

On the 12th, Pleiku airfield received 6x122mm rockets, and Kontum airfield took several rounds of incoming artillery, which hit very close to a C-130. Earlier, on 2 May, two other C-130s had been damaged by mortar and artillery fire. The incidents prompted 7AF to cease C-130 daylight operations into Kontum City on 12 May. The enemy had effectively zeroed-in on the Kontum runway, and the lack of effective return fire and probes from ARVN gave him free rein. SRAG and II Corps wanted the vital daylight resupply flights to continue, but the senior USAF representative at II DASC opted for night missions, provided all supply requirements could be met by them. ^{111/} The eve of the 13th presented a gloomy picture. As one senior U.S. advisor in Kontum City put it: ^{112/}

We had refugees by the tens of thousands . . . we kept on losing one FSB after another and the NVA kept on applying the pressure. However, from the time Tan Canh fell on 24 April to the battle at Kontum on the 14th we estimate that we killed about 40% of the NVA force - and it was predominantly with airpower. The tactic would be to hit the enemy as he was massing to attack the FSBs. From the assembly areas to the attack positions we would hit them, not only with tactical airpower but with ARC LIGHTS. We were really using the ARC LIGHTS as close-in protective fire; and as the enemy moved south they were used 1000 meters in front of the front lines as protective fire. We were having tremendous results with this firepower, but they kept on coming. The big question was, would the ARVN fight the tanks?

That question would be answered shortly.

The First Attack on Kontum City

Increasing numbers of tanks and enemy troops were sighted in the area around Kontum City. U.S. and VNAF TACAIR attacked seven enemy tanks

near Vo Dinh on the 13th with one tank reported destroyed. At Ben Het, VNAF helicopters attempted to extract some of the mutineers, but heavy AAA prevented success. Six VNAF A-1s were then assigned to provide protective cover, but failed to suppress enemy fire causing postponement of the operation. Failure dogged the QL 14 "Rockpile" clearing operation as well, and a route to the west, circumventing the pass, was examined as an alternative.^{113/} The HQ of the NVA 2d Division was reported to be 15 km northwest of the city, with the HQ of the NVA 320th Division and 48th Regiment also in the area. This led most observers to feel that the show-down battle for Kontum City would take place within a few days.^{114/}

The few days shortened to a few hours when ABFs and light ground probes occurred on the night of 13/14 May at FSB November, northwest of Kontum City, and at FSBs 41 and 42. By 0600H, an estimated 11 tanks and battalion-size infantry attacked Kontum City, primarily from the north and northwest. Would this be a repeat of Tan Canh? The 23d Division G-3 U.S. advisor on the scene recalled that^{115/}

we found out on the 14th that they (ARVN) could fight the tanks. They fought the tanks before daylight, before we could bring in tactical air, the Cobras, the gunships, or the TOW missiles

The ignominious defeat at Tan Canh was not repeated. ARVN 23d Division ground troops engaged the initial tank assault with M-72 LAWs, and by 0730H helicopter gunships mounting TOWs and U.S./VNAF TACAIR had joined the engagement. By noon, USAF FACs reported six tanks out of action, with three burning. Enemy ground attacks by elements of the NVA 320th Division

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were repulsed north and west of the city, as was a small probe from the south along the Dak Bla River. The ARVN 23d Division had closed successfully, and coordination among ARVN, VNAF and U.S. forces was at a high point. The senior USAF officer at II DASC recalled: ^{116/}

At one time today approx 1300H, TACAIR both VNAF and USAF was striking NE, NW and south of Kontum and friendly artillery firing to the west, all simultaneously. Mr. Vann, SRAG and USAF observers were on the scene, and Mr. Vann remarked that it was one of the greatest applications of power he had observed and he was elated. He was particularly impressed by VNAF performance and response. The ultimate occurred in coordination today when a VNAF FAC expended all his Willie Petes and a USAF FAC on the scene marked for the VNAF FAC using English language, and the VNAF FAC talked in the VNAF TACAIR using USAF FAC mark and accomplished a very successful air strike. . . . The operation at Kontum today was an all Vietnamese show, with VNAF and ARVN performing well. USAF and U.S. Army assisted only in a minor way. USAF TACAIR . . . was always ready to come in, if needed. The new II Corps Commander and most of his staff were on the scene . . . it appears that a new image of II Corps is in the making with an excellent start considering today's performance.

The back of the initial enemy thrust was quickly broken. The senior U.S. advisor to the 23d Division credited ^{117/}

the application of the tactical airstrikes, both USAF and VNAF, with preventing an NVA follow-through of the initial lodgement they had made in our positions. The application of the B-52 strikes during this initial attack on the 14th was stepped-up in the Kontum area over what it had been. The strategic strikes were committed principally in a tactical role in the immediate vicinity of Kontum.

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An American intelligence source confirmed the success of airpower in thwarting the 14 May attack when it reported that ^{118/}

at least two hundred enemy bodies and 100 individual weapons were observed on the morning of 15 May in an area, 4 km NW of Kontum City, where B-52 strikes had been delivered on 14 May.

By 0130H, 15 May, the attack had tapered off, although incoming artillery and mortar fire continued. At Kontum airfield an ABF ignited JP-4 fuel in the POL storage area. Two incidents occurred near Pleiku where attacks left a POL tank burning and destroyed an ammo dump. ^{119/} The loss from the sapper attacks on the Pleiku POL storage area and the ammunition dump were as follows: ^{120/}

330 tons total, consisting of 97 tons dynamite, 90,000 feet of det cord, 18,000 lb blocks of TNT, 90,000 105mm fuses and various amounts of 40mm and 57mm and smaller ammo. Sabotage on the POL tanks on 15 May resulted in loss of 150,000 gal of JP-4, one tank and the pumping station. The system is back in operation at this time.

On the 15th limited military activity continued. By noon the 95th Ranger Bn had replaced the mutinous 71st Ranger Battalion at Ben Het. Enemy units continued to threaten the camp and VNAF TACAIR destroyed 20 out of 30 enemy sampans near the beleaguered outpost. Spectre 04 reported nine secondary explosions (SEX) and the possible destruction of a tank north of Kontum City. It was apparent that the enemy had suffered large losses during the Sunday attack, but ARVN stocks, especially of vital

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artillery ammunition, were down to 10 percent in some cases. It became evident that increased C-130 resupply missions into Kontum City would be requested. ^{121/}

The enemy continually probed for a weak spot in ARVN defenses. FSB 41 (ZA 196695) repelled a ground attack on the 16th with the help of TACAIR. Some 40 enemy KBA were reported. In Kontum City, incoming enemy artillery set two VNAF C-123 supply aircraft on fire. One was loaded with ammunition, and resultant explosions pitted the runway and forced its closure. ^{122/}

Although QL 14 between Kontum and Pleiku cities remained closed, some 14,000 refugees streamed into Pleiku City from the Kontum area. Some 75 percent of Pleiku City's normal population of 60,000 had left. Work on defenses in the city was going slowly, without a sense of urgency, and the city was quiet and orderly. ^{123/}

The "quiet" atmosphere was tragically shattered at Kontum City on the afternoon of 17 May. The 7th Air Force intelligence bulletin reported that ^{124/}

a U.S. C-130 was attempting to take off (while under fire at Kontum airfield) and failed to achieve take-off speed. The aircraft hit a building at the end of the runway and exploded, causing ammunition and POL fires in adjacent areas. Seven U.S. personnel were killed and two were wounded in the accident. 3,000 rounds of 105mm howitzer ammunition, the JP-4 pumping station and all the JP-4 fuel was destroyed.

