was a medical doctor from North Viet Nam, and had been on a reconnaissance mission with a local Viet Cong female. The interrogation revealed that they were searching for a 200 bed hospital! Other intelligence revealed two NVA divisions in province, and two tank regiments. Some later estimates put enemy strength at about 30,000 troops.

Due to the increased enemy activities, there was a daily stream of reporters, US Advisory teams, helicopter pilots, and other "straphangers" attending the daily briefings.

PART II - THE EASTER OFFENSIVE

On the morning of last day of March 1972, Captain Montgomery gave the Intelligence portion of the morning briefing in the Team 41 mess hall, which had been taken over for that purpose due to the number of personnel that were now in the province. Montgomery

began the briefing by reporting that there had been about 146 rockets fired into the city during the night and early morning. With that said, all heard the familiar “boom” in the distance signaling another round of rockets. Montgomery corrected his report: “Make that 147!” Everyone headed for the exit with a burly Special Forces NCO leading the way. The unfortunate double screen doors opened inward, but proved to be no obstacle for the SF NCO, who hit them like a Green Bay Packer tackle, busting them off their hinges. This was the beginning of the 1972 Easter Offensive as witnessed by those who were in the Team 41 briefing that morning.

From that moment on, the pace quickened throughout the province. Tan Canh was shelled constantly, reaching almost 1,000 shells a day. Colonel Dat began to doubt that he could hold onto his forward headquarters and the 22nd Division’s defenses were poorly thought out.

Colonel Bachinski became concerned with the possibility of being overrun. He divided Team 41 into three groups and gave them specific rendezvous locations south of Kontum City where they could regroup and be extracted. Each individual made a “go bag,” or a pack of bare essentials, some ammunition, and a couple of grenades. These “go bags” also included a special transmitter that, when turned on, would broadcast a beeping signal on an emergency frequency that was monitored by all USAF aircraft. When the aircraft heard the signal, the pilot was to call back three times: “Beeper, beeper, come up voice.” At that time the person with the transmitter, pressed the only button on the transmitter, and spoke into the microphone, identifying themselves as American, and giving the aircraft their location so they could be extracted. If after three “beeper, beeper, come up voice,” with no response, the pilot was instructed to treat the location of the signal as hostile.

About the third week of April, the 22nd Division began to crack under the pressure. NVA tanks (Soviet and Chinese T-54 and T-55’s) were reported attacking Tan Canh on the 23rd. One morning clearly remembered by all (April 24th) was the scene of dispirited ARVN troops straggling into Kontum City, and discarding their military attire and trying to blend into the population. The road north to Tan Canh was scattered with assorted discarded uniforms and

military ware. The fire support bases (FSB) on the ridge running parallel to the road north to Tan Canh were overrun or abandoned by the ARVN. Kontum City was next. It was during this week that Cpt. Montgomery received an order to fly to a hilltop to find a US Army officer that had escaped from his overrun compound near Tan Canh. He ordered up a chopper from Pleiku and set forth to find the man. The officer, Army Cpt. Charles Carden, had made his way up to an abandoned FSB with an ARVN interpreter. Cpt. Montgomery had the helicopter fly to that location and extract the two men. Both were extremely frightened and hugely grateful to be rescued. Their clothes were in tatters from running through the forest. The captain had been part of a signals intercept station in the valley near a stream. His commander was a Colonel Robert Brownlee who had given the order to abandon the post when the NVA began moving down from overrunning Tan Canh. They were forced to leave everything and try to make it to the FSB for extraction. (Cpt. Montgomery had met Col. Brownlee several times at briefings.) Arriving back in Kontum City, Cpt. Montgomery provided the rescued captain with a fresh pair of his own fatigues, and the captain and the interpreter were allowed to shower and eat before being debriefed by Montgomery. SFC Hieu debriefed the interpreter along with Montgomery. Cpt. Montgomery found out that during their evacuation of the compound, Col. Brownlee led the captain and interpreter west toward the ridge and the FSB. The enemy was in hot pursuit and shooting at the fleeing men. As they crossed the stream to start up the ridge, the stream slowed the men down. Col. Brownlee, being somewhat overweight, was the slowest, and ordered his two subordinates to continue to push forward and not wait for him. As the men hurried up the ridge, the captain looked back at Brownlee who had fallen behind. He could see the bullets hitting the water around him. It was the last time anyone saw the colonel. He is still listed as MIA.

