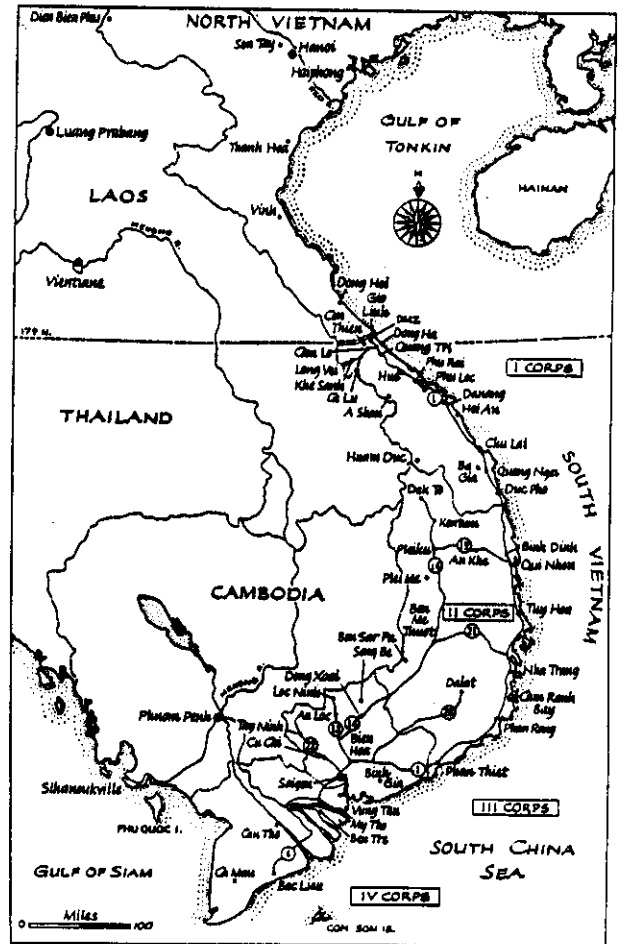


# KONTUM: BATTLE FOR THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

30 March - 10 June 1972

HQ PACAF  
Directorate of Operations Analysis  
CHECO/CORONA Harvest Division

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**REPORT**



Southeast Asia, showing Tactical Zones for I, II, III, and IV Corps

Prepared by: Capt. Peter A.W. Liebchen  
Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC

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DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
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## PROJECT CHECO REPORTS

The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in USAF airpower being employed to meet a multitude of requirements. These varied applications have involved the full spectrum of USAF aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, operational data and experiences have accumulated which should be collected, documented, and analyzed for current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

Fortunately, the value of collecting and documenting our SEA experiences was recognized at an early date. In 1962, Hq USAF directed CINCPACAF to establish an activity which would provide timely and analytical studies of USAF combat operations in SEA and would be primarily responsive to Air Staff requirements and direction.

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations, was established to meet the Air Staff directive. Based on the policy guidance of the Office of Air Force History and managed by Hq PACAF, with elements in Southeast Asia, Project CHECO provides a scholarly "on-going" historical examination, documentation, and reporting on USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in PACOM. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and examination which is being accomplished. It is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in PACOM when used in proper context. The reader must view the study in relation to the events and circumstances at the time of its preparation--recognizing that it was prepared on a contemporary basis which restricted perspective and that the author's research was limited to records available within his local headquarters area.

*Robert E. Hiller*

ROBERT E. HILLER  
Chief, Operations Analysis  
DCS/Plans and Operations

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Captain Liebchen received his commission in the USAF upon graduation from Officer Training School at Lackland AFB, Texas, in December 1967. He had completed a Master's Degree in Modern European History at Rutgers University prior to entering the Air Force. Since that time he has served as an Administrative Officer, a Squadron Commander and as Chief of the Language Training Branch at Chanute AFB, Illinois. Immediately before becoming a CHECO writer, Captain Liebchen was an Instructor in German at the United States Air Force Academy. He plans to return there upon the completion of his SEAsia assignment.

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## FOREWORD

Kontum: Battle for the Central Highlands is one of a series of Project CHECO reports on the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) 1972 Offensive. Predicted by most observers as the "logical" focal point of any new enemy offensive, action in the Central Highlands of Military Region II (MR II) remained disquietingly inconclusive until mid-May. While major battles at Quang Tri in MR I and at An Loc in MR III captured most of the headlines, a series of engagements at Tan Canh/Dak To and the smaller Fire Support Bases (FSBs) along "Rocket Ridge" set the scene for the major attacks on Kontum City of 14 and 24 May 1972.

This report focuses primarily on the action in Kontum and Pleiku provinces, although significant events in other areas of MR II are mentioned. The almost immediate loss of Tam Quan, Hoai Nhon and Hoaian districts in the east coast province of Binh Dinh rendered the defense of the Central Highlands extremely critical since the loss of Kontum and Pleiku would, in effect, have split South Vietnam in two.

The role of United States and South Vietnamese airpower in preventing defeat in the Central Highlands is the dominant theme of this report. In many cases, on-the-scene interviews with participants in the battles form the basis for personal assessments of the key role airpower played in the defense of Kontum City; however, tables and charts of sorties flown and Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) are provided in an appendix.

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I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to all II DASC personnel for their aid in the preparation of this report. Special appreciation is reserved for Colonel Donald B. Swenholt, Major General Alton D. Slay's\* personal representative at II DASC (Direct Air Support Center) during the battles for Kontum City. The bulk of Chapter III is based on Colonel Swenholt's on-the-scene reports.

\*Former Director of Operations, Headquarters 7th Air Force.

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CHAPTER I  
BACKGROUND TO INVASION

Intelligence Estimates: The Central Highlands As The Primary Target\*

Late in 1971, Allied intelligence officials became increasingly aware of and concerned about stepped-up NVA activity in the tri-border area near South Vietnam's Central Highlands. All-source intelligence indications in Base Area 609 (that area on which Cambodia, Laos and the Republic of Vietnam [RVN] all border) caused some analysts to speculate that the area was in danger of sinking from its saturation with enemy supplies and equipment. <sup>1/</sup>

The USAF air interdiction campaign, labeled COMMANDO HUNT VII, began early in November 1971. It attempted to minimize the flow of supplies from North Vietnam (NVN) through the Laotian panhandle into South Vietnam, but decreased strike sorties (due to the U.S. drawdown) coupled with the increasing diversity of the enemy road network weakened the effort. The Viet Cong (VC)-designated B-3 front (consisting primarily of Kontum and Pleiku provinces), received many of the benefits of the enemy's stockpiling efforts.

Early in 1972 U.S. officials publicly revealed that the 320th NVA Division, in concert with the 2d NVA Division, had infiltrated to the B-3

\*Unless otherwise noted, material for this chapter comes from the CHECO report U.S. Air Deployments In Response to the NVA 1972 Offensive. Chapter II entitled "Intelligence Estimates and Military Situation," based on classified and unclassified sources, was particularly helpful.

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Front from Laos. This focused attention on the Central Highlands, where the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces were weakest, the population sparse, and government control tenuous. Neither the 22d nor the 23d ARVN Divisions was highly regarded," and both "showed a marked reluctance to mount long-range patrols outside their artillery fans."<sup>2/</sup>

On 15 January 1972 heavy B-52 raids, averaging over nine sorties per day, began concentrating in the B-3 Front area, where some 30-50,000 NVA troops were believed to be concentrating. The dynamic John Paul Vann, Senior U.S. Advisor in MR II, expected any new enemy offensive to hit hardest in Kontum province with Dak To and Ben Het as major targets. He was not too worried about demonstrated ARVN weaknesses such as the inadequate command and control lines; nor did he seem too concerned about serious NVA attempts to take Pleiku or Kontum. Vann felt that any attack would be halted by massive air and artillery power rather than ARVN because, "I'm enough of a realist that I'm not going to ask the ARVN to do what they won't do." He further predicted that the enemy was prepared to lose one fifth of the approximately 50,000 troops reportedly ready to attack in MR I and MR II.

Most estimates predicted the start of the offensive during Tet, the lunar New Year holiday, which fell on 14 February. Although increased enemy activity was noted in many regions, no unanimity existed in the interpretation of these moves. Some felt the offensive had already begun. Others saw the probes as a prelude to a major offensive due between July and September and timed to coincide with the U.S. presidential campaign.

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Still others predicted March or April based on captured NVA documents and prisoner of war (POW) interrogations. Vann, who still maintained that the initial blow would be struck in MR II, had settled initially on 21 February as the start of the offensive; but later changed this to late March. On 27 March he predicted the offensive would begin within seven days. Events were to prove him correct.<sup>3/</sup>

#### The Surprises: Tanks and Conventional Tactics

The NVA use of tanks in MR II was anticipated, but the volume and diversity of types encountered was not. In addition to the Soviet-built T-54 and its variants, the offensive marked the appearance of the PT-76 (a light amphibious tank) and the ZSU-57/2 (equipped with twin 57mm antiaircraft artillery (AAA) and target-acquisition radar). A later estimate stated that approximately 400 enemy tanks were in-place in MR II at the beginning of the offensive. While intelligence experts were aware that tanks were present, obtaining confirmed photo reconnaissance of them in any quantity proved an elusive goal. Nevertheless agent and occasionally Forward Air Controller (FAC) reports noted unusual activity and included occasional references to tanks. A USAF FAC who flew in the tri-border region during early 1972 stated that<sup>4/</sup>

*we noticed a lot of activity on the trails. They were building new roads; a lot of truck traffic in Laos and Cambodia. They were constructing storage areas, but we could never get any air to put on them. . . . For 6 months before the current offensive we worked almost exclusively with VNAF. We'd get one or two U.S. frags per day into MR II; then the offensive started and we got swarms of it that we couldn't use.*

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Another Covey FAC flying the same region during the above period contended that<sup>5/</sup>