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An operation advanced by the senior USAF representative in II Corps involved airfield cleanup teams to keep the runway, ramp and taxiways clear at all times. He charged the Kontum Province Chief with providing some 100 people for this team. Planning for future eventualities, the USAF representative also suggested that a suitable drop zone be located, secured, and prepared in the event resupply of Kontum City by paradrop became necessary. He recommended the river bed to the south as a likely area. He also remained dissatisfied with ARVN actions regarding silencing of the enemy artillery, which had the airfield zeroed-in. He advocated sending ARVN infantry recon teams out to locate and destroy a particularly troublesome 105mm howitzer, but again ran into ARVN "reluctance" to mount offensive operations. He noted: "Thus far the favorite actions that the ARVN keep falling back on is an ARC LIGHT in the suspected area followed by TACAIR."^{125/}

Air Frustrates a Major Enemy Assault

Various enemy incursions and ABFs continued, primarily at the FSBs near Kontum City. Dak Pek Border Ranger Camp and FSB 42 Alpha received heavy AFBs, while the ARVN 44th Regiment located NW of Kontum City was subjected to heavy ground assaults supported by tanks. TACAIR and helicopter gunships heavily supported ground units in these actions. It was at this crucial point that one of the vagaries of war overtook the enemy. As dawn broke on the 19th, USAF F-4s and helicopter gunships supporting the ARVN 44th Regiment forced the retreating enemy into a preplanned ARC

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ARC LIGHT strike box. The senior U.S. advisor to the ARVN 23d Division recalled: 126/

The next strike by the NVA occurred on the night of the 18th, again from the northwest and again they had armor, however, in this attack their armor kind of held back, and did not reach the forward defense lines. However, the infantry did, and on this night they made three separate attempts to penetrate our positions. On this night we had planned and were employing our B-52 strikes about 6 km from our outer defense lines to as close as 1 km. The VC attack had made initial penetrations into our forward defense positions by 0500, and the division commander was just about to call for his artillery fire on his own position against the NVA infantry. At this particular spot we had a B-52 strike that was planned for 0530, running approximately 1 km parallel to the front. I suggested that he hold off firing on his own positions until the strike went in. The strike did go in on time, and the NVA attack stopped immediately. The NVA pulled out of their positions and started running, at which time the front-line troops were able to kill quite a few.

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John Paul Vann noted that

there are many indications that the enemy has planned a major assault on Kontum City, but that his timetable has been disrupted by preemptive bombardments. Further attempts to seize Kontum are expected.

Although BDA figures varied according to source, there was no doubt that TACAIR and B-52 strikes hurt the enemy and caused his loss of momentum.

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A CAS report stated that

a variety of sources indicate that the enemy is preparing a major attack on Kontum City in the very near future, but there are reports also that they may be having difficulty getting set for it. A rallier from the K-2 Bn, NVA 28th Regiment said on 18 May that his unit was disrupted by heavy losses from a B-52 strike as his Bn was moving into attack position. . . . Info from this rallier supports POW statements that the 28th Regiment has suffered heavy casualties. A POW from the NVA 64th Regiment, 320th Division, said that this regiment

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received 600 replacements during March, April and May, suggesting a very high casualty rate that is probably continuing.

Preludes to the Final Effort

The C-130 operation into Kontum airfield resumed on the night of 18/19 May, although incoming artillery of various types and the high AAA threat made this run extremely dangerous. Landings were now at the pilot's discretion, and fixed wing aircraft traffic was restricted to the hours of darkness. When a C-130 received small arms fire while landing on the 20th, two subsequent C-130 bladder birds were diverted to Pleiku airfield. By 1720H, Kontum airfield had received 12x122mm rockets, three of which hit a VNAF C-123 on the ramp, destroying it. The saga of C-130 resupply missions during the crucial days of May remains one of the USAF's finest achievements, and deserved credit goes to the brave crews who flew these dangerous assignments against great odds. Some 17 C-130 resupply missions were flown on 19 May and 15 on the 20th.^{129/}

The whole range of aircraft in the U.S. and VNAF armada prepared to meet any contingency. When Ben Het reported tracked vehicles, Spectres and TACAIR responded. When the offensive to reopen Kontum pass began on 19/20 May, John Paul Vann stated that^{130/}

the preliminary bombardments to open the Kontum pass started on 19 May with 36 TACAIR strikes. TACAIR will continue . . . thru 21 May, when a ground attack will start. . . . Their assault will be supported by B-52 strikes, U.S. and VNAF TACAIR and air cavalry.

With an attack becoming likely daily, military activity increased at Kontum airport. First, an aircraft accident closed the airport to C-130 resupply. Spare 622, a C-130, blew a tire and broke a hydraulic line

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while landing. This effectively terminated the night airlift, except for a C-130 bladder bird and a C-130 which carried parts for Spare 622.^{131/} Unfortunately, by early morning of the 22nd Spare 622 became the target of enemy artillery fire. A hit on the number one engine caused a fuel leak, which subsequent enemy fire ignited. Apparent ARVN indifference allowed the plane to continue burning until a U.S. Army Colonel put out the blaze with a large fire extinguisher. However, the aircraft had to be considered a loss.^{132/}

Next, at 0220H, 23 May, an enemy rocket hit the ramp of Kontum airport. A C-130 bladder bird, bringing in vitally needed fuel, took off immediately without unloading. When enemy action ceased shortly thereafter the runway reopened and some seven C-130s landed and unloaded on the night of 22/23 May.^{133/}

C-130 resupply continued with a protective shield. Spectre gunships flew escort duties for the transport aircraft, and provided AAA suppression. Often the mere presence of a Spectre hovering over Kontum airfield proved effective enough to silence enemy guns and rockets.^{134/} The ubiquity of air support was well expressed in the following fragment from the Daily Staff Journal kept in Kontum City:^{135/}

*23 May. Spectre 02 engaging truck . . . ARC LIGHT
detonated NE of Kontum. Covey 564 on station
Kontum . . . C-130 landed and unloaded . . . Covey
550 directing airstrikes on enemy.*

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The time was fast approaching when all available assets would be required. Kontum airfield continued to receive occasional ABFs, but the runway remained open. The importance of the resupply mission could be ascertained from John Paul Vann's description: ^{136/}

240204Z May 1972. Thirteen C-130 sorties into Kontum last night delivered 147 skids of 105mm how he (3758 rounds); 26 skids of 105mm illum, (628 rounds); and 29 skids of fuses (16,700). While additional sorties were scheduled, they were curtailed due to precautionary security measures which slowed down the operation. The JP-4 point at Kontum is being switched from a bladder to a blivit operation to allow for quick offload of JP-4 from the C-130.

Although occasional closures of the runway resulted from the back-up of ammunition on the offload areas, 17 C-130 sorties resupplied Kontum City during the night of 24/25 May. ^{137/}

In other operations no significant progress was reported on the QL 14 "Rockpile" operation. A USAF FAC was killed while making a low level pass to resupply U.S. advisors at the Plei Mrong Ranger Camp. U.S. helicopters converged on the scene and recovered the body on the afternoon of the 24th. ^{138/}

All-Out Attack on Kontum City

Shortly after the last C-130 departed Kontum airfield on the night of 24/25 May, the USAF tower at the field reported that seven rounds of ordnance detonated on the southeastern edge of the runway. This was at 0510H, 25 May. By 0607H small enemy sapper units had penetrated to the

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"Bishop's House," and to the eastern edge of the runway. Reports circulated that an enemy force of estimated reinforced company size had infiltrated and attacked the city from four directions, dressed in ARVN uniforms. ^{139/}

At 0830H an enemy force led by tanks attacked the defensive line of the ARVN 53d Regiment from the north and northeast. U.S. and VNAF TACAIR responded and the initial thrust was repulsed. ^{140/} However, heavy incoming fire, primarily 122mm rockets and 105mm artillery, forced the closure of the runway. These ABFs hit the helicopter refueling point at the airport, and the 23d Division TOC. Brigadier General Hill, Senior Army Advisor to MR II, circled the besieged city in a helicopter and declared a TAC-E. This decision was based on several factors: intercepted enemy message traffic indicated reinforcements for the initial sapper force; aerial observations from his helicopter showed enemy troops moving in the area south of the city; and some three enemy battalions were either in or close to the southern and eastern edges of the city. Facing them were three friendly regiments in and around the city, and two battalions of the ARVN 44th Regiment, which attempted to return to Kontum City after engaging the enemy early that morning north of town. About 1545H, Gen Hill requested additional TACAIR to replace ARVN artillery neutralized by enemy shelling.