Part of the enemy’s strategy was to push the civilian population out of their villages and flood the roads with refugees. Team 41’s barracks compound on the north side of the city was soon presented with a huge mob of people wanting to get into the compound to access the helicopters that flew in and out of the compound. There were a few tense moments when an ARVN deserter pulled a grenade at the gate, and threatened to blow up some folks if he didn’t get on a

helicopter. He was eventually disarmed and taken away. Another time a woman with an infant was pressed against Team 41's gates so hard that her infant was crushed.

Most of the evacuations took place at the airstrip in the middle of the city. In one instance, a VNAF (Vietnamese Air Force) CH-47 Chinook came to the airstrip loaded with Montagnard refugees from recently overrun villages of Ben Het and Dak To, which fell when Tan Canh fell. Most of the Montagnards had exited the aircraft when it began to bounce on the tarmac. The crew closed the ramp door, but the Chinook rose in an unsteady manner. It went up about 200 feet, still very wobbly, and then it began to spin horizontally and increasing in speed until the occupants inside were thrown out the back ramp door to their deaths. The Chinook began to fall, and it fell on VNAF Huey that had just landed with more refugees. Cpt. Montgomery was on the other side of town when he was radioed to report to the air strip, and arrived there just as two of his Team 41 teammates were extracting an injured boy from the Huey UH-1 which lay on the side of the field upside down, with the engine of the craft still running! JP4 fuel was flowing all over the craft and the tarmac. There were still bodies in the Huey, but they were dead. The US Army Advisors, Cpt. Fruitticher and SFC Cato, who rescued the refugees, received Soldier's Medals for their heroic work to save those refugees!

With events cascading and chaotic, the II Corps Commander, John Paul Vann ordered the ARVN 23rd Division to defend Kontum. He also gave authority to the 23rd's US Advisors for control of the B52 strikes. The 23rd's G-3 (Operations) Air advisor was Cpt. Jack Finch (Army). He carried the authorization codes for the strikes. (Heretofore, air strikes were requested through operations in Pleiku.) Cpt. Finch was rather nervous about having "Secret No Foreign" documents in his constant possession. The "No Foreign," or NOFORN in military terminology, meant that our allies, the South Vietnamese, could not have access to them. His superior, Lt. Col. Bricker told him he had to keep the document on his person at all times, and that if they were overrun, or if he was threatened, he would have to destroy the documents...even eat them, if necessary!

Captains Montgomery and Finch began an almost daily association and were instrumental in targeting something between 500 and 900 B52 strikes in the

Province over the next few months. B52's can carry 70,000 pounds of bombs, and targeting required the requester to identify the target and give the coordinates for a one-kilometer by three kilometers box over the target. B52's flew missions in threes, in close formation, and dropped their payloads in unison. Both men believe, as do many others who were there, that they are here today because of these tremendous war machines that prevented a determined, well-armed, conventional enemy army from completely overrunning the ARVN forces and their US Advisors.

During this time, SFC Hieu was frequently with Montgomery and assisted in screening refugees and coordination with the Vietnamese military. Most merchants had fled the city earlier, and eventually, Hieu's wife, Nguyen Ngoc Lan, and two small children were evacuated to Saigon. His children then were two and three years old (Dominique and Frederic). Earlier, because of concern and frustration over poor conditions for his family, SFC Hieu asked Cpt. Montgomery if he could obtain some clothing from the US. Montgomery wrote his family and they responded generously. Some of the clothing was also donated to the local Catholic Diocese.

The situation continued to deteriorate. The B52 strikes were targeted closer to the city, and enemy shells peppered the city. Cpt. Montgomery and SFC Hieu were frequently out in the city responding to requests by the Team's Tactical Operations Center (TOC) to check shell craters, or to debrief POW's, or locals, for useful intelligence. On one occasion, there was a 122 rocket that hit in the center of the city, and as Montgomery approached, he noticed a glare off a large standing pool of what appeared to be water gathered between a corner curbing and the sidewalk. It turned out to be a large pool of blood alongside two pregnant Vietnamese corpses recently slain by shrapnel from the 122 rocket. The NVA did not concern themselves with civilian casualties. Rockets were launched from makeshift bamboo supports. The enemy only knew their range and direction.

All nonessential civilians and military were ordered evacuated in late April. Captains Finch, Montgomery, and Major Frasche continued to coordinate B52 and other air assets as they became available.