*at the time most of the air assets were going further up north - on the trail. We just did not have the air assets available to us. . . . We'd report our sightings to our intel shop. Some of the targets were struck, but quite a bit of it did get through for lack of air resources.*

The latter FAC added that he personally sighted six tanks, but they were outside his area of operations (AO), and the Rules of Engagement (ROE) prevented his calling strikes on them. He noted that<sup>6/</sup>

*we had O-2's stationed at Pleiku and their specific task was flying the tri-border area. There was quite a bit of evidence of troop buildups, moving in equipment and supplies by truck, and tank escorts for the trucks. . . . We saw evidence of it coming down the trail, and where the Laos/Cambodian border is, there's a fork in the trail - one going to Cambodia and one going to South Vietnam. We noticed several new roads that used to be paths, with heavy tank and truck traffic.*

While reduced U.S. air assets might be a partial explanation for the limited detection and destruction of enemy tanks, geography proved to be the greatest liability in detecting tank concentration. Much of the sophisticated and extensive road network carved out by the enemy had been constructed in areas impenetrable from the air. One USAF officer at II Direct Air Support Center (DASC) in Pleiku noted a<sup>7/</sup>

*large area northeast of us here. . . . it's all triple canopy. That's the theory of how the enemy infiltrated, rather than coming down through Ben*

*Het and that area in the western approaches. He went from Cambodia/Laos well north of Kontum into that triple canopy stuff, and worked his way down to the northeast. We fly over it days, but we can't see anything. The only way is to put people in it on the ground to see what's going on.*

In addition to aerial reconnaissance, intelligence data and ARVN patrols confirmed the enemy buildup in MR II. An ARVN airborne brigade added to the 22d and 23d Divisions led to more aggressive patrols from FSB's Five and Six resulting in almost daily contacts with the enemy. Signs, such as VC/NVA logistics and troop movements, pointed to MR II and the Central Highlands as the major enemy objective.<sup>8/</sup> The crack NVA 320th Division, with its subordinate 48th, 52nd and 64th regiments, joined the 2d Division and the indigenous VC units to pose a threat to the area. On the east coast of MR II, particularly in Binh Dinh province, the NVA 3d Division bolstered the local VC units.<sup>9/</sup> The size and composition of enemy divisions varied with the part of the country and the specific area in which they operated. The NVA 320th Division had an estimated 6,875 soldiers before the heavy contact at Kontum; other divisions ran higher, while some had as few as 4,500.<sup>10/</sup>

The estimated enemy strength in the Central Highlands was put at some 20,000 men organized into:<sup>11/</sup>

- |  |                                 |
|--|---------------------------------|
| 1 Corps (B-3 Front)  | 13 Artillery Bn's (105/85mm)    |
| 2 Infantry Division Headquarters (HQs) - NVA 320th and 2nd Divisions | 1 Bn 130mm                      |
| 8 Infantry Regiment (Reg) HQ's                                       | 1 Bn 122/107 rockets            |
| 29 Infantry Battalion (Bn) HQ's                                      | 3 Bn 82, 120, 160mm mortars     |
| 2 Tank Bn's (PT-76, T-54)  | 3 Bn 12.7, 14.5, 37mm AAA       |
| 1 Artillery Reg. HQ's  | 4 Bn 57/75mm recoilless rifles. |

The scale and composition of the enemy build-up clearly indicated that any new offensive would be primarily an NVA operation, conducted along the lines of classical and conventional warfare. The unprecedented NVA invasion of late March gave final proof to the RVN claim that the rebellion in the south was not indigenous, as claimed by the Viet Cong and their allies; but deliberately fomented, controlled and executed by North Vietnam.<sup>12/</sup>



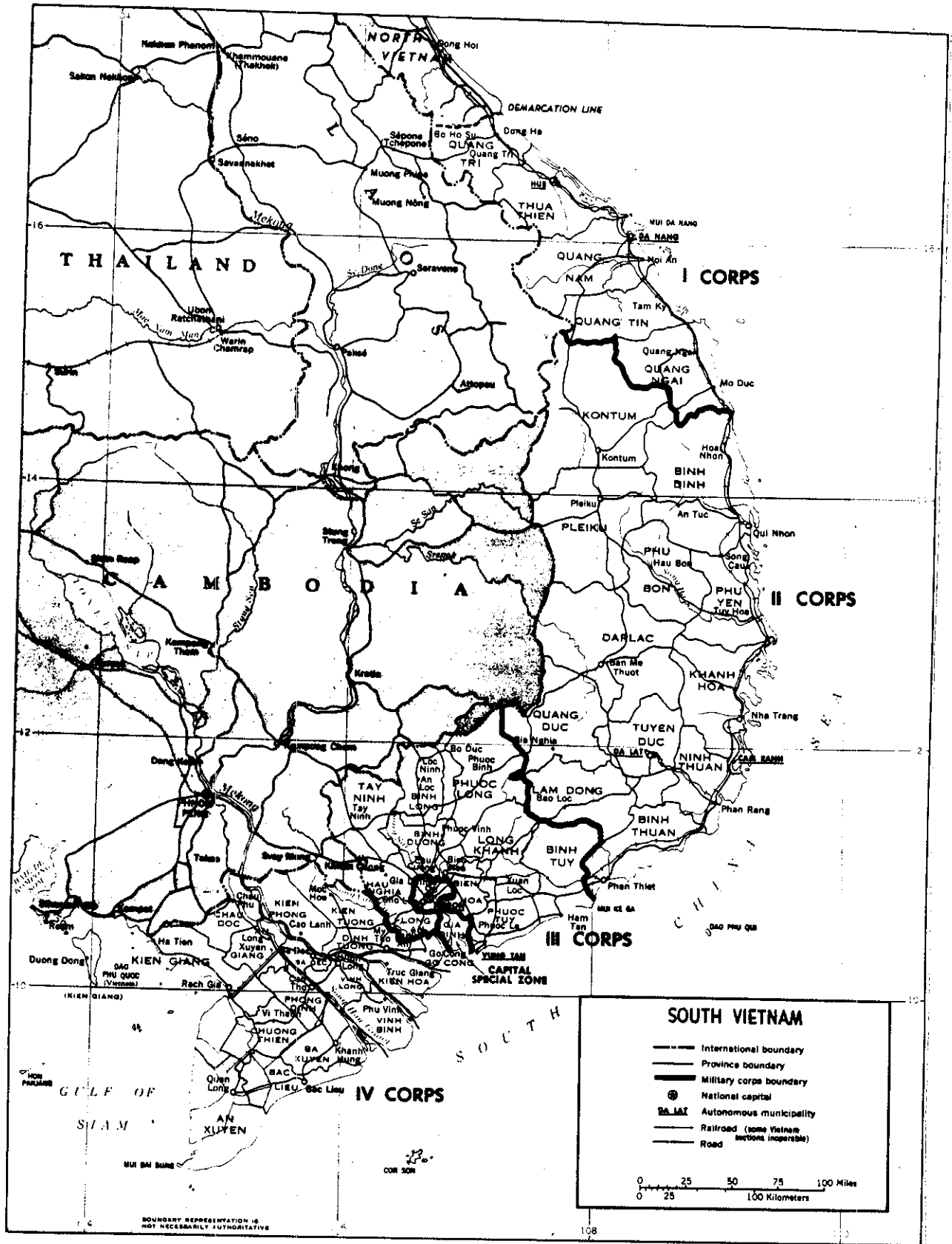


FIGURE 1  
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## CHAPTER II

### THE OFFENSIVE BEGINS: EARLY NVA SUCCESSES

#### The Enemy Probes the Highlands

Occasional ARVN contacts with the enemy increased in number and intensity as March began. VNAF and USAF aircraft, operating in what was once considered a permissive environment, noted a definite increase in AAA activity, especially in north-western Kontum province. A U.S. Army advisor to the VNAF helicopter force states that for his unit the offensive "started on March 22nd when he had 11 ships damaged in one day."<sup>13/</sup> In general terms, however, no all-out attack had as yet been unleashed. There were several reasons why the general offensive did not strike the Central Highlands first. Although the enemy had established lines of communication (LOC) in the area, seasoned MR II analysts felt that "the NVA have had a great deal of difficulty coordinating, and it didn't appear as if they had everything set up, ready to go."<sup>14/</sup> Added to possible internal problems, B-52 strikes and the ARVN harassed the enemy. A visual reconnaissance (VR) of a B-52 strike area on 23 March indicated that a probable enemy command post (CP) area had been hit, and that a forward element of the B-3 front had probably been the victim of the giant bombers.<sup>15/</sup>

On 28 March fighting broke out when<sup>16/</sup>

*the enemy locked in combat with 23rd Ranger Bn . . . 20 kms north of Kontum City. The rangers fought well, linked up with another ranger unit on the 29th after fighting every step of the way, often hand to hand.*

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The extraction of wounded rangers was marked by professionalism and extreme bravery on the part of senior VNAF officers, in particular wing and squadron commanders, who flew repeatedly into heavy enemy fire. The CO of the 235th Squadron continued flying support despite painfully severe face wounds caused by shattered plexiglass incurred from heavy ground fire. Documents and prisoners confirmed that the two day donnybrook with the rangers had cost the B-3 Front's 28th Regiment 338 KIA, a casualty figure which was only a harbinger of things to come. Any suspicion that these were not NVA regulars was dispelled by their appearance, which saw young Vietnamese dressed smartly in green and khaki uniforms. Ranger losses were set at 33 KIA and 57 WIA.