TACAIR now provided the only fire support for the ARVN infantry. The TACAIR provided was principally VNAF, as agreement had finally been reached with Gen Toan to cover the "Rockpile" with U.S. TACAIR and to use VNAF TACAIR in support of Kontum City. By 1730H all non-essential

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U.S. personnel had been evacuated from Kontum City, and the airfield closed. The II DASC notified the 7th AF Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) that no C-130 resupply missions could safely land that night. As night fell, some enemy troops were lodged in Kontum City.^{141/} In a related action to the south, Pleiku Air Base received 7x122mm rockets on the same day. Four VNAF helicopters were damaged, and several Montagnard refugees killed. Immediate action by VNAF Cobras resulted in the location and destruction of six of the eight enemy rocketeers. The area was quiet once again.^{142/}

In spite of B-52 strikes and gunship sorties that night, at 0115H on the 26th enemy tanks and infantry attacked the 53d regiment again. Attacks on the eastern and southeastern perimeter coincided with this tank/infantry assault from the northeast. By 0300H the defensive line of the 53d had been breached, and by 0615H enemy tanks and troops moved to within 50 meters of the 44th Regiment Command Post.^{143/}

One observer on the scene stated that the NVA must have had a "sorry weatherman," for just as the enemy attack rolled into high gear at dawn, the weather broke and allowed TACAIR and TOW-equipped UH-1 helicopters to engage the enemy armor. By 0856H the U.S. Air Cavalry had destroyed 10 tanks and a water tower held by the enemy with their TOW missiles.* One of these tanks had been previously damaged by a Spectre operating in the area.^{144/}

*Five T-54s, two PT-76x, three disabled ARVN M-41s.

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Refugees Flee Kontum City

FIGURE 7

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U.S. TACAIR struck the ridge northwest of the city and silenced enemy artillery. An ARC LIGHT strike was planned for the same area that night, since intelligence reports indicated that the NVA 3d division from Binh Dinh might try to reinforce the 2d and 320th divisions in attacking Kontum City. Elements of the 2d NVA Division and the 28th Regiment had already engaged ARVN 23d Division units at the perimeter. As night fell, over 1,000 rounds of 105mm, 122mm and 155mm artillery and 122mm rockets had pounded the city, and the enemy elements remained lodged within it and along its perimeter. The TAC-E continued, and no C-130 resupply missions were flown into Kontum City. U.S. and VNAF CH-47 "Hooks," landing at the soccer field inside Kontum City, were the only source of resupply and medevac. Police and ARVN troops had to secure the area from swarms of refugees, who tried to force their way onto the helicopters leaving the besieged city.^{145/} Just as VNAF and U.S. TACAIR sorties had covered Kontum City during the daylight hours of the 26th, so B-52 strikes and gunship coverage extended the protection of air into the night of the 26/27th. When a Spectre saw four tanks, one of which was firing at the city, he drove it off by engaging it with 40mm.

Although the ARVN 53d Regiment's defensive line in the northeast had been penetrated in several places, none of the panic evident at Tan Canh prevailed. While an ARVN battalion had run on the 26th, it quickly reformed and returned to its position. The tanks did not create the fear they had at Tan Canh, especially after the TOWs had eliminated many of them. On the morning of the 27th, ARVN soldiers armed with M-72 LAWS disposed

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of two more enemy tanks; the same toll was taken by TOW-equipped helicopters. The ARVN soldier began to get his feet on the ground; the enemy was no longer nine feet tall; the tanks were no longer invincible. When evacuation became necessary, as it did at FSB November on the 27th, it was orderly. ^{146/}

Weather remained unworkable for TACAIR on the morning of the 27th, although several sets of fighters were expended IFR in jettison boxes. A COMBAT SKY SPOT (CSS) attempt at 1130H failed due to radar difficulties, but by that time the weather cleared sufficiently for visual FAC targeting. The II Corps and 23d Division Commanders asked that CSS safe separation criteria be reduced from the 700 meter minimum to 500 meters, and they agreed to accept the responsibility for short rounds. Between 1600 and 0400H 27/28 May some 75 sorties of U.S. TACAIR served the Kontum City area; ^{147/} an average of better than one sortie every 10 minutes.

As the 27th drew to a close, the situation found the ARVN with the enemy lodged inside their perimeter, but they were unable to evict them. On the other hand, the NVA found themselves too weak to expand their perimeter and force their way into the inner city. A USAF advisor to the VNAF ^{148/} offered his opinion that

the NVA itself helped save Kontum City by making numerous mistakes. First of all, they never made an all-out, coordinated effort where they used artillery, armor and infantry. Sometimes their infantry would get ahead of their tanks and vice-versa. On occasion they brought their tanks right down the open highway in single file.

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There was no doubt that the enemy had made errors, and had been seriously hurt. Casualty figures for the period 14-27 May showed 2237 enemy KIA in the highlands versus friendly losses of 259.^{149/}

The operation to reopen the Kontum pass continued to run hot and cold. ARVN Rangers had taken almost 20 percent casualties in the operation, but they tied down two NVA regiments that might have made the difference during the battle of Kontum City. TACAIR and B-52s continued to pound the "Rockpile," but the SRAG Chief of Staff noted that^{150/}

in this pass clearing operation what we really have is an attack against a fortified position. This is not just an attack against hastily-dug fortifications; this is an attack of the magnitude of the attack against Casino in WW II. Some of the caves that the enemy is ensconced in have been noted to be as deep as 18 feet, making them impervious even to B-52 strikes. Because of this, and because ARVN has never had the preponderance of force which it could commit to this kind of operation and which it takes to be successful . . . we have a situation where neither adversary is strong enough . . . it's been a battle of attrition.

Although the situation remained critical, ARVN forces began to counter-attack and attempted to consolidate the perimeter. Efforts began on the 28th to disengage the enemy from the eastern end of the runway and the eastern portion of town. The southwestern portion had been secured, and a helicopter refueling point and a C-130 airdrop area were established there. The C-130 resupply by airdrop began that afternoon, and 50 of 64 bundles were recovered. The TAC-E remained in effect, and TACAIR punished the enemy moving on the ground. The arrival in Kontum City of an experienced

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Covey FAC* and a radio operator promised better coordinated use of TACAIR at Kontum City. Several targets were struck with CBU 55s at the "Rockpile" and within Kontum City, while CSS targets were prepared in the event of poor weather. ^{151/}

The enemy had failed to route ARVN, or to achieve significant gains. They had made errors, such as the blowing of the Kontum City ammunition dump on the 27th preventing two of their own units from joining; and their whole attack was marked by lack of coordination. ^{152/} By the 29th the senior USAF representative at II DASC reported that ^{153/}

although much of Kontum remains occupied by the enemy, principally the eastern and northern positions, Mr. Vann is greatly encouraged by the lack of enemy activity in and around the town last night and this morning. Mr. Vann told Lt Gen Toan that Quote: We may have turned this situation around. If so, it's only because of the absolutely tremendous ARC LIGHT and TACAIR support we've received in the past two nights. Unquote. Mr. Vann went on to say that we have prevented the enemy from moving and reinforcing during the times he normally could do so. Vann stated he could see no other reason why, with two enemy divisions confronting our forces, the enemy has failed to press the attack decisively. Mr. Vann also cautioned that we may be wrong and must keep up the pressure until the enemy withdraws.