Tanks and rumors of tanks were everywhere. US teams of the 82nd Airborne were deployed with jeeps



T 54 Tank (from Wikipedia)

mounted with TOW (Tube launched, Optically tracked, Wire commanded) missiles. Also, Hueys, (NUH-1B) specially equipped to shoot TOW missiles were assigned to the 17th Combat Aviation Group in Pleiku. The aircraft used the call sign, "Hawk's Claw." This was the first use of the TOW missile in combat. About 79 were fired in the battle for Kontum.

During the second week of May, Cpt. Montgomery was afflicted with severe headaches, and what would later be diagnosed as "aseptic meningitis." He was evacuated to a US Army hospital in Saigon for tests and spinal taps. He returned in about ten days to continue his work. In the interval, SFC Hieu and Major Frasche continued with the struggle. However, it was clear that the NVA was weakening and the tempo began to slow down a little. The B52 strikes continued to pound the enemy and their planning kept everyone busy.

When Montgomery returned to Kontum, Team 41 had moved from the barracks compound on the north side of the city, to an old French plantation compound near the bridge over the Dak Bla River, on the south side of the city. This was done for safety, and the fact that the fighting was more intense on the north side.

The number of tanks destroyed in Kontum was never quite settled, but estimates indicate that somewhere between 30 and 50 of these vehicles were neutralized. A couple of tanks were hauled into town for people to see. Another was taken to Pleiku and sat outside the entrance to Camp Holloway.

On one occasion, Montgomery was in the 23rd Division's headquarters bunker planning B52 strikes with Cpt. Finch when he had a tap on the shoulder. When he turned around, there stood none other than the President of South Viet Nam, Nguyen Van Thieu. He promoted the 23rd Division Commander, Colonel Ly Tong Ba, to brigadier general at that moment. It was the 30th of May, 1972.

PART III - JOHN PAUL VANN

On June 9, a Friday, it was learned that John Paul Vann, the II Corps Commander, the only civilian in Viet Nam to command a corps, which is a two star general level of command, crashed in his helicopter halfway between Pleiku and Kontum. The following Sunday edition (June 11, 1972) of the *Stars and Stripes* reported from the Associated Press:

Helo Crash Kills John Paul Vann

SAIGON (AP) --John Paul Vann, the senior U.S. adviser in South Vietnam's 2nd Military Region and considered the top American expert on pacification, was killed Friday night in a helicopter crash.

Vann, his pilot and a U.S. military passenger died when their light observation helicopter crashed in flames on a night flight from Pleiku to Kontum in the central highlands, the U.S. command said.

First reports said it was not known whether hostile fire was the cause of the crash of the OH58 helicopter. The command said there were no reports of Communist ground fire of the area. The crash was witnessed by South Vietnamese soldiers at Fire Base 41, south of Kontum.

U.S. and South Vietnamese troops later reached the crash site and found the bodies of all three men.

Military sources said Vann, 47, a flamboyant figure noted for his outspoken views on Vietnam, was flying to Kontum to spend the night when the helicopter crashed about 9:20 p.m.

Although frequently at odds with the U.S. State Department, for which he worked, and the military command because of his controversial public statements,

Vann was widely respected as a capable and courageous figure.

In recent weeks he had assumed virtually outright command of the situation in the central highlands, where North Vietnamese forces have been trying to capture Kontum. Vann had repeatedly predicted the attacks would fail.

Mr. Vann was almost a daily visitor to Kontum during the Easter Offensive. On one visit, Mr. Vann was in the mess for lunch, when it was reported that tanks were to the east of the city, moving towards it. Mr. Vann asked for the intelligence officer on the province advisory team, and Cpt. Montgomery reported to him.



OH-58A (From Armed Forces History Museum)

Vann told Montgomery to take his pilot and OH-58 helicopter up (the same helicopter in which Vann would perish just a few days later) for reconnaissance and report back as soon as he could. The pilot and Cpt. Montgomery were soon over the reported site. It was immediately clear to Montgomery that the “movement of tanks” was an illusion created by Montagnard rice racks near their rice fields. These racks were a few feet off the ground, and a few feet square. The harvested rice sheaves are placed over the racks to dry as part of the harvest processing. The shadows cast by the racks gave the illusion of movement when flying over them, and square shape might suggest vehicular

T-55 tanks



movement in an open field. Apparently someone flying over Kontum that day had seen these and thought they could be tanks moving toward the city. Cpt. Montgomery reported his findings to Vann, and the concern was over.