Heavy attacks by fire (ABFs) on the Fire Support Bases lining the "Rocket Ridge" area west of Kontum City and southwest of Tan Canh began on 30 March at the same time enemy activity began in MR I at Quang Tri and MR III at Lac Long. <sup>17/</sup> By 1 April, sporadic contacts with the enemy had occurred as far south as 19 km WSW of Kontum City, where ARVN Ranger elements engaged an estimated platoon at 1125H. The clashes along Rocket Ridge continued, and by 2 April some 12 ABF's had occurred at eight of the 10 FSBs stretching from Dak To to Kontum City. <sup>18/</sup> Contacts near FSB Charlie (ZB013097) lasted for five hours, and involved elements of the NVA 320th Division. On 3 April, a FSB 20 KM south of Dak To reported enemy losses as 353 Killed in Action (KIA) with 200 of that number Killed by Air (KBA), primarily VNAF tactical air (TACAIR) and U.S. helicopter gunships. <sup>19/</sup> Pleiku Air Base received an ABF that same day, as did FSB 421.

The 3 April attack on Phung Hoang airfield,\* executed by sappers from the D-10 Sapper Bn of the 2d NVA Division, added a new element to the battle

\*Near Dak To.

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and left no doubt that the NVA considered the highlands a major objective.<sup>20/</sup> Prisoners captured during this assault stated that the attacks on the B-3 front were designed to seize Kontum Province as a base for the NVA 2d Division. The NVA 320th Division was to attack Kontum City. Further POW statements alleged that the VC/NVA campaign in the highlands was directed by Hanoi's General Giap, who promised 300 tanks for the B-3 front.<sup>21/</sup>

Probing attacks continued for the next several days, primarily in the Rocket Ridge area. Dak To I was fired on, and Dak To airfield was hit by sappers, who destroyed a fuel bladder. Aircraft reported heavy AAA fire north of Dak To, and two ARVN tanks were destroyed by recoilless rifle fire one kilometer west of the town.<sup>22/</sup> On 5 April, FSB Zulu was hit by a light ground probe, and some 15 incidents were reported in Kontum Province. Pleiku Province reported some three ABFs on that day, one of which consisted of a rocket attack on MR II HQ in Pleiku City. Of the five 122mm rockets launched against this target, four were duds and the fifth caused no damage. The ARVN military command now expected large-scale enemy attacks to come soon, particularly in the areas north of Kontum City and Dak To. Other probable targets were along Highway QL14 between Kontum and Pleiku cities, and on the lifeline road between Kontum City and Tan Canh/Dak To. In the eastern province of Binh Dinh, the enemy made rapid strides to consolidate his holdings in the three northern districts, and threatened to cut Highway 19, a vital link between Qui Nhon and Pleiku cities.<sup>23/</sup> On 6 April, with a relative lull in enemy activity throughout Kontum Province, ARVN units launched a counter-offensive on enemy

positions in the Dak To area. Such actions may have been just what the enemy desired, since documents captured shortly thereafter indicated that the NVA 320th Division was regrouping and waiting for ARVN troops to make large-scale commitments away from the relative safety of their base camps. <sup>24/</sup>

On 6 April the enemy, by attacking Pleiku airfield with 5x122mm rocket fire, renewed their offensive effort. At 0200H on 7 April FSB Mike, located 4 km from Vo Dinh in Kontum Province, reported a sapper attack. FSB Metro (ZB115045) repulsed an attack with the aid of VNAF AC-47 gunships, and Popular Force (PF) elements were harassed on Highways 14 and 19. The latter action resulted in explosives damage to bridge #29 on Route 19 (BR185520). On Route 14, ARVN Forces captured four 12.7mm AAA weapons and two 75mm recoilless rifles. <sup>25/</sup>

#### Air Keeps the Enemy Off-Balance

The record of the first week of the offensive showed that the airpower upset the enemy's equilibrium and blunted the probing efforts. For example, heavy enemy fire from the surrounding high ground kept Dak To airfield closed until 11 April, when a B-52 strike forced elements of the NVA 2d Division to retrench. The airfield quickly reopened. <sup>26/</sup> Friendly patrols found many groups of enemy KBA. For example, it was reported on 8 April that: <sup>27/</sup>

*In Kontum Province yesterday, ARVN elements on an ARC LIGHT BDA mission found 92 enemy KBA and 100 bunkers destroyed within 4 km of ZA225980 N W of Kontum City.*

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and:

*ARVN elements on a sweep operation 24 km N W of Kontum City (at ZB049038) discovered 80 enemy bodies killed by previous artillery and TACAIR strikes.*

A Regional Force (RF) patrol reported 92 KBA at ZA220020 near Kontum City, and a Controlled American Source (CAS) Field Comment summarized the effect air had on the invaders by adding: "Indications continue that massive U.S. air attacks are keeping the enemy off-balance on the B-3 Front."<sup>28/</sup>

The B-52 ARC LIGHT strikes proved especially potent in devastating enemy troop and supply concentrations. Many POWs stated that "the bombings . . . were sources of great demoralization among the (enemy) troops."<sup>29/</sup>

#### The Attacks Increase and Diversify

At 0050H on 9 April, sappers, possibly from the 407th VC Local Force, attacked the main U.S. housing and ammunition storage area at Cam Ranh Bay. Portions of the ammunition dumps were lost, but far worse was the loss of four Americans KIA and 20 U.S. personnel wounded, six seriously. The enemy had widened his AO to include the south eastern coastal region of MR II.<sup>30/</sup>

In the highlands, ARVN elements clashed several times with units of the 2d NVA Division in the area north of Route 512, within 6 km of Dak To II. Sweeping 14 km north of Tan Canh, they found some 62 enemy KBA. Four destroyed enemy bunkers with 45 bodies were found 25 km northwest of

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Kontum City, while a complex of 100 destroyed bunkers with 92 KBA was discovered 10 km north of the city.<sup>31/</sup>

The next few days saw clashes at the FSBs and outposts both north and south of Kontum City. Kontum City received 12X122mm on 9 April with little damage reported, and Dak To airfield was hit by a series of 82mm mortars. ARVN units continued to clash with the enemy throughout Kontum and Pleiku Provinces.<sup>32/</sup>

On 11/12 April FSB Charlie came under heavy attack, but the ARVN 11th Airborne Bn, aided by the timely arrival of TACAIR, repelled the enemy with 200 KIA.<sup>33/</sup> This incident signalled the beginning of a coordinated enemy effort, and artillery and ground attacks occurred in many different locations. The Ben Het Ranger Camp west of Dak To was attacked as were FSB's Six, Zulu, and Yankee (YB991130). The enemy employed 130mm artillery for the first time in the campaign in the attack on FSB Yankee.<sup>34/</sup>

In the Eastern sector of MR II, clashes occurred at the An Khe pass on QL19. Here ARVN and Republic of Korea (ROK) forces clashed with two enemy battalions attempting to interdict the vital supply route between Qui Nhon and Pleiku cities. During the period 12/13 April Qui Nhon City received a ground and sapper attack and was cut off from QL 1: 7x122mm rockets hit Cam Ranh Bay, and 4x107mm rounds hit Nha Trang.<sup>35/</sup>

One of the enemy's objectives seemed to center on the interdiction of major road arteries from the coast to the Central Highlands, and between

Pleiku and Kontum cities, to deny the use of these routes for ARVN's resupply, replacement and redeployment.

Loss of FSB Charlie

The intensity of the action in the highlands increased daily. Heavy contacts between ARVN and the enemy took place north of Phung Hoang Air Base. Kontum City airport was rocketed, and on 14/15 April FSB Charlie was abandoned by its defenders, who had not been supplied in four days.<sup>36/</sup> The withdrawal by the ARVN airborne unit defenders was orderly, and had cost the NVA 48th Regiment so dearly that it was forced to move out of the line to refit and replace heavy losses.<sup>37/</sup> In contrast to the ignominious defeat yet to come at Tan Canh/Dak To, the ARVN Rangers acquitted themselves admirably. In a contemporary newspaper interview a U.S. Army FAC stated that<sup>38/</sup>

*both sides showed a lot of guts. . . . The people on Charlie were far outnumbered, but they held on. . . . They never did break. They made the reds take bunker by bunker. They just did not give up and run. And the NVA, even though they lost as many as 800 kept coming. Both sides showed a lot of guts. . . . Wave after wave of TACAIR pounded them. . . . Cobras, F-4's, A-7, A-37 . . . even after ARVN soldiers had evacuated the base camp. Air strikes made the base and road adjacent to it a wasteland. If what they wanted was an infiltration route, they've got it, but if they want the ridge northwest of Kontum the big stuff is yet to come, and if they try to hit another of those base camps, it'll take them a long time to regroup afterwards.*



ARVN forces and air strikes continued to take their toll of the enemy. POWs stated that some of their battalions had lost up to one third of their manpower on the infiltration route from NVN. Most of this personnel attrition was ascribed to air strikes.<sup>39/</sup>

The continuing closure of QL19 from Qui Nhon to Pleiku cities began to cause supply problems in the Central Highlands. Lt General Dzu, ARVN Commander of MR II, restricted the expenditure of artillery ammunition in Kontum Province. Soon other supplies would reach critical proportions. Rice reserves in Kontum City had fallen from 700 to 19 tons by 19 April.<sup>40/</sup>

Enemy Objectives

Enemy objectives were not limited to the purely military aims of interdiction but included political and psychological goals as well. By engagement of the usually inferior PF/RF militia units the enemy hoped to weaken, discredit, and destroy the concepts of Vietnamization and Pacification. This, coupled with the military victories he hoped to achieve, would be a clear signal to the Americans at the Paris talks to abandon RVN and agree to terms. Or so the enemy hoped.