The situation was indeed "turned around" by air. During the 36-hour period from 271600H to 290400H, 203 U.S. TACAIR sorties were expended

*He had performed the same function at Quang Tri.

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ARVN 23rd Division Gunners Defend the Perimeter

FIGURE 8

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ARVN Soldiers Rost Out the Enemy in Kontum City

FIGURE 9

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in MR II, principally in support of Kontum City. In addition, B-52 strikes and gunship flights kept the enemy constantly disoriented.^{154/}

The enemy held basically the same positions on the 29th as he had the previous day. He occupied the east end of town from north to south, and many of the compounds across the north. The entire south side of the runway remained in enemy hands, and to the northwest a sizeable force occupied the low ground between the ARVN 45th Regiment and the northwest corner of town. Contacts remained close, but sporadic and light. A flanking movement by RF/PF troops caused the enemy to withdraw from the section of the west end of the runway. Resupply continued by C-130 airdrop, but only 24 of 48 bundles dropped that morning were immediately recovered. A recovery of the remainder was expected by ground personnel. Requests for more TACAIR were honored when ARVN planned a clearing action, but marginal weather at mid-morning limited such assistance both in Kontum City and the "Rockpile."^{155/} Near the "Rockpile," at FSB 42, CBU-55 delivered on the 29th was reported "right on target" and "did an excellent job of destroying the enemy bunkers." Two more CBU sorties were scheduled for early morning of the 30th.^{156/} Although the TAC-E continued on the 30th, the ground situation was relatively quiet in the city.* On the 31st, ARVN units continued to clear the enemy from the northern portions of the town, while RF units attacked and occupied enemy positions in southeastern Kontum City. Less than 100 rounds of

*President Nguyen Van Thieu visited the 23d Division TOC and promoted Col Ba, the Division Commander to Brigadier General on the 30th.

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incoming artillery were reported, and at 0830H Mr. Vann terminated the TAC-E at Kontum City. The senior USAF representative recalled that Mr. Vann ^{157/}

expressed deep appreciation for the outstanding tactical air support provided to MR II during the emergency. Mr. Vann cautioned that in his view the lull in enemy activity may be only temporary, and requested air elements, specifically the Covey FACs, to conduct aggressive VR of their operational areas and rapidly report significant intelligence.

To better use the Covey FACs (then stationed at DaNang), the senior USAF representative recommended that ^{158/}

some of our Coveys be positioned at Pleiku. I believe a minimum adequate posture would require two Coveys to RON each night . . . this procedure would virtually eliminate the possibility of workable morning weather and no FACs available to work.

Weather problems between DaNang and Pleiku City prevented Covey FACs from arriving on station when planned or required. Beginning two days later one Covey FAC was to RON at Pleiku each night.

The Enemy Withdraws

By 1 June the enemy had ceased direct heavy pressure on Kontum City although three pockets of resistance remained in town. Fighting to expel or destroy these elements continued. Intelligence and VR indicated that the lull in activity might be short-lived, and SRAG expected resumption of the attack within four or five days. General Hill did not expect ARVN to aggressively expand the Kontum perimeter during the lull, citing ARVN's

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own weakened posture from the recent battle and disinclination for such operations. However, measures to harass and attrit the enemy were taken. General Hill ordered the Air Cavalry to undertake aggressive VR and ground team infiltration to the west and northwest. A Covey FAC would coordinate with the Air Cav and conduct airstrikes as required. The senior USAF representative at II DASC reported that ^{159/}

Mr. Vann considers that our recent success in driving off the enemy at Kontum is due in large measure to the fact that we kept the enemy off-balance at night with gunships, ARC LIGHT, COMBAT SKY SPOT, LORAN releases, and visual strikes. He requests that the TACAIR fraged to MR II during the past two nights be increased to continue the pressure on the enemy.

Clearing operations continued on 2 June at the southern and eastern end of the runway, and at the two northern pockets of resistance. The C-130 drop zone was moved to the northwest corner of town, inside defensive positions held by the ARVN 45th Regiment. Sporadic shelling continued throughout the day. Although the fighting was slowing down, losses were almost inevitable. For example at 1100H a U.S. "Huey" helicopter was shot down near FSB 41 while enroute from Pleiku to Kontum. The Army pilot was killed and two officers severely injured. One of the two was the USAF Air Liaison Officer (ALO) advisor to the ARVN 23d Division. During the critical days at Kontum City he had functioned single-handedly as both VNAF ALO advisor, and U.S. Tactical Air Control Party (TACP). Tragedy continued to follow the operation when the first pilot of an Army rescue helicopter was killed by small arms fire. A third Army

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helicopter rescued the survivors, but the USAF ALO died enroute to a hospital outside the war zone. ^{160/} In the Chu Pao pass, two additional ranger battalions were committed to the clearing operation, and began moving from the Plei Mrong Ranger Camp to the west end of the "Rockpile." The camp, and nearby FSB 41, received light ABFs during the day. On the east coast of MR II, in Binh Dinh province, attacks were expected at LZ Crystal following a heavy ABF. Gunships, Tum FACs and CSS targets were assigned to the area. ^{161/}

The runway remained closed on the 3rd, but reduction of enemy pockets surrounding it continued. The north (hospital) compound was further reduced, and other engagements took place outside the northwestern perimeter. It appeared that several major NVA units were pulling back from Kontum City to the area north and east of town. A POW claimed over 2100 replacements had been sent to NVA units during May to take part in the highlands battles. Air and ARVN had taken their toll, and a Ranger battalion sweeping west of the "Rockpile" reported finding another 100 enemy KBA. ^{162/}

Major action shifted to the LZ Crystal/Phu My area on the east coast. The senior U.S. advisor at LZ Crystal declared a TAC-E, but this was cancelled by General Hill. The policy was announced that only Mr. Vann or he would declare a TAC-E in MR II. Since poor weather in the highlands precluded visual work in the area, most of the TACAIR was sent to LZ Crystal. When the senior USAF representative at II DASC phoned the LZ

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to ask about the air support, they answered with an "enthusiastic" yes. They were very pleased with the TACAIR support. Some 40 enemy were reported KBA after the brief engagement. Tum FACs worked the area, but were not manned for 24-hour operation, and 7AF was requested to task the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS) for augmentees. ^{163/}

Air drop C-130 resupply continued on the 4th, as the runway remained closed. ARVN units cleared the southeastern corner of Kontum City and the 45th regiment continued sweeping the northwestern section of the city meeting very little resistance. The mopping-up operations called for little TACAIR, and only four CSS sorties flew in the Kontum area during the period 040400H and 041600H. In contrast, 60 sorties flew to the threatened LZ Crystal/Phu My area on the east coast. ^{164/}

High winds and rain continued to lash the highlands into the 5th, making air operations unfeasible except on the east coast. Clearing operations continued in Kontum City, and the runway was secured. ARVN engineers began repairing damage to the runway, but the Ground-Controlled Approach (GCA) unit and runway lights were still out. Aerial resupply therefore continued using MSQ-directed parachute drops. Kontum City continued to receive occasional incoming, as did Pleiku AB and LZ Crystal. An ARVN relief column had reached the latter, and the enemy's hopes of an easy victory vanished. ^{165/} As the enemy's strength seemed to wane, ARVN's aggressiveness increased. An intelligence bulletin of 6 June stated that ^{166/}

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General Toan, MR II Commander, has offered 50,000 Piaster rewards to his men for the destruction or capture of NVA tanks. This financial incentive has resulted in spirited competition and increased aggressiveness on the part of many friendly soldiers in the face of enemy tanks.

Action at SRAG and II Corps HQ intensified on the 6th, when intelligence reports from monitored enemy transmissions indicated that another all-out tank/infantry attack against Kontum City would begin late that afternoon.