During June, activity bottomed out. The NVA forces were decimated, and too weak to make any significant moves against their opponents. The constant B52 strikes kept them pinned down, yet they managed to continue their almost daily shelling of the city and other military locations.

PART IV - DEPARTURE

By the end of June, most activities became static and rather mundane. Some targeting of airstrikes, including B52's continued, as did the sporadic, and unpredictable, shelling, although not as intense. A certain weariness was palpable. US Advisors continued to dwindle and were not replaced. A Lt. Col. Willard Esplin replaced Col. Bachinski as Province Senior Advisor. Lt. Col. Esplin had served a tour with the First Infantry Division during his first tour in Viet Nam. This was his second tour in Viet Nam.

Rumors and news reports that a possible cease-fire might be arranged, and the civilians were told by the government to paint South Vietnamese flags on their roofs to show their loyalty. Cpt. Montgomery and SFC Hieu were requested to go to some of these villages to see if this was taking place, and it was. Once, SFC Hieu suggested that Cpt. Montgomery remain in the Jeep while he went into the building to talk to villagers. Montgomery wisely remained in the Jeep, sensing some sort of foreboding.

This was an uneasy time for all, because it became clear that the Americans were leaving. As an American, one could sense some animosity among the civilians, but could not discern if it was because they were leaving, or because they were Americans.

Cpt. Montgomery took advantage of this lull to go to Thailand on R & R. All military received one “Rest and Recuperation” leave during the one year tour of duty in Viet Nam. These R&Rs were usually a week to ten days depending on how far away a service member would choose to go.

Upon returning, Montgomery learned that US

Advisory Team 41 had been nominated for Bronze Star medals in recognition of their dedication and hard work during the recent battle. Those awards were presented in September.

Routines continued much as before except for the flights to Tan Canh. Montgomery continued liaison with the 23rd ARVN Infantry Division, whose headquarters was in Kontum City, and mostly with Captain Finch. People began to filter back into the city as the year 1972 grew short.

Farewell ceremonies for American Advisors only meant that the team was smaller since no one was being replaced. Most of the Americans were excited about finally going home, and what their new assignments would be. One could sense envy in the Vietnamese military personnel because they would stay, of course, and have to contend with a so-called cease-fire, and whatever the future brought. Cpt. Montgomery had a terrible feeling about leaving, knowing that the future for his Vietnamese friends was uncertain. He talked to SFC Hieu and provided him his address and hoped that they would maintain contact.



Sept. 1972, MACV Advisory Team 41 receiving the Bronze Star medal for their actions during the battle. Lt. Col. Esplin, left, presenting. (Montgomery is 4th from the far end of the file.)

Cpt. Montgomery continued to fly recon daily, and on one occasion spotted an NVA bulldozer, which was left unconcealed from its night's activities. The NVA knew to work at night as a precaution, but this piece of machinery was left in full daylight. The Huey Cobra at Montgomery's disposal made quick work of the bulldozer.

Cpt. Montgomery pursued his other daily routines, often flying twice a day to keep up with any NVA activities or movement in the province.

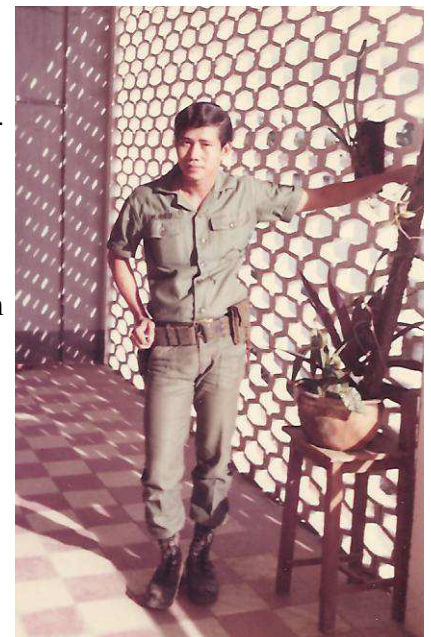
Captain Nguyen T. Long and Captain Montgomery, November 28, 1972



Note: In the above photo with Cpt. Long, on Montgomery's 30th birthday, the two men waited in vain for a helicopter for visual recon. The bird never arrived, and later it was learned that the aircraft had been hit by a .51 caliber round from an enemy position while flying from Pleiku to Kontum. It was reported that the pilot lost a part of his foot, so the mission was scrubbed. Cpt. Long was the Assistant Operations Officer on the Province staff, and sometime later immigrated to the United States.