The immediate enemy objectives in the highlands were best summarized by a POW from the 400th Sapper Regiment, B-3 Front, who claimed that Phase I of the campaign "Truong Song Chuyen Minh" (The Western Mountains Rise Up) was designed to destroy ARVN military bases, stores, and equipment in the Tan Canh area, as well as to open routes for enemy movement. This phase was to last from February through April. Phase II envisioned the occupation

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of Ben Het, Dak To, Tan Canh FSB Six, and key points along Route 14 preparatory to an attack on Kontum City.<sup>41/</sup>

### The Enemy Offensive Continues

Scattered incidents occurred in Pleiku and Kontum Provinces for several days after the fall of FSB Charlie. In Binh Dinh Province ROK and ARVN units, supported by U.S. and VNAF air, attempted to reopen the An Khe pass, but it remained closed to friendly traffic. Tam Quan and Hoai An district capitals in this east coast province fell to the enemy by 20 April.

Increased sensor-detected logistics activity in Base Area 609 signaled major enemy moves in the Central Highlands. A heavy ABF of 300-400 mixed rounds pounded the Dak Pek Ranger Camp on 19/20 April. Enemy losses during subsequent ground attack were put at 130 KIA to four friendlies KIA.<sup>42/</sup> Stinger 12, an AC-119 gunship supporting friendlies during the attack on this camp, noted in the Gunship Operational Summary that:<sup>43/</sup>

*ASAP launch, worked with Uranium 99, who said Vietnamese Commander in target area at Dak Pek estimated between 60 to 80 VC casualties KBA.*

The following day ABFs occurred at FSB's Bravo, Delta, Hotel and Yankee.<sup>44/</sup> A wartime twist of fate felled the enemy, when

*one enemy force opened up on the nearby camps of Bravo and Hotel and fifteen minutes later B-52 strikes rained down on them. The boxes had been preplanned for that day, but the almost unbelievable timing cost the enemy his initiative. All firing stopped abruptly after the air strikes.*

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Dak Pek Ranger Camp continued under fire, as did the FSBs and Dak To. Stingers (AC-119s) and Spectres (AC-130s) supporting friendlies in these actions reported heavy AAA in the area. Such reports coincided with enemy plans as gleaned from prisoner interrogations. A U.S. intelligence source reported that <sup>45/</sup>

*two NVA POWs captured in Kontum Province state that the NVA 2nd Division plans an attack on Hill 923, south of Dak To, to acquire high ground for the AAA site to protect 4 Bn of tanks and artillery arriving from Laos. Latter are to join the 2nd Division in a major assault on Tan Canh, 3 km west of Dak To. This attack is designed to complement attacks by the 320th NVA division along Rocket Ridge (this may have begun 21 April with the action at FSB Delta). NVA effort to take Hill 923 delayed on 20 April by word that tanks and artillery arrivals behind schedule. POWs speculate 24/25 will see beginning of action.*

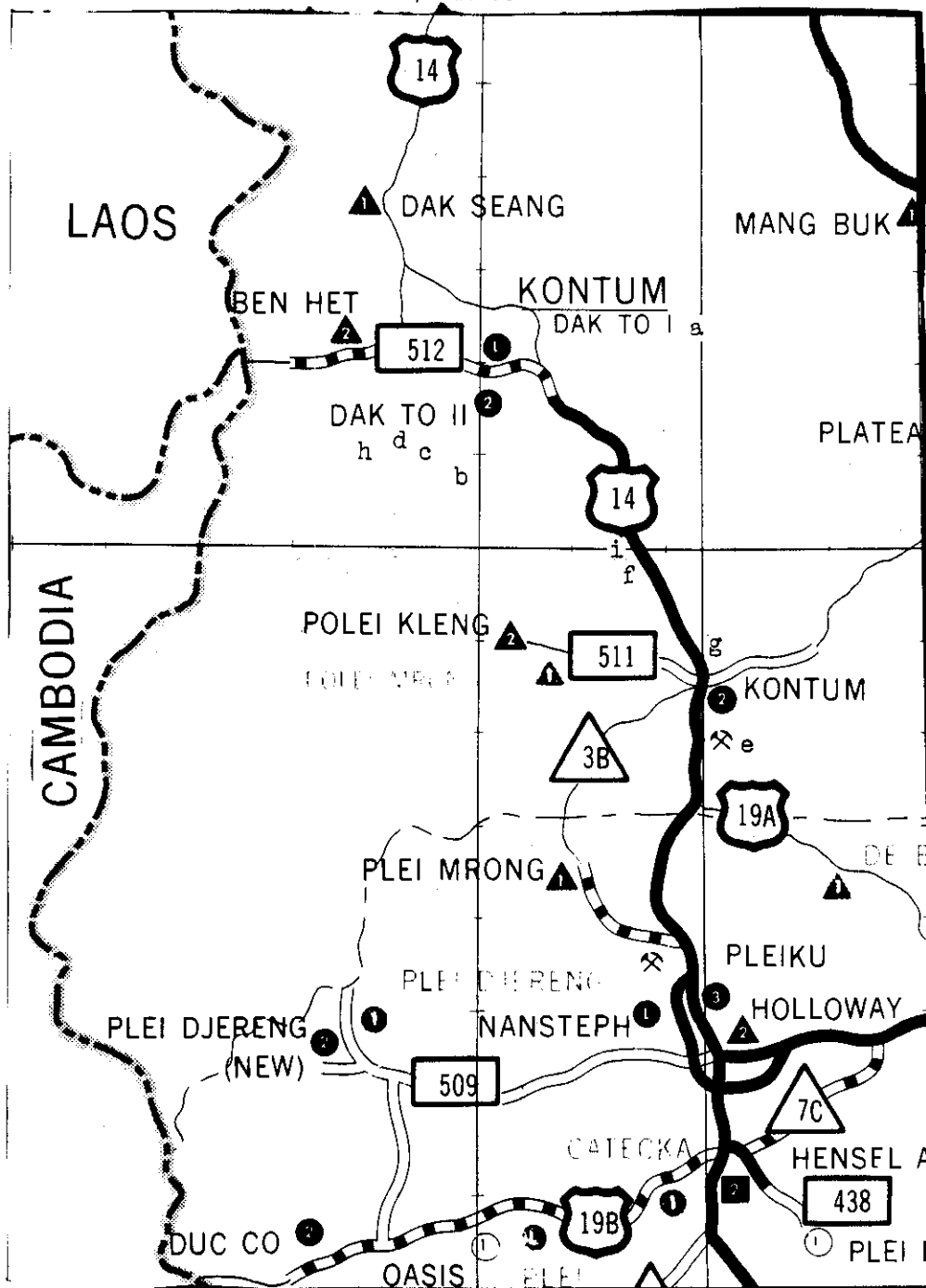
On 21 April FSB Delta received a heavy mortar and artillery barrage; this was followed by a ground attack supported by three tanks. The defenders withdrew 500 meters to FSB Delta South. <sup>46/</sup> Spectre 08 reported that Stinger 02 was giving support to the defenders as they withdrew south. Spectre 08 further reported that "we have possible tanks 200 meters south of the fire base. Open fire and score 1 hit." <sup>47/</sup> All three tanks were knocked out by defenders before they withdrew. <sup>48/</sup>

#### Tanks at Tan Canh/Dak To

Enemy activity begun on the morning of 23 April was designed to destroy Tan Canh, the HQ of the ARVN 22d Division. The enemy launched artillery, mortar and sapper attacks; his tanks were reported in the vicinity of Dak To, north of Phung Hoang airport and east of FSB Delta. The enemy also

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## BATTLE FOR TAN CANH/DAK TO



Scale 1:750,000

10 5 0 10

10 5 0 10 20

10 5 0 10

10 5 0 10

10 5 0 10

- a. Tan Canh
- b. Rocket Ridge
- c. FSB 5
- d. FSB 6
- e. "Rockpile"
- f. Vo Dinh
- g. FSB November
- i. FSB Charlie
- j. FSB Delta South

FIGURE 2

# UNCLASSIFIED

# UNCLASSIFIED

## II MR MAJOR ROAD NET & AIRFIELDS

(DIRECTORY OF ROADS AND AIRFIELDS ON REVERSE SIDE)

**AIRFIELDS**

ABANDONED	CLOSED	OPEN
C-130	⊠	●
C-123	⊞	▲
C-7A	△	⬢
LIGHT AIRCRAFT	⊙	⦿
MAJOR HELIPORT	⊕	⦿

NOTE: Numbers within airport classification symbols denote the correct airfield location. See MACV Directive 115.9 for criteria.

**ROAD CLASSIFICATIONS**

CENCOM STANDARD ROAD

CLASS 31 ROAD

CLASS 18 ROAD

CLASS 3 ROAD

STATUS OF ROAD NOT KNOWN OR CLOSED

NATIONAL ROUTES (01)

INTERPROVINCIAL ROUTES (1U)

PROVINCIAL ROUTES (7L)

SUPPLEMENTARY ROUTES (RT)

COMMUNAL ROUTES (ML)

**OTHER FEATURES**

INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY

PROVINCE BOUNDARY

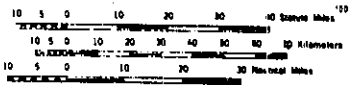
PROVINCE NAME

RAILROADS

QUARRY SITES FOR MACV LOG

INACTIVE QUARRY SITES

NOTE: For detailed information and construction contract ERAC (Logans 3000, 400 5000)



2 MAY 71

BASE COURSE COMPLETED  
SUB-GRADE PREPARATION

UNCLASSIFIED BY 657H ENGR CO (TOPG) (COMB) 5-71

COMPILED BY IFFORCEV ENGINEER SECTION  
DRAFTED BY 64TH ENGR CO (TOPG) (COMB) 5-71  
AVAILABLE AT THE GSA BOOKS OR MAP DEPT  
PRINTED BY 657H ENGR CO (TOPG) (COMB) 5-71