In preparation II DASC requested the following air support: ^{167/}

1. Increased TACAIR, including CSS, to begin at 1930H at 30 minute intervals, instead of the fragged 1.5-2.0 hour intervals.
2. Stationing of a PAVE AEGIS (105mm equipped) gunship.
3. Maximum flare capability for all gunships assigned.
4. A second Covey FAC to RON at Pleiku AB that night.
5. SRAG, in concert with ARVN, to develop divert targets for the B-52s near possible enemy assembly points.
6. A PAVE NAIL FAC and F-4s with laser-guided bombs to strike four bridges vital to the enemy's logistics.

Air drops, helicopter resupply and evacuation of wounded continued throughout the day, as ARVN began to clear the one remaining enemy pocket in the northeastern portion of the city. Government troops found many enemy bodies and weapons left behind by the retreating foe. Operations near the "Rock-pile" began to move as well, and Task Force 21 had proceeded 6 km that morning and were now 15 km northeast of Plei Mrong.

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In response to a request from 7AF concerning LORAN aircraft provided to MR II since 25 May, II DASC responded that ^{168/}

the only day since 25 May that DASC records indicate receiving substantial LORAN aircraft assistance is 31 May (15 aircraft). We do not normally make LORAN releases when FACs are working VFR. On the other hand, during peak ARC LIGHT periods it is difficult to obtain SKY SPOT MSQ service, and LORAN aircraft are very helpful in bad weather. This morning I requested Deputy Director, II DASC to prepare a message to 7AF requesting 2 LORAN Pathfinder aircraft daily during the rainy season in Pleiku.

The expected enemy attack failed to materialize, and work began on the 7th to put the runway back into operation. Half of an Army GCA unit was already in position, with the other half due in by airlift that afternoon. Air drop and helicopter resupply continued in the interim. Weather wavered between unworkable and marginal causing two sorties with LGBs to return to base (RTB). Seventeen of the Kontum TACAIR sorties during 070400H and 071600H were LORAN releases, and II DASC noted that "the increased availability of Pathfinder aircraft made MR II TACAIR operations much more flexible, less dependent on the MSQ schedule during bad weather, and reduced the necessity to use TACAN releases as a last resort." ^{169/}

ARVN II Corps reported the following results of enemy and friendly losses during the battle for Kontum 14 May-6 June: ^{170/}

1. Friendly Losses: 382 KIA, 1621 WIA, 32 MIA. Four crew served weapons destroyed, 47 small arms lost, 6 radios lost, 3 tanks 100% destroyed, 4 tanks 30% damaged.

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2. Enemy losses: 5688 KIA, 34 POW, 8* Hoi Chanh, 353 crew-served weapons captured, 862 small arms captured, 29 radios captured, 38 tanks destroyed.

The II DASC stated that ^{171/}

many of the enemy casualties were inflicted by USAF and VNAF TACAIR. Enemy tanks destroyed are believed to include some abandoned ARVN tanks that had been captured by the enemy (and those destroyed at Tan Canh also). I estimate that a very large number of enemy KBA at Kontum are not included in the above, since the target areas of most ARC LIGHT and TACAIR sorties in direct support of Kontum have not been swept by friendly forces. At 0908H today the one thousandth ARC LIGHT strike in MR II since 1 Jan 72 occurred. The occasion was marked by a small ceremony in II Corps G-2 at which toasts were drunk to USAF and SAC.

Early on the 8th, ARVN continued to eliminate the last pocket of enemy resistance at 1-1/2 km north of the runway. The runway itself was now open, and the GCA reported as operational although not yet checked by USAF flight check aircraft. No incoming was reported, and friendly troops sweeping the area continued to find enemy bodies in abandoned bunkers. Air drop sorties continued and "II Corps G-4 reports that air drops, using MSG, have been very accurate, and nearly all parachute bundles are impacting in the recovery area."^{172/} Slow ground recovery presented a problem, but the II Corps Commander directed additional manpower be provided for the task.

By midmorning II DASC announced that "the reported pocket of enemy resistance 1-1/2 km north of the runway has been eliminated. There is no

*Could not make out in source document whether the figure for the "Open Arms" ralliers was eight or 88.

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organized enemy resistance reported in town.^{173/} Mr. Vann considered runway resupply urgent, and requested resumption that night. II DASC agreed that C-130 night operations into Kontum now presented the same level of risk as they had prior to the attack on the city. The danger from enemy rocket and artillery fire still existed, but each C-130 was instructed to contact Carbon Outlaw (II DASC) for final clearance before beginning its GCA blackout approach to the airfield. The same procedure was in effect after takeoff, prior to clearing the next aircraft. If the 23d Division TOC reported enemy activity in town or near the airfield to II DASC, the aircraft were not permitted to land. By 0600H on the 9th, six C-130s had delivered cargo to Kontum City. Daylight aerial drops continued as well.^{174/}

The Death of John Paul Vann

Disaster struck at the hour when victory was near at hand. At 2115H 9 June, Mr. John Paul Vann, Senior U.S. Advisor to MR II, departed Pleiku City in his light observation helicopter (LOH) to spend the night in Kontum City. His pilot and another Army officer accompanied him. At about 2130H ARVN soldiers at FSBs 41 and 41a, near the "Rockpile" reported seeing a helicopter on fire. They further saw it crash and continue burning. II DASC was notified at 2145H and sent Covey 46 to assist in the rescue operations. He arrived on scene at 2155H, and was joined by two Army helicopters and Spectre 18 by 2215H. Nail 76 replaced Covey 46 at 2225H and directed the on-scene search using an Army helicopter and Spectre's air and ground burning flares, infra-red (IR), and illuminator. They located the wreckage at 2300H at coordinates ZA 205704, a short distance

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east of highway QL 14. ARVN ground troops from FSB 41a moved to the crash site and reported all three dead. At about 2330H Bambino 39, the Army helicopter, landed at the site and identified one of the bodies as that of Mr. Vann. Nail 76 and Spectre 18 had shown outstanding teamwork and professionalism in their efforts, and General Hill commended the Air Force for its outstanding support--but the flamboyant, the skilled, the incomparable John Paul Vann was dead. An era had ended. ^{175/}

On 10 June General Hill was replaced on normal rotation by Colonel (Brigadier General Selectee) Kingston, USA. Brigadier General Healy, USA, arrived to replace Mr. Vann. The two senior advisory positions in MR II had changed in less than 24 hours. ^{176/}

CHAPTER IV

USAF AND VNAF AIR IN THE DEFENSE OF THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

This brief chapter is generally devoted to the personal recollections and opinions of U.S. advisors, primarily those on the ground, who were directly affected by the role air played in the defense of the Central Highlands. This is not a cold statistical approach,* but an attempt to provide the honest impressions of those who lived the battles.

There are many references throughout the first three chapters of this report to the role B-52s, gunships, and TACAIR played, and these will be recapitulated only briefly. Problem areas, when documented, will also be mentioned.

The Role of the B-52s

The huge strategic bombers were used primarily in a tactical role. by dropping their ordnance into pre-planned boxes, or delivering it as close as 1000 meters in front of friendly defensive lines, the B-52s became the air weapon the enemy feared most. Whether used in an anti-logistics or in an anti-personnel/close - fire support role they became the silent terror. As one advisor put it: ^{177/}

It's a known fact that the greatest thing the enemy fears is the B-52s. They can see a Covey FAC or an

*The tables and charts in the appendix to this report provide some statistical data. An excellent source of such data is the Monthly HQ PACAF Summary of Air Operations in South East Asia.

O-1 flying over, but they never know when those B-52 bombs are going to come raining down on them...I'm convinced it was the B-52s that saved Kontum the way they were employed.