PART V – SFC HIEU

Sergeant First Class Hieu, born Nguyen Minh Hieu, 1 August 1946 in Gia Dinh province, near Saigon. The elder of six children, three boys and three girls. Growing up, he was educated in French schools. He attended the Taberd School in Saigon, the Mossard School in Thu Duc, and the Institution De LaSalle in Nha Trang, all taught by the De LaSalle Christian Brothers. All instruct-



-ion was in French. After the war, he studied law, but was halted by the fall of South Viet Nam to the communists.

Hieu enlisted in the South Vietnamese army (ARVN) on 25 September 1966, shortly after turning twenty years old. He was sent to Non-Commissioned Officers school, Interpreter and Army Language School in Saigon. From 1967 until 1972, he was assigned to the First US Infantry Division (Big Red One), 20th US Engineer Brigade in Can Tho.

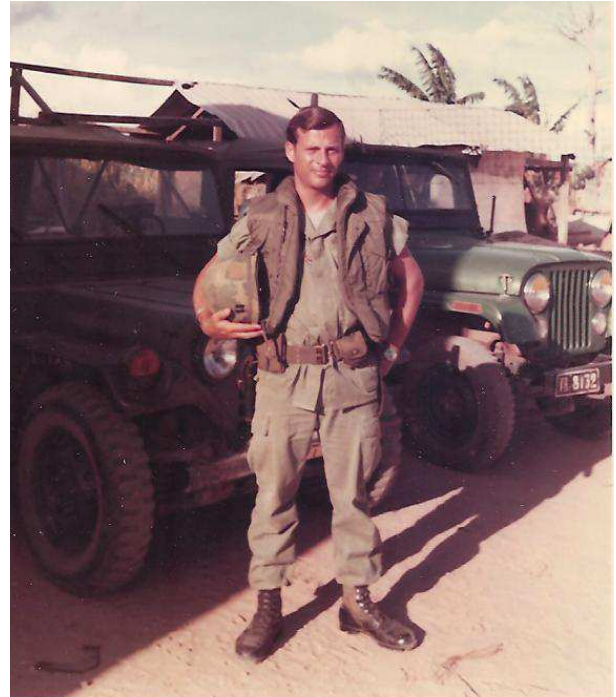
During Tet 1968 (January 31 – March 28, Phase I), many parts of Saigon were overrun by the Viet Cong. Fierce battles broke out between allied and enemy forces throughout the city and the country. Casualty rates among military and civilian populations skyrocketed. American losses in this time frame approached 5,000, as did South Vietnamese military losses. Communist forces were said to have lost 17,000. Another 14,000 civilians died. Sadly, Hieu lost his mother one sister and his youngest brother on the 13th of February that year. He was still with the 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division at Di An as an Interpreter with POWs on that fateful day.

Early in 1972, he reported to US Military Assistance Command, Advisory Team 41, Kontum, along with his wife and two small children.

After Cpt. Montgomery left for the States on January 16, 1973, Hieu remained in Kontum and served as an interpreter on the Joint Military Team/ARVN for the Canadian and Indonesian military personnel who came to monitor the cease fire, beginning January 28, 1973. According to many, including SFC Hieu, there were numerous violations by the communists. South Viet Nam controlled about 75% of the country, and 85% of the population. Later, he was assigned to the 18th Support Command Battalion, 18th Infantry Division (ARVN) as a signal equipment repair NCO. He was promoted to Master Sergeant in January 1975.

April 30, 1975. The fall of Saigon and the South Vietnamese government resulted in the transition of a free people into a socialist/communist state. A sad, bitter day for all, especially those who believed in democracy and freedom. And, an American failure.

CPT Richard Montgomery, Kontum 1972



As an NCO, Hieu was required to attend three days in a re-education camp. He was required to make a personal declaration in writing. The communist cadre told him, "You must be sincere, we know everything about you! Your sincerity will bring forgiveness by the Party and the Nation!" Hieu wrote down a kind of background: 1st Infantry Division (US), 20th Engineer Brigade (US), Kontum sector. He claimed to be only a S-4 (supply) interpreter. Hieu realized the implications were he to say he had been an IPW (Interrogation of Prisoners of War) or Intelligence interpreter, the latter being his function with Cpt. Montgomery.