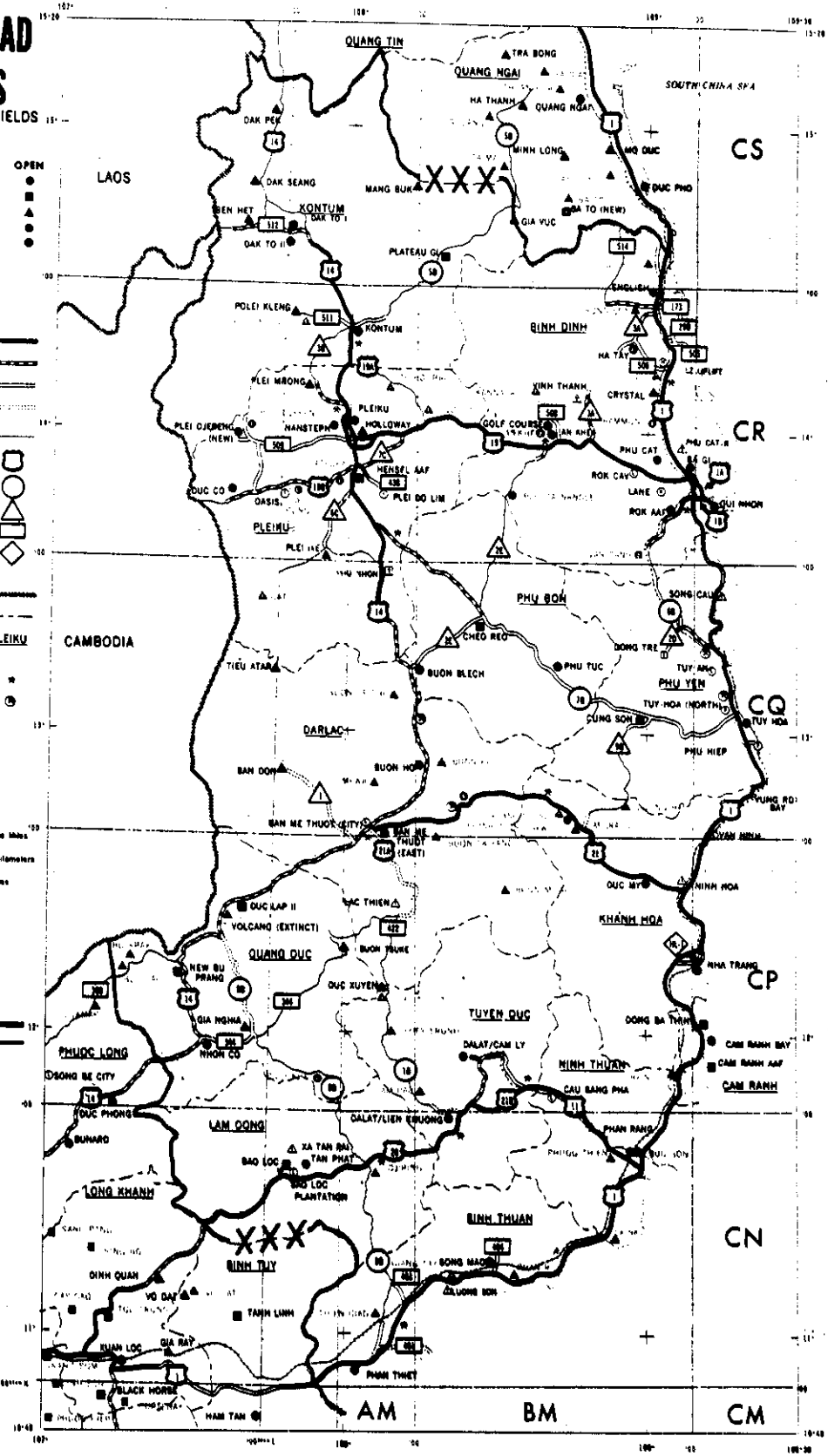


FIGURE 3  
**UNCLASSIFIED**

introduced his own wire-guided missiles (WGMs) and destroyed an ARVN M-41 tank with one at the gate of Tan Canh. Six more WGMs hit the 22d Division Forward Tactical Operations Center (TOC) wounding 50, including two U.S. advisors. FACs working in the area confirmed the presence of one 122mm and two 130mm guns.<sup>49/</sup> Air support to the Tan Canh/Dak To region rapidly increased when a tactical emergency (TAC-E) was declared in the area.<sup>50/</sup> Nevertheless the situation continued to deteriorate when enemy forces cut QL14 in three places above Dak To and south of Tan Canh. Route 14 was also cut south of Kontum City at the Chu Pao Pass, which became known as the "Rockpile." The Tan Canh/Dak To area was now effectively cut from Kontum City, and Kontum City was isolated from Pleiku City.<sup>51/</sup>

Now positive sightings of tanks and other vehicles increased in the Tan Canh area. At 1930H, 23 April 1972, Second Regional Assistance Group (SRAG) TOC reported ABFs at Tan Canh, FSB Delta South, FSB 41, Polei Kleng, FSB 5, and Vo Dinh. Dak To District HQ reported up to 30 vehicles moving south. By 2310H a 22d Division forward element identified the vehicles as tanks moving south on QL14 toward Tan Canh;<sup>52/</sup> a PAVE AEGIS (105mm howitzer equipped) Spectre gunship, on-station and engaging the tanks, reported a positive 10 tanks identified, and a probable 20-22 vehicle total. A subsequent report credited the Spectre (probably Spectre 19) with taking the tanks under fire; reportedly destroying one and damaging four.<sup>53/</sup>

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Spectre 11, piloted by Captain Russel T. Olson, was fragged to Tan Canh/Dak To on a fire support mission the same evening. Arriving in the beleaguered area, the gunship's crew found hostile T-54 tanks approaching friendly positions. Spectre 11 immediately engaged the tanks, although encountering 23mm and 51 caliber AAA fire, and dispersed the massed concentration. Unable to obtain a replacement aircraft, Spectre 11 made a rapid turn-around at Pleiku Air Base, and returned to the Tan Canh/Dak To area as dawn broke on the battlefield. A thick cloud layer obscured the battle area, and Spectre 11 chose to descend below its minimum normal daylight working altitude to support friendly ground personnel. In doing so, it exposed itself to 57mm,\* and the more usual AAA fire. Spectre 11 drew the fire from two of the tanks onto itself, and away from 11 United States Army advisory personnel who were being heli-lifted out of the area. Though running low on fuel, Spectre 11 remained to act as a FAC for newly-arrived TACAIR, which could not locate the targets independently due to low clouds, smoke and haze. Only after seeing the rescue operation to its successful conclusion did Spectre 11 leave the area. Although BDA assessment was difficult under the chaotic conditions of the battlefield, HQ 7AF confirmed that a minimum of seven enemy tanks were rendered useless by the gunship.<sup>54/</sup> The performance of the PAVE AEGIS gunships so impressed the ground troops that whenever Spectres appeared on the scene subsequently they were asked if they had "the big gun."<sup>55/</sup>

\*This was undoubtedly from the ZSU57/2, a T-54 body with twin 57mm AAA and target acquisition equipment. Usually the enemy used it like a normal tank instead of in its AAA role.

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In spite of the efforts of PAVE AEGIS, the remaining tanks continued toward Tan Canh at a high rate of speed. Four additional tanks were reported destroyed by the Vietnamese north of Tan Canh, but the remaining force entered Tan Canh Village at 0130H, 24 May. Artillery called in on the remaining tanks destroyed two to three more vehicles, but by dawn the remainder of the enemy tank force had surrounded Tan Canh. Three tanks had entered the Command Post (CP) compound virtually unopposed by elements of the ARVN 22d Division, who waited in their bunkers.<sup>56/</sup> Not all ARVN troops remained inactive. Elements of the 47th Regiment at Vo Dinh attempted to negotiate three enemy road interdictions to link up with elements of the 9th Airborne Battalion in the Dak To area.<sup>57/</sup> Heavy 23mm AAA fire and closing weather inhibited air support, although "the Dak To area was critical and supported with maximum TACAIR and gunships."<sup>58/</sup>

Having overrun Tan Canh, the tanks quickly turned west. By 1430H Dak To II was firmly under their control. All battalions of the 42d and 47th Regiments plus 1/41st Bn were fragmented and no longer considered combat effective in the area. A defensive line ordered around Vo Dinh consisted of five Ranger and one Airborne Bn, plus all the 22d Division stragglers moving south. Troops at FSBs Delta South and Hotel moved to FSB Metro, while FSB 5 and 6 forces moved to the Ben Het Ranger Camp. The 9th Airborne Bn moved from the Dak To II area south to Vo Dinh. No friendly troops were left on Rocket Ridge. U.S. casualties among 22d Division advisory personnel were four KIA, one WIA and 10 Missing in Action (MIA),<sup>59/</sup> the latter figure due to a helicopter crash near Dak To on the 24th.



Why Did Tan Canh/Dak To Fall?