The senior U.S. advisor to the ARVN 23d Division in Kontum City recalled that ^{178/}

Once penetrations were made and they pulled the plug on B-52 strikes, we employed them much in the same manner as our close defensive artillery. As a matter of fact, this is one of the functions they performed, and they do the job much better than artillery. It was extremely important because the only ammo supply we had was in our positions. We had lost our ammo dump and our resupply had been cut down to nothing. I think that airpower played an extremely vital role, allowing us to conserve artillery ammunition for when we had to use artillery. With the application of the B-52 strikes I feel they really saved the day, because after them the NVA was never able to come in again and significantly reinforce or resupply the lodgements they had made in the city. We estimate about 3 regiments were within the defense perimeter. In essence, airpower - tactical air and the B-52's - served as a shield which allowed us to pull enough infantry strength off the perimeter line to come back into the interior of the position and eliminate the lodgements that had been made.

A USAF Covey FAC who worked the Kontum City area during the battle recalled: ^{179/}

"There's no doubt in my mind that if it weren't for the B-52s and other air that Kontum would have fallen. The ARVN would sit in their bunkers and call for more and more air, closer and closer. I bombed two days inside the city. I found out later that's what helped destroy the 3 regiments which got into the city."

Finally, the comments of Brigadier General Ba, the Commander of the ARVN 23d Division: ^{180/}

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I must say that the air gave us (a) very good support. Support like I have never seen before... If the B-52s strike only strategic targets they can strike only Hanoi. From the 17th parallel south I say that the best strategic targets for the B-52s is right in front of my positions. That means from 5 klicks to 2 klicks (km), because that's where the VC regroup before they attack the positions. I think that's a strategic target where the VC group for an assault... We must use the B-52 in close support to the front lines.

General Creighton Abrams, COMUSMACV, sent a message of congratulations to 8AF in Guam. He said that ^{181/}

as the current offensive campaign extends into its seventh week, I am increasingly impressed with the contribution that the ARC LIGHT program has made. There is no question that the B-52s have been a major factor, and on occasion the deciding factor, in preventing the enemy's accomplishment of most of his major goals.

The Role of U.S. TACAIR

The rapid deployment of the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps air arms, in addition to a large augmentation of the USAF forces, created a veritable air armada to combat the enemy invasion. While initial problems arose in orienting newly assigned "fast mover" pilots to the area and to their mission, they soon became skilled at their wartime tasks. There was no disputing the inherent advantages of the F-4s, A-7s, and A-4s: ability to respond to an emergency and get to the target area quickly, greater survival rate against all but

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the most sophisticated* enemy anti-aircraft weapon, and great accuracy when using the new laser-guided bombs. There were, however, inherent disadvantages as well: short time on target (TOT) when laden with ordnance, restricted use in poor weather unless using sophisticated electronic methods, usually in conjunction with ground stations, and questionable accuracy at times when using freefall bombs. On the latter point, the senior USAF representatives at II DASC commented on "fast mover saturation bombing":^{182/}

"The accuracy of bombing thus far by the mission aircraft has been totally unacceptable. On one instance approximately 96 MK-82's were placed on a bridge that should have been destroyed by 2. Results of the 96 bombs - one bridge slightly damaged."

Other problem areas appeared with ordnance changes on the frag aircraft. A Covey FAC flying the Kontum area noted that^{183/}

the problem all the FACs have is getting a fast enough change of ordnance. For the first part of the offensive we couldn't get any snake or napalm, all we could get were slick bombs for high-angle dive bombing. You can't do close air support with fast moving aircraft. It's difficult-they don't have enough holding time and they can't make several passes because they don't have enough fuel. The F-4 is just not a good close air support aircraft... When they were making these attacks out in the open, we couldn't get nape, CBU or Rockeye. All we could get was slick hard bombs. Any of our fast moving aircraft going below a 3000 feet deck and trying to bomb a moving tank is trying to shoot a fish in a lake with a .22 off the bank.

However, there was no question but that the "fast mover" TACAIR

*No SAM launchings were reported in MR II.

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saved many of the FSB's from being overrun, effectively destroyed war material abandoned by ARVN or massed by the enemy, and provided a shield for friendly forces when used in a troop or logistics interdiction role.

The Role of The U.S. Gunships*

The enemy broke off many engagements merely by the appearance of a gunship on the scene. The AC-119 Stingers and AC-130 Spectres often provided the only available air during crucial contacts. For example, on the morning of 25 May the initial enemy forces attacking Kontum City were held off by VNAF TACAIR and Spectres. The effectiveness of the 20 and 40mm guns on the Spectres and the addition of the 105mm "big gun" on the PAVE AEGIS (C-130-E) Spectres made the AC-130s a much respected and feared weapon system.

The added electronic sophistication of the AC-130, in comparison to the AC-119, made it a more versatile gunship system. Among the roles the AC-130 performed were armed reconnaissance, tank and truck killer, general interdiction of troops and supplies, close air support under TIC conditions, the use of the 2kw light to mark targets and drop zones for other aircraft, artillery suppression and destruction, dropping of flares to aid FACs or ground troops, escort aircraft and AAA suppression for C-130 cargo planes, acting as a FAC for TACAIR, and search and rescue (SAR) support.

Among the innovative tactics developed by the Spectres was that

*Information for this section came primarily from a draft copy of the 16th SOS Quarterly History, March-June 1972.

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of firing off the inertial navigation system (INS) in a TIC environment. This all-weather tactic was introduced by Spectre 03 near Dak Pek on 10 June. The weather was bad with 7/8 cloud cover, and the ground commander did not have an X-band beacon. As the situation on the ground became more critical, the crew of Spectre 03 manually fed in coordinates to the gunship's fire control and INS computers. Since the gunship's LORAN was inoperative at the time, initial coordinates were determined by dropping flares near suspected friendly positions and receiving ground verification of these. The navigator tracked this position by sensor and updated his computer to the known reference. With this knowledge, target coordinates provided by the ground commander were fed into the computer. An initial trial run was then made on this position to make certain that it did not threaten friendly troops. Using corrections given by the ground commander, the crew was able to continually adjust their fire to successful strike enemy targets. Spectre 03 expended 62 rounds of 105mm and 216 of 40mm in this fashion. At no time did the gunship fire less than 500 meters from friendly positions. The enemy ABF and ground action ceased, and some 50 of them were reported KBA.

The gunships initially experienced some problems with FACs and II DASC personnel who did not fully understand the AC-119s and AC-130s versatility and capability. This was hardly surprising, since the gunships primary AO had been in Laos and Cambodia prior to the 1972 offensive in South Vietnam. Spectre 19 reported on 2 May that ^{184/}

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Covey 564 calls Carbon Outlaw requesting a gunship to work suspected TIC...almost unbelievably Carbon Outlaw says he has no gunship available. We call and tell him that Spectre 19 is a gunship. He says, "Stand By"....These people in MR II have no foggy idea of how to make use of an AC-130. Carbon Outlaw simply ran us from one FAC to another, hoping that one of them would not be working higher priority TACAIR. (At one point we had word from 7AF that we had priority over fighters; this is most definitely not the case). Until such time as Carbon Outlaw figures out how to make effective use of Spectre, I strongly recommend no further daytime sorties to MR II. In fact, why are we flying these day frags at all when we get kicked off almost every target by "high priority" fighter strikes?

Having to make way for the fighters was perhaps "sour grapes," but a far more serious problem was reported by Spectre 15 on 6 May: ^{185/}

At 2310 a COMBAT SKY SPOT was released over Tango's position. There were no guard warnings, and Carbon Outlaw and Rocket 44 were both unaware that the strike was to be held. The bombs fell through our altitudes on all sides narrowly missing us. Tango wasn't so lucky - 5 bombs impacted inside his compound wounding 15 persons...