At some point, the communist regime declared that "...all NCO interpreters are accused of being US Imperialist collaborators." So, three weeks after being released from his three days of re-education camp, at 8 pm in the evening, police came to arrest him at his father's home in Saigon. They told his father, "It won't be long for him, just a little re-education in order to be a good socialist citizen later." Previously, on April 30, 1975, his father had wisely burned all photos that Hieu had collected during his service with the Americans and other assignments for fear they might be used against him. Once in camp, Hieu had no idea how long he would stay! It turned out to be seven months!

During this second incarceration, the French

Consulate in Saigon sent out a communique about “half-French and ex-French citizens” being eligible for citizenship. Hieu’s wife began the paperwork to accomplish this and move to France, since she was of French descent. His father began to work on his freedom as well, and had to sell many of his possessions to raise sufficient money. The money was not for the French; but to bribe the other side. As Hieu later said, “It was beaucoup et beaucoup...money works.” After seven months, Hieu finally was released, and began to prepare for his departure.

Hieu and his family finally arrived in France on 17 September 1977. His family was placed under



Nguyen Minh Hieu with formula one racer

the protection of the High Committee for Refugees. On 13 December 1977, he was hired by Michelin and began working as an interpreter for his fellow Vietnamese compatriots who did not speak French, and also for American Michelin employees from the plant in Greenville, South Carolina. Other assignments and positions came over the years including becoming an R&D specialist for formula one tires.

Hieu became a naturalized French citizen on 14 August 1986, and retired from Michelin on August 14, 2011. He and his wife continue to live in Clermont-Ferrand, France, where the headquarters of the Michelin corporation is located.

Hieu and his wife, Lan, had two more children: Catherine and Richard. His last son being named after Cpt. Richard Montgomery. This son now must struggle with the additional title, of Junior!

Hieu’s son, Richard, now is a police officer, working in Paris, and has previously served in the French Gendarmerie Nationale, and was deployed to Libya last year to protect the French Embassy there. No doubt, another good man!

Hieu’s youngest son, Richard



PART VI-Reconnection

On July 21, 2012, Richard Montgomery, Lieutenant Colonel, US Army, retired, and living in Tucson, Arizona, received an e-mail from France. It was from Hieu. He had found a letter Montgomery had written to a web site: www.thebattleofkontum.com. The web site, run by retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel, Jack Heslin, focuses on the Easter Offensive of 1972, in Kontum. Heslin, a helicopter pilot flew out of Pleiku during that time. Hieu’s wife found the site, and showed it to her husband. They knew it had to be the American captain that Hieu had worked with during his time in Kontum. In the chaos after Montgomery left Kontum, Hieu had lost the American’s address, but never gave up looking for him.

Since, the two men have talked on the phone, e-mailed frequently, and exchanged pictures. There will be hours of talking about their shared experiences. It is their goal to meet, face-to-face, in the near future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I must thank Nguyen Minh Hieu for his patience and persistent long search to reconnect with me. It has been a most happy and memorable event for both of us in these later years, and it would not have come about without the genius of LTC Jack Heslin and his wonderful web site (www.thebattleofkontum.com) that endeavors to preserve for all that time long ago so deeply imprinted on the memories of those who were there.

I would equally like to thank LTC Thomas P. McKenna for his meticulous and most readable history of our shared experience, *Kontum – The Battle to Save South Viet Nam*, by Thomas P. McKenna, published by the University of Kentucky Press, 2011. His permission to use his most perfect prologue to my article, and his subsequent encouragement will always be appreciated and remembered.

Also, a thank you to Dale Andrade for his inspirational book, *America's Last Vietnam Battle – Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive*, University Press of Kansas, 1995, 2001.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard L. Montgomery was born in Kansas City in 1942, graduated from William Jewell College (Liberty, Missouri) in 1964 with a BA in History. He also has a Master's degree from Boston University, and is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He enlisted in the US Army as a private in October 1964, attended Officer Candidate School and Airborne training at Fort Benning Georgia, and was commissioned as an infantry second lieutenant in 1965. He retired from the US Army in 1989 as a Lieutenant Colonel. He now resides in Tucson, Arizona.