Many individuals associated with ARVN speculated on the failure to hold Tan Canh/Dak To. A FAC flying near Tan Canh shortly before the battle recalled that <sup>60/</sup>

*the day before Tan Canh, I noticed a lot of trucks on old QL14 north of Tan Canh. It had hardly ever received any use. . . . I called up II DASC requesting air for these. Of course no air was available because of other priority targets. . . . the next day the tanks showed up at Tan Canh.*

While this may be cited as a possible factor, one must remember that continuous air coverage began as soon as tanks were sighted on 23 April. Only the poor weather conditions on the morning of the 24th prevented full and effective use of aircraft, particularly the "fast movers." A senior U.S. Army advisor put it in these terms: <sup>61/</sup>

*Prior to the Tan Canh battle we felt we weren't getting our fair share of air, but once they started moving additional support units in I think we faired pretty well. Right now we're getting about 100 sorties per day, which is pretty damn good!*

In a different vein, he added: <sup>62/</sup>

*We taught them (the South Vietnamese) some bad habits with the fire Support Base Concept. These are little islands in the middle of no place using bunkers as command posts and bunkers for sleeping, and when the enemy is ready to knock out these islands all he has to do is put a devastating amount of indirect fire and everything collapses.*

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A new USAF advisor to the South Vietnamese ventured in his opinion that <sup>63/</sup>

*they [ARVN] were not trained specifically to handle a conventional war. They were trained for guerrilla warfare, because that's the only kind of warfare we had in the past.*

However a veteran senior U.S. advisor to the 23d ARVN Division disagreed, and he stated that <sup>64/</sup>

*we trained them both ways, but we tried not to burden them with large bulky equipment so they could also fight the counter-guerrilla war. I think the reason they broke and ran initially was the surprise of the tanks. They had never fought tanks before. They had plenty of anti-tank devices,\* but no one could visualize a bunch of T-54s and T-59s. . . . The best units when completely surprised might run and break.*

It appeared that the ARVN 22d Division could not be counted among "the best units." One novice USAF advisor suggested that the caliber of the enlisted men was below average and that the unit was "poorly led." <sup>65/</sup>

There were other explanations ventured, but all agreed that the main problem was psychological. A senior SRAG officer commented that <sup>66/</sup>

*ARVN was psyched by tanks. They didn't have a good psychological program to counter the tank threat. . . . They think the NVA is 9 feet tall, and he's not. He's a basic Vietnamese, and he thinks and acts like a Vietnamese; except I suspect he's probably better led.*

\*Among them the M-72 Light Anti-Tank Weapon (LAW) used very successfully at Kontum City in May.

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A segment of the unprecedented NVA invasion, using every weapon in its arsenal and almost every man it could muster, rolled over ARVN forces in the first major encounter in the Central Highlands. The reasons are many, and all are valid to some degree, i.e.: the firebases did not hold out as long as expected; increasing cloud cover hindered the optimum use of airpower; ARVN leadership was poor, as were some of the troops; and the psychological effect of tanks and 130mm guns broke the will to resist. Further, the high casualty rate following the missile attack on the 22d Division TOC on 23 April undoubtedly lowered the morale of officers and enlisted men alike.

Developments Through 30 April 1972

One could not cite material problems for ARVN's failure to counter the NVA threat at Tan Canh/Dak To. Loss figures revealed that retreating 22d Division troops left the enemy 23x105mm howitzers; 7x155mm field pieces, 10 M-41 tanks, and 16,000 rounds of ammunition (primarily 105mm).<sup>67/</sup> This unfortunate scene was repeated several times, and not only in MR II. The Senior Fighter Duty Officer at III DASC commented that on<sup>68/</sup>

*the first two weeks of this offensive we used at least 80% of our TACAIR destroying our own stuff which ARVN left when they broke and ran. That's my major complaint about ARVN; if you've got to retreat at least blow up your equipment.*

It would be unfair and untrue to assert that all ARVN units were ineffective. Certainly the Ranger and Airborne battalions near Tan Canh/Dak To put up a spirited defense, as did some elements of the ill-fated

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22d Division. Remnants of these units filtered initially toward Vo Dinh to regroup, but later were absorbed into the ARVN 23d Division. Many proved their determination in the battles for Kontum City.

Palace circles in Saigon were reported upset with the defeat of the ARVN 22d Division and tended to blame the division commander and Lt General Dzu. The loss of the northern approaches to Kontum City was termed "unnecessary," especially since Dzu had assured Saigon that he could hold them. <sup>69/</sup> General Dzu's days as commander were numbered. One officer at II DASC recalled that <sup>70/</sup>

*General Dzu, the previous Commander, was a sorry figure. After Tan Canh fell, and when he should have been out trying to rally his troops, he was coming in to us all the time saying give us max TACAIR. He wanted to blow up everything, villages, everything. He was damn near in a state of panic.*

Indeed, ominous days were ahead for the forces in MR II. After overrunning Tan Canh/Dak To, enemy units continued south toward Kontum City. The city, cut off by units of the NVA 95B Regiment to the south (at the "Rockpile"), was now in danger of being isolated from the north. Again, airpower provided the ARVN 23d Division with the priceless time needed to set up hastily developed defenses. Gunships, TACAIR and B-52s pounded the enemy every step of the way, and it was not uncommon to read mission reports such as the following two extracts: <sup>71/</sup>

*Visually found two trucks . . . damaged one with a hit with 105mm and lost the other truck in the foliage. . . . Covey 518 found 4 trucks for us, all of which we destroyed.*

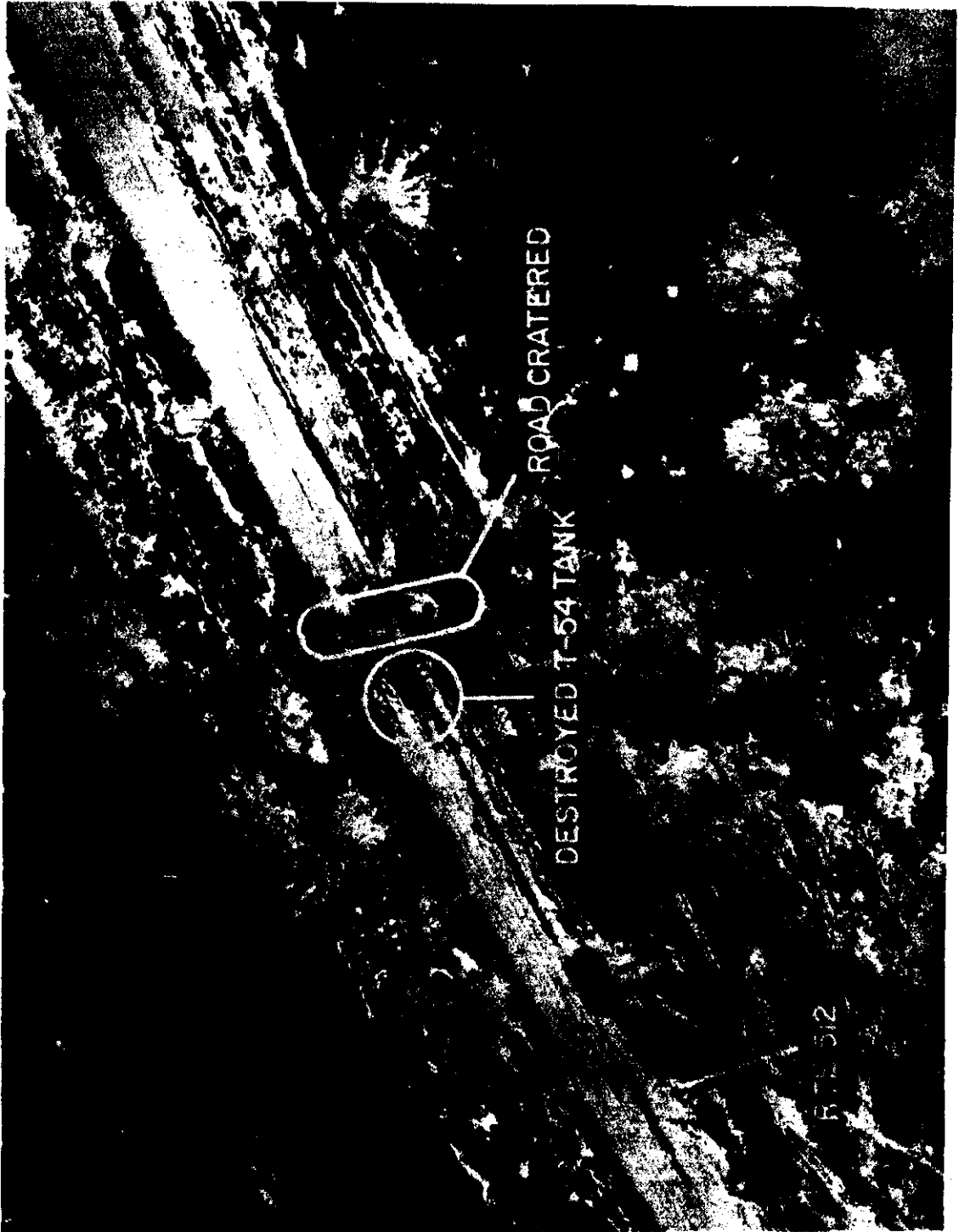
*Cleared to work west of Dak To for trucks and tanks. When we called in BDA we estimated 12-16 destroyed and 12 damaged.*

FACs guided F-4s and other fast movers into the Tan Canh area to destroy the war material ARVN had abandoned. The supersonic fighter-bombers, using the new Laser Guided Bombs (LGBs) also became tank killers, and were often guided on-target by Spectre gunships.<sup>72/</sup> On 26 April, U.S. TACAIR using guided and unguided bombs destroyed a vital bridge on QL14 near Dien Bien. Enemy armor, rolling south toward Kontum City, was effectively, although temporarily, halted at that point. Continuous TACAIR and gunship coverage of the area prevented repairs to the structure.<sup>73/</sup>

Heavy AAA posed a severe threat to the extensive air cover employed. The crew of Spectre 10 stated that in the Dak To area they<sup>74/</sup>

*had to break off target due to AAA on a nearby hill and AAA associated radar. This occurred during the day VFR to the SQ of Dak To. Recommend AC-130s not work during daylight hours due to the AAA threat in this area. . . . AAA radar and 37mm have been moved into this area. Possible 57mm in this area associated with AAA radar. It was very hard to break AAA radar lock-on. Spectre 07 worked this same area and had not encountered AAA during hours of darkness.*

Through all odds, the application of air assets slowed the enemy Blitzkrieg. Why the enemy suddenly became cautious after the lightning