A Covey FAC reported a similar occurrence. He stated that B-52 strikes ^{186/}

almost knocked me down three times in two days. working down in the valleys like we are, you don't get all the DART transmissions. B-52s just can't come up on Guard, I don't know what the problem is that they can't broadcast from that high an altitude to the valley. They walked right across my tail less than 1/4 mile. I sure have a lot of respect for the B-52s, and I think they're doing a tremendous job; but there sure ought to be a better safety program.

Often Stingers, Spectres and TACAIR were fragged to the same targets, but this did not present the same problems as did unannounced Army or

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VNAF aircraft. Spectre 19 reported on 9 May: ^{187/}

0425. For the second time a "Spooky" (VNAF C-47) gunship pulled into the area we were trying to work. Communication with these people is impossible, and if some form of controlling them isn't developed; we're going to have some friendly BDA one of these nights.

These problem areas were noted by 7AF, and in a message to the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) at Ubon, improvements were promised in some of these matters. The availability and use of the X-band beacons would be stressed with the U.S. Army, and all FACs and DASC personnel had been briefed several times on gunship operations and capabilities. ^{188/} Indeed, as the offensive continued, the gunship became the second most-feared air weapon after the B-52s; and because of its versatility it became a mainstay in the defense of the Central Highlands.

Other Air Resources

Not enough can be said about the C-130 crews, who risked their lives and aircraft so Kontum City would survive. During the 40 days between 22 May and 30 June, they made some 95 air drops and 284 landings in MR II, primarily at Kontum and Pleiku cities. ^{189/} They provided ARVN with the rations and material needed to press the fight to a favorable conclusion. Totally dependent upon other aircraft or ground forces for protection, the crews of these lumbering giants braved AAA, artillery rounds, rockets and small arms fire to deliver the vital goods. It is no wonder that many of their fellow pilots say that the C-130 crews have the most guts in South East Asia.

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The U.S. Air Cavalry, with its supply, medevac and gunship helicopters, certainly performed many vital functions. The introduction of the helicopter-mounted TOW missile brought a new, lethal anti-tank weapon to the highlands at a critical phase.

In effect, all types of aircraft were mobilized to defeat the enemy invasion. From the small O-2 FAC aircraft, to the giant B-52s, all played their roles in preventing defeat.

Problems With BDA/KBA

The senior USAF representatives at II DASC pointed out problems with vehicle BDA on 10 May. He reported that ^{190/}

accounting for vehicles destroyed during combat conditions involving ground troops with vehicle killer weapons, TAC-AIR, U.S. Army Air Cav and possibly other forces sometimes becomes a problem. In some cases, more than one force claims the same kill when both are engaging the same target. Another problem is the ability of the enemy to immediately tow away or camouflage a vehicle that has just been struck.

During the Tan Canh tank attack a relatively accurate tank destruction account was maintained. Each day after this battle a number of tanks and trucks previously counted as destroyed began to disappear. . . . They were either moved, camouflaged or buried, etc., . . . The enemy has been reported to have dozens of troops following each vehicle with tree branches erasing its tracks. When the vehicle stops, these troops put their tree branches over the vehicles to hide them. . . .

When I monitor an air strike or attack on radio I attempt to keep an account of the results. . . . An accountability problem again arose in the attack on Ben Het . . . TACAIR, Spectre gunships, U.S. Army Cobra gunships and ground friendly force M-72 teams all

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attacked these vehicles within a short period of time. . . . All three were destroyed . . . these vehicles could easily have been counted as six destroyed. . . . I will always have good reasons for any BDA claims, and I lean toward the conservative.

The accounting of KBA figures proved even more difficult. On the one hand, it was next to impossible to get ARVN to patrol beyond the perimeter. On the other hand, when ARVN did go out and report BDA/KBA they often "turned one NVA body over four ways."^{191/} While this may have been true in certain cases, John Paul Vann said that^{192/}

it should be noted that the ARVN have consistently refrained from reporting either TACAIR or B-52 KBA results that have not been confirmed by ground sweep. For that reason, it is my opinion that reported enemy casualties reflect only a small percentage of the actual damage the enemy has suffered.

By the time many of the ARVN ground sweeps took place, the enemy had buried or carried off its dead. As previously stated in the report, estimates of enemy KBA ran to 40 percent of the entire attacking force in the Central Highlands.

The SA-7 Threat

The Soviet-made SA-7* was a low altitude, surface-to-air, heat-seeking missile which could be hand carried and fired. Much like the U.S. "Redeye," the SA-7 had an operating range of two to three nautical miles and could reach altitudes of 10,000-12,000 feet. It was capable of downing aircraft traveling up to 430 knots.^{193/}

*Soviet designation "Strella" or "Strela." NATO designation "Grail."

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Although the SA-7 had been reported and confirmed in MRs I and III, the first possible sighting of an SA-7 in MR II occurred on 10 June. Two Army U-21 pilots and a passenger observed a missile apparently tracking an F-4 on his pullout from a dive bombing attack near Kontum City. The observers reported they were at 9500 feet MSL, and that the missile burn-out was at an estimated 7000 feet MSL. One of the U-21 pilots had seen an A-1 shot down near An Loc by an SA-7 and he believed that he had witnessed another SA-7. The introduction of the missile into MR II had been expected because of its confirmed effectiveness in other areas. The only question which bothered the senior USAF representative at II DASC was why the enemy had chosen to disclose the SA-7 capability against an F-4, rather than a C-130 or other slow mover. He recommended though, that night runway resupply be discontinued until conditions were more secure. The SRAG staff considered the recommendation "premature," and stressed the need for aerial resupply as long as QL 14 remained closed.^{194/} The decision was made to continue night runway resupply in spite of dangers involved to the cargo aircraft.

The Senior Air Force Representative was tasked by 7AF to devise procedures to minimize the SA-7 threat to the C-130s during their most vulnerable period, i.e., just prior to landing at Kontum. A three phase plan was developed to accomplish this task. First, friendly forces were ordered to occupy the area from which the SA-7 was reported launched - approximately four kilometers due east of the east end of the runway on high ground. Next the Senior Air Force Representative arranged a coordinated fire support plan. As C-130s reported on downwind, GCA had an artillery liaison officer

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who ordered suppressive artillery fire on the flanks of the friendly forces noted above. Finally as the aircraft turned base leg, an artillery flare shell was fired in the vicinity of the final approach in the hope that it would attract any SA-7 fired at the aircraft. These procedures were in effect for six days at which time the enemy was pushed from Kontum, significantly decreasing the threat to the landing aircraft.

The crew of Spectre 07 reported possible SA-7 launches on 10 and 11 June. They launched an XLUU flare on both occasions as a diversion and the missile did not strike the aircraft. ^{195/} There was also a report of a possible SA-7 launch against a C-130 about to land at Kontum City airfield on 13 June. However, no corroborating evidence was obtained, and it was speculated that a flare dropped by a Covey FAC near the GCA base leg might have been mistaken for a missile. ^{196/}

Although no aircraft had been downed in MR II by an SA-7 during the period of this report a potent antiaircraft weapon had made its appearance.

VNAF Performance

USAF could justifiably be proud of VNAF performance in MR II. The small force which had been trained, equipped and nurtured by USAF had now become the sixth largest air force in the world. Where ARVN generally suffered from lack of leadership and fighting spirit, VNAF had a surfeit of esprit'-de-corps among its elite pilot force. It was not uncommon for VNAF A-1 or A-37 pilots to have 4,000 or more flying hours in their aircraft, or for them to fly four or more missions per day. VNAF was a subordinate

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arm of ARVN, and not a separate and equal service. This relationship often presented problems of communication and coordination, but when given a mission VNAF pilots performed magnificently. A USAF advisor to VNAF recalled that ^{197/}

John Paul Vann came in just elated at the VNAF performance. They were getting right down on the deck and putting their butt right on the line. There was murderous fire there, because the NVA had brought down numerous 51 cal quad 50's; they had even 23mm AAA guns up there and those guys were going right down the barrel . . . John Paul Vann came in so excited and said: That's the best damn bombing I've seen in my 11 years over here! That was his estimation of the VNAF. I don't think you need any more testimony than that. In the defense of Kontum the VNAF has been magnificent, absolutely magnificent.