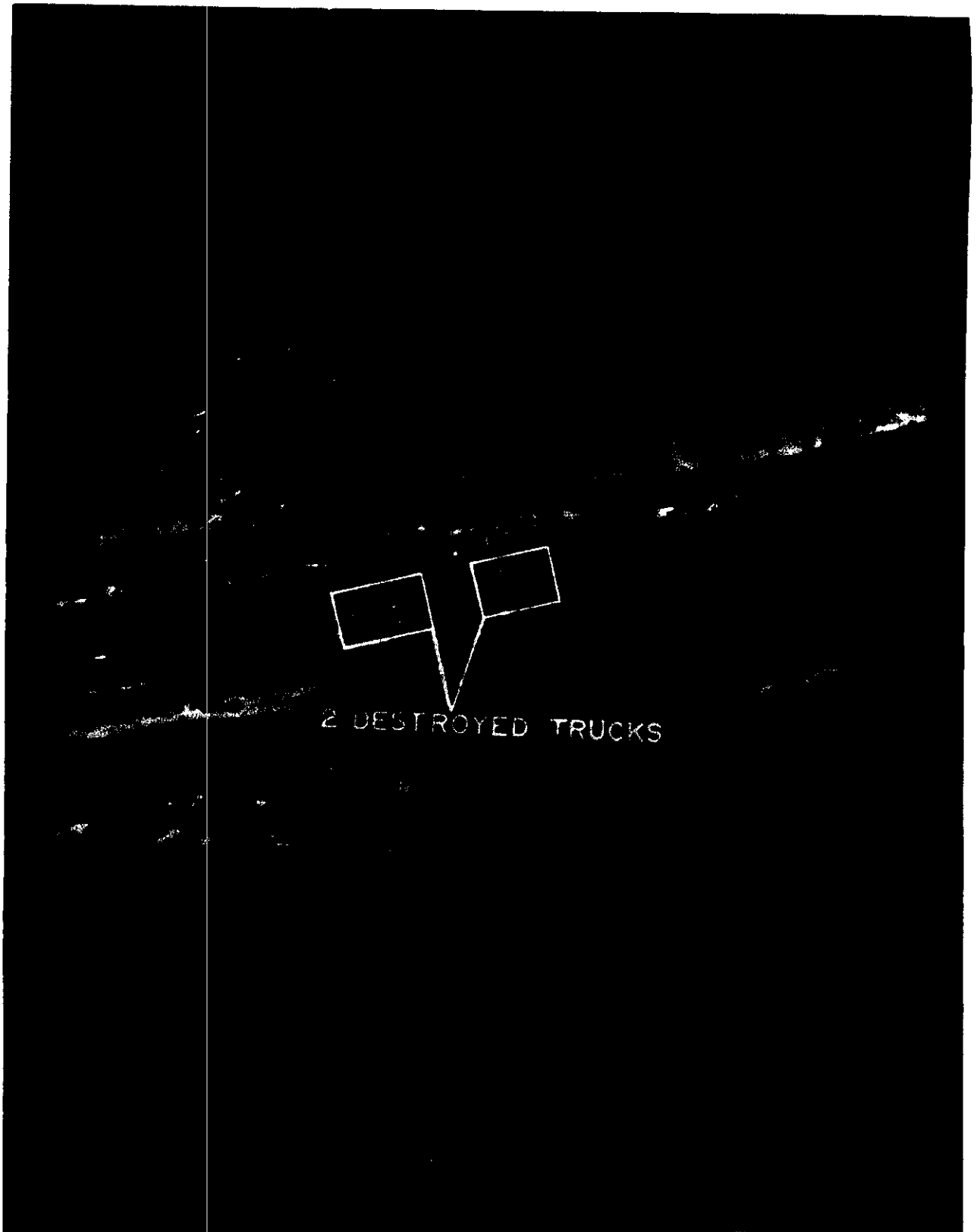


Air Force Fighter/Bombers Destroy Tank at Dak To

FIGURE 4

[REDACTED]

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Spectre Destroys Trucks on Route 14

FIGURE 5

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victory at Tan Canh is a moot question, but one senior advisor commenting on the devastating effects of airpower said, "After the fall of Tan Canh, the enemy lost approximately 40% of his forces on his drive on Kontum City."<sup>75/</sup> Another U.S. advisor added:<sup>76/</sup>

*In fact, I know the enemy was surprised beyond his wildest dreams that he took Tan Canh as quickly as he did. If he had been able to exploit that success, he could have been in Kontum that afternoon or the next day, but it was beyond his capabilities. His supply lines were extended - plus he didn't have the rationale - conventional warfare is new to him as well.*

Continued losses slowed the enemy, but did not stop him; and widely scattered actions continued throughout the highlands. Kontum and Pleiku cities were not spared during and after the drive on Tan Canh, and both received several ABFs. On 22 April, for example, an Air Vietnam plane was hit by enemy fire while on the ground at Kontum City airport. A stewardess was killed and several passengers were wounded. The aircraft was 80 percent damaged.<sup>77/</sup> On the 26th, the Ben Het Ranger Camp took some 400-500 rounds of mixed fire. This was followed early on the morning of the 27th by a ground attack, which was once again repulsed by the Montagnard defenders. Some 400 ARVN troops from the 22d Division, who had fled to Ben Het from Tan Canh, were heli-lifted out of Ben Het on the 26th. Other units of this division were sent to Pleiku City for reorganization.<sup>78/</sup>

The news from eastern MR II was mixed. Negatively, all of Binh Dinh Province seemed in danger of falling; on the positive side, ROK and ARVN troops reopened the An Khe Pass on 26 April. By 1600H a food

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convoy traveled through the pass without incident. The reopening of highway 19 eased the resupply of the Central Highlands. The Bong Son Pass on Route 1 was also reported cleared, although the enemy was still located in the high ground above the pass. Once again, the role of airpower in the pass clearing operation was significant and 7AF reported that "heavy U.S. TACAIR and B-52 strikes in the area over the past few days were decisive in helping clear the enemy from the target."<sup>79/</sup> In the Central Highlands, efforts to reopen the QL14 pass at the "Rockpile" continued to be inconclusive; although massive ARC LIGHT and TACAIR strikes supported the ARVN 45th Regiment in the operation.

Enemy ABFs continued throughout the highlands at Dak Pek, FSB Echo, Radar Site Peacock (near Pleiku City), and at Kontum City itself. The situation looked very grim as April drew to a close. Rocket Ridge had been lost, and Vo Dinh was abandoned on 29 April.<sup>80/</sup> The 23d Division slowly began to organize the defense of Kontum City along conventional lines. A CAS report stated that<sup>81/</sup>

*the situation in Kontum appears to be deteriorating; senior officials believe the city can't hold out 24 hours if attacked soon. However, they say if the attack can be stalled one week the organized defenses may be able to hold the city.*

*Morale in Pleiku is bad with rumors that Lt General Dzu is to be replaced. All non essential U.S. military personnel evacuated from Kontum and Pleiku. President Thieu ordered the families of military members out of Kontum and Pleiku Provinces. Air tickets to Saigon, normally 2850P (\$?) are black marketed for 10,000 Piasters.*

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Once again, airpower provided the precious time. The last news on 30 April proved a ray of hope when it was reported that <sup>82/</sup>

*an ARC LIGHT strike at 1790H on 30 April west of FSB Lima evidently frustrated plans by the 64th and 48th Regiments of the 320th Division to attack Lima. At least 50 KBA were reported by helicopters on a BDA mission following the strike. Additionally, 40-50 personnel in a dazed condition were observed 10 minutes after the strike and were engaged by the gunships involved in the BDA mission.*

This action took place only 15 km northwest of Kontum City.

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CHAPTER III

MAY 1972: THE ASSAULTS ON KONTUM CITY

Function of the II DASC

"MR II was supposed to be completely Vietnamized by June, and the II DASC, where I work, was supposed to close then. That was before the current offensive, of course."<sup>83/</sup> Thus spoke one of the handful of United States Air Force (USAF) personnel at the Direct Air Support Center,\* Pleiku City.

The II DASC included USAF and VNAF personnel, with the Americans acting primarily as advisors. During the offensive, U.S. personnel became more active in advising the U.S. Army SRAG at MR II HQs on the proper employment of tactical airpower in joint air/ground operations, and in providing control and direction of tactical airpower used in support of requests from ARVN. The Senior Fighter Duty Officer at II DASC put it this way:<sup>84/</sup>

*TACAIR is used with FACs. The FACs go out and look for targets, or the ground commander will direct them to a target or give them an area to check out. He calls back here with the coordinates to be cleared, and also requests air at the same time. We clear the target here by going through ARVN channels. After that's done, we have our incoming air that's been fraggled to us; we parcel it out to the FAC depending on what priority target he's got. Number one priority, of course, is anyone who's got a tactical emergency-*

\*For a more extensive report on II DASC checo CHECO report #20-188, The DASC's in II Corps Tactical Zone July 1965-June 1969. This report is classified SECRET.

*like if they're being overrun. The second is troops in contact; next in line is troops in the open etc.*

The same source, in explaining B-52 targeting said somewhat tongue-in-cheek: <sup>85/</sup>

*Frankly, that's no longer an Air Force weapon. We fly the airplane, but the (U.S.) Army puts in the target request; they handle the clearing etc. The only thing we do is hand out the air strike warning to our own aircraft, so they won't have bombs dumped on them.*

### The Offensive Continues

When B-52 raids slowed the enemy's move south, and broke his attack on FSB Lima, USAF sources at II DASC reported that <sup>86/</sup>

*Mr. Vann this morning expressed his great appreciation for the role currently effected by U.S. TACAIR and ARC LIGHT missions. He feels that the ARC LIGHTs in particular have severely hurt the enemy, and that this combined with TACAIR has stalled the enemy in mounting their expected offensive at Kontum. Intercepted enemy radio traffic reports that quote bombs continue to fall on us and we cannot attack unquote.*

The situation at Kontum City remained static, but an attack was expected in the near future. Mr. Vann expressed his confidence in ARVN's ability to hold Kontum. <sup>87/</sup> Such ability was called into question again when ARVN forces walked off and abandoned FSB Lima at 1800H, 1 May. They left numerous trucks, tanks, artillery pieces and other equipment behind, and made no attempt to destroy them. At this point II Corps then requested TACAIR to destroy this FSB and the abandoned equipment. This

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was accomplished as requested.<sup>88/</sup> The situation at the QL 14 "Rockpile" remained stalemated, particularly when bad weather precluded many air-strikes in the area. Use of Cluster Bomb Units (CBU)-55 on this target proved highly successful, but ARVN would not take follow-up action.<sup>89/</sup> The II DASC noted that<sup>90/</sup>

*II Corps is still apparently relying totally on TACAIR and ARC LIGHT support for offensive operations in this AO. This support is still considered outstanding both in quality and quantity.*

With the loss of the FSBs, SRAG attempted to replace the lost ground positions with a Command and Control (CC) helicopter. The senior USAF representatives at II DASC disagreed with the plan, since it tended to usurp II DASC's TACAIR support responsibility, and required two additional Air Liaison Officers (ALOs). He felt that<sup>91/</sup>

*FAC and Spectre support remains outstanding, and in addition to their basic mission, they are practically the sole source of accurate recon/intelligence information in the immediate area of tactical operations.*

News from the east coast continued to be bad. Early on 3 May some 2000 friendly troops abandoned Landing Zone (LZ) English, and again left all their useable equipment behind. U.S. and VNAF TACAIR were once again called on to deny this material to the enemy. Air and Naval gunfire supported the evacuation of these men by U.S. Navy landing craft.<sup>92/</sup>

In the highlands the situation became more critical when Polei Kleng and Ben Het received ABFs, and enemy artillery began to zero-in on Kontum

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City. Next, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) ordered the airborne unit out of Kontum and back to Saigon. The loss of these 1000-1500 sorely needed troops at this juncture caused much despair at II Corps, particularly since a planned combat assault on the QL 14 "Rockpile" was to take place within a few days. Air support remained a bright spot:<sup>93/</sup>

*Covey, Rustic and Nail FACs, as well as Spectre and Stinger gunships remain in high demand by this MR. . . . Mr. Vann continues to laud their contribution to the effort.*

Also encouraging were the reports of a new "air" weapon, helicopter mounted and issued to the U.S. Air Cavalry. This was the Tube Launched, Optically Tracked, Wire Guided Missile (TOW), which was to be used so successfully at the upcoming battles of Kontum City. Plans were made to use this weapon in conjunction with Spectres, when Spectres were using only their 40mm.<sup>94/</sup>

#### The "Rockpile" Operation

The ARVN-conceived assaults on the Chu Pao Pass commenced on 4 April. USAF TACAIR met its commitment and prepared the LZ for the ARVN troop drop. However, the ARVN insertion came some four hours behind schedule due to poor coordination with VNAF helicopter forces. A similar situation on the following day caused the senior USAF representative at II DASC to point out the poor VNAF helicopter support to General Vogt, Commander 7AF. He said that "the failure to insert reinforcements into this operation could mean the difference between success and failure."<sup>95/</sup> The ARVN 45th Regiment

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moved up Route 14 from Pleiku City, while the 2d Ranger Battalion moved south from Kontum City. Indeed, on 5 May both units went through the pass, but any thoughts of victory in the operation proved illusory. By 6 May the pass was closed again, and would remain so for many weeks despite continued air-supported ARVN attempts to reopen it.<sup>96/</sup> When the senior USAF representative at II DASC heard that ARVN was considering abandoning the effort after only a few days, due to "lack of support," he countered: "If this is true, it is because they are reluctant to engage the enemy - air support seemed adequate. No BDA can be reliably obtained from this operation. . . ." <sup>97/</sup>

#### Closing in on Kontum City

At 1515H, 5 May, a USAF FAC confirmed five tanks and enemy troops moving toward Polei Kleng. Early that evening the situation became grave when the enemy tanks and troops arrived at the compound wire, but TACAIR with MR-82s, Rockeyes, and LGBs responded to the TAC "E", as did Spectre gunships. Once again, air repelled what might have been an almost certain enemy overrun of the camp. Twelve sorties were flown in support of the TAC "E" with one AAA pit and a possible two tanks damaged. Nightfall, smoke and foliage prevented accurate BDA. The remainder of the sorties that night were dropped by COMBAT SKYSPOT on targets northwest of Kontum City.<sup>98/</sup>

Although repulsed at the wire, the enemy continued to pound Polei Kleng with 130mm artillery fire. The ARVN Ranger Battalion was reported in "gross disorder" after the CP area had taken several hits. By 1930H on the 6th, three U.S. advisors at the camp were heli-lifted to Pleiku, although the Rangers were still tenuously holding the site.

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Meanwhile, tanks and troops were reported moving on the Ben Het Ranger Camp, and a Spectre moved in to suppress the activity. Dak Pek, Dak Seang, and Plei Mrong also reported ABFs. The increased enemy action called forth expanded air support. TACAIR sorties to the highlands region went from almost nil on 1 May to 45 on the night of 6 May. This figure included USAF, United States Navy (USN) and the United States Marine Corps (USMC) aircraft.<sup>99/</sup> On 7 May the enemy hurled 160mm mortar shells at the Ben Het Ranger Camp, the first use of this weapon in MR II. Against the backdrop of increased activity Montagnard forces "revolted," wounding the ARVN camp commander.<sup>100/</sup> Rocket 82, the U.S. advisor, reported that the Montagnard Rangers had demanded withdrawal from the threatened FSB within 48 hours. Apparently they wanted to be relocated with their families, whom they had not seen for two months. The "revolt" continued to simmer, but constant enemy pressure on the camp forced the Montagnards to concentrate their efforts elsewhere. The II DASC reported that the "Ben Het revolt is still current, but quiet at this time, and they are fighting well. Could be we need more revolts."<sup>101/</sup> The II Corps Commander agreed to move the Montagnards out as soon as air extraction became possible.<sup>102/</sup>

Enemy activity in the general area around Kontum continued to intensify, presaging the attack on the city itself. Plei Kleng had another TAC "E" at 0800H, 8 May, and VNAF TACAIR responded with A-37 and A-1 support. USAF and VNAF FACs continued to work the area, although the weather precluded maximum air support. Spectres and F-4s saved the day for Plei Mrong, which came under attack again.<sup>103/</sup> FSB 41, north of Pleiku, had been abandoned by the RF company holding it on 7 May; but it had been

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retaken by ARVN elements on 8 May. On the following day, Plei Kleng received another ground attack at 0500H, and evacuation began two hours later. Poor weather conditions prevented TACAIR aid for the camp until 1100H, but by that time all friendlies had departed. TACAIR then turned on enemy troops and LOCs in the area. The early morning hours also brought a renewed tank assault and TAC "E" at Ben Het. Spectres, and M-72 LAWs used by ground troops, destroyed four PT-76 tanks. Several TACAIR sorties, both U.S. and VNAF, claimed three more tanks destroyed and one damaged. The attack was repulsed, even though the enemy held one-third of the compound at one point. The attempt to extract the 71st Ranger Bn from Ben Het failed due to heavy AAA surrounding the site. Although the enemy continued to mount probes at Ben Het, they were held at bay by flares and fire from Spectre gunships.<sup>104/</sup> The siege continued during the following day. POWs reported that the all-out assault on Ben Het was planned for that night. As a result, II DASC requested priority on TACAIR and gunships. VNAF air drops to beleaguered Ben Het landed outside the perimeter and supplies the enemy. TACAIR continued to blow up supplies at the abandoned Plei Kleng camp, and to punish the enemy buildup around Plei Mrong. The area immediately around Kontum City was carefully watched by USAF FACs and U.S. Air Cavalry for an attack on the provincial capital thought probable on Ho Chi Minh's birthday, 19 May.<sup>105/</sup> In the midst of the furious struggle Lt General Ngo Dzu was replaced by Maj General Nguyen Van Toan as Commander of II Corps, on 10 May. General Toan, the armored specialist on the JGS, was considered tenacious in contrast to his predecessor.<sup>106/</sup>

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The defense of Kontum City now rested with 11 regular ARVN battalions two RF Bns, 28 artillery pieces, and 10 tanks.<sup>107/</sup> A senior U.S. Army advisor recalled that<sup>108/</sup>

*when we arrived, the 23d Division had not closed. In fact, it didn't close until the 13th of May - the day before the attack. It was the first time in war that the 23d Division had worked as a unit. After the battle of Tan Canh and the withdrawal of the 22d, we came into a group that was pretty well devastated moralewise.*

The situation in Pleiku and Kontum cities was deteriorating. Some 15,000 refugees from the Dak To area swelled the population of Kontum City, which continued to be hit by sporadic ABFs. On 9 May an Air Vietnam DC-4 was rocketed as it landed at Pleiku airfield, and II DASC prepared to put Phase One of a four phase evacuation plan into effect on 11 May.<sup>109/</sup>

#### Maneuvering for the Attack

The senior USAF representative at II DASC reported on the 11th that all areas in MR II were quiet--so quiet that SRAG and II Corps officials were "uneasy." He added that ARC LIGHT and TACAIR strikes at Ben Het had resulted in 304 KIA, primarily KBA, with some 65 individual weapons, several crew-served weapons, and an additional five PT-76 tanks destroyed.\* The expected attack on Kontum City had not materialized, but 20 USAF and 12 VNAF TACAIR strikes continued to pound the main infiltration routes to Kontum and Pleiku.<sup>110/</sup>

\*Four Soviet "Sagger" Wire-Guided Anti-Tank Missiles were also captured at Ben Het.

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