Within its limited resources, VNAF did an outstanding job. VNAF fixed-wing cargo planes could not resupply Kontum City at night because their crews were not night-qualified, but VNAF CH-47 and "Slick" helicopters resupplied the city and the FSBs during some of the heaviest fighting. The VNAF helicopter gunships took four times as many hits as any other VNAF aircraft. VNAF medevac helicopters went into Kontum City during the daylight hours, and during some of the heaviest action. ^{198/}

VNAF came into its own during the 1972 offensive, and supported the campaign in the highlands to the maximum of its capability.

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Air Power and the Battle for Kontum

There was no disagreement from any source when air power, specifically the U.S. air armada, was given credit for preventing a South Vietnamese defeat during the current offensive. The senior U.S. advisor to the ARVN 23d Division stated that ^{199/}

the Vietnamese here were probably better supported by airpower than in any other engagements I've seen including the 1968 Tet offensive. I think this assisted in giving them the confidence that they needed to stay and make a fight of it.

A USAF advisor to VNAF echoed these sentiments when he said that ^{200/}

what we have done with the use of U.S. air is to allow the South Vietnamese to maintain their country while they continue to become strong. That to me has been the role of U.S. air at Kontum. We've allowed the South Vietnamese to fight very capably at Kontum.

In conclusion, there was probably no better summation of the role air power played in the defense of Kontum City than that spoken by the HQ SRAG Chief of Staff. He said that ^{201/}

undoubtedly, airpower played a critically important role. As one looks back, one could say there were many ifs on the battlefield. For example, one would make the case that if it had not been for John Paul Vann, the battle could have been lost. One could make the case that if it had not been for the presence of Gen. Hill over Kontum on the 26th of May that the battle could have been lost. If it had not been for the TOWs at a critical point in time, the battle could have been lost. Many of these "ifs" are possible. However, one "if" is a certainty--that if it had not been for U.S. airpower the battle would have been lost.

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

A New ARVN Aggressiveness

A U.S. intelligence source stated that ^{202/}

at the start of the VC/NVA offensive, which is on a larger scale than any ever before mounted by the North Vietnamese (and which has effectively scotched the fiction Hanoi has been trying to maintain that the fighting is an indigenous "rebellion") South Vietnamese forces had never faced a conventional attack of such magnitude. It was moreover the first time ARVN had been called on to fight in major actions without the presence of U.S. ground forces in South Vietnam. The lack of confidence (and experience) on the part of both ARVN troops and their commanders was reflected in the events which marked the first part of the enemy offensive, the loss of Quang Tri City under questionable circumstances, the defeat at Tan Canh in the western highlands, and the overrunning of Loc Ninh in Binh Long Province. ARVN did not collapse under these physical and psychological blows, however, and instead dug in along new defensive lines where they have hung on tenaciously. Thanks in part to heavy U.S. air support, VN/NVA thrusts in MR-II have been contained and repelled, the attack on Kontum City was so decisively defeated that the two VC/NVA divisions involved have pulled back to lick their wounds, and the city of An Loc has held.

A U.S. advisor to the ARVN 23d Division commented that defensively ^{203/}

the ARVN here at Kontum did very well; offensively, by our own standards, they don't move as aggressively, but this is the first time this division has worked together. We're building a new division right now; one that had never been up against the NVA before. . . . Collectively I'm very proud of the ARVN performance during this battle.

~~SECRET NOFORN~~

Allegations were made that the ARVN 23d Division did not run from Kontum City as the 22d had at Tan Canh because there was no place to run to. QL 14 between Kontum and Pleiku cities was cut, and VC/NVA units held the vital pass. The Chief of Staff, HQ SRAG commented on this and said ^{204/}

that has been alleged, of course. Undoubtedly it did play a psychological role with the ARVN. However, remember that you don't need to have an open road for units to disappear: to put on civilian clothes, and evaporate. These things did not happen in any great magnitude during the battle of Kontum. It cannot be stated that the closure of the pass was the reason that the ARVN stayed and fought. They could have stayed and have given up, for example, but they stayed and they fought.

One of the American advisors admitted that when left to their own devices, ARVN and VNAF could usually do the job, even if they floundered initially; but he added that ^{205/}

we're Americans, and a very impatient group of people. When this battle was joined, we were in fact directing the air power. We would influence the action by our communication with higher headquarters. We were thinking rationally in many cases where the Vietnamese became very excited. What are you going to do? When your damn butt's on the line, what are you going to do. Are you going to sit back and say I've failed, I'm not a successful advisor because I can't get my counterparts to do what he's supposed to do - or take over . . . When your neck's out on the line you're going to do as you've been trained and take over.

Leadership, always a weak point in the ARVN structure, took a positive turn with the appointment of General Toan as II Corps Commander and

~~SECRET~~ ~~NOFORN~~

Brigadier General Ba as Commander of the 23d ARVN Division at Kontum City.
Both were aggressive individuals, and a U.S. advisor said General Ba has ^{206/}

his complete unit there, he knows his commanders and he's doing a hell of a good job. He's on the offensive right now to regain territory and build confidence in his unit, and go out and find the enemy.

The 23d Division indeed became more aggressive, and by the latter part of June it patrolled some 9 km, beyond its perimeter. On 17 June a successful ARVN/VNAF planned and executed operation took place at Tan Canh, and many refugees were helilifted out of the area. By 29 June a 30-vehicle Military Convoy passed through the "Rockpile," reopening QL 14 from Pleiku to Kontum cities. On the east coast, after initial reverses at Phu My, ARVN offensive operations brought the Binh Dinh Province towns captured by the enemy in early April under government control. By 29 July all three district towns were in ARVN hands.

Airpower, while providing ARVN with tremendous support, could not be the total answer. Airpower, in and of itself, cannot insure victory; but in combination with a spirited ground defense it can prevent defeat. As the Chief of Staff, HQ SRAG put it: ^{207/}

One of the "ifs" we can refer to, is if the ARVN hadn't had the fortitude and the guts to stay in Kontum no amount of airpower could have prevented the loss of Kontum. So, we can say that ARVN in that case performed magnificently.

~~SECRET~~ ~~NOFORN~~

Enemy Reactions and Future Plans

Late in July an article in the Los Angeles Times stated that ^{208/}

American officials speculate that the supply problem prompted Hanoi to abandon its offensive in the Highlands. Within the last few weeks evidence has mounted that Hanoi has literally written off this campaign.

Intelligence readouts indicate that the Viet Cong 2d Division has moved back into sanctuary areas from its positions north of Kontum and that the regiments of the 320th Division, which were to capture the city, have pulled back in Laos. South Vietnamese intelligence sources claim the commanders of both were recalled and reprimanded by Lt Gen Hoang Minh Thao, the overall commander, who led a division at Dien Bien Phu.*

At any rate, Kontum is now being regularly supplied by truck convoys and the shelling of the city has all but ceased - an indication that the 40th North Vietnamese Artillery Regiment has also been pulled back into Laos as military intelligence officers claim.

A 90-day intelligence assessment of enemy gains and losses throughout ^{209/} SVN during the offensive concluded that:

- the enemy still held most of the limited gains achieved in the first month of the fighting, but increased ARVN aggressiveness was reversing this stand.*
- the enemy had failed to fatally damage ARVN, which was now stronger numerically and more effective in combat than at the start of the enemy offensive*

*This should be NVA 2d Division.